Four Book Reviews

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NOTES

For those interested in developing a similar programme for secondary schools or adults, all the activities are among those to be published in Talking With Confidence by Cambridge University Press, July 1995.

The contribution of the La Trobe University DipEd students who agreed to take part in this pilot trial is acknowledged with gratitude.

REFERENCES:


BOOK REVIEWS


Mem Fox's "passionate opinions" are introduced to us as "ammunition" for teachers and parents "who are, this minute, engaged in fighting against the still current skills-and-drills mentality in the teaching of language arts". Her style is lively and anecdotal and her arguments are completely convincing. As the author of the best selling children's book ever in Australia, Possum Magic, as a sought after story-teller and performer, as a teacher educator and an academic, Mem Fox is uniquely and powerfully placed to attacked poor practice in language arts teaching, and this is a timely publication. The book challenges educators to think again about how and why we learn. It is most valuable for teacher trainees to read such a passionate and knowledgeable account of language teaching and learning as an antidote to the often purely academic and joyless approach to teaching language offered in schools and tertiary institutions.

The book is a collection of articles and presentations on various aspects of language arts teaching which retain the charismatic quality of her live addresses. She has a valuable refreshing and irreverent approach to teaching and learning which is people oriented, not "intellectual", which affirms the all important affective aspects of learning, not just the academic ones. For example, she says, "we know intellectually that we should trust our students to learn - after all that's what we preach - but we're only human ... (34). It is the humanity in the approach which shines through the book, inspiring the reader to trust our students to learn". It is an affirmation of the role of significant people, ideas, books, words and excitement for effective learning. In "Notes from the Battlefield" she presents the strongest and best argued affirmation of the fun and the power of writing, and compares this with the lack of power in much school writing. "It seems to me a supreme arrogance on our part as teachers not to see that the granting of power to our children is politically and socially essential". (21) She attacks the "skills and drills" approach to teaching reading with energy and conviction in 'A Fox in Possum's Clothing'', comparing her own significant experiences sharing books and her own writing with the dry and joyless experiences children have with basal readers. In "There's a Coffin in my Office" Mem Fox buries "past mistakes in the teaching of English" (34) in the coffin in her office - "dead ideas, dead theories, and dead practices", and describes how she uses the coffin as a footstool. She is irreverent, too, about current academic research, suggesting that "a great Ph.D. dissertation topic would be 'The Role of Love in the Mastery of Reading'". I hope someone tackles it soon" (52). Many other aspects of teaching and learning are covered in the articles, from the detailed affirmation of "read" writing experiences which are shared with significant people to issues of politics and sexism in literature. All topics are presented with conviction and enthusiasm which make the book a powerful and memorable addition to current writing about teaching, and I highly recommend it for teacher trainees and young teachers.

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Much of the spectacular reform effort over the past decade in Australian schools systems has been directed to increasing efficiency with much less done to improve effectiveness or to make the lives of those involved in schooling more satisfying. Valuing Teachers' Work, like the ACER's 1989 publication by J Lokan and P McKenzie, is an important resource for teacher educators who seek to stimulate classroom teacher's thought and action on matters related to teacher evaluation. Many classroom teachers in Australia have not given informed thought to teacher evaluation since they began teaching. Many have not experienced satisfactory systematic teacher evaluation since they commenced their career. They have little idea of how appropriate teacher evaluation may help them become more effective teachers and make the experience of schooling
more satisfying, both for themselves and the children in their classrooms.

The papers in Valuing Teachers' Work provide a solid basis for challenging teacher's thinking on the topics raised. The book is divided into three parts: (1) Conceptual developments: models and approaches, (2) Contextual developments: state, national and overseas policies, and (3) Case studies of teacher appraisal and evaluation.

The editors offer a career development model of teacher evaluation which entails vertical mobility through various levels of teaching, graded. in exciting possibilities, its successful implementation hinges upon identifying and while the career development model offers a knowledge base. M. Scriven's duties-based model is one attempt. He contrasts this with other forms of teacher evaluation, namely summative evaluation be carried out externally by expert peers, using multiple sources of data and new methods of teacher evaluation be investigated, such as the narrative and the teacher portfolio.

While the career development model offers exciting possibilities, its successful implementation hinges upon identifying and establishing a knowledge base for teaching. As the editors acknowledge, many researchers are attempting to identify the main dimensions of a knowledge base. M. Scriven's duties-based model is one attempt. He contrasts this with other forms of teacher evaluation, namely research-based, administrative, competency-based and peer evaluation, as well as reflective teaching. One of the benefits ascribed to the duties-based model is that it identifies the main dimensions of a knowledge base. M. Scriven's duties-based model is one attempt. He contrasts this with other forms of teacher evaluation, namely research-based, administrative, competency-based and peer evaluation, as well as reflective teaching. One of the benefits ascribed to the duties-based model is that it identifies the main dimensions of a knowledge base. M. Scriven's duties-based model is one attempt. 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with the computers, why they are engaged in these activities and to what effect.

Let us take another pertinent example, as illustration of the difficulties inherent to this survey. The questionnaire asks principals to list the software used by teachers in their schools, for teaching purposes. The analysis of responses to this question, are tables (tables 16–17, pp. 16-17) of titles and frequencies of software mentioned. For both primary and secondary schools, we find that generic software packages (Claris Works and Microsoft Works) are mentioned the most (apart from Carmen Dan Diego, a simulation). The author concludes from this, that “beyond the generic titles such as typing tutors, spreadsheets, word processors and Logo, there is not a lot of software listed that would indicate wide use across subject areas within schools. This could also reflect the lack of access for students in subject areas such as science, music or graphics, or even a lack of knowledge or access by teachers to the available software applications in those areas” (p. 16).

