

# Charting a New Course with Whole Language

The battle between proponents of phonics and the champions of whole language is just another skirmish in the struggle to redefine the role of teachers.

In the past 20 years, no proposed change in the craft of teaching has generated as high a level of emotion within the profession as the current debate over reading/writing instruction. By virtually limiting the discussion of the issue to "Phonics vs. Whole Language,"<sup>1</sup> practitioners have entrenched themselves in two opposing pedagogical camps, making it increasingly difficult to establish common ground. Despite all the heated commentary and rhetoric, literacy educators and educational reformers on both sides are so focused on the phonics battle that the true cause of the war has eluded them. In this article, we enlarge the debate by conducting it within the broader context of our beliefs about the teaching/learning process.

In doing so, we focus not on the issue of phonics instruction, but on the evolving role of the classroom teacher. Whole language involves a fundamental change in a teacher's belief system about the culture of the classroom; this reconceptualization is at the core of the controversy sur-



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rounding the teaching of reading and writing. If the whole language philosophy is to be successfully implemented, it requires a complex shift in emphasis from the historical model of teaching, in which teachers dispense knowledge to students, to an approach through which students actively construct meaning. We have characterized this change as a paradigm shift from *transmission*—teachers transmitting knowledge to students—to *transaction*—students engaging in a transaction between what is known and what is unknown (see fig. 1). Such a view of the teaching/learning process encompasses considerably more than the issue of phonics instruction; it has direct impact on the role of the professional—it forces a teacher to chart a new course.

## Learning From the Past

If we accept that instructional practice ought to be based on what we know about learning, we should consider the historical origins of the present role and the cognitive assumptions that supported its development. Nineteenth century America demanded that its system of public schooling develop an efficient, cost-effective way of providing large numbers of children with basic skills. The industrial efficiency model, which worked so well in factories, was transplanted to schools using Ebbinghaus' (1885) "drill and practice" theory, thereby enabling teachers to effectively cover material in the time allotted. Skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic were acquired with the pragmatics of the workplace in mind. Thus, by the late 1880's, the culture of the schools closely resembled the culture of the factory (Callahan 1962). As teachers developed into "assembly line workers with a quota to attain in a certain time period" (Hall 1986), the transmission model became synonymous with this perception of their role.

**Fig. 1. Paradigm Shift Required of the Whole Language Philosophy**

TRANSMISSION MODEL	What Is Learned	TRANSACTION MODEL
Defining what we know Acquisition of knowledge Fact-orientation	<i>Objective</i> <i>Purpose</i> <i>Outcome</i>	Interacting with the unknown Construction of meaning Thinking process
	How It Is Learned	
Teacher-centered instruction		Student-centered learning
Part to whole Skills-based One dimensional Dissemination of information Passive learning Mastery	<i>Strategy</i> <i>Content</i> <i>Context</i> <i>Teacher role</i> <i>Learner role</i> <i>Assessment</i>	Whole to part Concept-based Multi-dimensional Catalyst for problem solving Active learning Demonstrated competence

### Phonics in Proper Perspective

Much of what is defended as "proven practice" in literacy education today is built on early learning theories that have undergone considerable revision in more recent times. The basic assumptions underlying a synthetic/basal reader approach to phonics instruction are firmly embedded in the belief structure that supports the transmission model, namely, "that reading must be taught in an explicit way, that reading is learned from parts to whole through a carefully worked-out sequential hierarchy of skills, and that each skill must be taught, positively reinforced, mastered, and tested before the next appropriate skill in the hierarchy is presented" (Goodman et al. 1987). This drill and practice, part-to-whole philosophy of phonics proponents, which is being passionately defended today, rests upon the theoretical assumptions posited by our 19th century ancestors; far too few of the advocates of this approach, we believe, recall the historical genesis of the transmission model. Most, we suspect, would retreat if they realized that the belief system behind the transmission paradigm is based upon an industrial model.

In contrast, the holistic view of the reading process defended by advocates of whole language rests upon more

current developmental, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic research.<sup>2</sup> Although their point is rarely heard (and less frequently comprehended) above the noise of battle, proponents of whole language do not deny that phonics plays a role in an integrated model of reading instruction. Rather, they promote the belief that the construction of meaning is at the center of a semantic language system, surrounded and supported by syntactic and graphophonic surface features (Goodman et al. 1987). When the phonics dispute is placed in perspective, the changing role of the teacher in a whole language classroom emerges as a critical issue in the overall debate.

### The Teacher's Role and the Paradigm Shift

Whole language is creating a ruckus because it is pushing against 100-year-old assumptions about teaching; whole language requires a new set of assumptions about learning. This set of assumptions comprises the transaction model, a model in which the teacher designs learning experiences that foster active engagement with the known for the purposes of understanding the unknown. The transaction model is based upon the belief that learning is a process of meaning making and prob-

lem-solving; the acquisition of specific facts and skills are peripheral to this central process. The transaction model not only suggests that *what* is learned is different from our historical understandings, it also suggests that *how* it is learned is different.

