Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 14
Issue 1 *Whole Language - Dead or Alive?*

Article 7

1998

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Recommended Citation

Shafer, Greg (1998) "Whole Language in the Developmental Class," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1431>

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Whole Language in the Developmental Class

Greg Shafer

In the fall of 1996, I was asked to share the responsibility for developing and teaching a remedial English program at my high school. The challenge before my colleague Carol and me was to design a set of classes for remedial students that would lead to what our principal called "a more meaningful and effective linguistic experience." In the past, remedial students had typically completed the program feeling unable to write in the high school's "regular" or "advanced" classes and had met with little success in completing exit exams on comprehension and writing. In essence, then, our challenge was to make students more thoughtful, versatile, and competent readers and writers, to help them find success beyond the workbook and to see language as an empowering activity.

Making Whole Language a Reality

What made the invitation especially appealing to both Carol and me was the opportunity to experiment with the whole language theories and lessons that had been so much a part of our lunch-time discussions and regular teaching load. With the morale of the administration quite low and the expectations high, we began what was to be a very challenging and enlightening experience in the importance of whole language pedagogy for basic or remedial writers.

The design for our program began with a set of premises that we considered basic for the construction of a whole language classroom. First, we would assume that students, like children, learn best in a setting that proceeds from whole to part—one that presents language as real life communication rather than skills to be completed.

Both of us liked the idea of a literacy club as presented by Frank Smith (1988) and hoped to use writing workshops and reading discussions as a holistic alternative to the almost exclusive use of basal readers and workbooks that had been a staple of this program previously.

Equally important was the contention that language use and development be seen as natural human endeavor, akin to walking. Again, theorists such as Frank Smith, Connie Weaver, and Ken Goodman lend support to the idea that language learning, when effective, cannot be divorced from the growth and interests of the learner. As we began to construct the tenets of our program, we felt committed to the idea that language is natural, holistic, meaning-centered, and personal. Or, as Harold Foster argues in *Crossing Over: Whole Language for Secondary School Teachers*, "Whole language empowers students, is patterned after natural language growth, and is meaning centered" (20-21).

With these ideas in mind, we began the design for our classes. Our first dilemma was to find a set of books that would fulfill our goal to foster interest as well as challenge our students. As can be expected, our book supply was filled with canonical works that had little relevance for our students. If our program was to be successful, we were convinced that we would need a book that was both inviting and accessible. From discussions from the previous director, we knew that these students tended to see reading as a risky, intimidating exercise. We further knew that because of these unpleasant experiences with English, they had created strategies to avoid doing it and had little experience with good books. Thus,

it was up to us to find a book or set of books that would enliven a very basic need to read and write, despite the failure that was probably associated with it.

Thus, in those final frenetic days before the opening of school, with the heat still hovering around summer-like temperatures, we began our methodical search for a high-interest book that would engage students without insulting their intelligence. Finally, after hours of conversation, catalog searches, and phone work, we inadvertently found the book that would become a favorite of both students and the staff. I discovered it while browsing through a small, second-hand store that sold used books. At the time, I had taken a break from the search and found my first Illustrated Classic lying among a miscellaneous group of novels to the side of the store. Immediately I was drawn to its color, illustrations, and vivid print. The title was *Frankenstein*, and as I read it, I was quickly impressed with its attention to accuracy as well as its inviting design. Beside it lay a second Illustrated Classic of Dicken's *Great Expectations* and Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Here was a series of classic novels written in a simple style. Each page had large print and was followed by an illustration that provided background information for the students as they read. Most importantly, these books seemed fun, non-threatening, and success-oriented. Students could feel good about reading a classic like *Moby Dick* without having to become mired in the small print and difficult style. They would be, in short, enjoying a good book.

With our budget we bought class sets of five different titles and made plans to order more as soon as money was available. We found dozens of copies at outlet malls and bigger bookstores and began stocking our shelves. Later, as we finished designing our boards with posters, we felt ready for our first day of class.

