

# Conditions for Literacy Learning

Brian Cambourne

## Explicit and Systematic Teaching of Reading—A new slogan?

Teachers through the ages have been bombarded with slogans that reflect the preferred methods for teaching reading. In the 1940s it was Look and Say or Whole Word. In the 50s it was Phonics First. Then came Language Experience, which merged into Reading for Meaning, then Whole Language. Direct Instruction was a slogan that challenged Whole Language during the 70s and early 80s.

In the mid-80s and 90s there has been a strengthening of support for Direct Instruction in most western democracies (e.g., U.S., Australia, U.K., Canada, New Zealand). This support for Direct Instruction seems to have brought with it a new slogan: Explicit and Systematic Teaching of Reading. In each of these countries the slogan (or some paraphrase of it) pervades, with monotonous regularity, curriculum, policy, and legislative documents, and a diverse range of other literacy-related texts.

Some time ago the prevalence of this slogan coerced me to pose myself a research question: When it comes to creating classroom conditions that support a relatively uncomplicated and barrier-free approach to the acquisition of literacy, what is the role of explicit and systematic teaching? I revisited the classroom data archives I've been building for several years to address this question. Here is what has so far emerged from this retrospective incursion into the data.

The teaching-learning events and activities that took place in those classrooms that seemed to produce effective readers and users of texts could be described in terms of four categories of learning and teaching. These four categories—explicit teaching, systematically planned teaching, mindful teaching, and contextualised teaching—were really concepts that had opposites. If their opposite concepts—implicit teaching; unsystematically planned, unstructured teaching; mindless teaching; and decontextualised teaching—were placed so that they formed imaginary continuums, a potentially useful framework for understanding the teaching and learning that occurred in such classrooms emerged. I decided to call this framework the Four Possible Dimensions of Learning and Teaching: explicit, as opposed to implicit; systematic, as opposed to unsystematic; mindful, as opposed to mindless; contextualised, as opposed to decontextualised. Here's how I defined each of these dimensions.

### Explicit—Implicit

Explicit teaching refers to the practice of deliberately demonstrating and bringing to learners' conscious awareness those covert and invisible processes, understandings, knowledge, and skills over which they need to get control if they are to become effective readers. Implicit teaching refers to the

practice of deliberately leaving it to learners to discover or work out these things for themselves.

What sorts of things were made explicit in effective classrooms? While this varied from classroom to classroom, in the classrooms I observed there seemed to be a high incidence of teachers making explicit such things as (a) personal dislikes, enthusiasms, tastes in literature, and other kinds of texts; (b) the reasons for engaging in the reading events and activities that they prepared; and (c) the implicit, often invisible, processes that make successful reading (and writing, spelling, and learning) possible. Each of these forms of explicit teaching seemed to serve the following purposes.

- By making explicit their personal likes and dislikes about the texts they read, and even sharing some of their personal lives (e.g., what their children and relatives were doing, or the things they did with their families on the weekend), teachers were able to create an ethos that supported the establishment of the kind of personal relationships they believed were at the core of the learning cultures they were trying to create.
- By making explicit the invisible, often taken-for-granted, processes and knowledge that effective literacy behavior entails, teachers were helping learners in at least two ways. First, for those who did not come from home cultures that provided repeated opportunities to discover these processes,

teachers were providing repeated demonstrations of the skills, understandings, and know-how their students might not otherwise get the opportunity to understand. Second, teachers were providing opportunities for students with a confused understanding of how reading and writing worked to clarify their confusions.

- By making the reasons for asking students to engage in the learning activities that were introduced into the setting explicit, teachers were constantly helping students understand how all the bits of what they did in the course of a school day fit together to achieve the purposes of school and school learning.

### Systematic—Unsystematic

I defined systematic instruction as that which is based on proactive rational planning. It was evidenced by formal planning documents indicating that teachers had thought ahead, developed, and documented a set of plans or blueprints of future lessons, activities, resources, and assessment procedures that they intended to use. Unsystematic instruction was unplanned or showed little evidence of rational planning.

A teacher's position on this continuum reflected the coherence, rationality, and proactive nature of a teacher's planning and preparation. Two interdependent indicators were used to locate teachers along this continuum. One was the degree to which the planning documents they prepared reflected proactive rational planning. The other was each teacher's ability to articulate this rationale. Teachers who were judged to be high on "systematicity" were those who could explain in confident and coherent ways why they'd planned to use the teaching-learning activities and processes they'd included in their planning documents and how such activities facilitated their students' learning.

Teachers who were judged to be more toward the unsystematic end of this continuum were those whose planning documents were sparse or difficult for another professional to understand, and those who could not explain and justify their planning decisions in anything but superficial ways ("I don't know why I have Show and Tell each

day. Isn't it good for kids?"). My data strongly indicated that teachers who were successful (according to my criteria) at creating effective reading classrooms were more toward the systematic end of this continuum.

### Mindful—Mindless

The concept of mindful, as opposed to mindless, learning is the brainchild of Ellen Langer (1989, 1994). She argued that the way we take in information or learn skills ultimately determines how we use it or them later. Thus, if we learn something like reading, writing, or indeed any of the accoutrements of literacy in a mindful way, we are more likely to use it in mindful ways, and vice versa.

Langer equated mindless learning with learning that encourages and develops nonconscious automaticity. Such automaticity, she argued, usually develops as a consequence of mindless repetition and practice. Automaticity results in responses and meanings that tend to be nonconscious, invariant, and fixed, regardless of context. This kind of learning creates a mindset that inhibits critical awareness. Langer equated mindful learning with an openness to other possibilities. I equate it with metacognitive awareness; that is, the state of being consciously aware of what's going on, of being consciously aware of other possibilities, given the context. Mindful teaching and learning were more obvious in those classrooms I judged to be producing more effective readers.

### Contextualised—Decontextualised

Contextualised learning is learning that makes sense to the learner. Because it makes sense, such learning is not only less complicated, it is more likely to result in robust, transferable, useful, and mindful learning. In contrast, learning that learners can't make much sense of leads to automatic, rigid, mindless learning. The degree to which learners can make sense of any learning situation is

a function of the degree to which they can place it in a context that helps them make connections. In those classrooms that I judged to be producing effective readers, teachers consciously strove to contextualise their students' learning.

My data also showed that these teachers tried to contextualise the learning activities associated with learning to read by employing a mix of such strategies as (a) creating meaningful and authentic purposes for engaging in reading behaviour; (b) giving the message that reading helps us get control of information and information is a source of power in our culture; and (c) making the learning activities associated with reading as much like the reading, writing, learning, and problem-solving behaviours that highly literate adults would demonstrate in the world outside school.

### A word of caution

From this retrospective revisiting of classroom data, I drew this conclusion: The new slogan—Explicit and Systematic Teaching of Reading—is potentially a dangerous one for teachers to implement. This is not because there is anything wrong with teachers being both explicit and systematic. On the contrary, it is when explicit and systematic teaching is also mindless and decontextualised that it becomes dangerous because it makes learning much more complex than it ought to be.

On the other hand, my data suggest that mindful, contextualised teaching that is also implicit and unsystematic would also create serious barriers for many learners. Perhaps a so-called balanced approach to teaching reading is one that needs teachers to create the optimum mix of these four dimensions of learning.

### References

- Langer, E. (1989). *Mindfulness*. New York: Addison-Wesley.  
Langer, E. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. New York: Addison-Wesley.

The editor welcomes reader comments on this column. E-mail: [brian\\_cambourne@uow.edu.au](mailto:brian_cambourne@uow.edu.au). Mail: Brian Cambourne, Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia.