

Theory, Politics, Hope, and Action

By: Carole Edelsky

I'm going to tell a rather long story this morning, a teaching story about literacy. And along the way, I'll talk about theory—because our "theories"—our beliefs and our passions—shape what we do, including how we listen to stories about teaching. Even when I'm not talking about politics, I'll be talking about politics because when we're faced with politically mandated programs it's more obvious than ever that teaching, especially teaching literacy, is political. And if our theories shape our teaching and if teaching is political, then our theories are also political.

Let's begin with two exceptional final drafts by fifth-graders in a dual language program in Phoenix, Arizona—exceptional in terms of focus, voice, craft.

Trip to Rocky Point

"Let's go! Let's go!" I shouted. I could already see myself on the beaches of Rocky Point taking in the sun, stuffing myself with camarones, swimming in the ocean until my skin was as wrinkled as a prune. When my dad and my mom finally made it on the road, it seemed endless. We passed mountains and deserts and freeways until finally . . . Rocky Point!

The ocean smell attracted me. As I got closer and closer, the smell got stronger and stronger. I saw the waves hit the rocks, and I heard the water calling me. I went into the water. I was in a trance. I could feel the water on my feet. I was so cold escalofríos appeared all over my body like tiny little mountains. I turned slowly in the water taking in my surroundings. There were people playing in the sand and taking in the sun.

"No te vayas muy lejos, David!" My mother's soft voice broke the silence. I looked over at her and smiled. She had taken two steps in the water. I turned to continue my exploration when suddenly I heard someone scream.

"Oh, no!" I knew it was the same sweet voice. My mom. I ran towards her cutting through the water like a knife. I asked her what happened, but she couldn't answer. My mother's face was clenched in pain—a pain I had never seen or would want to see again. I went running to my dad. He was buying a newspaper at a stand nearby.

"Papí, Papí, una agua mala mordió a mamá." My dad helped my mother to shore and went running to a liquor store nearby. When he got there he bought medication for my mom. He sprayed the medication on my mom. My mom tried to smile, but I could see pain in her eyes. I felt anxious and helpless. My mom was in pain and there was nothing I could do.

When we returned to the hotel, everyone was tired and quiet. We spent the night at the hotel. The very next morning we packed up and left.

"Papí, ya nunca volveremos a Puerto Peñasco!" I said to my dad on the way home. My mom pulled me close as my dad said, "Está bien, hijo.

— David S.

The Greatest Gift

Every year my abuelita would come to visit from Parral, Chihuahua, and she would cook the most delicious food you could imagine: tamales, chicken, cookies, doughnuts and best of all . . . my favorite . . . CAKES! Chocolate, vanilla, pecan! They were number one! But she never let me cook, not once! "You're too little," she'd say.

It was my sixth birthday. "Oh, Isabeeel, ven a sacar la mantequilla, por favor."

It was my seventh birthday. "Oh, Isabeeel, ven a sacar la jarra de la azucar, por favor."

It was my eighth birthday. "Oh Isabeeel, ven a sacar la harina, por favor."

As the years crept by, I kept loving her wonderful food, and I kept watching every step it took to make her delicious cakes.

One day as I was reading in my room, I heard my grandmother call me, "Oh, Isabeeel, come help me please!" I sighed then headed to the kitchen.

When I walked in the kitchen I saw my grandmother wearing her usual flower apron, and she was reaching out for the top cabinet where the baking powder was.

I sighed again. "I'll get it," I mumbled. I got on the counter, and I got the baking powder from the top of the cabinet.

"Thank you, mijita," I heard my grandmother say as I was heading out the door.

"Espera? no me quieres ayudar?" said my grandmother smiling. I couldn't believe it! My grandmother was asking me to help her! I couldn't help it, so I ran to hug her.

After two hours of mixing and pouring and baking and eating, I washed my hands, then I took one step toward the door, when suddenly. . . .

"No, no, no, ahora tenemos que limpiar, it is time to clean."

The huge grin on my face disappeared. Everything turned blue. . . .

And so my grandmother and I cleaned, but it was worth it!

