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BALANCED

WEAVING THEORY INTO PRACTICE FOR SUCCESSFUL

LITERACY

INSTRUCTION IN READING, WRITING, AND TALK

ESSENTIALS



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CHAPTER 1

The Art of Navigation in Teaching

It is this art [*navigation*] that drew me to love the sea at a very young age and that compelled me to challenge its treacherous waters all of my life and that made me navigate and follow the coast of parts of America . . .

— Samuel de Champlain, explorer extraordinaire, 1613

Leo Lionni's picture book *Frederick* has become a touchstone text for each of us. We both loved this book when we taught elementary students. When we shifted to teaching teacher candidates, we found it equally compelling. The text became one we wanted future teachers in our language and literacy course to know, to consider, and to "ponder deeply." The book's layers of meaning, its simple, evocative illustrations, and, above all, the memorable dreamer mouse, Frederick, make it fertile ground for thinking, feeling, questioning, and discussing — it doesn't matter whether the reader is 5 or 50. *Frederick* has sparked lively debate about what counts as "work," friendship, the value of the arts, the power of imagination, and the contributions to the group by those individuals who are "different." It is exactly the sort of text we champion the use of.

Touchstones

By *touchstone text*, a term coined by Lucy Calkins (1994), we are referring to all types of texts that are read, viewed, or experienced on multiple occasions for multiple purposes over time. These texts become part of the collective narrative of a classroom community.

Although it appears to be straightforward, *Frederick* invariably stimulates strong reactions from our students. Teachers-to-be have voiced a wide range of opinions. One group wanted to "vote Frederick off the island," criticizing his laziness as a bad role model for children. Others admired his artistic nature and appreciated the role of dreamer. Initial responses are often revised after a second or third reading. *Frederick* is a book that is worth returning to and revisiting again and again — our definition of a "touchstone" text.

A Line on Which to Hang Concerns and Understandings

In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, Vivian Gussin Paley recounts her experiences "doing Leo Lionni" in her Kindergarten class. Reeny, the student who inspired the title of Paley's book, identifies with Frederick: "that brown mouse seem to be just like me." Reeny is a Frederick-type of character — an artist, a poet, one who contributes something unique and valuable to the group.

Paley delved into Leo Lionni's books for the entire school year, creating conditions where "five or six year olds debate their concerns with as much fervor and insight as could any group of adults" (1997, p. 18). As they used Lionni's stories as a line on which to hang their concerns and growing understandings, the students' knowledge of character and social dynamics developed with astonishing depth.

This Kindergarten community became expert navigators of Lionni's texts — and day by day, they collaboratively navigated the world of literacy.

As navigators, literacy teachers and learners plan, direct, and travel their routes towards literacy, making use of multiple tools and texts to read their environment, chart their route, and adjust their sails when necessary, particularly if they feel part of their world is in jeopardy. They blend theory and practice, reception and expression of information through the language arts, and thinking, doing, and becoming in a seamless way. In Paley's Kindergarten classroom, all members of the community were free to read, write, and talk not simply about literal interpretations of Lionni, but far beyond, into the texts of their lives, their identities, and their places in the world.

So, what are the conditions that foster such engagement and enable students and teachers to grow into literacy? For us, the essentials for effective balanced literacy instruction include the following:

- knowing yourself within the context of your own literacy experiences, curriculum expectations, and the literacy outcomes you envision for your students (see Chapter 1)
- creating a classroom community that fosters respect for individual differences and makes it possible for students to take risks while feeling safe and supported (see Chapter 2)
- organizing your classroom through the effective establishment of literacy workshops, centres, and anchor charts (see Chapter 3)
- fostering constructive and accountable talk for learning and communication (see Chapter 4)
- using read-alouds to model the range of literate behaviors required of students who read, write, and talk with confidence (see Chapter 5)
- understanding reading as a complex process that involves multiple roles, responses, and levels of support (see Chapter 6)
- understanding writing in terms of purpose, pleasure, and multiple levels of support (see Chapter 7)
- using poetry to engage students in playing with and exploring language, both aloud and written (see Chapter 8)
- envisioning drama as a dynamic way of knowing that brings story and information to life (see Chapter 9)
- using traditional and digital storytelling as ways for students to create and share stories that matter to them (see Chapter 10)

So Many Questions to Ponder

One way to approach a story such as *Frederick* is to maintain a questioning stance about the author and illustrator. In this case, what was Leo Lionni's purpose when constructing the story? Why does he create a character that seems to refuse to work with the group as they busily prepare for winter? Why does he choose a small, brown mouse and use shades of grey with splashes of primary color in the scenery? Such uncomplicated illustrations, such a down-to-earth story, yet so many questions to ponder.

