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The Teaching of Reading
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IRA articles paper

Teachers face a number of challenges in the classroom to which they must respond adequately to promote the success of the students. To that end, even within a single classroom, the needs of the students may be varied and wide-spread. Teachers need to be prepared to meet these challenges with an array of possible solutions. In the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* published by the International Reading Association, the article authors presented a number of specific techniques and points to be considered in teaching literacy in the classroom.

In the face of classroom experience which indicated that students in his community-college biology classes did not read their textbook, Gregory Phillips implemented a policy of open-book testing as a component of the three exams given each term. Tapping into “students’ positive perceptions of open-book tests,”¹ Phillips used these tests to the purpose of encouraging reading of the text, as well as building the study skills of students. The article, “Using open-book tests to strengthen the study skills of community-college biology students,” details Phillips’ results over the course of a decade, examining the successes of 1,080 students who were divided into three groups based on the strength of their study skills as measured by performance on the first open-book test. Phillips’ article reports that students with weak study skills showed the most improvement, while those with moderate study skills (a C on the first test) also made improvement, though not as dramatic. The strong study skills group showed a slight

¹ Gregory Phillips, “Using open-book tests to strengthen the study skills of community-college biology students,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49, no. 7 (April 2006): 574.

decrease in score over the course of the study, which Phillips attributes partially to the negative change in students' study skills after experiencing initial success as well as the increasing difficulty of the course material.

Barbara G. Pace's article, "Between response and interpretation: Ideological becoming and literacy events in critical readings of literature," reports on her research about the impact of the classroom on students' interpretation of literature. She focuses on the "shifting perspectives on gender roles in the story ["The Yellow Wallpaper"]"² of two girls, Kavita and Jennifer; as they engage the text in "literacy events" – a journal entry, a class discussion and a final essay – Pace tracks the changes in the girls' understanding and analysis. She finds that their initial reactions change to accommodate the dominant discourse presented by their peers in class discussion. Pace concludes that though teachers may be well intentioned in presenting literature that promotes multiple perspectives, they must be conscious about how discussion is structured so as to support and not trample the development of the students' "ideological becoming."

"Rationale for systematic vocabulary development: Antidote for state mandates" makes a strong argument that while students must be taught vocabulary in the face of state mandates and the challenge of a changing cultural vocabulary which has become coarser over time, offering a list of 19 reasons grounded in research for the explicit teaching of vocabulary. Manzo, Manzo and Thomas then offer two examples of ways to teach vocabulary by immersing students in low-frequency/high-power words. In the community-of-language approach, members of the school faculty and staff are asked to use a list of target words as frequently as possible, exposing children to the words in daily

² Barbara G. Pace, "Between response and interpretation: Ideological becoming and literacy events in critical readings of literature," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49, no. 7 (April 2006): 584.

contexts; the hybrid cultures and media approach, meanwhile, encourages the teacher to capitalize on children's popular culture interests, using them to develop literacy.

James Trier's article, "Media Literacy: Representations of critical media literacy in the film *Pump Up the Volume*," analyzes a film "about the production and use of media texts for critical purposes."³ Such media literacy, as promoted by the creation of media texts such as this film, urges teachers to educate students about the uses of media through critique. The main character of the film subverts a radio station over which he broadcasts a show that, for his peers, very relevantly offers a critique of the school and general aspects of teenage life. Trier calls attention to such "critical medial literacy" events as the use of radio, graffiti and rap music to spread a message of critique. Though the article serves mainly as a summary and analysis of the critical media literacy in the film, Trier's article can serve as a basis for performing such analysis on other media sources.

These articles all seem to have a common theme in that they stress the importance of teacher support for students, whether in the form of the intentional structuring of discussion or instruction of vocabulary, or the explicit teaching of study skills or media literacy. The author of each article emphasizes a different skill to teach students to support their overall development; each topic should be considered as part of classroom life and, indeed, they are reciprocal in influence. An improved vocabulary can be taught through exposure to media, which is critically analyzed in a discussion carefully facilitated to promote the maintenance of an array of perspectives.

³ James Trier, "Media Literacy: Representations of critical media literacy in the film *Pump Up the Volume*," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49, no. 7 (April 2006): 622.

Another theme common to these articles is the impact of such teaching methods on disadvantaged students. In the case of Phillips, the majority of his students were first-year community college students; their schooling backgrounds may not have been extremely strong and, indeed, a group of these college students were identified as having weak study skills. His method, meanwhile, showed a great amount of improvement for these students. Similarly, Manzo, Manzo and Thomas advocated for instruction in vocabulary, suggesting that schools that fail to do so “may be depriving the less privileged especially of access to alternative ways of considering a feeling or situation,”⁴ as those students need help in discovering the language of the culture of power.