My grandmother had given me the best thing in the world. . . .

Something that will live on forever through her recipe. . . .

— Isabel P.

How did these pieces of writing come to be? Are there theories that directed how these accomplished writings took shape? Before I tell you the story of these two pieces of writing, I want to introduce two quite different theories for thinking about learning to read and write and for understanding how these kids and the others in that dual language classroom came to produce such fine writing.

Second Language Learning

The first of these theories has to do with ideas about how we learn a second language. For years I thought the best analogy for learning to read and write was learning to talk, learning your first language. Now, I'm beginning to think that an even better way of thinking about literacy learning is to see it as very similar to second language learning. For one thing, learning to read and write happens second in a person's life; you already have begun learning the language(s) you were born into when you meet up with written language. As well, many of the theoretical issues involved in learning a second language have big implications for literacy learning.

A particularly generative connection seems to me to be "the immersion experience." Now I'm not talking here about "English immersion"—immersion versus bilingual education. The contrast I want to make is immersion versus nonimmersion. It's unfortunate that the enemies of bilingual education have stolen the word immersion, when what they really mean is sink-or-swim submersion. I'm reclaiming the word *immersion* here, in the sense of dual language immersion programs (which in places like Arizona, where English only changed its name to English immersion, have had to drop immersion and just call themselves "dual language." See what I mean about stealing the word?) People know—sometimes from firsthand experience, sometimes from hearing about it from others—about the contrast between immersion and nonimmersion experiences for learners of a second language. The prototypical example of that contrast comes from common experience in second language or foreign language instruction in high school.

If we took French or German or Spanish, chances are we did French or German or Spanish exercises—we memorized dialogues, filled in blanks, took vocabulary tests, translated sentences, did verb conjugations—the second language learner's equivalent of worksheets in literacy. And then, one day, if we were lucky, we went to France or Germany or Puerto Rico or Mexico and discovered that, lo and behold, we could barely understand or be understood.

Krashen's theoretical distinction between acquisition and learning (1985) was right there in our own lives. We were confronted with the consequences of having spent several semesters, say, in a high school German class, dealing with German through exercises. We may have consciously learned grammatical rules and vocabulary items, but we hadn't acquired the language—hadn't taken it in almost through osmosis, through lots of genuine participation where our focus was on something *else*, not the language (which is why it seemed like osmosis). We hadn't participated in the world of the users of that language, hadn't internalized the language so that it could become an unconscious resource.

Of course, just getting off the plane and plunking yourself down in that other-language-dominant place doesn't make it an immersion experience. So what is an immersion experience—not punitive submersion but friendly immersion?

Immersion, first off, involves a **time** element—an immersion experience is long, months perhaps or years. Second, there is the element of **meaning**—what is the experience about? Your purpose for getting into an immersion experience in Italy might have been to learn Italian, say, but once you're there—immersed—what the experience is about isn't so much *learning* Italian as living through Italian; i.e., *living through* the second language in the second culture—buying food, making friends, getting your shoes repaired, getting medical care, doing your job (e.g., in the Peace Corps or in an overseas branch of your company or going to high school as an exchange student). You're not a tourist—you're not removed, you're not "looking at the natives." You're there. Present. Engaged. Third, you also have **support**. You may be in Italy on your own, but the chances are you have a host family that helps you with language and culture, or you were intensively prepared by Peace Corps training before you went—or—in the case of maintenance bilingual programs or dual language immersion programs but not English-only submersion programs, your home language and culture is there to provide

support, with *both* languages there to be *used* not just to be "taken" as subjects. And fourth, sometimes in an immersion experience, the second language is treated as a subject, foregrounding **form**. In the prototypical immersion case of someone going to, say, Italy for two years to work, they would almost surely spend a little time in a language school or just on their own in their rented room, studying, doing second language learning exercises, focusing on bits and pieces. But in this case, these exercises wouldn't be artificial or out of context. Instead, they'd be immediately useful because they could be tried out right away in the life of the community.

