

HEAR

Patience, caring, listening, intuition, and the elements in nature—these are the raw materials of organic teaching and learning.

The literacy bug has bitten North American educators, all looking for paths to literacy. They itch from complaining professors, worried parents, and too many "Johnny can't read" reports. Their crops are nipped in the bud by English placement, functional literacy, or minimal competency tests.

Pressured and threatened, teachers reach frantically for the can of Raid—the speller, the grammar text, the package labeled "diagnostic," "prescriptive," "remedial."

Too often the classroom takes on the pulse of urgency: "You must!" "They can't!" "Do it!" Too often left-hemisphere thinking dominates; all becomes linear, factual, functional. Too often we forget there is more to reading than the translation of symbols on a printed page. Too often we forget to listen to the natural pulse of each child. . . .

Path One: The Mask

Rhonda constantly bumped into things. She tripped over her own feet. Her legs seemed too long and too thin and much too wobbly.

She rarely spoke in class or looked anyone in the eye. Questions forced her to hide, tipping her face, small and pale, into a veil of thick, black hair. School records indicated that her learning ability was "Poor, but difficult to assess, as Rhonda lacks motivation."

At first, the tenth graders stared, some snickered. It didn't take long before they completely ignored her.

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Miss Forest refused to ignore her. She kept involving Rhonda in activities, straining to hear the soft voice, encouraging any sign of response. One Tuesday morning, after two months of seeming futility, Miss Forest handed each class member a blank sheet of paper. She played "The Rites of Spring" by Stravinsky and passed out cans of bright paint. "Please make a mask."

The music became a little frantic. When the teacher glanced up, she

THE BEAT

CAROLYN MAMCHUR



found herself staring into the eyes of a wildly grimacing girl. Sweat appeared on Rhonda's lip, her hair lay damp against her cheek, which was smudged with red paint. Rhonda had created the most awful, awesome mask Miss Forest had ever seen produced by a child.

Children have two visions, the inner and the outer. Of the two, the inner vision is brighter (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 21).

"Tell me about it. What does it say?" Softly.

"I saw you shoot them. My mother and that man. I saw you, father, I saw you shoot them." The words were distinct. The voice didn't tremble. Rhonda stared Miss Forest straight in the eye.

The teacher put her arms around the girl's small shoulders. She held her close. There would be a time later for words, for writing in the journal, for more painting. And there was.

The tones changed to pastel; the medium became water color; the masks

were soft silk; the music Debussy's "Sonate pour violon et piano." "Let's wear the masks. Let's dance as we do sometimes for drama relaxation, just free form dancing, but wearing our masks."

The curtains had been tightly closed. In the soft lights of an old tri-lite fitted with small red and blue bulbs, Miss Forest could barely recognize one student from another. Yet one did stand out. One form moved with exquisite dignity and subtle freedom. Small white hands swept through the air. Black hair flowed from side to side as a thin, graceful body swayed to the music.

It was the first time she had seen Rhonda dance. It was not to be the last. In the next two years, Rhonda would delight the whole school with her dancing on grad nights, talent nights, and special event days.

A flower had bloomed.

Another change Miss Forest could happily record in the cumulative record was that all reading and motivational problems disappeared.

The method? Patience, listening, caring, mask making, journal writing. Long walks, soft talks, patience, music, dance, more listening. (See Jezic, 1980, for details on the use of masks; and Way, 1967, pp. 112-117, on freeform dancing with masks.)

Perhaps I should also mention what Miss Forest did *not* do. She did not say, "Rhonda, speak up, you're mumbling again." She did not say, "Rhonda, quit hiding behind that hair and stay with us, for God's sake." She did not give detentions, or lines, or ridicule for unfinished work, for daydreaming moments, for half-spoken ideas. Only through months of setting the stage of sincerity, of trust, could Rhonda's mask speak to Miss Forest. Only then could the child speak to the woman, and could the woman hear the words.



Perhaps this is what Rogers (1969) calls the "prizing of the learner as an important human being with many feelings, many potentialities. The facilitator's prizing or acceptance of the learner is an operational expression of his essential confidence and trust in the capacity of the human organism" (p. 109).

The method? Key vocabulary.

The key vocabulary centers round the two main instincts, fear and sex (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 36).

Path Two: Dead Babies

Harry talked plenty. Plenty often, plenty loud. Plenty irritating. Harry did little. Failure smeared itself across the faces of Harry and his teacher, Mr. Thompson.

