

Conditions for Literacy Learning

Turning learning theory into classroom instruction: A minicase study

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Teachers the world over are eminently practical beings. There is a strong practicality ethic embedded within their psyches. Those of us interested in designing and teaching professional development courses will have experienced just how strong this lust for good practical ideas can be. A common response most staff developers have experienced would be identical with, or at least similar to, "Yes. That sounds good in theory, but what does it look like in practice?"

A theory-into-practice venture

Between 1984 and 1999 I had the opportunity to be a participant observer with school staffs who were engaged in the process of turning theory into classroom practice. The Table is an example of what one group produced after spending some time engaged in this enterprise.

What's the point? The Table is *not* intended as a back-door way of reviewing or reconsidering a particular theory of learning. Nor is it an attempt to remedy what I might perceive as misrepresentations of a theory in which I have a strong vested interest. As Luke and Freebody (1999) pointed out, "an axiom of mid-century New Criticism holds that trying to recover authorial intent is a waste of time." Furthermore, I have continually modified and explicated the

theory as it's evolved. Accordingly I have no desire to attempt to recover authorial intent.

Rather, my aim is to illustrate how teachers in one Western educational culture (Australia) went about addressing an issue that has a long tradition in teacher-culture—namely, turning theory into classroom practice. By so doing I hope to illuminate the nature of the issues that have to be addressed when teachers seek to engage in the theory-into-practice process. Finally I hope to draw some conclusions about the level of debate that necessarily underpins the attempt to translate *any* theory (not just mine), into effective classroom practice.

Developing shared meanings. The Table resulted from a complex social process involving a community of learners jointly constructing knowledge through the use of language. Like most knowledge-building communities, this group engaged in a range of language behaviours that included discussing, arguing, questioning, describing, drawing analogies, writing on erasable boards and chart paper, and clarifying. The result is the set of general principles (the centre column) and the set of teacher behaviours (the right-hand column) in the Table. These two columns are an example of the practicality ethic in action. Turbill (1994), whose work clearly showed that this process is a prerequisite of the theory-into-practice enterprise, referred to this

jointly constructed knowledge as "shared meanings."

Does shared meanings mean the same as shared values and beliefs? Do the shared meanings in the Table necessarily mean that all members of this knowledge-building community shared the same beliefs and values? Not necessarily. My data suggest that there is another layer or level of debate that needs to occur before shared meanings begin to emerge. This level of debate typically involves the teachers who create and maintain a group culture that encourages open and frank examination of some deeper, more ideological values and beliefs.

While some of these beliefs and values are commonly held and could therefore be considered to be the same as shared meanings, some are not. In fact some significant differences, often hotly debated, begin to emerge. For example, this particular group of teachers shared one belief that strongly united them: "Being able to read effectively is an extremely important part of the *mainstream* culture." (There was some doubt that indigenous Australians who have an oral culture that is over 50,000 years old would have the same opinion.)

All members of the group believed that teaching their students to be both effective readers *and* effective writers was one of the most important roles that teachers, schools, and education systems perform. In my opinion, this point of

A framework for turning a theory of learning into classroom reading instruction

Condition	What we think this condition means	Some possible classroom strategies that we can employ to implement this condition
Immersion	Providing multiple opportunities for students to experience (a) visual saturation of print and text and (b) aural saturation of sounds of written texts.	Make functional use of wall print through regular "print walks"; sustained silent reading (SSR); teacher read-alouds; shared reading (SR); taped books; choral reading (e.g., poems, rhymes, songs, jingles) on wall print.
Demonstration	Doing lots of teacher modeling of the processes of reading, with special emphasis on making explicit the invisible processes that make reading possible. Collecting, displaying, and discussing models (examples) of different kinds of texts.	Do teacher read-alouds and SR accompanied by think-alouds. Use joint construction of texts accompanied by think-alouds. Focus on processes, knowledge, and understandings that make effective reading, spelling, and writing possible.
Engagement	Continually communicating and modeling a set of reasons for becoming powerful, critical readers. These reasons must be relevant to the pupils we teach.	"Propagandize" the value of reading through constant messages, explicit reasons, personal stories, "nagging," posters, models, and demonstrations of power and value of reading.
Expectations	Communicating, through language and behaviour, the message that every pupil is capable of learning to read, and that you expect every child to become a reader.	Use flexible, mixed-ability groups that continually change and avoid communicating subtle negative expectations through ability grouping, odious comparisons, and "put-down" language. Make explicit the processes, knowledge, and understanding that effective readers use. Constantly remind students that they all learned to talk—a much harder task.
Responsibility	Encouraging pupils, and giving them opportunities, to make some, not all, decisions about what and how they learn. Making explicit the idea that good learners know how to make learning decisions. Modeling and demonstrating examples of "taking responsibility" or "ownership" of learning.	Devise activities that don't have simple right-wrong answers. Insist that comments and judgments be justified wherever possible. Set up support structures, processes that allow pupils to take responsibility for learning. Use language that invites open-ended responses and reflection (e.g., "What else could you do when you're reading and you come to something you don't understand? Why would you do that?").
Approximation	Communicating through discourse, (i.e., language and behaviour) such messages as these: Having a go (i.e., making an attempt and not getting it perfect at first) is fundamental to learning. Mistakes are our friends in that they help us adjust and refine our knowledge, understandings, and skills so that next time we do better. Ultimately our approximations must become conventional (expectations).	Share stories of how we learn to do things outside of school—like learning to talk, skate, or play tennis. Highlight the role that approximations and responses play. Model and demonstrate good/bad miscues as approximations that help/hinder the reader. Discuss spelling approximations as temporary spellings (not invented) and study similarities/differences to conventional spelling. Model/demonstrate how effective readers deal with approximations.

