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Learning to Value Learning: What Our Students Teach Us

Mary M. Dekker

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My high school graduating class celebrated its 20th reunion this summer. Since I received the invitation, I have had several flashbacks, one of which pertains to this article. I recalled a test in an advanced biology class which was of a multiple choice variety: a. b, c, both a and c, all of the above, none of the above. I received a C, an unfair grade I explained at the time to the teacher, since I knew the material. I realize now that I had been asking for a format where I could show what I knew, while the teacher thought I should have been able to demonstrate what I knew on his terms.

I have been a teacher for most of those twenty years since high school, and am now beginning to realize the importance for us as teachers to provide a variety of ways for students to show us what they know. This realization has come about over the past several years of applying whole language principles in my classroom. Like many teachers, my whole language teaching has evolved over time. While my students have been engaged for a number of years in activities that promote the whole language philosophy, such as reading and writing for authentic purposes, it has been only recently that I have been able to replace the emphasis on traditional forms of assessment with ways that are consistent with whole language. That is, even though my students must still take standardized tests, and must still engage in some forms of decontextualized skills, I can look at these forms of assessment for what they are—small pieces of a much bigger picture of student learning. As a whole language teacher and teacher-researcher, I have used various assessment tools, including miscue analyses, interviews, reading logs, and writing portfolios. The assessment focus here, however, will be on the power of “kidwatching,” Yetta Goodman’s term for observing what children say and do. It is a form of observation that is as much watching as it is waiting and looking for the learner to show what he or she knows.

The story that follows is the result of my “kidwatching” one of my students and recording her growth throughout a year in second grade. It is as much a story about providing a variety of ways for students to show what

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they know as it is a story of the power of whole language classrooms. It is also a demonstration of how closely intertwined the learning and assessment processes are in such classrooms. And finally, it is a story about what our students can teach us about how to value their learning if we are ready to watch, listen, and reflect.

During the first few weeks of school, Sue was incredibly shy. She rarely initiated a conversation with me, and when I asked her a question, her response was inaudible. She did not talk to the other children very much, either. She was often inattentive and on one occasion fell asleep. When I wanted to talk to her, I needed to say her name several times, each time progressively louder, and even when I was almost shouting, it was a student next to her who nudged her to get her attention. When I inquired about a hearing problem, I was assured one did not exist. The problem, it seemed, was that Sue was in her own world a lot of the time. During those first few weeks, it was difficult to find out what Sue knew. She appeared to have some reading difficulty since she was not able to retell parts of a story, answer comprehension questions, or read fluently. On all assignments she worked slowly and was often confused. She avoided all oral activities. One day, when it was her turn to tell one thing about a book she read, she asked, “Do I have to?” Then Sue’s behavior began to change slowly. The first real evidence of this was a letter I received from her in October after I read *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen. The letter read:

Dear Ms. D.,

I like how you teach us. I like how you teach us how to read. So I have something to tell you. I like the Owl book. Have fun, Ms. D. And I hope you do.

This letter was the first indication I had that Sue was listening to what went on in the classroom. But it was, of course, more than that, because not only was she listening, she was also thinking about and responding to what was happening in the classroom. Other changes began to occur. Sue started to ask clarifying questions about assignments she did not understand. In addition, she told me about things that happened at home and about activities she did at home that were like things we were doing in school.

By December, Sue volunteered to share a story she had written during our writing time. On another occasion she did a “chalk talk” about a book she had read. Then one day before Christmas vacation she brought in a book of Christmas poetry and asked if she could share one poem with the class. The poem she chose was a difficult one.

She stumbled over a good portion of it and asked my help with many of the words, but when she finished, she smiled. Sue made dramatic changes over those first four months: from oblivion to attentiveness, from total avoidance of oral activities to choosing to read a difficult poem orally. From her shy beginnings. Sue emerged as a student who understood content, enjoyed learning, was persistent, and initiated many creative activities. These observed characteristics are not only the important areas which describe Sue as a learner, but they are also the basis of much of my assessment of her learning. In order to assess Sue's learning, I looked just as carefully at how she was learning as what she was learning. The following descriptions of Sue's behavior demonstrate the expected products of learning, such as an ability to read longer and more sophisticated texts. But it is in the description of the process—how she went about learning—that we discover the strength of Sue's learning capabilities.

Sue performed well with the second grade curriculum after the initial period of shyness. She was a good reader who enjoyed reading. She liked to write stories. She had a good understanding of math as well as science and social studies units.

Although Sue performed well with every part of the curriculum, she approached learning situations differently from her classmates. Her difficulty in understanding oral directions led to a pattern where whenever I gave directions she came to me to ask some questions. After clarifying the assignment, she could almost always do the task independently. This initial confusion was characteristic. For her to function, she needed the time with me to clarify the assignments. One day, for example, we were working on writing the numbers from 150-200 in sequence. She started the assignment but came to me after she had written 159. She was not sure what the next number was.

"Would I write a ten?" she asked.

