From Communion to Communication: Connecting Heart and Brain in the Learning Process

In this case study, Sherry Swain and Richard Graves demonstrate the idea that for skill learning to stick it needs to have an emotional component. “Learning at its best grows out of the moment … It is both communal and individual and … it occurs naturally.” Working with first-grader DeScott and his classmates, the authors illustrate how their “dialogic” approach leads students to take chances and experiment with language much in advance of grade level expectations.

Sherry Seale Swain and Richard L. Graves

When a child participates and learns in a group project, then that child can accomplish a similar task individually. This is an assumption that will guide our work today in the schools. Today, we are going to French Elementary School in West Jackson, Mississippi, where school counselor Barbara McHenry has invited us to visit and teach in a first grade classroom. For the past year, McHenry has been a participant in our Writing as Art and Craft project, a year-long series of workshops and classroom demonstrations for kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers. In these interactive workshops, we involve teachers in the process of writing and the teaching of writing. In the classroom demonstrations, we visit the classroom of each individual in the workshop, adapting our lessons for that particular audience of young people.

Our plans this morning are minimal—only twenty words or so jotted down on a two-by-three-inch note pad. We are a bit nervous because, from a traditional perspective, we are “unprepared.” Below that nervous feeling, however, is a river of confidence based on years of teaching experience. Though we sometimes do take music, poems, or other materials to the classroom, we deliberately avoid canned programs. Instead, we rely on the children themselves, their individual responses and stories, and the opportunities the classroom community presents for learning. This is the core of what we believe—that learning at its best grows out of the moment, that it is both communal and individual, and that it occurs naturally.

We teach and learn as a team, and our Writing as Art and Craft professional development series reflects our discrete expertise as well as our common beliefs about teaching and learning. Sherry’s experience includes some twenty years as a first grade teacher and more recently as director of the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute, the state’s network of writing project sites. Dick, founding director of the Sunbelt Writing Project at Auburn, brings almost forty years as a junior and senior high school English teacher and professor of English education. Our different backgrounds complement each other, however, because we share common beliefs about human learning, and we continue to learn from each other as well as from those we encounter in classrooms.

The Demonstration: What We Give to the Classroom

“Let’s make a circle,” Sherry suggests today, when we are introduced to the first grade classroom. The children gather on the carpeted floor, along with their teacher. The lesson begins in quiet anticipation.

“Turn to the right, put your hands on the shoulders of the person in front of you, and gently rub. Now, turn back to the left and do the same.” Sherry’s voice is pleasing, and the children respond, each giving and receiving in the back-rub circle. “Next I’m going to turn to the right, look that person in the eye, call her by
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name, and compliment her.” Sherry models the activity. “Lawanda, your beautiful smile lights up our circle this morning.” Sherry invites us to go around the circle, one at a time, offering compliments to each other.

The children are painfully shy. They look down or away and stumble to find words. “Look at the person next to you very carefully,” Sherry urges. “Think about special things that friend has said or done.”Across the circle, Tokevia is so shy she cannot speak a word. With a finger in her mouth, she looks down in apparent embarrassment. Sherry moves across the circle and puts an arm around her. “Tokevia, can you tell Ebony something you appreciate about her?” she asks. Tokevia’s lips move, almost inaudibly, and she says something to the friend next to her. The two share a smile and a giggle. And the compliments continue.

This activity, the compliment circle, is an important part of our morning work. At the heart of everything we do is the belief that communication grows out of communion. Literacy and language learning, indeed, all learning, flourishes in an environment of friendship and caring. In all our work—whether in schools, workshops, or professional meetings—first comes communion, then communication. First, we come to know the other by name, we look into the face of the other, we listen to what the other says, and we speak with truth and kindness.

“Does anyone have a birthday today?” Sherry asks.

A boy raises his hand. “I don’t, but it’s my mother’s birthday,” he responds. Sherry invites him to the front of the circle.

“What is your name?” she asks.

“DeScott,” he responds. Sherry writes it on chart paper as DeScott dictates each letter. What Sherry is creating this morning is a formula poem. It will begin with the name DeScott, include three things about DeScott (either nouns or adjectives), three things he does (all verbs ending in ing), and conclude with a sentence about DeScott.