IQ 140. Achievement level D-. This made Harry an underachiever, a far less forgivable sin than being a poor achiever.

The teacher had listened—not only to Harry's endless conversations about music, but to that God-awful Alice Cooper screeching "Dead Babies" on the record player, lovingly purchased by the school board to bring classical music to the eleventh grade. Mr. Thompson had suggested contract after contract.

"How about a history of rock 'n roll?"

"Nope."

"An analysis of the lyrics in Cooper's songs?"

"Nope."

"A biography comparing Cooper to Zappa."

"Nope. Forget it. I'll take the test on Kim."

He failed the test, mumbling about not being able to read it. When Mr. Thompson returned the test to Harry, he also handed him a movie camera (another purchase coaxed from the school board).

"Show me 'Dead Babies!'"

And he did. Gruesome. Awful. A brilliant three-minute film. The class

applauded when they viewed it. Harry grinned and shrugged.

Thompson couldn't stop Harry after that. The boy made films based on *The Lord of the Flies*, *MacBeth*, and scenes from *Coney Island of the Mind*. He eventually started writing his own songs, poems, and story scripts. Harry organized a school club, "The Movie Makers," and taught other students his interest and his art. He became teacher.

The method? Patience, listening, caring, music, contract teaching, accepting, trusting, a movie camera, a film budget, short stories, novels, plays. (For details on contract teaching, see Gibbons and Phillips, 1979.)

The method? Key vocabulary.

I make mistakes over the choice of these words on occasion . . . and there are pitfalls like copying, mood, repression, and crippling fears which block the organic expulsion of a word. But you get to know all these after awhile and there comes in time, sometimes at once, and sometimes later on, a regular flow of organic words which are captions to the pictures in the mind (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 45).

Path Three: The Tester

Mrs. Russell, the English teacher, was assigned to a group of "impossible grade eights." But she had a reputation for believing in kids. "Group interaction," she always claimed, "is the key to good classroom teaching."

When you have companions, you have more courage, don't you? . . . We know we are no longer alone . . . but many together (Rogers, 1980, p. 318).

Believing was not enough. The class went for long walks together, shared good food together, and experienced group process exercises from Pfeiffer and Jones (1974). But nothing clicked. The group was uneasy, uncomfortable, couldn't let relating happen.

"It's the drugs," announced the French teacher. "All those damn kids take drugs."

That part was true, and it was a real problem. But there was more. Mrs. Russell hadn't yet put her finger on it, hadn't yet heard the "key" word.

That was when she decided to use the film idea, since it had worked so well for Mr. Thompson. She would need the strength of her convictions. She would also need a few lessons in filmmaking. She got them from Harry.

Then she went to the class. "Let's put the books away and *all* do *one* thing. Let's write a movie script and then let's film it."

They shouted and whispered ideas as the teacher furiously wrote words all over the blackboard. Scripts emerged, were erased, changed, evolved, developed. The issues: death, drugs, and deceit. This was no easy story. It was large and frightening. It was filled with fear and . . . guilt. Mrs. Russell trembled, trying hard to hear what those ideas had to be telling her. Nothing.



Photo: Gary O. Staples

The class began shooting the first scene. A drug party, an accidental overdose. They shot, they waited for the film to come back. Nothing. They tried again. This time she heard it—just that strain of tension in the voice as the words flew at her. "What we need in our story is a tester."

A tester, one who tests the dope. One who gets dope free when it comes to town because he tests it to see if it's okay. Is it too weak to be effective? Is it too laced with poison to be safe? Will the tester get pleasantly stoned? Mildly disappointed? Blind?

Using. Being used. The tester.

No one looked at Duane. The room was too quiet. Mrs. Russell let the silence rest there. She let it stop there. She didn't turn around, just wrote the word on the board. New character: tester—

The dash meant "Who would play the role?" It meant Mrs. Russell was

wondering if she could handle the drama unfolding before her. She remembered studying with Dorothy Heathcote and the promise Heathcote makes in using drama:

1. To give children an opportunity to examine their own living problems with a new perspective
2. To tell the truth as she knows it
3. To show it is important to listen
4. To accept, support, and then challenge decisions the class makes
5. To bring to the teaching situation an energy level equal to that of the class
6. To show any student the direction in which he or she is going (Wagner, 1976, p. 226).

And, "by consciously using her own values as her touchstone, Heathcote taps the energy of the human spirit" (Wagner, 1976, p. 230).

Mrs. Russell didn't erase the dash.

