

Open Court Meeting

One teacher's experience with a district wide presentation of the program, subsequent meeting with an *Open Court* representative, and how it effected her performance evaluation.

The Presentation

We had a district-wide presentation to 4th and 5th grade teachers last week. Before the meeting, I gave my notes from Bess Altwerger's talk to our Language Arts specialist (who attended a couple of WLU Conferences years ago and who is now a phonemic awareness fanatic) and we talked briefly about my stance. The presentation was unbelievable. I can't remember all the phrases that were used, but it was totally slick, cheesy, corporate, conservative. There was all sorts of buzz words used and a bunch of stuff on the importance of sequencing the reading program, analogies of strategies and skills to the knowledge when you're driving that you have to brake to the ability to put your foot on the pedal, an explanation of lexiling—that it's the new way to level books, the integration of language arts, writing workshop, spelling and vocabulary, reading, social studies and science (6 books in all for language arts)—all scripted (literally) and ready for teachers to use for two hours of every morning next year. It was hard to get a read on what teachers were thinking—everyone looked typically exhausted, but some were probably kind of interested. The turn-off for the teachers is whether they have to turn in assessments and samples to the district on a regular basis like we do right now with math. They didn't mention whether we'd really have to.

Anyway, the Language Arts teacher asked me yesterday if I would sit on Thursday with the Open Court sales/support person so that she can address some of my concerns directly. I have the research article from Margaret Moustafa, the e-mail from the LA times, my notes from Bess' talk which compares whole language, the backlash, and these kind of programs in a bunch of different categories. I'm nervous that I won't be thinking on the spot of responses to her and that there will be more of them than just me.

My Notes for Open Court Meeting:

My set of principles (which have been successful)

- love for literature and positive attitudes towards reading
- constructivist, child-centered
- multiple perspectives
- differences, not sameness (re: sequencing skills)
- natural discussions and dialogue that lead to student inquiry and critical thinking
- diverse responses to texts
- encourage choice and responsibility
- real books, real reading

Problems with the program

- scripted—too explicit/tidy
- too many non-authentic L.A. resources
- jury is still out on Open Court's success
- goal towards sameness through scope and sequencing
- leveled texts
- doesn't stand to make teachers smarter and more capable

Questions

- how much flexibility will I have in using my professional judgment?
- how much is this costing OP per student?

Meeting with Representative

Well, I just finished. The Language Arts specialist, the Open Court representative, and I had a 45-minute discussion. I got to start and used the points above. I said that I could compare reading in my class to a Book Club for reasons that were on my think sheet, and I added what's in place in my room that you probably wouldn't see in a Book Club—more of a framework, focused conversations, mini-lessons, more responsibility for the reader. I used some examples of breakthroughs of kids in my class and talked about the books I remember reading when I was little. Then I moved toward concerns about Open Court.

It got heated a few times when she'd say things and I'd disagree. She asked me whether I've considered teaching from another point of view, since I described my experience as only teaching this way that I must not know what it's like to be a phonics-based teacher. She loved telling me, at least twice, how she was a phonics teacher, then a whole language teacher, and she "came back to structure". She's come full cycle and told me she thinks I could too! She told me that one of Ken Goodman's researchers who did initial research for either Open Court or for the president's study realized that everything he was believing was wrong and now he's left camp and joined Open Court. We had a discussion about lexiling, which she said is better than anything at leveling, because in the old days teachers had to use a 'reading formula' that was tedious to figure out the level themselves and now a computer can do it. She said that she agreed that leveling doesn't put trust in kids to choose books themselves, but if Open Court didn't level they wouldn't have any customers. She said that in a whole language classroom the kids could have completely different experiences than other whole language classrooms. She got kind of stern with me when she said that it's really important that kids have the skills this program covers, otherwise they'll have holes. She said that I needed to start valuing test scores because they're not going away. She said that for everything I value there's an Open Court answer for it, such as the theme book—those are the extensions and responses that I said mattered. She mentioned the first year teacher who wouldn't know what to do....I said I had a first day too.....

I think I did a good job but it fell on deaf ears. She didn't even offer me the out for my own class. She said that she hopes I'll come half way and that Open Court will come half way. The Language Arts specialist invited me to join the adoption committee so that I can learn more about Open Court and help them decide how to select Open Court resources for upper grades. I imagined announcing that I was quitting at the end of our conversation. I feel better and not better. (February 2002)

Performance Evaluation

Remember the message I forwarded last year from my colleague going through Open Court challenges? [see above] She just called tonight to tell me that she was marked down on her teacher evaluation because she has not fully enacted the program. The principal [an in-control woman due to retire next year] told her she would reevaluate her next year [instead of the normal 3 year calendar for her contract] if she wanted the chance to fully implement the program and improve her rating. She responded that she might need to think about what she would be doing next year. The response: "Is that a threat?" to which she responded, "Is this?"

She checked the contract and it states that teachers will inquire and learn about their subject area and pedagogy. She told the principal that, who responded, "Well, I didn't know where to put your lack of compliance." The rationale is that we are living in a new time and that compliance with curriculum mandates, rather than taking one's lead from student, is what's expected.

She was a second year teacher colleague of mine 8 years ago when a district curriculum director tried to intimidate me because I wanted time off to go to NCTE. She invited me to take 'leave without pay' and challenged that my colleague and I were going there to make money! [More like spend it!] Is it even possible to take the fight out of good teachers?! As a new employee in the district that year, I was not offered a permanent contract. (June 2004)