Culture, Family and Literacy Instruction: A Response to Fishman

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It has been my professional experience that few keynote speeches accomplish the purpose of developing a perspective for conference attendees to discuss critical issues. An exception was Dr. Andrea Fishman's keynote speech, "Looking back for the future: Amish literacy and its implications for educators," at the 1989 American Reading Forum. It seems that conversations everywhere gravitated toward her stimulating presentation. I found myself continuously discussing and rehashing her speech—debating, condemning, praising, and generally using Amish literacy, culture, and schooling as a perspective to examine literacy, culture, and schooling in mainstream American society. When I returned to campus, I ordered her book (Fishman, 1988), and looked up an article in *Language Arts* (Fishman, 1987). And, using one of the advantages of the intimacy of professional relationships offered by ARF, I called Dr. Fishman and asked for a copy of her speech. It occurred to me that her study provided me with a structure to think through some issues that have been on my mind for some time, and hence I set about to write this response to her speech.

Contrary to much of the discussion at the conference, I am certain that it was not Dr. Fishman's intention to either praise or condemn Amish culture or schooling. There is certainly much to be admired about the Amish way of life—its simplicity, its sense of family, its harmony with nature. Moreover, to those of us whose lives revolve around literacy and literacy instruction, there is a fascination with the high levels of literacy and the near total absence of illiteracy. Conversely, the isolation, the patriarchal system, and the willingness of the Amish to selectively

benefit from modern technology while refusing to contribute to it are issues which raise serious concerns. But these issues are moot; the American system of government guarantees the rights of the Amish to pursue their way of life. I would even go further to say that our pluralistic culture demands that their values be respected. Indeed, what Fishman's work makes marvelously clear is that because of their homogeneity and relative isolation from mainstream culture, there is much that we can learn from the Amish.

It seems to me that the central point of Fishman's presentation was that there is a coherence among the Amish community, family life and reading instruction in their schools. What her research demonstrates is that literacy is an integral part of Amish life. Mason (1984) argues that basic knowledge about function of print, form and structure of print, and conventions of reading must be in place before a child can learn to read. Amish children acquire this knowledge as they acquire membership in family and community. With little conscious effort, as a result of participation in day to day social life, Amish children become "literate" before they enter school and begin to learn how to "read."

For the Amish, literacy is embedded in culture and activity. Since their children are actively engaged in the culture, they enter school with basic knowledge about literacy already in place. The focus in school then becomes *reading* instruction. Lessons at the primary level adhere to direct instruction formats, emphasizing basic word-recognition skills and literal-level comprehension. Older children participate in recitation lessons which are highly teacher directed and focus on factual knowledge.

The danger is to jump to the conclusion that this instructional style leads to the universal literacy of the Amish community. The deeper insight is that instruction in Amish school reflects literacy as defined by activity in the Amish community. Reading and writing are tools used by the Amish to communicate with other members of the community. Acquiring basic information about the Amish way of life—particularly about religion, farming, and home-making—and entertaining themselves with books, magazines and newspapers defines Amish literacy and is reflected in the instruction in their schools. None of these basic literacy functions requires creativity or critical-thinking skills. In fact, creativity and critical thinking present a threat to the traditional, well-ordered, hierarchial Amish way of life. Literacy cannot be an emancipatory process; it can only provide one more avenue to conform to a system designed to insure the continued existence of Amish culture. There is no room in this system for questions, except how can one best fit into predetermined roles. Hence, there is no need for instruction aimed at creating independent, critical readers.

What, then, is there to be learned from an examination of Amish literacy? First, it seems that in most American schools it cannot be assumed that children come to school with the kinds of general understandings about literacy that Amish children demonstrate. In a pluralistic educational system, a primary aim of early schooling ought to be to develop a culture of literacy within each classroom. Skills in reading and writing would be requisite to membership in that culture. Students would gain basic understandings as they engage in literacy activities embedded in classroom activity, just as Amish children learn about literacy as they engage in family and community activities. It is crucial that the classroom culture be made so impelling, so attractive, and so exciting that all children will want to join in. Such classrooms are dependent on the sense of culture that children bring with them from membership in their own communities. Before we can establish these kinds of classrooms, it is critical that we understand the communities and families of the students. Schools cannot replace students' cultural backgrounds; they can only build on them.