"Hell, I'll do it." From Duane.

A week later, from the principal:

"Lorraine, you've been working on that film for over a month now. You've hauled those kids everywhere in that old bus you somehow talked me into okaying. And that's fine. But just what are you teaching them?"

It was a good "principal" question.

"Communication skills?" Mrs. Russell checked out for his approval.

"Go on," he nodded.

"This week the class interviewed a bishop, who gave us permission to use the Sacred Heart Cathedral, wear his vestments, use the golden, jewelled chalice for wine, and unblest hosts for Holy Communion."

She told the principal more. The class had interviewed the local mortician, who demonstrated the whole process of preparing a body for the graveyard. The boys spent over a week there. One even got a part-time job at the funeral parlor. The students were not only impressed, they were impressive! (These, the town's "bad" kids, the druggers, the school-or-jail gang.)

And the class had interviewed a local cattle rancher. They needed a barn scene. They had an outdoor supper with him one night, rode horses, and sat around the fire until midnight listening to stories. Mrs. Russell had never seen those kids so relaxed, she told the principal.

"Visual literacy? Interaction skills? Group management? Responsibility? Pride? Film technique? Editing? Oh, did I tell you they've written their own music? Did you know these kids have a band? Want to hear it? We're having a parents' night next Thursday. I thought it would be more meaningful than a mark on a report card. I've already sent a letter."

In her latest book, *Becoming a Teacher*, Wasserman (unpublished) writes a letter to parents.

... to judge a youngster with respect to an arbitrary standard is, to me, a flagrant



compromise of my own standards and professional ethics. Moreover, as I attempt to put these mandated symbols into the little boxes, it is more and more evident not only do these *not tell the story* of your child's progress, but they are, in fact, misleading (p. 801).

That's how Mrs. Russell felt that day. The principal touched her shoulder as he walked her to the door. "Okay, okay" was all he said.

The teacher needed no more. The night of their "Premier Performance," she saw Duane's face during the church scene as he, the star, the drug-taking tester turned priest, held the sacrament high and faced his clergy, the grade eight class. Heads bowed, they knelt before him to receive the host in the traditional style.

Duane's face was radiant. Mrs. Russell needed no more. She

looked toward Duane's mother. The mother was crying. Chances are those were the first sweet tears she'd cried in a long time.

The method? Patience, listening, caring, film, creative drama, script writing, organizing, working.

The method? Key vocabulary.

You never want to say it's good or bad. That's got nothing to do with it. You've got no right at all to criticize the content of



another's mind. A child doesn't make his own mind. It's just there. Your job is to see what's in it. Your only allowable comment is one of natural interest in what he is writing (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 53).

Path Four: Head Hunters

It had been two years since I'd been in a classroom. Oh, as a graduate student I had taught a session or two, but that wasn't Teaching teaching. (I hadn't yet learned that adults are people, too.) So

when my research led me to that middle school in the deep South, I was delighted. My task was to develop an observation instrument that could determine student cognitive styles according to personality concepts developed by Jung. To validate my instrument, I would have students take the MBTI (Myers-Briggs Type Indicator), a 166-forced-answer questionnaire that indicates Jungian type preference.

Behold my surprise when the eighth graders couldn't read the questionnaire. I hadn't counted on that. I asked the teacher if he minded my trying to raise their reading level to enable them to take the MBTI.

I started out by telling the class I didn't trust their "reading scores." A reading test only told you how well a student was able to read that material at that time—for a myriad of reasons.

I told them I could *promise* to raise their lowest marks, even if all I did was give them pre- and posttest scores. (We had a small lesson in statistics, in moving toward the mean, and in becoming test-wise.)

I then went on to explain the tricks of my trade—that I use Sylvia Ashton-Warner's methods of organic teaching to teach reading. I started to talk about her: "She developed these ideas to teach Maori children in New Zealand. She didn't feel that children whose grandfathers had been headhunters would find much meaning in reading a book that said, 'Run, Spot, Jump, Puff.'"

I felt the electricity change. I stopped talking. I secretly thanked Mary Budd Rowe (1974) for teaching me about wait time. She taught me that when a teacher waits, stops talking for three seconds after a student has answered a question, students will develop a sense of fate control, of ownership in what's going on. They will initiate responses themselves, and begin to ask questions rather

than listening passively or responding directly to the teacher's questions.

And sure enough, the questions started.

"Headhunters?"

"You mean they ate people?"

"How long ago?"

