

Don Holdaway

Shared Book Experience: Teaching Reading Using Favorite Books

Most children would agree that listening to stories is a most enjoyable activity, especially during the early years of schooling. Most teachers do read to their children and they, too, enjoy the experience. By contrast, the *instructional* reading program, however, does not seem to be characterized by anything like the same level of enjoyment for either children or teacher—it is often a time of boredom or stress and the ritualistic performance of unmotivating activities. Story time and reading time have different purposes, different content, and different rewards. They are so different that one must ask, "which best embodies literacy?"

As teachers, we tend to take the differences between these two situations for granted: story time is for pleasure and nothing — least of all word-solving — should be allowed to break the spell; reading time is for learning to read and is a necessarily difficult and painful activity for many children, requiring hard work and application — no spellbinding here. For the work of learning to read we attempt to motivate the children artificially and reward them extrinsically, neglecting the deep satisfactions which spring naturally from a proper engagement with books of high quality. We accept the structured materials provided for instruction without questioning their lack of intrinsic interest or worth.

Most surprisingly for an intellectually oriented institution like the school, we assume that problem

Don Holdaway is visiting professor of English and modern languages at The University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, and educational consultant for Scholastic International Educational Publishers.

solving—represented in reading by such "skills" as word-attack and in written language by such skills as spelling and calligraphy — cannot possibly be a rich source of pleasure. In contrast, we know by simple observation that the stumbling approximations of infants as they attempt to solve the problems of walking or talking *do*, in fact, provide them with immense pleasure, but we are so myopic in our observation of reading behavior that we fail to register the intense joy which may be experienced by children in solving the most basic problems of literacy. Before long the reading program has so completely excluded such forms of joy that they are no longer there to observe. To turn a topical Australian phrase, literacy, inasmuch as it has anything to do with life, wasn't meant to be easy.

Children who are already reading and writing when they enter school at 5, or who are so ready to learn that they take literacy in their stride, have had a rather different introduction to the real processes of literacy. Some of their deepest satisfactions for several years have centered around their fumbling but excited attempts to read, write, and spell. Almost invariably they are familiar with a wide range of favorite books which, to use one of Bill Martin's delightful phrases, they can "zoom through with joyous familiarity" (1972).

These are the books they loved so much that they pestered people to read to them again and again. These are the books which they played at reading to themselves, puzzled and pored over with aggressive curiosity about the devices of print. In this naturally joyful activity they learned rapidly about

the mysterious relationships between fascinating language and pages of print. Their learning from these loved books was self-selected, intrinsically rewarded, and highly individualized.

Although story time in primary classes tends to be as enjoyable as it is in the book-loving home, it is not so effective in producing this "favorite book syndrome," and this is so for a number of reasons. There is not the same opportunity for personal selection. The teacher is not so free to respond to clamoring requests to "read-it-again." There is seldom the opportunity for all the children to handle the books independently as they become favorites. Because of visual and tactile distance from the text, there is not the same tendency for children to become curious about print at the crucial moments when they are reveling in the sounds of the language, nor is there the opportunity for them to point with their little fingers to details in the text and ask pointed questions. However, despite these losses in providing some of the crucial conditions to turn enjoyed books into favorite books, story time is still a powerhouse of natural motivation. Sadly, its output is largely wasted as a reinforcement for healthy reading behavior.

The Advent of Shared Book Experience Procedures

About 15 years ago a group of teachers and academics in Auckland, New Zealand, began to take this natural literacy-learning situation very seriously. They were stimulated by a new challenge presented by a rapidly growing migrant movement of Polynesian people from the Pacific islands and Maori people from rural districts into inner city schools. They were supported by a particularly lively climate of research and educational enthusiasm which was articulated throughout the system from department officers to practicing teachers, from university personnel to student teachers. They began cooperating and experimenting in new ways while maintaining healthy patterns of both criticism and support. The teaching procedures which began to develop and to be clarified in the ensuing years came to be known as "shared book experience." These procedures were integrated with already well-developed techniques in language experience approaches forming a complementary body of insights and techniques rather than a new methodology.