But mostly—that word *mostly* is important (in an immersion experience the proportion of language lessons to living is crucial)—most of the time in that prototypical voluntarily-go-to-Italy-to-work immersion experience is spent being a part of some community in Italy, taking on that community's ways of doing things, ways of seeing things, ways of talking about it all. Not dropping your own ways, but adding to them, for that context.

The Role of "Big D" Discourse

In other words, immersion involves taking on a Discourse with a capital D, the second of those helpful theoretical frames. That's the socially-oriented linguist Jim Gee's term for a combination of ways of acting (including ways of using language) and all the beliefs and values and worldviews embedded in those ways of acting. A Discourse is like a culture, but not quite as amorphous. It's got a center and that center is activity—the work, the practices (including beliefs and values and worldviews related to the practices) of a community of practice. Anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) have written extensively about communities of practice. A community of practice is people who take part in certain activities in certain ways and therefore share a certain identity for some piece of their lives—like members of a book club in Phoenix, members of a Weight Watchers group in Minneapolis, scientists at the Biosphere, bowlers in a league in New Jersey, teachers in a practitioner research community in Santa Barbara, writers who meet weekly in a cafe in Vermont.

So to link these two lenses together: In a second language learning immersion experience, one takes part in a Discourse—participates in the work, the activity of a community of practice, using the second language to understand what's going on and to make oneself understood, that is, to be a member of that community of practice.

So instead of attending to individual differences in what learners have "in the head," comparing learners, ensuring that some come out on the bottom, these two theoretical lenses ask us to think about how the Discourse permits access to its inner circle, what opportunities it offers newcomers, what the practices are of the community. Paying attention to such issues means attending to—and probably changing—power relations in schools.

Connection to Literacy and Schools

Now what does all this have to do with literacy and schools? If learning to read and write is like learning a second language, then we have to figure out how to set up something like an immersion experience for written language in school.

That means extended engagement (**time**) with practices that are like what some community of practice does outside of school—journalists, short story writers, anthropologists, newscasters, poets—an engagement in practices that result in kids improving their reading and writing in general but that aren't *about* learning to read and write in general. What they're about (**meaning**) is being a certain kind of reader or writer—a poet, a short story writer, etc. That means ensuring **support** (through the first language and the home culture), and paying some attention to the bits and pieces of literacy (**form**) to help kids with what they're engaged in.

And right along with that, we have to figure out how to get kids to be attracted to a community of practice that has literacy at its center, how to get kids to want to identify with that community of practice, to want to be "members" of the generalized community of book lovers, the generalized community of short story writers, the community of poets—at least for the short term—so they begin to take on a Discourse— not just "learn literacy skills" but take on the identity as they gain proficiency with the actual tasks, the work, the activity of people in that out-of-school community. At the least, to do that means we have to make school work as much as possible like the actual work of the community of essayists or journalists or investigative reporters or memoirists or poets or avid readers.

And that means taking an honest look at the academic work we usually plan for kids. The practices of avid readers don't include answering questions at the end of each chapter. The community of poets doesn't write poetry from a prompt. Essayists don't write about topics they don't care about.

But how *do* you make schoolwork resemble out-of-school work? How do you give kids an immersion experience, setting up a context where kids want to acquire a Discourse that includes and values highly literate practices? How do you get them to want to become members? I am emphasizing that attraction to the identity, that membership. It's the key. Without it, all the activity may end up being a lot of exercises (Edelsky 1991).

Isabel, David, and the Community of Practice

Back to the gorgeous final drafts I introduced at the start. I'll tell you more of the story now, a story of an immersion experience for Isabel and David and the other fifth-graders in this dual language classroom in central Phoenix. It's a story of academic work that was aligned with the work of memoirists, a story of kids acquiring the Discourse of memoirist—behaving as memoirists, believing and valuing as memoirists, taking on the identity of memoirists.

