

Don Holdaway.
THE FOUNDATIONS OF LITERACY.
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Learning to read can be a joyful and natural process. In 1908, Huey wrote concerning children who learn to read by themselves, "they grow into it as they learned to talk, with no special instruction or purposed method, and usually such readers are our best and most natural readers." (p. 330) In 1980, Holdaway's book is a refreshing "child watcher's" guide to beginning literacy and to literacy failure, especially in view of a long history of language learning as a natural process, yet also of continued public anxiety about falling literacy standards.

Holdaway generates a remarkable congruency and balance between theory and practice, with insight, wit and admirable respect for the language learning potential of young children. Anyone who has been following language learning theory and research for the past decade will not be surprised by his theoretical stance on literacy as a developmental, natural process rather than as a skills-item-oriented product, nor by his strong emphasis on a language environment which is invitational and emulative rather than prescriptive and instructional. A recurring leitmotif in each chapter is that "literacy begins with immersion in an environment in which the skill is used in a purposeful, active, and meaningful way."

The book is a personal synthesis of Holdaway's experiences as teacher, clinician, programme developer, and researcher in language learning, as well as a scholarly exploration into the process towards literacy. He moves the reader from hypotheses (Chapter I), through a coherent theory of language learning as a developmental model (and perhaps "the basic model for literacy learning," Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 8), to its implications for classroom instruction and suggestions for effective, diagnostic teaching (Chapters 4, 6, 7, 9); terminating with a challenge to the entire educational enterprise to adopt an authentic conservative approach to literacy in which "basic equals meaningful."

Chapter I defeats the notion of conscious rule application, ritualized in daily purple passion sheets, and lays a firm foundation for looking at literacy as a complex learned process within a developmental framework in which "the child's own system acts as an amazingly sensitive teaching machine."

Holdaway points out that in spite of linguistic science's impressive thirty year contribution to language knowledge and to the current richness of semantic theory, the propensity of most researchers is to concentrate on more accessible surface structure problems (i.e., of syntax and phonology) and to avoid deeper complex semantic and sociolinguistic questions. He returns to this issue in Chapter 8, arguing the need for more carefully designed, descriptive,

longitudinal research which provides a clear picture of individuals engaged in a natural process towards literacy; and cautioning that any theory or practice of literacy teaching which fails to take into account the deep and powerful implications of language in the whole personality, fails at the most fundamental level.

His succinct sketch in Chapter 2, of how present and past methodologies measure up to the developmental model represented in spoken language, spans three generations. The "Great Debate" ends with an eclectic approach of loosely tied-together models, aptly dubbed by R. Van Allen the "Dab-a-Do curriculum." Whereas the alphabetic/phonetic debate grotesquely reduced a receptive language skill to a performance skill, Holdaway believes greater harm was done during the Phonetic/Look-Say reign. Proponents of both approaches influenced publishers to control students' advancement through insipid "See Spot Run" readers, which lacked literary worth, blighted children's natural language use and encouraged both children and parents to fool the teacher by learning each book by heart. Holdaway signals the advent of the language experience approach as the first real attempt to satisfy children's natural aspirations to use the symbols of print to encode personal meanings. He sees an answer to failures to achieve literacy in the close links between early reading and early writing recently established by the exciting research of M. Clay on young children's natural development of spelling generalizations and conventions of print, and finds increasing support for the principle of approximation as a crucial and healthy facet of literacy development.

Chapters 3 and 4 study the natural and early "reading-like behaviour" of high progress pre-school readers within a context of shared book experience and book handling, and through some fascinating and delightful transcriptions of young children's re-enactments with their favourite books. Holdaway's evidence and that of Clarke, Durkin, and Clay strongly suggest that children with a background of book experience since infancy develop a complex range of attitudes, concepts, and skills predisposing them to literacy, and underscore the fact that even infants are working conscientiously at developing their own language "face," monitoring their own performance in a self-regulative manner. Holdaway finds similar confirmation for the psycholinguistic model of language learning in the incidence of early "writing-like behaviour" which displays the same characteristics of initiative and approximation. The learnings which emerge for the reader and are thoughtfully summarized at the end of Chapter 3 include such *motivational factors* as children's high expectations from all aspects of print; *linguistic factors* which show children operating at a level of deep semantic processing, manipulating their own syntax to the deep syntactical structure of the text and experimenting with complex transformations; and *operational factors* which also show children mastering self-monitoring, predicting, structural, and imaginative operations, all essential strategies for handling written language both in context and context-free situations.

Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 tease out the ramifications of his model in actual

classroom experiments conducted by Holdaway in Auckland, and create an insightful picture of what “emergent literacy” may look like in first, second and third year programmes. His approach is clearly patterned on the early experience of his successful readers in the previous chapters, and on sound principles of language acquisition. Particularly interesting in these chapters is Holdaway’s detailed description of how prediction can be used in the shared book experience, “unison activities,” and cloze exercises, by inducing children to make gap-filling responses within the natural flow of story language and authentic literature. The colourful pictures of young children in his study groups responding to the total environment of literacy, pleasure, and aesthetic excitement, coupled with his impressive list of teacher-tested techniques which allow children to develop literacy in natural ways, should enrich our traditional notions of reading readiness and challenge the instructional assumptions which underlie our carefully graded reading programmes. The work of David Doake and Judith Newman (Acadia University) demonstrate that Holdaway’s shared book experience and the hypothesis model of literacy are having a significant impact on the schools of Nova Scotia as well.

Chapter 5 refines the hypothesis model of language learning to account for the various cognitive and perceptual strategies employed by readers, underscores the importance of teacher understanding of how language processes operate, and clearly distinguishes between helpful and harmful interventions. An important insight to be drawn from this chapter for both teacher and researcher is the sensitive observation of children’s actual language behaviour while engaged in genuine learning activities, rather than in what James Britton labelled “dummy runs.” As a guide to diagnostic teaching, Holdaway includes useful procedures for recording such behaviour and keeping “running records” for later comparison and reflection. Whereas Chapters 6 and 7 provide teachers with imaginative strategies for presenting print to children, teachers who opt for “strategies” as a suitable concept with which to refer to instructional objectives may also wish to consult the following complementary resources: (1) Goodman and Burke, *Reading Strategies: Focus on Comprehension*, (2) James Moffat, *Interaction Series*, (3) Peter Doughty, *Language in Use*. Chapters 7 to 9 address such issues as integrating principles, materials, and methods in a developmental setting; controlling task difficulty; and preventive programmes which include sensitive observation, timely intervention, establishment of self-regulation in the learner, and multi-disciplinary team work. The final chapters return to Holdaway’s theoretical stance that every human purpose has a linguistic correlative, and explore the extent to which language learning is dependent on integrated human functioning and how such functioning can be induced in both young children and adults.

Chapter 8 manifests a certain professional “chutzpah” as he attempts to yoke theory and practice more firmly together, but with the acknowledgment that whereas the literature on language learning (Britton, Vygotsky, Halliday) is highly suggestive, the actual empirical research is rather slim. His treatment of

Britton and Vygotsky is obviously sparse, perhaps the only noticeable weakness in his scholarship, but his delineation of Halliday's sociolinguistic view of language and characterization of language functions is clear and accurate. A more extensive explication of the classroom implications of Halliday's functional analysis of meaning, and the making of three distinctions — (1) learning language, (2) learning through language, (3) learning about language — would have been particularly helpful to teachers confronted with the complexities of a multilingual setting, as well as to those who find themselves besieged by the Back to Basics movement with its pedantic concern for surface structure correctness. Holdaway quotes one of Halliday's central tenets that "language learning is learning how to mean," then tantalizes the reader with an elusive, unexplained statement that "one cannot teach language without messing with reality."

Holdaway's model reminds us of the deeply creative involvement which is demanded of every language user, and that to achieve Halliday's linguistic potentiality the learner must be productive, actively questioning, risk-taking, intrinsically motivated, and self-regulative. However, Holdaway concludes his exploration on a sardonic if not pessimistic note. To introduce literacy as a self-actualizing experience and genuinely generative exploration will be next to impossible for teachers, until the entire educational enterprise is prepared to deal with one of the more sobering conclusions of his enquiry: that preset instructional shibboleths, institutional priorities, public attitudes, and professional-client relationships inhibit children's ability to become literate, and that more often than not the children who are failing in literacy are those who are most conscientiously doing what they are told.

For readers interested in pursuing some of the theoretical issues in more detail, Holdaway has provided extensive and interesting notes on each chapter. His reference section is reasonably up to date and comprehensive, the only glaring omissions being the work of Douglas Barnes, James Moffet, and Courtney Cazden. Despite the sparsity of Canadian content in his reference sections on children's books and materials, it is a pleasure to recommend this book because of its theoretical clarity, amazing congruency between theory and the realities of practice, and truly important message: that comprehending and becoming literate, albeit a complex social matter, is a highly personal creative and natural endeavour.

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