We were concerned to transform the educational context of the school in such a way as to achieve two goals.

- a. To make available the most efficient learning environment possible in which to achieve literacy readiness for 5 year olds who did not come from literacy oriented backgrounds, and without segregating them from those who did.
- b. To make entry into literacy a more natural and successful process in which children of widely differing backgrounds could make optimum progress without developing a sense of failure in the first years of schooling.

The prevailing model for literacy-learning was failing to provide a satisfactory structure for a large proportion of children, especially those from cultural backgrounds widely different from the culture of the school. We wished to avoid those aspects of traditional approaches which highlighted invidious comparisons among children, such as lockstep movement through a series of readers. We were looking for procedures to develop competence in written English, without forcing children to regard their own spoken dialects as wrong or inferior. We were, as well, looking for procedures which teachers could readily use and understand.

Our studies indicated that under suitable motivation and in a favorable learning environment children would master literacy skills in a way very similar to that in which they master other developmental tasks, especially those of spoken language. The adults involved in providing the conditions for such natural learning do so without expert, academic knowledge, with justifiable optimism and with evident personal reward. It might, after all, be possible to approach these ambitious goals we set for ourselves.

A Development Expedition

The magnificently successful processes of learning spoken language in infancy provided the central model for the project and in an important sense provided justification for many thinly researched conclusions. What follows should be understood as implying that the spoken language learning model has been taken very seriously, and we know of no evidence that it is improperly applied to literacy learning.

One of the features of early research and development in this project was a determined attempt to study and understand the learning background which produces children who become high-progress readers in their first year at school. As with the spoken language model, this study leads us into a

fascinating field of natural, developmental, pre-school learning. It is remarkable how little was really known 10 years ago about the conditions which produced our literacy-oriented children. Everyone agreed that it was a "good thing" to read to young children, and joked tolerantly about their tiresome demands to hear their favorite stories read again and again, but that's about as far as it went. Everyone talked about pre-reading skills and programs without reference to the learning situations which actually produced the most literacy-ready children at school entry. A more systematic study of pre-school literacy activities soon highlighted some surprising features.

First, book-handling activities began at a very early stage, expanding the child's exposure to special forms of language and special types of language process long before the tasks of spoken language were mastered. These children began experimenting with book language in its primary, oral form while they were still using baby grammar and struggling with the phonology of speech. Yet it seemed an ideal time for this exposure and experiment. The sooner book-oriented activities began, the more likely it was that book-handling and experimental writing would become an important part of the daily preoccupations of the infant. Literacy orientation does not wait upon accomplished spoken language.

Second, the literature made available by ordinary, sensible parents to their children, even before the age of 2 years, was remarkably rich in comparison to "readers" used in the first year of school. They often included highly structured or patterned language of a repetitive, cumulative, or cyclic kind. Although the adults always seemed willing to attempt to explain new vocabulary, meanings, and idioms, the stories usually carried growing understanding from their central human concerns, and the adults were seldom worried about making certain their children understood every last word, or that they had had direct sensory experience of every new concept. Just as speech develops in an environment which is immensely more rich than the immediate needs of the learner, so the orientation to book language develops in an environment of rich exposure beyond the immediate needs of the learner. In both situations, the learner selects appropriate items from the range.

Third, by determining *which* books they will have repeated experience of, children are involved in selection of those book experiences which will deeply preoccupy them from the earliest stages. The request to "read it again" arises as a natural

developmental demand of high significance and an integral part of book exposure. Furthermore, in the behavior described in ensuing paragraphs, children quickly avail themselves of the opportunity to practice and experiment with a selection from the material made available to them. As in the mastery of other developmental tasks, self-selection rather than adult direction characterizes the specific and intensive preoccupations of early literacy orientation.

