

Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 2

1-1-1988

Toward Teachers Defining Good Teaching

Julie M. Jensen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Jensen, Julie M. (1988) "Toward Teachers Defining Good Teaching," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1696>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

TOWARD TEACHERS DEFINING GOOD TEACHING

Julie M. Jensen

One of the important concerns in our profession is the need to reconcile theory and practice, and we often do this by stressing "practice that is informed by theory." But I would like to look at this concern in a different light and emphasize the reverse: theory and research that are informed by practice. I will argue for a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice for at least four reasons: a recent experience in my life, a project I just completed which grew from that experience, some wrinkles in the professional literature which reinforce my argument, and a lifetime of scientifically untainted memories.

First, the experience. Along with fifty-nine others, I attended a three-week conference in July 1987. It was sponsored by NCTE and several other organizations which share its goals, together known as the Coalition of English Associations. We pondered the course of English teaching from our diverse vantage points. We were from elementary, secondary, and college levels of schooling. We were professors of English, teacher educators, school district office personnel, and, most important of all, we were kindergarten through grade twelve classroom teachers. We met daily in groups that maximized our diversity and in groups that minimized it.

I was one of a fifteen-member contingent representing the elementary school level, and I bring up this conference because it is a graphic example of

the practical wisdom of classroom teachers--in this case elementary school classroom teachers. Their presence at the conference was critical to its success. Among their contributions was an ability to support their views with concrete examples of sound practices and school realities. Time and time again they helped others to understand why and how to put students first--before a textbook, a test, a favored literary work, a trusted teaching method. They patiently and persistently demonstrated how knowledge about children's language and learning forms the foundation for decisions about goals, curricula, and methods. Near the end of the conference I asked several prominent English educators-- Wayne Booth, Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, Richard Lloyd-Jones, Andrea Lunsford, Robert Scholes-- "What influence do you think elementary teachers had on this conference?" Here are some of their answers:

-We've all ended up trying to express the special combination of emotional and cognitive engagement they talked about and exemplified.

-Their influence was profound because of their emphasis on teaching children, on child-centered approaches. They had a humanizing effect.

-They focused upon the learner as inquirer.

-They taught us what it means to teach a child.

-They established an emphasis on interaction.

-They forced us not only to talk about but to experience literature.

-The concepts of interactive learning and student-centered teaching dominated the conference --because of elementary teachers.

For the elementary teachers at the conference, it was not good enough to talk about schooling in the abstract; they illustrated their positions with specific pictures and stories of effective language arts classrooms.

That brings me to a second reason for talking about theory and research that are informed by practice: a just-completed project that grew out of the conference experience. What began as good-natured grousing among a few of the elementary teachers about how the college people in the group would probably end up with any publications about our work, followed by a challenge from me that they come up with a satisfying solution, ended with a book to be published by Heinemann Educational Books, Inc. in time for the 1988 NCTE Convention in St. Louis. This book is intended to enlarge our conference work and to sustain a point of view on which we were united: that kindergarten through grade eight classrooms, to say nothing about classrooms for grades nine through twelve, can have environments which are in harmony with what we understand about how children learn language. Though the book had two parts--our final conference report and eight classroom-based stories which illuminate that report--the book is not in the least about the power of a report. It is very much about the power of story.

We believe that, just as children can be transformed through the power of story, so too can teachers. Stories are a source of pleasure and insight, capable of lifting teachers, like anyone else, from their individual experiences into the world of the storyteller. Through stories teachers can gain new perspectives on their own environments and the people who inhabit them. They can see how others live and how they respond to important questions in their lives; they can recognize themselves in stories--their beliefs and attitudes, hopes and fears. Stories can launch a quest for self-discovery. The reader of a tale, faced with its puzzlements and problems, comes to ask Where do I stand? What would I do? How could I do better? Our book, Stories to Grow on: Demonstrations of Language Learning in K-8 Classrooms, is intended to establish connections among teachers--those in the book and those who will read the book. By telling our stories we hope to become so real to readers that they will become participants in the stories. Then, seeing reflections of themselves, they will come to take part in a long, continuing story of professional growth.

