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Read to a Child and Change the World

BY DOROTHY FAMOLARE

Dottie Famolare graduated from Bridgewater State College in the spring of 2005 as an English major with a concentration in writing. This piece was written as a final paper for the Theory in Writing course in 2004. It was then revised as a part of her Writing Portfolio class in 2005. Dottie would like to thank Dr. Lee Torda for her thoughtful advising, gentle prodding, and unfailing confidence.

Dottie plans to keep reading everything that is worthy of her time, and to continue writing anything that is worthy of someone else's time.

It has often been said that learning to read begins at home with reading aloud to young children. We can all relate to childhood memories of curling up on the sofa with a parent or grandparent to read a favorite book. Even before the ability to actually read the words on the page came the pleasure of seeing the pictures as we were read to. While this Norman Rockwell moment is in itself a sentimental cherished childhood memory, it is also the foundation of literacy; it is the beginning of a lifelong journey to become a fully literate individual. The poignancy of these memories can be equated with other life lessons learned, from the small, to the monumental: tying shoes, riding a bike, driving a car. Sometimes, the importance of these memories can only be recognized in hindsight, after we have grown, and can appreciate what a gift we had been given. How were we to know that those tender moments could hold the keys that unlocked our hearts, our minds, and our future? The gift of literacy, that is born in those moments, stay with us always.

Literacy is not just the ability to read a recipe, a street sign, or a medicine bottle. To be truly, fully literate means so much more. In an all encompassing, or global context, literacy can be expressed as the ability to read different types of texts with a discerning eye and analytical mind for the purpose of formulating theories, reacting with emotion, and acting upon those ideas and emotions for the advancement of society through meaningful dialogue and social activism. The ability to formulate theories about a particular written work, leads to problem solving within the text, and beyond the text, in real life situations. Literacy is therefore, a beginning, not a final objective for learning. Reading to children is the first step to moving beyond concrete knowledge, toward more abstract thinking and theorizing.

Reading aloud to children stimulates their imagination, introduces them to the outside world, communicates cultural awareness and values, and helps

establish a foundation for learning. Additionally, frequent reading will help children acquire intrinsic knowledge, and critical thinking skills that they will need to create meaning from texts as they learn to read on their own. Parents and other caregivers who read aloud to their children are also demonstrating to them the importance that books and reading have in their lives (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 12). Children learn as they grow older that their future plans depend on their ability to read well. Getting children interested in books and learning at an early age is probably one of the most important legacies a parent can leave a child. However, there are some parents who have great difficulty reading to their children either because the books are not written in the parent's native language, or because they are marginal readers themselves. Studies have shown that in such cases, with a little outside help and patience, both parent and child can learn to read together (Malo). Reading to children not only promotes literacy, it can also end the cycle of poverty in some families where illiteracy is the primary cause.

Among the myriad reading skills that can be acquired by reading aloud is the "concept of story", because stories have a beginning, middle, and end. As the story unfolds the plot can include complexities such as, "broad descriptions, details, and sub-plots." Children exposed to storytelling begin to understand the "concept of character development," beginning with simple good and bad characters, to more complex characters as the child grows (Malo 6-8). This can be an important life lesson as well, because children learn to recognize character traits: honesty, intelligence, vanity, courage, cruelty, etc. The children gain intrinsic and "intuitive knowledge" about a character's personality, depth, and purpose to the story. This intuition shifts to "prediction skills" as children learn to "anticipate what comes next" in the story (Malo 6-8). These intuitive and anticipatory skills can also have importance in the world outside of books as they become a sort of sixth sense that the child uses to

discern intent, or intention, of people and situations they come in contact with throughout their lives. Rather than growing up gullible and complacent, children become more sophisticated and question the motives of those who are in a positions of authority and power.

Children also learn other skills from the interaction that occurs during the relating and retelling of stories such as, acquisition of oral listening skills and narrative organization skills that later translate to reading and writing skills. During story time,

"Young children are routinely involved in literacy events as part of their interactions with adults and eventually one another.

