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Susan Tchudi

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PROGRESS DOWN UNDER

By Susan Tchudi

Michael sat at the table wiggling and dawdling. "Do I have to do all of these words today?"

"Why don't you get started instead of complaining about it? You're wasting time that you could be using to play." I sounded like a typical nagging mom and I was pushing my seven-year-old through the typical homework assignment--his spelling list. Each Monday he came home with fifteen spelling words. By Thursday he was to write a sentence using each word on the list, and on Friday he had a spelling test. No surprises. Practically every child in America grows up with the same experience. But this was Australia--halfway around the world from the traditions I'd known all my life. And this was the age of enlightenment in Australia--the post-Donald Graves period.

"Can I use two spelling words in one sentence?" Michael pressed.

"Sounds good to me. Just get it done." I hoped Miss Hollingworth would find that as clever a strategy as I did.

We'd been in Australia for three or four weeks when Michael got his first spelling list. My husband was teaching at Sydney University on exchange with Ken Watson and I had taken a leave of absence from my job to accompany him. I was hoping to make the trip a combination vacation and educational experience. So far that had been the case. I conducted a six hour workshop at the Australian Association of Teachers of English in Perth, Western Australia, and spent a day consulting with teacher trainers and supervisors at Wattle Park Teacher Center in Adelaide, South Australia. The stories and concerns I'd heard from teachers were

not universally optimistic, but one thing seemed clear: the process-conference approach seemed firmly in place following the sweeping popularity of Donald Graves in Australia a few years ago.

That's why I was surprised by the spelling list. The process-conference approach encourages invented spelling and drafting for young children--naturalistic learning as the means of developing skills. And in fact, when we'd gone to enroll Michael for school, his teacher proudly told me that her first/second graders wrote books and that they used the "writing process" and that Mums came in to help with publishing. But the anomaly of invented spelling and spelling memorization co-existing in a class should not have surprised me. The same situation exists in the U.S. And tradition dies hard.

Jack Thomson of Mitchell College in New South Wales shed some light on this problem for me when he described his difficulties in training teachers. Students, he said, when they go from one teacher preparation class to another, don't make distinctions among the very different theoretical assumptions of the methodologies they are being taught. Jack, whose teaching and writing emphasizes student-centered, process-oriented approaches, tries to help his students recognize the very different models of learning in his approach and the behavioristic approach which he believes still dominates teacher education in Australia. The eclecticism of the schools, then, is in part a reflection and a continuation of what happens in teacher training programs.

As a parent volunteer in Michael's school I observed eclecticism in reading instruction. I was assigned two second grade girls--Jane and Kate--to work with two days a week to help them with their reading. The principal gave me the materials to help them: a set of about 75 flash cards with the words they would be encountering in stories they would later read in class; a packet of "word parts" that the girls could use to help them learn to "blend sounds"; basal readers accompanied by workbooks that asked them to answer comprehension questions and construct words from word parts. Using these materials as a starting

point, I found Kate to be a quick study with the flash cards and Jane to be a dogged "sound-it-out" type. But neither of them read. I was given a free rein with my tutees, so needless to say, it wasn't long before I was bringing in literature from home to share with them and they were writing their own stories.

On the bright side, the reading instruction with the nonremedial students included a highly active band of volunteer mothers who came into the school to listen to children read. On the mornings I worked I found there were usually two to three volunteers per room sitting in the hall each with one child. The emphasis on oral reading seemed appropriate at the primary level, and it lacked the elements of the competitive challenge or the devastating embarrassment that is often the problem with round robin reading. Moreover, the reading books I looked at were good. Michael's second grade reader, *Gobble and Munch*, contained traditional Australian literature and stories and poems by real writers on the theme of eating and food. One story was about a king who gave his baker the challenge of creating the highest, lightest, fluffiest cake anyone had ever made; another was about the hungry bunyip who, like the fat cat, ate everyone and everything in sight, including a school full of children who generously told him to "Eat the teacher." My student Kate (when we abandoned the simplistic basal) happily read both of these stories to me more than once. And she loved a playground chant type poem "Bananas and Cream" which she read to me at least once a week. She refused, however, to read a nonrhyming poem about children starving in Africa because it was so sad. (I was thrilled to have a textbook in which there was a piece of literature that someone would have an emotional reaction to. It's not something we encounter in our U.S. texts.)

