Sixty Years of Language Arts Education: Looking Back in Order to Look Forward

My career in professional education is intertwined with the history of language arts education in the United States and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). So, like any contemporary historian, what I report is influenced by how I experienced it.

I joined NCTE in the 1960s, though I was already teaching for about ten years with a well-developed constructivist perspective on teaching and learning. Throughout the same period, however, the transmission model of teaching was very much in evidence. Over the years, the two models, transmission and constructivist, have ebbed and flowed but neither completely dominated. I reject the pendulum metaphor that characterizes this conflict as swinging from one view of teaching and learning to the other. Rather, I believe that both models maintain their influences on language arts teaching and learning and that they have become more or less prominent for theoretical, social, and political reasons. At the same time, many teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers swing with the political winds without examining what they are asked to do. Sometimes, as in the current era, that may be a means of surviving. But the professionalization of literacy teaching and the development of literacy learning depends on teachers who understand and are committed to what they know is best for their students.

One of NCTE’s goals is to inform teachers so that they become professionally articulate about the paradigms they embrace. I invite you to join my journey and consider the connections between your professional history and your beliefs.

The 1950s and 1960s

My views about constructivist teaching and learning developed throughout my career as a teacher, teacher educator, and researcher, but it started in a progressive teacher education program in Los Angeles in the early 1950s. I came to believe that learners construct their own knowledge as they make sense of the world. As they engage in listening, speaking, reading, and writing they come to understand the nature of using language in all its forms and through diverse contents and in a range of contexts. As my understanding grew, I organized my classroom to be rich in experiences that engaged my students in inquiry about relevant issues. My beliefs were strengthened by my work in summer and after-school camps for the Los Angeles Jewish community centers under the direction of professional social workers. Camping was informed by different philosophies in the same way as professional education. There were camps concerned mainly with “fun” activities for kids. In our camps we involved campers and staff in social learning communities that fostered collaborative relations at the same time that we enjoyed a range of enjoyable, out-of-doors activities.

The McCarthy Era and Teachers

My early teaching years were during the McCarthy era, a repressive time for teachers. The term progressive
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Many are aware of the actors and directors in the movie industry affected by McCarthyism, but few know the degree to which the educational community suffered as teachers were blacklisted, fired, and never allowed to return to their classrooms. I told the superintendent what I knew about Julius Rosenwald as a philanthropist in Chicago. He asked, “This has nothing to do with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg?” (the American couple executed in 1953 on charges of attempting to commit espionage). I said “No,” and I was told to return to the classroom with no apology or further explanation.

I recount this story because in ominous times many American teachers are reluctant to take responsibility for professional decision-making in their classrooms and engage in self-censorship to avoid risks. I, however, continued my focus on progressive education because I was supported by principals and teaching colleagues. We sought the support of parents and read professional works, discussed educational issues with each other, and became aware of the influence of professional organizations. I completed my master’s degree at a time when courses in language and literature included new understandings from linguistics and anthropology. We studied how language was used by adults and students and critiqued the prescriptive ways in which grammar and phonics were being taught in many classrooms. We involved our students in curriculum planning and self-evaluation. We encouraged students to write reflecting on their own experiences. We developed individualized spelling programs based on the words the students selected from their own writing and reading, including words from their work in science, math, and social studies.

A Time of Change in the Country

This period was a time of dynamic change in America that included an ever-widening circle of women and people of color achieving their places in the job market and in the professions. At the time, many professional educators were actively involved in the civil rights movement. Americans were marching for
peace, and peace resolutions were introduced at NCTE’s annual Board of Directors’ meetings.

When my husband and I moved to Detroit, I became part of a cohort of doctoral students at Wayne State University working in an innovative, on-site preservice teacher program. Faculty and students organized a support group called the Center for the Expansion of Language and Thinking (CELT) where we discussed ideas about using children’s literature, the importance of language variation, the role of language in thinking, professional education, and constructivist learning. Our professors encouraged us to participate and present at national conferences, and we became active in NCTE. This was an important development: As one of the oldest professional organizations in the United States, NCTE has a history of helping to advance the teaching of English. But it also has been a platform for all legitimate points of view. Literacy and language are not without controversy, and healthy debate has on occasion moved close to fist fights over grammar, literature, phonics, language variation, not to mention politics. For me and many others, NCTE’s conferences and journals were places to encounter new ideas, speak, publish, meet colleagues, and become professionally visible. Wayne State supported a modest amount of travel, which made it possible for me to move into leadership positions in NCTE.