Role Playing as Reader—A Neglected Feature of Literacy Learning

By far the most interesting and surprising aspect of pre-school book experience is the independent activity of these very young children with their favorite books. Almost as soon as the child begins to be familiarized with particular books by repetitive experience, self-motivated, reading-like behavior begins. Attracted by the familiar object, the child picks it up, opens it, and begins attempting to retrieve for himself some of the language and its intonations. Quite early this reading-like play becomes story-complete, page-matched, and picture-stimulated. The story tends to be reexperienced as complete semantic units transcending sentence limits.

The time spent each day in these spontaneous attempts to retrieve the pleasurable experiences of favorite books is often greatly in excess of the time spent in listening to books being read by the adult(s) being emulated. The child attends for surprisingly long periods of time until the experience has achieved a semantic completeness, and the process may be repeated immediately with the same or another book.

A superficial assumption about this reading-like behavior would be that it was a form of rote learning based on repetitive patterning without deep comprehension or emotional response; that it would produce attempts at mere surface verbal recall. However, detailed study of this behavior through the analysis of tape recordings did not bear this out. On the contrary, what was displayed was a deep understanding of and response to central story meanings. The younger the child, and the less verbally competent, the greater was likely to be the distance from the surface verbal features of the text. The responses often involved what could only be called translation into forms of the language more typical of the child's current stage of linguistic development.

Here are two brief examples of this behavior at different levels of development:

Damion, age 2.0 years, retrieving *Are You My Mother* by P. D. Eastman:

Text	Responses
4 The egg jumped. "Oh, oh!" said the mother bird. "My baby will be here! He will want to eat."	Ow ow! A mummy bird baby here. Someping a eat ("a" used throughout to replace "to" and "for").
6 "I must get something for my baby to eat!" she said. "I will be back." So away she went.	Must baby bird a (i.e. "to") eated Dat way went. Fly a gye.
8 The egg jumped. It jumped and jumped! Out came the baby bird.	Ig jumped and jumped! Out baby bird!
10 "Where is my mother?" he said. He looked for her.	Whis my mudder? She look a her and look her.
12 He looked up. He did not see her. He looked down. He did not see her.	Her look up, look down. See her. (Damion cannot yet form a negative so he uses the affirmative in all such cases, adding a special intonation and a <i>shake of the head!</i>)

Far from producing the text in parrot-like fashion, Damion is guided by deep meanings to perform brilliant translations of meaning into baby grammar, displaying what have come to be known as "pivot structures."

Lisa-Jane, 4.0 years, from the same book:

34 The kitten and the hen were not his mother. The dog and the cow were not his mother. Did he have a mother?	So the pussy wasn't his mother. The hen wasn't his mother. The dog wasn't his mother. The cow wasn't his mother. And the baby bird said, "Did I have a mother?" and he DID!
36 "I did have a mother," said the baby bird. "I know I did. I have to find her. I will. I WILL!"	What a sad face. That one says: Did he have a mother? Did he have a mother? HE DID!

Note how on page 34 reported speech is trans-

posed into direct speech and the converse is carried out on page 36. Note also that the side comment, "That one says," is an indication that Lisa-Jane knows the story comes from the print. She also has perfect control of the registers of both conversation and book language, and can change readily from one to the other.

The remarkable thing about the developmental difference between the 2 and the 4 year old is not that it is different in kind, but that it is different in the degree of syntactic sophistication—an expression of the level of syntactic control available in deep processing. Both children start from whole-story understanding and retrieve in sentence units encoded into an appropriate syntax at the level of their spoken language development. Neither has memorized the vocabulary or the grammar word for word—they have memorized the meaning.

Approximation is a ruling principle, just as it is in learning spoken language. It should not come as a surprise—but to many it does—that these two learning situations in developmental behavior display classical reinforcement theory more clearly than any but highly contrived situations in school. Here is perfect exemplification of immediate reinforcement for every approximation in the right direction which learning theory recommends to us so strongly. Far from it being the case that developmental or "play" learning is something inferior to organized learning which sets up rigorous and efficient contingencies, developmental learning, in its almost flawless control of learning contingencies, puts the classroom to shame. We should not be saying that developmental learning is a hit-and-miss affair, lacking the efficient guidance and control provided in the school environment. It is so efficient and delicately controlled that we should, as teachers, be approximating towards that right learning structure. Yet we allow almost no place for approximation in learning to read, write, or spell.

