The Reading Connection

By Norma Inabinette, Guest Contributor

Jordan’s Note: From palate to pedagogy, the R.E.G. Winter Dinner on February 21 was a treat. We can’t reproduce the camaraderie or the delicious Asian cuisine; however, we can re-create the highlights of Norma Inabinette’s address, because she has kindly summarized it for the newsletter. I imagine that Norma has been instructor and instructional model for most of us, and how good it was to hear again her message of balanced, researched, holistic teaching and learning, helping us to remember these principles and refocus our practice.

READING IN THE NEW MILLENIUM

As teachers we face new challenges in the 21st century. We know that by the end of the decade:

one of five children will be on a behavior-altering drug

80% will be overweight

asthma, high blood pressure and childhood diabetes will continue to be at epidemic proportions

only one in five will be raised in a totally functional family

the suicide rate will again increase by 50%

accumulated knowledge will continue to double every two years

Yet knowing that the readers in our classrooms are a new breed of students, we continue to approach the task of meeting new needs with old behaviors. We’ve come a long way, and have not come any way at all.

In the past 10 years we have accumulated more knowledge about how students learn than we had ever known. Now we must ponder this new knowledge and make changes in our educational practices to reflect the best that knowledge has to offer.

Children learn through multi-sensory contact. Information is stored in various parts of the brain, and in order to both preserve it in long term memory and retrieve it, we need to provide more than auditory and visual stimuli. Learners need to touch, smell, see, taste, handle, and manipulate things in order for information to be learned for permanent recall. Research now tells us that learners attend for only one minute for each of their chronological years. If we only talk at them or only demonstrate information, we have lost them long before our explanation is finished. We need to pace learning and determine what are the critical outcomes that we want to promote, and then provide multiple experiences for them to learn.

We must control the amount of information we present to them. We expose our students to 85% more information than any other country in the world. In the rapidity to cover ground, we often fail to uncover it. Brain researchers are telling us that the average adult, who has every intention of remembering something, will forget half of it within two days. The average high school student will forget 65% of what s/he has read within 24 hours, yet we continue to cram the curriculum with facts and concepts that will never be really learned. It is recommended that we spend 55-80% of each instructional day helping readers process information, that is practicing it (doing the same thing over and over) and rehearsing it
(doing tasks in different ways to learn to apply knowledge). If the brain researchers are correct in determining that acquisition of new information or skills can and may erase old acquisition (unless it is thoroughly learned) then we waste a great deal of instructional time by exposing students to information that will never become a part of long-term memory. Perhaps we need to begin creating themes that will allow us to relate all new learning in such a way that it makes sense and students can use the information over and over until it becomes truly learned.

We cannot ignore the place of emotions in learning. Learners do not function in an academic vacuum. They have fears, concerns, insecurities, doubts, motivations and intentions that strongly influence what occurs in during the instructional time. Learners are too often punished for not having knowledge and skills when the acquisition of them is the role of the school. Teachers should consider children’s lack of abilities as a challenge and a sign of the direction s/he needs to take to turn the student into a true learner. We can do this by considering how much a learner can learn and then tailoring learning to meet that need. We can create a community of learners in the classroom so that students feel a part of the instruction and are willing to interact freely without fear of failure or ridicule. Positive reinforcement is much more effective in creating learners than is negative or even neutral reinforcement. Our classrooms need to be places where it is OK to make mistakes because it is trial and error learning that is most effective for long-term recall. Also remember that teacher attitude and behavior toward the class is the primary factor in determining the willingness and enthusiasm of the learners to become involved. Teachers’ bad hair days create bad learning days.

Learners have physical needs that need to be met for optimal learning. We are well aware of the need for sleep, yet we continue to begin school very early (especially for adolescents whose sleep cycle varies from adults and children, and who require up to 10 hours of sleep per day). Humans need 64 ounces of water a day to irrigate the brain alone, much less what is needed for the rest of the body. Yet our learners are lucky if they get 2 sips of drinking fountain water and ½ pint of milk at lunch. In addition we know that our learners need vast amounts of protein for the brain to function yet we provide large amounts of carbohydrates that require that the body works very hard to deal with them, taking away from the brain the fuel needed for learning. The brain uses 20-25% of the body’s fuel each day. Without it our students are handicapped in both their ability to learn and their ability to grow strong neurons for adequate brain function. We need to change school policies so that our students get a great deal of exercise and movement each day as well as provide variations in session times and feeding practices.

As the amount of information and our access to it increases at an outstanding rate, we need to change the way we approach the learning task. Students need to know how to find, read, and then evaluate the worth, accuracy and usefulness of information that they find. On the other hand, researchers are now telling us that if humans don’t practice and use their rote learning skills, they are lost forever. We need to find a balance between providing freedom to explore and evaluate information that interests our students and a set of material that is memorized in order to maintain the neurons that allow us to recall information rapidly.

Lastly, we are now in what is being called an Educational Timequake. The influences from outside groups are creating an overwhelming anxiety that threatens to crumble the schools under the pressure of standardized tests (sometimes considered to cannibalize the curriculum), standards (there is not evidence of a positive influence of standards on learning outcomes), parental expectations, and demands of sub-groups whose own agendas want to control what is happening in the schools. Teacher depression and anxiety are at a all time high. The average new teacher only stays in the profession for 3-5 years and becomes disillusioned and frustrated. Principals are no longer “principal teachers,” but people and property managers. Our schools have lost their focus and will disintegrate completely if we are not diligent in our attempts to regain the leadership the schools need. We need to remember that we are educated to know what are good instructional practices, and there are more of us than there are politicians and school boards. It is time to take back our schools for the children.

The 21st century provides frightening challenges and marvelous opportunities. We can make our classrooms places that provide our students with learning that will last a life time and provide them with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to make this a better world for all. But we need to
remember, IF WE CONTINUE TO DO WHAT WE DID, WE WILL CONTINUE TO GET WHAT WE GOT. That's not good enough anymore.

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**Faculty Footnotes**

By Kathi Bartle Angus

The dynamic growth and healthy size of the reading program continue to be a dominant theme around the department. This March we had a record number of students participate in the comprehensive exam. Seventy-five students at three locations across the county underwent the same two-question process that is familiar to the vast majority of our graduates. Needless to say we look forward to our largest graduating class ever.

More students, of course, necessitates more faculty. Over the last two months searches have been conducted for three to four full-time tenure track reading positions. JoAnn Carter-Wells, who coordinated the searches, was kept extremely busy guiding candidates through their lengthy, multifaceted interviews. It was exciting to meet with so many dynamic reading professionals from across the country who were interested in joining us at CSUF. The candidate list also included several Reading Program alumni. Faculty were treated to presentations by each of the candidates outlining their research followed by a discussion of how their research guides their practice. Look for introductions to the new faculty in the next issue's column.

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**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:

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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!