

1 The Mind and the Word

Anyone who writes about learning has to admit that nobody can prove that one method of teaching categorically surpasses another. We all know that learning, for each of us, takes place all the time; the world is coming to us constantly, and our minds, through our bodies and through our conscious processes, are constantly assimilating bits and pieces of that world and shaping them into patterns of ideas and expectations. We are more full of receptors than we can possibly be aware: indeed, an incredible amount of our knowledge comes to us unconsciously. Furthermore, the learning process is so subtle and often so nearly imperceptible that even theories of genetically transferred knowledge continue to flourish despite the efforts of the social and behavioral sciences to assert the cultural, environmental basis of learning. The rise of cognitive science, which has given us such invaluable metaphors as *right-brain* and *left-brain* thinking, represents nothing so much as our recognition of the mystery of learning.

Of course, once we acknowledge the mystery of learning, the more open we should become to new and varied ways of teaching. Even more important, we should become more fascinated observers of our children as they learn—we should become students of our students. Perhaps the most compelling feature of the best writing about children's learning of language over the past few decades has been its fascinated focus on the child. From Piaget to Donaldson to Graves, these writers give us the great pleasure—adventure, really—of hearing how young minds explore the world and shape it, make sense of it, through what they say and write. Who can resist, for example, the wonder in a writer such as John Holt (1967) as he reports in his diary the discoveries of twenty-five-month-old Lisa?

Later, Lisa walked round and round the balloon, singing, more or less, her own version of "Ring-around-a-rosie." As she sang it, she began to change it, until before long it had become an entirely different song. Much of what she says, sings, and does, is like this; it starts out as one thing, and gradually turns into another. A musician might call it variations on a theme. (5)

We come to know real people through this research, and this is probably its most important lesson. Rather than comparing educational

“treatments” and attempting to measure “results” through numerical comparisons, these scholars look at many individuals, observing each child closely and trying to build, as might a poet, as full an understanding as possible of what is happening in the child and in the world the child affects. These writers take a very optimistic view of children. They trust them, as James Britton said all teachers must, to show us parents, teachers, and researchers how to teach and how to observe. For those of us who must daily attempt to mediate between our students and the mandated curricula of schools and school boards, this open-minded attention to the children, this research attitude, would also seem the best, maybe the only, way of letting us know what to teach and when.

You might wonder why I've begun this little book on *language across the curriculum* with this brief exclamation on attitudes and research methods. I've started this way because my practice, my reflection, and my talk with other teachers and parents on this phenomenon have led me to realize that language across the curriculum is not primarily a teaching method or a set of activities, but is basically a way to describe fundamental principles that some teachers bring to, and have learned from, their calling. Beyond this, language across the curriculum also describes how all of us—at any age—do a great deal of our learning. Language across the curriculum can be nurtured or hindered through methods and activities, but even the soundest of methods will be hollow and inflexible if the teacher doesn't believe in and actively understand this way of thinking about learning. It is not a coincidence that the teachers and researchers who have written most compellingly about language across the curriculum have “discovered” it, as it were, after countless hours of watching, listening to, and talking with children. They have discovered that language across the curriculum is something that happens continuously in classrooms and in homes and on playgrounds, whether we wish it to or not, and that much learning—when we really mean learning, not just clock-watching—can't happen without it. It may be possible, of course, to learn without language, if by language we mean only words and other symbols; after all, we recognize faces, imitate actions, and form a multitude of other impressions without the tools of language. Nevertheless, when we speak of *curriculum*, we mean almost exclusively a reality that is presented to us through words and symbols, either written or spoken. And in this context, researcher after researcher has found that to own, to know, anything of the world requires the child's manipulation of it through words and symbols. It follows from this that to encourage language across the curriculum, methods and activities would include *anything* students do and teachers design that brings into the learning process as much language use—talking, writ-

ing, listening, reading—as possible. The concept requires further that teachers exploit imaginatively, as occasions for learning, anything that children want to talk and write about.

Given this definition, a language-across-the-curriculum attitude implies the restructuring of curricula away from so-called “coverage” of content and toward creation of opportunities for such means of learning as discussions, games, and in-class writing projects. Since conversation and composing will invariably spark a group to new ideas and unpredicted curiosity, this definition also implies the willingness of adults (e.g., teachers and principals) to let the learning move as it may, at least within broad limits.

Chapter two will “flesh out” the theory of language across the curriculum through a summary and analysis of the landmark research in this field over the last two decades. It will also touch on the major disciplines in order to cite significant research and to suggest practical techniques for bringing a learning-through-language approach to bear on the teaching of all subjects.

The largest portion of this small book, chapters three through seven, will take you into five classrooms and introduce you to five teachers whose nurturing of learning through language, in every subject area, shows the imagination and commitment I’ve described. You will meet these teachers not only through my narratives but also through their own words, as they describe further details of their practice and how that practice has been shaped by theory and experience. I’ve chosen these five for various reasons. First, all are recognized in their schools and in their region as excellent teachers, professionals who have studied principles of classroom research and have written about the learners they lead. Second, their students represent grades one through six, thus providing the reader with numerous examples of how language across the curriculum occurs among children of widely varying interests and levels of sophistication. Third, these teachers work in different types of classes and with students to whom the system gives distinctive, often isolating, labels: learning disabled, speech impaired, gifted and talented, and, of course, “regular.” These differing situations show how language across the curriculum can cut across and often blur—in a positive way—these distinctions. Finally, I chose these teachers because the richness of their work makes it easy for me as the observer to describe scenes and projects on which fellow teachers can exert their own imaginative analysis.

Reference

Holt, John. *How Children Learn*. New York: Dell, 1967. Rev. ed., 1983.