WHAT’S WRONG HERE?

The Reading Connection By Jordan Fabish

When you graduated from the CSUF Reading Program, as masters of your science, I’ll bet you hit the ground running, infusing your class with both efferent and aesthetic approaches to “good, rich literature” (can’t you just hear Dr. Bishop saying it?), vocabulary in context, metacognition strategies, motivation strategies, a variety of creative and research-based teaching and learning styles, software supplementation, cultural and gender awareness, and exploration of language and ideas that laid a foundation of knowledge and comprehension secure enough to support your students’ trek up the levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. You used it all, Baby! Right? That’s what I did; always purposing to trust the great gift of the education I had received. I was a new teacher, however (“old,” but “new”), so you can imagine my surprise when not every single one of my two-year college students was transformed into a literature-loving, clear thinker. Hyperbole aside, I expected better results, and after many (albeit anecdotal) colleague-to-colleague talks about our shared clientele, I began to think that some students would always embrace learning, moving steadily along, while others either did not care or would be chronically confused, no matter what we did. What was going wrong with that invisible thinking process inside those students’ heads?

The key! The key! What was the key? If we could find the key to exactly what was going wrong—a cause—we could find a cure! Of course, it’s always easy to blame the victim, in this case, the student—but the student is a “who,” not a “what.”
Keeping the focus on what could be wrong, there are plenty of possibilities—everything from poor nutrition and lack of exercise to a culture of entitlement—and I wish all of us readers could be chiming in right now with everyone’s insights, but here are mine. “Poor nutrition and lack of exercise” . . . their physical condition could be the key. The mind-body connection is well-documented. I really do believe we gotta get ’em in shape before they can learn! For that matter, is their emotional condition the key? I have often thought so, observing that the most dynamic and pedagogically perfect lesson will be as refuse if the listener is not listening. Our students often appear uncaring about whether they learn or not. Have they been burdened with failure so long that they have become inured to it? Or, conversely, in the name of raising their self-esteem, has someone praised them so long for work that lacks merit that they do not realize how far away from an acceptable academic standard they are? I could easily be persuaded that in most academic subjects, an affective approach such as Skip Downing’s emphasis on students’ personal goals and behavior choices—helping them see themselves as scholars, echoing Frank Smith’s membership in the “literacy club”—is the only way to reach them. (See September/October 2001 of “The Reading Connection—Pedagogically Blonde,” for a further discussion of Downing’s philosophy.)

Meanwhile, I have also noticed how many details are simply invisible to my students. Is their inability to see details the key? They often do not catch the nuances of meaning implied by such language conventions as spelling (“quit,” “quite,” and “quiet” all look the same) or apostrophes (which they seem to use decoratively, rather than for contractions or possessives). To get by, have they just been skimming over the tops of words and punctuation and ideas all their lives until interpreting print has become a foggy habit? Will telling them fix it? I can remember the day, perhaps 37 years ago, my upstairs neighbor Nancy mentioned that a sink is not really clean until one also cleans the “splash” (the tile and faucet area behind the sink). Whoa! It was true! There was her splash, shiny and spot-free; back downstairs, there was mine, stained and flecked with who-knows-what. I had looked at that place thousands of times, but had never seen it. However, since being told . . . [play angel choir] . . . I do see it—mine, yours, everyone’s splash! And I clean it (only mine). Maybe all we have to do is tell them.

During the last year, I actually have felt as if I found the key: “general” and “specific.” Our students do not really understand the concept what is general and what is

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specific. For example, although they might understand that *roses*, *pansies*, and *tulips* are more specific than *flowers*, it is difficult for them to extract their thought process and apply it to general and specific text. I had assumed the problem was just a matter of their getting used to the words, to the terminology of specificity. More recently, though, I have started to worry that their “wrong answers” in class (which I had attributed to simply trouble with terms) indicate that many of them might not even comprehend the relationship between roses and flowers—that it is the concepts, not the terms, all of which occur inside that mysterious black-box brain and are discerned intuitively through experience, that underlie why they cannot find a main idea, but, instead, gravitate toward a detail of little consequence. The “key” could lie in figuring out how to teach these intuitive distinctions of specificity. What a treasure trove of research possibilities! What a broad expanse of application! All ages, all complexities of text. Sorting, matching, organizing, classifying. This absolutely deserves further study.