Another noteworthy feature of this reading-like behavior is that it lacks an audience and is therefore self-regulated, self-corrected, and self-sustained. The child engages in this behavior without being directed to do so, at just those times when the loved adult is *not* available to do the reading. The child is not self-conscious or over-awed by the need to please an adult, nor is the child dependent on the adult for help or correction. Clay (1972) has shown how important the self-corrective strategy is to success in the early stages of reading.

To summarize, the bedtime story situation should not be separated from the independent out-

put behavior which it generates. Such behavior normally engages the infant in extensive, self-monitored, linguistic behavior for longer periods of time than are spent in the input activity of listening. The input and the output activities are complementary aspects of the same language-learning cycle. In both aspects there is close visual and tactile contact with the book, becoming increasingly oriented to print detail. All of the most powerful strategies of mature reading are being established and practiced in the reading-like, output behavior. The complexity and sophistication of the processes being mastered make the normal corpus of pre-reading skills look quite ridiculous.

There is obviously a great deal of positive reinforcement provided by both the input and output activities. In the first is the pleasure and delight of listening to the familiar human voice, full of warm intonation and bringing meaning to the special language where it differs from conversational language. The situation is socially rewarding, giving pleasure to both the adult and the child. It is a secure situation associated with proximity to or bodily contact with the adult.

The output activity is equally rewarding. Success in recreating the story is rewarded in a continuous, cyclic fashion similar to the rewards of experimenting with speech, and therefore tends to be self-sustaining. It is a situation which recalls the secure, pleasurable presence of the loved adult, and provides recall of the explanatory comments and answers to questions in the input sessions. The experience builds confidence in the ability to control language without outside help and, by the absence of criticism or correction, encourages self-regulation of complex language tasks.

In this situation, we have a further model for literacy-learning consistent in every way with the model derived from learning spoken language. Furthermore, it is the actual model demonstrated in the learning of those children who become our high progress readers or who teach themselves to read before entering school. In the model, the adult does not give instructions which the learner then attempts to carry out: rather, the adult provides real experience of the skill in joyful use. The skill then becomes a central feature of the learner's natural play and natural striving.

The early stages in the development of any complex human skill is activity which is *like* that skill and approximates progressively toward an activity which incorporates real processes and operations in mature use of the skill. Appropriate

processes and strategies provide the foundation for successful practice and refinement — practice and refinement do *not* lead to the mature processes and strategies.

For literacy these strategies include:

- A deep, meaning-centered drive.
- Predictive alertness which harnesses background abilities such as syntactic responsiveness, semantic purposefulness, and experiential meaningfulness.
- Confirmatory and corrective self-monitoring by which output is constantly compared with sound models in prior experiences.
- Self-regulating and self-corrective operations leading to reinforcement patterns which are largely intrinsic and maintain high levels of task attention without extrinsic intervention.
- Risk-taking by approximation and trial backed by these sound strategies of self-monitoring. (More detailed examples and implications are given in Holdaway, 1979.)

Application to Classroom Teaching

This model of natural, developmental learning in language could provide a powerful framework for a literacy program if the application to classroom conditions could be worked through. Such a program would be meaning-centered and process-centered rather than word-centered. It would be based on books from a wide literature which had become favorites for the children through enjoyable aural-oral experience. It would promote readiness in powerful ways associated with books and print, and would allow for a gradual transition from reading-like behavior to reading behavior. Approximation would be rewarded, thus supporting the early development of predictive and self-corrective strategies governed by meaning, which are crucial to healthy language use.

All of these factors seemed to be pointing in quite different directions from current methods, although they shared many features with language-experience approaches. We decided to take the model seriously and, at least for the purposes of exploration, see if it were possible to build a literacy program in which these principles were given genuine priority.

