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Literacy: A Never-Ending Story

Renee Webster

Imagine!

In the words of little old Mrs. Gumm, a storybook character from *sometimes it's TURKEY - sometimes it's FEATHERS* by Lorna Balian, we hear: "We'll hatch it and feed it and let it grow plump. What a fine Thanksgiving dinner we will have. Imagine!"

After each event in Balian's story, Mrs. Gumm ends her conversation with Cat, with the request to "Imagine." What would classrooms be like if students were indeed asked to imagine? What kinds of learning interactions would take place in a classroom environment where students and teachers alike approached learning in this manner?

The Language of Our Stories

My beliefs about literacy and learning, like most of the beliefs I hold, come from the stories of my life, the voices of my own children, and the kaleidoscope of interactions with students in which I have shared a learning community. Language enables me to put together and express the stories that make my life meaningful. Language enables me to share my experiences. If thought did not have language it could not create many of the worlds that I experience and share. I cannot keep thoughts in my head for more than a few minutes, and I cannot display them without the benefit of language, music, or art. Imagine the power of language and literacy in the sharing of

written and oral text—my stories and our stories, experienced together in a learning community.

My interest in the things my students come to school thinking and talking about gives them power inside our classroom that extends to their lives beyond our room. Their voices arise from a desire to share their stories, to discover more about our world, and provide both speaker and listener with a greater understanding of self and others.

In The Beginning

When I began teaching in 1975, I thought of literacy as an end product—something that would be achieved by teaching reading to students. Each year I taught reading to my first graders by covering three pre-primers, one primer, and one reader. Each book had a workbook with pages to drill each skill, a ditto master worksheet, a reinforcement ditto page, and an assessment test master for each skill. Approximately three hundred separate reading skills, a majority of which emphasized sound-symbol correspondence, were taught to my first graders to prepare them for second grade.

I actually believed this was what I wanted my students to learn. An evaluation checklist indicating all the skills to be taught was kept for each student. Skills were checked off as they were mastered, reassuring teachers, like myself, that we were doing our jobs, even though I knew that

there were students who, despite all the drilling, were not able to apply the isolated skills to their reading or even to remember them in isolation for long-term evaluations.

Breaking the code was the goal, and when comprehension was emphasized, the first-grade manuals asked students only to recall facts that were given within the text. Students were not provided opportunities to think about the text or about themselves as learners, or to connect powerful ideas. They did not think about valuing each other, or imagining what might be!

When I contrast those students with the students participating in my classroom today, I am aware of all that was missing. Learning was contrived and lacked the excitement and energy that is present when children are truly engaged.

The sense of wonderment and commitment towards investigation of personal understanding was not a part of my early classrooms.

My Metamorphosis

I found my views concerning literacy changing many years ago when I began to think about "talk" in my classroom. I had made an assignment change from teaching a second/third grade split to teaching kindergarten. In my new placement, I was given permission to change the direction of the program from workbook-based to a developmentally appropriate activity-based program. In the process I worked closely with another kindergarten teacher establishing a curriculum that met each student's needs as he or she entered our classrooms and provided a large variety of activity-based learning opportunities. We used our professional texts and manuals as resources and incorporated what we knew about young children and learning to create our own strategies to assist students in attaining our district's educational goals.

Moving away from teaching where learning was broken down into minute skills into an environment where talk was the focused method of learning led me to begin reading and reflecting on literacy and how learning occurred. I began to examine what I could do to develop an atmosphere of trust and respect within my classroom that would encourage talk and learning. I looked

at conversations during dramatic play, at talk used to initiate play or other interactions, and at talk used to solve conflicts. I also listened for concept development in student conversations. I observed talk as a way to express thoughts and to celebrate individual voices. I saw the many facets of literacy, including reading, writing, listening and speaking, as tools through which thinking was transacted and which facilitated students' social and intellectual development.

As my students' excitement in learning grew, so did mine! Fewer school days ended with me feeling like I had done all the work! I began doing an abundance of professional reading which led me to become a participant in a National Writing Project which influenced my decision to enter the masters program in Literacy at Michigan State University.

Building a Team

As teacher and students interact in a classroom, they become a learning community. I saw this occurring in the Teamroom—the name the students in my classroom selected to call our multiage program. Teamkids used "exploratory" talk to discuss concepts to make sense of their investigations, in Book Club discussions, and during whole group meetings. Science investigations with simple machines and the water cycle illustrate the power of talk. The Teamkids read about simple machines and explored real objects containing wheels, gears, axles, belts, and levers. The students experimented to create ramps and measured with rubber bands the force needed to lift a load straight up, as compared with using an incline plane. They carved with wedges and balanced objects with a changing fulcrum point. One of their tasks was to work in small groups to create devices that had wheels and turned on an axle. The rotation of these wheels was required to cause a gear to also turn. Listening to their conversations and watching their interactions were very exciting. The sharing of ideas and information led them towards solving their problems together. Most of them had never interacted with gears, belts, or axles. They were delighted with the devices they were able to create. The longer they interacted in this learning event, the

more they demonstrated abilities to devise mechanisms where one movement caused another part to move a multiple of connecting parts.

