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Tell Me What You Want, What You Really, Really Want: Student Preferences about Literacy and Learning

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Think of something different. Don't just stand up there and just drag on all the time and ask, you know, "What's going on here?" I mean, somehow spice it up!
--Sondra

Faded images of the Spice Girls come to mind as I talk with Sondra. I imagine teachers dressed in babydoll or athletic clothing, licking lollypops or turning handsprings in order to capture the attention of students. I shake my head in disbelief. Sondra continues, "I just get tired, you know, of the same old, same old thing. In every class, we read the story, talk about the story, answer questions about it in groups, and take a test on it. I mean, how dull is that?"

We can learn a lot from our students. As teachers we often complain about incomplete homework, tortuous discussions, halfhearted reading, and careless writing. The topic of lunchtime conversations in the faculty lounge becomes those students who just don't try hard enough. As my colleagues and I struggle for answers, exchanging and sharing what we believe are more effective and inspirational literacy practices, I notice that nowhere are students involved in this dialogue. They eat in a separate cafeteria. It seems that we teachers are the ones who are doing most of the talking for and about them.

Students like Sondra have a great deal to teach us about effective and ineffective learning experiences in the language arts classroom. They are, as Alvermann, et al., remind us, experts on the topic of their own experiences. Yet few educational policymakers or stakeholders

place student experiences with schooling at the center of their explorations. Part of the reason for this lack of student presence may be that few researchers have placed students' perceptions and experiences at the center of their attention (Erickson and Schultz). Researchers have sought opinions about their best teachers (McCabe; McDowell and McDowell). Attitudes about certain subjects and types of or contexts for instruction have also been examined (Fouts and Meyers; Maroufi; Oldfather; Shug, Todd, and Beery). Two studies provide a

I began the slow process of gathering information about students' perceptions

broader focus on student experiences (Taylor and Roselli; Wasserman). But clearly, there is a lot more to discover about students' ideas about literacy learning.

Three years ago I began the slow process of gathering information about students' perceptions of effective and ineffective language and literacy instruction. In brief, my research protocol involved interviews and surveys. I used the critical incidents technique, a qualitative data gathering tool that asks informants to "tell the story" of two incidents, one the best example of the construct under study and the other the worst example (Patton). The interview/survey questions asked students to describe fully their best and worst literacy learning experiences. I simply defined *best* as "I enjoyed myself and I really learned a lot" and *worst* as its

opposite. I also asked students to articulate desired changes in schools or schooling, requesting that they refrain from impossible demands like two-hour lunch breaks, even though we might all enjoy these. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis. In all, 75 students of varying academic abilities in grades 8-12 shared their experiences over a two-year period.

My analysis scheme was inductive. Using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss), I looked for domains and categories across student experiences. Participation with a local collaborative research team (Kasten, Kinner, McKeon, Newton, Padak, Peck, Styslinger, and Wuthrick; Kasten, Kinner, McKeon, Newton, Padak, Peck, and Styslinger) allowed for the opportunity to cross-check findings with those of other teachers. The discussion shared below focuses on common elements garnered from the student stories.

The Best

Overwhelmingly, students categorize those experiences in the language arts classroom as “best” which allow for creative self-expression. Be it dramatic, artistic, or musical, the young men and women interviewed and surveyed want opportunities to further explore the fine arts during literacy learning. Students list speeches, skits, plays, commercials, debates, and even “teaching the class” as favorite activities. Artistic projects remain in their memories as they tell of making books and taking pictures: “You get a camera, and you go take all the pictures and then he [the teacher] says, ‘make a project out of it.’ You have to use so many pictures and it has to relate to whatever you’re doing. Like, if you’re reading a book, it has to relate to the theme of the book or some idea in it, or you just have freedom to express whatever it is, you know?” Students fondly recall illustrating scenes and producing videos in response to reading. Also falling into this realm of the desired creative response are those practices relating to musical expression. In the ninth grade, one student had to locate and write about a song he thought explained a part of his life. Sean thinks that was “way cool.”

More specifically related to the reading process, these students poignantly recall those “best” experiences as those which allowed them opportunities for escape: “The best thing about reading is escaping from your life. It takes your mind off things and makes you feel better to hear that everybody else’s life is just as messed up as yours.” Johana agrees: “When you are reading, you can put yourself in another world. You can become that person in the book and do the things that person does. Reading helps me escape from the world I’m in and takes me to a totally different place.” Empathy is a byproduct: “A book just makes you think about certain people and life situations.” These young men and women astutely describe the “movie-in-the-mind” quality reading offers: “When a story really takes you places and puts you in the story itself, it’s lots like a little TV in your mind.”

In order for this mental flight and emotional understanding to occur, students want us to allow them to make more personal choices. They want to read what they want to read at a pace that is comfortable for them. Tanya, for example, tells passionately of a single opportunity to select a book that related to her experience, admitting, “I had a brother that committed suicide and it [*The Pact: A Love Story*] was about a suicide and it was about human relations, so I really, it was like you could understand it about a girl and a boy who grew up together.” They request independence in their reading lives: “Just give us a block of time and let us read.”

Similar to the reasons why these students enjoy reading are those why they enjoy writing: “The thing that I like best about writing is my stress outlet. I have a book that I write in when I’m really upset. If you were to read it, you’d swear I was suicidal. Writing is a way for me to vent all my anger and frustration in a healthy, constructive way.” The responses of Tiara, Sean, Obad, and Carlos are similar in theme. These students desire more opportunities for personal writing, moments to “write about things that are important in my life,” chances to “write about things I wish would happen in my life.” Opportunity for escape is reiterated as Susan admits to enjoying writing “because it takes me to a

different world that I create.” In this way, they can “learn stuff” about themselves. Again, these students ask teachers for more flexibility in assignments. “Please, let us write a short story on anything,” Beth pleads. They don’t want an assigned topic. The need for creative expression is a common theme among the stories told about best writing experiences.

The Worst

It is obvious that these students enjoy those activities which allow for independent expression. Sara likes opportunities to “talk about what your opinions are, like your opinions actually matter in the class.” Ed enjoys the “circle thing” where he is provided the opportunity to voice his own opinions about a book or story. And interestingly, students also share their appreciation for the research process, as long as it allows the opportunity to explore what interests them.

Not surprisingly, these students are tired of ineffectively managed collaborative assignments. They complain of teachers who haphazardly assign groups, leaving them “stuck with others who won’t do anything.” These young men and women think it unfair to “put a group of students together and expect all of them to turn in one report, and then grade them all on the same scale.” Many students tell of having to teach some “obnoxious boy [or girl] who slept in class and didn’t listen.” “Seldom am I paired with people who want to work and who care about their grade,” Sara, an A student, confesses.

