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"AFLOAT ON A SEA OF TALK"

Lois Matz Rosen

Like most teachers, I'm a pack rat, collecting, organizing, and storing anything that looks remotely as if it might someday be useful for teaching, or maybe research, or maybe writing, or even just a bulletin board display. In reality, a lot of the stuff I can't part with is more in the line of memorabilia, the squirreled away bits and pieces of my life that I save because I can't bear to let go of the part of my past that each represents. Recently I moved, forcing me to go through the accumulated clutter and to reconsider the boxes still unopened from the previous move nine years earlier.

As the trash pile grew higher, and I grew increasingly pleased with myself for discarding such stored sentiment as my dissertation drafts and the box of student writing from the first college class I taught in 1977, I found a box in the back of the closet containing all my teaching materials from the Philadelphia schools in the early sixties— daily lesson plans, tests, handouts, grade books, and a set of teaching guides dated 1960 for grades ten to twelve from the curriculum department of the Philadelphia school system. "I might want to use them again" had been my excuse as I'd moved the box to Michigan in 1970 and then, unopened, on to several apartments and houses. Well, now was the time to throw them out, I thought; but first, I had to reminisce. Settling back against the packing boxes, I began turning the pages of the half-dozen spiral-bound notebooks, eager to see what I'd been like as a teacher in the early years of my professional life.

What I found on those pages was in such direct conflict with the theoretical underpinnings of my present teaching that I was tempted to burn the boxes instead of merely putting them out with the trash. The contrast in methods, materials, and values between the early '60s and the '90s was enormous, reflective not just of my own development as an English teacher, but of major changes in the profession itself over the last thirty years. I'd like to describe what I found in these notebooks because I believe they represent,

in microcosm, our collective past; and an examination of them offers insight into the forces that shaped English teaching throughout much of this century. Then, turning to the new understandings that have re-shaped our thinking about English/language arts in the past three decades, I want to explore the significance of this information in changing teaching and learning in today's classrooms.

Part I
The Way It Was

My box of lesson plan notebooks from the early '60s revealed a consistent pattern to my weekly planning:

Monday— word study: spelling test, new spelling list, vocabulary study, dictionary work.

Tuesday and Wednesday— grammar and composition. Each year I began with a review of the parts of speech and parts of a sentence, then proceeded to whatever the curriculum guide specified for that grade. We seemed to spend a lot of time on simple, compound, and complex sentences and the various kinds of dependent clauses. I assigned workbook exercises from Warriner's, gave grammar tests, and occasionally passed out classroom sets of texts based on the newest method for reinforcing language text: "Give it to him. Give it to me. Give it to him and me." or "She went to the store. I went to the store. She and I went to the store."

Once a month students spent a period writing a composition in class on topics I gave them— My Future Plans, My Proudest Moment, My Angriest Moment, On Saving Money, On Being the Oldest or Youngest in the Family. When I returned the graded papers the following week, I read a few "A" papers aloud and then had students spend the rest of the period correcting the errors I had marked.

Thursday and Friday— literature: three whole-class readings per term, including one play by Shakespeare; three books a term read independently and reported on with a book review written in class on the due date. With a literature curriculum based on "Great Books," we read *Silas Marner*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Tale of Two Cities*, interspersed with a few more modern classics such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and *The Human Comedy*. Paperbacks hadn't reached the schools yet, and the genre known as adolescent literature was still in its infancy.

Here's a typical day's lesson plan for literature as it appeared in my lesson plan notebook, the beginning of a unit on short stories:

Aim: Introduction to short story as a form of literature

Materials: 1) Some magazines
2) "The Open Window" by Saki,
p. 163 of anthology

Method: 1) Ask: Where do we find short stories? (Show magazines to illustrate variety and prevalence)
2) Ask: Why popular? Think of the title. (Because short)
3) List characteristics of short stories on board:
1. Short
2. One experience in brief action
3. Few characters
4. Easily and quickly read
5. Condensed— each word important

Introduce "The Open Window":

Saki— pseudonym of H.H. Munro

Word for "The Creator" from *Rubaiyat of Omar*

Khayyam, a ghost story

Read story aloud, students taking turns up and down rows

Discuss story: Where does it take place? What is Framton Nuttel like? What happens at the end?
How do we know the young girl made the story up? What two stories does she make up? Is this a ghost story?

