Teaching As We Are Taught: A Model for Whole Language Inservice

Maureen C. Prenn
Mankato State University

Patricia A. Scanlan
University of Wisconsin

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic

Teaching As We Are Taught: A Model for Whole Language Inservice

Maureen C. Prenn
Patricia A. Scanlan

Teacher educators teach in a system of isolated and fragmented courses, passing on knowledge about teaching to passive students sitting in desks. They cannot expect either preservice or in-service teachers to teach on the basis of new models of learning and literacy when their college classrooms and many of the public schools in which they teach continue to operate from old models.

Short and Burke, 1989, p. 194.

We acknowledge the truth of this criticism. As teacher educators we are well aware that *how* we teach is not always compatible with *what* we teach. While this reality is often a concern to us in our work with preservice teachers, it struck us as especially important because we had been asked to teach an off-campus, whole language inservice course. Teaching whole language demanded that our methodology complement the course content. Because of this, we organized the class in concert with characteristics of a whole language environment: time, ownership, process, conferences, and resources (Butler and Turbill, 1984). Implementing these elements provided many challenges both for the students in the course and for us. The story that follows is our view of how these characteristics affected our students' experiences and our own.

Time

Butler and Turbill point out that children need time "to practice the processes of reading and writing" (1984, p. 22). A similar statement could be made that graduate students need time to be language users in an inservice class. As we considered how we might best model whole language, we found ourselves trying to provide regular, weekly opportunities for the teachers to read, write, talk, listen, and choose. During every class period time was provided for several key experiences: reading aloud, whole group instruction, small group sharing of self-selected texts and adult literature, reading/writing workshop, individual conferences, and a brief closure. The weekly sessions became predictable for students. They came to expect that the time for whole group instruction would be teacher-directed, that they would have time to work in small groups, and that they would also have time to choose their own individual literacy activities. As one student wrote in a final evaluation: "We came in knowing what was to be expected of us and left exhausted knowing we had really put in our time learning something. Our questions were answered — not just by teacher answers but by small group work or by individual research."

Our students were not the only ones who needed time. In order to become whole language teachers, we found it also necessary for us. Because we were commuting, we spent many hours in the car. We used our travel time to plan, share observations, and encourage one another. Teaching as a team meant we had joint responsibility for teaching and planning. It required us not only to be organized and clear about the lessons we prepared together, but also to take time to communicate with one another about where we were and where the class was going. Additionally, we needed individual time to respond to student writing and to plan portions of the class session that

each of us would lead. Because teaching this whole language class became important to us, we found time which we did not think we had.

Although we both saw ourselves as readers prior to this course, we did not always regularly read. This teaching and learning experience helped us to adjust our time so that today we have become practicing readers. Students reported a similar discovery. John reflected, "I have learned to *make* time for reading. I have gone back and reread books that greatly influenced me earlier in life. I've also started reading simply for pleasure."

Ownership

Control and responsibility for learning belong to the learner (Butler and Turbill, 1986). Graves (1982) refers to this as student ownership. In an attempt to build choice, responsibility, and ownership into this class, we developed the following requirements:

1. Students chose one of two texts to read and share, and they also chose one of four literature selections. The groups with whom they shared their readings were also chosen by the students. Determination of the weekly assignments, then, was the individual group's responsibility.

2. Students wrote a piece of self-sponsored writing on a topic of their choice. These pieces were published in books which became part of the class library.

3. Students wrote I-Search papers (Macrorie, 1984), again on topics of their own choosing. It was up to the students to decide not only what questions they would pursue, but also the resources they would use in the search for their answers.

The choice and responsibility that were extended to our students often generated a sense of pride and independence in them. In turn, they sometimes invited their own students to take ownership. In reflecting on her learning, Susan told us:

> My I-Search was good. I accomplished something useful, not just a paper to please someone else... I found my students to be thrilled at the freedom allowed in literature circles and eager to write and discuss their writing. Publishing brought tremendous satisfaction to the students and the pupil–to–pupil interaction was beyond my expectations.