To understand the progress of these students, we need to focus on the work of Ernestina Aragon, a teacher at Machan School in Phoenix, Arizona. Ernestina was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with her students' writing. She was doing all the right things—reading good literature to them and pointing out things like the phrasing and rhythms of written literary language. She was asking kids to write in writers' notebooks about what they thought about what she had read aloud to them (they did that), and also about whatever they thought was important to them (they didn't do that). And she sponsored writing workshops. But the writing was perfunctory—minimal voice, little engagement, no sense of audience. Here are two pieces, the first by Isabel, the second by David, written during this period.

The Wall

When I saw the video and I saw the wall I felt really sad because I saw all the names of the soldiers that had passed away. I felt really sad when I saw all the soldiers' relatives crying and tracing the soldiers' names with a pencil and I felt really sorry for the people who had relatives in the war but never met them.

I feel happy that this woman thought of the idea of building this memorial because I think that all the soldiers gave in their lives because two countries disagreed (America and Vietnam).

— Isabel P.

Two Bad Ants

What I think that the mom queen would feel very mad at her two sons because the two ants got in a lot of trouble. What I think is that if I see like a hole they would think that it's food inside for them but what if there is nothing in there. And if I put a bucket a big bucket and they get n there and what if there's a snake, that snake will eat them.

— David S.

They're alright, but there's not much in the way of craft here.

So Ernestina talked to Rebecca Osorio, her teammate; Nora Ulloa, the assistant principal at Machan; Cecilia Espinosa, the former Title VII director; and Karen Smith, a professor at Arizona State University who was teaming at the time with Cecilia. The five got together and started by reading, at Karen's suggestion, the August 1999 issue of *Primary Voices* dedicated to the idea of putting more meat into writing teaching. They understood what Isoke Nia was talking about regarding writers' workshops—how most writing workshops were just an endless repetition of "steps" in a writing cycle, how writing workshops were crying out for some writing content. That issue of *Primary Voices* led these five adults to decide to do an extended study of memoir. (There's that feature of **time**.) And now, here's the first answer to the question of how you make schoolwork like real out-of-school work.

Partial Answer 1: The adults picked an out-of-school community of practice that makes literacy a major part of its practice. Ernestina, Rebecca, and the others picked the work of memoirists, not a Weight Watchers group near their school, say, even though Weight Watchers uses literacy. (They record weight on cards, read booklets, and recipes, but reading and writing is not their major project.) For getting kids to take on a Discourse infused with literacy, you need an out-of-school community of practice whose literacy practices are what is meant when we say someone "lives a literate life." And then you bring what you believe that community's literate practices are into the classroom.

The five adults first decided to wallow in memoir themselves. Ernestina, Rebecca, Nora, Cecilia, and Karen read about memoir—Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*. They read examples of memoir—*The Color of Water* by James McBride, *Woman Hollering Creek* and *the House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. They read Esmerelda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*. They spent a whole month reading memoir themselves, talking together about it, and writing some, while Ernestina and Rebecca talked to the kids about the memoir study group they were in and occasionally read aloud to the students some of what the adults were reading. But they did not bring the students in in a big way just yet.

Partial Answer 2: The teachers formed, and therefore joined, a community of memoirists themselves. So the kids saw them engaged with its work, its actual tasks.

Partial Answer 3: The teachers set up preludes to immersion. The long time of an immersion experience in school can start with these preludes, letting the kids stay on the margins, hearing about what the teacher is doing and about the teacher's life without them ("Aha! Verrrrry interesting!"), being told about it but not being let in just yet to the adult world. These preludes are "teases"; they help to make the work and the teachers' community of practice desirable.

All this was going on during the election campaign for ballot proposition 203 to end bilingual education in Arizona. So when Ernestina and Rebecca decided they were ready to bring the kids into the memoir study, they linked that to proposition 203, which, therefore, brings us to the next answer.

Partial Answer 4: The teachers positioned the kids and the work in relation to the world around them. Ernestina pointed out to the students that Latinos and kids in bilingual education were being misrepresented by the media, that minorities are often spoken about in the media but they don't often define themselves, that our stories help define us and so it's crucial for minority kids to tell the world their own stories. She told them they'd be writing and publishing memoirs, maybe for a larger audience. And she told them to begin filling their notebooks with seed ideas. To the kids, then, this project wasn't about learning memoir for the sake of school; it was about putting their stories out

there for the sake of their own families and communities. They were answering the immersion question: What is this about?