While they may not expect us to turn handsprings, these young men and women want less lecture in the classroom. “Just having the teacher sit and explain things piece by piece every day gets boring. I really don’t like it when a teacher gets up and preaches at you.” Brad insightfully describes how some teachers talk too much about who the author is and when he died. “The authors want to be known by what they wrote, not by where they lived and when they died,” he rightly concludes. These students would like more current reading selections: “Everything you read is old.” Brittney suggests that teachers “get something more modern, something people

might care about because they’re going to be more interested and more in tune to learning and reading and even writing about it and everything.” They hate textbooks, prefer novels, and admit that the worst reading experiences are those in which they have no personal choices (as compared to the best reading experiences when they do have choices).

The worst writing assignments recalled are those that permit little flexibility: “Boundaries are everywhere.” Topics are assigned. These young men and women are tired of writing in journals and memorizing roots and stems. “Busywork,” they moan. They agree that you need to know what a noun is, what a verb is, but argue that “there’s got to be a better way than just passing out a worksheet and saying, ‘find the verb; find the noun.’”

Reflection

So what have I learned from Sondra, Sean, Johana, Tonya, Tiara, Obad, Carlos, Susan, Beth, Sara, Ed, Brittney, and the sixty-four other students I had the pleasure of chatting with? Talking with these students has reaffirmed my own beliefs in what constitutes good language and literacy teaching practice. Our students need opportunities for personal and creative expression during the reading and writing processes. We must better nurture the aesthetic response, broadening our conceptualizations of literacy to include more of the communicative and visual arts. As Flood and Lapp suggest, we should embrace a definition that encompasses “reading, writing, speaking, and listening to viewing and producing various modes of visual displays including dance, art, drama, computer technology, video, movies, and television” (343).

Students need chances to read and write about that which they feel passionately, selecting personal topics and conducting independent inquiry. They should be encouraged and guided in making their own decisions about reading and writing assignments. We must provide those experiences that allow for self-exploration and discovery, nurturing the processes of becoming within our students. Our guidance is needed, and we should do

our best to create those thoughtful moments in classrooms that allow young men and women to escape into and onto the page. We need to offer opportunities both for reflective independent and supervised collaborative work, carefully moderating the amount of our own talk. Journal writing, grammar assignments, and vocabulary study should be related to authentic reading and writing experiences. Above all else, I have determined from listening to these seventy-five voices that our students are astute and articulate. They want only to be more engaged in the processes of language and literacy learning. While I may not turn handsprings, I can offer them what they really, really want.

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World Literature and Multiculturalism in High School Curricula

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Overview

During the past twenty-five years, multiculturalism has become an important part of American schooling (Banks; Stover and Tway; Rasool and Curtis). This pedagogical development has necessarily prompted curricular changes. In many high schools and colleges, world history has replaced courses focusing on Europe and America. Less clear, however, is the relationship between world literature and multiculturalism, especially in high school curricula. The following discussion is an attempt to enhance our understanding of this issue.

Background

Literature written in English was not a distinct component of secondary curricula until the last third of the nineteenth century. In 1874, Harvard University began requiring the reading of standard authors as part of its admissions criteria in “English composition,” and in the early 1890s, Yale University made its entrance requirement in English literature separate from its composition requirement (Applebee, *Tradition*). Progressives championed subsequent pedagogical innovations, including the use of anthologies and literary works outside the nineteenth-century canon. Nevertheless, a fairly uniform curriculum existed between 1900 and 1950; academically tracked students usually took an American literature course in the junior or senior year of high school, followed or preceded by one in British literature. In the 1950s, students were increasingly permitted to take an elective instead of a course in British literature. The most common substitute was world literature, though such a course

usually contained a heavy dose of English authors (Applebee, *Tradition*). This development paralleled the continuing emphasis that secondary curricula placed on literature written by American or European (white) males. Indeed, as recently

The future of world literature . . . will remain uncertain until there is greater precision in defining the content

as the early 1990s, books on high school reading lists reflected these same attributes (Applebee “Stability” and *Literature*).¹

Context and Methodology

The present analysis focuses on survey data collected from high school language arts teachers in Greenville County, South Carolina, the largest school district in the state. Located in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, Greenville was part of the textile crescent spanning western South and North Carolina. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the region’s economy did not require, nor did it instill an appreciation for, advanced education. The region was characterized by low levels of educational attainment and a relatively homogeneous population whose cultural-political attitudes were (and

¹ The author of this article recently supervised a student teacher who instructed 10th and 11th grade language arts classes in a Greenville County high school. In those classes, students read *Lord of the Flies* and *Of Mice and Men*, respectively. This conforms to the pattern noted by Applebee.

remain) highly conservative. Even though Greenville has experienced significant change in the past decade (namely, an influx of Latin American immigrants and the second highest per capita foreign investment in the United States), the area's residents remain suspicious of—sometimes even hostile toward—diversity. These characteristics suggest a need for, but also potential obstacles against, implementing multicultural curricula in Upstate South Carolina.

With this context in mind, a twelve-item survey was mailed to Greenville's 150 high school language arts teachers in January 2002. The purpose of the survey was to clarify the frequency of world literature as a separate course offering; determine the actual content of, and attitudes toward, this course; and identify the strategies, if any, that teachers use to incorporate world literature into other language arts classes. The response rate (60 percent) was sufficient to validate the instrument, although the results, like all survey data, provide impressionistic, not definitive, answers to certain questions. Rather than form the basis of a curricular prescription, these data are more useful as a way to initiate a curricular "conversation," to borrow and modify the words of Arthur Applebee, a leading scholar of language arts pedagogy (Applebee, *Curriculum*). If the admittedly qualified results from the Greenville survey are at all representative of regional or national trends, then such a conversation describes an ambiguous situation. While students are likely receiving greater exposure to world literature than they did in the past, this exposure is neither systematic nor comprehensive.

Survey Results

Of the ninety teachers who responded to the survey, 36 percent indicated that they had taught a world literature course. That datum, however, is misleading. In Greenville, the school district currently uses Holt, Rinehart, and Winston's *Elements of Literature* series for grades 7-12. The textbooks for the third and fourth "courses" of that series, intended for ninth and tenth grade,

incorporate excerpts from "world" literature; the "fourth course" textbook actually uses the subtitle, "With Readings in World Literature" (Probst). As a result, five respondents indicated (through notations on the survey) that freshman and sophomore language arts classes in Greenville are equivalent to world literature courses. While this reasoning might be valid, the survey question did not contemplate such an interpretation. In retrospect, this item should have clarified the definition for "world literature course."