Discuss how this story fulfills the five characteristics of short stories listed on board.

The next class period started with a quiz on the story and then we went on to another story handled in a similar fashion.

Years later, I had difficulty believing what I was reading in that lesson plan notebook! Instead of discussing *their* experiences with short stories, I told them *my* experiences with short stories—magazines. I asked questions that I answered myself; the questions were only a rhetorical device to enable me to tell them what I wanted them to know. Worst of all, I *gave* them a canned list of characteristics of short stories instead of permitting them to discover what short stories were all about by reading them. Then I put everyone into a state of tension as good and poor readers alike were forced into a public revelation of their ability to read aloud from a text they'd never seen before.

But other things I found in these lesson plan notebooks were equally disturbing. Once, I returned a set of marked and graded compositions, all entitled "I was Frightened," and spent the entire period teaching a lesson on fragments and run-ons using examples from their papers. One week I structured three consecutive days of total silence in the classroom while students wrote an essay on Wednesday and read to themselves in their outside reading books on Thursday and Friday. Even now I remember how bored I was, sitting in the silent classroom, watching them read and write.

Reading these notebooks was like finding grandma's journal in the attic, thinking you now had a treasured family heirloom and instead discovering that she'd had an affair with the farmer next door. Shocking! Lecturer, tester, grader, transmitter of all those carefully structured lessons on grammar or Shakespeare's theater, I'd stood daily in front of the black-

board giving out information to thirty-five students per class as they sat silently in brown wooden desks nailed to the floor in single rows with narrow aisles. Now, almost thirty years later, I'm appalled by the isolation of skills and the fragmentation of knowledge that I see on the pages of those lesson plan notebooks. But I'm even more dismayed by the emphasis on passive learning, on what Connie Weaver calls the "transmission model" of teaching, on the very "teacher-centeredness" of my curriculum. The only physical evidence I have of the students on the other side of my desk are my gradebooks. No copies of student writing, let alone bound classroom publications. No photos of group projects or student-created bulletin boards. No personal journal records of jotted notes of what actually went on in the classroom on those days when we discussed literature or worked on grammar.

Oh, we had an occasional spirited discussion of a piece of literature that students found relevant to their own lives. As I remember, *Romeo and Juliet* sparked an intense debate over whether or not Romeo and Juliet had spent the night alone together, thus giving them an opportunity to "do it." And I'd tried "group work" on *Macbeth*, letting the students sit on their desks so they could face each other while planning the project I'd assigned each group. At the time, I looked on this as a courageous act because the principal, who often roamed the halls peering into classrooms, might have caught me letting students talk to each other during class and lowered my annual evaluation. I don't know how the principal would have responded if he'd seen one of the school's most notorious gang leaders demonstrating how the "The Role of the Witches in *Macbeth*" (the group's assigned topic) was to set a mood of fear. Putting out the lights and turning on an eerie recording of the opening witches' scene, he had donned a hideous rubber Halloween mask and role-played one of the witches, lit only by the beam of a flashlight flicked off and on by his best buddy. We loved it—rather noisily, I might add.

There were these diversions, but mainly the days were full of teaching and testing as I covered the material recommended in the course guides and spun my students through each literary classic in the six weeks allotted before the classroom set had to go on to the next teacher. Two incidents remain unforgettable from those days, times when I felt both helpless and hopeless in my own classroom, although teaching a subject I loved and knew well.

We were reading aloud in one of my tenth grade classes, going up and down the aisles, each student reading about half a page before I called on the next one, when we reached a tall, gangly boy who sat silently in the back corner of the room on those infrequent days he came to school. He started to read haltingly, stammering, sounding out simple words like "this," obviously struggling, clearly functionally illiterate. I stopped him at the end of one sentence, trying desperately to cover up for his problem with some bright chatter about what we'd just read. Before I could reach him at the end of the period, he left class and never came back again. Even if I'd reached him, what could I have done? I knew nothing about teaching reading and our high school remedial reading program dealt only with those reading below grade level, not with non-readers.