Transactional learning rests upon the assumption that learning, in large part, is self-directed. The prior knowledge brought to each new learning situation varies from child to child; subsequently, the meaning taken from the learning situation is equally diverse. Students build upon their knowledge base by using it as a framework for interpretation. Through the process of negotiating new understandings into the existing framework, the student constructs meaning, internalizes patterns, makes connections, and responds emotionally. As a result of this negotiation, the learner is confronted with questions, feelings, discrepancies, and inconsistencies, in an ongoing attempt to resolve these, the process becomes recursive. Although transactional learners never completely master the learning process, they demonstrate their competence as active participants. Because the process is unique to each individual, it does not come about as a result of teacher-centered instruction.

If learning is viewed as a one-dimensional activity in which the teacher is the sole source of information and the student's only role is to accumulate as much information as possible in a given amount of time, then we have reduced the process to information storage and retrieval. In contrast, the whole language approach and the transaction model demonstrate respect for the idiosyncratic and complex nature of the learning process. Synthetic phonics and/or basal reading approaches, used exclusively, do not demonstrate the same respect for the inquiring minds of individuals.

Although the definition of transaction may seem to suggest a primary focus on process, we are not contending that content should be discarded. Students must develop a knowledge base; facts must be learned and skills acquired. In order for readers to effectively use graphophonic surface struc-

tures to construct meaning from text, for instance, a firm foundation in sound/symbol relationships ("phonics") is necessary. This foundation is built, however, upon active engagement with text through which generalizations can gradually be internalized, tested, and solidified. The building of such a foundation cannot be communicated to the learner; it must be experienced by the learner.

### Effecting the Paradigm Shift

This brings us to the core of why the whole language philosophy inspires such strong opposition and emotional resistance. It suggests, indeed, *requires*, that the context for learning be radically altered. As schooling moves from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered learning, classroom norms and patterns of interaction will undergo important changes. The process of transactional learning requires that traditional roles for teachers and learners be reconfigured. In the transmission model, the teacher is the authority and disseminator of knowledge; in the transaction model, the teacher facilitates the learning process by acting as a catalyst for problem solving. The changing role of the teacher directly influences the role of the learner. No longer seen as merely receptive—a "blank slate" or an "empty vessel"—the learner interacts with peers and teachers in a cooperative fashion and shares the responsibility for learning. In a community of learners, teaching is a shared endeavor.

A paradigm shift of this magnitude is no easy feat, particularly if one has experienced success with the transmission belief system and practices. For practitioners, it means breaking down the prevailing norms of isolation and control and replacing them with the new norms of collaboration and responsibility. For a district attempting to implement whole language, it means shifting the focus of staff development from a traditional "corrective orientation" to a more developmental "growth orientation" (Krupp 1989). Teachers, too, are transactional learners. Our practices in staff development should reflect and be consistent with what we believe about the learning process in general. This means, in effect, changing

our emphasis in staff development from transmission to transaction.

### Contributing to the Paradigm Wars?

Whole language is one of several movements that are focusing our attention on the need for a new way of conceptualizing the role of the classroom teacher. Echoes of the transaction model are seen in the recently developed standards of the National Council of the Teachers of Mathematics, in the ARTS PROPEL concept espoused by Howard Gardner that is being piloted in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, and in the "Pathways" approach to education at Harvard Medical School. In each of these initiatives, practitioners are pushing at the borders of the traditional role of teachers. As this transition takes place, it does not have to be as a battle between opposing forces. In the words of N.L. Gage (1989), "paradigm differences do not require paradigm conflict."

Although we believe that the transaction model will be more effective in helping learners become creative problem solvers and strategic thinkers, it is not the final model. Like any paradigm, it is a conceptualization limited by what is presently known. In the final analysis, those of us in the education profession must sustain and encourage a transaction between effective practice and the knowledge that is yet to be discovered. □

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<sup>1</sup>For a more complete discussion of the debate, see M. Carbo, (1988), "Debunking the Great Phonics Myth," *Phi Delta Kappan* 70: 226-240; J.S. Chall, (1967), *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (New York: McGraw Hill); J.S. Chall, (1989), "Learning to Read: The Great Debate Twenty Years Later: A Response to 'Debunking the Great Phonics Myth,'" *Phi Delta Kappan* 71: 521-538; and M.J. Adams, (1990), *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).

<sup>2</sup>For a comprehensive analysis of the research base see M. M. Clay, (1972), *Reading: The Patterning of Complex Behavior* (Auckland, New Zealand: Heinemann); Y. Goodman, (1990), *How Children Construct Literacy: Piagetian Perspectives* (Newark, Del.: International Reading Association); J. C. Harste, V. A. Woodard, and C. L. Burke, (1984), *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* (Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann); E.B. Huey, (1908, 1968), *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press); F. Smith, (1973), *Psycholinguistics and Reading* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston); C. Weaver, (1988), *Reading Process and Practice From Socio-Psycholinguistics to Whole Language* (Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann); and L. Vygotsky, (1986), *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).

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