Of her memorable Kindergarten year, Paley (1997, p. 10) writes: "But what is really happening? Is it the contagious effect of one charismatic child's determination to celebrate a mouse as she celebrates herself? Or do I deliberately engineer this phenomenon because, without something entirely new and remarkable going on, I slip into a half-life? Each year I wait to be awakened by a Reeny, just as she has entered school looking for a Frederick, a something to ponder deeply and expand upon extravagantly."

In the text that follows, you are invited to reflect upon your literacy teaching — to determine "what is really happening" — and with, we hope, our help, to chart a course that leads your students in the direction they need and want to go.

Understanding Yourself as a Teacher of Language and Literacy

“Anyone who has begun to think, places some portion of the world in jeopardy.”

— John Dewey

Consider how texts such as *Frederick* and experiences such as Lionni describes have shaped your identity as a teacher. Perhaps there have been times when your goals and those of the group (your colleagues, your family, your friends) were at odds. Perhaps the tensions were resolved through creative approaches — seeing things from a fresh perspective or in brighter colors. In part inspired by *Frederick*, we hope to offer you various inventive approaches — some new and some remarkable practices that deserve revisiting. An adventurous spirit, combined with creativity, is invaluable when considering, exploring, and ultimately navigating literacy essentials.

We recommend beginning with a good, long look at who you are and who you are becoming as a teacher. As teacher educators, we do this every autumn: along with the teacher candidates in our course, we question who and where we are as we embark on an eight-month adventure and travel beyond into the landscapes of literacy education.

Many of us, both present and future literacy educators, are equipped with the strategies and tools common to literate beings. Often, what we lack is an awareness of *how* we acquired them and the many influences, positive and negative, that have shaped who we are.

But teaching requires an awareness of who we are as literate beings and why we behave as we do. Our intuitive ideas about literacy — about listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, and representing — underlie our literacy teaching, our planning, and our interactions with students. Recognizing these implicit assumptions is critical to understanding; it helps us decide which ideas we need to set aside, to reconsider, to retain, and, above all, to call into question.

The following questions pertain to personal strengths and preferences. We invite you to consider them:

- Are your memories of literacy learning positive? Or are they negative?
- What is it that you have brought into your classroom?
- What are your strengths as a literate being? What are your needs?
- Are you comfortable speaking in large groups? Or, do you prefer small groups?
- Are you an active listener?
- Do you prefer to attend a lecture or read a book?
- Do you like to read? What do you like to read?
- Do you like to write? What do you like to write?
- Are you a critical viewer? Do you recognize the impact of music, lighting, camera angle?
- How do you prefer to represent your learning? Do you write songs or poetry? Do you draw or paint pictures?

If you picked up this book, you probably view the role of a teacher of language and literacy as going well beyond *covering* the curriculum in a way that prepares students for standardized testing. You likely appreciate that a well-rounded teacher of language and literacy teaches students in a way that recognizes who they are in multiple contexts, what they bring to the learning environment, and where they can go in the context of the classroom and beyond.

Teachers of language and literacy may look to metaphors that allow them to envision their role in a meaningful and holistic way (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Massengill Shaw & Mahlios, 2011). For example, some teachers view themselves

as jugglers, ever aware of the number of balls they have to work with (e.g., differentiation, parents, and school board directives), trying to ensure that the balls are always in the air and that no one ball is dropped long enough to harm the overall juggling act — ultimately, a child’s learning. Some teachers see themselves as circus ringleaders fully aware of the multiple rings they are expected to keep watch over: the ring of curriculum, the ring of accountability, the ring of children’s strengths and needs, and so on. Their task is to coordinate the rings into one show and to ensure that the class is entertaining and worth coming back to tomorrow. And then some teachers are lighthouse keepers. They have a long view on curriculum and see the big picture; they have good sightlines and can see things from both within and outside. They offer a safe haven for students as they negotiate rocky shorelines.

