Edelsky Talk Brings Urban Sites Conference Theme Alive

BY ART PETERSON

Looking at the theme of the 2003 Urban Sites Conference—“Between the Mountains and the Sea: Literacy and Justice for All?”—one might wonder if the question mark was a typo. But as those at the conference will attest, it wasn’t. In fact, those at the conference, held April 25–26, 2003, in Santa Barbara, California, were challenged to consider whether the promise of literacy and justice extends to all the children they teach. At no point during this weekend was the question more dramatically raised than in the conference’s keynote address, “Theory, Politics, Hope, and Action,” delivered by Carole Edelsky, professor of curriculum and instruction at Arizona State University.

In her talk, Edelsky documented the remarkable achievements of fifth grade students David and Isabel, both of whom participate in a dual-language program at their school in Phoenix, Arizona. The drafts these students produced, Edelsky called “exceptional in terms of focus, voice, and craft.” She argued that student writing of this quality is the product of an environment where young writers have the time and freedom to experiment and revise.

Edelsky began her presentation by sharing the final drafts that emerged from David’s and Isabel’s efforts in the dual-language setting. David brings a Jaws-like tension to his account of the time his mother was stung or bitten by a sea creature on a trip to the ocean.

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One paragraph reads:

I ran towards her cutting through the water like a knife. I asked what happened but she couldn’t answer. My mother’s face was clenched in pain—a pain I had never seen or would want to see again. I went running to my dad. He was buying a newspaper at a stand nearby.

“Papi, Papi, una agua mala mordio mami.”

Isabel tells the story of how, after years of being considered too young to bake cakes with her grandmother, she is finally invited to participate in this coveted activity:

“My grandmother was asking ME to help her! I couldn’t help it, so I ran to hug her… After two hours of mixing and pouring and making and eating I washed my hands then I took one step toward the door, when suddenly…” “No, no no ahora tenemos que, limpiar, it is time to clean.”

Edelsky then goes on to describe the theory and second-language practice that made these drafts possible. Citing Stephen Krashen, Edelsky argues that second language learning isn’t likely to stick unless the learners participate in the world of the users of that language. The language must become internalized “so that it becomes an unconscious resource.” This, she believes, is equally true for English speakers learning Italian, for Spanish speakers learning English, in fact for all second-language students. In both cases, learners need an immersion experience. But this experience must have some purpose. The student of Italian lives through the second language in Italy “buying food making friends… getting shoes repaired.” The learner is engaged. English language learners, Edelsky argues, need the same kind of engagement.

At the same time, however, the student of Italian in Italy will benefit from support in his or her own language—benefit, say, from involvement with a host family. Likewise, maintenance bilingual programs and dual-language immersion programs (but not what Edelsky calls “English only immersion programs”) provide support in a home language; the languages are “there to be used, not just to be ‘taken’ as subjects.”

This combination of immersion and support was present in the classroom that Edelsky studied, but other factors were also present. To explain these concepts, Edelsky introduced two terms. The first, “Discourse with a capital D” (from Jin Gee, 1990), is defined as a combination of ways of acting (including ways of using language) as well as the beliefs embedded in those ways of acting. The second, “community of practice,” describes a group who share a central activity and discourse. Edelsky gave the examples of a book club in Phoenix or a Weight Watchers group in Minneapolis.

But, she asked, “What does all this have to do with literacy and schools?” She explained that an immersion experience for written language in school should mean extended engagement with practices that are like what a community of practice does outside of school. This community should be one that engages in practices that, when emulated in a school setting, can result in kids improving their reading and writing—a community of journalists, or newscasters, or poets, for example. But this activity should not be about “learning to read and write in general.” Such activity would be like trying to learn Italian from worksheets without ever going to Italy for the purpose of immersion in Italian culture. “At the least…” Edelsky said, “we have to make school work as much as possible like the actual work of a community.”

How David and Isabel’s fifth grade dual-language class became a community of practice provides an instructive story. Edelsky described how the teacher of these students, Ernestina Aragon at Machan School in Phoenix, was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with her students’ writing. She was doing all the right things—having her students read good literature, sponsoring writing workshops, and more—but despite these efforts, the student writing was “perfunctory—minimal voice, little engagement, no sense of audience.”

Then Aragon and her teammate, Rebecca Osorio, figured out some of what was going wrong. Reading the work of Isoko Nia, they came to understand that their “writing workshops were often just an endless series of ‘steps’…crying out for some writing content.” Aragon, Osorio, and three of their colleagues agreed it was time to create some content, an extended study of memoir, but before introducing this content to their students, the teachers themselves would become a community of memoirists. They read and talked about memoirs like The Color of Water and The House on Mango Street, they talked with their students about what they, the adults, were doing, and they introduced students to the idea that they’d be writing and publishing a memoir maybe for a larger audience. So, to the kids this wasn’t about learning memoir for the sake of school; it was about putting stories out there for the sake of their own families and communities.” These ideas were presented at the time of the debate over Arizona’s Proposition 203, which would outlaw bilingual education. So the purpose of this community took on a significant immediacy.

Edelsky showed her audience early drafts of the later-polished pieces by Isabel and David. Isabel wrote her first sketchy draft in Spanish then decided to translate it to English. David wrote in English what Donald Graves (1983) calls a “bed-to-bed story, one of those pieces of writing in which the central incident of the story is buried in what precedes and follows it.”

The challenge now was how this emerging community of student memoirists could become increasingly familiar with the discourse of memoirists. The teachers read published memoirs aloud to the students. They continually reminded kids of the importance of their stories; they encouraged them to integrate their first languages and cultures into their stories. They provided numerous examples of techniques professional writers of memoir use: appeal to the senses, ellipses, code switching, and other writers’ use of words—sometimes translating, sometimes not—single word sentences, repetition for effect, and more. Edelsky demonstrated how the writers tried out in “tiny drafts” some of these techniques. And if they found something appropriate to their work, incorporated that structure in their memoir, explaining why they were using it.

Edelsky concluded by again showing David and Isabel’s final drafts. Now the audience, familiar with the pieces from which the memoirs were constructed, saw these works differently. But useful as it was to accompany Isabel and David
on their memoirist journey, this trip was not the sole point of Edelsky’s talk. She also wanted her audience to understand that none of the demonstratively successful strategies employed by Aragon will be possible in a literacy world dominated by Open Court and other prescriptive programs currently finding favor. She called for action by those who understand the necessity of respect for and application of a student’s first language, by those who believe that school writing should be real writing, and by those who recognize that kids need time to experiment with form and language. It’s time, she said, that the current trend be reversed so that “kids like David and Isabel and all kids [will be able to] participate in communities—in school and out—that value highly literate practices.”

The complete text of Carole Edelsky’s talk at the Urban Sites Conference will be published in the fall issue of The Quarterly of the National Writing Project.