That some language arts teachers believe that utilizing the textbooks cited above is tantamount to a course in world literature is instructive. As advertised, the "fourth course" textbook *does* contain excerpts from world literature. Using the categories provided by the textbook itself, an analysis reveals the following distribution of readings: America, 75; Europe 19; Asia, 9; the Middle East, 9; the Americas (including Canada), 6; Africa, 2; South Pacific, 1. Thus, out of 121 selections, only 27 (22 percent) come from outside America or Europe. Even that figure is deceptive because the "Middle East" category contains six readings from the Bible. Despite the Bible's authorship by individuals from southwestern Asia, its resonance with a large percentage of Americans diminishes its relevance as an example of literary diversity; excerpts from the Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh* would probably serve that purpose better. Admittedly, readings in the "fourth course" by American authors reflect ethnic and gender diversity (which qualifies as one form of multiculturalism), but this variety does not make them "world" literature. Whatever the merits of the "fourth course" textbook, it provides only a cursory introduction to literary works not already found on most high school reading lists.

The tendency among some respondents to equate a tenth-grade language arts class with a world literature course was further highlighted in the responses given to the fourth question on the survey. When asked to identify the primary audience in world literature classes, 34 percent of the respondents indicated tenth graders. Though it is possible that some tenth graders in

Greenville have had the opportunity to take a world literature course, it seems more likely that these students were simply exposed to the excerpts found in the “fourth course” textbook (see remarks later in this article for a discussion of which students are eligible to take world literature). On the other hand, 44 percent indicated that twelfth graders were the primary audience in world literature courses; an additional 12.5 percent said that the student cohort was “mixed,” with three respondents defining “mixed” as eleventh and twelfth graders. Combining these data suggests that 56.5 percent of the students who have taken (or are taking) a world literature course were either juniors or seniors. This profile is consistent with the historical development of world literature as a course most frequently offered during the last half of high school.

Responses to items focusing on the actual content of world literature courses were more problematic from a curricular perspective. All but one respondent (97 percent) identified Europeans as the “most often represented” authors of world literature selections. According to respondents, significantly fewer readings are written by African, Asian, or Latin American authors (25, 28, and 28 percent, respectively). None of the respondents indicated that Australian or Pacific Rim authors qualify for the status of “most often represented.” These data confirm the longstanding tendency, as noted by Applebee and others, for world literature courses to concentrate on European authors. While there is nothing technically wrong with this focus, it certainly illustrates a constrained definition of world literature. One might plausibly argue, given the strong cultural and political affinities between the United States and Western Europe, that courses in world literature should minimize, not maximize, the inclusion of European authors. As we shall see below, this and other assertions depend on how one defines “world” literature and its objectives.²

² The percentages for this question should have totaled 100. Some respondents, however, marked more than one answer for this item, despite the directions on the survey to choose only one.

When asked if their personal conception of world literature included readings set outside the United States by American authors (for example, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*), 53 percent of the respondents answered affirmatively. Such a perspective undeniably possesses pedagogical value. Exposing students to literary works that illustrate how American authors depict other societies often provides insights into our own cultural preconceptions and biases. If, however, one employs the criteria of multiculturalism, this perspective raises some thorny issues. At its most basic level, a multicultural curriculum attempts to increase knowledge about, and appreciation for, a wide range of people and customs. James Banks, the eminent social studies educator, makes an important additional point. He distinguishes between curriculum “infusion” and curriculum “transformation.” In the former, experiences of various underrepresented and/or subordinated groups are added to curricula, *but are viewed through the lens of dominant groups and/or ideologies*. The latter attempts to present these experiences *from the perspective of the underrepresented groups and/or individuals themselves* (Banks). To effect curriculum “transformation” in world literature would therefore require the study of literary works describing or imagining a particular culture from the vantage of an indigenous, rather than an outside, observer.

The survey also asked language arts teachers if their definition of world literature included readings by non-American authors set in countries different from that of the authors’ origins (for example, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Ditch*—the author is Nigerian, but the story is set in England). Approximately 75 percent answered in the affirmative. This is almost twice the number who answered “yes” to the previous question. At first glance, this might seem curious since both questions involve writers who have a non-indigenous perspective on the cultures they depict. A key difference exists, however. While works such as *The Ditch* do not offer an indigenous viewpoint, they do not reflect an American one either. For this reason, respondents might feel more justified

including these works within their definition of world literature. Such a definition might not entirely qualify as an example of Banks's curriculum "transformation," yet it seems a more likely candidate than one that would label Twain's *Innocents Abroad* as "world" literature (to cite only one possible example).

A few observations are necessary. The survey under discussion was predicated on the assumption that one of the objectives of world literature is to provide a multicultural component within various curricula. Banks's notion of "infusion" versus "transformation" is one way, but not the only way, to assess world literature's success in achieving this objective. This article does not deny that some individuals (irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, or political ideology) *are* capable of describing and/or imagining the worldviews of those who differ from them. This article does contend that such depictions should be in the minority, not the majority, at least where multicultural issues are at stake. It would be highly problematic, for instance, to use a predominant number of American or European authors to present the cultures and traditions of Latin America. One could conjure up many other equally problematic examples.³

An impressive 80 percent of respondents stated that they incorporate elements of world literature into their other language arts courses. They do so in a variety of ways. The most common strategy is to use supplemental readings (72 percent), followed by formal/informal classroom remarks (32 percent), non-textual material (22 percent), and world literature textbooks (15 percent). Responses under the category of "other" (12.5 percent) included seven references to using the "fourth course" textbook. These data indicate that, in addition to textual

materials, Greenville's language arts teachers are using verbal cues to transmit information about world literature. Such cues often play a significant role in highlighting the importance of a particular topic or area of study. Only slightly over a fifth of the respondents indicated that they use electronic media ("non-textual material" including videos, audio tapes, and/or the internet) to incorporate elements of world literature into their courses. Interpreting this datum poses difficulty, since a number of factors influence the instructional use of technology. Perhaps the only conclusion that can be drawn is the need for further examination of additional ways, if any, that technology can be utilized to enhance the instruction of world literature.⁴

Teachers at high schools where world literature is never, or only rarely, taught were asked to identify the cause or causes of this phenomenon. Twenty-six respondents (29 percent) left this question blank. In retrospect, the wording of the question makes it impossible to determine why so many individuals failed to respond. Some might have skipped the question because their schools do offer world literature on a regular basis (one respondent indicated this on his/her survey). Others might have been reluctant to speculate without additional information. Among those who did respond, the most common answer (62.5 percent) was that world literature is not currently a high school graduation requirement in Greenville County. Other responses included staffing shortages (28 percent), lack of funding (5 percent), and a weak correlation to college admission (17 percent) and/or successful performance on standardized tests (11 percent). Two respondents (3 percent) indicated that the primary use of world literature as a bailout course was the reason for its infrequent offering; three other respondents noted this fact elsewhere on their surveys. Only 6 percent of the respondents believed that negative attitudes toward multiculturalism accounted for the infrequency of world literature in local high schools. Though this last datum might

³ World literature courses have many objectives, some of which have nothing to do with multiculturalism per se. For example, exposure to world literature allows students to compare the use of literary devices (metaphors, symbols, plot, etc.) across cultures.

