

Preservice Teachers Study Themselves as Readers: One Component in the Education of Reading Teachers

By Ken Winograd with Sherry Rosen

My problem was a routine one for teachers. Not enough time and a very large knowledge base. In this case, the problem had to do with the teaching of a reading methods class. I was assigned to teach this class to students in a Masters of Arts in Teaching Program. This course was the students' only reading methods class, taught in the summer before a full-year practicum, and I had twenty contact hours with them. I wanted students to develop understandings of their own literacy as well as, of course, to begin their study of the theory and methods of literacy education.

How could I best structure time for these goals?

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I propose that our ideas about the general conditions of teachers' learning should guide the organization of preservice teacher education. Accordingly, in the initial planning of this course, I reflected upon my own theory of how teachers learn to become reading teachers. In the process of teachers' development, what types of experiences do they have that influence this development? The answer to this question helped me organize the class.

How Reading Teachers Learn: A Personal Theory

My notions about learning draw upon Dewey (1910) regarding the role of reflection in the learning process. The Deweyian maxim, we learn by doing and thinking about it, is powerful in its simplicity and, at some level, is a component in most classrooms. For example, it is a ritual of class trips that, afterwards, the students return to the classroom and reflect upon the trip in some manner: by writing, drawing, talking, modeling or dramatization. The quality of one's reflections upon "raw" experience, how one thinks about experience, is fundamental to learning.

There are several kinds of reflection that are particularly educational for reading teachers. First, I believe that teachers develop as reading teachers when they interact with the written literatures in literacy education (e.g., *The Reading Teacher*, *Language Arts*). Second, teachers grow as reading teachers by talking to other teachers about their work, collaborating with these colleagues, raising their own questions and then pursuing answers to these questions (Short, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, Klassen & Sherman, 1992). Third, teachers learn by observing children as they read and by talking to children about reading and books (Goodman, 1978). Finally, reading teachers learn as they reflect on their own behaviors and beliefs about reading, and they use this knowledge to suggest directions for reading instruction. The remainder of this paper explores this last idea: teachers' study of themselves as readers.

Rationale of a Self-Study Task for Teachers of Reading

Teachers ought to study themselves as practitioners in the curricular domains simply because personal familiarity with these subjects as "insiders" makes them better teachers (Power & Hubbard, 1990; Graves, 1990). Teachers are at a great disadvantage when, for example, they teach writing but they do not write themselves nor do they understand themselves as writers. Understanding of one's own literacy, across the disciplines, is one important type of information for teachers as they plan and implement curricula. Considering the fact that so many teachers do not act on this common sense notion, it is no wonder that Graves (1990) wrote a book encouraging teachers to read and write with their students, and to talk to students about the experience of doing so. A central component of whole language theory posits the teacher as the more knowledgeable language user who routinely provides demonstrations for students on how more mature readers and writers think, solve problems, etc. (Susi, 1984).

Dewey (1964) suggested that the first topic for learning of preservice teachers should be students' own experience as learners, and that the limited formal background of beginning teachers can be adequately supplemented by their **own**

experience. The content for the reflection of beginning teachers can easily be their own learning experiences in and out of school:

Beginning students have, without any reference to immediate teaching, a very large capital of an exceedingly practical sort of their own experience...plenty of practical material by which to illustrate and vitalize theoretical principles and laws of mental growth in the process of learning. (Dewey, 1964, p. 322-323)

Before exposing preservice teachers to the theories of others, it makes sense to lead these students to develop and formalize more personal theories of learning, theories that are based on their emerging understandings of how they themselves learn and behave, and in this case, read.

The Assignment: Self-Study as Reader

My students studied their reading behaviors as they read two types of books: a textbook, Constance Weaver's (1988) *Reading Process and Practice*; and fiction, Tracy Kidder's (1989) *Among Schoolchildren*. Students made notations in reading process journals whenever they were aware of any interruption in their reading. Students were to record at least 50 behaviors with each of the books. After taking notes on at least 100 behaviors, students then organized this data through the use of an analytic induction procedure (see Appendix; also, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, students developed instructional implications, based on patterns in their reading behavior.

What follows are excerpts of the case study report of one student, Sherry Rosen, who is also the second author of this article. Sherry is in her early forties and entered this program after ten years as a homemaker. Her study is representative of studies completed by her peers.