The teacher education program at Wayne State was a rich learning environment with faculty and students committed to progressive education. We were involved with progressive secondary educators such as Earl Kelley whose workshop techniques were being used with adolescents. Our major professors Ken Goodman and E. Brooks Smith involved us in understanding curriculum development based on engaging students in language and thinking (Goodman, Smith, Meredith, and Goodman).

Children’s and Adolescent Literature

Shelton Root, who edited the “Books for Children” column for NCTE’s Elementary English, involved doctoral students in his teaching and in reviewing children’s and adolescent literature. He organized an annual program to bring authors of children’s and adolescent literature to the university over a two-week period cosponsored by Detroit’s daily newspapers. Busloads of school children came to hear and visit with children’s and young adult writers S. E. Hinton, Lorenz Graham, Charlotte Zolotow, Virginia Hamilton, and many others.

In Dora V. Smith’s 50-year review of the growing force of children’s literature, she documented “the freshness, the originality, the unbelievable variety in themes in text and in illustration represented by this new form [that] has revolutionized writing for little children” (Smith 422). She reported on new information books, easy books, and biographies for young readers. Teachers were being encouraged to organize individualized self-selected reading programs and to involve children in selecting creative writing topics and learning through community resources.

However, some scholars were concerned that using children’s literature in reading instruction would destroy children’s joy of reading while some professors of reading methods courses believed it was important to teach teachers how to use commercial textbooks that involved children in the skills of reading before allowing them to read self-selected trade books. Thirty years later, at the height of the whole language movement, literature became the center of literacy instruction, and there was an explosion of publishing for children and young people.

At the same time, there was a relationship between what was happening in some constructivist language arts classes and the individuals who received the annual NCTE David H. Russell Research Award given for an outstanding body of knowledge. For instance, in 1963, Ruth Strickland received the Russell Award, and in 1967, she went to Walter Loban for their studies of children’s oral language development. In 1968 William Labov received his award for research on dialects and social stratification. The richness of children’s language development was an issue being discussed in

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The 1970s and 1980s

Language arts pedagogy from an interdisciplinary perspective expanded greatly in the 1970s and 1980s, supported by integration of research from psychologists, anthropologists, and linguistics in the new fields of sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics. As researchers studied language use in urban communities, the new understandings about language variation, language development, and language learning and their influences on pedagogy became part of teacher education programs. The importance of building on the child’s mother tongue and valuing every student’s language were common topics in teacher education and conference programs.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) of NCTE passed a resolution in 1972 on the students’ right to their own language, eventually adopted by NCTE. The statement begins:

We affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. (National Council of Teachers of English 2–3)

The resolution led to heated debates about dialect and the growing number of languages other than English that children were bringing into the classrooms. NCTE established committees to consider knowledge about multilingual and multicultural education. These debates about language use in school and the political nature of language policy paralleled discussion for the need for critical literacy as central to language arts curriculum. Similar discussions were taking place in other English speaking countries and at the International Federation of Teachers of English (IFTE) conferences that involved educators and social science researchers from Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, and the United States.

Language across the Curriculum

At the time, the concept of language across the curriculum was popularized by James Britton. The
Bullock report, *A Language for Life*, commissioned by the British government, had a strong influence on the teaching and learning of language arts in the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries. It encouraged language arts educators to view language learning as occurring in every language context and every content area. The international discussions about the nature of language arts continued about how humans use language, how language influences thinking, what constitutes language knowledge, and how such knowledge impacts school curriculum. These discussions also influenced teacher education programs for primary schools (Featherstone, “Experiments,” “Why”).

