

Conditions for Literacy Learning

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Observing literacy learning in elementary classrooms: Nine years of classroom anthropology

Let me first set the scene: On February 4, 1995, I (a classroom anthropologist) went to an Australian school I'll call Cook Primary School to observe the first day of the school year. I found my way to the classroom under study and began taking field notes. Here is what I recorded. (All names are pseudonyms.)

I arrived at 8:15 a.m. Helen Smith (the teacher) appeared to be very agitated. She made some comments about wishing I hadn't come, that she still had a "a thousand things to do" before classes began, that she was unsure about whether the Grade 2 she thought she was getting would actually end up being a "straight or composite," that she still had stock to get from the stock room, and that I should go along and chat with Bob (the new principal) because she hadn't informed him that I'd be coming.

The room seems to be very spacious without the kids. There are five "islands" of desks with room for six kids at each. Helen has obviously sharpened pencils, covered jam tins with fancy paper to contain them, placed one ruler in each, put two laminated alphabet charts on each desk (I must get copies). In the grade she had last year, these laminated charts served as models and as resources, and as tools for exploring the phonemic structure of language, as well as a means of identifying and recognising the shapes of letters.

Most of the wall print and charts I recall from last year are gone, and the walls look relatively bare. The alphabet cards from last year are still on the wall, as are the "heavy duty" words. There are also some word "mobiles" hanging from a string—they seem to contain

random words (at least I cannot determine any function for them).

There are some books in a bookshelf to the side of the room and a set of dictionaries, a stack of storage tubs, Helen's easel, and a flip-chart. Her desk is in a different part of the room than last year. Helen's language plan is on her desk—it is similar to the one she's been using for some time now.

Homework = 10 minutes
Teacher reading = 15 minutes
Demonstration = 15 minutes
Word study = 10 minutes
Print walk = 10 minutes
Individual writing = 25 minutes
Sharing = 10 minutes
Individual reading = 15 minutes
Sharing = 10 minutes

Outside the door is a computer-generated text in big print that proclaims, "Kids who read—succeed."

These field notes describe the origins of a deliberately planned learning setting that Helen was about to create for the group of 27 Grade 2 children who had been assigned to her for the new school year. Such field notes represent one small piece of the range of data I have collected from a number of classrooms over the years as I struggled to understand how and why literacy is learned in those formal settings we call "classrooms."

Unfortunately, the most significant findings to emerge from nearly a decade of such observations and analysis comes out sounding like a bland truism.

It is this: These classrooms were very complex settings. I don't think I'll ever fully understand this complexity, nor will I understand how teachers manage to orchestrate it in ways that promote productive literacy learning. The best I can do is provide some preliminary insights to the nature of this complexity.

Unravelling some threads

Where does one begin with trying to understand and describe this complexity? I began by trying to make sense of the following three aspects of the classrooms I was observing.

1. The inanimate physical paraphernalia that were present in the setting.
2. The human behaviours that took place in the midst of these paraphernalia.
3. The programs (i.e., routines and events) that typically occur within settings.

Let me briefly describe what I've so far learned by unraveling each of these three threads.

1. *The inanimate physical paraphernalia that were present in the setting.* The classroom settings I observed had a set of common physical attributes. The teacher and the students either used them frequently every day, or they were an integral part of their everyday behaviour. I feel confident in asserting that these "things" were obviously impor-

tant in the literacy teaching and learning that took place each day.

These paraphernalia included

- a flood of wall print that was in constant use by both teacher and students;
- a furniture arrangement that encouraged and coerced verbal interaction between students;
- plenty of display space;
- a large and diverse range of readily available books, magazines, and other texts;
- resources such as overhead projectors, epidiascopes, tape recorders, chart paper, felt pens, scrap paper for writing, lined and unlined exercise books for specific tasks (e.g., language note/workbook, handwriting books), writing and drawing implements, flip-charts and easels, and in some cases typewriters, computers, and printers.

2. *The human behaviours that took place in the midst of these paraphernalia.* As well as physical properties, classroom settings include people. In fact the human components of a setting are what bring it to life and set the processes inherent in any learning culture in motion. While the physical properties of the classrooms I observed could endure without the human components (when the children and teacher go home each day the room still exists), the setting known as “Helen Smith’s classroom” (and the culture it manifested) could exist only when the human inhabitants arrived at 9:00 a.m. each weekday during the school term, and last only as long as they remained in it. During the school day the humans who enter classroom settings engage in a wide range of interactions, both with one another and with the physical paraphernalia there. As with most elementary classrooms, in the settings I observed there were two kinds of human inhabitants: a critical mass of between 25 and 30 children and one adult teacher. The major initiator of the interactions that took place in these settings was the teacher who had the executive power to do things and make things happen.

