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CHAPTER ONE

The Language of Influence in Teaching

When I was in fourth grade, my teacher turned to me in response to one of my transgressions and said with relish, “By the gods, thou art a scurvy knave. Verily I shall bonce thee on thine evil sconce.” An observer might have chuckled and forgotten this brief and trivial event. Its genius is easily missed. My teacher’s playful use of language got my attention, stopping the inappropriate behavior, but at the same time it took the edge off the rebuke by making it playful, leaving my dignity intact (showing that he cared), and it showed me how valuable and interesting language can be—valuable enough to play with, powerful enough to change behavior without force. He also showed the possibilities for adopting other voices, drawing language from other sources, while incidentally reminding us of a topic we had studied in social studies. It would be foolish to argue that this single event is the reason I use language as I do in my learning, thinking, teaching, and social life. It would be less foolish, I think, to point to it as an example of a conversational current that left its mark on my social and intellectual being. As with most of the teachers it has been my privilege to study, I doubt that my fourth-grade teacher was aware of the implications of how he used language. He was just good at using it in ways that assisted our learning. Some of us have to think more carefully about the language we use to offer our students the best learning environment we can.
Recently, my colleagues and I had the privilege of studying how successful literacy teachers work their magic in the classroom (Allington and Johnston 2002b). We selected these teachers as successful both because their students did well on conventional literacy tests and because people who were familiar with their work recommended them, aspired to be like them, or wished to have them teach their children. Each was excellent in his or her own way, and each had areas with which he or she struggled, just like the rest of us. I became particularly interested in the powerful and subtle ways these teachers used language, and began to explore its significance. In this book I focus on those things teachers say (and don’t say) whose combined effect changes the literate lives of their students. I use examples of apparently ordinary words, phrases, and uses of language that are pivotal in the orchestration of the classroom. I drew my examples initially from the teachers in our study, and I have added examples from the work of other researchers and from my own experience to elaborate certain points.

My initial interest was in how teachers’ use of language might explain their students’ success in becoming literate, as documented on literacy tests. However, I frequently watched teachers accomplish remarkable things with their students and at the end of the day express guilt about their failure to accomplish some part of the curriculum. This guilt was, in my view, both unfounded and unproductive. It was caused, in part, by the teachers’ inability to name all the things they did accomplish. Consequently, my second goal with this book is to reduce this guilt by showing the complex learning that teachers produce that is not recognized by tests, policy makers, the general public, and often even by teachers themselves, but that is particularly important.

If we have learned anything from Vygotsky (1978), it is that “children grow into the intellectual life around them” (p. 88). That intellectual life is fundamentally social, and language has a special place in it. Because the intellectual life is social, it is also relational and emotional. To me, the most humbling part of observing accomplished teachers is seeing the subtle ways in which they build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings. Observing these teachers accomplish both goals convinced me that the two achievements are not completely at odds.

Some years ago, I read Mary Rose O’Reilley’s The Peaceable Classroom. Early in the book she observes, “I had gone off to be a
teacher, asking myself from time to time if it might be possible to teach
English in such a way that people would stop killing each other”
(O’Reilley 1993, p. 30). When I first encountered this confession, I was
reminded of my own journey into teaching and filed both under youth-
ful idealism. However, I happened to reread the passage while studying
these teachers and realized I had been wrong. It is both realistic and fun-
damental. In one classroom, I noticed a student return from the library
with a book. His teacher looked up and asked if he had found the book
he needed for his project. His cheerful answer? “Not yet, but I found one
for Richard.” In another school, I watched a whole class of fourth
graders engage in a deeply philosophical discussion of science and ethics
for an hour and a quarter with little input from the teacher. In another,
over the course of four months, I watched as a student, who had been
classified as emotionally disturbed, was systematically made undis-
turbed, becoming a “normal” participant in class activities with none of
his former outbursts. In the face of relentless testing pressures, these
teachers were accomplishing some of what O’Reilley imagined—not
without struggle, and not without soliciting the help of the students in
their classes.