Excerpts from Sherry's Self-Study

Introduction

As a beginning teacher, it is important to look at my own reading behavior and understand the way I approach reading problems and experiences. I kept a reading process journal during the reading of Kidder's *Among Schoolchildren* and Weaver's *Reading Process and Practice*. I recorded 120 reading behaviors. I categorized these behaviors and then interpreted them according to what I know about the reading process. Finally, at the end of the paper, I speculate how my findings might help me as a reading teacher.

Findings: Categories of Reading Behaviors

A. Comprehension problems:

1. Comprehension breakdowns at the word level: used semantic and syntactic information, plus some knowledge of Latin and Spanish to approximate meaning (seven examples, all Kidder).
2. Comprehension problems at the sentence or paragraph level:
 - a. reread sections for further clarification (two from Weaver, one from Kidder).
 - b. paused to think about something that didn't make sense to me (two from Weaver).

Example: page 156 in Weaver, I paused to understand why the skills and subskills approaches to teaching reading are so easy to use.

B. Mind wanderings, unrelated to text (12 from Kidder, one from Weaver).

C. Mind wanderings, related to text:

I paused and reflected on text; thought about related ideas and experiences, formulated opinions and questions, confirmed impressions, questioned previous ideas or authors' opinions, anticipated future material, consciously acknowledged that I was learning a lot by recalling my own previous experiences and relating them to the text, checked to see whether they confirmed or contradicted the authors' ideas (20 examples from Kidder, 24 from Weaver).

Example: page 164, Weaver, thought about language arts curriculum development in Canada and Australia. Wondered what's happening in lang arts curricula in other parts of the world, such as Africa, Asia and South America.

D. Outside distractions:

My attention was drawn to the outside noise and activity as children walked by me in library (one from Weaver).

E. Purposeful skimming or skipping ahead:

1. I found that I was not interested in certain parts of the text, so I skipped ahead to something that was more relevant (six from Kidder).

Example: page 67, Kidder, skip over lengthy description of neighborhood.

2. I found that certain material was either redundant or I was already very familiar with it, so I skimmed or skipped ahead to a part which was newer (ten from Weaver).

Example: page 143, Weaver, I skipped over repeated descriptions of word identification versus contextual approaches to reading.

3. I skimmed to look for answers to questions or for specific informa-

tion (four examples, all from Weaver).

4. I skimmed whole sections, skipping back and forth, in order to get a sense of the section (four examples, all Weaver).

Discussion

I experienced comprehension problems when reading both Kidder and Weaver. All problems with individual words occurred in my reading of Kidder. With Weaver, all comprehension problems occurred at the larger level of sentences and paragraphs. The reason for this may have been that Kidder did introduce some relatively unusual new words without explanation or sufficient context. At the same time the concepts in the book (Kidder) were real life situations and very easy to understand. Weaver presented some new concepts which sometimes required rereading or pondering to understand; yet, when she presented new vocabulary, she was very careful to provide explanations and definitions.

My mind wandered in directions unrelated to the text many more times in Kidder than in Weaver. I anticipated that the opposite would have occurred, that my mind would have wandered more during the reading of expository text, which is often less emotionally engaging than fiction. Because of my professional interest, I was concentrating more during Weaver in order to be sure I was understanding all the details. In contrast, I read quickly through much of Kidder, not caring if I picked up all the details, reading instead for the gist of the story.

In the category, "Mind wandering, related to the text," my examples were evenly divided between Kidder and Weaver. Both books engaged me personally, though for different reasons. Weaver's book speaks to my emerging professionalism and challenges me to question my previous ideas. Because I had already quite a bit of experience with whole language, I was actively engaged with the text the entire time. Kidder's book brought up memories of childhood as well experiences in classroom situations as an adult.

In the category, "Purposeful skimming or skipping ahead," the differences between Kidder and Weaver were apparent. In Kidder, there were many sections which didn't interest me, and I skimmed them. In Weaver I had a specific purpose in mind for reading. I wanted to understand the process of teaching reading from a whole language perspective. With that goal in mind, I skimmed to get an overview of each chapter, to look for specific information, or because I already knew the information.

Instructional Implications

1. Rereading is an important strategy for increasing comprehension,

both at the word level and at the larger levels of sentence, paragraph or page. This is an important strategy that should be taught to all students.

2. Using all available cuing systems is a helpful strategy in figuring out unknown words. Students should be taught to use all three cuing systems, semantic, syntactic, and grapho-phonetic, in a coordinated way.

3. Time for reflection, thoughts, and ideas related to the text can foster deeper comprehension, appreciation, and interaction with the text. It is also important to stop and reflect on the material to see whether or not it is being understood. Therefore, the following strategies should be taught: (a) reflecting if the material is being understood; (b) thinking about related ideas and/or experiences; (c) formulating one's own opinions and questions; (d) questioning previously held ideas and/or author's opinions; (e) confirming or changing previously held beliefs; and (f) anticipating what may be coming next in the text.