The NCTE David H. Russell awards in the 1970s and 1980s again show a strong relationship between what was valued as research and constructivist language arts pedagogy. Carol Chomsky received her award in 1971, and Roger Brown won in 1974 for studies on children’s language acquisition. Ken Goodman (1975) received the award for his studies in reading miscue analysis, while Marie Clay (1979) was honored for her studies of New Zealand children’s reading and writing. Louise Rosenblatt (1980) received it for her concepts of reader response and reading transactions. Michael A. K. Halliday’s (1981) Russell Award was for his study of language development in its social settings and Don Graves’s (1982) award was for his work on children’s process writing development. Margaret Donaldson (1983) won for new insights into children’s intellectual development. The Russell Award went to Shirley Brice Heath (1985) for patterns of language in Appalachian communities. And Jerome C. Harste, Carolyn Burke, and Virginia Woodward (1987) were honored for documenting preschoolers’ construction of literacy knowledge.

In this era teachers were involving students in more reading and writing of authentic materials than ever before. Children were invited to write personal narratives and were encouraged to respond to literature. When I was invited to write about the use of authentic evaluation of children’s literacy development, I introduced the term *kidwatching* (Y. Goodman, “Kidwatching”) to highlight the ways that knowledgeable teachers documented literacy development through careful observation of their children’s language interactions. I realized that effective teaching was enhanced by teachers’ careful analyses of their students’ work. Teachers were researchers in these contexts, and their conclusions informed their curriculum.

### Whole Language

During this dynamic interdisciplinary period of language learning and teaching, holistic teachers came to value their own knowledge and experiences. The term *whole language* was popularized by a group of Canadian public school educators in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the late 1970s. Study groups sprang up for practitioners to talk with each other about the importance of what they were learning and how to implement their ideas. They shared their excitement about their vibrant classrooms in which their children constructed language knowledge and meaning. Whole language developed as a grassroots movement among teachers and was also a social movement (Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield) in education that vigorously rejected the transmission model.

Whole language engaged in theme studies and built collaborative social learning communities involving teachers and students, as well as parents and community members. As teachers discovered their voices, they threw away scripted commercial language arts programs. Whole language was not a methodology; it was a philosophy that informed their teaching.

Whole language teacher support groups developed across the United States and Canada where teachers met regularly to explore their ideas, their successes, and failures. They organized conferences to present their ideas, and the Whole Language Umbrella (WLU) emerged as an international organization. It is now a conference of NCTE with a strand of whole language sessions at the Annual Convention, and it holds an annual conference every summer.

With rising professionalism that came with the whole language movement, some educational publishers discovered that teachers eagerly bought professional books in addition to books for children and adolescents. There was an explosion of books and workshops for and by whole language educators.

### The Impact Conferences

The 1980s included my NCTE presidency (1979) at the same time that Dorothy Strickland was president of International Reading Association (IRA).
Charlotte Huck had developed a project during her 1976 NCTE presidency but was not able to obtain adequate financial support. She wanted to organize a conference to showcase the exciting research being done in reading, writing, and oral language during the previous decade and to make this knowledge accessible to teachers and teacher educators. She believed this knowledge would have significant impact on the language arts.

Dorothy Strickland and I enthusiastically collaborated on organizing a set of conferences: Oral and Written Language Development Research: Impact on the Schools, commonly referred to as the Impact Conferences. Over a period of more than five years and with support of the IRA and NCTE executive boards and the NCTE Elementary Section, 18 NCTE and IRA national and regional conferences were held in cities across the United States as well as one in Ireland at the World Reading Congress. Sheila Fitzgerald and Bea Cullinan (NCTE and IRA presidents, respectively, after myself and Dorothy Strickland) extended the conferences to focus on classroom applications and strategies for improving language and literacy instruction. The conferences established the vision of Charlotte Huck: “a new theoretical and integrated base for the teaching of the language arts including reading would be the result and . . . its impact on the elementary school would be great” (Huck).