The second incident centered on writing. After a forty-five-minute in-class writing session, a student turned in a stunning description of a street fight he'd witnessed. Vivid, detailed, full of dialogue and description, it was the kind of rich and fluent narration readers hunger for. But the only punctuation on two full pages of prose was a capital letter at the start and a period at the end. I didn't know how to grade it, how to respond to it (circling all the errors was out of the question), how to help the student harness his considerable power as a writer. In response to the same assignment, another student turned in a perfectly punctuated, perfectly correct, perfectly empty half page of writing. When she asked me why she only got a "C" even though she had no errors, all I could answer was, "It should have been longer." I didn't know how to help her either. All my teacher training courses, all the books I'd read about the teaching of English, hadn't given me the methods I needed to help these students become better readers and writers. The necessary understanding of reading and writing processes was not yet part of our professional knowledge.

My teacher training in English had consisted of one secondary English methods course taught by a man whose specialty was linguistics. Over fifty percent of my notes from that class have to do with teaching English grammar. Techniques for teaching writing had been covered in two lectures. Reading courses were only for elementary teachers. When it came time to stand before my own classes, I feel certain that what I drew on most was the way my English teachers had taught me at South Philadelphia High School less than ten years earlier. Nothing, either in my own student experiences or my teacher training courses, had suggested that classrooms should be other

than teacher-dominated places where students learned, quietly, what teachers taught. And I had limited understanding, as did the teaching profession, of how writers and readers performed these complex language skills, and of the intimate relationship between language and learning.

In those days, we were teaching out of tradition, applying assumptions about teaching and learning based on what had always been done—a strategy that John Mayher recently labeled “commonsense teaching.” English teaching had a one hundred-year tradition behind it of teaching grammar, spelling, vocabulary, composition, and literature as separate entities under the assumption that students would integrate this information mentally through constant exposure to it and become better readers, writers, and speakers. Teaching methods and materials within each of these areas had also undergone little change over the years—the weekly spelling list, the domination of literary “classics,” the “assign and mark” approach to composition instruction. My own review of composition marking from 1845 to 1980 shows how pervasive and unchanging had been the focus on error in evaluations student writing for over a hundred years.

Part II

Moving Forward: Recent Insights

In the three decades since my first teaching experience, the theoretical underpinnings of English teaching have undergone radical change, and the repercussions of this change are now reverberating throughout all subject areas, not just English. The methods espoused for language arts teaching today are grounded in the research and theory that came out of the '60s, '70s, and '80s, research into language acquisition and reading and writing processes that has had such a profound effect on educators, we now talk of a paradigm shift in education, and extensive and permanent change in our way of looking at both learning and teaching.

Let me step back for a moment to my own experiences as a teacher in order to illustrate the depth of this change. Still teaching grammar two days a week and conscientiously circling all the errors on my students' papers, I resigned in 1965 when my five-month-old pregnancy became impossible to hide any longer. Those days, in the Philadelphia schools, pregnant teachers weren't allowed to remain in the classroom once they began to “show.” Ten years later, now in Michigan, I registered for an English education methods course in order to “brush-up” a bit before returning to the classroom as a

secondary English teacher. The change in what I was taught about teaching English in that course was so dramatic I stayed on to find out what had been happening in my profession over those ten years from 1965-1975. And I know now that this decade was just the beginning of the rich outpouring of thinking, research, and writing that marked the following years.

As an English Education graduate student in the late '70s, I was taught to create thematic units integrating literature with related writing and speaking activities. I learned to teach writing as a process that began with helping students generate material and continued through revision, proof-reading, and publishing. Instead of assigning a topic, correcting all the errors on each paper, and plunking on a grade, I began to think of myself as a writing coach, a helpful editor, even a fellow-writer. Reading Donald Murray (1968) helped me understand that writing was a process of discovery, not a matter of filling in a carefully pre-planned outline. Janet Emig's case study research into the writing instruction processes of twelfth graders showed me that the approach to writing instruction I'd been using was "a limited, and limiting, experience"(97), something I'd suspected at the time since my students' writing never seemed to change much despite my best efforts. However, I hadn't known, then, of any other method for teaching writing. I read dozens of studies that tried to relate grammar study to writing improvement and came to the same conclusions as Braddock in *Research on Written Composition*: "The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (37-8). And I had been spending two days a week teaching grammatical labels and structures in the belief that this would improve students' speaking and writing.