⁴ Most secondary textbooks, including *Elements of Literature*, now list sites on the internet that provide supplemental material.

suggest that world literature's inability to gain a vocal constituency has little if anything to do with opposition to multiculturalism, the fact that world literature does not usually count toward one of the language-arts units required for high school graduation might support the opposite conclusion.⁵

When asked if high school students should receive "more exposure to world literature," respondents were almost unanimous in giving an affirmative answer. Out of 87 responses (3 individuals left this question blank), only 7 percent said "no." Among those who agreed with the question, one person added "absolutely" and another wrote "definitely." A third individual wrote the phrase "truly diverse," and several others placed an exclamation point next to their "yes" response. These additional notations seem to indicate enthusiastic agreement with the question, while perhaps also conveying a belief that current offerings and/or definitions of world literature are not sufficiently inclusive.

Conclusion

Like many school districts in the United States, Greenville County is attempting to employ multicultural curricula. World literature appears to be one way to introduce some students to a multicultural perspective during high school. The readings found in most world literature courses, however, remain focused on Western Europe. In South Carolina, part of this imbalance might be attributable to the state learning standards. The "Reading/English Standards" for twelfth grade mandate that "students will identify universal themes in the literature of all

cultures," and that they will "read a variety of print material" and "critique a variety of poetry." Despite this emphasis on "variety," a separate standard asserts that "the student will analyze the development of *British literature* [emphasis added] and literature of other cultures" (South Carolina Department of Education). This last standard appears to identify two categories of literature: "British" and everything else. Its wording probably reflects the prevalence of British literature courses in South Carolina high schools, a class usually taken by eleventh or twelfth graders; teachers, however, might also construe the standard to mean that they should emphasize works written by English-speaking authors throughout their language-arts curriculum. Finally—and perhaps most troubling—world literature's elective/bailout status in Greenville County likely creates the impression among students that it is a relatively unimportant course.

The exposure Greenville students receive to world literature in other language arts courses presents an equally ambiguous situation. That students are reading and discussing at least some non-American literature is a step toward a multicultural curriculum. On a qualifying note, the "fourth course" textbook (recall its use in tenth-grade classrooms and its emphasis on "world" literature) mostly contains selections written by American and Western European authors. This might technically fit definitions of "world" literature and multiculturalism, yet it seems more analogous to a restaurant buffet whose putative variety is based on offering several starches: They look different but taste similar.

In conclusion, a few points seem clear. The future of world literature in high school curricula will remain uncertain until there is greater precision in defining the content of such a course. Teachers and curriculum writers also need to specify more clearly the links between world literature and multiculturalism. This will necessarily involve a discussion of multiculturalism, including its goals and objectives. In areas where this dialogue can potentially generate community discord, education decision makers might opt to concentrate their efforts on less

⁵ The ability of students in Greenville County to count world literature as one of their four language-art units necessary for high school graduation ceased in the fall of 2001. But administrators do grant exceptions in certain circumstances. For instance, some students decide to drop out of the advanced-placement track in the twelfth grade. Those students would essentially repeat the curriculum they covered during their junior year were they to enroll in a regular twelfth-grade language arts class. To prevent this overlap, students take world literature, which does count as a graduation requirement in this situation.

controversial issues. In doing so, they will leave students confused over the significance of world literature and the importance of possessing a global perspective. Another point is worth considering. Textbook publishers and anthology assemblers make certain assumptions about what constitutes world literature. High school language arts teachers, trained mostly in American and British literature, probably do not think that they possess enough expertise to challenge these assumptions. Thus, even in areas where the broader issue of multiculturalism is largely uncontested, its content may lie, to some extent, outside the direct control of local teachers. We need to address this aspect of world literature if its future is to be less problematic than it is at present.

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Redefining Professional Development: Conversations Create and Sustain the South Carolina Reading Initiative

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“It is in learning and using language that we enter into and participate in the ongoing dialogue of meaning making in the communities to which we belong.”

- Gordon Wells, 1999

Conversations, participation in on-going dialogue, naturally evolve from significant events in our professional communities. Conversations can lead us to new understandings. The South Carolina Reading Initiative, a three-year long professional development experience for 2,100 teachers across the state of South Carolina, spotlights the value of conversation. Conversations from our first organizational meetings laid the foundation for interactions that continue to be critical to the evolution and success of the South Carolina Reading Initiative. This article uses those conversations to describe chronologically an experience that has the potential to change the face of literacy in South Carolina.

Organizational Conversations

First conversations were initiated in 1999 when Governor Jim Hodges of South Carolina announced the creation of the Governor’s Institute of Reading. The goal of the Institute was to improve literacy education across the state by helping teachers become more knowledgeable about reading and readers. In order to ensure the success of the Institute, the State Superintendent of Education, Inez Tenebaum, along with the Coordinator of the Governor’s Institute of Reading, Suzette Lee, determined that it should begin with a

“grand conversation” among literacy stakeholders in the state. They did this by orchestrating the South Carolina Reading Summit. The Summit design intentionally encouraged rich dialogue and active participation from 700 state teachers, state

Conversations can lead us to new understandings.

department staff, school district personnel, and university professors. At the Summit:

- Speakers focused on best practices in reading, writing and staff development.
- Small group conversations followed each speaker and were facilitated by individuals known for their expertise in literacy.
- Participants were charged with making suggestions about how to best help teachers in the state develop a knowledge base about reading to support readers.
- Recorders documented and summarized these conversations in writing.

Many participants in the Summit dialogue envisioned a long-term staff development effort. Some made connections to an existing three-year-long program by the National Council Teachers of English (NCTE). The Reading Initiative, sponsored by the National Council Teachers of English, involves professional readings, videotapes of best practice, and literacy

leaders who facilitate small yearlong study group sessions at individual school sites. A task force composed of Summit attendees condensed insights from the Summit conversations and investigated alternatives to long-term staff development. Finally, the decision to enter into a partnership with NCTE permitted South Carolina's evolving design to feature the use of multiple resources for long-term professional growth. A segment of this partnership would include revising and altering materials to fit the unique needs of South Carolina's Reading Initiative (SCRI). Like NCTE, South Carolina's Reading Initiative would involve teachers and their principals in small school-based study groups. However, unlike the NCTE model, literacy coaches would be hired by the school district to facilitate study groups and to provide instructional support in teachers' classrooms. Literacy coaches would be selected based on their expertise in language arts instruction. Coaches' instructional expertise coupled with a deepening and broadening of their knowledge over the three years of SCRI would help ensure that a common knowledge base would be developed among the 2,000 participants in SCRI. A teaching team of university literacy educators, who had prior experience with NCTE's Reading Initiative, were brought together to plan SCRI's instructional organization and content. At the same time, with state legislative appropriation, South Carolina school districts applied for \$50,000 grants to support SCRI in their districts.

