

Remembering Marie

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*Photographs and memories,
Christmas cards you sent to me...
All that I have are these,
to remember you.*

When I looked through the photographs and artifacts people have sent me of my own life in Reading Recovery, this haunting melody by Jim Croce floated through my mind. I had to smile, though, because Marie Clay left me far richer than that, for she left me with books and ideas.

The articles and books that comprise the collected works of Dr. Marie Clay sit on my shelf, most of them tattered and worn. I've read them each many times, and I refer to them every time I write or teach. Her written language is a tool for my mind, a firm foundation, a structure for thinking and acting—a scaffold that has supported my professional life (Vygotsky, 1978; Luria, 1973; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Her humor, honesty, directness, curiosity, and celebration of life, teachers, and children have impacted me personally as well.

My professional life has been influenced most strongly by two central ideas from the elegant, complex, well-grounded theories Clay formulated. The first is about constructive activity and its role in learning (for children and teachers), and the second is the power of observation of literacy activities in assessment and instructional decision making. These two notions have high utility for teachers of all levels.

Constructive Activity

Constructive activity is central to Clay's theory of literacy acquisition and framework of teacher professional development. The foundations of her ideas came from developmental psychology. "Cognitive developmental psychologists have applied terms like 'active construction' by a 'constructive learner' to many of the child's activities—seeing, searching, remembering, monitoring, correcting, validating, and problem solving. They examine how the carrying out of an activity builds more competence in the activity" (Clay, 1991, p. 318).

As children read books and write messages, they learn from the activity, engage in self-directed learning, and learn by discovery. Clay states that within 'activity' children construct their own knowledge and their new learning influences subsequent behavior. Clay characterized this as a "self improving system, that is a response system which extends its own capacity," or "a self-extending system of literacy expertise, as the act of reading expands the range and effectiveness of strategies which the reader can bring to the task, and the size of the practiced response repertoire upon which he can draw" (Clay, 1991, p. 317).

The model of professional development of teachers is another application of this idea. When Reading Recovery teachers gather for professional development, there is always an observation of a lesson. Behind a one-way glass, the teacher studies the child's responses and makes rapid-fire decisions about the nature of reading and writing activity that will sup-

port and extend the child's reading and writing. The child's reading and writing gives the teacher feedback about teaching decisions and informs the nature of the next decisions and actions taken. On the other side of the glass, teacher colleagues are engaged in constructive activity—the observation and analysis of the lesson. They talk about the processing they see, ask questions, and consider different explanations in light of the teacher-child interactions.

Jones and Smith-Burke note (1999), "The continuous interplay between what teachers and children are *doing* and *thinking* facilitates teachers' construction of personal theories about each child that are grounded in observational data" (p. 273). In this case, acts of teaching engage the teacher's problem solving, provide feedback about teaching and learning, and inform and expand subsequent acts of teaching in a similar self-extending system of teaching expertise. "Instruction should provide learners with opportunities that are open-ended, allowing the learner to surprise the teacher and expand any aspect of his or her existing knowledge. The challenge for teachers is to understand what is going on before their eyes..." (Clay, 2001, p. 12).

I first encountered these ideas in 1983 when I observed my first Reading Recovery lesson at Ohio State University. Twenty-four years later, the idea of constructive activity frames how I observe and teach children, how I work with adults, and how I teach in my university classes and professional development sessions. No matter what the topic is, I



try to keep some form of constructive activity central to the teaching/learning. If the course is on coaching, then there has to be a coaching activity to focus our discussion, analysis, and theory building. If the course is on assessment, then the participants have to engage in assessment to understand assessment. Our state-level Reading First professional development for interventionists embed teaching observations of small groups of children and group discussions and analysis.

My own teaching since I met Dr. Marie Clay has never been the same. My views are ever expanding. Clay cautions us to carefully gauge the level of difficulty of tasks with an eye to the learner, to maintain the complexity within tasks if it is the complexity that is instructive, and to change our teaching as the competence of the learner increases. I have found these notions about teaching, learning, and activity to be sturdy rudders to guide my actions as a teacher.