Isabel made a beginning effort at her story. The fifth-graders wrote in whatever language they wanted to, so Isabel wrote first in Spanish and later decided to translate this and write the full memoir in English:

Cada año cuando mi abuelita viene a visitarnos, hace tamales, pasteles, donitas, galletas, pollo y otras comidas muy buenas. Ella nunca nos dejaba a mi o a mi hermanito ayudarle porque decía que hibamos a hacer un batidero y que hiba a hacer mas trabajo para ella porque hiba a tener que estar cuidando que no se queme la comida y que no nos quememos nosotros.

(Every year, when my grandmother comes to visit, she makes tamales, cookies, donuts, cakes, chicken and other delicious foods. She never would let me or my little brother help her because she would say that we would make a big mess and that it would make more work for her because she would have to take care that we didn't burn the food and that we didn't burn ourselves.)

David wrote a draft in English, a piece that Donald Graves would place in the category of bed-to-bed story in which the central incident is buried in what precedes and follows it:

I remember a time when we went to Rocky Point and i had gone with my mom and dad and my grandpa and grandma. When I got there I was so excited but once an hour passed it didn't go very nice. When I wanted to go to the water I told my dad but my dad was too busy looking at other stuff. and then I told my mom. She was available. She took me only to the top of the water. She couldn't take me any farther because if she did I would drown.

When I got inside of the water she got inside of the water. Not even two minutes had . . . when I heard her scream really loud. I had got really scared and I asked her in a scared voice that what had happened. She didn't answer. I got really scared and went running to where my dad was. I told him 'Dad stop doing what you're doing and come and help mom. She is in trouble. Then he threw the camera and he started running and he got to my mom and he asked what had happened and she said that a jelly fish had gone in her skin. My dad called my grandpa and he came and said "Qué pasó? What happened" And I told him that some kind of seafish had gone in her skin and my dad ran to a liquor store and he got there running and running. When he came back with a little bottle of liquid and I asked what it was my dad didn't answer. And when my dad put that liquid on my mom she started screaming more than she wa screaming already. I was really sad and I said is mom gonna be alright. And my dad answered, 'yes, she will be alright.' Half an hour had passed. My mom was OK. And I asked her how was she feeling and she said "I'm Ok."

And it got night and we went to a hotel but when it got morning we went home and we decided not to go there anymore.

THE END.

Every day Ernestina and Rebecca read published memoirs aloud to the kids. They set aside time each day for pairs of kids to tell each other their memories, showing kids that their lives counted in this classroom as cultural capital. And they kept reminding the students of the importance of their own stories, kept using the first languages and cultures (oral Spanish, oral English, home and community life) as the lifeline—the **support**—for the written genre in which the kids were being immersed. That leads to the next answer to the question of how to make schoolwork like the work of an out-of-school community of practice.

Partial Answer 5: The adults immersed kids in examples, in the sounds of the genre, in ways of talking about it. Along with reading memoirs aloud and having kids filling their notebooks with seed ideas, Ernestina and Rebecca pointed out crafting techniques and had kids hunt for them themselves.

Partial Answer 6: The adults put some emphasis on form/techniques. For example, they used *Owl Moon* to show kids how Jane Yolen used the senses—sight, hearing, skin sensations—to capture the sense of a time and place. Then they offered kids the chance to try out the technique. These "try its" were optional. What's interesting is that although no child tried them all, each child voluntarily tried several. This is David's "try it" on the ocean based on Yolen's multisensory writing.

The ocean smell attracted me and as I got closer the smell would get stronger and stronger. I saw that the water was hitting the rocks and I could see the water calling me and I went into the water and then I could feel the water and it was so cold and I could see all of the people in the sand. And laying down taking a little bit of the sun.

