Pedagogically Blonde

I have really been on vacation. I’ve been to the show three times this summer!—once for Tomb Raider, twice for Legally Blonde (hey, I have a ten-year old). What’s odd is that I am carrying this silly “blonde” movie around in my head; what’s odd is that I mention it at all to a readership of educated professionals. Please do not be insulted—Legally Blonde is for fun, not close scrutiny, but it is set in academia with some teaching and learning principles worth examining.

Elle Woods, a cheery, beautiful, Bel Air blonde with personal expectations as shallow as her father’s martini, determines to enter Harvard Law School to win intellectual respect (and, thus, a marriage proposal) from the boy who has dropped her because he, also off to Harvard, “needs a Jackie, not a Marilyn.” She is smarter than her Fashion Merchandising degree portends, and bravely overcomes East Coast snobbery, cerebral elitism, a lecherous professor, and Harvard’s tough law courses to figure out the Real Murderer, save her client, and graduate as the honored class-elected speaker with a promising career ahead as well as a new self-image and a new boyfriend who recognizes the bright, creative, tenacious woman she truly is. The good guys win, the bad guys lose, the audience (possibly our students among them) feels great.

In fact, the film presents some praiseworthy pedagogy: peer tutoring, self-testing, consulting experts, group study, vocabulary study, thorough preparation for class, the Socratic method, and over-learning via lengthy hours spent in serious reading. The professor who incorporates “blood-bath”-style competition into his class is shown to be unprincipled and unimaginative, his character negatively affecting his judgment. Elle, however, wins the day through application, analysis, and synthesis of information; with kindness and loyalty to all, whether of high or low estate; and by promoting passion for the law and faith in people as the keys to law and life. What could be wrong with that message?

If that message is interpreted “just believe in yourself and you can live your dream,” then we’re shuddering, not applauding. Some students simply will not attain the proficiency required to pass nursing boards, fire-fighter exams, or the fifth grade, no matter how hard they believe. Others do have the capacity, but one wonders if the square-peggedness of their cultural experience will ever fit into the round holes of the education system they face. And, who is to say which is the better perspective, round or square?

Certainly every student and teacher must make adjustments to accommodate different learning styles, prior knowledge, and cultural emphases, but in a classroom (as opposed to private tutoring) can we ever create the ideal distance between what students can attain alone and what they can attain with support to bring each of them into Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development? Despite our training in and understanding of cultural diversity, the enormity of it is overwhelming.

I thought I “got” multiculturalism, but thought again this summer when I finally read Shirley Brice Heath’s classic, Ways with Words, something I have yearned to do since Dr. Brenda Spencer so pithily referred to the author’s research in the “Linguistics in Reading” course. In the late 70s, Heath, a linguistic anthropologist and social historian, lived with the families of two mill communities in the Piedmont Carolinas, Roadville and Trackton, in order to study their underlying assumptions about language acquisition, uses of texts, and functions of literacy. A scholarly work that reads like a novel, its
implications are profound, and it is worthy of intense study. A sample from the epilogue, however, may suffice to summarize how deeply the foundations of learning run:

The patterns of language use of the children of Roadville and Trackton before they go to school stand in sharp contrast to each other and to those of the youngsters from townspeople families. Though parents in all three communities want to “get ahead,” their constructions of the social activities the children must engage in for access to language, oral and written, vary greatly. The sequence of habits Trackton children develop in learning language, telling stories, making metaphors, and seeing patterns across items and events do not fit the developmental patterns of either linguistic or cognitive growth reported in the research literature on mainstream children. Roadville children, on the other hand, seem to have developed many of the cognitive and linguistic patterns equated with readiness for school, yet they seem not to move outward from these basics to the integrative types of skills necessary for sustained academic success (Heath, 1983, p. 343).

They do not fit the pattern; they do not move outward from the basics, because of the most fundamental perceptions—issues of order, sequence, imagination, predictability, limits, purposes—that they, as children, acquire at home and bring to class, to your class. Square pegs. Add in adult students’ possible anxiety, negative self-perceptions (Jones, 1981), embarrassment at returning to school, or embarrassment over their initial reading and writing products (Jenkins, 1995), feelings of impostorship (imminent failure because of inadequacy) or of cultural suicide (alienation from their former non-literature culture) (Brookfield, 1999), and “the zone” feels very far away.

Students come to our classes in various states of cultural, intellectual, and emotional mismatch to the lessons we so carefully construct. What can we do?

Heath’s complex answer to a complex problem, involving study of the home routines, social networks, and basic understandings (of, say, imagination as useful exaggeration versus lying) of a school’s population and adjusting reading and writing tasks to address authentic purposes that correspond more closely to familiar mindsets, is undoubtedly the only truly effective accommodation.

