A Review: Supporting Literacy: Developing Effective Learning Enviorments by Loughlin and Martin

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In an era marked by changing priorities toward process learning and descriptive research, the contexts for learning take on new importance. Drawing upon the growing body of research on literacy acquisition from a variety of disciplines and upon grounded research conducted on classroom literacy environments, Catherine Loughlin and Mavis Martin weave theory and practice to generate insight into the fabric of classroom life as supported by rich learning environments.

Supporting Literacy begins with a brief look at the natural language principles that propel young children into oral language development in their mother tongue. The authors note that the conditions for language acquisition include an environment where adults actively model language in use, where there are opportunities for interaction and practice in ways which are intensely personal, where there is a focus on purpose, meaning, and creativity, and where there is adult tolerance, indeed appreciation for, trial and error. The writings of Don Holdaway and Brian Cambourne amplify this outline of conditions for learning and remind us always that the power of natural developmental principles in early childhood can provide a framework for school based learning. Loughlin and Martin make this important connection in *Supporting Literacy*. "Any environment for literacy must first be a functioning learning environment; no amount of literacy can create a functioning literacy environment unless that environment already effectively supports children's learning activities." The authors have understood that the central questions in education are first about learning, not about teaching. The subtitle of the book itself makes this point clear. But the title also implies the important roles that significant others and, indeed, the environment itself, play to support learning. These concepts form the underpinning of the book's discussion of the functioning literacy environment. The authors note that "early and personal literacy support in the school environment resembles the environmental support for early oral language learning that surrounds the child in the home. In each case the environment supplies a continuous, interactive, meaning-focused opportunity for the use of language in one of its forms, within a social milieu in which the child is comfortable."

Loughlin and Martin then describe some essential characteristics and outcomes of a functioning literacy environment. Firstly, they stress the importance of connecting the child's home and community life to school life. This

reference is made at several junctures in the book and is, in this writer's judgment, a reflection of the authors' respect for personal and cultural diversity. In fact, in a multi-cultural society, a respect for and integration of the values of diverse homes and communities must be reflected genuinely in school life. Loughlin and Martin also share Holdaway's belief in the importance of immersing children in print-rich environments where there is ongoing, "evident use of literacy by all adults and children as a normal, active way of life." The classroom becomes a place where adults not only model their skill but also share the ownership and responsibility of the environment with the children. In a functioning literacy environment, children are self-directed, self-regulative, and focused.

Loughlin and Martin are, as Yetta Goodman notes in the Foreward, "no strangers to classrooms." They are firmly grounded in the practical world of classrooms and have organized the book to describe environmental arrangements and to offer vignettes of classroom experiences. A variety of diagrams and charts throughout the book offer further clarity in presentation. *Supporting Literacy* speaks to teachers, not in the familiar, directive sense of the "teacher's guide" or manual, but as observational data that describes real teachers, students, and their environments. The authors divide the arrangements of the learning environment into three basic tasks: provisioning, materials arrangement, and spatial organization. Building on earlier work (Loughlin & Suina, 1982), Loughlin and Martin describe six provisioning categories: raw materials, tools, information sources, containers, work spaces, and display facilities. They then turn to a discussion about distribution of provisions and arrangement of materials and, finally, spatial organization. Throughout this section they stress that a literacy-rich environment is never static but always changing with a decentralized organization of materials that are systematically arranged for access by children in sustained, flexible learning activities. The authors are thorough, straightforward, and masterful in connecting ordinary materials to a philosophical base that gives them life and energy. For example, they cite the importance of containers (objects used by learners to store information, materials, or work-in-progress) for the encouragement of "depth and complexity in ongoing study, by reminding children that projects can be continued beyond the immediately available working time." The holding power of complex materials and activities is highlighted throughout the book as the authors describe the tools for recording, illustrating, and constructing; the variety of "books everywhere"; literacy stimuli ranging from blocks to sand to nature study collections; and the many display spaces which invite children to create, claim, share, and respond. One is reminded of how children love to play with complex language. Bill Martin, Jr. writes that "the culture offered children the word 'supercalifragilisticexpialidocious' on the wings of a song. We didn't tell the children they had to learn the word before they were allowed to sing the song. We didn't tell them that if they were in the low reading group we would give them a small, uninteresting word to take the place of this complex, exciting word. And the children responded to our freely given invitation."

Much of the book deals specifically with the ways in which literacy is enhanced through the classroom environment. The functional uses of print, such as sign-on charts for awaiting turns, daily routines, labeling, directions, and record keeping, are described in detail. Loughlin and Martin then turn to the importance of establishing "shared, personal communication as a way to engage children in the spontaneous use of literacy." Print messages enliven the

environment with appointments, requests, commentary, social contact, personal announcements, and reporting.

