

CHAPTER 6

A Constructivist Perspective on Teaching and Learning in the Language Arts

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There are no workbooks or step-by-step guidebooks to a perfect literacy program. To facilitate real learning a teacher must provide a full-immersion approach to the language arts. Classrooms that are moving in this direction provide relevant, literate talk; real literature; spelling taught in context; and writing that grows out of children's interests, experiences, and expertise. Worksheets, canned teacher-proof lessons, assigned topics, and language arts textbooks have no place in these classrooms.

LITERATE ENVIRONMENTS

Constructivist frameworks challenge teachers to create innovative environments in which they and their students are encouraged to think and explore. For conceptual learning to occur, however, it is not enough to organize a classroom with language arts activities in which problems may be encountered. First, learners must play an active role in selecting and defining the activities, which must be both challenging and intrinsically motivating; second, there must be appropriate teacher support as learners build concepts, values, schemata, and problem-solving abilities.

Teaching this way, collaborating with pupils and negotiating the curriculum with them is not easy. It requires a considerable degree of flexibility

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and an ability and readiness to meet the needs of children by providing information and materials that children will be interested in and wish to pursue. It also demands a constant creative stance with children—receptivity to children's ideas and a willingness to take them seriously, even when, from an adult point of view, they seem naive or immature. At the same time, creating an authentic learning environment requires clear thinking and planning in relation to broad, long-term goals and imagination in finding specific themes, activities, and materials that will spark fresh interests and make connections between those that have already been developed.

Classrooms and schools that encourage the active construction of meaning have several characteristics: They focus on big ideas rather than facts; they encourage and empower students to follow their own interests; to make connections; to reformulate ideas; and to reach unique conclusions. Teachers and students in these classrooms are aware that the world is a complex place in which multiple perspectives exist and truth is often a matter of interpretation, and they acknowledge that learning and the process of assessing learning are intricate and require student and teacher interaction as well as time, documentation, and analyses by both teacher and students.

But does knowing each child and understanding his or her perspective in detail give us all the information we need to provide adequate classroom instruction? The social milieu of the classroom, the relationships between children one to the other and to the group must also be considered when we look at children's learning. The language arts are, in fact, highly social acts, but past instructional practices mistakenly conceived of them as solitary activities. In writing, for example, even if drafting is done alone, most real writing is part of a dialogue, one voice in an ongoing conversation in some larger community. When that conversation is one-sided because students simply write, turn in the paper, and get it back with a grade, we keep them from experiencing a major portion of the available learning experience. Social activities integrated into the language arts processes can actually lead to better writing, reading, and spelling (Graves, 1983), for the talking, sharing, and listening that occur pull down the barriers to communication and enhance the child's literacy growth (Amarel, 1987).

With a population as diverse as our own, we need to become more aware of both the social and cognitive dimensions of classroom activities. To facilitate real learning, we need to look closely at how children with different literacy backgrounds and understandings react to the activities we choose with and for them. Only then will we understand the classroom environment we can revise and reconstruct as we work to create more comfortable and effective classrooms for all students (Freedman, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe, 1985).

COLLABORATION, IN

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the needs of children by providing an environment in which they will be interested in and wish to participate. A receptive stance with children—receptivity to their ideas, to take them seriously, even when, from an adult perspective, they are immature. At the same time, a receptive stance requires clear thinking and planning. It requires the use of words and imagination in finding specific examples and making connections that will spark fresh interests and make connections that have already been developed.

Encourage the active construction of meaning. Focus on big ideas rather than facts; encourage children to follow their own interests, to make connections, to reach unique conclusions. Teach children to be aware that the world is a complex one and that truth is often a matter of interpretation. Encourage the process of assessing and evaluating student and teacher interaction as well as interaction between both teacher and students.

Encourage understanding his or her perspective. Encourage children to need to provide adequate classroom space. In the classroom, the relationships between children and the language arts are, in fact, highly social. Children are often taken for granted as solitary beings. If drafting is done alone, most real learning takes place in an ongoing conversation in some form. Interaction is one-sided because students often do not bring it back with a grade, we keep them from having the available learning experience. So, language arts processes can actually lead to the development of barriers to communication and understanding (Comber, 1987).