However, Heath includes another suggestion, and it is the core of a college text titled On Course by Skip Downing: help the students to believe in themselves. What??!!! Are we back to Legally Blonde? Downing is an instructor at Baltimore City Community College; On Course is the writing and/or study skills curriculum he designed after overcoming his own teaching burnout, obtaining a masters degree in applied psychology, and 20 years of teaching and observing students of comparable academic potential succeed or fail in school. What did he observe the successful students doing? Making wise behavior choices. Like Elle Woods, one of Downing’s keys to success in school and in life is the wise choice of adopting positive beliefs. Well, that is very nice, but realistically, isn’t this position a sickening sort of Dr. Feelgood hokum that ignores the evidence of “mismatch”?

Downing offers a persuasive rebuttal in the story of Roger Bannister. Does 3:59.4 mean anything to you? That was Bannister’s time when he broke the four-minute-mile in 1954, a year when health and sports experts agreed that it was impossible for human beings to run any faster. Only months after Bannister proved otherwise, a number of other runners did the same. “In other words, once runners chose a new belief (one can run a mile under four minutes), they pushed their physical abilities, and suddenly the impossible became possible” (Downing, 1999, p. 4). It is the action that follows the belief that is the key, of course. Just as Keith Stanovich’s well-known “Matthew Effects” describe the painful and verifiable negative cycle of reading difficulties (where a child lacking phonemic awareness has trouble decoding, is too frustrated to enjoy reading and, so, avoids it, never quite progressing to the automaticity that encourages further practice and the meaning-based cues that follow, never rewarded by the elevated level of interest in texts that are accessible to the reader who has it all), Downing describes a similar psychological cycle:
After a disappointing test score, a struggling student thinks, “I knew I couldn’t do college math!” This belief will likely lead the student to miss classes and neglect assignments. These self-defeating behaviors lead to even lower test scores, reinforcing the negative beliefs. This student, caught in a cycle of failure, is now in grave danger of failing math.

In that same class, however, someone with no better math ability is passing the course because this student believes she can pass college math. Consequently, she chooses positive behaviors such as attending every class, completing all of her assignments, getting a tutor, and asking the instructor for help. Her grades go up, confirming her empowering belief (p. 4).

Positive actions follow positive beliefs—that makes sense, where “just” believing does not.

Then, am I actually suggesting that you emulate Legally Blonde’s enthusiastic heroine and model the positive beliefs of passion for your subject and faith in your subjects to your very next class? Well . . . yes!


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**Note:** If you could use some practical help (such as lesson plans!) instilling in your students positive self-esteem for the purpose of establishing positive actions, you might want to try On Course as a primary or supplemental text, especially if you teach secondary- or college-age students. Simultaneously tough and nurturing, Downing’s book leads students through the study of their favorite subject, themselves, with research-based writing strategies, study skills, and critical thinking prompts as a means to discover that subject. I am sure I would not have made it through my first semester of teaching without it!

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**Faculty Footnotes**

By Kathi Bartle Angus

We are still in growth mode. The Reading Program has returned to department status and continues to serve record numbers of students on the Fullerton and Mission Viejo campuses as well as in our five cohorts. Graduate students are able to attend classes in Rancho Santa Margarita, San Juan Capistrano, Costa Mesa, and East Whittier. The addition of four new full-time faculty members has allowed us to more effectively serve our students and added a wealth of expertise to our courses. This newsletter will provide an introduction to Dr Penny Chiappe and Ms. Rosario Jasis. Look for introductions to Drs. Anthony and Ula Manzo in October.
Dr. Penny Chiappe is our new clinic director. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Western Ontario, her Masters degree at the University of Toronto, and her doctorate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. Dr. Chiappe joins us from the State University of New York at Fredonia, where she coordinated the Reading Clinic. Her primary teaching responsibility revolves around the assessment and remediation of literacy difficulties. Her major research interest lies in the cognitive processes that underlie reading acquisition and reading disabilities. Dr. Chiappe has written numerous articles on reading which have appeared in journals such as the Journal of Educational Psychology, Reading and Writing, and Memory & Cognition. She has presented her research to international audiences in China and Sweden. In addition, she has given inservices and workshops for school districts in British Columbia and western New York.

Rosario Ordonez Jasis, Ph.D. Candidate, is our new specialist in multicultural education. She received her undergraduate degree from California State University, Fullerton and her Masters Degree at University of California, Berkeley. She is finishing her doctoral work in the School of Education at the University of California, Berkeley. Her teaching responsibilities include cross-cultural issues in the teaching and learning of reading and language arts. Her research examines the socio-cultural contexts of minority schooling and literacy acquisition.

Other research interests include the practices and policies influencing the relationship between families and schools. Her work with schools includes teaching, ongoing teacher professional development on language, literacy and culture, utilization of interactive technology to enhance literacy among middle school students in urban settings, and the assessment and evaluation of school-wide restructuring programs. Most recently, Ms Ordonez Jasis received awards in recognition of her scholarly contributions from the Spencer Foundation and the Language Minority Research Institute.

The best of a book is not the thought which it contains, but the thought which it suggests; just as the charm of music dwells not in the tones but in the echoes of our hearts.
- Oliver Wendell Holmes

Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside of a dog it’s to dark to read.
- Groucho Marx

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!