While my data show that teachers can (and do) manipulate physical properties (like space and other resources) in interesting ways to create such cultures,

my data strongly indicate that one of the most potent things teachers manipulate is the discourse that pervades the setting. By discourse I mean what Gee (1992) meant when he called it

a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network”...a kind of identity kit which comes with appropriate costume and instructions on how to talk and act and take on roles that others will recognise. (p. 21)

The discourse features I identified could be grouped under a general heading that I described as a strong “proreading/prowriting” ethos. By *ethos* I mean something that is akin to climate, atmosphere, tone, and other such terms. Each one describes a rather ubiquitous, ethereal “thing” that pervades all that takes place in a setting but is not immediately obvious to observers and is difficult to capture in language, except in broad terms. One only becomes aware of it after prolonged immersion in the settings where it occurs.

“It” manifested itself in the classrooms I studied as a strong consensus, among and between the students and the teacher, about the value of reading, writing, and the accoutrements of literacy. My interview data and observational data revealed very clearly that the majority of children in these classes believed reading and writing were extremely important activities that were not only worth engaging with, but also worth learning to control. Furthermore these data strongly suggested that these beliefs could not be attributed to home background, but were more a function of the learning contexts that the teacher deliberately and consciously established. Other discourse features I identified follow.

Specific language use

The major component of the discourse used in any setting is a range of actual language choices and strategies or tactics that the humans who enter the setting typically use. I identified the following examples in the data.

- A predominance of open questions (What else could you do to improve this draft you’re working on?)

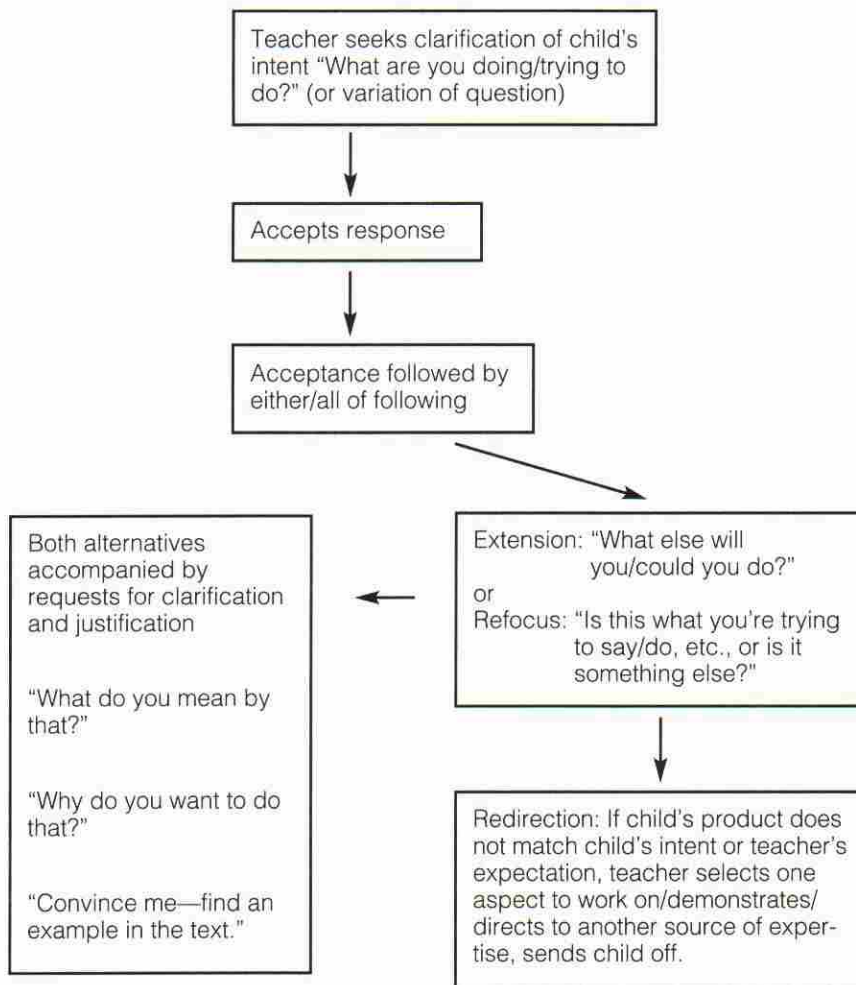
- A significant proportion of questions that pushed learners to a meta-textual level of response—I found two broad types of such questions: (a) justification questions (e.g., Why do you think that? Why would you want to do that? Why did you make that decision?) and (b) clarification questions (e.g., What do you mean by that? Will you help me understand what you mean? How could you explain that to a child who was very young?)
- Constant recapping and summarization during teacher-led discussions (“Let me see if we can pull together the main points of what we’ve discovered about writing an argumentative text.”)
- Hit-and-run/never-let-a-chance-go-by demonstrations (“Stop what you’re doing and listen to the persuasive piece that Le Minh’s just drafted. I think it’s a good one because.... Now go back on with what you were doing.”)

Expectations that were communicated

There were six basic “expectation messages” (i.e., embedded themes) within the discourse I observed.