Content Conversations

Conversations moved next to the details of staff development. Conversations with university colleagues and SC State Department of Education personnel began with questions about how to develop understandings of literacy theory while helping individuals connect theory to instructional practices. After many hours of state and national conversations, a culminating design for an innovative staff development model was born. The diagram on the following page illustrates the multi-tiered design of this long-term professional

development called the South Carolina Reading Initiative.

The design, instituted in the 2000-01 school year, illustrates the groups of people involved: state department personnel, university faculty, and literacy coaches from regions, districts and schools. Every district literacy coach leads approximately four study groups of teachers, each consisting of 10 to 15 teachers. South Carolina school districts identified as Greatest Needs Districts, on the basis of percentages of students scoring in the bottom quartile as measured by standardized tests, also participate in the Initiative at the school level. Literacy coaches spend four days a week in teachers' classrooms helping them experiment with instructional strategies congruent with literacy theories they have explored in study group sessions. Literacy coaches use professional journals and books, videos of classroom practice, and a variety of children's literature to help teachers explore best practices in the teaching of reading. Once a week, literacy coaches gather information about teachers and children. Reflecting on that information, coaches design instructional strategies to support teachers in becoming better teachers of readers and ultimately, help children become better readers. Coaches continue learning to help teachers extend instructional expertise based on identified needs of students and to design instruction that is congruent with current knowledge literacy practices by attending monthly regional and statewide meetings facilitated by the teaching team or literacy faculty from the University of South Carolina.

All literacy coaches meet with university teaching team members for three weeks each summer for intensive learning time as well as one day a month during the academic year. SCRI is organized into six cohorts or learning communities consisting of approximately 30 coaches from the regional, district, and school levels. A university teaching team member in conjunction with a State Department liaison and a regional coach lead each cohort.

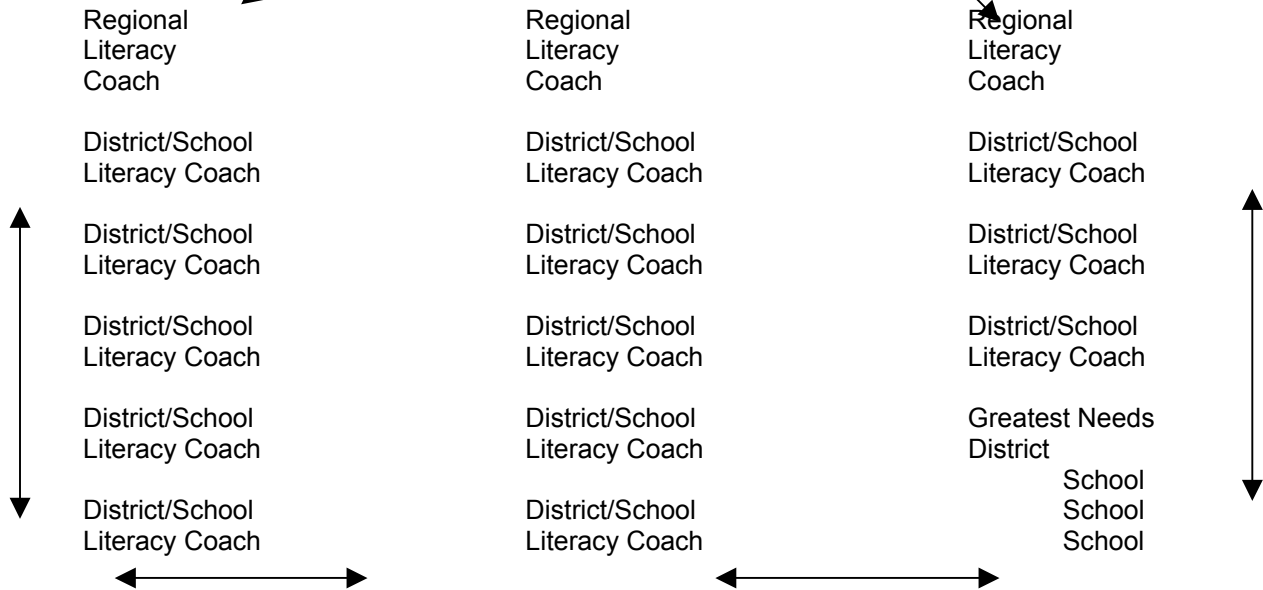
South Carolina Reading Initiative

Initial Conversations



Continuing Conversations

Teaching Team
Member and State Dept Liaison
(Cohort Leader)



The unique framework of SCRI staff development highlights a three-year initiative and features:

- o creating professional communities as safe contexts for learning,
- o learning engagements designed as demonstrations,
- o classroom demonstrations supporting teacher change,
- o professional reading and conversations necessary to ground personal knowing and change,
- o teacher choice as an essential element for instructional change,
- o the critical role of on-going coaching, and small group

conversations as key to creating the risk-taking environment necessary for teachers to test their growing knowledge base and practice.

Learning from Conversations

Looking closely at a staff development design that illuminates conversation as an element involved in sustaining instructional change enables us to appreciate what others have taught us about literacy learning (Barth; Routman). In South Carolina, conversation helped individuals identify what they want to know and connect with others to generate new ideas beyond their immediate experience

(Lindors). With SCRI, learning is a social process (Vygotsky). Learning communities support intellectual endeavors (Mills and Donnelly). An apprenticeship model, such as coaching, facilitate learning (Rogoff). In addition, choice of resources to use and developing personal questions related to professional reading combine to create a potent fuel to propel reform. Just as children need more practice and personalized instruction to become proficient readers (Allington), teachers need to take time to perfect instructional strategies as an expected part of staff development. Teachers need to take time to talk about reading behaviors as well as changes they noticed in their children's learning. A staff development model that encourage teachers to read professional literature, talk about their practice, share what they are learning as well as designing instructional strategies that facilitate children's development is grounded in on-going, authentic conversation.

Once the design was established, conversations among stakeholders turned to assessment. New conversations ensued as the University research team worked to investigate the significance of this staff development model. One major issue investigated with the support of the Office of Educational Research and Information at the US Department of Education is a study of how the beliefs and practices of SCRI teachers change across the three years of Initiative. Questions focusing the formal evaluation of SCRI include:

1. How do reading skills and strategies of SCRI children change over three years?
2. How will teachers' beliefs and practices change over three years?
3. Over three years,
 - a) How will the reading skills and strategies of SCRI children compare with the reading skills and strategies of non-SCRI children?
 - a. How will the standardized test scores of SCRI children compare with non- SCRI children?
 - b. What is the relationship of SCRI teachers' instructional

beliefs and practice to theory and to standardized test scores of SCRI children?