The Power of Observation of Literacy Activity in Assessment and Instructional Decision Making

Observation is central to the research, assessments, and practices Clay integrated into her scholarly work. The Observation Survey, Reading Recovery lessons, and teacher professional development revolve around observation. She provided an account of changes in progress, and careful descriptions of how children's problem solving changed over time. The focus of her work was on the changes she *observed* in the day-to-day reading and writing of children, or on some standard tasks, rather than on

responses to experiments, or changes in test scores (Clay, 2001, p. 46). Clay sought to answer questions like, "What is the young child attending to as he or she attends to print?" Not surprisingly, she found that "*Often the child's attention is not where the teacher expects it to be*" (Clay, 2001, p. 19). The careful observations she made of children allowed her to document how children passed through several different phases in the first years of instruction and how they achieved greater complexity in their processing systems. "*What I end up with is not a theory of instruction, but a theory of the construction of an inner control of literacy act.*" (Clay, 2001, p. 46).

Observation and assessment

Clay's approach to assessment is truly unique. To be consistent with her theories of literacy acquisition, she developed her own assessment tools. These tools were sensitive to change over time across key areas of literacy learning (hence the notion of a survey, or multiple, complementary tools that capture knowledge about letter identification, words learned in reading and writing, concepts about print and book handling, writing, and reading of continuous text). They allowed the correct and incorrect, as well as the partially correct responses to be captured so that the emerging literacy-learning system was apparent to a noticing teacher. They also had to be easy enough to administer and interpret reliably by classroom teachers. "For optimal validity and reliability, Clay's Observation Survey tasks are administered individually, with standardized conditions, directions, and probes to elicit evidence of partial knowledge or strategic operation" (Jones & Smith-Burke,

1999, p. 269). The instruments she developed are revolutionary today as they each offer "an unusual lens" to provide information about individual differences; "an alternative view of progress" (Clay, 2001, p. 46).

Observation and instructional decision making

Observation is key to teaching within Reading Recovery lessons. The noticing teacher must observe the child's sure responses, the tentative first steps, record evidence of self-corrections, pauses, incorrect responses, error detection, fluent and independent activity, and student comments, etc. Within and across lessons, "things are moving and changing: shifts are occurring, lifts in dealing with complexity are required by the texts selected for the individual learner, and by increasing demands in writing" (Clay, 2001, p. 222). Within the complexity of acts of reading and writing that comprise the lesson framework in Reading Recovery, the teacher must be a keen observer of student processing and changes that occur within and across lessons. This requires that the teacher observe carefully in order to make minute-by-minute decisions about teaching actions that will further the child's reading and writing.

Whatever aspect of the complex processing system is presently challenging a pupil the lesson format allows for daily adjustments. The learner achieves success on a task of appropriate difficulty with teacher support, but the teacher at the same time works on ways to achieve learner success by drawing on his or her most competent responses. *A new way of working is drawn into the well-func-*

tioning network, and tentative responding is supported until new strengths become established.

(Clay, 2001, p. 222)

The way in which complex, constructive activity, sensitive observation tools, simple recording devices, and teacher decision making are interwoven into an instructional framework that makes a difference in students' reading and writing development, to me, is the elegance of Dr. Clay's contribution. She described herself in this way:

I live in a perpetual state of enquiry, finding new questions to ask, then moving on. I do not have 'a position' or a safe haven where what is 'right' exists. Pragmatism precludes idealism. I search for questions which need answers. What exists in the real world? And how well do our theories explain what exists? Opposing arguments in debates seem to block my search for new solutions, although I have great enthusiasm for brain-clearing discussions. I want to find evidence to convince me of the need for changes in understanding. (Clay, 2001, p. 3)

What a blessing she has given teachers and children the world over! What I know about assessment, observation, teaching, constructive activity, and literacy learning is an outgrowth of Marie Clay's inquiries. Terms like *simple yet complex*, or *a comprehensive theory that informs* paired with her caution to *interpret what we see from a stance that is tentative* have left their mark on me. I will



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always be a student of Marie Clay's work. I hear her voice ringing in my ear with such comments as "a teacher with an agenda may fail to see a surprisingly new response," and "work for surprises," and "Why did you do that?"

When I announced that I was moving to the University of South Carolina Marie wrote a card showing a picture of an Alaskan husky. She said one of her more-treasured memories of Reading Recovery was a dog-sled ride that she had in Alaska. She wrote, "Diane, here is to fond remembrances for the past and vistas of possibilities for the future." Marie Clay, the person, is my most treasured memory. I will miss her. But her legacy is new vistas and possibilities for children and teachers. Thank you, Marie.

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