When Talking to Yourself is a “Good Thing”: Opening Learners to New Strategies--Uncovering, Unraveling and Using Inner-Speech

Author’s note: The most important missing piece in the draft is the fact that personal learning strategies are really habits of mind. Therefore, they are embedded in each of us, and need to be sorted out with reference to the complex literature and lore on “habit” formation and re-formation--about the most difficult thing human beings can do. (Think eating habits, drinking habits, language patterns/habits.) Therefore, finding a way into our “source code”--inner-speech--and reprogramming it to provide recursive self-guidance is necessary at a minimum to seriously improve learning (and, Tharp and Gallimore tell us, teaching) strategies/habits.

It could be argued that most all learning eventually must become self-learning. It is by immersion in the various neighborhoods of possible knowledge that learning becomes synergistic and potentially generative. However, this takes more than exposure; it takes a ready mind--a mind that is actively selecting and reflecting on the targeted “points of interest” from an otherwise overwhelming assault on the senses from various impinging stimulation and competing motivations. The core paradigm by which [self-learning] occurs appears to be through a combination of direct instruction, some form of stroking, and mental modeling--essentially the way we learn our first words on Mommy’s knee. Our goal then should be to better understand why and what accelerates and possibly inhibits this otherwise natural process from occurring.

Under & Over Potencies

The process of making meaning was well described as early as 1917 when Edward L. Thorndike, in an article titled “Reading as Reasoning” wrote

when one reads a paragraph The mind is assailed, as it were, by every word in a paragraph. It must select, repress, soften, emphasize, correlate, and organize, all under the right mental set or purpose on demand.

Further ahead in that same article, Thorndike used two concept-words, largely forgotten, that deserve rediscovery. These words should become code for anyone trying to understand meaning making. They can be very valuable in diagnosing and prescribing appropriate intervention, and potentially in reconciling a host of mundane misunderstandings. The idea, very simply, is that most meaning-making problems arise from the reader (listener) assigning an under-or over-potency to selected words and thought units in a piece of textual material.
Proportional Thinking: The Seeds of Our Discontent

The assigning of potency while reading, and listening and viewing, speaks to the importance of a function referred in cognitive psychology as proportional thinking. Most argumentation and disagreement over interpretation can be traced to this source. Variable potency for same words by different minds has people saying conflicting things to themselves about the same set of facts, thus making them “different facts.” This is not always evident because the social context of everything read and heard and viewed is invisible, and largely inaccessible. Clearly, the most striking difference in what is being said with the same words, and presumed context, is that which occurs daily between men and women. This abstraction is made palpable (at least for me) with two examples.

When Ula and I had Byron, a late-life child, I was preoccupied with thoughts like, “Would I be up to the challenge physically, emotionally and financially?” So, for that reason, everything we said to one another I believed Ula understood in those terms. Hence, a reasonable “potency” for me would be to listen for, and attach value to, and make decisions based on anything that might lighten this “burden.” So, as we attempted to venture out with Baby Byron to the grocery store, I was feeling a bit sorry for both of us as we carried baby bottles, diapers, wet wipes, car seat, and stroller to the car, along with limp-necked Byron. In this context I was totally perplexed when I saw Ula reenter the house to gather up a collection of stuffed bears and rattles and other such clanging, brightly colored toys and carry them out to the car. I managed to get the question out as to what in the (*#@!) she was doing, in a way that this one time had her miss the under-the-voice expletives because the engine in the car already was running in the echoing garage. So, she answered, readily from her context, but with incredulous surprise that I could be missing anything so obvious, “Well that’s all the fun!” Nowhere in my male mind had I ever connected the thought units carrying lots of stuff with fun. We were and are reading two different books with the same pages. However, I now know to ask occasionally, if something is fun--although I’m still struck by the answers.

Reading is Fun (?)