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A framework for turning a theory of learning into classroom reading instruction (continued)

Condition	What we think this condition means	Some possible classroom strategies that we can employ to implement this condition
Use	Providing multiple opportunities for learner-readers to apply their developing skills and understandings about reading and the reading process in authentic and meaningful ways.	Provide lots of structures, opportunities for students to engage in acts of reading for specific purposes, problems, and events. Try SSR and DEAR (Drop Everything and Read). Use reading for a range of purposes, do lots of meaningful and authentic writing, and develop a pool of authentic reading/writing activities and tasks that can be constantly reused without boring the students (e.g., read and retell on different text types).
Response	Paying close attention to learners' approximations and recycling demonstrations and models that contain information; knowledge they've not yet got under control. Drawing explicit attention to salient features of demonstrations/models that will help learners modify approximations.	Set up structures/processes that make it possible for learners to receive feedback (responses) from multiple sources, e.g., other students as well as the teacher. Constantly model how effective readers use various cues available to create/understand meaning.

strong agreement was an important factor that supported and maintained group cohesion as the members engaged in the deeper levels of debate I alluded to earlier. These deeper levels of debate usually begin to occur when teachers address such value-laden questions as, "What is 'good' reading?" "How is it best learned?" and "After it's been learned, what should it be used for?"

It seems that when teachers have the opportunity to address such questions, a wide range of long-held beliefs and values, which up until this time have been implicit, are exposed to the light of argument and debate (Turbill, 1994). This group was no different. For example, with respect to the first question ("What is 'good' reading?"), while there were significant differences within the group, these were mainly of degree rather than kind. There were many references to "comprehending" what the author of the text being read intended and to "constructing appropriate meanings."

Others in the group agreed, but they emphasised such things as "automaticity in basic skills to allow comprehension to occur," while yet others emphasised "comprehension plus the ability to apply critical analysis to the 'truth-value' of the meanings which have been compre-

hended." On the other hand, some emphasised attitudinal factors such as "love of reading," "becoming lifelong readers," "love of literature," "avid users of text," and similar descriptors.

With respect to the second question ("How is it best learned?"), the differences were much more pronounced. One strongly held point of view was that the knowledge, skills, and understandings that underpin effective reading need to be "explicitly, systematically, and directly" taught. Of those who favoured the "explicit-systematic-direct" instruction option, there was some confusion about what the term actually meant. Did it mean the same as "linear-lockstep-sequential" instruction? What should be made explicit? What, if anything, could be left implicit? Did *systematic* mean evidence of careful proactive planning by the teacher as opposed to "unplanned learning by osmosis"?

A subgroup believed that being explicit and systematic was not enough unless there were also high degrees of what they called "mindful and contextualised" teaching. The members of this subgroup strongly believed that complex learning like learning to read could occur only if a certain kind of learning community or culture was deliberately

and purposefully created by the teacher. They argued that learner-readers should be "*acculturated* into a community of readers and writers." Those who held this view seemed to believe that such learning cultures were the result of careful decisions regarding resources, personal relationships, and organisational routines and programs.

With respect to the third question ("After it's been learned, what should it be used for?") the responses were again more different in degree than in kind. Essentially three main uses to which reading could be applied, once learners became skillful in it, emerged. These were as a tool for (a) communication and information gathering; (b) personal growth and development; and (c) gaining access to power, righting wrongs, and working towards a better, fairer, kinder society.

Final thoughts

These different emphases, values, and beliefs needed to be brought together into a sophisticated consensus before the Table could be completed. Although relatively short in length and simple in format (three columns and eight rows), the Table represents the product of some

very complex learning. Turbill's (1994) work strongly supported the conclusion that most groups of teachers need the opportunity to do similar things when engaged in learning how to turn theory into practice.

Like the students they teach, it seems that teachers also benefit from being in learning settings that go beyond mere transmission of how-to knowledge. It seems that they too need learning settings in which

- the relationships between those who make up the learning community are supportive, honest, inclusive, and collaborative;
- there is an authentic need for learners to construct meaning and knowl-

edge *individually* through deep reflection of their own assumptions or states of knowledge;

- there is an authentic need for learners to construct meaning and knowledge *collaboratively* around these assumptions and current states of knowledge, predominantly through oral and written language; and
- there are both time and opportunity for these things to occur.

References

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- Turbill, J.B. (1994). *From a personal to a grounded theory of staff development*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia.

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In our inaugural editorial, we discussed technology as a force that will affect literacy learning in the 21st century. In this themed issue, which will appear April 2002, our goal is to explore the ways in which technology has become a cognitive tool for literacy learning in PreK through Grade 6 classrooms.

We raise the following questions that we hope authors will address in their submissions for this special issue of *The Reading Teacher*:

- How has technology changed the lives of teachers and children in schools?
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- How do our understandings of the reading process and reading acquisition apply to processing onscreen text?
- Have our hopes for the impact of technology on instruction been met?
- Where are we now and where will we be in 20 years in our use of technology in classrooms?
- What are the questions we should be asking about the potential for technology to transform teaching?

Articles submitted for this themed issue should arrive at IRA Headquarters by April 30, 2001. Include a cover letter indicating that the manuscript is being submitted for the themed issue. Send manuscripts to The Reading Teacher themed issue, Attention: Michele Jester, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA.