

THE AUTHORIZING CYCLE AS A MODEL FOR MULTI-AGE CURRICULUM PLANNING: A REVIEW ESSAY

Harste, Jerome, Kathy Short, and Carolyn Burke. *Creating Classrooms for Authors: The Reading-Writing Connection*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1988.

Harste, Jerome, Virginia Woodward, and Carolyn Burke. *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1984.

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In the Preface to their award winning *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*¹, Jerome Harste and his coauthors, Virginia Woodward and Carolyn Burke, claim few “discoveries.” Others have noted already that children scribble as a preliminary stage in learning to write; others have remarked on the rule-governed nature of children’s speech; others have observed that children “invent” spelling. What Harste et al. offer is not isolated observations about children, but a “broad theoretical frame” for understanding literacy learning (x). This frame allows us to see children’s scribbles or invented spelling in a new light:

a light which says that persons studying what preschool children know about reading and writing have a good deal more in common with cognitive psychologists studying the adult reading and writing process, literary critics studying

reader response and interpretation, and semioticians studying all kinds of signs and how it is that sign functions are established, than we've ever been able to see before. (xi)

In seeking to understand early childhood literacy learning, the authors crossed both disciplinary and traditional age boundaries, to find that what had appeared to be gaps in the language-learning process were in fact gaps between disciplines. Once the boundaries were crossed, Harste and his colleagues could see that the continuous and self-correcting process of language learning is the "same for the 3-year-old as it is for the adult" (xi).

It strikes me that it is more likely for "boundary-crossing" of this sort to happen at the early-childhood and elementary levels than at the secondary and post-secondary where disciplinary demands seem greater. But it may be that even apparently discipline-bound high school and college teachers of writing and reading will find "new colleagues"—to borrow a phrase from Harste et al.—in teacher-researchers investigating the language learning of young children. A growing body of work has developed out of the early childhood and elementary whole language movement that intersects in informative and challenging ways with not only some process-oriented approaches to composition, but also social constructivist theories of literacy learning. *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* and *Creating Classrooms for Authors* together offer "practical theory" for anyone interested in a broader understanding of literacy learning and, as importantly, a challenge to what is too often a constricted view of literacy education at the elementary, and by extension, at the secondary and post-secondary levels.

Language Stories and Literacy Lessons reports on the authors' naturalistic inquiry into the language learning of preschool children, providing a theoretical frame for generating and interrogating curricular decisions. *Creating Classrooms for Authors* builds on this earlier research and offers a flexible model for curriculum. What began as the "authoring cycle" in the earlier book—a model of the key cognitive processes involved in language learning generally and reading and writing specifically (*Language Stories* 215-216)—is refined and broadened in the latter book to what might be called a socio-semiotic model for learning. It is this broadening of the model that may provide the bridge for discipline-specific secondary and post-secondary teachers, a way, that is, to imagine extending

to content-specific courses in literature (as well as other fields) those dynamic approaches to teaching and learning already available to teachers of composition.

I would not want to suggest that Harste and his colleagues offer a simple blueprint for transforming classrooms. Indeed, they are very careful to say that theirs is no “how-to-do-it curricular cookbook” (*Language Stories* ix). Rather the theoretical frame rubbing up against significant differences among classroom settings—the clear difference between having children all day long, for example, and meeting young adults every day for an hour, or only a few hours a week; the built-in potential for cross-disciplinary, holistic teaching at the primary and elementary levels in contrast to the often-mandated separation of disciplinary fields at the secondary and post-secondary levels—serves to generate the sort of critical attention to curricular decisions too often absent especially at the post-secondary level where pedagogy is undervalued² or at the secondary level where curricular decisions are removed from teacher, student, and classroom.

In a sense, these two books comprise an “immodest proposal”—not recipes of “neat assignments” (*Creating* 105) (although there is much concrete teacher talk which should be useful beyond the elementary level), but a call for a “quiet revolution” in which those who are closest to classrooms and to students research literacy learning, design, and critically assess curriculum: “Since both our children and our profession are at stake, the study of literacy and literacy learning is much too important to be left in the hands of persons who rarely come in contact with children [and by extension, with adolescent and adult learners]” (*Language Stories* xx; *Creating* 51-52). The books are designed to involve teachers in the process of literacy learning through research and teaching, not as passive consumers but as “authors.” Thus the “authoring cycle” serves as a model not only for teachers teaching, but for teachers learning.

The “authoring cycle” can be seen as a “metaphor for a . . . general process of meaning construction that occurs regardless of the communication system or field of study involved” (*Creating* 33). Whatever the communicative system, whether it be language, art, music, dance, or math, learners bring to the general movement of meaning making “a stock of life experiences” that form the basis for learning (*Creating* 10). The authoring cycle necessarily occurs in a culture-specific, situational context. It is multimodal not only

in that learners make use of various communicative systems, but also in terms of the roles the learners play. Learners are always composing whether as readers, writers, artists, speakers. They are engaged, that is, in expressive and interpretive activities and in exploring the varying potential of different modes to make sense of the world, to express ideas, to work in the world.

In particular contexts, starting from life experiences, learners engage in repeated and uninterrupted attempts at meaning construction (uninterrupted reading and writing is the paradigm); informally explore some of these constructions with others and negotiate understandings with them; reflect on and revise constructions; share the authoring with others in some public form; step back to reflect on the process used to construct meaning; and move on to new invitations to form new “texts,” whatever the medium, with each new cycle adding to the life experiences brought to bear on each successive cycle (*Creating* 35-36).

Many composition teachers already incorporate at least some parts of the authoring cycle into their classrooms. Inviting students to draw from their life experiences even in the most formal of writing contexts is common; so too is structuring a class for collaborative exchange. But Harste and his colleagues make a persuasive case for the importance of understanding and implementing the authoring cycle as a whole, not as a formula to follow (like the ten steps to the composing process), but as a conceptual matrix. It really is not important that students always pass through all phases of the cycle each time they compose. Rather students are invited into the authoring cycle in multiple ways. Choice is essential to developing independent and critical language learning. But it may be choice that is the most difficult component for discipline-specific teachers to manage.

What is particularly refreshing about *Language Stories* and *Creating Classrooms*, however, is that in arguing for the centrality of choice for students, the authors also enact that centrality in offering multiple invitations to teachers, multiple ways in which they might work choice into their classrooms. I found the discussion of journals, for example, to be one of the most persuasive, because it was not dogmatic, like any of the many articles I have read, offering as it does multiple ways to use reading logs, dialogue journals, personal and public journals. Similarly, the authors’ use of “text-sets” led me to reconsider not only what I do in the first-year reading and writing course I teach and supervise, but also

my upper level literature classes. Text-sets are groups of two or more books that are related in some way—gathered by the teacher or by the students or both, often ranging across genres and age categories (adults do like to read children's books and children do like to read adult "fact" books). One might have a text set of cultural variants of the same story (the Cinderella story, for example); different organizational plots; common themes (family, war, and environment); one author; a single culture—and so on. The sets can be used in a number of ways, but the fundamental feature is choice. Students may be invited to browse through picture books, trade books, nonfiction "fact" books—in order to choose what they would like to read. They then will share their choice with others, connecting and contrasting their book with the books others in the group share (*Creating* 358-365). Text-sets rest in interesting ways on a notion of intertextuality familiar to literary critics: the idea that one reads always in relation to other "texts," not only other written texts, but other lived "texts." I can imagine a text-set on women writers in the seventeenth century, including not only their literature, but autobiography, social history, picture books of homes and clothing and the like. In reading and sharing such works, students would have the opportunity to develop a "thicker" description, as Clifford Geertz puts it, than if they read only in seriatim or if all "background" came from lecture notes.

Such borrowings of teaching techniques, however, are not terribly interesting if the curricular choices a teacher makes are not guided by some larger conception of language learning. Harste and his colleagues offer such a larger conception in the research that has informed their thinking and the path of their evolving thinking. *Language Stories* consists of three sections: "Language Stories" introduces the young children—three years to six years—who serve as "informants," sharing their language stories or "language vignettes . . . that accent . . . some important aspects of language and language learning" (xv). The vignettes provide the starting point for reflecting on various key assumptions underpinning literacy pedagogy—from process/product distinctions and developmental models for learning to conceptions of literacy and the socio-economic context of literacy learning.

