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### **Kick Starting the Inner Site: Reading to see and feel**

-Phil Fitzsimmons

**Not only is there an art in knowing a thing,  
but also an art in teaching it. (Cicero 106-43  
BC)**

#### **An Accident Waiting to Happen**

I had sat in Joy's class for almost three years. I knew a great deal about the way she taught, the way she transformed her views of learning into practice and the tremendous impact this had on her pupil's literacy learning. Yet I always had this suspicion that I was missing something. I could see clearly on the faces of the children in this class a reoccurring network of looks that seemed to shift between smiling at the teacher, to apparent deep reflection and then sweeping looks at the other pupils. I wondered what was really going on in this class? I wondered what this thinking network meant?

Data from this teacher had in the past revealed some unexpected findings, such as her powerful classroom management practices (Fitzsimmons 1997), but it wasn't until a chance meeting with a past student in my office that the full impact of her approach became apparent. Dale often dropped in to see me, and she knew that I also knew Joy This had become a connection between us as Joy had been her year two teacher.

It was obvious to 'Dale', now a first year law student, that I was watching a video in my office. After the quip about academics and their work load she sat down and soon saw I was watching Joy in action. As we sat and watched we began chatting about the teaching processes that was unfolding on the screen, it became clear that that although she hadn't sat in this class for almost 13 years, it was still very familiar. As we talked a key element that I had not fully considered kept cropping up. 'Dale' claimed that, while she had learned a great deal about literacy from Joy, the most important element that she had gained was related to what she termed "thinking about myself and others".

I remember very clearly the order she taught, the things we did every morning. But, it wasn't what she did or things she taught us, but the way she did it. And I think that's what she left us with. She pushed us into taking control. Not like here were we get lectured to, she wanted us to take responsibility for our learning. She used to say that all the time. I took on that responsibility because when we talked about our reading and writing she made me think that I was capable and that I mattered. I changed that year because, .... I started to really see that I had opinions. It wasn't so much what she said but, that really mattered, .. but the, the way she said it and the messages she gave us without saying it. I learnt to see my self clearly and I could pick up on others. I didn't agree with them all the time, but I could see what they were saying and what they were like. It was like she gave us x-ray vision. (Dale)

As we talked, the "here and now constructions" that emerged from this marathon "conversation with a purpose" (Lincoln and Guba 1985:268) revealed a unique view of the impact that teachers can have beyond the teaching of literacy. From this conversation I then interviewed 20 other adults in regard to what they could remember about their favourite teachers. This convenience sample of 11 males and 9 females (ages 19 to 47), drawn initially from three acquaintances and then spreading to a network of people I had heard of but never met, revealed that the dominant memory of school rested firmly on one of their past teachers. The majority of these teachers seemed to male. It should be noted that I did approach many more people before unearthing respondents who actually could remember a favourite teacher. While many could remember specific instances where 'ah ha' connections of learning had occurred, it was only these 20 who could clearly remember and articulate this form of remembering. From this relatively small group, the dominant and most enduring memory was one of emotional introspection. This memory was more than a simple fond remembrance. It was enduring because it was an active constituent of their daily life. While it did not dominate their minute-to-minute thinking or charge their lives with dynamism, it was nonetheless a constant comfortable companion.

Phil, it's got something to do with just knowing, something to do with love. It's been along time since I've even seen her, but it's a quiet memory, kind of a longing, kind of just being. I can't put it into words but she's always there. I don't think of it all the time, but it's a solid. I feel it, it was a great time of my life and it made me in once instance. Your past is always a part of you, it's who you are and that was a happy time, those things... They're the things that last. (Female Respondent #4)

### **The Transforming of 'Self': Looking out and looking in**

While the emergent themes of data supplied by these respondents supported much of the literature regarding the nature of effective teachers in that they remembered them as being compassionate (Elbaz 1992), thoughtful (Cazdun 1988) and passionate (Fitzsimmons and Bilbo 2000), these memories were only the tip of the recalled iceberg. While these teachers had obviously made an incredible impact on the lives of these past students in that they could recall vivid emotional pictures and graphic details of these experiences (Turner 1978; Asseslin 2000), significantly there were other more important connections and relationships.

While these teachers used a variety of teaching approaches in their teaching of reading, one of the commonalities as recalled by this group of respondents was that that they all used some form of a 'literature based' approach in their teaching of reading. This daily ritual of reading to the class was also accompanied by a sharing of responses. While interesting in itself, this was not the major source of emphasis for this group, rather it was the nature of the interaction that remained with them. It seems that these teachers took an affirming attitude towards each child and each interaction. It was the quality of these episodes of teacher-child interaction focussing on "what the characters in the book were thinking and doing" (Female Respondent #6) that seems to have begun to develop within these respondents a sense of who they were as a person, their value in the eyes of their teacher and inferences as to the nature and personality of their peers. It appears that it was through the interaction in these shared reading experiences that the most potent, most enduring and the most unexpected learning took place.

