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# Whole Language: Origins and Practice

Greg Shafer

People have been arguing about whole language and the educational philosophy it embraces since its inception in the early 1980s. For some, it represents a disquieting departure from long-celebrated notions about the political and pedagogical direction of our schools. To them, it is nothing but a prescription for permissive, indolent, Summerhill-like nonsense. For others, however, it is nothing short of a panacea, a revolutionary response to the top-down, alienating practices of the workbook era. Advocates point to the liberating influences of a system that is democratic, one that designs lessons around students rather than prescribing skills out of context.

Such dichotomies, of course, are both exaggerated and regressive. Whole language and the theories, lessons, and scholarship which radiate from its philosophy, carry with them few mandates for laziness or guarantees of success. What whole language does promote is an invitation to re-envision the act of learning and the linguistic ability children bring to the scholastic context. In this essay, I would like to examine whole language, its origins, proponents, theories, and practical application in the high school English class.

## **The Noam Chomsky Challenge**

There is little question that the seeds of the whole language movement are firmly rooted in the theories of linguist Noam Chomsky and his contention that language is natural, generative, and automatic. For educators, Chomsky's assertions, especially when combined with the work of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, represented a Copernican-like change in the way language was taught. Where generations of English teachers had perceived reading, writing, and speech as artificial, behavioristic responses to conditioning, the Chomskyian school saw them as natural, active, and learner-driven — a predictable step in one's

development. For the first time, then, language was not something to be taught as much as part of growth which required guidance.

Chomsky's challenge to behaviorism took tangible form in his publication of *Syntactic Structures* in 1957. In this seminal work, he questioned the linguistic model that portrayed language acquisition as mechanical and teacher-driven. For B. F. Skinner and the disciples of behaviorism, speech instruction had always been similar to the conditioning one used to induce a pigeon to pick at a colored light. For these educators, learning was programmed because children always responded predictably to a stimulus. Like the blank slates of John Locke's time, children were seen as vacuous, passive, and dependent upon instruction.

*Warriner's English Grammar Book*, as an example, was organized with the most basic, simplistic skills introduced first. It was the implicit contention of the authors that children needed to be taught language — its syntax and rules — before they could use it.

Chomsky's response to Skinner and his behavioristic model came in the development of what came to be called transformational grammar. In it, Chomsky argued that language is meaning-centered, complex, and forever interwoven in the life and energy of the learner. Linguist Julia Falk describes Chomsky's contribution this way:

He began to raise questions about how language exists in the minds of human beings and about what it is that permits speakers of a language to use that language creatively producing and understanding sentences that they have never before heard or seen. (71)

From Chomsky's scholarship came an emerging model of literacy that represented a dramatic reversal in how the process of learning was

approached. No longer seen as empty receptacles waiting to be filled with information, the student was now perceived as a creator of knowledge, a generator of information which radiated quite fluidly from her curious, ever-evolving vision of the world. "People," argued Chomsky, "come born with the ability to develop language. That is, babies learn to speak and listen through a natural process of imitation and maturation" (1975).

### **The Influence of Jean Piaget**

Adding wood to the linguistic fire was the work of Jean Piaget, who, in his own way, contributed to and refined the theory set forth by Chomsky. Especially interesting was his assertion that children learn language for personal and aesthetic reasons and through a gradual, constructive approach to society. From the Piagetian laboratory came concepts like accommodation, assimilation, and schemata. It was Piaget's belief that language was a process of active exploration and discovery — a constant building of meaning. According to this theory, then, children maintained a model or schemata of the world based on their perceptions and experiences. With each event, this schemata assimilated and accommodated new information and went through gradual adjustments. Strickland chronicles the Piagetian perception this way:

As learners encounter new information, they integrate it with what they already know. They then apply this new knowledge to novel situations (assimilation) and restructure their schemata to include the new knowledge (accommodation). (Galda, Cullinan, Strickland 10)

### **Vygotsky's Contributions**

An equally significant contribution to the whole language school was made by Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist and educator who most adamantly advocated a language approach which celebrated the inherent knowledge of the learner. In particular, Vygotsky wrote about the power of social interaction, play, and the importance of creating learning contexts that foster discovery. "The best method for teaching reading and writing is one in which children do not learn to read and write but in which both of these skills are found in play situations" (118).