Once basic knowledge about *literacy* is in place, *reading* instruction can begin. Seven decades of research leave little doubt that direct, intensive and sustained instruction in word recognition and other basic reading skills is highly effective (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1989). Such instruction can increase the power and precision of every reader, as well as overcome individual differences and deficits in reading achievement. The Amish experience demonstrates that students who recognize the role of reading and writing in the larger context of community literacy readily accept and prosper from basic reading instruction. However, in the absence of the insight that participation in the culture is dependent on literate behavior, this instruction invites wholesale failure. The American experience with minority education is a vivid example.

In practice, it would appear that a compromise in the current "Great Debate" (Chall, 1989) is called for. This debate pits "whole language" advocates (e.g. Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1987) against those who call for instruction which includes the direct teaching of reading skills (e.g. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). At its simplest level, the compromise would include extensive use of whole-language activities and approaches early in schooling, pre-school through perhaps early first grade. This would allow children to acquire knowledge about literacy through participation in classroom activities which demonstrate how the system works. Once most students in the instructional setting demonstrate an understanding of literacy, intensive instruction in basic word recognition and comprehension skills should begin. Such an approach is supported by Stahl and Miller's (1989) extensive review of whole-language and language-experience research.

A more sophisticated version of the compromise would weave direct instruction in basic skills into the whole-language portion of the sequence, but only for those students who demonstrate prerequisite understandings about literacy. Further, the start of basic instruction would not signal the end of the classroom culture that values and encourages literacy behaviors. Literacy instruction would be characterized by "authenticity" (Edelsky & Draper, 1989): students engaged in reading and writing activities that more closely resemble real-world tasks. Basal readers and content textbooks would be supplemented by newspapers, short stories, novels, factual books and other reading materials typical of adult reading materials. Students would write letters, stories, memos and reports, *not* to please teachers but to entertain a variety of different and real audiences. These literacy tasks should be accompanied by explicit (e.g. Duffy & Roehler, 1987; Pearson, 1984) and metacognitive (e.g. Armbruster & Brown, 1984; Baker & Brown, 1984) instruction aimed at helping students become strategic and independent in their use of basic reading skills.

An even more critical literacy education issue arises after students have acquired a basic level of reading proficiency. While basic levels of reading proficiency are adequate in Amish culture, full participation in highly technological American society requires high levels of critical and creative literacy. The ability to use reading and writing as higher-order cognitive tools demands instruction that is more sophisticated and more empowering than either direct, explicit or whole-language instruction. Current National Assessment of Educational Progress (1990) data would indicate that the problem in American education lies more in our inability to teach high school students to think critically than in an inability to teach younger children basic reading skills. How, then, can we begin to conceptualize reading instruction to meet the demands of the 21st century?

Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) suggest a "cognitive apprenticeship" model where learning and content are embedded in authentic social and physical activity. Reading, writing, and other learning processes become cognitive tools whose strategic uses are understood within the context of meaningful knowledge acquisition. In this respect, cognitive apprenticeship is similar to the whole-language model of instruction in its recognition of the centrality of social activity to learning and knowing. However, similar to explicit instruction models, instruction in cognitive apprenticeship focuses on the teacher modeling appropriate learning behavior while articulating the cognitive processing that must accompany such behavior. This is not unlike, for example, how an expert chef trains an apprentice. Beginning with the apprentice looking over his or her shoulder, the chef models how to prepare an item while explaining

the mental processes that accompany the preparation of the food. The apprentice then does the preparation while the chef directs. Finally, the apprentice does both the preparation and the explaining, while the chef provides comments to increase precision and understanding. All this activity is situated in a real kitchen, preparing real food for real diners.

It would appear that formal education would benefit greatly from a move (or perhaps a return) to education that places a premium on instruction embedded in social and work activity. We must begin to conceptualize knowledge and knowledge-acquisition processes such as reading as tools for problem solving, not as the end products of instruction. Classroom activity should be patterned on the social and work activity students will encounter after leaving school. For this to happen, schools must begin to develop social settings within the classroom where instruction mirrors the activity and learning that occur in real-world knowledge domains. Hence, math instruction would be patterned on the activity of mathematicians engaged in mathematical problem solving, history instruction on the activity of historians solving historical problems, and so on. Students then can acquire the basic insight that real workers in real jobs must have in order to be successful: knowledge is a useful tool for solving problems. I would argue that this is a very different insight from the one most students acquire in today's schools.

Beyond any doubt, I have over-extended the results of Fishman's study, and the intent of her keynote address. But then, that ought to be the function of a keynote address. Thank you, Dr. Fishman for your careful research and thought-provoking insight.

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