I remember sitting in 'Mrs R's' [name supplied] class as if it were yesterday. It seems silly, but she was just wonderful. We would sit on the floor with her and just be enthralled. But the thing I remember most is she valued me. She valued every

one, but I loved her because she valued what I had to say. I think I listened more and I think I began to see more. I could look into the characters of the book, and then movies we talked about, and I could see them in my head. That's what I carry now, maybe I'm wrong but I think I can tell what people are like. Maybe I'm just seeing things, my husband thinks I'm nuts, but I do it all the time. (Female Respondent #5)

While these respondents generally still value reading, as described in the previous quote the dominant residual memory of these teachers was that they taught these students self worth with its twin corollaries of being able to see emotional distance and monitor how environmental cues. In effect, the outcome of the learning to be literate experiences of these respondents is that they were, through the quality of the teacher-pupil interaction, unexpectedly moulded them into a thinking being somewhat akin to what Beers, Lassiter and Flannery (1997) have termed 'high self monitors', hereafter termed HSM's. Although based on an experience that occurred for many almost two decades earlier, this process by which they discussed plots, characters and interacted with their teacher on a personal level became an over-arching reflective process of memory in action. While there were degrees of perception and apparent perceived ability, in specific terms, this self monitoring process were characterised by a nested set of perceived beliefs that they were able to:

- **see others in a clearer light.** These respondents believe that one the major legacies of their favourite teacher was the ability to know people, even after the most casual or briefest of meetings.

I think that she left me a better person. We could talk between us as a class about anything. Even when we talked about books we would get side tracked. But that was good. She used to never give us answers though, she always answer a question with question, and then ask what we think. So I'd look deeper, I think, inside before I'd ask. I'd have to think ahead. She taught me to look carefully at everything, and everyone. Because we had to think like that we'd listen to ourselves and our classmates in a, I don't know, much more clearer way. We, well at least I did, learnt to see what people were like very quickly. (Male Respondent #10)

It seems that the questions their past teachers employed and the shuffling process of to and fro questioning enacted in each shared book experience, allowed them to sit and clearly focus on those who were interacting with the teacher, as well as move into deep reflection regarding the book characters in focus.

It seems silly now I talk about it, but 'Mr Mac' [name supplied] really honed in on the characters in the books we were reading. He made us relate them to our experience, people we knew and how we felt about them. I think we just used a great deal of prediction, and that gave me some kind of lateral thinking. I could begin to actually visualise the characters, and then know how my classmates would feel and think. I knew what they would say before they said it. (Female Respondent #8)

This ability supports Snyder's (1974) claim that people who have the ability to reflect on those around them in such a way as described in the previous quote have learnt to 'monitor'

people's reactions and to draw heavily from external cues in their immediate surroundings. Thus, in social situations they automatically move into a perceived expectations of others. In this instance, these respondents do not take on these values of those they meet but are acutely aware of them.

A large volume of experimental research into self-monitoring has brought different aspects of this 'self monitoring' to light. Snyder and Cantor (1980) report that high self monitors are actually particularly adept at remembering information about people whom they interact with and are better able to interpret the emotions and affective experience which guides other people's overt behaviour. Beers, Lassiter and Flannery (1997) suggest that those with this ability have developed this memory by having experienced rich descriptions of other's behaviours in past experiences. This information allows them to create schematic constructs regarding the typical activities relating to different personality traits such as the extrovert and introvert, as well as picking up on inconsistent behaviours. Beers et al (1997) believe this behaviour comes from the HSM's desire to acquire information on the way that people are likely to perform in future interactions. HSM's may, in fact, be drawn or create situations which give them clear cues on how they "should" react (Snyder and Cantor, 1980).

- ***see themselves in a clearer light.*** It would seem that the stepping stone that linked the perceptive understanding described in the previous section, and this ideal was the teacher's demonstration of being open, confronting and their constant emphasis on 'risk taking'. Both aspects were made explicit as the teacher began the process of questioning and "peeling back the layers of the books they were focussing on" (Male Respondent #2). One of the most emphatic memories seems to be that because of this process, the teacher actually forced these people to confront themselves in a process of reflection that made them;

..... stand outside of their head and see what they were really like and where they were coming from. It was very confronting, and I think he made it like that deliberately. But each time he pushed us he made it clear that we could push back. I think that's when I knew what I was, he made me respond, when before I never would. He always said the he could get what he gave out and he was true to his word. When I think back he said some really rough stuff, especially his jokes, but we learnt that we could give it back. I think that.. with him as my teacher I learnt to trust him first and then myself. All the others at that school didn't even come close to doing this. I came to know myself in ways I didn't even realise then. (Female Respondent # 3).