“Now,” Sherry tells the group, “Tell me something about DeScott: what he looks like, what he likes to do, what makes him special.” As several respond, Sherry writes their responses on chart paper for all to see.


“M-O-U-S-E-S,” James volunteers, and Sherry records his response on the paper.

“James, that’s wonderful. You have the beginning sounds, the middle sounds, and the ending sounds. You trusted yourself to know how to use letters to make the sounds you heard. We are all proud of you for taking a risk on spelling. Mr. Dick, what do you think about this spelling of muscles?”

As Dick responds, Sherry underlines each correct letter volunteered by James. It turns out that James has correctly identified five letters, m-u-s-e-s, and missed only two, the difficult c and the e before the s. Sherry asks James to come to the front. “Thank you for taking a risk,” she tells him. “Take a bow, and we’ll applaud you!”

It is crucially important, we believe, to reconstruct the process through which this poem (figure 1) was created. So much learning occurs in the process of composing, in the voluntary responses that appear here as elements in the poem, in the elements not chosen as well as those appearing in the final version. Learning occurs in the act of constructing more than in the completed construction itself. The finished construction confirms and reinforces the learning, but it is not the process of learning itself.

DeScott’s classmates brainstormed significant things they knew about DeScott as possibilities for the first line. Afterward, DeScott chose the two he liked for his poem. Sherry asked the children to respond with ing words describing DeScott’s actions: running, bouncing, eating, hopping, talking, climbing, writing. This presented an opportunity for discovering spelling changes in verb forms: dropping the final e (bounce/bouncing; write/writing), doubling the final consonant (run/running; hop/hopping). Spelling was important to the children that morning because they were engaged in a literacy event significant to them, communicating the special characteristics of DeScott, who then chose the
three words he wanted for the second line.

Drafting the sentences for the poem's final line seemed to be taking a predictable path: “He likes to play.” “He likes to eat pizza.” “He watches cartoons on TV.” “He bounces up and down.”

At that point, Sherry asked DeScott to “bounce up and down” while we watched.

“Tell me what you see,” she said. “Describe DeScott for me.”

“Shoestrings flopping!” Jerome offered.

“Very, very good,” Sherry responded, adding the two words to the sentence. Sherry realized that Jerome had responded with the grammatical form of nominative absolute, a form generally taught at the high school level or above. “What grade level is this sentence, Mr. Dick?”

“Well, it must be about the fourth grade or even higher,” Dick said. Jerome beamed.

Following Jerome's lead, others responded using the same form: feet stomping, hands in his pockets, hair bouncing, clothes jumping, fingers wiggling, nose twitching. With DeScott taking the lead, the class organized the cumulative sentence that became the poem's concluding line. Then we celebrated by recopying the poem on paper for DeScott to take home. The teacher assured her students that in the coming days the class would compose a similar poem celebrating each classmate.

It was never our purpose to teach any form of grammar, much less the nominative absolute. We did not use the term nominative absolute in the classroom, choosing instead to focus on expanding the base sentence (“He bounces up and down”) using the children's observations. What is so important to recognize from this brief dialogue is that the language of children is rich with possibility. What we adults ordinarily take for an “advanced” level of grammar is often right there before us in the internal grammar of the children. Merely by encouraging them and using their responses, we helped them create a poem that concluded, not with the simple sentence we expected, but with a cumulative sentence to which they proudly pointed and exclaimed, “Twenty-two words! We wrote a twenty-two word sentence!” Kellogg Hunt has told us that the average sentence length of fourth-graders is 8.6 words, for eighth-graders 11.5 words, and for twelfth-graders 14.4 words (1965, 307).

At the outset of this article, we said we believed that what children accomplish together, they can successfully accomplish individually. But this is a long process, and we don't mean that these first-graders could instantly write nominative absolutes. Children learn from each other, and this is the foundation for individual learning. Learning is cumulative, day by day, success on top of success. But learning is also a process of engagement. When the mind is engaged, then real, permanent learning is happening. We are teaching not just skills but a habit of the mind.