I also read reading researchers such as Frank Smith, Ken and Yetta Goodman, George Miller, and Paul Kolars. Through my own research with the Reading Miscue Inventory, a diagnostic test with which I analyzed and categorized the kinds of miscues my young readers were making, I saw that reading really is a form of using language and a constant quest for meaning. I could see that in reading we draw on all of our previous knowledge of language, of the world, and of the look of words on the page. Meaning isn't there on the page to be decoded; rather, meaning has to be created through the interaction of text and reader. In fact, what the reader brings to the text is even more important than the symbols on the page; or, as Frank Smith puts it, "Reading is not primarily a visual process" (6). This explained, at least in

part, why my inner city students had had so much difficulty with *Tale of Two Cities*, and why even *Cheaper by the Dozen* had only succeeded in generating a few laughs rather than the lively discussions of family life I'd envisioned. The reading material was too far removed from the reality of my students' own lives for them to interact with it successfully.

But most important of all, I learned from the British researcher and theorist, James Britton, that language "is the means by which human beings create the world for themselves and themselves in the world" (quoted in Douglas 266-67), which suggests why language is so important in the classroom. In *Language and Learning*, Britton says that language is the primary means by which humans symbolize experience. We turn the multiple images of reality into symbols—into words—in order to handle our experience of the world, organizing reality through language. One of the ways we do this is to classify experience with language, creating categories that make sense to us and allow us to broaden our understanding as new information comes in. For example, we use the symbol "green" to cover a wide range of shades from a pale and golden spring green, a deeper grass green, an avocado green, to a dark forest green. It's language that allows us to classify all these colors as one family, green (though they're all different) and then describe the variations of this color through the associations brought about by other symbols: *spring green*, *forest green*, *avocado green*. It also allows us to add even more shades to our "green" category such as last year's designer color—a dull and brassy green appropriately labeled "breen." Without language to show that all these colors are sub-categories of green, each color would represent a totally different, unrelated tint because they are indeed all different. According to Britton, this is how we organize our representation of reality—in other words "create the world" for ourselves by turning "confusion into order" with language. All of us, our students as well as ourselves, continue throughout our lives to add to and modify our understanding of experience by relating the new to the old through language.

Talk forces us to shape our ideas into oral language, especially if we are communicating to others. This shaping process is even stronger in writing because we have more time to reflect and to wrestle with ideas mentally, forming then more carefully, revising them if necessary. All of this is powerful grounds for viewing language as the primary medium through which we learn about our world and position ourselves in it.

Early in my graduate study I came across Britton's statement that our lives are "afloat on a sea of talk" (Judy 187), a phrase that haunted me for years and that now has become the backbone of my teaching. Since language is primary to learning and classrooms are the context in which much of this learning takes place, it increasingly became clear to me that classrooms should be afloat on a sea of talk, just as life is. And if a classroom is afloat upon a sea of talk, the teacher and the teacher's language plus the voice of the classroom text can't be the only forces that keep it floating. Classrooms that float on talk must be sustained by the language of the students as well as the teacher and the text. A classroom that is afloat on a sea of talk is full of language interactions—*talk* between students in pairs and small groups; *talk* between teacher and students one-to-one, in small groups, or in whole class discussions; *talk* between the classroom texts and the readers of those texts. Language-centered classrooms are also full of writing—*talk written down*—adding another dimension to the rich interactions of classroom discourse.

In short, classrooms that float on talk are full of *language in use*—both oral and written—language in use to explore ideas, to share ideas, to discover ideas, to chat and to record, to plan and to reflect, to solve problems and to respond to issues, to gather new information and to share what has already been learned. They are not the silent classrooms full of passive students characteristic of my teaching in the '60s. Interactive, language-centered classrooms are, in fact, often noisy, full of the purposeful hum of active learning and the enthusiasm of discovery.

These ideas about language, reading, and writing, not necessarily new to education, but corroborated and codified by the last three decades of research and theory, now underlie the substantive changes in classroom practice advocated in language arts classes as well as throughout the teaching profession.

Part III

Today's Classroom: The Interactive Model

What is all this research and theory telling us? How do these insights translate into classroom practice? I see several key features of the contemporary classroom—approaches to student, subject, and classroom structure that differ markedly from my classroom of the '60s but are firmly grounded

in the recent explosion of information about language and learning, reading and writing processes.