"Well, what comes after 159?" I asked.

"Oh, 160."

And with that realization, she was off. I did not talk to her again until she finished the assignment. It was done correctly, and she wanted to read off the numbers from 190-200.

Sue enjoyed school. She liked reading and often talked to me about what she read at home with her sister. She frequently asked to read passages to me out loud. She brought books that she was reading at home to share with the class. In addition to reading, she did other types of activities at home that pertained to what we were learning in school. For

instance, when we watched bean seeds germinate in our study of plants, she told me she was starting some seeds at home. In a conversation with me, her mom confirmed that Sue really seemed to be enjoying school. In terms of assessment, part of Sue's growing strength as a learner was present in her positive attitude toward learning. Also important in my assessment of Sue's growth was her persistence when it came to getting my attention. Having the courage to do so was rarely a problem for help with assignments; often at inappropriate times she wanted to talk over possibilities for projects or tell a story about something that happened at home. On several occasions I had to tell her to sit down and we could talk later. On one particular occasion she came to me at the very end of the day as we were getting ready to go home. She had homework from her absence the previous day. I told her quite bluntly that I just did not have time to give her directions—she could wait until the next day or take it home and get help there.

"But –," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"But I think I know what to do."

And with that quick opening she proceeded to explain what to do on each page of homework. Sue demonstrated this same type of persistence with certain classroom activities, too. One day during our study of sound we made straw horns. The activity was designed to show high and low sounds. As we worked through the activity, a few students could not get any sound out of their horns no matter how hard they tried. Sue was one of those having difficulty.

When the time for the activity was over, all the students who could not get their horns to make noise threw them away—except Sue. Her frustrated classmates were more than happy to throw away the source of their frustration. Sue, on the other hand, came to me and said, "I have more of these straws at home, so I could keep practicing, and I bet I could do it." From situations such as these, it became apparent that Sue's persistence in learning tasks played a key role in the process—and that any assessment I did of her learning must take her determination to learn into account.

Another characteristic of how Sue learned was evident in her creativity. And Sue was creative. For example, she was quick to make connections between subject areas and also between what she was reading independently and what the class was doing. One of the times this occurred was when our class went to an assembly where they saw several birds of prey. When we returned, Sue suggested that we do a graph to find out which birds were the class favorites. I told her I liked the idea and we could set it up for the following morning. Later the next day I told her she could show the

graph to the class. She came to me with a book in which she had found several of the birds we had seen— falcons, owls, and hawks— and asked if she could also show the pictures to the class. One of the pictures was an owlet. Since the owlets look different than their parents, Sue was able to offer the class some additional information about the birds as well as the graph results.

Her creativity was demonstrated in her writing also. In one of her reading log entries she copied the poem and picture of Shel Silverstein's "Lazy Jane". In the short poem, a girl lies on the ground with her mouth open. The poem explains that "she wants a drink of water" but "waits for it to rain" (87). Sue explained that she liked this poem because the girl "drinks the words."

Another example of Sue's creativity appeared on an assignment where the students were given a familiar rhyme with blank spaces on it:

_____ little snowmen fat,
Each with a funny hat,
'Out came the sun and melted _____.
What a sad thing was that.
Down, down, down.

The students were given this sheet. They were instructed to use numbers to fill in the blanks and then draw a picture to show what was left. For instance, if there were 10 snowmen and 5 melted, the students would have shown 5 snowmen left on their page. All of the students but two used numbers less than 11. Sue began with 50. Six melted. And on her paper she had drawn 44 snowmen.

Up to this point I have provided many details of the story of Sue's learning— what she was like at the beginning of the year and how she changed over time. Sue's story affirmed how much growth a student can make in one school year. Although the precise reasons for her growth remain a mystery, several characteristics of whole language classrooms demonstrate an atmosphere where such learning is possible. In her book *Understanding Whole Language*, Weaver describes many characteristics of whole language classrooms, four of which are pertinent to this discussion of how my assessment of Sue had to go beyond the measuring of skills.

First, in whole language classrooms students are viewed as "capable and developing" (25) rather than deficient in skills. This was an important assumption for me to make about Sue. Rather than focusing on all the areas where Sue seemed to be lacking at the beginning of the year, I focused on where she was and went from there. Even though Sue was

too shy to speak in an audible tone at first, and later confused about how to tackle almost every assignment, it was my expectation that Sue would come along, would learn, and would make great gains in my classroom, even if she was starting slowly, shyly, and with little confidence in herself. I began with celebrating the letter about Owl Moon, recognizing the implications involved with her writing an unsolicited letter in response to a book. There were many celebrations to follow as she shared her work and ideas with the class and became a part of our classroom community. I was prepared from the beginning to give her time and space to let her learn, and she did.

