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Regeneration in English Language Arts Education



ESSAY REVIEW BY **DON HONES**

*Remember that you are all people and
that all people are you.*

*Remember that you are this universe
and that this universe is you.*

*Remember that all is in motion, is
growing, is you.*

*Remember that language comes from
this.*

*Remember the dance that language is,
that life is.*

Remember.

— “Remember,” by Joy Harjo

Education in literacy and the language arts is a powerful tool which can be used to reproduce the status quo or serve as a vehicle for personal and societal transformation. Henry Giroux claims that the former has usually been the case in the history of the United States, where the focus has either been to train workers with “functional” reading and writing skills or to foster the development of character traits through “the transmission and mastery of a unitary Western tradition” (in Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 3). The last century of English language arts education in the United States has been marked by periodic reforms which seem to justify Giroux’s assertion: Some reforms, such as those of the post-Sputnik era and the 1980s, have stressed “academics” and a return to the “great books” (the so-called classics) of the Western tradition; other reforms, such as those of the 1930s and 1960s, have included curriculums for “life adjustment” or programs such as Headstart, aimed at functional needs of the working class and the poor. Yet, although literacy and language arts have

often been used to reinforce social and economic divisions within society, they also have been instrumental, at various times, in giving voice to people usually silenced because of their race, class or gender.

In her poem, “Remember,” Joy Harjo tells us that “all is in motion, is growing, is you” (Harjo, 1983). If we adopt this moving, growing, personal metaphor to describe the historical development of English language arts education, it allows us to not only recognize the contributions of reforms past and present, but to validate the experiences of the people at the heart of every educational reform — the students, teachers and their communities. Essays on the history of English language arts education by Probst (1988), Squire (1991) and Rosenblatt (1991) illustrate that this field is in motion and is growing, and that social forces have always played a part in language arts reforms.

Social Forces and Reforms

Probst, Squire and Rosenblatt each discusses in some depth the social contexts of educational reform efforts. Probst focuses his essay on the historical position of literature within the public school curriculum, and he suggests that the literature/English curriculum must be seen as in a process of evolution. Probst adopts Miller’s (1967) four stages to describe this evolution, these being the authoritarian (19th century), the progressive (1900-1950), the academic (post-Sputnik) and the humanitarian (mid-1960s onward). Miller himself acknowledged that these stages were

not "clearly defined," but that they illustrated the swinging of a pendulum between "substance and psychology, subject matter and student, or intellectuality and society" (quoted in Probst, 1988, p. 202). Both Miller's stages and his metaphor are problematic: Do not the "excellence" reforms of the 1980s bear more resemblance to an academic than a humanitarian stage? Furthermore, if reform initiatives follow the swinging of a pendulum, how can we blame long-term teachers for adopting the "rhetoric" of the current reform without changing their basic practice? A swinging pendulum offers no room for growth, and this metaphor fails to capture the overlap between authoritarian, progressive, academic and humanitarian initiatives.

Probst recognizes that the curriculum was socially constructed and that its content focus on the British heritage ignored other diverse cultural heritages of the United States. Moreover, Probst feels that courses devoted to the "great books" have often failed to address issues relevant to students, and that such courses "are likely to be more like a walk through the graveyard than an encounter with the minds of great writers and thinkers" (Probst, 1988, p. 203). Interestingly, the periods when the "great books" approach was challenged most were the 1930s and 1960s, periods of tremendous social crises and mobilization.

Squire provides an account of professional developments in the English language arts, and he explores the reforms arising between the 1930s and 1960s in some depth. He outlines the development of the "experience" curriculum in the late 1930s, an effort wherein many professionals began "talking about the project method, about integrating the language arts in 'meaningful' classroom activities, about 'functional teaching' of English, and about correlating English studies with those in other subjects"

(Squire, 1991, p. 5). Educators such as John Dewey had been talking about "meaningful classroom activities" and the "project method" since the early part of the century: Why did these innovations gain new acceptance in the late 1930s? Although Squire doesn't directly address the societal pressures which required an "experience" curriculum, the sample unit focused on the needs of an indigent family (Probst, 1988) gives us some indication that the experience curriculum was designed to address real and pressing needs of a society marked by tremendous poverty and unemployment. Obviously, the "great books" approach had little to offer the majority of Americans, who were not only trying to survive the Depression but also redefine their "democracy" in an era of totalitarian regimes. Interestingly, Squire notes that the basic tenets of the experience curriculum would resurface later in the turbulent 1960s.

The Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957 served as a catalyst for academic reforms in the United States, and many English language arts professionals did their part to aid in the nation's "defense." Squire served on the Committee on National Interest which called for academic curriculum development and better preparation of teachers. Although Probst points out that the English profession's role in national defense did not necessarily translate into money for research, for some years reforms focused away from "experience" and in the direction of college preparatory academics. It is quite possible that the societal context also influenced this reform as much as the Sputnik: By the 1950s many Americans enjoyed increased prosperity, college attendance rose, and persecution of communists and "fellow travellers" removed from the teaching ranks many voices which would otherwise have challenged the general conformity of the decade.