"Do you think they still want to eat people?"

And there it was. As always. As it had been with Rhonda and Harry and Duane and . . .

Here it was again: a group of non-reading children talking excitedly about cannibalism, ritual dances, tribal wars, initiations into manhood. Here we were talking and *reading* and sharing.

Backward readers have a private key vocabulary which, once found, launches them into reading (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 36).

I couldn't get them enough books on the subject. Most of the books came from the university library. None were below the eighth grade level.

The method? Patience, caring, listening, willingness to let them in on process, having wait time, not being afraid of reality, willing to risk truth, facing the hate as well as the love. Trusting the idea of

"negative capability," that quality which Keats thought was necessary in a poet. . . . [Having] the patience and wisdom to listen, to watch and wait, until the individual child's "line of thought" becomes apparent. This "line" may be crooked—in its first years the child develops a mental complex of guilt as naturally as it inherits the physical traits of its parents. But these unconscious forces determine the *intensity* of its interests, and learning becomes incomparably easier if it is built on such a dynamic basis—in fact, it becomes part of the unfolding pattern of personality (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 12).

Method: Organic Teaching

Because the organic method of teaching is so natural, one would imagine it to be a method accepted and used by many

teachers the world over. Surprisingly not. Most North American educators employ standard texts and curricula such as the "basal reader." Until *Teacher* was published, too few educators had even considered an organic approach to the teaching of reading.

Ashton-Warner unfolded her theory of organic teaching in the principles of the infant room: listening for the key to unlock the unconscious; patient, caring, careful listening; using basic instincts so the teacher flows with, not against, children; turning the power of destructiveness into creativity; using nature, wind, song, music, dance; using touch and taste and sound and every natural element available to open doors and broaden experience; allowing one experience to move and flow into another. This is the essence of organic teaching.

Although these principles also apply to the secondary classroom, the natural miracle of organic teaching occurs less at the secondary level than at the primary. The reason may be found more in fear of taking risks than in lack of awareness.

The essence of the organic method is that it touches those things very deep and real within the child. When the child is an adolescent with learning (most often reading) difficulties, those things very deep and meaningful to him or her can be quite frightening. So frightening, in fact, that many teachers dare not become involved with them. Key vocabulary is not meant for such teachers.

As is true in all teaching, teachers can only do that with which they are comfortable. Above all things, they must trust that comfort in themselves and work from that base. "When a threshold has been crossed, a teacher loses poise, control, and satisfaction. Therefore, it is up to each teacher to know just what her or his own security requires, so as to keep from crossing a crucial threshold" (Wagner, 1976, p. 34). If the threshold allows this risk, then the ideas of the infant room are easily translated to the secondary classroom.

A Word of Warning: There is No Method

It is an art, a faith, a happening. It is alive between teacher and student.

To the extent that a teacher is an artist, . . . his inner eye has the native power, unatrophied, to hold the work he means to do. And in the places where he can't see, he has a trust in himself that he will see it, either in time for the occasion or eventually (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 79).



It is no accident that Ashton-Warner uses the word "artist" in her description of the great teacher. Rubin (1981) uses the same language in his description of "Artistry in Teaching." His beliefs about the teacher as artist grow from his interest in, first, developing and nurturing a natural style in teaching that allows the practitioner to exploit particular personality characteristics that are unique to the individual, and, secondly, counteracting teacher "burnout"—that decline of passion in teaching.

Organic teaching can only work if it is enhanced by the natural artistry of the teacher. Everyone uses the principles in his or her own unique way. Thus a "method" goes beyond being a stagnant, dull, or dead thing.

Rubin draws parallels between the theater and the classroom. I attempt a similar comparison using the words of the most recognized master of the stage, Stanislavski: "There is no Stanislavski

System. There is only the authentic, incontestable one—the system of nature itself. Artists who do not go forward go backward."

In order for artists to go forward, they must use nature, which is science. "The Stanislavski System is the science of theatre art. As a science, it does not stand still; being a science, it has unlimited possibilities for experiment and discoveries" (Moore, 1976).

In adopting organic teaching, teachers must adapt it to their needs, in a way natural to them, complementing their own unique artistry. To ever accept a "method" as *the* method is to destroy it and make it move backward. Teaching can be the greatest of all arts. The greatest of all sciences.

The sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter the heart, head, and hands of educators, and which, by entering in, render the performance of the education function more enlightened, more humane, more truly educational than it was before (Dewey, 1929, p. 76). □

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