•**Teach writing as a process** that includes time for thinking, generating, planning, drafting and revising, polishing and proofreading, sharing with readers. Murray (1982) labels this process "prewriting, writing, and rewriting" (15). Kirby and Liner refer to it as "getting started, getting it down, getting it right, checking it out" (9). But no matter what terminology one uses, teaching writing as a process means that we encourage students to do what professional writers do in order to produce finished pieces. Instead of teaching prescriptive formulas (i.e., the five paragraph theme) and grammatical structures, then allowing forty-five minutes for a finished essay to be produced, we teach students to think and act like writers. A corollary to this approach includes teaching mechanical/grammatical skills as part of the final editing stages of composing, often through brief mini-lessons that are applied directly to students' papers. Other features of the process approach are collaboration among students and conferences with the teacher throughout the composing process. Thus, writing is not viewed as a solitary act but rather one that is both collaborative and social.

This approach to teaching writing is an outgrowth of research into how writers at all levels, from professional to inexperienced, go about the work of producing finished pieces. The success of teaching writing as a process is now well-documented in the writings of practicing teachers such as Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, and Tom Romano.

•**Teach reading as a personal interaction between text and reader**, dependent on the information, life experiences, and reading strategies that are unique to each student. Andrasick's *Opening Texts: Using Writing to Teach Literature*, one of the most recent texts to espouse this approach, is based on the belief that "as literature teachers, the core of our enterprise is first to help students recognize and *value* their personal connections and initial readings" (6). Much earlier than this we find Rosenblatt's eloquent description of the reader-text relationship: "The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings" (25). And Purves's explosive: "The mind as it meets the book. The response. That is the center of a curriculum in literature" (27). By exploring texts through informal writing, small group discussions, and dramatic activities, students can be helped to develop their

own critical skills, trust their initial responses as readers, and learn to compose meanings for themselves rather than rely on the teacher to provide a formal critical interpretation of the text. An underlying assumption of this approach is that literature classes do not center on teaching literary terminology (i.e., plot, character, setting, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia); but rather on guiding students through exploratory talk and writing to develop increasing competence as active readers, seeking and building meaning through personal and shared transactions with the text. Following this model, reading becomes a collaborative and social act similar to writing.

This approach grows out of research exploring how readers read and much theoretical discussion about what the goals of a literature curriculum should be. Practical methods for approaching literature from this perspective are offered in Andrasick's *Opening Texts, How Porcupines Make Lovell* by Purves, Rogers, and Soter; *Literature in the Classroom: Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by Nelms; and *Adolescent Literature: Response and Analysis* by Robert Probst, as well as in numerous *English Journal* and *Language Arts* articles.

•Use collaborative learning strategies. providing opportunities for students to work together to explore new materials, sharing knowledge and learning from and with each other. Transmitting information through a lecture or reading assignments may seem to be the most efficient way to get information across, but we are increasingly coming to understand that the best learning occurs when students are active participants in the learning process, using both oral and written language to grapple with new material in order to make it their own. When working with others in pairs or small groups, students are able to use their own language to express their ideas and to turn new information into language that is more personally meaningful than memorization of text material or lecture notes. They can also receive immediate feedback on their thoughts and opinions in order to validate their ideas or modify them based on peer response, thus building important critical thinking skills. Consistent use of oral language (a "sea of talk") to learn also helps students develop the oral language skills so important in contemporary society. Although the cognitive and linguistic benefits of collaborative learning are apparent, when I discuss this learning strategy with teachers, they always point out the beneficial social dimensions as well: opportunities for all students, even the reserved, to participate; opportunities to learn to

work with others; opportunities for some to build leadership skills and for all to develop both increased self-esteem and respect for others.

The approaches to writing and reading described earlier rely on collaborative learning strategies. In writing, students work together in student response and editing groups, talk and share with each other as they write, even produce collaborative pieces. Collaborative work in literature classes can include such activities as having groups work together on critical interpretations of texts or dramatizations of key scenes. Collaborative learning activities for language arts students at all levels are described in NCTE's *Focus on Collaborative Learning*, the 1988 publication of the Committee on Classroom Practices.