Thus, continues Vygotsky, educators are most effective in the role of nurturer. Because learning is an outgrowth of playful, curious ventures into social interaction, one does not have to reinforce it artificially or subject it to elaborate schemes. "Vygotsky helps us to understand," writes Yetta

Goodman, "that as children transact with their world, they are capable of doing more than they appear to be and that they can get much more out of an activity or experience if there is an adult or more experienced playmate to mediate the experience for them" (228).

In understanding this philosophy, we must focus on words like mediation and nurturer, for they capture the essence of the dramatic transition that was occurring in linguistic scholarship. Instead of being acted upon, instead of being taught and conditioned, students were seen as active participants in an academic setting that acknowledged the amazing ability they brought to each context.

Much of this enthusiasm, of course, was also precipitated by observations of infants as they acquired language and often began to read and write before ever being subjected to formal instruction. Why, scientists asked, do we espouse a behavioristic approach to language pedagogy when it seems clear that preschool children learn speech effortlessly and with an efficiency that belies any need for formal instruction? Indeed, with all of the hand-wringing about why Johnny can't read, write, or recite the dates of the Civil War, it is curious to see no examples of children failing to acquire the language skill that is rarely part of a scholastic setting — speech.

Emerging from the scholarship of Chomsky, Piaget, and Vygotsky came a whole language paradigm which celebrated the student's inherent ability and desire to generate sophisticated, socially-driven language. Frank Smith, a prominent leader of the whole language model, best captures its tenets when he argues, "my own recommendation for how reading and writing should be taught is perhaps radical; they should not be taught at all" (211).

What Smith advocates, of course, is that skills instruction and programmed mastery learning — behavioristic schemes that do not allow for individual language experiences — be replaced with reading and writing assignments that are meaningful for each dynamic individual. Students come to English classes with an intrinsic desire to make sense of their world and to do so through communication. Whole language teachers acknowledge this linguistic skill and motivation and design their classes so that learning in school is consonant with the inventive spirit and personal goals of each student. Connie Weaver, who has written a very helpful handbook on whole language says, "Meaning and learning should be based on a model that emphasizes development which is facilitated but not directly controlled by the teacher"(9).

## **The Opposition to Whole Language**

Over the years, various writers, politicians, and media sources have taken aim at whole language, vilifying its motives and misrepresenting its goals. While many of the attacks have come from a lamentable ignorance on the part of T.V. reporters and talk show hosts, evidence exists that a portion of it has been carefully orchestrated by conservatives who clearly seem threatened by the implications of a whole language curriculum. Indeed, the list of writers who have opposed whole language initiatives reads like a who's who of conservative pundits. William Bennett, Phyllis Schlafly, Cal Thomas, and Chester Finn have all written articles deriding whole language, despite its overwhelming acceptance among academic organizations and respected scholars.

Many theories have been offered as to why whole language has become so partisan and acrimonious — and why conservatives in particular seem threatened by its humanistic objectives. What seems glaringly clear, in the end, is that whole language — with its caveat for student liberation and control — scares people who want to maintain a hierarchical, top-down approach to learning. The threat of whole language, at least from my perspective, lies in its bold challenge to traditional icons and time-honored practices. Some teachers feel intimidated by the notion that their way is not the only way — that their favorite authors shouldn't be their students' favorite authors.

When students cease to be receptacles of information and begin generating their own ideas, they occasionally formulate theories that are disconcerting to those who want to maintain "authority" in the classroom. Thus, the recent controversy over teaching a literary canon and classes in western civilization helps illustrate the result of whole language — where students question rather than absorb — and where learning comes to be a very personal, reflective activity. "To study," argues Paulo Freire, "is not to consume ideas, but to create and recreate them" (4).