Encourage children to, in their own words, we need to become more aware of the dimensions of classroom activities. To understand how children with different backgrounds react to the activities we choose, we need to understand the classroom environment and work to create more comfortable and effective learning environments (Comber, Dyson, Flower, & Chafe,

COLLABORATION, INTERACTION, AND QUESTIONING

To facilitate real learning, teachers need to organize their classrooms and their curriculum so that students can collaborate, interact, and raise questions of both classmates and the teacher. Crouse and Davey (1989), elementary school teachers, researched what happened in their classroom when they provided for student collaboration. They learned from their children that friendship was much more important to them than they had ever thought because being able to work with someone else made them feel confident and secure and enabled them to make and keep new friends. Children learned a great deal from one another, for together they could plan and organize and help each other with the mechanics of writing. But more significantly, they were able to help one another make "sense" of that writing. Finally, they learned that a certain type of environment fostered collaborative learning. This type of environment provided mobility so that they might be able to interact with their friends when they needed or wanted to. Materials needed to be handy for a variety of purposes. They needed to be free to choose their own topics and to manage their own time.

Teachers who want their students to collaborate and question need to create a safe community like Crouse and Davey's. Safety is brought about by teachers who have made a commitment to providing appropriate boundaries and dependable structures in order to enhance the potential for children both to work together and to ask their own questions. Children's questions are valuable because they help teachers understand where children are developmentally and are yet another window into how they understand literacy tasks and how they operate as learners. Unfortunately, most teachers barely tap into the potential of using children's questions to get a better glimpse of children's inner thoughts. By listening to children's questions over a number of episodes, and waiting for their answers before jumping in with another question or the answer, we can see patterns in children's approaches that help us stretch the child's thinking. The most important step for teachers who want to create a powerful learning environment is to facilitate the children's sense that they can trust that they can ask (Comber, 1988).

Heath (1983), Lindfors (1987), McLure and French (1981), and Wells (1986) point out to us that children ask few questions in a traditional classroom. In fact, the teacher's role is usually to ask the questions and the children's role is to answer them. Teachers who wish to create an atmosphere for questioning need to provide time and a safe haven for children's questions about literature, their own writing, and their classmates' writing. Helping students clarify and formulate their own questions, helping them to be

able to state their own questions so they can be pursued on their level, and helping them in interpreting the results in light of their experience and other knowledge they have generated are the central tasks of the teacher.

COLLABORATIVE TALK, DIALOGUE, AND DEVELOPMENT

When we look at lessons as collaborative talk, our emphasis can be on both finding out where the children are and where we can stretch and challenge them to go further. Genishi, McCarrier, and Nussbaum indicate that "Our images of collaborative talk resemble voiceprints, which aren't straight at all but full of complex zigzags that form unique and interesting patterns" (1988, p. 190).

Teachers who talk with children about a piece of literature or writing need to give children a chance to explore half-formed ideas and to expand their understandings of their own writing or literature through hearing others' interpretations. The way a teacher listens and talks to children helps children become learners who think critically and deeply about what they read and write. Writing process workshops have been designed to model and facilitate collaborative talk. Writers are confirmed by the response which tells them that the text fits their intentions. First, the teacher provides an active response by confirming what he or she has heard and by asking a few clarifying questions. Second, the teacher helps the entire class to learn the same procedure during group share time. Each writing period ends with two or three children sharing their pieces with the group while the group follows the discipline of confirming, through pointing to what is in the text and then asking questions to learn more about what the child has written. All of these responses, whether by the teacher or the other children, are geared to help writers learn to listen to their own words, their own ideas, their own texts (Graves, 1983).

A language arts classroom that facilitates a child's development through collaborative talk and dialogue is carefully planned and organized by the teacher, but the curriculum is negotiated and enacted by everyone. "The soul of enactment is the dialogues in which teachers and children inform, err, question, correct, self correct, think aloud, repeat, make sense—in other words, develop together" (Genishi, McCarrier, & Nussbaum, 1988, p. 190).

