

Marie Clay: An Eminent Scholar

Scholars open windows to the world for others' learning. Marie Clay was an avid learner, researcher, writer, and teacher. Isaac Asimov wrote, "Research" means 'to search again.' Why not? Sometimes a new interpretation emerges that is of vast importance" (Asimov, 1988).

Marie Clay's curiosity for learning evidenced in her vast reading of research across multiple fields of study and close observation of literacy learning for our youngest learners opened new worlds of possibility.

In addition to remembrances by Courtney Cazden, Carol Lyons, and Peter Johnston, some of Marie's most-cited articles are reprinted here.

In closing, may I personally take a moment to reflect on how Marie Clay's scholarship has touched my life as a literacy learner, teacher, leader, and aspiring scholar. As a school leader, I had the great privilege of implementing Reading Recovery for more than 10 years in our school district. By following the research and practice so clearly articulated in Reading Recovery, our students and teachers were able to achieve new heights in literacy learning never imagined in the district.

When I came to Texas Woman's University to study in the trainer role, I never imagined how much more I would grow from Marie Clay's research and scholarship. Marie never came to TWU that she didn't visit the library and return with a new reading/wondering. Marie was a great listener. Her patience with my journey in developing and deepening my understandings during the training year surpassed the patience that most teachers could or would tolerate. Marie's model for rigorous study and expectations for writing leave me with a sense of expectation and challenge for our future.

— Anne Simpson

How Far Reading Recovery Ideas Travel: For Marie with Thanks

Courtney B. Cazden, professor emerita,
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It's hard to remember that Marie Clay has left us, and before I ever really thanked her—for our friendship over 25 years across an ocean and a continent, for introducing me not only to Reading Recovery but to New Zealand, and for all I've learned.

We met, as I remember, at conferences on literacy in the early 1980s in Pittsburgh. Then, after I was invited to speak at the first South Pacific Conference on Reading in January 1983, a follow-up letter from Marie asked if I would consider staying on and teaching a course on classroom discourse at the University of Auckland. So began many trips to New Zealand to learn not only more about literacy teaching, but also about the exciting Maori language and culture revitalization then underway—and always to see Marie, sometimes staying with her on Bassett Road, catching up on new ideas and on our respective children and grandchildren. I especially regret never taking the time to tell her about two distant extensions of one Reading Recovery practice—first in a South African high school and then more surprisingly to my own aging needs.

In August–September 1992, I spent a month in South Africa, more than 18 months before the first democratic election in 1994. In Johannesburg,

I spent 2 weeks at the Educational Programmes Centre (EPC) whose director, Bernadette Mosala, I had met the summer before at the Bread Loaf School of English. EPC was one of the most successful of the independent schools that had developed during those final apartheid years when Black students were increasingly alienated from the racist education available in the public system. At EPC, the pass rate on the national school-leaving exam had risen to 96% (100 passes/104 students), and 30 received "distinctions" in English. Mrs. Mosala and her teachers were doing some things right.

One of her innovations was how she helped her students from non-English-speaking homes and dismal schools cope with the British novels on the official syllabus. Her booklet, "The Battered Seatwork Book: Teaching the Novel" (1992), gives Mosala's suggestions for creating what we would call scaffolds to prompt the students' interest as well as comprehension:

- Introduce the book with a brief summary of the plot and main characters.
- Ask students to flip through the book, read one paragraph, and try to relate it to the summary.

- Ask each student to pick one character, flip through the book again noting what “their” character is doing, and hypothesize a relation to the summary.
- Have the class read the first and last paragraphs in the book and relate them to all of the above.

What is important, Mosala explained to me, is that the students gain, right at the beginning, an understanding of the whole story line, and an interest in it, as they skim through the book several times in these ways. Almost halfway around the world in another, very different, southern hemisphere country, Mrs. Mosala had created a book-orientation process for her students, much older than Reading Recovery’s children but still not fluent readers.

My second and more surprising extension of that same Reading Recovery practice is for needs of my own. In the last few years, becoming increasingly aware of hearing problems, I started noticing when I had an especially hard time. Most obviously, of course, surrounding noise matters enormously, and sometimes it’s possible to initiate a change in the physical external environment. Less obviously but more frequently useful, becoming aware of my experiences revealed that all words are not informationally equal, that some lost words matter more to overall comprehension than others. Thinking about that, I came up with two hunches, and two suggestions for self-initiated assistance..

First, the hardest for me to hear—and by *hear* I mean perceive with understanding—are the words at



Marie Clay and Courtney Cazden began their 25-plus year friendship, travel, and exploration of literacy theory in the early 1980s at a conference in Pittsburgh.

the beginning of a new speaking situation, those for which there are fewest contextual clues. When being introduced to new people or meeting a group or class for the first time, for example, I very often miss proper names—after all, they could be anything—whereas once the conversation gets going, I can keep up much more easily. Having isolated this problem, I try to get a written list of expected attendees ahead of time. Then when I hear a name orally, I am already familiar with a limited set of possibilities.

Second, at any point in a talk from which I am hoping to learn something new, I know I’ll be apt to confront new concepts expressed in unfamiliar terms. So here, too, I seek out any materials available in advance. Before any speech event for which I can prepare, including a movie or play, I try to read whatever I can ahead of time. Such assistance con-

stitutes a self-initiated change in my internal mental resources for coping with the unfamiliar speech I will hear.

Only when I was recently asked to speak at a conference on helping hard-of-hearing children (Cazden, 2003) did I realize the analogies between what I was doing for myself and what Reading Recovery teachers do for each child.

Describing how the teacher helps the young beginning reader by drawing attention to the important ideas, and giving the child opportunities to hear and use the new words and structures which he will have to work out from the pictures, print, and language context, *“the teacher is ensuring that the child has in his head the ideas and the language he needs to produce when prompted in sequence by print cues. He should know what the story is about before he reads it”* (Clay 1993, p. 37, italics added).

Describing how an older, now diminished hearer helps herself, *I try to have in my head the ideas and language I will need to understand when prompted in sequence by auditory cues. I try to know the gist of what the talk will be about before I hear it.*

Interestingly, at the bottom of the page in which Clay describes this orientation process, a footnote explains, “Orientation (by the child) means the adjustment or alignment of oneself or one’s ideas to surroundings or circumstances (1993, p. 37).” As an experienced learner, I try to help myself in ways that the teacher needs to do for the young child. Writing a few years later, Clay describes the solutions of an experienced learner for her own computer problems (1998, p. 68–69).

This summer, July 2007, I again traveled to New Zealand to catch up on the latest research of Marie’s former colleague, Stuart McNaughton. Knowing she was not well, I had hoped against hope that we could have one more visit. She will remain much in my thoughts—with thanks and love.

References

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Remembering Marie

Marie Clay loved to stir the waters by challenging our thinking. She changed the way teachers all over the world observe children and teach to their literacy strengths. Through her insight, tenacity, and humility she has also stirred our hearts. We miss you, Marie.

Salli Forbes, Emporia State University

It was through conversations with Marie Clay over transcripts of interactions between Reading Recovery children and teachers that I came to view change over time through Marie’s unusual lens; as if she were passing the lens over to me and saying, “Here it is; now you have a look too.” And, of course, there it was. The view was transformational to my way of thinking about how children learn. Learning how to view progress through that same unusual lens: observing and analyzing how children are learning rather than what teachers are teaching is what I now strive to convey to Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders while we observe child and teacher interactions or analyze observational records of what actually occurred.

Janice Van Dyke, Central Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery

Many of us have stood on the shoulders of this giant of early literacy learning and intervention. She generously offered guidance, support, friendship, and mentoring to so many of us. She was a visionary and the ultimate exemplar of keen intelligence, insight, and wit, always balanced with humility and respect. Perhaps most will remember Marie Clay as the founder of Reading Recovery, but her writings and research have changed literacy and education’s trajectory. She is among the most frequently cited researchers in the field of literacy. Marie Clay was a pioneer in conceptualizing emergent literacy, in her emphasis on the importance of writing in early literacy development, and certainly, as the pathfinder in early literacy intervention. Each decade of her work gave us new ideas and understandings; researchers and educators are still “mining” many of them.

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