Story reading is an interactive negotiation during which time certain sequences of interaction are acquired and ways of organizing narrative are presented and mediated through the adults who display to children ways of taking information and giving it back" (Schieffelin 181).

This oral reciprocity of information gathering and giving is reiterated in Rosenblatt's Literature as exploration, in which reading is described as a reciprocal process between the reader and text, as the reader makes meaning out of the words on the page (Rosenblatt 26). Just as independent reading helps the reader make meaning out of the text, reading aloud helps young children make meaning out of text. Young children can then question, discuss, and internalize the story they have "read" to make meaning out of their world.

The early beginnings to literacy from reading aloud transform into greater knowledge needed to become proficient readers. As young children listen to a story and follow along in the book with their eyes they are storing visual pictures and information that will be stored in memory then drawn upon and referred to in later reading experiences. Frank Smith talks about this eye-brain relationship during reading and he claims that the non-visual information, or prior knowledge, that is stored in the brain for later retrieval

when reading is just as important as the visual information the brain receives from the eyes during the act of reading. The non-visual information helps to make meaning out of what the eyes are reading (82). Even young children who cannot yet read are not just passively listening and looking on while being read to, they are gathering a wealth of information for later use when they can read independently.

The wealth of information that is acquired over time as a child reads becomes a foundation for reading comprehension. Once the knowledge is accumulated of letters into words, words into phrases, and phrases into sentences, then the contextual understanding begins to evolve. Smith describes this understanding as “the ability to get a sense of the whole of a text” rather than focusing on individual words (82). This type of reading comprehension involves the ability to understand in context what particular words on a page mean in relation to the entire text. As children learn to understand what the words mean in the context they are used they can then respond intellectually to the experience of reading.

Responding to reading is a reciprocal process between the reader and text, whereby “the meaning emerges as the reader carries on give-and-take with the signs on the page” (Rosenblatt 26). It is also a process of development that is constructed over time. Rosenblatt notes that even “beginning readers draw on past experience of life and language to elicit meaning from the printed words, and it is possible to see how through these words he reorganizes past experience to attain new understanding” (25). This idea of drawing on past life experiences to draw meaning from a text may benefit adults who are learning to read even more so than children; adults have a much larger well from which to draw.

As the reader grows in life experiences, his literary, and therefore literacy, experience also grows with frequent reading. The more a reader reads, the greater his/her literary knowledge becomes. This knowledge base becomes

important for many reasons including, the increased ability to read between the lines of a text; to be able to “bridge the gaps” between what is said and what is not said, to achieve a richer, more meaningful reading (Iser 9). While this is certainly important as part of the aesthetic experience of reading literature, it is equally important as part of the everyday experience of reading everything from the newspaper to a loan application. To be able to understand the complexities of such everyday literature can mean the difference between being in control of our world, to being controlled by others who have this ability. As a child’s (or adult’s) reading comprehension increases, the ability to read well any type of discourse whether Literature, scientific journals, or even the newspaper increases as well. The critical thinking skills and intrinsic knowledge mentioned earlier are part of the basis for understanding these other type of texts. Additionally, if a child, or young adult experiences a temporary gap in their formal education, these skills along with a more proficient reading comprehension will better enable them to bridge any gaps in learning that have occurred. By filling in the gaps to their education, they become more empowered to make smarter choices in life, leading to a better life economically, as well as intellectually. The benefits of reading proficiency can have far reaching effects even into future generations. Reading can change lives.

Along with the literacy skills that children learn while reading stories are the concepts of cultural identity; both individually, and of the world around them. Children learn about their own culture and other cultures through stories. They formulate ideas about the differences and similarities to their native culture, and they try to identify and position themselves within the larger cultural community. This “cultural literacy” is just as important as the ability to read in becoming a fully literate individual.