The authors' discussion of knowledge content and literacy offers the reader a clear picture of a developmental view of learning. Teachers provide an "encounter with new information that is so compelling a child wants to know more." Children then explore through observation, reading, viewing, listening, discussing, and experimenting with a variety of information sources in the environment. Information gathering is alternated with reorganizing activities such as writing and the related arts which help children to accommodate and internalize new understandings. Here again the authors underscore the complexity principle discussed earlier. "The richer the information offered to children for their self-initiated exploration, the more elaborate and extensive their involvement with literacy." The environmental role of the teacher is keynoted here as elsewhere as important work in modeling, listening, commenting, and encouraging, as well as the critical behind the scenes provisioning and arranging to sustain the children's involvement. One of the great strengths of this book is that it puts literacy right into the contexts for learning where it belongs.

Supporting Literacy also speaks directly to the concrete ways in which the environment influences the development of writing and book use. Loughlin and Martin describe the ways in which the environment supports children's growing understanding of the conventions of print and how the engaging provisions and interactions stimulate writing and the arts. Recognizing that writing takes place in a social setting, the authors show how the environment offers ways for children to try out ideas in print, collaborate, extend their writing through illustration and "publishing," and share their classmates' writing. Child-initiated displayed print is read with eagerness when kept current and offers an invitation for feedback.

The chapter on "Book Use" extends some of the earlier references to the variety of "books everywhere" and the different purposes for reading. It highlights both the research and the insights shared widely among parents and teachers that children's experiences with books nurture both joy and skill in reading. Throughout, there is emphasis on browsing, lingering, revisiting, and sustaining interest and activities in meaningful, purposeful ways. Valuing literacy enough to choose to "use reading and writing behaviors as a part of daily life" goes hand in hand with the development of skill. Skill-getting and skill-using are inextricably woven together through purpose and joy. An important part of this process has to do with children observing and emulating skill users. The New Zealand concept of shared reading gives new meaning to the notions of demonstration and emulation and is referenced in *Supporting Literacy* through Don Holdaway's writing. This writer has had the extraordinary opportunity to see the power of this strategy at work with teachers and children in the Cambridge-Lesley Literacy Project and in recent visits to New Zealand classrooms. Embedded in shared reading and in Loughlin's and Martin's vivid descriptions is the concept of learning as fundamentally communal in nature. The essence of acts of reading, writing, and meaning-making in the broadest sense is discovered and heightened in shared experiences rather than solitary ones, though the capacity of those same experiences to touch our innermost lives deepens our understandings and recharges the spirit. Yetta Goodman reminds us in the Foreward that "the classroom is more than the sum of its parts. The classroom is more than one child plus one child plus one child. It is a community."

Loughlin and Martin do not leave the reader with the rich patchwork quilt of description. They also prepare the reader for further inquiry. The Survey of Displayed Literacy Stimuli (Loughlin & Cole, 1986) is included in the Appendix as a tool for examining each area in a learning environment for information about patterns of distribution of literacy stimuli and shows a way to summarize what Holdaway would call the "thick" data of observation in actual classrooms. The authors also append a checklist of environmental evidence for literacy growth. Unlike the typical checklist of myriad discrete skills, this checklist requires the reader to go back to the classroom to "read the environment..." and "note children in the environment..." for ongoing signs of literacy growth. The questions are complex ones such as, "Do children understand what they read? Do children choose a variety of reading materials? Do children write for a variety of purposes?"

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Supporting Literacy* is its grounding in observational strategies. If education reform is to have any lasting impact and the possibility of self-sustaining growth and development, it will be because we have at last learned how to gather the "thick" data of children and teachers at work and to systematically reflect on and analyze that data. Such systematic observation and analysis will restore the focus on the total classroom experience as the central element in school settings. It will be respectful of teachers and children at work (and at play!) and, importantly, it will deliver a form of accountability that is richer and deeper than the thin, single-dimensional data of standardized tests.

Another feature of systematic observation that is reflective of the emerging paradigm shift is that it is often collaborative. Systematic observation invites different views on events and a talking/walking through of varied perceptions to gain greater insight. In a profession which has tended to isolate teachers in classrooms, students in skills-oriented worksheets, administrators from the daily learning of classroom life, and parents from ongoing participation in their children's education, systematic observation offers new vitality and opportunities for sharing. And it offers the possibility for a new partnership between teachers and researchers.

Systematic observation is also expansive rather than reductionist in nature. It offers the opportunity to understand literacy in broader contexts. Literacy acquisition becomes meaning-making activities of a most diverse sort. It is a tapestry of threads of many different colors and textures. It is at once reading, writing, thinking, creation. The arts can no longer be separated from literacy development. The traditional subject area lines blur as literacy and learning are integrated in math, the sciences, and social studies. And skill is not compromised; indeed, it gains new strength in the contexts of purpose and meaning. Catherine Loughlin and Mavis Martin have presented a compelling picture of effective learning environments as a framework for teaching/learning activities which are skillfully dovetailed with the theoretical understandings of learning. *Supporting Literacy* invites practitioner and theorist alike to think deeply about all the environmental issues which touch children and teachers on a daily basis.