The collaborative conversations involved in this exploration demonstrated the co-constructing of knowledge as first and second graders shared their understanding and problem-solving strategies used to create their devices. Each day I was able to observe this co-constructing of knowledge in the Teamroom through the pairing of learning partners and during large and small group explorations, such as the learning task using gears.

Ron questioned, "If water is recycled over and over again, Mrs. Webster, does that mean we have dinosaur spit in our water?"

In our science investigation of water this past year we studied the water cycle and the conservation of water. Ron questioned, "If water is recycled over and over again, Mrs. Webster, does that mean we have dinosaur spit in our water?" This question evoked a ton of moans and many thought-provoking questions, which eventually led the students to construct a scaled-down version of a water system used by municipalities to clean water supplies for human use and consumption. Following hours of study, experiments, and investigation, the students built their own municipal water system, large enough for them to crawl through and experience firsthand the purification process of water. The students acting as tour guides for children in other classrooms explained in detail how their water system worked to filter the water from the time it entered the mixing basin where it mixed with alum, to when it entered a filter where gravity forced it through sand and gravel for the actual filtering process. As clear water traveled through a pipe, chlorine and fluoride were injected and, finally, it flowed into a pipe which led to the water tower where it was stored and distributed to residents. Students then wrote a letter inviting Perry's Department of Public Works Superintendent to come to school

and share his knowledge of Perry's water system. Individually, students developed lists of questions they each wanted to ask the Superintendent of Public Works about Perry's water. Their thoughtful and meaningful list of questions showed how the pursuit of learning is focused on finding out, not just wondering. It was interesting to see how inquiries pushed students' desire to know. As the content of investigation deepened, the students' need to know grew, and their confidence to question and test expanded. Our questions became tools for understanding when they were connected to data sources, such as books, more knowledgeable others, or media.

The same types of conversations happened in the Book Club Program of Raphael and McMahon (1994) slightly adapted for working with lower elementary children. I invited my students to join book clubs where they responded through writing and conversation. Book clubs encouraged students to organize their response to a text in a personal way, which stimulated their prior experiences, abilities, and ideas. Conversing through book talks provided students with the experience of sharing a text as more than an exercise in decoding, supporting a belief that the role of a reader goes beyond the reciting of words to discover the multiple interpretations of a text. The following transcript describes the first few minutes of a student-led conversation about the Beverly Cleary story *Henry and Beezus*. In the section of the story discussed by the Teamkids, Henry discovers forty-nine boxes of bubble gum in a vacant lot. The three first graders and one second grader in this heterogeneous grouping of students try to unravel how Henry actually discovered the gum and enumerate the events which led up to his discovery.

- 1 -M. He found it in the ... alley.
- 2 -E. It's not an alley, really.
- 3 -M. It's like one.
- 4 -E. Yea.
- 5 -M. Henry's dog ran up to chase a cat and ...
he found a package of something and
he looked in it and it was gum.
- 6 -E. I don't remember any cat.
- 7 -R. Neither do I.

- 8 -T. I do.
 9 -M. There was -
 10-T. A cat.
 11-R. I thought that was a dog.
 12-E. It was a dog. There was a dog there.
 13-R. There was.
 14-E. Yea.
 15-T. There was a cat and a dog.
 16-M. The dog started chasing the cat and he
 found the package of something.
 17-E. Oh yea!
 18-M. And he opened it and it was gum.
 19-T. Meat.
 20-E. The dog didn't open it.
 21-R. Yea, the dog didn't open it.
 22-T. The dog chased the cat and THEN he
 found it.
 23-R. The dog didn't find it.
 24-E. Yes, he did.
 25-M. The dog (inaudible)
 26-E. The dog found the package.
 27-T. Yea!
 28-R. The dog found the cat.
 29-E. Yea, and that was when Henry opened
 the package and there was gum in
 there.
 30-M. And then he ran to his friend's house and
 asked for a barrow.
 31-R. Ah, no, not a barrow, a ...
 32-All A wagon.

