



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Developing a Common Language*

Developing a Common Language

Developing a common language among members of a community is essential for effective and efficient communication. This principle is well established in the business world leading to higher profits and sustainability. In fact, many major corporations have found that developing and using a common language is essential to creating common understanding of their way of work. Examples can be found in almost any field including manufacturing, health care, and entertainment/tourism. In manufacturing, the sales force must clearly describe the performance and usefulness of the product to customers while employing the proper language of the production company. Similarly, in the health field, the pharmacology industry must be clearly attuned to the language of nurses and doctors. When there is a breakdown in communication there can be disastrous financial and personal losses.

Consider the common language used at Walt Disney World that defines both the culture and the way of work. All staff members who work on site (on stage) are called *cast members*. Every waitress and store clerk plays an important role in our enjoyment of the theme parks. A “clerk” is not just a salesperson, but a *cast member* who plays a part by providing service, atmosphere and the appropriate aura of the venue in which he or she serves. Using the terminology “*cast member*” is a specific reminder that they are “on stage” and of the behaviors that define their performance. Behind the scenes employees have *roles*, not jobs. Each *role* is essential to the production of the larger drama which is the Walt Disney World experience. The word “job” has a connotation of an individual showing up to do an isolated task; a *role* brings to mind an image of an essential person who enables the mission to be accomplished. Language in this case expresses the organizational vision and the personal responsibilities of each individual.

All world cultures develop a language that expresses their particular world view. Think of the Eskimos, who need more than 50 words to express their experience of snow, whereas people from the lower 48 states need only one word for snow (Bryson,

1990). For most of us living in areas of moderate temperatures we have enough descriptive phrases to communicate effectively in our culture concerning snow. Our vocabulary matches our needs and emotions and suffices for our communication needs related to snow (Romaine, 1994). This example shows that our thinking is not controlled or limited as in the theory of linguistic determination, but we are definitely affected by the dimensions of our language and our ability to use it effectively.

In the culture of our schools, a concept may not exist until it has been experienced, named, and its meaning communicated. For instance, participating in interactive vocabulary instruction may be necessary to understand the full impact on students’ vocabulary learning, engagement, and application of new words. Cazden (1981) refers to this process of literacy experience leading the development of concepts as “performance before competence,” while Clay (1998) describes it as “acts to awareness.” Learning is a messy process at best with spurts and starts. Nearly all learners progress through stages of cognitive dissonance to cognitive clarity. Participation in collegial study and discourse about instructional practices has the ability to empower the participants to reshape their thinking and possibly their models of learning. The process of developing new vocabulary may shape experience and ultimately empower the participants.

Defining Literacy

In order for schools to engage in conversation designed to bring about sustained changes in classroom instruction, it is important to develop a culture of learning and sharing that allows teachers to discuss important issues. Included in developing that culture is the need to find time to establish and develop a common language (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001). Of particular importance is the need to define literacy as it applies to each school and department.

Defining the difference between teaching reading and promoting literacy may be the first step. In defining

terms, many perspectives have to be taken into account. For example, the National Reading Panel's report on reading identifies five elements of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Much emphasis has been placed on direct and explicit instruction as useful for improving learning of these five elements. On the other hand, the International Reading Association (1999) defines reading as...

“a complex system of deriving meaning from print that requires all of the following:

- the development and maintenance of a motivation to read
- the development of appropriate active strategies [strategic actions] to construct meaning from print
- sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension
- the ability to read fluently
- the ability to decode unfamiliar words
- the skills and knowledge to understand how phonemes or speech sounds are connected to print.”

Moreover, Constance Weaver reminds us that “first and foremost, reading means constructing meaning” (2002, p. 3). All of these definitions focus on processing print as a definition of reading.

The definition of literacy is much more complex. Until fairly recently, literacy was defined by the ability to read and write one's own name. That definition has expanded over time to include multiple forms of literacy such as cultural, scientific, computer, media, functional, and political. Literacy then is much more closely related to the specific learning content and includes not only the ability to read and write, but the ability to assimilate information from a wide-variety of texts and mediums (Kane, 2007).

Allowing time for teachers to discuss the broader definition of literacy and identify the skills students need in order to be literate within the context of content learning will promote greater buy-in to implementing literacy as a focus for the whole school.

One way to begin this discussion is to have teachers work together within their grade-levels or content-areas to define for themselves what it means to be literate. The focus on literacy will be quite different

for a kindergarten teacher than for a 5th grade teacher and for a science teacher than for a literature teacher. Allowing time for teachers to engage in this conversation, chart their responses, and share with the whole staff allows all parties to better define what it means to be literate within the school context. The process will also promote discussion revolving around elements of literacy essential to all content and grade levels. Once the staff agrees on a common definition of literacy, the work focusing on identifying specific needs of students can begin.

Strategy or Strategic Action?

