



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Conditions for Learning*

“When one teaches, two learn.”

~ often attributed to Robert Half

BACKGROUND

Do you remember learning to ride a bike? It is not likely that you happened upon a bicycle, just knew its purpose, and hopped on to cycle down the road. Your interest was probably piqued by the sight of a sibling or neighborhood child riding a bike. Your friends may have talked with you about riding a bike and a parent may have held onto the bike while you made your first attempts. You might have used training wheels for a while. Encouragement from others was more useful and motivating than having your failures pointed out to you. When you finally got the hang of riding that bike all by yourself, you called “Look at me” to anyone and everyone who would listen. Other people played a role in your learning. Whether learning to ride a bike, use a computer or read a book, learning can be enhanced through social interactions. A well-developed learning environment takes advantage of this social nature of learning (Cambourne, 2002; Holdaway, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).

What are characteristics of a classroom that capitalize on the role of social interactions in learning? Brian Cambourne (1995), an educational anthropologist from Australia, has been researching learning, especially literacy learning, since the early 1970’s. He has identified eight conditions or prerequisites that promote literacy learning:

- Immersion - saturating the learner with literacy experiences.
- Demonstration – modeling literate behaviors, formally and informally.
- Expectation – learners “get the message” that they can and will learn.
- Responsibility – learners choose what they will “try out” or explore intellectually as they are continuously immersed in demonstrations of literate behaviors.
- Approximations – learners approximate literacy behaviors at their own level of development. They are not required to understand and use all aspects of literacy

appropriately before attempting to use what they do know.

- Employment – opportunities to use and practice what they are learning alone and with others.
- Response – formal and informal feedback.
- Engagement – learners must actively participate in literacy experiences. Learners are more likely to engage in literacy activities when the other conditions are present.

Don Holdaway (2000), a member of the International Reading Association’s Hall of Fame, describes similar conditions for learning:

- Demonstration – immersion in environments of skill use that lead to learners’ engagement in approximating what they have observed.
- Participation – learners choose which demonstrations (responsibility) to approximate. The teacher (formally or informally) often responds to these approximations on the spot.
- Role Playing or Practice – Holdaway emphasizes the importance of self-correction. This is a form of self-response that supports the development of “learning-to-learn” (p. 15).
- Performance – “an appeal for group acknowledgement, not an appeal to be judged better than the others” (p. 16).

These conditions do not exist in isolation. For example, a learner’s ability and willingness to approximate behaviors in which she has not been immersed and seen demonstrated is unlikely. Both Cambourne and Holdaway have described conditions for learning in isolation but emphasize the synergy between them in actual practice.

These conditions provide a foundation for learning that should be woven throughout all aspects of the classroom environment. Cambourne (2000) described three elements of the learning environment that impact literacy learning. They include:

- the physical environment, including materials,
- interactions between the teacher, learners and the materials, and
- routines and events.

Environment and Materials

The physical environment should have an abundance of print with which learners can interact. A classroom library stocked with diverse genres (fiction, historical fiction, biographies, autobiographies, expository text on a variety of topics, poetry, magazines, newspapers, texts on tapes or CD's) at a variety of difficulty levels is critical. Resources such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and word walls can be useful when students employ them in their approximations of literacy behaviors. *Do students have the opportunity to take responsibility for their learning by choosing the text they will read?*

Content area teachers can stock their classroom libraries with materials that are relevant to their subject matter. The classroom text may be more difficult than some students can read, but a plethora of materials at many levels can serve as a scaffold for below level readers. Learners can access topic information through supplemental texts available through a classroom library. Math teachers could collect biographies and autobiographies of mathematicians. Some narrative texts include rich information about a variety of topics and support content learning. For example, *Tangerine* by Edward Bloor, includes information about growing oranges, soccer, sink holes, osprey, and the impact of so much peat in Florida's soil.

A classroom library is not the only way to enrich the physical environment. Word walls, posters, journals, written directions, class newsletters, labels and displays of student work provide additional reading materials. Teacher creativity leads to unlimited opportunities to get students reading – passing “legal” notes and putting poetry on the bathroom wall are but two examples.

Seating arrangements impact opportunities for students to respond to each other. Primary classrooms where learners typically sit in groups at tables and work at stations lend themselves to many interactions. As we move up the grades, the prospects for interactions decrease without special efforts to arrange the physical environment or ways students work to promote opportunities for responses among learners.

Interactions Among Teachers, Learners, and Materials

Many conditions for learning live within the interactions among teachers, learners and materials. For example, immersion does not simply mean surrounding a learner with reading materials. It also means immersing students in many demonstrations of literate behaviors through shared, guided, and independent reading as well as through teacher talk, discussions, and authentic literacy experiences.

