

Philosophy of Literacy Instruction – Laura Weakland

The teaching of literacy needs to include a balance of reading, writing, speaking and listening activities and needs to be a social endeavor that provides a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of all diverse learners. It needs to be taught in the context of authentic literature and include a balance of reading/writing "to" the students, "with" the students and "by" the students with a blend of small group, whole group and individual instruction. In addition, teachers need to scaffold student learning to ensure students are learning in a zone that is challenging enough, but not too difficult. Teachers need to be reflective in their practice, stay current in best practices and continually assess what is working and what isn't.

According to Dianne Nettles in *Comprehensive Literacy Instruction in Today's Classroom: The Whole, the Parts, and the Heart* (Pearson, 2006), literacy instruction needs to include the "whole," the "parts" and the "heart." Teaching the whole means understanding reading and writing as social activities, understanding writing as a reciprocal process to reading, and allowing students to read authentic texts for pleasure and often and to use such texts as touchstone texts for writing. Teaching the parts means students need explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, fluency and writing. Teaching the heart means bringing students' interests, past experiences, values, family and culture into reading/writing and motivating students to want to read and write more. Teachers should model reading and writing, be enthusiastic about literacy, and share their reading and writing with their students.

My philosophy of **reading** instruction includes concepts from both the whole language and the phonics philosophies. I agree with the whole language approach to reading instruction that an emphasis should be placed on comprehension and appreciation of the text and that lots of high-quality authentic texts should be used in the teaching of reading (and writing). However, I also agree that students need to be taught the "rules" about how print works and the corresponding letter-sound relationships. I also firmly believe that the meaning of text is enhanced with the background knowledge (schemata) that a student brings to reading and the more we can broaden their background knowledge, the greater the comprehension.

My philosophy of **writing** instruction has been molded by the writing of Katie Wood Ray and really began to take shape when I read *Wondrous Words* (NCTE, 1999). Upon reading this book, I had a great "aha" moment when Katie Wood Ray so eloquently stated that writing instruction is all about teaching students the "reading-like-writers" habit of mind and to help students think of themselves as writers and to learn the craft of writing from writers themselves. One of my favorite children's author, Kate DiCamillo (*Because of Winn-Dixie*, *Tale of Desperaux*, and *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*), sums it up by saying "Every well-written book is a light for me. When you write, you use other writers and their books as guides in the wilderness" (<http://kidsreads.com/authors/au-dicamillo-kate.asp>, accessed August 8, 2008). As

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teachers we need to guide students to the works of these authors and engage in active inquiry into the study of their craft.

My approach to the teaching of reading and writing would include the following 10 commandments of good literacy instruction (in no particular order):

1. **Lots of passion and enthusiasm** – Passion and enthusiasm are contagious! If we teach literacy and all subjects with lots of passion and enthusiasm, students will respond with mirrored passion and enthusiasm for learning.
2. **Multiple intelligences** – Teachers should use a variety of activities and tailor their instruction to the various intelligences and methods of processing information according to Howard Gardner (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal).
3. **Differentiated instruction and pacing** – No two minds are alike and teachers need to be cognizant of this fact and strive to meet the learning needs of all students, working with their strengths and addressing their weaknesses and respecting their cultural backgrounds. Diversity is the norm...not the exception.
4. **Read aloud – read aloud and read aloud OFTEN!** - Studies have found that the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for reading success in school is “reading aloud” to children. In the words of Katie Wood Ray in *Wondrous Words* (NCTE, 1999), begin every session with reading something aloud, because it is “the single most important classroom structure there is.”
5. **Modeling – Practice what you preach!** Students need to see their teachers (and parents) reading and writing. In addition, teachers need to model “think aloud” strategies in shared and guided reading and writing activities in order to scaffold students learning of good reading and writing habits and strategies.
6. **Comprehension strategies, including building background knowledge** - The ultimate goal of reading is to make “*meaning*” from the text we read. Students need to be taught strategies to pull meaning from the decoded words. Building and using background knowledge is central to comprehension, followed by Zimmerman and Hutchins other keys to comprehension: creating mental images, asking questions, making inferences, determining importance, synthesizing and using “fix-up” strategies when needed.
7. **Practice, practice, practice!** – Students need LOTS of time to independently practice reading and writing.

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8. **Strategies for decoding text that include meaning (semantic), structure/language (syntactic) and visual (graphophonic) cues** – Teachers need to arm their students with a battery of strategies to figure out unfamiliar words and to monitor their reading. An example of strategies might be as follows:

To help myself read, I can...

1. Check the picture.
2. Go back and read it again.
3. Get my lips ready.
4. Does it sound right? Does it look right? Does it make sense?
5. Find chunks I know.

9. **Word study – working and playing with words** – Students need explicit instruction and lots of practice in sight word recognition, phonics and morphemic analysis. Good readers are good decoders.

10. **Writing** – Writing mirrors reading. It is conceptually different to “encode” rather than to “decode,” and strengthening writing will strengthen reading and vice versa. Writing needs to include immersion into the study of mentor texts and the authors that write them. It needs to include teaching students to think like writers and to read like writers.

My philosophy is based on the following resources for the teaching of reading and writing:

Combs, M. (2006). *Readers and writers in primary grades: a balanced and integrated approach*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education

Calkins, L. M. (2001). *The art of teaching reading*. New York: Addison-Wesley Longman.

Calkins, L. M. (1994). *The art of teaching writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ezell, H. & Justice, L. (2005). *Shared storybook reading: building young children’s language and emergent literacy skills*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.

Fox, M. (2001). *Reading magic: why reading aloud to our children will change their lives forever*. New York: Harcourt.

Keene, E. & Zimmerman, S. (1997). *Mosaic of thought: teaching comprehension in a reader’s workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Levine, M. (2002). *A mind at a time*. New York: Schuster & Schuster.

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Nettles, D. (2006). *Comprehensive Literacy Instruction in Today's Classroom: The Whole, the Parts, and the Heart*. New York: Pearson.

Trelease, J. (2001). *The read-aloud handbook (fifth edition)*. New York: Penguin Books.

Wood Ray, K. (1999). *Wondrous words: writers and writing in the elementary classroom*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Zimmerman, S. & Hutchins, C. (2003) *7 keys to comprehension: how to help your kids read it and get it!* New York: Three Rivers Press.