While investigation of initial data from approximately 2,100 teachers and their children is just beginning, a preliminary analysis of the teacher data seems to indicate that to varying degrees and within varying timeframes, SCRI teachers engaged in the processes of reflection, experimentation, and collaboration. These processes, although not named as such, provided critical learning experiences and were intentionally built into the design of SCRI. Throughout the first year, teachers repeatedly and explicitly highlighted the value of conversations that took place among their colleagues during the small group study sessions. Seemingly, such conversations were a significant construct that encouraged reflection, experimentation and collaboration to occur. Reflection, experimentation and collaboration are well documented as desirable learning processes (Routman; Hubbard and Power; Short, Harste and Burke). Without the explicit structure of conversation, these processes may not have been readily accessed and used in developing teachers' reading knowledge and instructional practices. Through professional conversations, teachers have opportunities to articulate what they know, ask questions that propel their own learning and construct new understandings with the help of others in the conversation. Conversations that took place within the learning communities built through small group study sessions contributed to the learning that occurred.

Using Conversations to Move Forward

As demands on teachers continue to increase, and calls for educational reform are heard (Barth; Darling-Hammond; Fullan), it is necessary for teachers to have a knowledge base developed from sound research closely related to what matters most to develop proficient readers (Stephens; Braunger and Lewis; Clay; Moustafa). Teachers develop a critical knowledge base by engaging in reflection related to current research and practice,

experimenting with instructional designs, and conversing with colleagues about professional literature and reading instruction. In South Carolina, we are learning that staff development engagements need to be on-going and include opportunities for participants to read, reflect, experiment, and collaborate.

Conversation is a tool used to facilitate professional learning and develop professional communities (Routman; Mills, Jennings, Donnelly, and Mueller; Lambert, Callay, and Dietz; Lyons and Pinnell). As Routman notes, "Without rich, powerful conversation, we remain isolated and limited in our practices and effectiveness" (520). Conversations allow children and adults to verbalize and sharpen their thinking as they teach one another. Small group conversations provide a context necessary for the risk-taking essential in developing effective, informed teachers. Conversations are the lifeblood of meaningful change.

Some participants have described SCRI as an extremely successful staff development program. Here are some of their comments:

- "All staff development in our district has been useless – except for SCRI."
- "We did not just learn about strategies and theories but we participated. For example, I could have read everything there is to read about the authoring cycle with little connection or impact. When I had to [read] and write and have someone else provide feedback, I realized the true value of the process."
- "One key was that SCRI is not just about activities. The activities served to immerse us in literacy, rather than in activities. Providing a clear theoretical foundation was key."
- "Our test scores appear to have improved so much that now everyone wants to be a part of SCRI."
- "SCRI is the pioneer movement of the 21st century."

The kind of richer, more powerful, engaging teaching discussed in the reform literature will not come about with more

isolated, one-shot training models conducted in the name of staff development (Allington). In South Carolina, it is critical that professional teachers learn how to improve reading skills and strategies of children by increasing their knowledge base and adjusting instructional practices to be consistent with reading research. During the first year of SCRI, conversation was an important construct to help teachers build a knowledge base about reading so they might strategically support the growth of readers in a theoretically sound manner. During the second and third year of SCRI, we look forward to continuing conversations that highlight how young South Carolina readers have changed due to their teachers who were courageous enough to become learners again.

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Comma Splice Queen: Bending Isn't Breaking and Ruminations on Putting Theory into Practice

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I am the Comma Splice Queen.

It's a sad, but all too true story that, regardless of the reams of paper I've spent in writing, I still struggle with what I've come to see as the bane of my existence as a writer—the comma splice.

Oh, I understand what brings them about: forcing two sentences together with inadequate marks of punctuation. I've taught the rules to my students; the alternatives to conjoining two sentences with a comma are but three: a period, a semi-colon, or a comma-conjunction combination. I confess these categories are my own and arrived at after my personal struggles, but the students seem to understand them. I like to think that my explanations of the categories are helpful, but I may be deluding myself.

A Brief Digression: A Hands-On Concept Lesson

I've even, when faced with extreme frustration and a desire to stamp out comma splices among my students, developed a tactile-kinesthetic concept lesson that helps. I bring in two lengths of electrical wire that are coated with plastic coating. I remove, or better yet get my husband to remove, the last inch or so of the plastic coating, cleverly exposing the wiring. I present the pieces of wiring to the students and ask them to think of the wires as pieces of a TV cable that a puppy has chewed through. The problem is that in the next five minutes, my favorite show will start. Whatever shall I do? Usually someone comes up with the idea of sticking the two pieces of bare wire together.

We do so. I give the wires a gentle pull and they fall back apart. At this point,

someone usually notices the black electrical tape on the desk. We tape them together; this time the gentle pull doesn't separate the wires. I heave a sigh of relief; my television viewing is saved. Should I watch television and forget about the wires, now that the problem is solved? After what's usually a lively debate, we arrive at the conclusion that the wires shouldn't be left taped. The puppy might continue to chew; it creates something of a fire hazard, we

I still struggle with
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think, and it's simply not the best solution. I bring out a collection of electrical connectors. They look a bit like the caps to a pen; you buy them in small containers at hardware stores.

Using the connectors, the wires are conjoined. What else might we have done? Left the electrical tape, surely. We could have replaced the wire or—ha!—paid for someone to replace it. We could have replaced the television or the entire cable. The options are somewhat limited.

At this point, I usually spring my *piece de resistance* on my students—the act of putting two pieces of wire together is called *conjoining*. Another way to say this is that the electrical tape or the connector is what links two pieces of wire. Do we have to use a *conjunction*, oops, I mean *connector*? No. We can replace the wire. If we were talking about sentences rather than wire, we also have just a few ways of conjoining or putting two complete sentences together.

Another way of saying this, naturally, is *splicing*. When we put the wires together with tape or connector, we splice them. When we put two sentences together, we *splice* them. And, as with the wires, there are effective ways to splice sentences and not-so-effective ways. Connecting the wires somehow cements the idea of splicing into the students' brains, and that's a good thing. After all, I don't want to have my title changed. I think it also stems from the shock I sustained when I finally realized, sometime late in my twenties, that *splicing* meant bringing two wires together and that splicing was what I was being accused of doing to my poor sentences. For some reason, I had never made the connection between what splicing meant in the "real" world and what it meant on paper. Go figure.

The Gulf Between Theory and Practice in Writing

To return to what is primarily my point, and this should all come together fairly easily—understanding the theory behind comma splices has never, to this date, helped me create a text that is comma splice free. Oh, I've become quite the authority on comma splices; hence, my title. I talk about them. They leap from my students' pages to my eagle eye. I can talk about comparing grammar check comma splices to the rules of the road.

But, I still produce them—without fail—in my own drafts and once on a blackboard.

If this is so, then I reasonably expect my students to have their own battles with writing, and I share this with them, as well (although I tell them they cannot, under any circumstances, lay claim to the monarchy that I possess). Not unlike the Sweet Potato Queens, my students and I learn to take what others may overlook and celebrate it. But that's another story altogether, and I've done enough digressing for the moment.

My students, however, are not your students. While once I shared the joys and challenges of the secondary classroom, I now work with pre- and in-service teachers. And, in working with my students, I run into occasional brick walls. One of them is

that theory is wonderful, but it doesn't mean much to the classroom teacher. Hogwash.