But in order to create a classroom where curriculum is negotiated, teachers have to give up some old habits. Most teachers are used to informing and asking questions. We need to give children "wait" time (Rowe, 1986). Instead of telling children what to do, we need to react sensitively and intelligently to what the child tells us. But what do teachers need to know so they can intelligently react? A critical part of the give-and-take dur-

ing conferring consists of the teacher's knowledge of the child's current and potential levels of development, where the child is and where they might go, and the teacher's knowledge of this "leading from behind." It is precisely this "leading from behind" that is pre-emptive collaborative talk that the teacher is at all times aware of children's thinking in general (Dugan, 1986). It is this specific task that the teacher can become aware of in such talk with a particular child and the child's current purposes and current state of understanding or her contributions contingently respond to (Graves, 1986).

SCAFFOLDING: AS

Facilitating a child's development through collaborative work with children. While we may not know exactly how it takes place, we do know that at the moment it is needed has an important role to play in the scaffolding framework that assists the child in making scaffolding changes.

When I confer with children, I use a process that is adapted from Graves (1983). The core of the process is, the child is able to predict what will happen. The conference is focused on only one or two questions designed to help solve the child's problem. The process of children's questioning. There is shared fun, exploration, and adventure.

Calkins (1986) uses mini-lessons in modeling theory, direct instruction (Graves, 1983; Ratner, 1978; Cazden, 1988; Graves, 1983). These are five to seven minutes long, are conducted in the context of writers' and readers' workshops. They are often used without the expectation that the child will use the strategy on the day it is given to them. The teacher gives to the child what the child thinks is good enough and then adds information that causes the child to revise his or her own writing. For example, the concept of focus over and over again for a period of six months. He or she might share a focused story that some-

can be pursued on their level, and in light of their experience and other central tasks of the teacher.

GUE, AND DEVELOPMENT

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ing conferring consists of the teacher's interpretations of children's actual and potential levels of development, his or her own judgments of where children are and where they might go. Wells and Chang-Wells (1992) call this "leading from behind." It is precisely through frequently engaging in collaborative talk that the teacher is able to increase his or her understanding of children's thinking in general (Duckworth, 1987), and it is only by engaging in such talk with a particular learner while he or she is engaged on a specific task that the teacher can become knowledgeable about that learner's purposes and current state of understanding, and thus be able to make his or her contributions contingently responsive to the learner's needs (Wells, 1986).

SCAFFOLDING: ASSISTING GROWTH

Facilitating a child's development demands new ways to look at and work with children. While we may not be able to explain exactly how learning takes place, we do know that the availability of "scaffolding" in the moment it is needed has an important part to play. Scaffolding is a temporary framework that assists the child's growth. As the child develops, the scaffolding changes.

When I confer with children, I use a scaffolding procedure that I have adapted from Graves (1983). The conference is consistently predictable, that is, the child is able to predict what will happen in the conference. The conference is focused on only one or two features of the child's piece and is designed to help solve the child's problem. The conference is supportive of children's questioning. There is shared responsibility as well as elements of fun, exploration, and adventure.

Calkins (1986) uses mini-lessons as a scaffolding process that is grounded in modeling theory, direct instruction, and developmental theory (Bruner & Ratner, 1978; Cazden, 1988; Graves, 1983). Mini-lessons, which are about five to seven minutes long, are conducted by the teacher at the beginning of writers' and readers' workshops. They give students a strategy they can use often without the expectation that they will integrate the suggested strategy on the day it is given to them (Calkins, 1986). The information or strategies the teacher gives to the children in the mini-lesson contradicts what the child thinks is good enough writing. They perturb the child. They add information that causes the child to experience errors or insufficiencies in his or her own writing. For example, a second-grade teacher may teach the concept of focus over and over again in many different ways and over a period of six months. He or she might discuss how an author focused a story, share a focused story that someone in the class has written, or might

show a sample of his or her own unfocused story and its revisions. For second graders who believe everything has equal weight in a story and who find it difficult to focus on the most important points in their stories, these new strategies may foster contradictions to the child's present understandings, making them insufficient, and thus perturbing and disequilibrating structures and facilitating accommodation. Mini-lessons provide for those moments when the teacher takes the child by the hand and participates with him or her in the jointly constructed potential level of performance (Bruner, 1978 and Cambourne, 1988; cited in Bickmore-Brand & Gawned, 1993).