Explicit instruction that includes deliberate demonstrations of “those covert and invisible processes, understandings, knowledge and skills” (Cambourne, 1999, p. 126) students must master to become independent readers is critical. Teacher talk is not the only way to provide these demonstrations. Students demonstrate ways to understand and use literate behaviors as they work together and talk about how they accomplish their work. Systematic instruction based on knowledge of the students' current abilities is also important. Teachers who know their students, through formal and informal assessment and observation, can make good decisions about the type of learning activities in which to engage students. Learners will be more engaged if they expect to approximate reading behaviors successfully.

Read alouds and book talks provide opportunities to immerse students in a wide variety of texts. Read alouds should not be confined to narratives. Teachers should also read aloud newspaper and magazine articles, poetry, memos sharing information relevant to students, and anything else they can find of interest to their students. In addition to demonstrating fluent reading of different genres, teachers may engage students in new topics. Teachers are not the only ones who can read aloud or introduce new books. Classroom guests and the students themselves can also use these opportunities to employ their own learning and receive validation (response) as members of the learning community.

Having a well-stocked classroom library is not enough. Students need time and opportunity to employ those texts as they “practise their developing control in functional, realistic, and nonartificial ways” (Cambourne, 1995, p. 187). *Is the classroom library easily accessible to learners or does the teacher decide who will read what? Does the teacher expect learners to take responsibility for choosing text to read? Does the teacher provide time for students to interact with texts in the classroom library?* Learners need time to approximate reading self selected materials as well as classroom texts. In addition to providing explicit, systematic demonstrations of literate behaviors, the teacher must expect students to employ those behaviors by providing time.

Opportunities for response or feedback must be “relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, and non-threatening” (Cambourne, 1995, p. 187). In addition to providing feedback themselves, teachers should orchestrate an environment where students frequently respond to each other about their reading. Gee (1992) describes these responses (discourse) as “socially accepted association[s] among ways of using language, of thinking, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’” (p. 22). These associations promote student engagement in the literacy activities of the classroom which promotes students taking responsibility for their own learning. Smith (1988) describes these interactions as opportunities to “join a literacy club” where approximations are acceptable and encouraged by other “club members” at varying levels of mastery.

Holdaway (2000) reminds us of the importance of relationships in learning environments. Learning is enhanced when relationships are warm and students feel comfortable approximating reading behaviors at all skill levels. Students are motivated intrinsically by their ability to self-correct some of their own misunderstandings. An atmosphere that validates a student’s “membership” in the learning community, regardless of skill level, is powerful. Learners are more likely to risk approximations when they are free to risk exposing their struggle toward master of literate behaviors.

Routines and Events

The teacher’s expectation that each student can learn to read and that learning to read well is a worthwhile endeavor is demonstrated through the time devoted to routines and events in the classroom. For example, if the teacher states that reading is important but rarely provides time for reading, a mixed message is sent.

Examples of schedules that include time for a variety of literate activities have been provided by Just Read, Florida! Students need opportunities to observe demonstrations by the teacher and peers during whole and small group activities. Providing a variety of literacy experiences (whole group, small group, independent reading) frees some of the teacher’s own time for individual and small group conferencing (response). Responses to students should be ongoing and take advantage of the teachable moments that arise when addressing the specific challenges a learner faces with a specific text.

Robert Gagne, a former Florida State University professor, provides a framework for infusing the

conditions of learning into an explicit teacher directed lesson. The instruction design he describes is broken into three parts: lesson orientation, lesson presentation, and lesson assessment.

- Lesson Orientation – engage the learner’s interest and display the expectation that students will be successful.
- Lesson Presentation – immerse the learner in demonstrations of the skill or concept to be learned.
- Lesson Assessment - learners accept responsibility for their learning, employing the skills or concepts. Response is provided based on the accuracy of the learner’s approximation.

The teacher should expect learners to be responsible for making choices about what they read some of the time and to engage in real reading (employment and approximation) by providing time for independent reading. One way to immerse students in independent reading is to establish Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) time. A number of names have been used for this, e.g., Drop Everything And Read (DEAR), Read Any Place (RAP), Be Excited about Reading (BEAR).

Students have opportunities to give and receive responses from the teacher and their peers when classroom time is regularly devoted to sharing through book talks, read alouds and other social interactions related to reading. Guest readers or authors provide additional opportunities for demonstration and response.

CONCLUSION

The conditions for learning are relevant to all learning, not just literacy learning. Many examples in various contexts illustrate this. When examining tailoring apprentices in Liberia, young violinists using the Suzuki method and people learning to play computer games independently, these conditions were present (Cambourne, 2002). Holdaway (2000) describes how these conditions support the development of oral language and provide ways to interact with others in various social situations. Teachers will continually improve their practice as they work within environments that incorporate these conditions for learning. As teachers themselves are exposed to many models of effective instructional practices and their approximations are accepted, they develop as the maestro of learning in their classrooms.

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