My third reason for talking about theory and research being informed by stories about practice is the growing attention directed to examples of good practice in the professional literature. Our stories, along with the portraits, for example, of Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, stand in stark contrast to the familiar fact-and-figure-laden rhetoric intended to establish pathology in education. Like Lightfoot we have tried to create richly elaborated instances of "goodness" in teaching. The power of stories teachers can tell lies in their richness of detail. Stories provide nuance, they embed ideas and practices in familiar contexts, they account for the importance of affect, they clarify relationships, they communicate in everyday language to diverse audiences, they persuade people to think about complicated issues, they are holistic and comprehensive

statements, they are hopeful, empathetic, and confidence-building. By viewing teachers as primary informants, as reflective and wise practitioners, by identifying teachers with vision and using their stories as a vehicle for knowing and changing, we can compose a picture of good teaching. Where better than in teachers' tales will we find the specifics of school life, specifics that will allow the identification of general patterns?

Stories are, at long last, coming into their own as a text, a data base, for researchers. While it has not been fashionable to value the wisdom of practice as a source of knowledge about teaching, even those researchers who do not consider the elementary classroom their home are beginning to ask good teachers what they believe, understand, and know how to do that enables them to teach well. Best of all, the line between teacher and researcher is growing less visible. The documented observations and conclusions of those who have daily contact with children in classrooms are making substantial contributions to the professional literature. The result is that portrayals of expertise in teaching are becoming more accessible. Lee Shulman is one who has been conducting "wisdom of practice" studies. The descriptions of excellent teaching he has been gathering will become the basis for principles of good practice, which, in turn, will yield guidelines for educational improvement. Pointing out the extensive but unarticulated knowledge of practitioners, Shulman (1987) writes, "A major portion of the research agenda for the next decade will be to collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature and codifying its principles, precedents, and parables" (12).

So, through a conference, a forthcoming book, and a segment of the professional literature, my contemporaries transported me to their classrooms in a way that only a story can do. But of all the stories each of us has to tell, not all are set in the present. We were all students of the English language arts before we were teachers, and that brings me to my fourth reason for arguing today that practice can inform theory. I believe our memories are still another source of stories to grow on. I invite you to join me on a trip into our pasts where we will search our school years for models of teaching that inspire growth. As you listen to my stories, I hope you will identify takes from your own past and invest them with as much detail as your memory allows.

Here are some milestones in my life as a public school student in small-town Minnesota:

- The day we made butter, and the time we spent constructing, stocking, and staffing a grocery store in Miss McNelly's kindergarten classroom.
- The trip Miss Heidenger's fifth-grade class took to the state capitol building in St. Paul.
- The weeks in Miss Ardolf's sixth-grade class during which we created a half-scale papier mache giraffe, which we donated to a Minneapolis children's hospital.
- the trial-and-error search with a classmate for the identity of a chemical element presented to us in Mr. Summerfield's senior chemistry class.

What I knew during those days and weeks of kindergarten, fifth grade, sixth grade, and twelfth grade was that school was immensely important to me

and that I couldn't wait to get there. How could I miss a chance to churn, to say nothing of taste, our own butter? How could the class grocery store possibly open without the day's cash register operator? How could a giraffe get built without the assistant chair of the paste-mixing committee? How could I miss a close up look at the gold horses at the base of the capitol dome? How could Georgine, my chemistry lab partner, identify zinc without me?

What I know now is that I had four teachers who could plan and guide not only memorable, but instructive, English language arts experiences. As butter-makers we learned lessons in how to listen to each other and to adults, how to read a recipe, how to follow directions, how to take turns, how to report a school activity to those at home, and how to invite the school principal to an important event without forgetting essential information. As grocers we learned how to make cooperative business decisions, how to read and compose ads, how to label and price merchandise, how to fill-out order forms, how to please a customer, and how to respond to a complaint. In order to go to the capitol we learned how to plan a trip-- where to write and what to find out, how to listen to a tour guide, how to ask appropriate questions, how to record key information, and how to write a news story upon our return. (Unfortunately, my friend, Janice, did not learn how not to throw up on the bus.) As giraffe-makers we read about size, shape, and color, we became planning committee members, we developed a schedule, we composed letters to possible recipients, we arranged for delivery, we made an informative and gracious presentation, we were interviewed by the local newspaper, and we composed a photographic scrapbook of the stages in our process. As teenage chemists we learned the importance of collaboration, of reading detail, and of recording observations with precision and in a standard form.

I dredge up these details for anyone who needs reminding that making butter, running a successful grocery store, constructing a papier mache giraffe, taking a field trip, and identifying a chemical unknown are basic. They are not "enrichment" experiences intended to occur after the "real" business of the school is conducted. They are the real business of the school. One cannot engage in experiences such as these without learning how to learn, without becoming a better listener, speaker, reader, and writer, to say nothing about learning lessons in social studies, science, and mathematics. Most obviously, one cannot be a participant in experiences such as these and be left without memories.