**Principles of Learning: What We Take from the Classroom**

Every day, thousands of stories, such as the one presented here, occur in classrooms throughout the nation. Embedded in these teacher stories, like hidden faces or animal figures in children's pictures, are certain principles of human growth and learning. Often, such principles exist only as tacit knowledge of veteran classroom teachers—unarticulated and mostly intuitive. We believe that real growth in the quality of learning will come when such principles are fully articulated, that is, when they become conscious teaching practice rather than unconscious or intuitive teacher lore. Below are some of the principles we have derived from classroom experiences such as we have described.

Learning grows out of an environment of communion. Within the competitive environment of many school settings, it is little wonder that children find it difficult to recognize the talents of others, value their own unique talents, or even like their classmates. We believe that learning occurs best in a nurturing environment.

We start our lesson in a circle in which we face each other and call each other by name. We touch. We confirm. Our goal is to come to true communion in the classroom. We use the word communion deliberately, as it suggests the highest level of human relations. It is precisely this kind of environment that encourages the highest quality of learning.

When children are immersed in an intellectual activity, they are constantly confronted with the acquisition of language conventions. During the process, they acquire skills that become part of their internal linguistic tool kit. The deeper and more extensive the intellectual activity, the more permanently the conventions are stored. DeScott and his classmates composed a poem after first generating a multitude of words, phrases, and sentences that described his characteristics. They then narrowed and revised their ideas to fit the form of a poem. Had we begun with the form of the poem, experience tells us that the children's responses would have been less plentiful and aimed at filling in the blanks of the form rather than creating an authentic description of DeScott.

Learning is both social and personal. Since children learn from each other as
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well as from the teacher, it is important that the classroom provide structures for communal learning. This suggests the provision for large- and small-group activities, interchange, questions, and responses. It is equally true that learning is personal: only when an individual incorporates material into his or her own personal frame of reference can learning be said to occur. On the surface, this communal-personal dichotomy appears contradictory, but the converse is true. Learning follows both communal and personal paths, and the two tend to reinforce each other. The tension between the two provides the rhythm and energy for continual learning, following Lev Vygotsky’s thinking that what children can do in cooperation with others today, they can do alone tomorrow (1986, 187).

The collaborative process that resulted in DeScott’s poem becomes a model for individual learning as children explore new possibilities on their own. Learners need a variety of tools, internalized problem-solving processes, with which they continue to build their unique constructs of knowledge. Practicing these tools in communal settings supports the individual learning of each student.

Learning is dialogic and authentic. Although memorization and “direct teaching” are sometimes appropriate, especially in higher education, we believe the most powerful form of learning is dialogic. This means that learning grows best out of the questions and responses that occur between and among teachers and learners. We came into DeScott’s classroom with no explicit objectives or formal lesson plans or canned “teacher-proof” stuff. We came to listen to the children and to encourage literacy learning. Their responses became the impetus and energy for classroom learning. In this process, the learner becomes an active partner in learning, as opposed to the passive recipient of information that worksheets and fill-in-the-blank activities spawn. It is true that worksheets are “fail-safe” and the dialogic approach is risky. We believe, however, that the potential for learning is much greater in the dialogic approach that the risks are worth taking.

The dialogic implies a whole new conception of lesson plans. In this approach, every day is different because everything is authentic. For example, we could not go into another classroom and replicate our results. We could, however, replicate the approach itself, which in another time and place would yield different results. Teachers who employ the dialogic approach become proficient in “spotlighting” skills that arise within the dialogic context (Swain 1994, 5). Just as DeScott and his classmates came to realize that they had created a sentence out of a series of two-word descriptors (the second ending with ing), other students engaged in dialogues can be led to awareness of their language skills, too.

Learning is accompanied by an emotional component. We began our lesson with a compliment circle, each child giving and receiving a compliment, before focusing on DeScott’s unique characteristics. The celebration processes were structured to evoke strong positive emotional connections—first compliments, then the connotations associated with birthdays, then the personal description of DeScott. Without the emotional component, we believe, the rich flow of language that the children produced would not have occurred. Vygotsky describes the connection between emotion and thought. “Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by motivation . . . by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency . . .” (1986, 252).

