

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION



One of the most contentious and fundamental questions in literacy education centers on the relationship between learning and teaching. P. David Pearson (1994), one of our editorial board members, puts it simply: "Must we teach what must be learned?" (p. 12)

All three articles in this issue of *RTE* address Pearson's question, although in very different ways. Susi Long examines her own daughter's experiences of being socialized into the language of Iceland through her daughter's immersion in Icelandic culture, arguing that authentic activity in social life is the key to learning literacy concepts. Stuart Yeh studies different methods of teaching argumentation to middle school students, concluding that explicit instruction in argumentative form can improve students' writing of arguments and that such an approach is particularly important for minority students. Jane Agee focuses on a preservice teaching methods class in which the professor attempts to move students toward his own beliefs about teaching and learning through whole-class and small-group discussion and debate.

The articles investigate instructional approaches generally associated with broad conceptions of teaching and learning that are often viewed as incom-

patible. In particular, the field has long been divided about the relative value of direct and indirect methods of instruction. Goodman and Goodman (1990), for instance, advocate an "immersion view" of literacy development (p. 225) in which teachers "mediate the learners' transactions with the world in minimally intrusive ways, supporting learning without controlling it" (p. 228). They argue that students should learn in school through the kinds of authentic social interactions that Long's daughter experienced outside school. They claim that if teachers focus on the creation of contexts instead of on direct instruction in concepts and strategies, teacher-student relationships will be characterized by "trust and collaboration rather than conflict and domination" (p. 235). In this conception, the type of learning experienced in Long's study should provide the model for learning in school, with linguistic development coming through immersion in authentic social activity.

This view of teaching and learning appears directly at odds with the work of those researchers in reading (e.g., Durkin, 1978–1979), writing (e.g., Hillocks, 1995), and literary understanding (e.g., Scholes, 1985) who argue that it is a teacher's job to interfere, albeit as

humanely as possible, by deliberately and explicitly providing instruction in textual knowledge. In arguments similar to those provided by Yeh, some researchers (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Lee, 1993) have further argued that conventional knowledge particularly benefits minority students whose home cultures do not spontaneously provide the kinds of formal knowledge that students need to succeed in school or the mainstream economy. Rather than viewing these interventions as efforts that result in conflict and domination, these researchers see direct instruction in generic conventions to be potentially socially empowering.

Professor Bill Lee, the university methods teacher studied by Jane Agee, appears to operate somewhere between these two sets of beliefs. On the one hand, he wants his pre-service teachers to adopt more complex views of students, teaching, and learning. In particular, he wants them to move beyond a conception of English as a collection of knowledge to be learned and of teaching as the effort to transmit that knowledge to students. Yet his method for effecting this change is not explicit in the manner of Yeh's direct efforts to teach argumentation. Instead he relies on provocative topics and assignments and on the discussions that follow them to broaden students' perspectives. Professor Lee, we would argue, appears caught between the tensions suggested by Long and Yeh and the traditions they represent: He has clear goals for the ways

he wants his students to think, yet he tries to reach them by orchestrating the context in which students consider new concepts rather than teaching those concepts directly.

In previous editorials we have argued that *RTE* ought to embrace methodological and epistemological diversity. We feel that this set of articles provides a good case for why such diversity is important. Each takes a different angle on a central issue in literacy education, that of the contexts that support language and concept development. Each author makes a case for promoting literacy in different ways. We do not see these different means as being in conflict, though they are often portrayed as such in the rhetoric of educational research. Rather, the studies illustrate the necessity, if not the sufficiency, of taking different approaches to assisting different kinds of learning. As we read these articles in the context of the broader dispute about how best to promote language development and its concomitant concept development, we see a need to move away from seeking to identify a winner in the debates surrounding Pearson's question and instead to complicate that question by asking others: What kind of teaching? Who is doing the learning? Of what? In what context? Though these questions are smaller, we believe that the articles in this issue establish that they are no less interesting or important.

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References

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Memberships Available in the NCTE Committee on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English

A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to investigate and make recommendations to counteract racism and bias in written and visual teaching materials for English and language arts classrooms; to serve as a resource for Council groups, administrators, and/or community leaders on matters pertaining to racism and racial bias in teaching English and language arts and make recommendations for specific actions; to provide guidance and serve as a resource in eliminating racism and racial bias in teaching methods and the administration of programs in language arts and English classrooms; to develop brief information sheets on pressing or emerging issues or events in racism and racial bias in the profession. If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by October 10, 1998, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Carol Thompson, Administrative Assistant to the Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.