Whether in literacy leadership team meetings, in professional learning sessions, or in literacy coaching situations, professional conversations regarding various literacy topics occur on a regular basis. Unfortunately, some of the language and terms used in these discussions have very different meanings for each of the participants. For example, the term *literature circles* is used to refer to anything from Harvey Daniels' model of cooperative learning groups to a group of students sitting in a circle reading. But there is one particularly overworked term which begs for some relief, and that is the word *strategy*.

Consider the following statements:

- A. “Hey, Ms. A, can you give me a strategy to use when I read my biology assignment?”
- B. “My teachers are asking for good strategies they can use to teach inferences.”
- C. “Sam isn't using questioning as a strategy when he reads.”
- D. “Making predictions is a strategy that good readers use.”

Each of the above is representative of the many different contexts in which the word *strategy* is used. The problem is that the word has a different meaning in each context. In statement A, a student is asking for a tool to use to guide his thinking as he reads, while in statement B a reading coach is referring to a teacher's request for instructional practices to use for teaching inferring. In C and D, *strategy* is being used to refer to in-the-head systems that readers assemble to process text. So, how can we give this term a rest and make our language more precise?

One option is to follow the example of Marie Clay. In *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Development*, Clay uses *strategic activities* to refer

to “...mental activities initiated by the child to problem-solve the puzzle of getting the messages from a text...” (2002, p. 34). Similarly, in *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Children* (1996), Fountas and Pinnell refer to the in-the-head strategies which readers employ, but in their text published ten years later, *Teaching for Comprehending and Fluency Grades K-8: Thinking, Talking, and Writing about Reading, K-8* (2006), there is evidence that they have refined their language as they talk about the same in-the-head processes, but refer to them as *strategic actions*.

Let’s consider the general definition of *strategy*: a plan, method, or series of maneuvers or stratagems for obtaining a specific goal or result (Dictionary.com, 2007). When we apply this definition to literacy and think of the systems we assemble as proficient readers, they aren’t planned, but are instead actions we automatically employ as we read. A strategic action then is a plan that we put into action to efficiently assemble those systems. For example, referring back to statements A–D, the student in A is asking for a strategy—a plan—to help him efficiently read his biology text. This might take the form of two column notes, text coding, or any other comprehension monitoring strategic action. This strategic action will support knowing when reading makes sense and when one doesn’t understand.

Developing Common Language with Your Colleagues

How do we get started with this process? Have you begun examining the language used in your learning community? Is everyone on the same page in being clear on what expectations are for students and staff? What does a team meeting look like? Is it interactive, thoughtful, and presented with a clear agenda and procedures so that true outcomes are developed, or is it an adult version of show and tell?

In her book *Redefining Staff Development* (2000), Laura Robb describes self-directed learners as having the following characteristics:

- take risks
- become confident
- focus and concentrate
- become more knowledgeable in their teaching discipline
- be enthusiastic
- become motivated to learn and improve students’ learning

- possess a philosophy of learning
- become more organized, creative, and imaginative
- manage time well
- become an effective decision maker
- self-evaluate and reflect
- set reasonable goals
- become responsive to others
- listen

Do you see these qualities exhibited when your colleagues meet? Think about a professional learning experience that you participated in that was effective. What is your evidence that it was effective for you as a learner, and for your students as learners? Consider using a teacher/staff literacy knowledge inventory to assess knowledge of effective literacy practices. This can be an objective tool in understanding what people know, or don’t know about literacy, as well as building a shared common language among staff.

Closing

Teachers working together as literacy leadership teams can develop commitment to shared goals and inspire collegial action. By developing a specialized language related to literacy, teams may build a solid foundation for their own literacy learning. Teachers can become actively engaged in their own instructional changes, taking control and responsibility for their own learning. As a school team we may become united by a common language and also by considering dissenting views we can clarify our own thinking. When teachers in schools and districts lack a common language and vision we may see the symptoms of the Tower of Babel syndrome which may include confusion and lack of instructional direction.

Developing a common language within a school is essential in order to promote whole-school commitment to improving the literacy of students. Coming to consensus about what it means to be literate is just one of many steps that should be considered when identifying terms necessary to develop a collective culture of commitment to bringing about changes in instructional practices designed to improve student learning.

In order to maximize the productivity of professional discourse, time must be devoted to establishing a common language. We, as literacy educators, realize that in order to best serve our

students' needs, we must continue to deepen our knowledge. Since learning is a social process, conversation must transpire, and if that conversation is to be effective, we must be on the same page. The more specific our language is the more intentional our teaching becomes and the door is opened for that deeper learning to occur for the teacher and student (Puig & Froelich, 2007).

Developing a common language is one of the foundations for a strong professional learning community that supports literacy growth and development across the curriculum. Supporting one another with effective communication skills is one piece of the puzzle for effective literacy leadership teams and quality literacy instruction. Relationships can develop that will encourage and support independent inquiry for all learners.

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