

June 2008

## The Words of Peter Johnson

Cindy Morris

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

---

### Recommended Citation

Morris, Cindy (2008) "The Words of Peter Johnson," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol40/iss3/13>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

# The Words of Peter Johnston

BY CINDY MORRIS

Once again the Michigan Reading Association's annual conference gave me a renewed enthusiasm for teaching and, maybe even more importantly, an unsurpassed learning opportunity. I was especially thrilled this year because I was asked to interview Peter Johnston, the author of many books, including *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* (2004). Peter Johnston is a native New Zealander who has an incredibly impressive record of teaching and publishing and is a true leader in the field of education. I must admit the idea of sitting down and talking with a luminary in the field of education was awe-inspiring.

I began my interview with a question about praise. The question was important to me because of remarks he made during his presentation on creating resilient students. He defined a resilient student as one who maintains a focus on learning when the going gets tough. Resilient learners will understand that if they act strategically they can accomplish their goals. I was inspired about teaching my students to become resilient. I wanted my students to, as Peter put it, "embrace challenge for the sake of learning."

The key moment for me in his presentation was when he talked about how teachers reduce resilience. He listed several examples of teacher talk that can reduce resiliency in students. I could feel my head nodding yes with each statement proud that I had avoided phrases like "I'm disappointed in you," "you're a bad girl," or "you're not good at this." These forms of criticism can paralyze kids. I was feeling very confident up to the point that Peter began listing phrases that I have said, including "I'm proud of you," "you're a good girl," and "you're good at this." These words also encourage children to judge themselves on the basis of their successes and failures. I had used the phrases to create confidence nearly every day—confidence, I now realized, but not resilience.

When I asked Peter about this during our interview, he pointed out the problems with empty praise and how often teachers use it. I told him how hard it would be for me to stop saying what came so naturally. He said, "We're all so used to judging." Peter went on to explain that the most useful response is to show the child how his actions resulted in the success or how her persistence accomplished something. Peter suggested that because empty praise

comes so readily out of a teacher's mouth, to try saying nothing by taking a breath to think first. He reminded me of an old Quaker saying, "Say nothing unless you can improve on the silence." As teachers, he went on, "We often think things need to be right or wrong, or we focus on whether it's what we want, or think is right, rather than learning from what the child has to say." He warned that it is easy to create dependency on praise, which will undermine resiliency. While I have always wanted to respond to my students in a positive way, there are other ways to be positive besides using praise, such as sharing enjoyment, showing engagement, and interest.

My second question came as a result of a struggle I have been having over the past year with grading, especially in writing. My thinking was that grades can paralyze students just as quickly as words. I wanted to hear Peter's ideas. He paused and then said, "We live in a competitive society. It is part of our culture to reward good achievements." He explained that grades tell us whether we are being successful. He went on to say if the students, parents, and families approach school with the mindset that learning and personal growth will take place, then grades don't have such an impact. The question he wants students asking is, "How can I grow?" What we should hope for, according to Peter, is, "If we look 20 years out, we want kids having better conversations about education than adults do now." To sum it up he said, "We will always have people being more or less successful at things, however does it mean they are less valuable?"

I asked him about the differences between U.S. and New Zealand schools. He shared that New Zealand does not use the high stakes testing that we have in the United States. The teachers are given more

*Cindy Morris is a fourth-grade teacher in Lapeer Community Schools*

freedom and perhaps there is more of a culture of sharing and support among teachers. Commenting on principals in New Zealand, he indicated that before a person can become a principal he or she must serve as a teacher for 7 years. This creates a principal more likely to act as a teaching partner than an administrator.