Pace’s work expresses the importance of facilitating the classroom so that minority voices may be heard over the dominant voices of culture; failure to do so, she points out, can result in the changing of the minority perspectives to fit dominant ideology. Trier’s work, in the meantime, encourages instruction of students in media literacy so that they can both understand and utilize media to express themselves, voices that may be silenced ordinarily. Thus both authors pay attention to the expression of minority voices, the students that might not ordinarily be heard in the traditional school system.

While these articles, a source of professional knowledge, all deal with secondary education, elements of many of the strategies we have learned about thus far, though intended for primary students and beginning readers, can also be applied. One of the first such principles that stretch past academic delineations is the importance of a teacher’s belief system in the art and practice of teaching. All of the articles emphasize teachers

⁴ Anthony V. Manzo, Ula C. Manzo and Matthew M. Thomas, “Rationale for systematic vocabulary development: Antidote for state mandates,” *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 49, no. 7 (April 2006): 614.

making an effort to help students through a variety of methods, using a comprehensive approach to education. This belief, in return, benefits the most students; specific approaches are suggested in some articles such as the Manzo article, but using a mixture of these will ultimately be of the most use to all students.

The Phillips article, in the meantime, offers a prime example of the use of instructional scaffolding to promote success in the classroom. By teaching his students how to study for the open book tests, he facilitated the development of study skills in his students. As college students, there he places more responsibility on them to take charge of their own learning, but recognizing they might not have the necessary skills to do so on their own, his explicit introduction of the skills gives them the tools they need to achieve. By teaching his students strategies like ReQuest and OtA, Phillips is also teaching his students to do “reciprocal teaching” on their own, that is derive questions from the text, especially those that may appear on the tests, independently.

Phillips’ article also emphasizes the use of standardized tests to serve as both an incentive for the students to study appropriately, and as a measure of the success of this studying. Additionally, Phillips mentions the preparation that his standardized tests offer for the high stakes testing that his students face as part of the Texas community college community, which is subject to testing in core curriculum areas, as determined by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.⁵

Trier’s media literacy article connects to the classroom text in that media literacy itself thrives on the use of a variety of environmental texts. Not only do students use these texts to develop literacy as in a primary classroom, but the media literacy essence stresses that students learn to “read” media factors such as bias, intention, audience and

⁵ Phillips, 579.

other techniques. Creating a media literate environment for students means that students need to be appropriately taught not just how to physically read the texts, but also how to break down the media presented to them, figuratively reading the media texts.

Pace conducts her research essentially by kidwatching students in a Florida college classroom. Through her observations she notes the changes in the girls' perceptions about the text as they were exposed to it in different settings; more significantly she notices through her kidwatching exactly when the girls' change their thought about the text: after exposure to the dominant voices in the class. From this, it is important for educators to use kidwatching to make similar observations and respond accordingly. The idea of intently observing students should not be limited to researchers in classrooms, but instead used by every teacher as a way of checking their instruction.

Finally, Dale's Cone of Experience seems to apply to a few of these articles. According to this theory, the degree to which students retain what they learn is based on the different ways in which the material is presented. They retain the least when material is simply read, but the most when they are submerged in the material. This fits with Manzo's article in that the more students are surrounded by low-frequency vocabulary terms, the more they will pick up on the contexts of the words. Additionally, in light of Trier's article about media literacy, according to Dale's Cone of Experience, people retain information based on visual media better than simply reading. In our society today which is becoming increasingly visual, the teaching of critical media literacy is even more potent.

Each article offers unique insight into teaching methods to be employed in the classroom to the benefit of the students. As I look to begin student teaching next year,

such information will certainly be useful. Most resonant, though, is that while each article presents important information, none offer an end-all solution to the difficulties of teaching. Instead, it is important to weigh each as tools that may be applicable at times, making this professional literature a part of a comprehensive view of education. Thus in some instances open-book tests may be a useful conduit for introducing and supporting study skills in students; for other students it may be redundant and a less effective strategy for facilitating information to meet their needs. The point is, though, that I now have added tools for addressing different situations as they arise.

As the articles all seemed to indicate, whether explicitly or indirectly, maintaining such a “toolbox” of instructional points and strategies is important not only to promote learning in the majority of students, but also in reaching those students who would ordinarily be held back by disadvantage. It is the job of the teacher to promote learning in *all* students, so reaching those few who may not have had the opportunity to develop study skills or vocabulary, or who approach a text differently than the rest of the class, is of the utmost importance. Thus through exposure to such professional literature, I will hopefully be able to meet the challenges of all members of my classes.