•**Use writing to learn** because it is a powerful tool for personal meaning making, even a way of discovering new meaning as the writer struggles to clarify thoughts and turn them into language. The act of writing forces the writer to formulate vague and general ideas, to synthesize, organize, and shape experiences and thoughts into visible language that the writer or other readers can then learn from. This process enhances learning at all levels and in all subjects. Using writing as a tool for learning means offering students frequent opportunities to express their ideas on paper, often in the kind of short, informal, writing that James Britton labels "expressive." In journals, learning logs, brainstorm lists, or responsive writings (to list just a few possibilities) students are invited to work personally with the material they are learning, exploring possibilities, asking and answering questions, discovering what they do and do not know. Teachers can plant ways of thinking about course material by asking students to write in specific ways about what they are reading and learning—personal responses, comparisons, summaries, evaluative statements, problems and solutions, opinions, progress reports, reviews, interpretations. Longer, more formal writing assignments offer opportunities for students to organize and synthesize new material, making it their own.

In contrast, my '60s writing curriculum was based on assessment: each time a student wrote, I was really testing what he or she already knew about writing. Writing—study guide questions, essay exams—was also used to evaluate student learning. We now view writing from a much broader perspective and understand its value in helping students become better learners and critical thinkers. The Writing Across the Curriculum programs proliferating in schools and colleges throughout the U.S. are based on this

concept of using writing to learn. We also now have materials to guide those who want to incorporate more writing into their instruction. See, for instance, Fulwiler's *Teaching with Writing*; Tchudi et al's *Teaching Writing in the Content Areas* for elementary, middle school/junior high, high school, and college; Zinsser's *Writing to Learn*; or Gere's *Roots in the Sawdust*.

•**Integrate reading, writing, listening, and speaking** so that students have an opportunity to use *all* their language skills while learning, just as they do in the world beyond school. This concept stems from our understanding that language in all its forms is learned holistically rather than as a series of isolated skills. Each of the four forms of language has a unique role to play in learning and the four language processes are mutually reinforcing. The best learning occurs when students are able to draw on all their linguistic skills when engaging with new material. Mayher's *Uncommon Sense: Theoretical Practice in Language Education* provides both rationale and methodology for this model of the English classroom. See especially Chapter Seven, "Integrating the Four Modes of Language Use." Goodman's *What's Whole in Whole Language?* and Newman's *Whole Language: Theory in Use* are also excellent resources in this area.

The theme that underlies all the contemporary approaches described above is *language in use*. Classrooms incorporating these methods are "afloat on a sea of talk" as students read, write, listen, and speak in order to make sense of the material through their own personal explorations and responses plus interactions with each other and the teacher. Perhaps the most dramatic change from the '60s classroom is the current emphasis on students' productive language—writing and speaking—thus encouraging much more active participation from the student. Instead of working on someone else's constructions by answering study guide questions at the end of the chapter, filling out worksheets, or copying large amounts of lecture information organized by the teacher, students are invited to approach new material from their own perspective by writing and talking about it, seeking answers to their own questions, or guided to explore important issues by the teacher.

What emerges from this is a substantive change in the roles of both student and teacher. The teacher becomes director of student learning rather than transmitter and tester of information, organizing materials and activities so that students are actively involved in their learning and directed toward attainable goals. In turn, these new approaches give students more

authority over their learning than ever before as they, for example, decide on group projects or choose their own writing topics.

Finally, because learning in all disciplines depends on the use of language for transmitting information and learning it, these approaches are equally valuable throughout the curriculum, kindergarten through college, and across all disciplines.

Part IV

Looking Back

Many times over the past years, as I experimented with these methods and eventually re-fashioned my teaching so that my classrooms were afloat upon Britton's "sea of talk," I found myself thinking "I'd give anything to have my former high school students back again. I could do it so much better!" Instead of teaching grammar, I'd run writing workshops two, maybe even three days a week. And if a developing writers such as the one described earlier turned in a stunning description of a gang fight with only two punctuation marks, I'd know how to handle it. I'd praise the piece for its realism, probably have him read it to the class so we could all revel in its striking language, and treat it like the first draft that it was—ready to be polished and proofread with his writing group before it was put into our class publication. I wouldn't throw my hands up in despair the way I did in 1963 and give it a low grade. Peer response groups and emphasis on revision would help undeveloped writers like my mechanically perfect "C" writer soon learn to add the details that make writing worth reading. In the meantime, she'd be an asset to her editing group and might even gain a reputation as the best student to work with before turning a paper in to be graded.

