

Sowing Seeds of Promise: To Create Meaningful Contexts for Skills



John Shaughnessy

It is tempting to emphasize skills for their own sake, but students learn best when they use skills in meaningful activities.

The volume of information and opinions about teaching basic skills reminds one of the fable concerning the blind men and the elephant. Not being able to assimilate the whole elephant, each man in the fable defined it from his experience with just a part. Educators are in an analogous situation. Interested parties inside and outside schools claim that students are weak in basic skills because of soft courses, weak discipline, television, too much leisure, low willingness to work, too many electives, and so on.

The fact is that quality school programming cannot—and never really did—shelve attention to the basic skills, particularly those in language arts, citizenship, and computation. Quality school programming continuously incorporates the best of the new and promising with the most valued and valuable of the old. Such a posture argues for embedding adequate basic skill instruction in meaningful experiences.

At a time when there is so much emphasis on basic skills for their own sake, teachers may be tempted to focus on exercise of a skill rather than performance in an expressive context. For

example, it is quite possible to focus attention on spelling, punctuation, and usage, but never get around to concentrating on the cultivation of the various thinking skills involved in the composition of written language, the context in which independent mastery of those conventions really matters. Too often the copy editing skills are proxies for the real thing, the assumption being that writing is being taught because skills used in writing are being exercised. Skills, in other words, have various levels of difficulty and complexity as well as different domains of substantive application. Other parallel examples could be drawn from mathematics, science, or reading as well.

Just as the hierarchy of basic skills can mitigate against integrated mastery, so can confusion over what is the substance of the skill. Specific knowledge of a discipline can become so entwined with skill application that the learner is assumed to be able to apply a skill better because he or she knows something related to it. The controversy surrounding the new grammars of the 1960s is illustrative. Even though research has shown again and again that knowledge of grammar has

no effect on writing, the myth persists that it does. The incorporation of new grammars into school curricula was in part an attempt to find a way to make grammar knowledge transfer to the use of language, as in writing or speaking. But the disagreements over which grammar to use and the failure to differentiate between grammar and usage simply exacerbated the confusion. It is no wonder that students and teachers became frustrated when still another attempt to improve language performance fell short. The point to be made, however, is that the thinking and performance skills associated with effective use of language are quite different from knowledge about language or the skills of language inquiry in the learner.

Still another observation about skill development is apropos. It is often the case that the most highly motivated and competent are the ones most likely to isolate a skill for specific drill and practice. This isolation is most visible in psychomotor activities like fingering exercises, swimming strokes, dance steps, and so forth; it can be extended however, to academic undertakings like vocabulary drill or sentence combining. Such exercise is designed to contribute to the perfection of a meaningful performance, and it is only in that context that the isolated skill takes on meaning. In instruction, however, economy of effort argues for including component skills in larger contexts of meaning to provide support to the learner whose overall performance level cannot sustain purified skill practice very long.

It may be useful to cite some examples of programs in which students develop basic skills in connection with meaningful activities.

- In the area of written language, the Weehawken (New Jersey) Individualized Language Arts program presents a set of writing techniques (applied skills) that have been shown through research to improve student written language performance. The program, by its own description, is a language-experience approach (meaningful context) with the techniques derived from modern linguistic theory (discipline) to enhance children's writing. It encourages the development of writing in all subject areas of the curriculum and plots growth against a set of clearly defined objectives.

- The Parkway School District in St. Louis County has designed a seventh- and eighth-grade unified studies program. Based on a three pronged rationale—that the world of the adult is unified, that programs can be organized around critical concepts, and that the majority of skills are equally required in language arts, social studies, and reading—the curriculum is organized in units. In more than 70 classroom visits made by a team of evaluators, time and time again basic skill treatment was identified as an integral part of the day's lesson, most often operating on some dimension of the thematic unit.

- A writers-in-the-schools program, cosponsored by the Ladue School District, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Missouri Arts Council, brought published authors into the classroom to work with students on creative writing. The students at each school produced an anthology of writing that was distributed to the children and their parents. Page after page reflected not only creative pieces and illustrations—examples of higher order skills—but also a whole range of lower order skills: capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure to name a few. The anthology demonstrated the integration of these various skills in "publishable" writing.

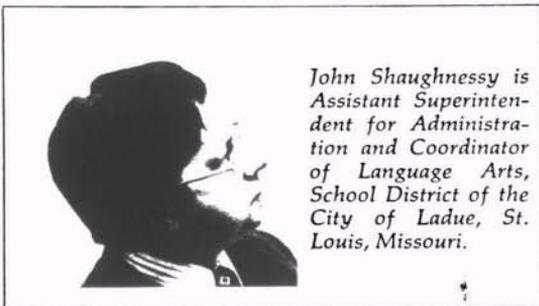
- A junior high language arts teacher, confronted with the required usage component in language arts, decided that if students could become familiar with the language skill requirements of particular careers and jobs while they were practicing the skills, they would be much more willing learners. To that end she embedded the usage material in a careers project, and each student arranged for a spokesperson from the work world to speak to the class. Each of the speakers addressed the class and detailed the language skills needed in his or her line of work, described the work and a typical day, and reviewed necessary training and background. The experience afforded many real opportunities for skill application and extension in locating, inviting, briefing, presenting, and thanking consultants, as well as motivation and credibility for stressing such skills as the mechanics of writing and sentence structure.

- A third-grade teacher wondered whether such complex economic concepts as scarcity, op-

portunity cost, supply and demand, borrowing, income, investment, and banking could be made appealing to her students. A strong "yes" was the result of a unit that had the students form a class bank in which interest on savings was computed; earn capital by providing service at home; loan money to student-formed corporations; and choose, make, and market a product. The simulation offered many occasions for skill learning in mathematics, speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Faced with needs for calculating, students wanted to learn multiplication and division as short cuts to lengthy additions and subtractions. Writing projects required factual data gathering and reporting in newswriting and advertising. And students began to cite examples of what they were learning from the world outside school, from neighborhood stores, and even from the President's State of the Union message.

- Twenty ninth-grade science students spent five days at the Koster Dig in Illinois as student archeologists. Pairs of students screened 2 x 2-foot squares for artifacts and noted and recorded their findings, which included two varieties of potsherds, parts of blades and projectiles, a bead, a deer bone, and charred corn. They also noted and recorded the features of the soil. They measured and staked out new plots, and worked in the laboratory cleaning and cataloging their finds. During the five days, the students went through the entire sequence of events involved in an archeological dig, and in the process applied a variety of important basic skills.

The list of examples could be extended, but what has been supplied is adequate to demonstrate that meaningful contexts can be developed that provide for the learning and reinforcement of important basic skills. *FL*



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