Presidents of NCTE have for some years had themes. Mine is "Taking Language to Heart." Both my theme and the book I have described are a salute to teachers who touch the hearts of students, teachers who create communities of language learners where memories are built.

But this positive, warm theme does not mean that I lack concerns. While I am sustained by exemplary teaching in many classrooms I visit, by the work of talented teachers I read about in the professional literature, and by my own good memories, I despair of the prominence of those who would have us teach facts, of those who think the answer is skills, of those who would respond with yet another test, of those who constrict, constrain, impose. And I must confess that, while some of my own school memories sustain me, more of them escape me. I did not confine my sharing of school experience to five because of space limitations or because of compassion for my audience, but because the well ran dry. The memories I have detailed were the exceptions.

My professional views today are influenced in no small measure by the nameless and faceless who never let a meaningful experience interfere with their dedication to the gnats' eyes of the English teaching world. It is as much a surprise to me, as it would be to them, that I am where I am today -- this elementary school student from the middle reading group, this junior high student with a D in English. It's a good thing NCTE officers aren't subject to confirmation hearings. For me, as for many students today, school was for the most part an undifferentiated blur, a prolonged sequence of dispassionate, unconnected motions. With few exceptions it was neither engaging nor affecting, and it is not memorable. Skills were taught in the absence of any function apparent to us and without content of enduring value. Content was transmitted without a meaningful context and without our involvement. Preoccupation with the head was nearly complete.

Tuned out students aren't new. Critics of the schools with simple solutions to educational problems aren't new. Forgettable teachers aren't new. Neither are teachers with large measures of practical wisdom new. But it is those teachers who know and can do who are more important as a source of insights for the improvement of teaching than we have acknowledged. Who can demonstrate better than they the range of talking, reading, and writing that can go on and for what purposes in an instructive and memorable language learning community?

Let me give you a few examples of what Miss McNelly, Miss Heidinger, Miss Ardolf, and Mr. Summerfield knew and could do.

They knew something about those buzzwords of today --ownership and empowerment. Our talking and reading and writing were about our butter, our

grocery store, our trip, our giraffe, our experiments. How significant that we thought we were in charge. Ken Macrorie likes to call our guiding hands 'enablers,' not teachers. Though these enablers never read Macrorie's book 20 Teachers (1984), they certainly knew about drawing out learners and challenging them to produce good work. They got to know us; they created circumstances for our learning; they made it possible for us to succeed. We felt pride, and power, and confidence.

These teachers knew something about social learning as well as individual learning. In all the memories I shared, I was a member of a learning community rather than an individual in a captive audience. My teachers didn't seem to think that we would come to control our worlds through language if they held the view that all learning came from them. We interacted with each other as well as with the teacher; we talked, read, and wrote together in order to carry out personal and social goals that were worth achieving. Yet, I doubt if any of these teachers consulted John Dewey (1916), Jerome Bruner (1971), or Margaret Donaldson (1978) on the power of social learning.

These teachers seemed to understand that every one of us came to school with ideas, interests, worries, and feelings of our own. We all knew about and cared about something. And, in all likelihood, that is exactly what we were eager to talk about, read about, write about. I know my teachers didn't read Neil Postman's (1979) views about personalizing language experiences for students, yet when we learned the format of a business letter we learned it in the context of a piece of discourse that was compelling to us; it was a form we needed to use in order to accomplish our purposes. When it was time to make written arrangements to visit the capitol in St. Paul, my teacher did no cajoling.

She depended on no textbook or workbook, and we took no multiple-choice tests on terms like "salutation" or on the placement of a comma in a date. Our agendas were fully compatible. How did she know without Postman to tell her that "language growth originates in the deepest need to express one's personality and knowledge, and to do so with variety, control, and precision.?" () How did she know that using language, knowing, and living are supposed to be intertwined?

These teachers knew the meaning of active learning. Instead of listening to a warmed-over lecture or completing an assigned textbook reading we saw, tasted, touched, and smelled what we talked and read and wrote about. We visited a grocery store, walked the aisles, interviewed an employee--all of which stimulated more talking, reading, and writing. My teachers didn't read John Goodlad's A Place Called School (1984). No matter. The flat, unaffectionate, passive classroom he observed are not places they would understand. It wasn't for them that he wrote:

The relentless monotony of telling, questioning, textbooks, and workbooks which we found to be so characteristic of classes from the fourth grade up must be in part replaced by activities calling for student involvement in planning and in the collaborative execution of plans.... In the process they read, write, compute and deal with the problems of people, their environment and the relationships among them.... A major problem of schooling is the degree of unconnectedness it often has with reality beyond the school. The incongruity between school as it is and the lives they are living makes much of school meaningless.(335)

To all of these teachers, language made no sense unless it was whole. Attention was directed to its significant use in integrated and worthwhile experi-

ences. We didn't have to be told to be convinced that language had practical value in our lives. We seldom used language to talk about language; we used it to talk about our world. We began with things worth doing, then, moved by our interest, acquired the necessary skills.