Exploring the nature of these teachers’ skill, I have been particu-
larly influenced by what children have to say. My colleague Rose Marie
Weber says that as a graduate student at Cornell she was introduced to
some first graders. One of the girls commented that her father was going
to be a doctor of philosophy. The teacher observed that Rose was, too.
The girl immediately pointed out that Rose couldn’t be a doctor of phi-
losophy, that she would have to be a nurse of philosophy. This is even
funnier now that Rose is a member of the International Reading
Association’s Hall of Fame, but beyond the humor is something a little
darker. This first grader could not imagine herself becoming a doctor.
Doubtless, she also could not imagine her brother becoming a nurse.
She didn’t just make this up out of nothing. She made it up out of the
linguistic—or, more broadly, the discursive—environment in which she
was immersed.

Children, in their own ways, teach us about the language of our
classrooms. We have to ask what discursive histories have made it pos-
sible for them to say what they say. What makes it possible for a student
. . . He’s, he’s not the kind of guy who laughs, and he doesn’t smile too
much. And in this book, he might smile” (Allington and Johnston 2002,
p. 201]. Why does another student describe herself thus: “I’m on one of the lowest levels in this class. It really stinks. . . . Most of them [classmates] are above me. . . . I have Peter Williams and he doesn’t care if I read with him and he always helps me out and stuff.” How come a student in a different class distinguishes herself as a reader with, “I love to read mystery, adventure, suspense, and I like to read books about animals doing everyday things that we do [Johnston, Bennett, and Cronin 2002b, p. 194]. . . . Barry likes to read about sports. And Amy likes to read about horses and dolphins. . . . Amanda’s reading is very different from mine because hers usually have a happy ending. Mine are like never-ending stories.” What classroom conversations lead to a student reporting that, “[recently] I have learned how to pronounce more words. . . . How to read more faster than before. . . . I’d like to learn how to pronounce more words” [Wharton-McDonald, Boothroyd, and Johnston 1999, p. 2]?

Teachers play a critical role in arranging the discursive histories from which these children speak. Talk is the central tool of their trade. With it they mediate children’s activity and experience, and help them make sense of learning, literacy, life, and themselves.

**An Example**

Let me give a slightly more expanded example of what I have in mind. Consider the following transcript from a Reading Recovery lesson [Lyons 1991, p. 209]:

Mary: You said, “I will to my friend, the car driver.” Does this word look like *will*?
Melissa: No.
Mary: What letters would you expect to see if the word was *will*?
Melissa: *W, L.*
Mary: What letters do you see?
Melissa: *W, A, V, E.*
Mary: Look at the picture. What is the boy doing? What is the car driver doing?
Melissa: They are waving to each other.
Mary: What do you think that word could be?
Melissa: Wave.
Mary: Does *wave* make sense?
Melissa: Yes. “I wave to my friend, the car driver.”
Mary: Does “wave to my friend, the car driver” sound right?
Melissa: Yes.
Mary: Does the word look right?
Melissa: The letters make wave.
Mary: I like the way you figured that out.

Several things strike me about this exchange. First, the teacher did not directly tell the student anything. Second, the teacher systematically socialized the student’s attention to different warrants (evidence and authority) for knowledge and the importance of noticing any conflicts among perceptions and information sources. Third, although the figuring out was collaborative with the teacher playing a primary role, her final comment, “I like the way you figured that out,” attributes the accomplishment entirely to the student. This final step offers the student a retrospective narrative about the event in which she stars as the successful protagonist, a collaborative fantasy that makes it possible for the child to become more than herself.

**Making Meaning: Making People**

When a mother interacts with her baby, she makes something meaningful out of what the baby “says.” The fact that there is not much to work with does not stop her from constructing a conversation. From “bem ba” she imputes a social intention and responds, “You want milk?” She acts as if the baby’s noises are not random but are intentional discursive actions, and responds accordingly. Relationally she positions the baby as a sentient, social being—a conversation partner. In the process, mother and child jointly construct the baby’s linguistic and social development and lay the foundation for future interactions with others—how the baby expects to be treated and to interact (Rio and Alvarez 2002; Scollon 2001).

The same is true, in a way, in the classroom. The teacher has to make something of what children say and do. She makes sense for herself, and offers a meaning for her students. She imputes intentions and offers possible worlds, positions, and identities. For example, suppose an independent book discussion group has deteriorated into chaos. The teacher decides to say something to the students. What does she say? Perhaps she says, “That group, get back to work or you’ll be staying in