

Whole Language: From a transmission to a transaction model: A Priority Message in In-service Training

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This article tries to clarify some misconceptions about Whole Language as a basis for literacy and language development. Since its upsurge in the 1990s, Whole Language, has been constantly slaughtered by its critics as a theory, the application of which hinders language learning and teaching. These constant attacks misconstrue the meaning and complexities of Whole Language as a *philosophy* of teaching and thus contribute to the continued misunderstanding and misapplication of the concept in classrooms.

Furthermore, the critics' attempts have led to the '*back to basics*' movement that continues to emphasise the *transmission* practice or the teacher as the '*knowledge-giver*' model.

The transmission model

The transmission model rests on the thinking that the teacher directs learning in the classroom, which means the teacher is the disseminator and transmitter of knowledge. The teacher works from a centrally prescribed curriculum and the purpose of learning in this model is to acquire a specific body of knowledge. The learner becomes a passive participant. Because the body of knowledge to be learnt is specific, learning is reduced to learning facts and, to make the learning more efficient, learners are usually grouped according to similar abilities so that the pace and content of instruction is geared to the needs of these groups. Students are summatively evaluated and ranked

according to what they know. Labels like 'weak', 'poor achiever', or 'good' are the norms of classification. They have a great deal of impact on students' self esteem. The implications can be disastrous for those wrongly labelled.

Whole Language is an antithesis to the thinking behind this transmission model. Whole Language is first and foremost not a method, or an approach. It is a thinking, "a belief system about the nature of learning and how it can be fostered in the classrooms" (Weaver 1990:3). "Whole Language is not a programme to be defined and mandated but a belief system that is in constant process of evolution and implementation" (Newman & Church 1990:24). Teachers who understand Whole Language and what it represents will certainly demonstrate the belief system in their approach to developing literacy. This approach is transactional.

The transactional model

A transaction model embraces Whole Language thinking. It is student-centred; that is, it values students as learners and regards teachers as facilitators of learning. The core of this model rests in the development of gaining meaning and understanding meaning through the utilisation of learning strategies and processes that enable learners to solve problems. The teacher's role in this model is to provide a learning environment that is conducive to student/child-centred

learning. The teacher demonstrates the use of ‘meaning-getting’ strategies that can be utilised by the learners when they interact with new information. Learners are allowed to interact and work with peers of differing abilities to respond to various needs and interests. Student learning is stimulated by working in groups (research activities, individual and collaborative experiences) and also by doing creative work, such as art and craft, drama, debates, oratory and other creative language learning work.

The teacher’s supportive attitude to the students’ attempts is a key aspect. This learning environment promotes a great deal of collaboration and reflection by the members of each group and results in the production and display of students’ work that they take pride in. In addition, the use of ongoing assessment means that students are formatively evaluated on how they are able to apply the strategies and processes of learning in ‘real’ writing and reading situations —authentic situations — and students are guided towards improvement and further learning.

In-service training

In-service training ought, therefore, to undergo a paradigm shift and promote a transactional model of development in classrooms. Participants need to be fully aware of the basis of Whole Language and how it changes the culture of learning in the classroom, particularly when the norm has been teacher-oriented and fact-oriented. The view that teaching and disseminating knowledge from a prescribed text, or the dependence on commercial materials to guide teachers on what to do, is now invalid and obsolete. This practice has turned teachers into “uninformed spectators” who “see no need or way to alter the course or content of their reading instruction except to change

the type of materials they use” (Shannon 1998). The shift of emphasis will definitely be a daunting experience because it involves a complex process. An interactive, collaborative, reflective process of defining and refining meaning are crucial for the purpose of understanding the underlying principles and philosophy of Whole Language.

In-service training for empowerment should also be a prolonged process that ought to include frequent opportunities for experimentation and modelling of the processes of development in the classroom, and collegial exchanges about experiences. These will ultimately impact on student learning in powerful ways that are both visible and invisible.

References

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