Such a conclusion only serves to draw attention to the difficulties of concluding anything of value from data describing frequencies of software titles mentioned (and this not even from teachers but from principals, speaking for teachers). Generic software titles (e.g., software that is not limited to any one subject or curriculum area, but relevant to all. So the high frequency with which this type of software is mentioned suggests, if anything, potentially wide use of computers across subject areas. Indeed, Professor Heppell indicates that the Information Technology components across the entire England and Wales National Curriculum could be delivered with such generic, open-ended, typically content free tools (Heppell, 1993, p. 231). Even more convincingly, Professor Heppell points out that “lap tops create positive changes in the main thing we should learn” (my italics).

A more cogent finding that Dr Shears himself refers to closely, further on in his book, that “lap tops broaden horizons”; “spellchecker overcomes meaninglessness (given the five year gap in the data) comparisons of numbers—particularly, that Victoria of today has a lower (better) ratio of children per computers for teaching, than other countries of the world possessed in 1989 (pp. 10, 21).”

The third and final section of this book is given over to ten case-studies, each written, as far as can be ascertained, by those individuals responsible for administering the project in respective schools. As already indicated, these are mixed in quality; but importantly, they lack overall coherence and meaning. They read as a series of short, unconnected, project reports (rather than detailed case–studies in an ethnographic sense), and consequently there is a strong need for an editor to distil the more salient and change theorists point out all too readily—that it is dangerous to make such comparisons in the first place, without also addressing the reasons for them (something which Dr Shears fails to even attempt), (Fullan, 1991). In this case, in the world of the researches of the IEA study, we are not comparing like with like:

“The influencing set of factors (on the implementation of computers) differs depending on the stage of implementation in which a school or a country finds itself at a certain moment. Therefore differences are found between countries when comparing reports at a certain point in time. These differences can, amongst other things, be explained by the countries’ policy on Information Technology in Education. Differences in stages of development are found when comparing the situation within one country over a period of time” (Reinen, Pelgrum & Plomp, 1995, p. 7) (my italics).

This is, it is not that Victorian school principals are indicating that we still facing the same problems of computer implementation we did some five years ago; but rather, that the cycle of implementation in computer education in Victoria, is at a point now that other countries and states of the world might already have experienced. Different countries are likely to experience the same implementation cycles but at different times and for different durations; thus, the use of computers in 1995 is likely to be at a different stage in implementation, than the use of computers elsewhere in the world. However, it would seem that Dr Shears misses this point altogether, preferring to focus on project reports and the IEA software, to the obvious fact that software, the more integration” (Pelgrum, 1995, p. 147).

One very perplexing point repeatedly made by the main author, Dr Shears, is that this book makes “no attempt to ascertain the nature, quality or amount of the usage” (pp. 11, 12, 140) of computers by teachers for teaching or by learners for learning. This really is a strange point to make in a book which is centrally concerned with computers in schools.

Computers and Schools reads as an unpublished project report—and in all senses, would have served its authors better, if it had stayed as such.

REFERENCES


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This textbook in Educational Psychology is divided into five parts: (a) background, (b) student characteristics, (c) learning and motivation, (d) teaching skills and strategies, and (e) assessment, evaluation and testing.

The relatively brief section on background describes research approaches on which educational psychology is based, and the objectives of teaching.

Part 2, on student characteristics, begins with a chapter on intelligence discussing the ways it has been defined, conceptualised and measured, and the research evidence on a number of issues of interest in the area of intelligence. This is followed by a single chapter on the development of cognition, language and personality. The section ends with two chapters on human diversity and schools, which cover cultural factors, gender, and children with special needs.

Part 3, which discusses learning and motivation, begins with a chapter mainly on operant conditioning. This is followed by a chapter on cognitive processing which surveys a wide range of issues including short-term and long-term memory, schemata, problem-solving, metacognition, and transfer of learning. The final chapter in this section investigates motivation, factors related to it, and how it influences learning.

The fourth part, on teaching skills and strategies, contains three of the longest chapters in the book. The first is on lecturing and group discussion. The second is on individual instruction, independent learning and some of the less traditional forms of instruction now gaining popularity, such as distance education and computer assisted learning. The third chapter is about strategies that can be used in the classroom to encourage learning and to manage behaviour.

The final part of the book, on assessment, evaluation and testing, is a nicely integrated section by a single author beginning with a chapter which introduces some of the basic concepts such as norms, reliability and validity. The second chapter critically evaluates standardised tests — their use, abuse, and interpretation. The final chapter, and one of the largest in the book, discusses the use of formal and informal methods of assessment of how well students have attained curriculum objectives.

There are nine authors, each responsible for chapters within his or her own areas of interest. The book is attractively presented and easy to use. At the beginning of each chapter, at the beginning of each section, and at the beginning of the book, overviews are given of what is to follow. Each chapter also ends with a summary. Levels of headings are also given at the beginning of each chapter. These headings as well as marginal key terms help give you a sense of where you are in the chapter. There is also quite a comprehensive glossary of terms at the end.

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