We can see from this discussion how the students were moving through the story to construct meaning. On lines 1 through 4, Mary and Ellie work to clarify a description of a vacant lot, which is not a familiar land mark for these rural students. They ended up agreeing it was not exactly an alley but it was like an alley. On line 6, Mary summarizes her interpretation regarding Henry's discovery of the gum. Ellie and Ron then begin questioning what actually happened in the story. Their inquiries take the form of restating or describing mental images of what they are trying to learn. These learners take ownership of their learning within a community that demands listening and participation. This also indicates these learners trust their own thinking as they take risks in expressing their views and seeking clarification as they support each other to come to

consensus. During a large group discussion or using individual worksheets, these students may never have had the opportunity to scaffold each other's construction of knowledge concerning their understanding of this text.

In building our class community, the students and I took time to meet as a large group to celebrate our discoveries, share information on our latest inquiries, or to restate strategies and knowledge constructed. Since students often worked in small groups, it was important for all students to meet as a large group and reflect on their experiences together to become more conscious of what and how tasks were accomplished.

Early in the year I noticed that many of the Teamkids were writing about the same topic everyday in their journals. I shared this observation with the Teamkids as we met for a community sharing time. The Teamkids reflected on whether they chose to vary the topics they wrote about each day in their journals.

As the content of investigation deepened, the students' need to know grew, and their confidence to question and test expanded.

Andy said, "I write about the same thing everyday because I do the same thing every day."

Ellie related, "It would be boring for me to write about the same thing every day, but sometimes I have a hard time thinking of something I want to write about."

"I know how to write about my family, and I like writing about what we do, so I almost always write about them," shared Dee.

"I'm writing a chapter story about aliens. I have been working on it all week. It might take me a month," explained Les.

As our conversation continued, we explored why we enjoyed writing about the topics we were using and discussed other topics we might like to write about in our journals. We decided to take the next day to make a list of topics we might want to write about during the year and then staple it to the inside of our journals.

This personal and whole-group reflection time was very important for each student and for me. I saw a lot of power in the notion of developing shared knowledge with a class. The developing and shaping of collective accounts of understanding build over time. Since I have my students for two or three years in my multi-age classroom, they carry these understandings from one year to the next.

A recent illustration of this shared understanding occurring in the Teamroom was Jack's observation that Mary's pumpkin was beginning to mold. I mentioned his discovery, saying: "Look what Jack has discovered." I began humming a little decomposing chant we learned last year and eyes lit up, as the class recalled our past experience together. Voices united: "It's decomposing." Conversations turned to discussing our walking trip to the old dump, the moldy french fries found under Cassie's bed that she brought to school, and the collection of food from our lunches we observed and then fed to our wormery. I cannot recall a day going by this year without references being made by at least one student concerning an experience remembered from last year's learning community. The students have a shared vocabulary of experiences and understanding that was established during their first year in the Teamroom.

I see my role in our class community as following the Vygotskian approach, where the process of classroom education is a joint enterprise involving teacher and learner, and where learning is socially constructed. I respond to each child in terms of his/her current ability, his/her efforts to solve problems, and my knowledge gained from the feedback provided by each child. I empower my students by appreciating their best efforts, listening to them carefully, asking for clarification when necessary, responding by acknowledging their starting points, assisting or encouraging them to extend, and modifying when necessary in light of new understanding.

Conclusion

In my multi-age classroom I have come to understand the power of talk. When surveying

my class of six, seven, and eight year-olds on how they felt about having an opportunity to get together with other students to share their ideas concerning a book or specific topic, almost all of them gave positive responses regarding talk in the classroom. As one student explained, "We listen to each other. We learn more things from each other, and I learn things from myself when we talk together."

My continuing research and observations of my students and children support my beliefs that literacy and learning are active, social, and collaborative. When provided choices, given ownership of learning events, and engaged in meaningful experiences, the students construct knowledge. Our minds are constantly thinking, trying to construct order from our experience in the world, creating stories.

Valuing talk in my classroom creates an intensity in my desire to understand more about collaborative talk and the critical thinking that surrounds the discussions of literature and other learning investigations. I want to know what I can do to improve the learning opportunities for my students during these interactions. This craving to know what I can say or model differently is what continues to lead me forward in my research.

When I read *sometimes it's TURKEY - and sometimes it's FEATHERS* for the first time, I expected the turkey to become Mrs. Gumm's Thanksgiving dinner. What I have discovered through the sharing of stories is that learning often goes beyond what is expected, and confidence and competence envelop learners as they gain respect for themselves as researchers and knowers.

If we focus on the classroom as a community where children explore new ideas, develop new ways of thinking, and construct knowledge through their interactions and writing, it then becomes clear that language will be the primary means through which such learning can occur. Imagine the power of language in such a classroom community.