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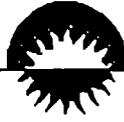


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READING: THE CONFERENCES

Jeanne M. Jacobson

***International Literacy Year:
Celebration, Inspiration, Dedication***

**International Reading Association,
35th Annual Convention, May, 1990**

Among the presentations at the annual convention of the International Reading Association, held in Atlanta in May, was a session titled "Teachers, Students, and Literacy Instruction: Profiles in Learning." The two session leaders, Robert B. Ruddell, from the University of California at Berkeley, and Martha Rapp-Haggard Ruddell, from Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, California, discussed their research, which has focused on two aspects of instruction: the characteristics of influential teachers, and the manner in which skillful and less skilled teachers employ ambiguity in their teaching.

In an eight-year longitudinal study, Robert Ruddell investigated the characteristics of teachers who are identified

by their former students, in after years, as having had a strong influence on their lives and learning. Such teachers are rare; some students never have the experience of being taught by a teacher whom they perceive as influential. When the experiences of high and low achieving students are contrasted, the low achievers, on average, report having studied with one or two such teachers; the average number of such teachers reported by high achievers is three.

High and low achievers tend to perceive teachers similarly, and to have similar views of the characteristics of influential teachers. Quality of instruction is a primary factor, and teachers' enthusiasm for their subject matter is important as well. Students also were strongly influenced by teachers who understood their potential for learning and adjusted instruction accordingly, who showed personal care for them, and who were willing to recognize their personal concerns and help them.

Dr. Ruddell offered an analogy (see page 74) between classrooms as learning environments in which the flow of teacher-guided instruction is intended to lead to future learning, and rivers flowing to the sea. The metaphor illuminates the importance of teaching which is goal-directed but not goal-driven, teaching which welcomes and assimilates diversity among students and among the many paths which lead to learning.

Martha Rapp-Haggard Ruddell discussed her research focusing on ambiguity in instruction and learning. Lack of clarity is frequently a factor in learning situations; instructional ambiguity may be categorized as intended or unintended. Skillful teachers intentionally introduce opportunities for students to make choices, and to take responsibility for aspects of their own learning. In the classrooms

of skillful teachers, students contribute to defining literacy, task content and task procedures. Student activities which have a component of intended ambiguity include open-ended writing, discussion, and group problem solving. Teaching methods which present elements of intended ambiguity include asking higher level comprehension questions such as those requiring analysis and synthesis, and engaging students in considering abstract ideas.

In the presence of ambiguity, students must make decisions. If decision making occurs in a supportive situation, where the teacher encourages students to accept a role in their own learning, and where different responses are valued, students' independence as learners is enhanced. If, however, the ambiguity is unintentional and students are engaged in guessing "what the teacher wants," and at risk if their understanding does not match a narrow range of options which the teacher has envisioned, both students' comfort in the learning situation, and their sense of themselves as learners, are diminished. In these cases students' thought and effort tend to focus not on learning, but on attempting to determine and fulfill the teacher's expectation. Moreover, students may carry this pattern of passivity into other learning situations.

Dr. Ruddell illustrated the concept of unintended ambiguity by describing her investigation of students' approaches to the "spelling story" assignment, in which a student's task is to write an original story using a set of assigned spelling words. In such an assignment the teacher's view of the task is also an ambiguous one, since a collection of unrelated words do not provide a useful basis for a story. Is the assignment truly to create an interesting, coherent tale? Or is it to complete a weekly, spelling-related task which is manageable for students in terms of its length, and

for teachers in terms of the ease with which it can be evaluated?

When interviewed, some students showed that they were able to disambiguate the assignment through their own planning. Although their strategies differed, all the students in this group had decided on ways to approach the task which enabled them to impose meaning on the process, as they completed the task successfully. These students planned metacognitively — they were conscious of the strategies they used, and their plans had a fail-safe component in that they were able to adopt a new strategy if their first was unsuccessful. A second group of students developed a single method for completing the task, and used it consistently without self-evaluation. A third group approached the task without planning. The requirement to complete an ambiguous writing task overrode their need to make sense in their writing.

The implications of research on classroom ambiguity are threefold. Teachers should be aware of various sources of ambiguity, develop literacy tasks intended to be ambiguous while avoiding sources of unintended ambiguity, and guide students as they work through ambiguous tasks, helping them to develop rich metacognitive plans as they make decisions and act upon them.

The presentation ended with a teaching strategy which both presenters recommend — reading aloud. Martha Ruddell chose a poem by Judith Viorst, appropriately titled "Before I Go."

The next annual convention of the International Reading Association will be held in Las Vegas, Nevada, on May 6-10, 1991. For further information about the convention, write to: International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, Delaware, 19714-8139.