But you surely notice I have omitted their instructor from being what is wrong with students. Yes, there are ignorant, lazy teachers who are in and out of the classroom, doing as little as possible. But I know who is reading the R. E. G. Newsletter: thoughtful, dedicated, innovative educators, and you are the best thing that ever happened to a student! So, yes, I am omitting their instructor. Still, while I’m deciding what is wrong with everyone, I will segue to a worrisome observation: people in the helping professions (like thoughtful, dedicated, innovative educators) tend to do too much, and often to their own hurt. Let us apply the ultimate question in reading, “Does this make sense?” to the doing-too-much scenario. Does it?

A couple of years ago, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a full page-and-a-half story about Nancy Mellor, a dedicated teacher who, through trial and error and sheer determination, developed a program to help the children of California farm workers gain entrée to schools like Berkeley, Stanford, Yale. Transformed from what sounds like simply a wife, mother, and nice Quaker lady to a powerful advocate for the underdog, Mellor’s conscience led her to become truly involved in the lives of her Latino students. She believed in them, nurtured them, pushed them, persuaded school officials to let them into honors math and English classes, then pushed them some more and oversaw their college admissions letters, too. Realizing they needed more support to succeed in the Berkeley summer program to which they had finally been accepted, she moved in with them as “unpaid cook, substitute mother and tutor.” It worked! Young Latino men

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and women found their way to a superlative education that would absolutely have been out of their reach without her, and the Coalinga-Huron program continues to be an “amazing college entrance machine,” which works, best, however, when Mellor is in charge (Garrison, 2002).

Perhaps only a fixed resolve and a more-than-extra-mile approach like hers can overcome what goes “wrong” with our students. Nancy Mellor’s story is dramatically inspirational, but also, I would say, a little frightening. Her tendency to control appears problematic. Her own neglected family is a chink in the armor. One can infer additional self-neglect—could she have scheduled in very many jogs in the park or sit-ups or hours of sleep or study? And . . . isn’t she a lot like you and me? We may not be moving in with our students, but I sure talk to a lot of tired teachers whose dedication keeps them up late, gets them up early, and sends them from class to meeting and back again, thus putting fitness, time for personal research and study (let alone time for personal pleasure reading), and even relationships last on their lengthening lists. I worry that maybe we do not feel worthy unless we are doing too much. That’s frightening and “wrong.”

How do we turn it all “right”? I vote for “balance” and “struggle.” Before ever rolling a tire onto the CSUF parking lot, I called Ashley Bishop to see just where the university stood on the phonics/whole language controversy. You already know what he said: “We teach balance.” Balance. It is remarkable how frequently a problem is just a good quality that is out of balance. Imbalance, the problem; balance, the answer . . . but finding the right mix is always a lifelong struggle, as it should be. That is, we can recognize imbalance, and, instead of feeling guilty about it (my first response), struggle cheerfully, logically, constantly, to find balance for both ourselves and our students. We do need to struggle for “keys” to comprehension, but it is unlikely there is only one key. Balanced teaching is still right, whether between phonics and literature or students’ physical, emotional, or perceptual imbalances. To give up the struggle for balance can be a path to complacency, smugness, or fanaticism, but to keep it up is draining, unless our own physical, emotional, and perceptual natures are in balance, wouldn’t you say?

Writing for “The Reading Connection” the last four years has been a welcome means of struggle and balance for me, and I will be ever-appreciative of the opportunity to have done this writing, being especially grateful to the warm R.E.G. readership for your encouragement. But, this will be my last column; it’s time for a new voice! I wish you all balance, fulfillment, and strength for the struggle.