Ernestina and Rebecca introduced techniques: ellipses (used by Cisneros and others); repetition of a phrase (as Rylant did in *When I Was Young in the Mountains* and as Cisneros did in *Eleven*); "and . . . and", instead of commas, for lyricism and emphasis; code switching for effect, and other uses of two languages, sometimes translating, sometimes not; nontraditional sentences like a single word used for emphasis; the repetition of a structure (as Karen English did in *Speak English for Us*, Marisol where one character after another calls out "Mariso-ol" and then adds a request; making a long story short; the differences between the way things are phrased in everyday talk and the sentence structure of artistically written published memoirs.

Ernestina and Rebecca scheduled a lot of time for kids to look through books themselves, hunting for techniques and for examples of memoirs. They spent huge blocks of time just looking at memoirs trying to find great beginnings and great endings.

Partial Answer 7: The teachers provided a mix of inquiry and experimentation. What the teachers were doing here was getting kids to do their own investigating by paying a special kind of attention to these texts, and also encouraging kids to try out what they were discovering in tiny drafts where there was no commitment to revise or even look at it again. The teachers weren't holding kids accountable for the techniques. They weren't testing them. Ernestina's only request was that if they used a technique in their memoir they had to be able to say why they were using it. And they did do that. In fact students began to make comments about what they were reading like "Hey, that author got us to the river in just two sentences!"

If the teachers were encouraging inquiry, what the kids were doing was hunting for ways to make their writing artistic because they had already come to believe that it was important, they had already come to see themselves as memoirists. Now look again at the final drafts. David gets us to the ocean right away; depicts place with multiple senses; code switches for characterization and voice (yes, he talked about it like that because that's the way of talking about it in this Discourse); uses nontraditional two-word sentences for emphasis; and drops the "The End" ending.

Now reconsider Isabel's final draft. Note her repetition of a structure, code switching without translating to show the character of the grandmother, the abbreviated text as she moves from age to age (making a long story short), her ellipses to let the reader fill in, her deliberate use of "and . . . and . . . and" to emphasize how much.

The Epilogue

These final drafts are where I should say "and then they lived happily ever after." Unfortunately that's not possible. This story took place in 2001. The screws have tightened since then, with federal legislation, state board mandates, and district policies going directly opposite to this story. In my state of Arizona, an immersion experience now means plunking non-English speakers into English only—what's old is new. And how likely do you think it is that a scripted program like Open Court or Success for All, mandated now in district after district, is going to make kids want to be memoirists or avid readers so they take on that Discourse?

But all teachers aren't taking this lying down. Probably, that includes many of you. Despite Arizona's proposition 203 that outlaws bilingual education, some teachers continue to use two languages for instruction.* There are teachers around the United States who are refusing to give up everything they believe in so they can drill kids on test taking and other exercises (Edelsky, in press). As one Philadelphia teacher told me when talking about looking for ways to insist on good practice, "Everything we can sneak in is a victory." A teacher in Oregon, required to use Open Court, has taught her kids that "you can't talk back to your grandma or your principal but you *can* talk back to books." And so she has carved out time for kids to talk back to Open Court—talking back about the time restrictions, talking back to the way ethnic groups are portrayed. This teacher and many others around the United States are not only teaching test preparation; they're also teaching kids tests as a genre, deconstructing the writing of test items, and also critiquing assumptions about norms, grade levels, cut scores, and so on. And all over the country individual teachers—and parents—are talking to their friends while standing at the checkout counter at the supermarket or the bank or any place they can be overheard—talking loud—rebutting what Steve Krashen calls urban legends—popular misconceptions and outright lies about the supposed evils of bilingual education and the presumed abject failure of meaningful whole language literacy instruction. From individual sporadic dissent to individual refusals to go along with policies that lower literacy levels to joining with others in organized collective action.

And this is where the hope is . . . in the possibility of getting rid of the wrong-headed mandates. In the belief in the power of people to change history when they act together. In the potential of kids like David and Isabel and all kids to participate in communities—in school and out—that value highly literate practices.

Endnote

*Ernestina, Rebecca, and their principal have made sure they comply with the provisions in the law for waivers, so their use of Spanish remains "legal."

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