I'd like to think that our new understanding of the reading process would assure that all students were at least minimally competent readers by the tenth grade. However, if I were once again faced with a tenth grade non-reader, I know enough to work with whole language and not phonics skills, and to select easy reading materials dealing with subjects of interest to the student.

For the literature we'd work with as a whole class, I'd select poems, plays, novels, and films in which themes or characters could be related in some personal way to my students' lives; and I'd stock a classroom library for independent reading with the richest collection I could put together of

contemporary adolescent novels, ethnic literature, biography, autobiography, and non-fiction. Writing would be central to our literature curriculum, but so would small group dramatizations of key scenes, and student-initiated projects. The boys in those classes who wore their belts unbuckled to signify their readiness to fight, would have opportunities to function in collaborative groups in the classroom as well as on the streets, and to write about their own lives instead of memorizing lists of vocabulary words.

Part V

Looking Forward

Problematic as my '60s classroom was, it had one advantage: consistency from grade to grade and school to school. Students entered their English classrooms each September with a set of expectations about what would occur; they were rarely wrong. Every teacher wielded a red pen; every teacher taught from the prescribed list of "great books"; every teacher covered a certain amount of grammar and gave out weekly vocabulary and spelling lists. This is not the case today. A student going through our schools is likely to be exposed to many, often contradictory, approaches to language arts, ranging from the most traditional classroom to one centered on writing workshops, collaborative learning, and thematic units. The language and writing skills developed in one class may be discarded completely the following year as a student enters an English classroom with a totally different thrust. Within the same school, some students may do relatively little writing throughout their secondary years while others graduate with a full range of writing experiences based on a process approach.

It is critically important that we recognize the value of the interactive language arts classroom, grounded as it is in current research, theory, and successful classroom practice, and take steps to reshape language arts curricula at all levels into a more consistent and coherent whole, reflecting these new understandings. When I visit schools or work with teachers in my role as an English educator, what I see today is a language arts curriculum in transition. I know of several schools and districts that have undergone major staff development programs over the past five to ten years, culminating in genuine curriculum revision: an elementary school in southeast Michigan in which the entire faculty is trained in and committed to a whole language approach; a school district outside Detroit where writing is taught as a process from the elementary grades through high school. But schools and districts such as these are rare. What I am more likely to find are a few

teachers in a school or district working with newer methods in their classes while trying to convince administrators and fellow-teachers of the value of these approaches. In some schools, several well-informed teachers are working together to provide workshops and idea exchanges among their faculty, hoping that this will eventually lead to a more uniform language arts curriculum based on current knowledge. Unfortunately, I occasionally visit a classroom where a teacher is having much success with these contemporary methods only to find herself isolated and misunderstood, even mistrusted, by both administrators and fellow-teachers.

But I also know of many schools and districts that are in the process of examining their language arts curriculum K-12 in light of these new ideas and are making major commitments of both time and money to provide inservice sessions, long-term staff development programs, and time for teachers to work together. The greatest hope for a major shift in English/language arts teaching lies in situations like this in which teachers are given opportunities to work collaboratively, learning and growing as a group of committed colleagues, given time to share ideas and empowered to design the curriculum they will all be teaching.

Current theory envisions classrooms as places where students learn and grow cooperatively, using language in all its forms to support the learning process. I'd like to suggest that the same should be true for teaching. One of the biggest problems teachers face is the isolation of the classroom. For generations, just as students have been expected to learn in solitary and usually silent environments, teachers have experienced similar isolation behind the closed classroom door. Opening the classroom in a way that empowers students to use language with each other to learn has its parallel in teaching: teachers also need to work collaboratively, opening their classroom doors to share curriculum and methods, learning together in study groups, creating curricula that draw on their own insights as experienced teachers as well as contemporary language arts theory. If the best environment for learning is a classroom "afloat on a sea of talk," the same holds true for teaching. An environment conducive to the professional growth necessary for change stems from teacher collaboration, floating on a sea of professional talk.

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