- Theme 1: Becoming an effective user of literacy is an extremely worthwhile enterprise that will further the purposes of one’s life.
- Theme 2: All members of this learning community are capable of becoming effective users of literacy. No one can fail to do it.
- Theme 3: The best way to learn is to share and discuss your learning problems with others; “have a go,” both as a member of a group and individually; approximate; and reflect on the feedback you get.
- Theme 4: All statements, comments, and judgments must be justified using plausible and sensible arguments and examples.
- Theme 5: It is safe to have a go in this setting.
- Theme 6: One can be said to know and understand when one has made that which is to be known and understood one’s own. (Sometimes this was expressed as “taking responsibility for one’s learning.”) The process of making something

The 3-minute individual conference



- Has positive attitudes toward learning.
- Seeks/accepts advice willingly.
- Accepts responsibility for learning and organization.
- Accepts mistakes as a natural part of learning.
- Has confidence to discuss learning.
- Accepts the necessity for justifications in discussion and argument.
- Has control of a variety of genres in reading, writing, and speaking.
- Makes considered decisions with regard to reading, writing, and speaking.
- Understands the need for preparedness/correctness when going public.
- Consults a variety of sources in search of information.
- Reads for a sustained period of time.
- Recognizes good/bad miscues.
- Has strategies to overcome blocks in reading/writing.
- Understands the value of rereading for information.
- Makes a positive attempt to edit.
- Displays a developing vocabulary.
- Controls the conventions of writing.
- Understands the elements of various forms of writing.
- Applies knowledge.

At another level I identified what I decided to call “microprograms.” (These are analogous to the subroutines found in computer programs.) An example would be the schematic representation of the 3-minute individual conferences one teacher regularly employed in her classroom (see Figure).

Our data show these macroprograms and microprograms emanated from two sources: The teacher’s values and beliefs about learning and literacy and outside forces (such as the mandated curriculum outcomes and funding policies).

Final thoughts

I have only begun to scratch the surface of the complexity inherent in these classrooms. Teachers in these settings also must be able to deal with unexpected student responses and behaviours in ways that continue to support learning. This in turn entails the skill and ability to do such things as the following.

- Make spontaneous decisions about students “on the run,” decisions that

one’s own involves potential learners in transforming the meanings or skills someone else has demonstrated into a set of meanings or skills that is uniquely theirs.

These expectation messages were continually being given (a) in the comments about texts and books and in responses to learners’ approximations (at the whole-class, small-group, and individual level); (b) in the comments made during sharing time when different students volunteered to share; and (c) in the think-alouds and modelling the teachers did, the features of text and process that they continually drew students’ attention to, and so on. At least one of these expectation themes (but

usually more) could be expected to occur in every episode.

3. *The programs (i.e., routines and events) that typically occur within settings.* Programs in this sense refer to the plans (routines, procedures) that are typically applied in the setting. (In one sense these plans/procedures/routines are analogous to the programs that drive computer applications.)

My data revealed at least two levels of programs. At one level I identified what I decided to call “macroprograms.” An example would be the set of broad outcomes (called “expectations” by many teachers) that lay behind each teacher’s planning. Here are some possible macroprograms or expectations.

are based on each learner's developing literacy. Often teachers have only microseconds to shape their responses to such behaviour. It seems to me that they must be able to deal, in instructionally appropriate ways, with the constant stream of surprises they know they will encounter.

- Transform these decisions into some kind of action that supports and extends learning.

How do they manage to do this? That's the question I'd like to be able to answer. I am certain only of one thing, and it is this: The more time I spend on the kinds of research I've de-

scribed in this column, the more I am convinced that those classroom settings we call balanced are much too complex to be orchestrated and maintained by teachers who are armed only with a mandated, one-size-fits-all set of teaching strategies, activities, or tips.

Reference

Gee, J.P. (1992). What is literacy? In P. Shannon (Ed.), *Becoming political: Readings and writings in the politics of literacy education* (pp. 21–29). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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■ Reading à la first grade

Nancy Warmbold Zamor

Oh, the places you'll go, when you've learned to read...
Your mind will sprout seedlings from one tiny seed,
That may start with a character, problem, or plot,
That engage you in reading and thinking a lot.

But to get to that wonderful, mind-growing place,
You've got to start *here*, and proceed at a pace
That is steady and sure. Why, you'll move right along.
If you gobble up words, you'll grow sturdy and strong.

Start with the pictures that help tell the tale.
Learn some words by heart, and then follow the trail
Of sounds at beginnings, and sounds at the end.
And does it make sense? On that you'll depend!

Go back to the start, try the whole thing once more,
Or spell it out loud, 'til that word starts to roar....
And if it still stumps you, refuses to grow,
Then peer deep within it, find one part you know....

And say that one part, and add on a sound
Until it grows bigger, and a new word you've found.
Or take a good guess that will make it make sense....
Try all of these things! Let reading commence!

And if *you* have a friend who's just learning to read,
Try sharing your books, and teaching our creed:
"We first graders work hard, so please don't distract us.
When learning to read, we need plenty of practice!"

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