PEER COLLABORATION

In most cases, the participants in collaborative talk are of approximately equal status, each able to take the role of either facilitator or student and to benefit accordingly. Typically, the purposes of the peer interaction are achieved when the task is completed, or at least when the student is able to continue with the next step. However, the benefits of collaborative talk need not be limited to the function of facilitating achievement of the task. Where one of the participants has greater expertise than the other, he or she can engage in interaction with the learner about the task with the deliberate intention of enabling the learner to acquire some procedure, knowledge, or skill that will be useful in other situations beyond that in which he or she is currently engaged.

Equally important is the help collaboration with another child can provide in enabling the learner to marshal and exploit resources he or she already has available, but over which he or she does not yet have explicit and conscious control (Karmiloff-Smith, 1979). What all collaborative talk has in common is that one of the participants has a goal that he or she would like to achieve and the other participant engages in talk that helps the first to achieve that goal (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992).

Many teachers who are trying to foster collaboration between students have used the following scaffolding for peer conferences in writing:

- The writer reads aloud.
- Listeners respond, or if the piece is confusing, the listeners ask questions, then respond.
- Listeners focus on the content, perhaps asking questions about it. The writer teaches them about the subject.
- The focus shifts to the text. What will the writer do next and how will he or she do it?

Calkins (1986) points out that we must be cautious about emphasizing the skills of peer conferences. She worries that responses can become canned

and mechanical; children perform or recite without thought of why we want children to collaborate. Conferences need to be about helping children learn from him or her, to understand their own stories more deeply, to interpret the world, and to understand other person's perspective. In Calkins' view, the purpose of peer conferences is by participating in "gently guiding" (1986, p. 132).

ERRORS: WINDOW

Errors need to be perceived as opportunities, therefore not minimized or avoided. Teachers gather information regarding children's writing to help structure the opportunity for a child to see his or her student's own reflective abstractions in both writing and spelling.

By adult standards, the hypothesis that errors appear to be mistakes or errors, but children find them useful for development. With the benefit of age and experience, strategies are ultimately superse-

An awareness of spelling, writing, and editing the so-called errors children make, can help teachers observe children's learning, and errors, therefore, need to find frameworks for what they have gathered. Developmental frameworks by scholars and are, therefore, still ways to shape their interactive teaching for children's development in writing; can judge errors as indicators of current writing and how to provide the appropriate scaffolding for the arts.

OWNERSHIP, POINTS OF VIEW

Recognition that the construction of knowledge by each individual learner must carry a personal "ownership" of the activities that take place. This requires that learners be

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and mechanical; children perform on cue and act a part. We need to keep
sight of why we want children to collaborate with one another. Peer confer-
ences need to be about helping children connect with another human being
in order to learn from him or her, to empathize, to hear peers' stories and
to understand their own stories more fully, to care about another person's
interpretation of the world, and to be able to identify and respond to an-
other person's perspective. In Calkins' words, "Perhaps the best way to ex-
tend peer conferences is by participating in them: listening, modeling, and
gently guiding" (1986, p. 132).

ERRORS: WINDOWS ON DEVELOPMENT

Errors need to be perceived as a result of learners' conceptions and
therefore not minimized or avoided. Teachers who listen effectively and
gather information regarding children's cognitive and affective functioning
help structure the opportunity for children's understandings, but it is the
student's own reflective abstractions that create the new understanding in
both writing and spelling.

By adult standards, the hypotheses and strategies children form may
appear to be mistakes or errors, but Ferreiro and Teberosky (1982) have
found that children's development follows a broadly common sequence of
development. With the benefit of appropriate experiences, their hypotheses
and strategies are ultimately superseded by more conventional ones.