I've been there. I remember complaining to my master's thesis supervisor that theory was all well and good for him, but I had to figure out how to get kids who didn't want to read and didn't want to be in school past the exit exam. He could forget the notion of exciting them about literature, encouraging literacy in all its forms, integrating reading and writing with the rest of the curriculum, portfolios, and the writing workshop—I had to live and work in the real world that my kids inhabited.

Being wise, sage, and the extremely talented teacher that he was, Dr. Harry Kroitor listened to my ravings.

He smiled at me across the desk and said, "If the theory can't be used in your classroom, why are you here?"

Why Are We Here? Theory.

Dr. Kroitor was the first person, ever to ask me why I was in the classroom. His question took my breath away. For the first time I was able to get past all the paperwork and headaches that I lived with every day and ask myself what I was doing, and why.

I don't even remember what answer, if any, I gave to Dr. K. that day. I remember that his question started me thinking at a time when I needed to be thinking and not just doing. What was I doing? Why was I doing it? If it wasn't working, why was I still doing it? If it wasn't working, what else could I try? What did people like Dr. K. know about my students' writing and thinking that I didn't know? And, wouldn't it be great if I could just show these exalted professors in their carpeted offices and heavy bookshelves that they were wrong? What if theory didn't translate into practice? Ha! Now I had motivation.

What I didn't realize at the time was that Dr. K's question is one that teachers have got to ask themselves—over and over and over and over again—during their careers. It's just too easy and too understandable to become absorbed in taking attendance and lunch count and checking ID's and assigning homework and

going to IEP meetings and planning lessons and getting materials run off and calling parents and answering e-mail and reading *English Journal* and grading papers and going to faculty meetings and worrying about Ty's home life and helping Jo with catching up after being in the hospital again and . . . all the truly valuable, important, and necessary things that teachers have to do.

Why are we here? What do we want to accomplish? Why are we doing what we do?

The answers are theory. Motivations and goals are theory. Beliefs are theory.

If I believe that every student truly can learn, then all of my interactions with that student will show what I believe. I will put what I believe into action. It will come out in how I talk to the students, the amount of eye-contact I maintain, what I know and remember about that student, how I respond to the student's writing, how I plan my lessons for the class and for this student, my tone of voice, and how I ask questions of the student.

Being Bent Out of Shape: Theory

The students with whom I now work can get bent out of shape by the word *theory*. I understand; I've been there, too. It doesn't help that the people who put together these theories that we study have intimidating names for themselves and their ideas: Foucault; Transactional Theory; Bakhtin; Stasis Theory; Kinneavy; Modes of Writing; Four Blocks; Paradigm Shifts; Heuristics; and Moffett.

Being bent out of shape isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Theory can be intimidating. It tends to be written by scholars and philosophers in ways that are almost guaranteed to be boring, if not impossible to decode. If I pick up an article about composition theory, it seems to expect me to know a ton of theory already. The authors throw names and ideas around like seasoning.

I still shudder when I read the title *Philosophical Hermeneutics* on my bookshelf. I'm sometimes half-convinced that the reason people adore Gadamer's book is that no one understands it, but no one wants to say the emperor is wearing no

clothes. But then I'm reminded that "to suffer is to grow" and "no pain, no gain," and I reconsider.

Being bent out of shape isn't necessarily a bad thing for teachers; it's what happened to me in Dr. K's office that day. I had to be bent out of my everyday way of looking at life so I could begin to ask the questions that radically changed the way I saw my students, my classroom, and my life.

A little cognitive dissonance is good for the soul. I need to struggle with ideas if I'm going to grow. I teach this to my students. I believe it for myself.

Bending Isn't Breaking

On the other hand, bending isn't breaking.

The more I dug into theories and theorists as I pursued my education, the more I became convinced of one thing—if the theory didn't play out in my classroom on Monday, it wasn't worth getting upset about.

I'm not talking about a single half-hearted attempt to do something in my class that I'd read about. That wouldn't be fair. I decided I'd think about what I read and try my best to see if it worked. Then, when it didn't, I'd be able to gloat. Then, I'd have the ammunition I needed to fire away at these ivory tower folks.

I'd read something, say Foucault's ideas that the way we look at people ("The Gaze") is a form of discipline. And schools and society are more about discipline (getting people to do things) than they are about anything else. I'd puzzle about these ideas and invariably decide these guys were crazy and hadn't tried to teach my "remedial" students to write a sentence.

Then, being as contrary minded then as I am now, I'd try to find a way to test these ideas just so I could see them fall flat on their faces and lord it over the professors in graduate school who had no idea just how cushy their jobs were.

Looking at people=discipline. Yeah, right. I mean, this Foucault character never had to fact those fifteen kids across the desk, check for the dress code, be sure they all come to class with their books, think about that note that I got from the guidance

counselor, and spot the chewing tobacco and gum . . . I mean if he'd ever seen the mess that chewing tobacco can make in a desk, he'd know why I had to watch Jerry like a hawk.

Watch Jerry like a hawk.

If I'd been as contrary as a student as I sometimes am as an adult and someone had watched me like I watch Jerry, maybe I'd be sneaking in chewing tobacco and gum and other things just to spite the old biddy, too. Anyone would know, just from the way that she stares at me all the time that I can't do anything to please her.

Watch Jerry like a hawk.

All right, I'd just try a week of not watching Jerry like a hawk to see what happened. Hey, I could even write this stuff down. Then everyone could see. Even me. Not watching Jerry like a hawk made a huge difference in the way I thought of and interacted with this student. Making a conscious effort to forget the chewing tobacco stains and look at the student helped me, eventually, to learn to like Jerry and then to reach him in new ways. It wasn't immediate, but it happened.

Okay, so maybe Foucault wasn't all washed up when it came to the way I was looking at my students as being important. But I wasn't all washed up, either. He had a point, but so did I. He never had faced Jerry and the fourteen other kids in my classroom. He didn't know what I knew about the kids. He didn't know me, the school, the community where I taught, or what I wanted to do with these kids.

I could take getting bent out of shape and seeing Jerry in a new way if Foucault could take my totally disregarding and disbelieving some of the other things that he had to say. I might be bent by this idea or looking at my kids differently, but I wasn't about to break and say that Foucault knew more than I did. And, I shouldn't.

Bringing theory into my classroom meant knowing what I did, and why. It meant constantly asking myself questions and seeking answers from a variety of resources. It meant acknowledging that I could be both the Comma Splice Queen and a good teacher. It meant, and it still means, that bringing theory into what I do every day is bending, but not breaking.