A growing body of psycholinguistic and developmental research seemed to be pointing in similar directions but a classroom methodology had not been worked out (e.g. Goodman, 1968). Early work

in individualized reading, led by Jeanette Veatch (1959), had broken much of the ground and provided valuable practical pointers, but teachers had been wary of this movement. In our own country, the work of Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) among rural Maori children had provided a useful debate and a persuasively documented account of classroom procedures consistent with many of the principles we were seeking to embody. In the United States, Bill Martin had begun to publish the materials which led to the Holt Rinehart *Sounds of Language* series, and we were certainly on the same wavelength. We gained much from a study of all of these movements.

What was missing from this rich body of knowledge about developmental teaching was some set of procedures whereby all the important aspects of the bedtime story cycle could be replicated in the classroom. How was it possible to provide the same impact, the same level of participation, the same security and joy, the same prominence of print when there were 30 children rather than one? As so often happens, however, once the priorities had been set up, practical applications fell into place quite simply.

Three requirements needed to be met in order to achieve comparable or stronger impact than is achieved in the ideal pre-school, home setting. First, the books to be used in the reading program needed to be those that had proved themselves as loved by children. In this respect we, as teachers, had many advantages over parents both in determining which books children enjoy most and in obtaining them. We soon had some 200 titles, largely from the open literature rather than from reading schemes, known to be loved by 5 to 7 year olds.

Second, the books needed to have comparable visual impact from 20 feet as a normal book would have on the knee of a child. This requirement was met by using enlarged texts. We made "blown-up" books about 30 inches by 24 inches—mainly from heavy brown paper. Every child in a class group could see the print very clearly without needing to strain and press forward. Other devices such as charts, overhead transparencies, and projected slides were also used. Here again we found advantages over the home situation in that pointing and identifying details in an enlarged text suited the undeveloped muscular coordination of beginners.

Third, the teacher needed to present new material with wholehearted enjoyment, rather more as a performance than would be the case with most

parents. The professional training of teachers normally ensures that this is a task they can carry out with skill and conviction.

Achieving the same level of participation as may occur in the one-to-one setting proved more difficult because only one question or comment could be fielded at a time. However, there were social compensations which far outweighed this limitation. Provided the children could engage in unison responses where it was natural and appropriate, we found that all the ancient satisfactions of chant and song were made available to sustain the feeling of involvement. Indeed, by using favorite poems, jingles, chants, and songs as basic reading material—that is, in the enlarged print format—another naturally satisfying part of normal school experience could be turned directly to literacy learning.

Security and joy developed naturally for both children and teacher. Favorite books soon carried with them all the secure associations of an old friend; children began going to books to *achieve* security. Because of the high impact of the books, and the teacher's pleasure-sharing role, joy was a common experience for all the children.

As for the teachers themselves, because they were doing something at the center of their competence rather than attempting to follow a half-understood methodology, they, too, experienced security and joy. They were able to develop their skill in using the natural opportunities for teaching gradually from a confident base—if attention were lost or a teaching point fell flat, they simply stepped back into the story, got it moving again, and recaptured the interest of the children.

Furthermore, they were able to engage in the input, reading activity with the whole class or a large group without a sense of guilt. (Try reading a captivating story to one group while the others carry out group tasks within earshot!) The problem of matching children to appropriate materials, or of keeping a group going at the same pace so as not to end up with nine or ten groups, almost disappeared. It was now the responsibility of each learner to select the materials he or she would "work on." Even though the teachers were using a new methodology with unusual priorities, their sense of relief from the pressures of structured programs and their enjoyment of the language period grew rapidly.

Once the decision had been made to put other priorities aside in an attempt to establish this model as the central framework of the reading program, the practical application proved a remarkably simple

matter. The task now was to refine the procedures in the light of professional knowledge from many sources in order to get optimal educational returns from the simple learning structure which had been set up.