The Impact Conference presenters included many David H. Russell Award winners, other respected language researchers, and classroom teachers as presenters and planners, who reported their research and discussed the implications for classroom teaching and learning. Evidence from the careful analysis of samples of children’s oral and written language use in homes and schools and from diverse social economic settings supported the constructivist learning theories of Piaget and Vygotsky.

In an NCTE publication based on a conference exploring the real basics in language arts, George Hillocks Jr. contrasted the real basics with the back-to-basics movement as one that moves control over curricular matters out of the hands of English and language arts teachers and puts it into the hands of lay people, administrators and publishers. . . . It implies an ideology . . . which asserts that every question worth consider-
ing education to justify using state and federal law to change the nature of US education.

The Reading Wars

Right after the 1996 US presidential election, an intense campaign in the media portrayed whole language as responsible for “disastrous” declines in reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). In key states, Texas and California, policymakers succeeded quickly in imposing the transmission model on text adoptions and curriculum. The “reading wars” were declared with national magazines proclaiming that whole language was at war with the true science of synthetic phonics.

The US Congress authorized two national panels, with carefully selected members, under the guidance of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. The second of these, the National Reading Panel, produced a report that was quickly digested into a slick paper summary (http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org). The summary was used to write federal law, first in the Reading Excellence Act in the Clinton administration and then in the No Child Left Behind Act of the Bush administration and its central part, Reading First (Garan).

Literacy educators found themselves almost totally marginalized. They had thought that the US Constitution prevented the federal government from controlling education. The ploy was that the law was not compulsory, but states that wanted the money it provided had to comply. The attack focused on whole language, but its effect was to paint all learner-centered practice as unscientific and to muzzle the articulate voices of teachers, researchers, and teacher educators. One intent by the National Business roundtable and some states’ business councils was to limit the economic burdens of public education. Using high-stakes testing as the single measure to judge teacher and student performance can make public education appear to be a failed experiment historically. And the press continues to paint a picture of public education as mediocre at every level. The current Obama administration has continued this direction. Its Race to the Top makes all federal aid competitive and centers around evaluating schools and teachers on the test scores of the students.

The campaign that supports writing the transmission model into law has placed NCTE and other professional organizations in a difficult position. They can oppose the laws or they can accept “a seat at the table” and hope to exert positive or moderating influence. If they do the latter, they can appear to be co-opted and in support of laws their members vigorously oppose. Indeed, these are difficult times for NCTE and for those like me who have devoted our lives to the improvement of language arts education and access to literacy. But even under the uneven conditions that turn sense into nonsense and absurdity into scientific truth, the pursuit of humane, scholarly, and effective language and literacy education goes on.

I am active on four discussion lists where teachers and teacher educators inform each other about the constructivist nature of teaching and learning with references and responses from their own classroom studies. Debates may continue among university researchers about whether teacher-research is “real” research, but teacher-researchers know the value of carefully observing and documenting learning experiences in their own classrooms (Cochran-Smith and Lytle). NCTE Convention programs and journals include articles by teacher-researchers and the influence of their work on language arts pedagogy. Although not as prevalent as in the 1980s, whole language, teacher research, children’s literature, and writing process study groups continue to engage in sustaining their own explorations into language arts curriculum decision making.

The value of teachers as knowledgeable researchers is reflected in the NCTE David H. Russell Research Award, and I refer to this award and others not to validate a hierarchy regarding the role of research, but to suggest that the language arts community recognizes the role of teacher-researchers and honors their work. In 1990 the Russell Award was given to Nancie Atwell for her research on the teaching of writing and reading with middle school students and, in her response to the award, she acknowledged the work of many other published teacher-researchers. In 1999, Vivian Paley received the Russell Award for research on storytelling and dramatic play with preschool and kindergarten
Constructivist Influences

Constructivist influences keep expanding during the 1990s and into the 21st century. Involving young students in inquiry into exploring language and language processes remains a focus in many classrooms. Rather than memorizing rules and searching for single correct answers to teacher questions, children are encouraged to study the language in their communities, explore their own literacy histories, and consider their own reading and writing processes. As an example, when a young author in Don Howard’s second-grade class wonders about the spelling of a word, Don organizes a sidewalk safari where the children explore the print on signs and other written material to discover their own rules and categorizations for the way English spelling works (Y. Goodman, Valuing, 178–79).