“Some Few to be Chewed and Digested”: Useful Books for English Teachers

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In his famous essay “Of Studies,” Francis Bacon encourages his audience to read “not to contradict or confute; not to believe and take for granted; not to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is some books are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention” (439). When deciding which books to recommend to English teachers, I selected two I would place in Bacon’s final category, the books that should be read “with diligence and attention” (Bacon 439). For me, such books are based on sound theoretical grounds—clearly announced and articulated by the authors—and contain carefully considered applications of those theories in one form or another, thereby combining both theory and praxis. I have chewed on the ideas in these books for some time, found them to be useful in almost every course I teach, and know teachers from every level of instruction who have found the books to be valuable resources. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (now in its fourth edition) by Erika Lindemann and *Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory* (third edition) by Steven Lynn confront the challenges of teaching composition (the former) and literary theory (the latter) with a keen awareness of the complexity of the tasks. Lindemann and Lynn do not oversimplify their subjects, but they make them accessible to inexperienced audiences, while also sparking important questions about theory and pedagogy for experienced teachers.

My first encounter with the ideas in Erika Lindemann’s *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* came not from the text but from Lindemann herself. As a student in her

graduate seminar on the history and development of the English language, I benefited from her use of the approach to teaching writing that she advocates in this book. Although *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, as its title states, focuses on writing teachers and instruction, what I learned from the author and her book is that all teachers are (or should be) writing teachers, whether they teach Shakespeare, science, or mathematics; and if we are going to help our students, we must know something about the art of rhetoric, its theories, and its practice.

Lindemann divides her book into three sections: “The Composing Process,”

**Lindemann and Lynn
do not over-simplify
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“Rhetorical Theory and Practice,” and “Teaching as Rhetoric.” In part one, she examines the composing process, both what it is and what it means; in part two, she explores what teachers should know about rhetoric, linguistics, and cognition by analyzing the crucial theories on each subject and by discussing techniques that show the theories at work. The last section of the book seems the natural extension of the first two parts because it is clearly constructed with the earlier information in mind and contains valuable instruction in chapters entitled “Developing Writing Assignments,” “Responding to Student

Writing,” “Designing Writing Courses,” and “Teaching Writing with Computers.” Confronting the complexity of the writing process without a slick, contrived formula, Lindemann offers earnest and thoughtful advice based on sound theoretical principles and practical experience.

As English teachers, most of us have been taught to embrace critical theory and to appreciate its multifaceted multiplicity. Teaching our students about critical theory can be an exciting and challenging adventure, an opportunity to engage them in the many ways of responding to texts. Many students, however, resist the notion of critical theories and see theory in general as a “distraction.” For some of our students, their first direct encounter with theory comes when they are just beginning to pursue their love of literature; and critical theory may seem an obstruction rather than a means of transformation.

Steven Lynn’s *Text and Contexts* provides an important bridge between critical theory and the careful reader. The book explores the major critical theories of the twentieth century, including a selective overview in several introductory chapters and more detailed examinations of particular approaches in subsequent chapters. Lynn organizes the vast array of theories into chapters on the following: New Criticism; reader-response criticism; deconstruction; biographical, historical, and New Historical criticism; psychological criticism; and feminist criticism. In each chapter, not only does he explain the purpose of each theory, reviewing its major tenants and practitioners; but he also shows his readers how to write that type of criticism and includes his own essays using the theories in question. Never reducing the act of criticism to a formula, he takes us through the process of reading, thinking,

and writing about literature by using critical theory. By focusing on the process, Lynn achieves in *Texts and Contexts* what many other textbooks on critical theory do not: he so closely intertwines the literature and the theory as to make them one creature; rather than constructing a matrix of terms to be indiscriminately applied to texts, he thoughtfully supports the process of reading and writing with questions and with personal revelations in annotated drafts of essays. The book is clearly organized and has a conversational tone that is welcoming to students who are unfamiliar with critical theory and teachers who are searching for ways to make theory available (and valuable) to their students.

In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* and *Texts and Contexts*, I have found the voices of teachers who have the “courage to teach,” to borrow Parker Palmer’s phrase. Lindemann and Lynn are never smug in the knowledge of their accomplishments; they recognize the difficulty of teaching writing and theory, but they are not afraid to face such challenges. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* and *Texts and Contexts* can serve as guides for those of us who also choose to follow the English teacher’s rugged but rewarding path.

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Viewpoint

Teachers Lead the Way to Perception and Understanding

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The choice of words will shape the world.

This provocative statement is attributed to a diplomat in attendance at the Congress of Vienna as the crowned heads of Europe assembled to repair the damage done by Napoleon.

For those of us who deal with the coinage of words in our professional specialties, the aphorism is worthy of reflection, if only as a sobering reminder of the magnitude of power and influence contained even in the simple words that govern and color the smallest actions of everyday existence. Undeniably indeed, as merchants of words, we teachers of English and rhetoric have the capacity—and the responsibility—to mold and to shape a world for the new generations of young people passing through our classrooms.

Unlike the illustrious gentlemen of Vienna, however, we teachers do not presume to impose our personal faith or convictions on others. Instead, we provide building blocks and guidelines that enable young people to create a perception of the world along wholesome and rational avenues. We do this by planting and nourishing in them a facility in the use and understanding of words, the garments of ideas, the raiment of culture and civilization.

The Congress of Vienna was convened in 1815 at a time when the history of Europe had reached a dramatic and significant turning point. Older values were dropping rapidly into oblivion, and new ideas were struggling to be recognized. Today, in our own time and in our own social system, something comparable is taking place, but on a more comprehensive

scale than the events of the last century. In America, today, society is undergoing a monumental transformation more profound than any social development in recent Western history. Our value system, standards of ethics and morality, role and rights of individuals, all of the elements comprising communal life are being affected by the cosmic forces of change.

**"The choice of words
will shape the
world."**

We all know that massive fundamental metamorphosis may take place in the structure of civilizations over the span of centuries. We know, too, that these great social changes are not in themselves either good or evil, but only that they are inevitable and inexorable.

In addition, we recognize that, like the generations before us, America is struggling to absorb and understand the new forces emanating from change. The relationship between the individual and society differs radically from that which prevailed in the childhood of our grandparents. Notably, for example, the scope and intensity of parental authority in the family environment have been altered by social and economic circumstances. The voice of the pulpit with its stern message of discipline and obedience is modulated in accord with a more rationalized spirituality. The rights of the individual have been elevated to new levels of eminence.

All of these currents of change converge to affect the climate of our

classrooms, while the role of the teacher in service to society becomes more demanding and more sensitive. Dissemination of the "word" becomes a more complex function as teachers attempt to lead the way to perception and understanding. Words and what words represent comprise the hallmark of civilization. Not only do they serve as a vehicle for transport of factual information, words serve also to convey the

abstractions of tradition; the mysteries of mythology, history and faith; the elements of the collective human spirit; and the reality of all that has gone before and all that the future holds for the mind and soul of humanity.

The thought is more meaningful and valid in our classrooms today than it was in the vaulted conference room in Vienna. "The choice of words will shape the world."

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