An awareness of spelling, writing, and reading development, as well as
the so-called errors children make, can help teachers plan instruction. When
teachers observe children's learning, stages of development emerge. Observ-
ers, therefore, need to find frameworks in order to organize the information
they have gathered. Developmental stages are continuously being examined
by scholars and are, therefore, still tentative, but they do offer teachers a
way to shape their interactive teaching goals with students. With a schema
for children's development in writing, spelling, or reading in mind, a teacher
can judge errors as indicators of current functioning level and can determine
how to provide the appropriate scaffolding in dialogue over the language
arts.

OWNERSHIP, POINTS OF VIEW, AND DECENTERING

Recognition that the construction of knowledge is an active process that
each individual learner must carry out has led to a greater emphasis placed
on "ownership" of the activities through which learning is intended to take
place. This requires that learners be given a share in the responsibility for

selecting the tasks in which they engage, for deciding on the means to be employed in carrying them out, and for evaluating the outcomes. Only in this way can they gain an active understanding of the principles involved and of the procedures that may be effective in achieving the desired outcome. Another important reason for encouraging learners to take ownership of learning tasks is that it increases intrinsic motivation to seek and carry through a way of finishing a piece successfully (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). Graves (1983) concurs. He states that the data show that writers who learn to choose topics that are most meaningful to them make the most significant growth in both information and skills. By choosing the best topic, children exercise their strongest control, establish ownership, and, with ownership, gain pride in their pieces.

Unfortunately, many teachers view their children's lives as interfering with classroom business-as-usual (Goodlad, 1984). But when children choose to write about their own interests, ideas, experiences, memories, and knowledge, they are expressing their point of view about the world they inhabit and their concepts about that world. I agree with Wells and Chang-Wells when they say:

Each student's point of view is an instructional entry point that sits at the gateway of personalized education. Teachers who operate without awareness of their students' points of view often doom students to dull, irrelevant experiences, and even failure. (p. 60)

Instruction begins with the child's ideas, hypotheses, strategies, not the product he or she presents to us. We do not want the product—the writing, spelling or reading—to improve without the child's learning something that will help on another day; otherwise, our conversation will have been a waste of everyone's time. Further, a conversation on a product, rather than an idea, may even be quite negative because it tends to make students dependent on our corrections.

There are many ways in which, without meaning to do so, ownership may be taken away from a child in a conversation about his or her work. Sometimes, for example, teachers may stare at the paper the child reads, looking for mistakes rather than listening to what the child is trying to say. Sometimes I find myself reading a student's first line and wanting desperately to have him or her move it to the end of the piece, or I have heard teachers tell children they cannot write about dinosaurs or their sister because they have already written about these topics. Sometimes, before the conference even starts, I know that I want a student to add details. These may seem trivial, but we must become more aware of the kinds of actions we take. They communicate to children that underneath our words, we still want to be in total control.

The teacher's role, both in ways as possible for students to express their writing, to reveal themselves emotionally, but also to enable children to decide what to write about. Unfortunately, the teacher focuses on a unit of study, an upcoming report card, or what next. In the meantime, children come with their own voices, illness, fear of abandonment, superstitions, dreams, and hopes. Teachers and the children's, are often emotionally and this disempowers both the teacher and the child.

What empowers—what ought to be the "reality" that is unquestionably true for children realize that reality must be there can be multiple perspective of perspectives. (1986, p. 782)

Andy, a third grader, writes: "I cried and cried. His family is too poor and he'll buy me another bike so I can see of his mother's car and left in a parking lot. He was terrified. He says, 'I want to write a real book because I want to go to the moon how much she misses her friend writing as a way to deal with a world, her first language, and her mother wants to 'get my sad feelings out' who write best have most powerful lives" (p. 123).