Similarly, critical literacy and the role of social constructive views of teaching and learning of language are highlighted by Carole Edelsky, a recipient of the NCTE Outstanding Educator in Language Arts Award. Edelsky explores the role of democracy in ways that involve integrating critical literacy and social constructive views of language learning:

Re-theorizing language education to make it serve education for democracy means highlighting the relationship of language and power . . . trying to understand the connections between the language-power issue and the idea of sociopsycholinguistic process, the idea of literacies as social practices, the idea of reading as transaction . . . keeping the language-power issue central. (255)

In another development, children are having greater experiences with technologies than most of their teachers ever had as they become involved in chat rooms, text messaging, and interactions with their peers. With new technologies, children can inquire into language questions in new ways. The involvement of digital technologies in curricular considerations has been embraced by NCTE through resolutions, major presentations, conference programs, journal articles, and books as we move into the 21st century.

At the same time, however, there is technology for schools using high tech for mindless worksheets in which children fill in the blanks about grammar and phonics. With serious talk of teachers being evaluated and held accountable for students’ scores in order to sustain top-down objectives and standards, NCTE developed its own language arts and reading standards, taking into consideration the knowledge and research from the past 60 years. The federal government rejected those standards. The NCTE Elementary Section Steering Committee suggested that standards “not be mandated and accepted without a process of thinking through what these standards mean” (13). The role of national standards is being debated presently on NCTE blogs and nings, in articles and conference sessions.

Though the research that continues to inform holistic practices in classrooms is being marginalized, it continues. The political nature of education is recognized by educators and researchers who raise the alarm about the future of public education in the United States. The hope that President Barack Obama’s administration would create opportunities for greater innovation for teachers and students is fading. In such a climate, there are teachers who are afraid to speak out. Yet at the same time, those who work in constructivism, to paraphrase a recent NCTE program description, continue to explore topics that provide understandings of critical literacy, inquiry and collaborative learning, and that integrate literacy with other sign systems and knowledge systems, situated in social, historical, political, and cultural contexts.

Closing Thoughts

My professional journey is not over. The ongoing conflict of views makes clear that there is no validity to a swinging pendulum metaphor. Paula Wolfe and Leslie Poynor support my view about the pendulum metaphor that they say is “designed and used to mask the inherent and inevitable political nature of all educational processes . . . and fails to recognize and conceptualize the pressure from the status quo that inevitably enters into the life of any innovation” (15).

The battle continues, and those educators with a constructivist view of education continue to engage in discussions about the efficacy of progressive and holistic education. The innovations of progres-
Progressive educators have been continuously challenged by those who want to control learners and denigrate the achievements of public schools in the United States. Progressive educators still must find ways to articulate our beliefs to the greater public. Earl Kelley’s concern, 40 years ago, remains current. He said that frightened teachers teach only that which is non-controversial and become “more and more tough on youth . . . in the name of high standards” (100).

In this politicized context, language arts educators must be clear about the growing knowledge regarding language, language use, language development, the teaching and learning of oral and written language, and use what they know for the benefit of their students. They must also be knowledgeable about the political forces that frame the arguments and become adept at framing the debate themselves. Pat Shannon observes that teachers and students need “to develop their abilities to read their own histories and cultures, to see their connections with the large social structure and to act according to this new knowledge” (147).

NCTE has made it possible for me to sharpen my own views of language and literacy education. It has given me an audience and, in some instances, a battleground for my ideas. NCTE, as it has through its history, will encourage teachers to think and act professionally. I believe that understanding its history helps future members and leaders to value its achievements and see both its potentials and its limitations. As difficult as it is now for teachers to be true to themselves and their students, I can put today’s events into the context of my personal history. Perhaps it has never been this bad, yet my experience teaches me to expect that sense will overcome nonsense. My journey has shown that during the roughest times, innovative and progressive ideas flourish, and courageous educators take risks to protect and improve the intellectual lives of their students.

Works Cited

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