One of the experiences from which I learned the most was a Catholic school district's conference on literature. Peter Jones, a curriculum supervisor in the Sydney Catholic school system, talked about the state of teaching literature in the schools. Jones believes that the teaching of technical terminology dominates the teaching of literature in Australia and distorts literature's purpose and function. This type of

teaching, he says, is based on the notion that literature can be turned into knowledge. Textbooks are organized by Plot/Theme/Character/Setting, and literature is used to illustrate those concepts. Teachers seem to be afraid that if you leave kids alone, they might "get it wrong." What are unimportant in teaching literature (but what are often taught) are moral precepts, genre, aesthetics, and technique; what *matter* are enjoyment, empathy, and "keenness" to read more and a deepening involvement in what one reads (or watches). Jones calls for more students' reading (some schools only teach one novel a term), more making of meaning, more sharing of meanings. And students will grow and develop if we respect their literary responses. Plot, theme, character, and setting are unimportant; but people's own worlds are utterly important, Jones concluded.

I found Jones' description of literature teaching to be borne out in the experiences of our sixteen-year-old, Emily. Emily studied two novels in the last term of year 11--Henry James' *Washington Square* and Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*. There was no encouragement for her to explore her personal views or to relate to novels to her own experience or to develop individual interpretations of the novels' meanings. The approach was literary-critical with the novel treated as a "piece" to be analyzed. Her writing assignment for *Washington Square* was to discuss--agreeing or disagreeing and providing evidence--the view of some critic that the novel was about hidden violence. Moreover, the task was to be done on her own; none of it was to be edited by her English teacher to rewrite; none of it was to be responded to or edited by peers. Her writing was to be done in the isolation of her own room, with in-process response coming from only her family.

I visited five high school English classes where I also found teacher-centered approaches. In one class where a teacher was using *The Loved One* the students were having a bit of trouble understanding the satire. She told me that she had had to talk them through the novel, explaining the humor that wasn't coming through to them. In the class I visited she posed questions that they couldn't answer, so she answered them herself. In a seventh grade class, I observed a journal

being used with *Charlotte's Web*, a practice I advocate in my courses at CMU as a means of giving kids an opportunity to think about what a piece means to them, to pose questions, to make their own connections. In this class, the children could not look in their books, could not talk to their neighbors, and were required to answer the three questions posed by the teacher. In another class I visited, the students were set to the task of working on their own writing while the teacher conferred with individuals. Unfortunately, those who were waiting for the teacher chatted (and shouted; Australian classrooms are noisy--typically, I'm told) about "this 'n' that" until she could get to them.

By contrast, one lively classroom I visited was taught by Ernie Tucker at Maroubra Junction High School in Sydney. The kids were reading a play and Ernie was acting as director. But the kids were making meaning. Both they and Ernie would stop to discuss aspects of the play that seemed important to them: How is this character responding to the speaker? What motivates this speech? Why do you suppose this character is acting in this way? Both students and teacher were active in the questioning and in the answering.

Tucker's school also runs a Wide Reading Program, a program I heard a good deal about in Australia. Wide reading programs make available a broad range of paperback, young adult novels in their classrooms. In addition to having the library as a resource, students are able to borrow books brought in by their classroom teachers--not for instructional purposes but for pleasure reading. I don't know how widespread such programs are, but I heard a number of people advocate them.

Ken Watson and Wayne Sawyer at Sydney University have also helped support the use of quality young adult literature in the schools both in their publications in Australia and in the U.S., and in their university teaching. Even so, adolescent literature is not without its detractors. While we were in Australia, there was quite an uproar over an article published by two Sydney University professors decrying the allegedly poor quality of literature being used in the schools and accusing

teachers of being unable to make good judgments about quality literature. Susan Moore and Dame Leonie Kramer cited books by Judy Blume, Paul Zindel, and Robert Cormier as examples of substandard literature. The controversy spilled out of the educational community into the daily press with articles and letters to the editor appearing for several weeks in the local papers.

But tradition is reinforced by the High School Certificate exam that high school seniors must take. Students, parents, the community, and colleges place a lot of stock in these test scores, which influence the college admissions of the small number of students who go on to college. In the middle-class community where we lived there was an almost obsessive concern about preparing for the test. Emily had warm-up assessment activities every week and the newspapers carried almost daily information about the tests, including advertisements by businesses offering test-preparation classes. In English classes, novels were studied to prepare students for what they would encounter on the H.S.C. (questions such as Emily's on hidden violence).

Now all of these things I've described are familiar to American educators. In Australia, I experienced the same tension between skills models and process models, between tradition and reform, between elitism and democratization that we struggle with here in the U.S. So in a way, I felt at home halfway around the world. I also met a score of teachers who deal with that tension with intellectual integrity, thorough scholarship, and humane passion. That alone made it worth the trip.

Susan Tchudi teaches at Central Michigan University.

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DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE DICTIONARY

aluminium transfer cases:	temporary coffins
manually powered fastener-driving impact device:	hammer
Emergency Exit light:	flashlight
hexiform rotatable surface compression unit:	steel nut
frame-supported tension structure:	tent