Children who are only exposed to their own culture’s histories, beliefs and practices become “culturally deficient.” Moreover, children who develop in an environment that lacks

"breadth and depth in educationally stimulating activities such as books, the arts, and world culture, will likely enter school unmotivated, diffident, unaware, and uninterested" (Newton185). On the other hand, if children are given opportunities to explore other cultures through reading and storytelling they are more likely to be tolerant, interested, and aware of the diversity of their world. Additionally, "If diversity is an integral component of young children's learning experiences during the formative years of schooling, they will come to accept it as fundamental to American life, world culture, and the human condition" (Gay 325). Paolo Freire put it best when he said we need "to read the world" before we "read the word." He says "Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world" (29). In other words, children need to become familiar with the world that surrounds them, through varied contexts and experiences, in order to make meaning from the written word. As the child's limited circle of experiences expands with increasing age, beginning from home and expanding to include: neighborhood, city, country, and finally to the global community, their perspective and awareness of the world also increases.

The larger, more universal meaning to being culturally literate is that as adults, we don't just read about our own community and individual culture, we read about things that concern the world as a global community. In order to connect with the concerns of other cultures within the global community we need to have some knowledge about them beyond merely geographical and political information. We need to feel that they are like neighbors that we have observed daily doing the same everyday things we do, with the same everyday concerns about life. We need to shift our thinking beyond the context of us and them to the context of we. Reading about other cultures as part of experiencing the diversity of our world can change people's attitudes and opinions. Reading can change the world.

Another important aspect of literacy is the ability to communicate in writing. That there is a relationship between reading and writing is well known, however, it may not be so widely known that writing skills are acquired in much the same way as learning a second language. In order to master another language one must have direct input of the language over a period of time to gain comprehension. According to one particular scholar, Steve Krashen, writing skills develop on the basis of the same principles of language acquisition, which involves the "unconscious assimilation" of language over time. Krashen argues that "we gain competence in writing the same way we gain competence in oral language, by comprehending written discourse and internalizing, after much exposure, the numerous conventions that characterize texts." He believes that reading is the primary means to gaining competence in writing. Krashen calls this the reading hypothesis, and he argues three important points to this hypothesis which are : (a) "all good writers will have done large amounts of pleasure reading"(b) "good writers, as a group, read and have read more than poor writers" (c)"reading remains the only way of developing competence in writing" (Williams 166).

While Krashen believes that reading is important to developing writing skills, he also feels that it does not guarantee that because someone is an excellent reader they will also be a naturally exceptional writer. He believes there is also a natural aptitude for writing that predicates this hypothesis (Williams 167). However, this natural aptitude that Krashen speaks of may have more to do with aesthetics and creativity than ability. How many of us have had to read brilliant, but dry texts written by highly intelligent scholars? These people are very well educated and no doubt have done a tremendous amount of reading in their lives; however, they appear to lack the ability to write with a certain style and flair that appeals to the reader. Regardless of whether someone has a natural ability for stylistic writing and wants to be a writer professionally, writing remains an important part of

literacy, and reading appears to have a direct effect on writing ability. The basic premise behind literacy is that it involves the ability to absorb, interpret, and communicate ideas and emotions into written language, with competence and confidence that the meaning will be comprehended from the writer to the reader. The more reading that we do, the better able we become to draw from the vast resource of what we have read, to use as a source of information, inspiration, and as a guide for what constitutes good writing.

Complete literacy is multidimensional, with technical components, social aspects, and cultural and educational implications. The act of reading to children to develop literacy skills is important on all of these levels; it is a foundation to help children become fully literate adults. But perhaps more

importantly, reading to children, and with children, is the most important legacy we can give our children, not just for the tender memories it will instill, but also for all of the opportunities it will provide. When we teach our children how to read, when we teach them the importance of books and learning, we lay the world at their feet, and the future at their fingertips. We give them competence to compete economically, and confidence to succeed educationally. With carefully chosen books we can teach them things like tolerance and compassion toward others, and reasoning skills so that they are able to think for themselves and not be swayed by those who would take advantage of them. As history has shown us time and again, illiteracy at any level is an invitation to oppression.

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