A reader could begin with the language stories and the reflections that follow. The children's views of writing and reading are rich sources for reflecting on what we do at any grade level, and they are rather humbling moments that expose how deeply rooted

are certain constricting notions of literacy and learning. In the second chapter of part 1, for example, preschoolers Tyler and Michelle, the two youngest readers in the study, help to show through their varying and sophisticated reading of environmental print (on jello boxes, gas station signs, a Wendy's cup, and the like) the limitations of a simple developmental model of learning. Harste and his colleagues understand the children's reading of their print-saturated environment to hinge on experiential opportunities for interpreting complex semiotics—not simply or centrally decoding the words (i.e., "sounding out" the print), but reading the color, shape, arrangement, relationship to illustration, and so on based on similar signs. "Why can most 5-year-olds identify colors and most 6-year-olds write their names?" the authors ask. "Because they live in environments which provide many meaningful and pleasant encounters with such processes" (27). They conclude from this language story that one of the most valuable gifts a teacher can give a language user is to "litter [the] environment with enticing language opportunities and guarantee [the students] the freedom to experiment with them" (27). One need only think about the relatively impoverished environment of the college classroom, with its almost exclusive focus on print and lecture—only two modes of language using—to find the call to multi-modal language learning provocative.

The authors suggest that some readers may choose to start their reading not with the language stories, but with the literacy lessons in part two, where they will find an overview of the research program and some of the concepts central to their project. It is in this section that Harste and his colleagues make clear upon whose research shoulders they stand. The authors take as a fundamental premise that "language only exists in use," and thus, to more fully understand how language works, one needs to study language in "functional real natural language settings" (204). They begin with the assurance—based on the earlier work of Yetta and Kenneth Goodman, Don Holdaway, Lev Vygotsky, and other language theorists and researchers—that young children know more about print than teachers and early childhood programs have assumed. They conclude their study with the sense that indeed children know more not only about print but about language learning more broadly conceived. What the children have to teach us leads not to a single method or scheme for classroom practice,

but to a larger frame for asking better questions about classroom practice and for generating better answers for curriculum design.

In the final section, Harste and his colleagues explore the conceptual and methodological implications of their study. I use these latter chapters for an introduction to a literacy studies course that draws teachers from all grades and find that it generally leads class members to seek out more of their work. This final section introduces the “authoring cycle” as well as discusses concisely ethnographic research that serves, as I read it, to invite teachers to become researchers.

Constructing Classrooms begins where *Language Stories* leaves off, with a “theoretical and practical overview” of the authoring cycle. This is a cogent introduction, theory and practice interacting as one would hope they would but often don’t. This chapter is followed, as each of the chapters is, by a “feature article” written by a classroom teacher that gives a window onto the lived experience of the authoring cycle in action. Indeed, the book as a whole cycles back, so that if one reads the whole book, one is engaged in multiple enactments of the core ideas: starting an authoring cycle, reading as authorship, creating a classroom for authors, extending the cycle to other content areas, and finally choosing from a thick section of curricular components, such as journals, learning logs, text sets, and quite a bit more.

While certainly not all the curricular components are transferable to the secondary and post-secondary levels—and those of us teaching at these levels will need to wrestle with different demands placed on us from our disciplines—the curricular frame should challenge us to consider what we have lost in assuming or letting others assume for us that adult learning and child learning are fundamentally distinct. Developmental models of learning that see adolescents and adults as inhabiting different cognitive stages than children, when flexibly applied, may help us in some ways to understand our students, but they may also get in the way of our understanding what Harste, Woodward and Burke call “natural language processing”: multi-modal uses of sign systems to learn in a complex world.

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NOTES

¹*Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* won the 1987 David H. Russell Award for distinguished research in the teaching of English.

²Patricia Donahue and Ellen Quandahl's collection of essays *Reclaiming Pedagogy: The Rhetoric of the Classroom* addresses the post-secondary neglect of pedagogy and offers some challenging ways to rethink pedagogy in a postmodern world.

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