When the conversation turned to problems or concerns he had with American education, he began with a positive comment. He said, "Some teachers are doing things that are so remarkable they would shock most people." This heartfelt comment was supported by the many examples of exceptional teaching he referenced during his presentation. On the other side of the coin, he felt that many of us lose track of what we are trying to do, particularly because of all the testing pressure. He would like to see more inquiry-oriented classrooms and playfulness. We need kids to be playful in education so they can be playful and creative adults. He believes it is our job to teach students to have a learning orientation rather than a performance orientation toward school, otherwise it is difficult for them to recover from failures. We need to consistently turn our students' attention toward their learning process rather than simply toward whether an answer is correct or not.

My final question resulted in two remarkable responses. I asked, "What gives you pause?" His first response was, "When you see kids doing something that, according to conventional wisdom, they shouldn't be able to do." His second statement will stick with me, hopefully, throughout my entire teaching career. He said, "The liveliness of kids minds and how easily we can squash it with poorly chosen words."

Peter Johnston shifted my mind set by turning my attention toward the language I use in my classroom. He made me think about how the language with which we think actually influences the language we use. It can be in the tiniest ways. He gave the following example: "That student is hard to teach." He then switched the comment to, "That student is hard for me to teach." This locates the problem in an entirely different space. Small words equal big changes in meaning.

Quoting Margaret Carr and Guy Claxton, Peter indicated that students and teachers need a "willingness to engage in joint learning tasks, to express uncertainties and ask questions, to take a variety of roles in joint learning enterprises and to take others' purposes and perspectives into account." He shared an example of what one teacher said to help create this reciprocal learning environment. A student in her class made a comment that might be considered off the wall. Instead of discounting or judging him, she replied, "That's a very interesting way of looking at it. I hadn't thought about it that way. I'll have to think about it some more." She modeled taking on the learner's role.

Peter Johnston altered my thinking about what it is I'm trying to do as a teacher. I want to create resilient learners who embrace the unknown with a willingness to try and maybe even fail, with the focus always on learning.

## Reference

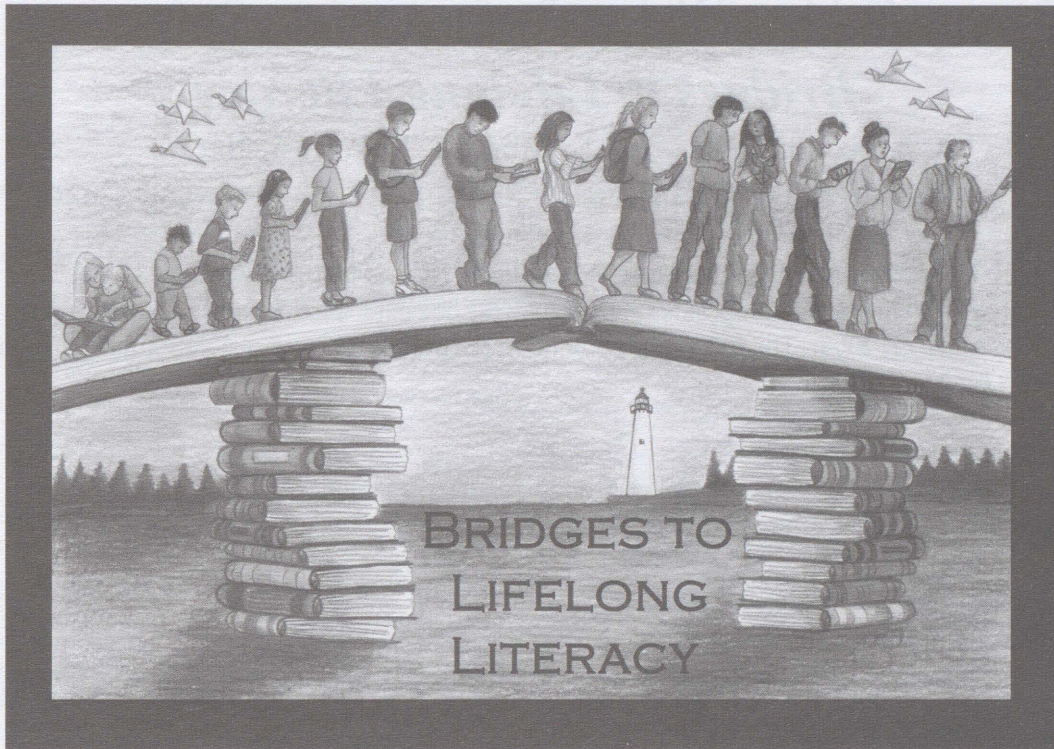
Johnston, P. H. (2004). *Choice words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Interviewer Cindy Morris, left, subject Peter Johnston, and fellow conference attendee Christy Chapin enjoy a laugh during the MRA's annual conference