The opportunity for teachers and their students to make personal learning choices not only allowed, but also required, ownership. One of the most risky aspects of this class for us was relinquishing the feeling of ownership that we had over student learning. Becoming whole language teachers required us to give up responsibilities. Some students expected that we would directly provide procedures for setting up a whole language classroom. We knew there was no such formula, and our resistance to providing such definitive answers was disappointing for them.

Teachers are the ones who most often make the instructional decisions. In many respects this class was no different. We made several key choices. *We* decided how to structure the class in a way that reflected a whole language philosophy. *We* determined what the specific requirements were in a way that allowed for student choice. And *we* intentionally forced students to take responsibility in a way which was sometimes exciting, and at other times uncomfortable. As we reflect on the decisions we made, we find ourselves satisfied with the productive learning environment that was created. On the other hand, we recognize that a different

set of teacher choices and responsibilities may be necessary the next time we teach this class.

Process

Process is central to teaching and learning. Both require reflection, time, and personal involvement; neither is ever really finished. Perhaps the most significant indicator of the process our students were experiencing was the recursiveness we observed. Not surprisingly, on the first and second nights of class, we fielded many comments that began, "Yeah, but..." By the fourth week we noticed a definite change. Our students entered the class happy, their talk was easy, they were feeling confident and knowledgeable. Progress continued until later in the quarter when students became more knowledgeable and encountered new questions. Once again we heard, "Yeah, but." This time, however, students addressed these questions to each other. They were learning to do without us. No gift from any student was greater than Donna's reflection: "I found that just as learning is a process, so is teaching. I used to think that because I had gone through schooling to be a teacher I should just 'know' how to do everything. After reading about other teachers' experiences a great pressure has been taken off my shoulders. I don't have all the answers, but I will continue to learn and grow with time and experience."

Another example of process was the class' experience with the topic of evaluation. Not surprisingly, this was an issue that students were anxious to address. When we first focused on the topic, students were frustrated and revealed a lack of prior information. There was confusion about what standardized tests were and the difference between formal and informal evaluation. In a second session, they showed an increase of knowledge, but also some lingering misunderstandings. For example, in a semantic map reflecting

concepts of whole language evaluation, some students identified journals as a formal assessment tool. Still, we were making progress. In order to understand something new, learners need time to manipulate concepts and to make "mistakes." It was only during the third, and final, class on evaluation that students became more tentative about the current evaluation practices in their own districts. They questioned the value of their elementary report card forms, and showed a new openness to alternatives that might better reflect a whole language philosophy.

We were also in the process of learning. We were learning what it meant to teach a whole language class, especially about our roles in this setting. In spite of the fact that we were the teachers, we did not assume the role of experts or dispensers of knowledge; we relied on our students for direction. As teachers and learners we listened, observed, read, and responded. Several students commented, "We want more of *your* ideas. We want to know what *you* think about it." In their journals they occasionally complained that we were not lecturing enough and that we were not answering their questions. One wrote: "What is the purpose of these journals anyway? Just to check to see if we're reading our assignments?" When students struggled and demanded, we struggled and wondered. Were we meeting their needs? Were they becoming more independent learners? Not every student valued the process-centered experience we sought to offer, and a handful of students never did accept this approach. Being process teachers required us to be reflective about our own roles, and to be patient with ourselves and with our students.

Conferences

Conferences are an integral part of whole language classrooms, allowing teachers to help individual students at

their own point of need (Butler and Turbill, 1984). Rita, for instance, began the class prepared to learn from traditional teachers. For the first weeks, she sat in a center, front seat with her pencil poised and a sober expression on her face. Rita's attention to details both in her journal and in the questions she posed before and after class suggested frustration at not receiving information about specific whole language practices. Several times she arranged to have conferences with us. These meetings provided her with the support she needed until she could modify her approach to learning. On one occasion, for instance, Rita wanted to know about the role of invented spelling in her kindergarten classroom. When should it be allowed? When should it be corrected? What should she tell parents? In these conferences, Rita learned what other teachers have done, and she learned about resources she could go to for further information. By the end of the class, Rita was enthusiastically planning to reread books to her students, to allow students to choose their own writing topics, and to integrate the teaching of skills with students' literacy activities. In her final reflections she outlined the following goals: "I plan to... read more about whole language and the reading-writing process...[and] to stay on top of national trends and continue growing professionally." For many students, as for Rita, conferences became a vehicle for bridging the gap between individual needs and group experiences.