These teachers knew something about the raw materials of learning. They appear to have shared a view that it's difficult to be passionate about the content of a textbook. We learned from talking to people, from examining and experimenting with materials in the classroom, and from going places, most particularly places where good books could be found. From a book about running a dairy, a book about Cass Gilbert, the architect of the state capitol building, and books about giraffes we learned the power and the promise of reading. My teachers would never have prompted Lynne Cheney to write about textbooks as she did in American Memory (1987), for they seemed to have a taste for materials that increased the appetite for reading and modeled fine writing. In general, they saw more instructional promise on a Wheaties box than in a teacher's manual. Though they were more likely to know Rachel Carson for her book Silent Spring, they seemed to subscribe to her philosophy of education expressed later in The Sense of Wonder (1956). In my favorite passage, Carson recounts the experiences she shared with her nephew, Roger:

When Roger has visited me in Maine and we have walked in these woods, I have made no conscious effort to name plants or animals nor to explain to him, but have just expressed my own pleasure in what we see, calling his attention to this or that but only as I would share discoveries with an older person. Later I have been amazed at the way names stick in his mind, for when I show color slides of my woods plants it is Roger who can identify them. "Oh that's what Rachel likes -- that's bunchberry!" Or, "That's juniper but you can't eat those green berries -- they are for the squirrels." I am sure no amount of drill would have im-

planted the names so firmly as just going through the woods
in the spirit of two friends on an expedition of exciting dis-
covery. (18)

Implied in all of these overlapping descriptions of my larger-than-life teachers is a call to dust off some age-old ideas about the role of meaning in the school experience. The best possible environments for language learning are not prepackaged through legislation; they are not ready-made between the covers of a textbook; and they are not revealed in published test scores. Growth is not installed from the outside for teachers or for students. Instead, it is active; it is personalized; it is collaborative. It is nourished by conversation, by reading, and by writing among teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

Just as students need to hear and see, talk and share, read and write in order for meaning to emerge from their experiences, so, too, do teachers. The best among us are not purveyors of facts and skills, not sages; they are learners. They are not teachers of writing and fonts of knowledge about the true meaning of a literary work, they are writers and readers who know how to guide other readers and writers in a supportive environment. For most of us, our task is to try less hard to be teachers and to try to be learners--to teach as we were taught in the best of our memories.

All of us have Miss McNellys, Miss Heidingers, Miss Ardolfs, and Mr. Summerfields to take cues from and to express gratitude to. They showed us how to learn from experiences that interested us and involved us deeply, they celebrated our good work, they made us feel proud and accomplished, they preserved our curiosity, and clearly, they built memories that endured. They

enriched our minds by touching our hearts, and they did it in the most delightful, artful, and powerful of ways—through language.

As we try to find our way toward better teaching and learning of the English language arts, my hope is that we not only heed the advice that our practice be informed by theory, but also that we attend to the stories of our wisest practitioners—those among us now and those in our memories.

References

- Bruner, Jerome S. "The Process of Education Revisited." Phi Delta Kappan 53 (1971):18-21.
- Carson, Rachel. The Sense of Wonder. New York: Harper & Row, 1956.
- Cheney, Lynne V. American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1987.
- Dewey, John. Democracy and Education. New York: Macmillan, 1916.
- Donaldson, Margaret. Children's Minds. London: Fontana, 1978.
- Goodlad, John. A Place Called School. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984.
- Jensen, Julie M., ed. Stories to Grow on; Demonstrations of Language Learning in K-8 Classrooms. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1988.
- Macrorie, Ken. 20 Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Postman, Neil. Teaching as a Conserving Activity. New York: Dell, 1979.
- Shulman, Lee S. 1987. "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform." Harvard Educational Review 57 (1987):1-22.

Julie Jensen is an elementary school teacher who is currently President of the National Council of Teachers of English.

Reprinted with permission of Heinemann Educational Books, Inc. from *Stories to Grow On: Demonstrations of Language Learning in K-8 Classrooms*, copyright 1988.