MRA 2009

# BRIDGES TO LIFELONG LITERACY



Poster artwork by Carolyn Stich

*Join us for an unforgettable  
Michigan Reading Association Conference with inspirational speakers,  
educators, authors, illustrators and many special events.*

Featured speakers include:

Katherine Paterson  
Jeffrey Wilhelm  
Barry Lane  
Tim Rasinski  
Regie Routman  
Marcia Invernizzi  
Irene Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell

Katie Wood Ray  
Carol Santa  
Richard Gentry  
Tim Shanahan  
Jacqueline Woodson  
Authors Readers Theater  
(featuring Avi, Katherine Paterson,  
Pamela Munoz Ryan and Sarah Weeks)

...and many more!!

March 13, 2009 • Research Pre-Conference

March 14 - 16, 2009 • 53<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference

DeVos Place Convention Center & Amway Grand Plaza Hotel • Grand Rapids, Michigan

DETAILS COMING SOON AT [WWW.MICHIGANREADING.ORG](http://WWW.MICHIGANREADING.ORG)



# Call for Program Proposals

The Michigan Reading Association, an affiliate of the International Reading Association, invites you to submit a program proposal for the 53rd Annual Michigan Reading Association Conference

## *Bridges to Lifelong Literacy*

Saturday, March 14 - Monday, March 16, 2009

Amway Grand Plaza Hotel & DeVos Place Convention Center • Grand Rapids, Michigan

**Proposals must be postmarked no later than September 15, 2008.**

The Program Committee will consider all proposals submitted by the due date. Notification of the committee's decision will be sent no later than November 17, 2008. The individual submitting the proposal is responsible for notifying co-presenters of the Program Committee's decision.

### **Factors that tend to enhance a proposal:**

- relevance and interest of program to proposed audience and/or conference theme
- clarity, conciseness, and coherence of proposal
- timeliness of issues or topics
- innovative ways of viewing more traditional issues
- evidence of presenters' knowledge about current practices and/or research
- specific and articulate program description that does not need editing

### **Factors that tend to disqualify a proposal:**

- promotion of commercial materials or programs
- content not clearly related to literacy
- failure to complete the proposal according to guidelines and format

### **PLEASE READ IMPORTANT DETAILS BELOW:**

- **All presenters and co-presenters of accepted proposals must register and pay for the conference.**
- **Failure of each presenter of the proposal to register for the conference by January 12, 2009 will result in the immediate cancellation of the scheduled session.**
- **Presenters and co-presenters that cancel following January 12, 2009 must submit a cancellation in writing and will be eligible for a 50% refund of the conference registration fees.**
- **Upon signing this proposal, it is also understood that presenters and co-presenters do not receive honoraria or reimbursement for travel, hotel or related expenses.**
- **Each presentation room will be equipped with an overhead projector and screen. Handouts and any additional A/V equipment, however, will be the responsibility of the presenters.**

All of the information on Page 2 of this Proposal Form must be mailed or faxed to the MRA office, complete with presenters' signatures, by September 15, 2008. It will not be accepted electronically. Be sure to provide all requested information. Incomplete or partial proposals will not be considered.

We request that, in addition to your faxed or mailed proposal, you submit electronically to the MRA office ([mra@michiganreading.org](mailto:mra@michiganreading.org)) only your proposed session titles and presentation descriptions with presenters' names and contact information clearly stated.