4. Pre-reading strategies can increase interest, motivation, comprehension, appreciation, and interaction with the text. The following strategies should be taught: (a) thinking about one's purpose in reading a particular selection; (b) thinking about what one already knows about the topic; (c) asking questions about what one wants to find out by reading something; (d) thinking about the title, the cover, chapter titles, pictures, and graphs; and (e) skimming topic sentences and reading summaries.

5. The external environment affects the ability to sustain concentration during reading. As much as possible, the classroom environment should be structured with a reading area with as few distractions as possible.

6. Regardless how the classroom environment is structured, a natural part of reading is that people need breaks for various reasons. Teachers should be sensitive to this need.

7. It seems obvious that reading books that are related to personal interests increases enjoyment, comprehension, and interaction with text. Teachers need to keep this in mind and remember the importance of letting students choose their own books to read.

Evaluation

Although I found the reading process note-taking to be tedious and bothersome, I did learn a great deal from it. As a result I do feel much more aware of my own reading behaviors, and much more knowledgeable about the reading process in general. I feel that the active participation and the process of writing facilitated my own practical understanding and integration of the theoretical information in this class.

Final Thoughts on Sherry's Study

Sherry's instructional implications make sense to me, and they reflect some important ideas and methods in the literacy education literature. I think that some of Sherry's instructional implications derive more from her learning from Weaver (1988) and class discussions than directly from the case study. Still, Sherry's insights gained from self-study supported her understanding of Weaver which led, I believe, to a set of instructional implications that are theoretically coherent and sensible. Sherry's study is a good start to a process that ought to continue throughout her career as a teacher. All students in the class agreed that the project was worthwhile, for reasons similar to the ones articulated by Sherry.

Beginning preservice teachers in our program bring at least 22 years of learning experiences to their study of educational theory and method. However, before exposing them to formal theory, the first subject of beginning teachers' study ought to be themselves. The early period of teacher education should be a time for preservice teachers to make sense of their experience as learners and, perhaps more significantly, their own experience as students. This suggestion is nothing more than what developmental education suggests for the young learner (i.e., learning moves in direction from the informal to the formal, from the personal to the impersonal). Our students would understand the formal literature better, much better, if they first had an emerging awareness of themselves as learners across domains and settings. Later on, a well-defined **personal** theory of the reading process, based in part on how (they as) readers engage in authentic reading, can lead teachers to more intelligent decisions about what in the reading literature makes sense and does not make sense. Reading teachers who think about their own experience as readers simply have one more type of knowledge when making instructional decisions.

Self-inquiry by teachers into their own learning process belongs in the teacher education curriculum. My colleagues in teacher education assure me that the idea of systematic self-inquiry is sensible. I am afraid, however, this is another situation of common sense **not** leading to common practice.

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Appendix

Data Analysis

This is an example of an analytic inductive procedure I used to organize and categorize my journal entries. It is based on a procedure described by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

1. I made photocopies of my process notes and then used scissors to cut and separate each note that could stand alone as a reading behavior.

2. I read each process note and placed them in piles according to their similarity, or "look alike" quality. For example, I placed the note, "epaulets: unknown word: used context and hypothesized it was ornamental object on jacket...move on", in the same pile as "Diablo: italics...exclamation mark: hypothesis-Oh my God."

3. Notes that did not share attributes with any other notes were placed in a miscellaneous category for later review.

4. Based on common characteristics of notes in the provisional categories, I developed rules or definitions for each category. I then named each category. My original list of reading behavior categories follows: skip or skim; comprehension breakdown at word level; comp break at text level; mind wanders; predict; recognize text feature and use to assist reading; note important information; miscellaneous. Although my final list of categories did not change from my original formulation, categories can change as you realize that some categories really should be combined or sub-divided.

5. I then read all the notes again and asked, Does each note belong in its assigned category, based on the rule, or definition, for that category? I tried to make sure that all items in each category were similar, and that differences among categories were clear and unmistakable. I moved some notes from one category to others. For example, within the category, comprehension breakdown at the text level, I removed the note, "reread paragraph...worthy of emphasis: take notes", and placed it in the category, note important information.

6. Once I was comfortable with my list of categories of reading behavior, I proceeded to interpret and discuss these behaviors. Interpretation consisted of my conjectures of why I behaved as I did.