A typical teaching-learning sequence of shared book experience in many classrooms developed along the following lines:

Opening warm-up	Favorite poems, jingles, songs, with enlarged text. Teaching of new poem or song.
Old favorite	Enjoyment of a favorite story in enlarged format. Teaching of skills in context. Deepening understanding. Unison participation. Role playing, dramatization.
Language games, especially alphabet	Alphabet games, rhymes, and songs, using letter names. Fun with words and sounds, meaningful situations. (Not isolated phonic drills.)
New story	Highlight of session. Long story may be broken naturally into two or more parts. Inducing word-solving strategies in context, participation in prediction and confirmation of new vocabulary.
Output activities	Independent reading from wide selection of favorites. Related arts activities stemming from new story. Creative writing often using structures from new story. Playing teacher—several children enjoy favorite together—one acting as teacher.

Development of shared book experience techniques went on for several years in key schools. Because the procedures tended to be communicated through demonstration and discussion, documentation was regrettably limited during this time. As a result of local and national in-service courses, and observation by hundreds of teachers and students in these key schools, the ideas spread rapidly. They tended to be used to supplement current procedures, and many mixed styles of teaching arose.

In 1973, convinced that the ideas deserved careful trial, the Department of Education nominated a large experimental school in a new housing area for the trial of these and other approaches. It was important to determine that shared book experience

procedures could lead to effective literacy without the support of other programs or materials, and so one class of 35 beginners was taught for two years by these procedures alone. No graded or structured materials were used and all word-solving skills were taught in context during real reading. This experimental group proved equal or superior to other experimental and control groups on a variety of measures including Marie Clay's *Diagnostic Survey* (1980). Of greatest significance was the highly positive attitudes toward reading displayed by the slow-developing children after two years in the natural, shared book experience environment.

Following this study, the Department of Education embarked on an ambitious, national in-service program for primary teachers which was known as the "Early Reading In-service Course," and a complementary program for parents in both radio and print media (Horton, 1978). The radical movement of early schooling toward developmental models has been accomplished on a national scale, albeit the scale of a small nation.

Much has been done internationally since then, and more remains to be done. From our own symposium Yetta Goodman (1980), Margaret Meek (1982), and Dorothy Butler (1979 and 1980) have contributed to that growing movement in literacy toward plain, human, good sense. The pioneering figures, Goodman (e.g. 1968, 1979), Frank Smith (e.g., 1978), and Marie Clay (e.g., 1980), have continued to inform the movement. Recent work in writing, such as is brought together in Temple et al. (1982), extends insights over the full corpus of literacy. Practical professionals, such as Robert and Marlene McCracken (1979), Bill Martin Jr. and Peggy Brogan (1972), Mark Aulls (1982), Anne Pulvertaft (1978), and F. L. Barrett (1982) in their diverse ways support teachers in the daily enterprise of application. Researchers too numerous to list, among them David Doake, Judith Newman, Elizabeth Sulzby, and Robert Teale, push back the frontiers.

Space does not permit a discussion of the written language and related arts aspects of shared book experience programs. When children are motivated to express themselves under the influence of a rich and highly familiar literature, and when such facilitating conditions for expression are provided, the outcomes are extremely satisfying. The whole set of ideas, sometimes referred to now as "holistic," is complex, rich, and compelling. Certainly it promises us a clarity beyond eclecticism and an opportunity to use our own deep responses

to what is memorable in print toward the mastery of literacy within the environment of early schooling.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to describe a complex movement of research and development spread over some 15 years and involving professional contributions too numerous and too subtle to be fully analyzed. There is an obvious need for specific research of many kinds within this framework. The purpose of this paper has been to bring together a set of ideas which both challenges some of our most sacred instructional assumptions and points to alternative models as appropriate and eminently workable.

The acquisition of spoken language in infancy is a highly complex process, but there are a number of very simple and natural insights at the center of our success in providing favorable conditions for the process to be learned. Experience and research suggest that a very similar set of simple and natural insights facilitate the mastery of literacy skills. Among these is that we may provide favorable conditions for learning literacy tasks in developmental ways such as using children's favorite books, and the powerful strategies they induce, at the very center of the literacy program.

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