### **Submit completed proposals to:**

Michigan Reading Association  
668 Three Mile Road NW, Suite C  
Grand Rapids, MI 49544-8219  
**Fax:** (616) 647-9378

# MRA PROGRAM PROPOSAL

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: POSTMARKED SEPTEMBER 15, 2008.

(Separate proposal forms must be submitted for each presentation title.)

Please submit the following information as you would like it to appear in the conference program book.

## I. Individual submitting proposal:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Institution/District: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City/State/ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
Day Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Evening Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## II. Co-presenters (limited to 3):

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Institution/District: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Institution/District: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Institution/District: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_  
Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## III. Of Primary Interest to:

\_\_\_\_ Pre-School  
\_\_\_\_ Early Elementary  
\_\_\_\_ Later Elementary  
\_\_\_\_ Middle School  
\_\_\_\_ High School  
\_\_\_\_ Researchers  
\_\_\_\_ Teacher Educators  
\_\_\_\_ Adult Educators  
\_\_\_\_ Literacy Coaches/Reading Specialists

\_\_\_\_ Administrators  
\_\_\_\_ Title I Educators  
\_\_\_\_ Special Educators  
\_\_\_\_ Librarians/Media Specialists  
\_\_\_\_ Pre-Service Teachers

## IV. Specialized Focus (no more than three):

\_\_\_\_ Adolescent Literacy  
\_\_\_\_ Content Area Literacy  
\_\_\_\_ Reading Instruction  
\_\_\_\_ Writing Instruction  
\_\_\_\_ Author/Illustrator  
\_\_\_\_ After school Literacy  
\_\_\_\_ Technology  
\_\_\_\_ Family Literacy  
\_\_\_\_ Teacher Preparation/Professional Development

\_\_\_\_ GLCE/HSCE  
\_\_\_\_ Assessment  
\_\_\_\_ Research  
\_\_\_\_ Administration  
\_\_\_\_ Adult Literacy  
\_\_\_\_ Legislative  
\_\_\_\_ Intervention  
\_\_\_\_ Reading Recovery  
\_\_\_\_ Reading First  
\_\_\_\_ MEAP/ACT/MME

## V. Title of Presentation:

\_\_\_\_\_

Please limit your title to ten words or less.

**VI. Description of Presentation:** Describe the content of your presentation in 60 words or less. This description will appear in the program book and will be edited if necessary. **Descriptions MUST be typed.** PROPOSALS SUBMITTED WITHOUT A DESCRIPTION ARE CONSIDERED INCOMPLETE.

Description also submitted via email on: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/2008 **Email Address:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Please provide the email address from which the description will be submitted.

**VII. Session Time (min):** \_\_\_\_ 45 \_\_\_\_ 75 **Willing to Repeat?:** \_\_\_\_

**Day Preference (not guaranteed) :** \_\_\_\_ Sat. (3/14/09) \_\_\_\_ Sun. (3/15/09) \_\_\_\_ Mon. (3/16/09)

**VIII. Audio Visual:** An overhead projector and screen will be provided. *Additional A/V equipment and handouts will be the responsibility of the presenters.*

**IX. Room Set-Up:** All rooms will be set up *theater style* unless otherwise approved by the Conference Chair prior to September 15, 2008.

I (and any co-presenters of this proposal) understand that (1) MRA does not provide honoraria or expense reimbursement, (2) that upon acceptance of this proposal, all presenters and co-presenters for this presentation must register and pay for the conference by January 12, 2009. He/she must submit a cancellation in writing and will be eligible for a 50% refund of the paid conference registration fees.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/2008



Please check box if you would like to receive an email confirmation from the Michigan Reading Association office stating that your Program Proposal has been received. **Confirmations will be sent by email only**, and will be sent to email address included in speaker information above. If you do not receive a confirmation within a week of submission, please contact the MRA office.