This principle is enforced by the brain’s physiology; the center of emotion is adjacent to what is thought to be the center of cognition. While a strongly negative emotional response to the environment can shut down a child’s capacity to learn, a positive emotional response invites new learning. In Teaching with the Brain in Mind, Eric Jensen writes, “Teachers who help their students feel good about learning through classroom success, friendships, and celebrations are doing the very things the student brain craves” (1998, 76). Whereas the emotional component provided the energy for the children to produce the language, the teaching process provided the scaffold for the lesson. We drew language out of the children, confident that skills were embedded there. When the time was right, we returned to the skills embedded in the children’s language.

When planning for literacy learning, we teachers need to remember that identifying skills, integrating skills, or even teaching skills is not enough. Always present is the need for an emotional component, which somehow provides energy for the learning process.

Learning involves taking risks and making approximations. So many times, teachers in our professional development sessions tell us that their students become blocked when they are unable to spell the words they want to write. This block represents the children’s need for experience with the risk taking that is necessary for learning. Constance
Weaver refers to risk taking as a “necessary balance between tentativeness and self-confidence” (1997, 120). We have come to view this risk taking as an important diagnostic tool, one that the teacher can use to analyze the skills that the learner has internalized. In our debriefing, we help teachers articulate how they might use students’ approximations or miscues to determine which elements of the language have become internalized, which are in a stage of linguistic problem solving, and which are not yet on the students’ agenda. However, teachers who lament that their students won’t or don’t take risks with unfamiliar skills—spelling words in this case—need to learn strategies for teaching their students to take those necessary risks. The classroom demonstration allows us to model techniques for encouraging children to make approximations and to model appropriate responses to those approximations.

DeScott’s classmates were encouraged to approximate the spelling of muscles: first we drew a line to indicate the word’s length, then we added letters to indicate the sounds they heard. As we confirmed the spelling, emphasis was first on the correct elements, then on conventional spelling. As students become comfortable using this technique in their individual compositions, the resulting underlined approximations will become signals for children in their revision process (Swain 1994, 15). Rather than relying on the teacher to point out misspelled words, the children return to their underlined approximations and work toward conventions based on their own needs. They can quickly assess which words might not follow conventions, and likewise, their teachers can assess the students’ awareness of their competence levels. Teachers who know how to encourage approximations and risk taking are more likely to

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### Poetry Corner

**Mothers Know What We Need**

**BILL CONNOLLY**

She, who had never written a poem—
or had she?
And was I sure
she had not read a poem since high school?
The futility of babbling into the phone
bothering my mother
about this small stack of rejection slips.
These poems that returned
in crumpled, self-addressed, stamped envelopes
were whispering in my ear
couplets I did not want to hear.
I was sagging under the sad, paternal acceptance
of these children sent home,
forced to confront my inferior legacy.

Why not talk about her grandchildren, her
week, the weather?

I still wanted that hand on my shoulder, I guess.
The same one when I came home that August day
sat down in the green and white chair in our living room
and cried after being cut from the football team.
How I had needed the gasp of disbelief in her voice,
her wide, sympathetic eyes,
her hand on my shoulder
as I just sat there
my right hand vising my face.
Her hand pronounced the injustice:
her Oh, Bill endorsed the incredulity.
How could this be?
That’s what I needed then
and needed now with the poems I was not crying over.

And so she listened
was silent a moment

slipped her hand through the phone line
and slapped me.
“Well,” she said, “maybe you’re not a good poet.”
She soothed the sting with talk of the essays I had written,
the ones that had made her late for church,
her tears smearing her mascara
as she’d drop the newspaper on the kitchen table.

Still, her hand was on my shoulder
pushing me toward something I had not
considered
something I would not have accepted when I
was 15.
The gentle shove reminding me
that you don’t always make it.

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incorporate these strategies into their teaching. Students who experience positive attempts to take risks, rather than always having their approximations counted as incorrect responses, are more likely to engage in language adventures like those DeScott and his classmates experienced.

We suspect there are still other beliefs and assumptions guiding our work just below the threshold of conscious awareness. As they emerge, they will likely continue to refine our views about learning. What remains central, however, the core around which so much revolves, is the idea that the human environment is primary in literacy learning. Always we begin with the communion, the shared presence of people together, and it continues to permeate all that we do. And so we say, without apology, that at its foundation, literacy learning has a sacred quality to it, as the term communion suggests.

Reference


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