In a more conventional professional sense, this is what I think is the cause of consternation and confusion over radically different and strongly felt approaches to reading. Whole Language enthusiasts think that “reading is fun.” So, by their way of thinking, reading hundreds of books, especially storybooks, is loads of fun. While sympathetic to the need for some direct instruction, Ula feels this way, although she denies a “whole language” orientation. She tells me often about the great pleasure she got from secretly reading Nancy Drew when the teacher was drilling the rest of the class. Byron, on the other hand, who is more like his father in this one regard, recently flat-out said to his mother “Enough with the stories, when are we going to read books with facts in them?” For me, and many like me, reading is not fun. Nor do we like it when you tell us that it should be. Reading for us is largely a tool, and occasionally a diversion, but it is hardly a JOY. Relatedly, literature-based content learning is painful, not enriching. It is not that we are not episodic learners as much as it is that we find stories tediously inefficient, and yearn for a clearly stated main idea with supporting evidence. This, again, is where inner-speech comes in. If we had access to each other’s inner-speech, that place where each of us is writing his/her own version of each moment, this all could go a bit easier. However, this is not so easily done. The social-cultural milieu of school and society embraces literature and the appreciation of reading with a level of (over-) potency that has corrupted our very capacity to say, “READING is NO JOY! It is just reading.” This is so sensible an alternative view that we seem to have all agreed not to speak or hear this simple maxim. Hence, the power of and the problem with exposing inner-speech; it could be transformative in more ways than we might wish.

Intrigued? Perhaps you are asking, “What does that mean--Inner-Speech?” “I heard he talked about psychological implications. What about them?” and “How does any of this influence my teaching?” If you have such questions, now is the time to access the entire article on the R.E.G. Web site! Be sure to read all the way to the end, where there are some very relevant and practical assessment instruments that you will love, as well as glimpses into the brilliant work in which our CSUF professors are engaged even as we read.
Faculty Footnotes

By Kathi Bartle Angus

The work of Hallie Yopp Slowick, professor of Elementary, Bilingual, and Reading Education and REG member, is well known to fellow REG members. It is also much better known now to the larger CSUF community after Hallie’s presentation on April 9. Hallie, who was named Outstanding CSUF Professor for 2000-2001, spoke to a very receptive audience on “Progress in Understanding Reading Acquisition: Where Are We Now?” She outlined the key research on the links between phonemic awareness and reading achievement to which she has made highly significant contributions. Numerous CSUF officials, faculty, retired faculty, students, and alumni attended the presentation. Peggy Hammer and Dixie Shaw, founding members of REG, were on hand to congratulate Hallie, as well as Dr. Deborah Osen Hancock, former Chair of the Reading Department. Preceding her presentation, CSUF President, Dr. Milton Gordon, announced that Hallie is one of four recipients of the Wang Family Excellence Awards. The award includes a cash prize of $20,000, which she may use for any purpose. The Wang award recognizes CSU faculty and administrators who have distinguished themselves through exemplary contributions and achievements in their academic disciplines and areas of assignment. Hallie joins a very exclusive club of two CSUF faculty members who have received this prestigious award.

The Reading Department will graduate another record-breaking class this June 1. We are anticipating about 130 MS and credential candidates who will be “hooded” at the first ever commencement ceremony exclusively for the School of Education graduates. Graduate students from our Capistrano and East Whittier cohorts will be joining Fullerton and Mission Viejo students for the ceremony and reception. REG members are welcome to meet and greet the new grads at the REG reception to be held on the second floor patio of the Education classroom building on June 1 at about noon (immediately following the commencement ceremony).

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:

Kathleen Engstrom
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Hallie Yopp-Slowik
Sarah Ross
Ellen Herich
Andrea Sward
Janice Blanton

Class Notes

We would like to hear from you. The Class Notes section will highlight news, joys, accomplishments and/or changes we have experienced since graduation. E-mail your notes to kellermrsjp@aol.com. Don’t forget to include your name and graduation year. Indicate if you would like your e-mail address included with your notes. We will print as many as possible in each edition.
Reading Educators' Guild Newsletter Staff

Editor: Jan Court-Keller

Faculty Footnotes: Kathi Bartle Angus

The Reading Connection: Jordan Fabish

If you would like to have something published in the REG Newsletter, please contact the REG staff at kellermrs@hotmail.com.