The second important characteristic of whole language classrooms is that "language and literacy are best developed through functional use" (24). In our classroom much of the reading and writing activities had authentic purposes. For example, students wrote stories which they shared with their classmates and sometimes with other classrooms. They wrote letters to pen pals. The class read books and magazines for enjoyment as well as for class projects. Sue was learning to write by writing real texts and to read by reading real texts. This contextualized nature of the reading and writing activities proved to be helpful to an easily confused child like Sue.

In a whole language classroom, students "learn to think of themselves as competent, as readers and writers rather than as mere children who have yet to master the skills of reading and writing" (26). This third characteristic is closely linked to the previous one. As Sue read and wrote for real purposes, she gained confidence in herself and developed independence as a reader and writer. Her letter about Owl Moon and her reading of the difficult Christmas poem are just two examples of how the classroom environment enabled her.

Finally, "assessment was intertwined with learning" (25). Two issues already discussed affect assessment. The first is the teacher's expectations about student learning. When the teacher regards a student's learning as being at a developmental level as opposed to being deficient in ability, the task of assessment lies in describing growth over time. In addition, this expectation translates into looking at and valuing what a child can do from the very beginning. The teacher trusts that all students will become proficient readers and writers when they spend time reading and writing. Therefore, the instructional and assessment emphasis is on getting the students to participate in literacy activities rather than worrying about their initial reading and writing abilities. Sue's learning story records her growth over time. Whatever she did as the year progressed was always measured against

her as a student who earlier in the year rarely spoke or attended to what was happening. Sue's letter about Owl Moon was significant for many reasons, but in terms of assessment the letter far outweighed any other previous measure of her literacy since it signaled her joining in the reading and writing activities of the classroom.

Assessment was "intertwined with learning" since every child's developmental level affected how they were assessed. In addition, the manner in which the language arts were taught—that is, through functional use—also "intertwined assessment with learning." For example, the very tasks that students engaged in to read and write for authentic purposes were often the same tasks on which they were assessed. Rather than taking some sort of test to show what they knew, students demonstrated their knowledge as they read and wrote. When Sue wrote a letter to her pen pal, for example, I assessed how well she was able to do this task—how well it was composed, what words she was able to spell without help, and how well she used capitalization and punctuation rules. But the task had a purpose over and above doing something to be assessed on. Assessment in this "kidwatching" form happened daily as students read and wrote. And, although there was still a place for the particular assessment tools often used in whole language classrooms such as miscue analyses, interviews, logs, and portfolios, these were still pieces of a picture that needed to be considered with the overall patterns of learning that developed over time in the day-to-day happenings of the classroom.

Assessment in the whole language classroom, then, has to do with valuing everything the student is doing well. It involves celebrating those areas of strength and honing in on less-developed areas to help the child as much as possible as she reads and writes. When we watch what the student is doing and assess in this way, we are waiting for the student to show us the best of what she can do. Rather than looking at formal assessment tools only, we are on the alert for any time a student shows positive progress. For Sue, the longer I focused on her strengths, the more I realized that her only weaknesses were her shyness and her need for additional clarification of assignments.

So what does all this mean? What is the importance of this story of one student in one whole language classroom? I find the story important because it affirms how much any child can grow given an appropriate environment. The richness of a whole language classroom is important for all learners but especially for students who enter our rooms the way Sue did—a student who didn't listen, didn't pay attention,

didn't know what was going on, and rarely understood any directions on the first try. It would have been easy but incorrect to assume Sue did not understand the content of the second-grade curriculum. And if I had used only traditional measures of assessment like publisher-prepared tests, standardized tests, and decontextualized skill sheets, I most likely would have had a measure that demonstrated how Sue was, in fact, not learning and did not know the second-grade curriculum. And that would have been wrong. As teachers we need to broaden our focus in the area of assessment. We need to be looking for and using tools which show as much as possible of what kids know and what they can do. The more open and flexible the assessment forum the more we are likely to learn about our students and be able to help them.

This story also demonstrates that all students—even those who may appear to be the least capable, or who enter our rooms with labels that might signal a limited potential—have a lot to offer if we provide an accessible environment where they can join in. In the timely context of our classrooms, each child lives an individual learning story. Each story begins and ends in a different place. What we do as their teachers, and what we choose to value about their learning, can have a considerable impact on how our students leave us: Do they feel successful? Do they perceive themselves as capable readers and writers? Do they have the confidence in themselves as learners?

And finally, in the end, it is not enough to merely provide for a rich and meaningful atmosphere in which our children will learn, even though that in and of itself is not a simple task. It is equally important to listen to what our students have to say—the questions they ask and the stories they tell. It is necessary to watch how they act—what they do and how they respond to various situations. And, then, we need to reflect on all of this. For each student is both an individual and a part of the group—both completely unique and also very much like other students of present and past. Through our observations and listening, we must learn when to provide time for the children to work alone and when to ask them to work with others. We must also learn when to provide assistance and when to encourage the child to work through the problem on his or her own. It is the teacher's job to find out what it is that the student needs to make the most out of the year's experience.

Sue's story illustrates the idea that all children will teach us how to value their learning if we are willing to watch, listen, and reflect.

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