What follows, then, are specific ways that whole language is practiced in classrooms across the nation. While much has been written about the radical nature of whole language, it is, in fact, a very sound and sensible alternative to more conventional practices.

## **Grammar and Language**

Almost a century of research has illustrated the impotence of grammar instruction as a way to improve writing or enhance students' knowledge of the parts of speech. In a whole language classroom, grammar, which includes the identifying of

adjectives, nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech, is often replaced with meaningful language activities like the composing of creative stories and the discussion of favorite poems. Key to these activities is the engagement of students in constructing language rather than simply labeling parts of a whole. It seems clear that people learn best when they are progressing from whole to part so that they understand the importance of correctness and the viability of certain non-standard dialects in certain settings. When participants are immersed in the real world of language use, they appreciate its rules and standards by using them with real people. Thus, the need to teach students about the rule-governed dialect spoken by African-Americans and the way power influences the "prestige" of certain ways with words. In a whole language class, students transcend simplistic monoliths about language purity and become more savvy language users in the process.

## **Literature in the Whole Language Class**

E.D. Hirsch's 1987 publication *Cultural Literacy* made educators acutely aware of how important a monolithic cultural literacy is to certain people. It also exposed the work as a behavioristic belief that all people need to be inculcated with the truths of a classical education because such information is shared and exulted by our society as a whole. While we may wonder why anyone has to be prescribed a body of information that is already supposed to be part of their "common culture," we can be equally confused as to why a certain body of information is privileged over the many colorful cultures of individual students.

Whole language advocates argue that a truly effective language class begins with students and progresses from their interests about reading. Rather than subjecting learners to a book list that was lionized by past scholars and teachers, whole language asks the literature instructor to let pupils shape the reading and the eventual evaluation of what should be considered "classical." Again, because whole language begins with pupils and trusts their choices, it often replaces canonical literature with young adult literature, or, even better, with stories written in student publications by students. To impose a reading list upon students — to prejudge what should be venerated — is to negate the involvement with language that all active, successful children experience.

## **The Controversy over Phonics**

Few issues inflame the passions of educators more than the controversy surrounding phonics. The question of whether teachers use phonics or

a whole language approach has become fodder for talk shows, news specials, and journalistic discussions. Of course, as with grammar, the phonics method is predicated upon a philosophy that attributes virtually no linguistic ability to the reader. Over the last two decades, a trove of reading specialists, including Yetta and Ken Goodman, Frank Smith, and Connie Weaver have written cogently about the inherent limitations of a phonics approach. At the center of each argument lies the contention that language, whether written, read, or spoken, is most easily and fluidly learned when it is holistically meaningful, when it is embedded in human experience. Or, to put it more concretely, Johnny understands words better than isolated bits of words, especially when the bits make little sense without context. Whole language provides a context for the words by establishing lessons that have complete stories, lessons that ask students to read rather than to process meaningless fragments in a workbook. In short, whole language espouses language over language preparation.

### **Composition Instruction**

Whole language proponents stress the importance of meaningful, student-centered writing assignments. Studies have shown that only a small percentage of the papers assigned to students are creative or expressive in the sense that they empower students to write about personal experience or individual emotions. In considering the significance of allowing for more latitude in the teaching of composition, whole language advocates would return to the intrinsic desire that all students have to express themselves and make language meaningful. Because young, preschool infants who acquire speech demonstrate an incredible aptitude to learn and grow as language users, there is no reason to believe that such fecundity cannot be fostered throughout one's linguistic life. Harold Foster, in his book *Crossing Over: Whole Language for Secondary School Teachers*, argues that "language teaching should be modeled after natural, meaning-centered language development" (10). This translates into assignments that foster journal writing and personal responses. It militates against fragmented lessons that undermine expression — the reason

why anyone writes—and reduce composition to a teacher-driven, five-paragraph formula. Choices are, of course, very important. So too, is the need for process, allowing writers to immerse themselves in the unwieldy, recursive, organic stages of generating prose or poetry. Such independent, student-centered assignments often foster more complex thought since students are given responsibility for invention.

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