Jordan Fabish

FACULTY FOOTNOTES by Kathryn Bartle-Angus

The College of Education (COE), lead by Dean Ash Bishop, hosted its inaugural Open House on Jan. 20. Special guests included CSUF President Milton Gordon, Orange County Supervisor Chris Norby, and Assemblywoman Lynne Daucher. Norby, a CSUF alum, presented the College with a proclamation from the Orange County Board of Supervisors. Daucher also presented a proclamation. Hers was from the California State Assembly congratulating CSUF on the founding of the COE. Other guests included many of the Advancement Board Members listed on the next page. The Advancement Board met following the Open House to begin exploring ways for the COE to enrich outreach efforts with educational, civic, and government agencies. The board will also focus on strategies for enhancing ties between alumni and COE and for development and fundraising. The list of board members is especially exciting for Reading since it includes a former chair of the Reading Department, Dr. Deborah Osen Hancock and a graduate of the Reading Program, Peggy Hammer. Peggy is a founding member of the Reading Educators’ Guild.

There will be many opportunities to involve alumni in the new College of Education. Some of these will be presented at our annual winter dinner.
Alumni News  

by Kathryn Bartle-Angus

**Tim Brown** (’90) has written a new text for Prentice Hall. *The Prentice Hall Text Book Reader* introduces 11 different comprehension strategies for application with college texts. The strategies are specifically geared to the top-selling Prentice Hall texts. Tim is Chair of the English and Speech Communication Department at Riverside Community College.

**Jill Nesbit** (’02) presented “The Write Stuff: A Writer’s Workshop for K-3 Teachers” at the Orange County Reading Association Fall Conference in October. Jill teaches first grade at Sierra Vista in Placentia-Yorba Linda USD.

**JoAnne Greenbaum** (’91) has been named co-leader for the College Reading Special Interest Group of the College Reading and Learning Association. JoAnne teaches critical reading and thinking classes at CSUF.

**Jan Bagwell** (’96) has been appointed co-chair of the Reading Department at Saddleback Community College. Jan teaches reading and critical thinking classes.
OUR MASTERS EXPERIENCE

Anxious, excited, happy to be here
We started the program without any fear
Bartle-Angus she came, and laid down the law
Fun in the future - none of us saw.

It was the first of our classes that worried us most.
We met Dr. Bishop, program difficulty did he boast
He spoke of diphthongs, digraphs, polar opposites, and schwas
We learned about consonants, blends, and vowel laws.

We then met Dygert-Clark, Barbara that is,
Who’s soapbox and enthusiasm will never lose fizz.
She taught us of spider webs and bean dip too.
Traditional or progressive, which method do we use?
What do you think, Adams or Smith?
A balanced approach is what we’ve finished with.

Our fun was not over, don’t fret or frown
Adult literacy was explored with Web-Master Tim Brown.
Presentations, group projects, chapter reviews galore
Look out cohort; the Davis group’s got the floor.

Cultural diversity and reading with Jasis was next
Journals, transparencies, and a large copied text.
With every new lesson, new insight came
Teaching students to read would never be the same.

The summer came and then it was gone
Our lives were enriched as we met Professor Phuntsong
Teaching this group during long summer days,
Simply unfair and with not enough pay
-Am I right, Mr. Ray?

Along came assessment with Professor Sanchez,
Not far behind was Mr. Valdez.
Powerpoints, program reviews, kids-inspiration
We learned from Valdez
To make technology fun

A portfolio, a resume, written without folly
Completed with pleasure for Jennifer Garrett-Smalley
Her job was to polish us
To make us stars
With her guidance and support
In staff development, we’ll go far!

Dr. Julie Chan, our link to the cohort
Not only did she begin this
She taught us to research and to report

Our master’s experience has come to an end
No more Daphne’s or Baja Fresh romps
Because “hot damn” ya’ll, we passed the comps!
Babies, engagements, weddings, new friends
Bittersweet farewells, as this all ends.

We thank you Fullerton, friends, and staff
For the stress, chocolate addictions, late nights, and laughs.
But most of all through this Masters sensation
We thank you for great memories and an awesome education.

Written and read chorally at the Newport-Mesa Cohort Graduation Dinner by the Davis (Elementary) Group:

Jaymi Ropp
Jennifer Hillestad
Jennifer Hauge
Deena Franko
Jennifer Burcham
We would welcome your submissions to the newsletter. Please send your article via email to lovett.gc@verizon.net. Please type “REG” on the subject line of your email.
Thanks, we’d love to hear from you!
Gena Lovett, Editor