Introducing Students to Active Learning

Class came and all of the theory and discussion were quickly washed away in a flood of wide-eyed children. As teachers who had never taught basic or remedial students, we were quickly aware of how unwilling many were to change and give up their workbook routine. They enjoyed the order, the simplicity of the exercises over vocabulary and context clues. They knew the expectations for fill-in-the-blank tests and were initially intransigent when we spoke of reading a book and writing papers. It had become a comfortable routine with "objective tests." They hesitated when we talked of story writing and novels. "We don't write

papers," lamented one sleepy-eyed girl in the first row. Added a husky boy in the second row, "We haven't done any of that stuff yet." Clearly, the consensus was that reading and writing were intricate, hierarchical skills that had yet to be grasped by these students. "We don't write until we complete the workbooks," added a very serious looking girl in the back.

With the workbooks carefully packed away and out of sight, we began our week with a tentative schedule. While we would read together almost every day, Thursday would be set aside for journal writing and free reading. Every two weeks there would be an assigned writing response that would require a rough draft, peer editing, and a final revision. I assured students that I would compose with them and that anything they did could be revised for a better grade. Finally, with looks of trepidation and moans of woe, they gathered their books and left.

It is very important, I believe, that a whole language class — especially one designed for remedial students — remain true to Judith Langer's idea that literacy be characterized as "reading toward a horizon of possibilities" (37). Each written assignment that I did with my students probed a topic that was relevant and engaging. Never did I assume that composition should be done to learn a skill or practice a prescribed lesson. Writing was a way to delve into personal adventures and curiosities. It needed to be meaningful.

From this assumption came an autobiographical assignment that asked students to explore a time in their lives they would never forget, one that resulted in a special reflection. For some students, the assignment was adjusted so that the autobiography illustrated an event that could or might some day happen. In all cases, the emphasis was placed on self expression, on personal contemplation. I would not penalize them for an organization, style, or topic that was unusual. "Tell me a story about yourself and bring it to life for all of us to hear, see, and feel," I told them.

As could be expected, initial responses to the assignment reflected a grudging sense of resignation. Most students didn't feel it was possible to write more than one paragraph, and virtually everyone was certain they had not studied enough writing and grammar to write a complete story.

Luckily, I had already started a rough draft of my own and was quick to read my opening page as an example. After reading my fictitious tale of exploring the jungles of Africa, I spent time talking to the class and helping them to tap into background experiences that would lead to a good story. Then, as a class, we worked on exciting

openings, the use of metaphors, and the need to develop a complete plot. Before providing time for silent writing, we did a clustering exercise on the board and discussed the discovery involved in all writing. Then, with much of the ideas and energy still swirling in the air, I asked them to begin, demanding that they keep their pens moving to generate ideas in the same ways a farmer plants seeds. Some will take root while others will quickly be tossed to the side. "It is important," I reminded them, "to be productive, to be active, to compose through cumbersome writing blocks."

Introducing the Writing Process

Peter Elbow calls these moments a time of "cooking" and "growing," and as students wrote and read and then composed some more, they became acquainted with holistic communication. For all, it was still a slow, labored process, but for many, it symbolized an awakening of sorts—an introduction to writing for the sake of saying something meaningful to a real audience. The concept of process, the need for revision, and the recognition of development and change all became a reality for students in this moving session.

In her book *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy argues that the "beginning writer does not know how writers behave" (79). Writers who are unaware of process, she adds, "tend to think that the point in writing is to get everything right the first time" (79). Much of what I accomplished in this first writing session was to orient the class to the holistic, evolutionary aspects of composing. Rather than being a single shot in the dark, it was a journey that would involve a reworking of thoughts and prose. Truly, to be a whole language teacher is to engage students in not only the recursive acts of writing but also the involvement of the whole person in the generating of discourse.

Emerging from the session came some practices that quickly became valued rituals in class. For many of the writing assignments after this, we would engage in the clustering and discussion that typified our opening assignment. It is extremely instructive to note that few students ever again claimed that they couldn't write a complete piece of prose. While revisions required coaxing and plenty of work, all students knew that the crafting of a story was something they could and often wanted to do, despite not having finished the workbook.

Teaching whole language means one requires process and nurtures its idiosyncratic, uneven, and often unpredictable stages. Jason, a student in the class, personified Donald Murray's focus on

"discovery" as a part of writing. Indeed, Jason's final drafts — sometimes a fourth or fifth revision — were often completely different from the opening one he crafted for a peer critique. For Jason, the ability to write stimulated and ignited his ability to think seriously about a subject. With each revision, one could see his ideas becoming more refined and coherent. Like running water that gradually becomes clear the longer it runs, Jason's interaction with the written word was a catalyst for clarity. Jerome Harste has said that "the same learning process that leads to errors leads to creativity. You can't have one without the other" (11). Truly, a whole language process approach allows for development of both writers and their works.