Decentering from first-hand experience with words, stories, and pictures "semiotic spaces" (Wertsch, 1991). But there can be no decentering without imbalance; the writer pulls off center (Graves, 1983). Decentering implies being aware of where to stand, how far enough away to see the process from different vantage points, I take

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The teacher's role, both in words and deed, must be to find as many ways as possible for students to express their points of view verbally and in their writing, to reveal themselves and their conceptions, to reflect on their conceptions, but also to enable children to grow intellectually, socially, and emotionally. All of us learn by making choices. We scan our lives and we decide what to write about. Unfortunately, in many American classrooms, the teacher focuses on a unit of study, a textbook, mastery outcomes, the upcoming report card, or what next year's teacher will think about the child. In the meantime, children come to school with their own concerns: a divorce, illness, fear of abandonment or displacement, abuse, misconceptions, superstitions, dreams, and hopes. Unfortunately, the two agendas, the teacher's and the child's, are often emotionally and intellectually a universe apart and this disempowers both the teacher and the child. Greene writes:

What empowers—what ought to empower—is the recognition that there is no “reality” that is unquestionably given, the same for everyone . . . we can help children realize that reality must be understood as interpreted experience, that there can be multiple perspectives and multiple interpretations . . . a reciprocity of perspectives. (1986, p. 782)

Andy, a third grader, writes about how his bike was stolen and how he cried and cried. His family is too poor to buy him another one this year. He wants his story to be “so good that it will make my Dad feel sorry for me and he'll buy me another bike soon.” Doug writes about being kicked out of his mother's car and left in a parking lot because he fought with his sister. He was terrified. He says, “I want to finish my story and make it sound like a real book because I want to get even with my sister.” Leah writes about how much she misses her friends in Moscow. She is only 10, but she uses writing as a way to deal with a deeply tragic issue—the loss of her homeland, her first language, and her friends. She revises her writing because she wants to “get my sad feelings out.” Mem Fox (1988) says, “Those of us who write best have most power and therefore have most control over our lives” (p. 123).

Decentering from first-hand experience, representing experiences and ideas with words, stories, and pictures about oneself allows the creation of “semiotic spaces” (Wertsch, 1991) where children can negotiate meaning. But there can be no decentering unless the writer first sees a problem, an imbalance; the writer pulls off center because he or she wants another look (Graves, 1983). Decentering implies a moving away from the center but also being aware of where to stand, what to look at. When I write I place myself far enough away to see the problem at a distance. I circle my piece from different vantage points, I take multiple views and perspectives on my

work—the view of an audience of peers, of an editor, of my favorite colleagues, of the opposition. I give myself both space and time to help me deal with the problem: I return to my original intention in writing or reread my material one more time with all the other views in mind, but with my own view strengthened. The process is the same for children, too. Writing is a way to make meaning in our lives, and it takes time.

CONCLUSION

Recent research has transformed our definition of literacy and now offers insights into how to create classroom communities of literate thinkers. Literacy develops in response to personal and social needs. It is an extension of speaking, listening, and interacting with one's environment. It is a state of becoming, not a point to be reached. It is functional, real and relevant, and involves an active construing and interpreting of ongoing and changeable texts, not a simple absorption of rules and models.

Teachers informed by the new constructivist theories seek to support learning, not control it. They further inquiry, not orthodoxy. They continuously evaluate themselves, their students, and the system in which they teach. They collaborate with their students and encourage them to collaborate, not to compete, with one another. Rather than waiting for a child to be "ready" or the right age to begin, teachers instead create opportunities for children to participate in joint literacy events with other, more mature members of the literate community. They become planners, models, guides, observers of development, facilitators, and challengers to children's existing personal models of the world. Instead of using a finite list of language arts skills as a curriculum, teachers informed by the new constructivist theories know that learning to write, spell, read, and speak are never-ending processes of meaning-making.

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eers, of an editor, of my favorite col-
yself both space and time to help me
original intention in writing or reread
the other views in mind, but with my
is the same for children, too. Writing
s, and it takes time.

CLUSION

our definition of literacy and now of
room communities of literate thinkers.
onal and social needs. It is an extension
g with one's environment. It is a state
hed. It is functional, real and relevant,
d interpreting of ongoing and change-
f rules and models.

constructivist theories seek to support
inquiry, not orthodoxy. They continu-
ents, and the system in which they
idents and encourage them to collabo-
her. Rather than waiting for a child to
1, teachers instead create opportunities
teracy events with other, more mature
They become planners, models, guides,
s, and challengers to children's existing
ad of using a finite list of language arts
med by the new constructivist theories
read, and speak are never-ending pro-

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