Other Metaphors for Teachers

Teacher candidates and colleagues have also proposed these metaphors:

- orchestra conductor
- artist whose classroom is the canvas
- director on a film set
- door
- a light, as in a “flood of illumination”

Teachers may also look to real life and fiction for role models to inspire them. For example, consider Anne Sullivan, Helen Keller’s teacher, or Erin Gruwel, whose story is covered in the film *Freedom Writers*. Fictional role models might range from Jane Eyre and Albus Dumbledore (in the Harry Potter series) to English professor John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*, Yoda in Star Wars, and LouAnne Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*.

How do you envision your role as a teacher of language and literacy?

- Do you look to a real role model, perhaps one profiled in books or films?
- Do you look to a fictional role model?
- Do you use a particular text to guide your overall philosophy and interaction with students (e.g., *Frederick* by Leo Lionni or “The Starfish” by Loren Eiseley)?
- Or, do you reach for a metaphor to help you explain and understand your role?

Reflecting upon Your Language and Literacy Block

In today’s classrooms, between 25 and 50 percent of a school day is allocated to the teaching of language and literacy. This amount of time can often be overwhelming, particularly for teachers in a new classroom or a new grade. We often wrestle with questions such as these:

- Where do I start?
- What do I do with an hour or more language and literacy block?
- How do I fit it all in? Is it even possible?
- How do I assess and evaluate?

And most important,

- How do I ensure that all my students meet with success?

In order to get started as a teacher in general or as a teacher of a new grade, or to challenge yourself so as not to “slip into a half-life” as Paley (1997, p. 10) dreads, consider adopting the role of navigator as a literacy learner and teacher. This orientation is characterized by a sense of adventure. As you embark on your journey, you need an open mind that relishes risk-taking, a willingness to question and consider closely, and a framework of dimensions, or guiding questions, to help you chart your course and plan an engaging program (see pages 10–12). We begin with an examination of what you currently do and believe as a teacher of language and literacy.

Take some time to think about your language and literacy block as it stands right now. Consider the following questions:

1. What are you doing well?
 - Make a list of the strengths of your language and literacy block. These might include resources, student responses, and long-range plans.
2. Are you balancing the language strands and support along the continuum?
 - You don't need to include everything in every lesson. That's the beauty of longer-range planning — you can see how over time the various dimensions can be addressed.
3. Do you have students who show particular strengths in specific dimensions? Where are the gaps?
 - When looking for gaps, try to think of a student who might have benefited from that particular gap being filled.
4. Do you need more strategies — or do you need to use your current strategies more effectively?
 - Identify and begin with what you're good at and gradually add to your repertoire. Using 10 strategies well is far better than doing 20 poorly.
5. How can you maintain your sanity and make constructive changes to your program?
 - To keep everything manageable, try one new strategy every two weeks.
 - Keep a log or journal to identify student responses, consequences — positive and negative — and outcomes. Repeat the same process again and again, until you have filled as many gaps as possible.
 - Maintain a focus on your students' needs — it will keep you motivated.
 - Keep in mind that the goal is to allow students to use their strengths not as something to fall into but as a tool to push them to grow on the edge of their comfort zones in their areas of greatest need.

The Language and Literacy Block: Adopting the Role of Navigator

As you reflect upon your language and literacy block, and the outcomes/goals you have for students, you may have many questions. We have organized the most common questions we hear from novice teachers into a framework that includes instructional, individual, and real-world dimensions. While you may view this framework as overwhelming, we urge you to work through the dimensions. They provide a theory-woven-into-practice way of conceptualizing the teaching of reading, writing, and talk in today's classroom.

The dimensions can be addressed in a variety of ways: you could take a holistic perspective, where you take a cursory glance at the big picture; you could work through the dimensions one at a time, beginning with what you've identified as your strength; or you could review the framework and choose the dimension that you feel needs most attention. Our goal is to get you thinking about your language and literacy block and how, through reflection, planning, and re-visioning, you can meet the needs of all learners in the classroom.

Please keep in mind that the framework is simply a starting point and can be adapted to meet your personal needs, the needs of your school, or the needs of a school district. (A reproducible framework for long-term planning begins on page 133.)

Literacy Essential 1: For your literacy journey in the classroom, adopt the adventurous orientation of a navigator, critically aware of personal strengths, formative influences, and dimensions that need to be considered.