A Reader Response Approach

Reading or literature in our classes took on the same whole language, student-centered, exploratory context that was indicative of our writing sessions. Early in the year, we made a commitment to approach literary studies as a personal, transactional search for relevance. Whole language literary classes, we believe, allow students to read complete stories and books, and focus their discussion on the visions of each reader's active experience with that text. Thus, rather than leading students in a teacher-directed review of literary terms or reading skills, students explore their vision of the stories in an active, dynamic, critical method — one that demands thought and personal investment. Of course, much of this lofty theory was both foreign and disquieting to our students. Conditioned as they were to see reading as a means to completing a skill, they had little notion of what it meant to read, interpret, and discuss. For the first time, they were expected to construct meaning rather than being given it from a book or lecture.

How do we generate inquiry in our students' reading? We began our classes by asking each student to complete informal response journals. Because they were so accustomed to being told what to do and how to read — because they seemed far removed from having a literary experience — we felt a first step would be to make them active readers, to help them to see that reading, when it is effective, engages one in personal investigation and reflection. Thus, students were asked to use their reading journals as a way to relate certain events to their own lives, to evaluate decisions made by characters, and to analyze other options. From some scenarios, students became embroiled in provocative debates concerning personal morals and societal ethics. Other days would find them writing their prediction for the next chapter

or communicating their hope for a character's future. Each journal response, whether short or lengthy, helped involve students in the construction of the story and established the fact that reading is a process of active meaning-making—a process that incorporates reading, writing, speech, and analysis.

As with the composition before it, this more demanding approach to reading initially caused some trepidation and resistance. Many felt that they didn't have the requisite skills to discuss literature and unearth the "answer" to the story. Others, as could be expected, wanted to revert to the workbook world of reading and answering questions on plot and character development. However, after a bit of persuasion and practice, students became quite content with this reader-response approach. Indeed, within one week, reading journals became a time that many looked forward to and openly praised. From the Illustrated Classics on *Frankenstein*, we moved to Dicken's *Great Expectations*, Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Gradually, with each new novel and feeling of success, students became more engaged and empowered, writing whole stories in response to a novel's ending. With the invitation to create and respond in a holistic, student-centered fashion, reading and writing became fun and was done with sophistication.

Of course, I do not want to leave my readers with an impression that our whole language classes were a panacea. Throughout the semester, we both saw alienated students refuse to participate in the whole language model. Many, lamentably, did not believe they were capable of writing complete stories or reading entire books, while others felt betrayed by a system that no longer simplified their language experience to short answers and exercises within basal readers. A few seemed turned-off by English and simply refused to join in at any cost.

Whole Language and Empowerment

However, as a whole, students seemed to be empowered by a class that made reading and writing a bridge to their interests and lives. Only a small percentage (ten percent) failed the class, and fifty percent saw their grades rise. More importantly, a significant number expressed a new enthusiasm about writing and reading. With their portfolios filled with work they had done, they perceived themselves as legitimate writers and authorities on reading. If there is a clear advantage to teaching whole language, it is in its ability to showcase the vigor and magic of personal expres-

sion. It parallels the social, meaningful way that children learn and use speech as they are acquiring language for the first time. Responses from students reflected a new sense of enthusiasm about English:

"I liked writing in journals and reading the stories. I liked *Frankenstein*, but I liked *Robinson Crusoe* the best."

"Writing was fun sometimes and sometimes it was hard. I like doing adventure stories and reading the books."

"I enjoyed writing and plan to do more of it. I never really liked English but you made it fun."

In her effort to define whole language, Connie Weaver alludes to the need to keep language "authentic" so that reading and writing extend to "the whole life of a child" (6). Because children come to our classes with sophisticated verbal skills, because they learn to read and write as they learned to talk—in a natural, gradual process—there is little need to "control" learning in what Weaver calls a "behavioristic, transmission model." Most essentially in whole language, "students view themselves as good readers and writers" (126) and learn to construct meaning from a variety of meaningful texts. I believe we did much of this in our class and helped students to become more excited about language and its use in their lives.

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