Whole Language—What a Bargain!

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Whole language is not a program. It cannot be prepackaged, made into a series, or sold as a kit. Thank goodness! With today's budget cuts and rising costs, few schools could afford the expense of another new program. You don't need a large (or even a small) budget because current, relevant materials are the tools of a whole-language classroom. Also, whole language appeals using common sense, keeping instruction simple, and not getting in the way of the learner. The instruction is integrated and holistic, surrounding students with language. Isn't it nice to know a bargain can still be found?

Ken Goodman and Frank Smith, leaders in the field of whole language, might groan to hear whole language referred to as a bargain. Years of research in linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, child development, curriculum, composition, literary theory, semiotics, and other fields have contributed to the development of this concept (Newman 1985). So why call it a bargain? Because classroom teachers have had their dues paid by the dedicated experts, they need only read and assimilate the knowledge.

Adopting the whole language perspective does not require money; what it does involve is "kid watching" (Goodman 1986). Knowledge of individual class members and their interests is a valuable resource. Students' outside interests can be tapped and shared with their peers. In fact, some of the best units of study come from the students themselves.

In Cindy's junior high classroom, for example, one student's interest resulted in an exciting whole-language experience:

"Early in the year I became aware of Brian's intense interest in the Titanic. When I heard he had constructed a model, I asked if he would share it with the class. Brian brought the model to school and immediately became the expert. Through Brian's enthusiasm, other students became curious. They began to generate factual and fictional accounts of the catastrophe. After reading and writing about the Titanic, the class enjoyed viewing the National Geographic video which depicted the recent discovery of the Titanic on the ocean floor. Throughout this unit, students were exposed to historical facts while reading articles of recent scientific discoveries."

Another strategy is to capitalize on current issues. For instance, Cindy's elementary class learned about the Alaskan oil spill. She brought a newspaper article to class that was then sequenced in logbook fashion the events of the oil spill in Prince William Sound. To prepare her students to understand the article, she had her students participate in several background-building experiences. First, they used a world map, an encyclopedia, and library books to gather and share relevant information. Next, she simulated an oil spill by coating an object with oil. By then, the class was eager to read the article:

"After the article was read and discussed, I asked the class for possible solutions for preventing this tragedy. One suggestion included lining the hull of the tanker with a thick layer of rubber. Then if the ship hit the rocks, it would bounce back rather than crash. Some students were critical of this plan but were expected to support their arguments. The exchange of ideas was a joy for me to watch."

"The next week I shared a follow-up article, "Illinoisians Can Help in Cleanup of Oil: Alaskan." I asked the class if they wanted to get involved. "Yes!" came the response. Students made posters asking for clean towels and gave speeches explaining that the towels were needed to clean the oil off the animals. The school responded, and my class sent four garbage bags full of towels to Alaska. Not only did the students and I feel good about helping the animals, but we also enjoyed the learning process."

As Cindy's and Cathie's experiences demonstrate, educators need look only to their own backyards for instructional potential. For example, local libraries, museums, and historical sites offer rich educational possibilities. Teachers can also devise thematic units from past/present historical events that have occurred or may be currently happening. In addition, community members can be invited to share their expertise.

The possibilities for launching reading and writing projects are limitless. Listen to your students. Find out what they want to know. Use their "expert" knowledge in a cooperative manner. Let them share in both the teaching and the learning process.

A small school in Illinois estimates that it would cost ten thousand dollars to update a new basal reading program. Factor this against the cost of a library card, community speakers, and the pool of student knowledge. Is whole language a bargain? You bet it is!

References


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