Teaming allowed us to benefit from conferences just as our students did. We provided feedback and encouragement to each other, focusing on our point of need. For instance, we strongly believed in the importance of beginning each class with a read aloud. Despite our careful selection of literature and preparation, the class appeared to be in a stupor during the reading. It was tempting to abandon the idea, but in our conferences we helped one another

see glimmers of interest and attention. We continued to read aloud, and students gradually learned to relax and enjoy having someone read to them. This enjoyment was reflected in their faces, in their journal entries, and in their plans to do more reading in their own classrooms.

Resources

Because we believed that the use of multiple and varied resources is important in a whole language classroom, we provided students with both printed and visual materials. Besides the text and adult literature selections they read, students also had access to books and articles from our university library. These were available during workshops and were signed out regularly for use at home. In class, as a part of our whole group lessons, students viewed video tapes which provided examples of reading and writing conferences, Author's Chair, and the use of big books.

Another resource that was highly valued in this setting was people. Students held interviews, wrote letters, and made phone calls in order to tap the expertise of other educators. They also came to value their interactions with one another, which allowed them to find out what other students were learning about whole language from their teaching experiences. About the time we were in the midst of struggling with the topic of evaluation, we read DeeDee's self-sponsored writing. It was a powerful piece, and because it was about evaluation, we asked her if she would be willing to share it for closure with the rest of the class. She agreed. With some difficulty, DeeDee read to her colleagues about the death of a junior high student she had taught in another state a few years earlier. The girl received an "F" in DeeDee's English class and was therefore required to attend summer school. Because her family could not afford this expense, her father shot her and then killed himself.

The room was uncomfortably silent as the students made their way out that evening. DeeDee was one of us and evaluation was something we did all the time. Beverly wrote: "When DeeDee read her paper, I couldn't stop thinking about what an impact we have on kids and their families." DeeDee's willingness to share this difficult experience made her a significant resource not only for Beverly, but for others as well. Her experience continues to shape our thinking about evaluation.

We came to view our human resources as most valuable. Our students were our primary resources. It was from them that we got our ideas about what needed to be done next and how future experiences might best be crafted. We counted on them to share experiences and to encourage one another; we expected them to become a caring community. Likewise, we had one another. As team members our backgrounds were different, but complementary; one of us specialized in reading, the other in language arts. Nevertheless, we shared a philosophy about what it means to teach and learn. Working as a team meant we could get feedback on what was happening when each of us was at the front of the class; we could see with another pair of eyes the dynamics of our own teaching. We also relied on the help of our colleagues and friends in other universities who were teaching whole language classes. From them, we learned about new materials; we also received the encouragement and support that whole language teachers need.

Conclusion
As the call for whole language courses increases and as such classes appear in more and more teacher education programs, the challenge before us is to create environments which show, rather than tell.

The kind of learning environments created in teacher education exert a slow, but steady pressure on students' sense of themselves as learners and teachers. What students learn from how they are taught in the college classroom will remain with them long after they have forgotten the theories and ideas discussed in those classrooms (Short and Burke, 1989, p. 203).

Butler and Turbill's five elements of whole language classrooms provided a framework for us to develop such an environment. Time, ownership, process, conferences, and resources were all critical components of this whole language inservice. These elements encouraged us and our students to shift roles, they nudged us to rethink our approaches to learning and teaching, and they urged us to re-examine our practices as readers and writers. These characteristics are certainly not the only way that we can model what we teach. But for us, they provided an exciting and effective means of reaching for this goal.

References
Butler, A., & Turbill, J. (1984). *Towards a reading-writing classroom.* Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
Graves, D. (1982). *Writing: Teachers and children at work.* Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
Macrorie, K. (1984). *Searching writing.* Montclair NJ: Boynton-Cook.
Short, K., & Burke, C. (1989). New potentials for teaching education: Teaching and learning as inquiry. *The Elementary School Journal, 90,* 193-206.

Maureen Prenn is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Mankato State University, in Mankato Minnesota. Patricia A. Scanlan is a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin, in LaCrosse Wisconsin.