Of the three authors Rosenblatt addresses most clearly the societal context of the 1960s reforms in English language arts. Focusing on literary theory, she places the decade's general discontent with "formalist criticism" and its "endless flow of sterile explications of literary works" (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 58) against the background of university protest against the Vietnam war. Along with a revival of Rosenblatt's own "reader response" theory, several other theories arose at this time of social unrest to give greater voice to readers. Interestingly, Rosenblatt relegates discussion of feminist, African-American, Ethnic, Marxist and "other" theories to *one short paragraph*. When one considers the amount of literary criticism today which is founded in these theories, particularly feminist and Marxist critiques, Rosenblatt's decision not to discuss them is astonishing, as well as revealing. While seemingly in agreement with approaches which allow readers to participate more directly with texts, does Rosenblatt still fear critical frameworks which would fundamentally challenge the control of the dominant culture?

Multiple Voices in the Classroom

Within the reform efforts, have spaces been created for personal and societal transformation? More specifically, have teachers and students found ways to offer and accept multiple interpretations of texts and events in their lives and in the classroom? Once again, Miller's authoritarian, progressive, academic and humanitarian stages seem too clear-cut, especially when one considers that even during the ill-defined "progressive" and "humanitarian" stages students seldom had the power to determine with what texts, and in what ways, they would interact. Furthermore, Cohen (1988) has argued that, because of the constraints of graded public schools, teachers have many incentives to teach conservatively,

offer single interpretations of reality, and limit discussion. Faced with the daunting task of preparing students to pass high stakes tests such as the MEAP, limited by the 50-minute periods, and often finding little support for innovation from either administrators or colleagues, few teachers have time to create a classroom where student discussion and interpretation can flourish. Traditionally teachers have been and continue to be the "authority" in the classroom, and any attempts to make classrooms more "humanitarian" or "progressive" will need to address both the structural and social limitations of schools faced by teachers and students.

Despite the institutional difficulties faced by any reform, Probst, Rosenblatt and Squire all see prospects for multiple interpretations of texts, inherent in transactional, reader response, and other reader and text theories. In transactional theory, according to Rosenblatt, "the new meaning, the literary work...is constituted during the actual transaction between reader and text" (Rosenblatt, 1991, p. 60). Social constructivist theory adds an additional human element to the transaction: Meaning comes not just from my reading of the text, but from the interaction between the text, myself, and you. Bringing such theories into practice allows students to contribute to the interpretations of texts as well as become "authors" of their own lives (see Bakhtin, 1981).

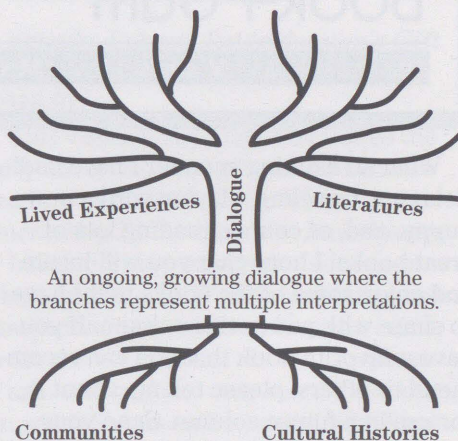
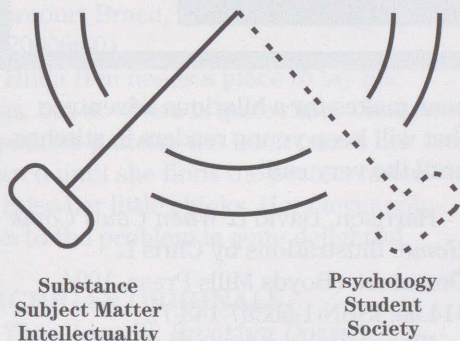
None of the authors, however, seriously questions whether students should have some power over the selection of texts. Squire, in fact, decries the excess of freedom in the "storefront" schools of the 1960s, many of which allowed students to design their own learning path. The authors seem satisfied that the teachers themselves have some power in text selection, although Squire points out how this power is limited by the constraints of the textbook industry: At dif-

Change in the English Language Arts!

A Swinging Pendulum?

OR

A Process of Organic Growth?



ferent times the language arts has been following a de facto national curriculum dictated by primers, McGuffey's, or basal readers. Where choice of text is limited, so are the prospects for multiple interpretations of reality.

While Squire and Rosenblatt seem to generally support curricular changes which promote democracy and diversity in English language arts education, Probst stays most focused on the importance of students, teachers, and the curriculum growing together. His essay is clearly a call to action, and the type of action he recommends would create and empower a community of learners. His conception of a curriculum which is alive, "changing and growing as the students and teachers change," contains within it an ongoing dialogue between students, teachers and texts.

In an increasingly diverse society we need to promote dialogue and the tolerance of multiple interpretations of reality. The English language arts curriculum provides a perfect forum to accomplish this goal. For educators in this field, the 1990s may provide an historic opportunity not only to transform the learning community within schools, but to partic-

ipate in the regeneration of the larger society. All is in motion, all is growing, is you: By accepting our connectedness with others, we begin.

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