Transacting with Text? Theory and Practice

1. Reading—transacting with texts
2. Writing—composing texts
3. Extending reading and writing—individually choosing texts for personal and social reasons.
4. Investigating language in social contexts—exploring how language works
5. Learning to learn—metacognition strategies

(Seaver & Botel, 1986)

Ring a bell? Anyone having taken Read 570, the literature and reading class, in the last couple of years will recognize Morton Botel’s “Five Critical Experiences” as the pinnacle of the principle of balance. Among traditional word attack (phonics-style) skills in Reading/Writing/Talking Across the Curriculum, Botel set his five (whole language-style) standards. Note, too, he did not name these features the Five Mediocre Experiences or the Five Take-or-Leave Experiences, but named them Critical: crucial, pivotal, decisive, important, major, consequential, significant, imperative, compelling, chief, vital. I think most of us would agree that these five experiences—reading, writing, their personalized extensions, the specifics for standard English, and metacognition—are the very essence of the balance we want to teach.

As CSUF Reading Program graduates, you are steeped in current research, your files and minds replete with journal articles, constantly connecting your classroom practices to the profound theoretical bases you have learned. But what I am wondering is if that theory aligns with your textbooks, with your superiors’ expectations, and therefore, with your practice; i.e., are you allowed and encouraged to practice what you preach?

A new (and naïve?) teacher of freshman college students, I have been surprised at the disparity between theory and practice. Where is the balance I embraced? I am puzzled that textbooks for reading instruction so often reflect an outdated model or are just plain workbooks. I am shocked but silent when more experienced instructors (not CSUF professors) have told me that what my low-level students need is drill, implying exclusivity for the practice, when I know that to the contrary, P. David Pearson writes,

Recent research has debunked the misconception that only already-able readers can benefit from time spent in actual text reading, while less able readers should spend time on isolated skills instruction and workbook practice… A newer, more compelling argument is that the different amounts of time teachers give students to read texts accounts for the widening gaps between more able and less able readers throughout the school grades (Fielding & Pearson, 1994)

It could be low-level students do need drill, but they also need to transact with text.

At the elementary and secondary school many of you are constantly pressured to teach to tests and
threatened with loss of funding or loss of your job if percentile scores do not all rise. Apart from the statistical impossibility of all the percentiles rising, it is obvious that the threat-makers promote an efferent stance, requiring that your students focus only on what can be “carried away” from text to test. Where is the balancing aesthetic stance, the “lived-through” experience? Louise Rosenblatt, cognitive theorist and creator of the aesthetic-efferent concepts, in fact, recommends that “our assignments, our ways of testing, our questions about the work, our techniques of analysis, should direct attention to, not away from, the work as an aesthetic experience,” encompassing “the experience of literature... the live sense of literature” (Rosenblatt as cited in Murphy, 1998)—a life-enriching way of transacting with texts.

The other night I took a break from the Cunningham/Stanovich article I was reading to e-mail two friends—just kind of a “Whazzup?” message—and what was up was that, unbeknownst to all three of us, each was that night reading the very same article! That was enough to make me think I had really better pay attention to it. That article was “What Reading Does for the Mind,” a handout from Anne Cunningham’s presentation at the last CRA conference. The gist of the Cunningham/Stanovich position was that the exposure to print (text), that is reading volume, not oral language, is the key success agent not only in vocabulary acquisition, but also verbal skill, comprehension, and general knowledge, both academic and practical. Cunningham and Stanovich’s statistical technique allowed them to spotlight reading volume (separate from general ability) as a direct cause of superior verbal skill, comprehension, and general knowledge, and the “Matthew Effects” truth was confirmed again. When Vygotsky’s legacy to us echoes, “Thought is born through words” (as cited in Moss, 1990, p11), we need to know that the best place to find those words is text, TEXT, TEXT. Transacting with text.

Our own Ruth and Hallie Yopp remind us:

Literature should be at the heart of our literacy programs. Not only does it support many aspects of literacy development—in language, comprehension, writing, attitudes, and perceptions—it provides an excellent context for deep thinking and personal response. Literature inspires us and informs us; it nurtures our imaginations; it moves us to laughter, to tears, and to action. (2001, p11)

Many people in education are not aware of Vygotsky, Stanovich, Rosenblatt, or Botel, but we are. Therefore, it is our responsibility to stay connected to current research, to bring balance to our classroom practice and text to our students. If this is how you teach, show us how; reach out a hand of encouragement to a colleague sliding down the slippery slope towards days of drill. If you’re on the slide, grab that hand!

References


*Seaver, J.T., & Botel, M. (1986). Reading/writing/talking across the curriculum, Levittown, PA: Morton Botel Associates*

Recommended Reading

By Kathi Bartle Angus


This thick (1010 pages, 47 chapters) tome is not a sit-down read, but it is brimming with information. Each chapter focuses on an area of current research in reading, and a well-written comprehensive overview begins each chapter. Almost 100 authors participated in the research summaries provided. The chapters end with extensive research lists that provide excellent resources for further reading in the various subject areas. Although the hardcover edition is priced at over $200, on-line bookstores offer a paperback version for well under $100, including shipping.

Hancock Fund

The Hancock Fund was established to honor Dr. Deborah Osen Hancock for her contributions to the field of reading and specifically to the Reading Department. The fund is solely for use by the CSUF Reading Clinic. Over the years, the fund has supplied books and technology for use by clinicians and students. REG would like to thank the following members for their generous contributions to the Hancock Fund:

- Marion Blakely
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REG Announcement

Volunteers Needed

CSUF in partnership with the City of Brea will be hosting a month long celebration at the Birch Street Promenade to coincide with the Grand Opening of all business and restaurants along that street. The event will take place between October 21 and November 19. The Reading Clinic is playing a vital role in programming for the month by providing three book shares and creative activities on October 21 as well as once-a-week book shares with activities on Tuesday afternoons from 2:00-4:00. In addition, on October 29, we will be hosting a Harry Potter event from 2:00-4:00. Hopefully, we will have a magician present for the event, followed by other activities to coincide with the book series.

The book shares on October 21 will happen at 12:00, 2:00 and 4:00. They will be centered on culturally diverse children’s literature. Additional themes include Imagination/Magic, History and Memories, and Expression and Art. Each week, those children participating will receive an annotated list of literature for future reference in selecting books.

If you are interested in assisting with any of the book shares or activities, please call JoAnne Greenbaum at (714) 278-5930 or Donna Padgett at (714) 278-2758 ext.8. The entire month of book
selections and coordinating activities has been determined. We just need extra hands to assist little ones with the creative process. We have put a ceiling on of 25 per session. The only problem is that we don’t know how many children will actually be present or their ages. This event is being promoted in the Brea elementary schools so it could be big. Call today if you wish to help. Thank you.

Reading Educators' Guild Newsletter Staff

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The Reading Connection: Jordan Fabish

If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, by being a regular column writer or just an occasional article donator, please contact Jan Bagwell at jbagwell@fullerton.edu. We need all of you to help make REG great!