In what appears to be a highly contentious area in the field of psychology, and standing in stark contrast to some of the quantitative psychological studies in this area, this sample of respondents claim that the past experiences with one fondly remembered teacher, has left with them an ongoing legacy of looking to be 'themselves' in any situation as well as being 'self aware'. Snyder and Cantor (1980) have suggested that while HSM's are highly perceptive of others, they are not as overtly aware of their own attitudes, traits and disposition and are unable to develop rich understandings of their own trait-related behaviours. Why then are these respondents different?

I believe that the answer may lie in the fact that because their teachers were not trying to teach, but educate. By this I mean the teachers mentioned in this study were not trying to manipulate children into their way of thinking or demonstrating without discussion, but were

rather deliberately and explicitly providing opportunities in which the children had to think for themselves. This seems to have had the effect that rather than expending energy on "trying to figure out what the teacher wanted or was thinking" (Male Respondent #14), these respondents became confident in their expressing their own ideas as well as having to justify and defend a position. It would appear that the classroom culture generated by these teachers was one in which the bi-product of the ongoing debate and discussions was the development of HSM characteristics. These facets included children who became adept at accurately assessing deception (Briggs, Cheek and Buss 1980) and less accepting of accepting of people who deliberately tried to mould their behaviour (Jones and Baumeister and Baumeister 1976). As one respondent stated, he was forced into "another head space" "another head space" (Male Respondent #7).

**- see the relationship between themselves and others as intimate distance.** In discussing the relationships between themselves, the teacher and others in the classes, the reminiscences had overtones of distance touched with emotion. This can be seen in the following excerpts.

I could feel the distances between get less and less. Mr 'J' [name supplied] kept on telling us to pull back the heads of the people in the book and look inside, to get close to them like friends or relatives. He'd sit on the floor with us as well, and we'd all kind of huddle. He used to tell us to do that with the other kids as well. We used to count how many times he said it. (Male Respondent #1)

I used to like the way we'd lie in bean bags on the floor and she'd read to us. It was just magic. It was like we were all being sucked in to the book, like that kid's movie, I can't remember its name now. We were drawn in together to. Like a club, kind of. You know we,... Our minds were just as close as the kids sitting next to you. It had this feel, this pull, just sitting in the bean bags and listening. Then you'd get hit with something that would jolt you, make you really think. (Female Respondent #9)

I hated reading when I first came into that class. But by the time the end of the year was over, I loved it. I still do. When I read to my kids, I think of those times sometimes. He's still in the area and I bump into him in the supermarket. We're still close. That was uncomfortable, ... for a while when I was little. The other kids thought he was a poof because he wore white socks and a skinny leather tie. But he'd make the book come alive, I could see it. He wasn't like the other teachers, he'd let us lie on the floor or flop on the desks, whatever. He gave me some kind of success by... doing all of that but also he'd make me just slide into this comfortable space, where I could hear, and tell him what I thought and . H'd had this habit of getting kids and himself inside your head, really upfront and personal. That took some getting used to though.(Male Respondent # 7)

It is interesting that these respondents remember the reading process in terms associated with closeness and comfort. It would appear that one of the key learning conditions for this group was based on the elements described by Hargraves (2001) as 'emotional geographies'. While the people interviewed in this study could remember books and

instances of interaction, in this case they could also remember the closeness of the physical, the closeness of professional space, the closeness of mind space. It would appear they had learned this because their teachers had engaged them in a learning process by helping them,

.... evaluate their emotions using situational cues and thus become HSM's" (Graziano & Bryant, 1998:259).

## Conclusion

There are numerous points of difference in paradigm, methodological approaches, reflection and psychology that could be discussed at this point. But at this juncture, I believe that the most important finding of this paper is the unearthing of the emotional aspects that formed the long-term memories of the people that took part in this study. I want to suggest that we have ignored the potential and vitality that emotional closeness can bring to the learning experience. Maybe I'm being too harsh, and I'm willing to recant if necessary, but I believe that teachers have become very adept at teaching the mechanics of reading and the process of learning, but I wonder if they are all as adept at injecting themselves at the intimate levels described by the people in the preceding paragraphs? I wonder, are they all as adept at creating emotional closeness through powerful yet subtle questioning as remembered by the people I stumbled across? I wonder have they all the ability to create visual images that will last a lifetime in the memories of their students?

Perhaps what is needed is teacher training programs aimed not at the expounding of curriculum, but aim at developing teachers capable of,

... spontaneous affirmation of others, as the union of the individual with others on the basis of preservation of the individual self. The dynamic quality of love lies in this very polarity: that springs from the need of overcoming separateness, that leads to oneness - and yet that individuality is not eliminated (Fromm 1941:260).

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