Creating New Possibilities

I live in a state of perpetual inquiry.
— Marie Clay
Change Over Time, p. 3

Teachers dare not overlook observation as a basic phase of teaching.
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Change Over Time, p. 268

With the few, simple words “I live in a state of perpetual inquiry,” Marie Clay (2001) described the ground of her intellectual method. She continually refined her understanding by posing new questions and refusing to definitively know. As she neared the end of her career she encouraged others not to rest with her findings, but instead, to go beyond what she had established, to have their own new questions of inquiry that will further refine our understanding of early literacy. As we each as teachers celebrate 25 years of Reading Recovery in the United States, perhaps the best tribute we can pay to Marie Clay is to ‘live in a state of perpetual inquiry’ with our students; to refuse to think we know all there is to know about this one young child who sits next to us for half an hour each day.

Clay also wrote, “Teachers dare not overlook observation as a basic phase of teaching” (2001, p. 268). In the intensity of teaching, we can forget how much focused observation—not only of the student, but of ourselves—can further develop our theories about our students’ learning. In reflecting about how we as individuals observe, we can know ourselves and our students better.

My words here will explore ways of bringing closer inquiry and awareness to observation.

How Did You Learn to Observe?
In becoming curious about your own observation, it can be helpful to think back to how you learned to observe—not your earliest memory, but your earliest memory of observation. I have two strong memories of observation as a child. One is sitting with my mother on our front steps on a clear night and seeing immense color in the sky—it was, I found years later, the Northern Lights. In that memory, I have a tremendous feeling of the security of being there close to my mother, of being overtaken by the newness of this night sky and of being stunned by its encompassing beauty.

I also as a young child played over and over again with this set of pattern blocks (below). I loved deciding on and preparing the repeated change of pattern, and I had clear preferences for the colors. I particularly remember one afternoon when my mother was cleaning in the living room and I was playing in my bedroom. Each time I chose and finished a new pattern, I would go to her and show her what I had created. She would comment on it, and I’d return to my room and choose a new pattern to follow.

Playing repeatedly with the blocks in this way involved the visual, the kinesthetic, and auditory. It was a well-known routine with a sense of creation, of order and family. Aesthetics, pattern, and creativity. Family and connection. These are all parts of what I look for in the world. I’m a writer, a teacher, a mother, a quilter. I don’t see these as unrelated to who I was as a child. Alison Gopnik, writing about recent scientific discoveries in The Philosophical Baby concludes, “Our childhood experiences guide the way we create our own lives” (2009, p. 17).

Ask yourself, “What is a clear memory of observation for you? How is that a part of how you listen/observe/sense/speak now? Was there an affective element to this observation?”

The year that Change Over Time came out, 2001, I visited my cousin Doris Abele in Germany. That summer, reading Marie’s new book, was when I started asking people the questions you just read above.

Doris is a marine biologist who leads international research on the ecosystems of the Antarctic Peninsula. Her earliest memories of observation are of time she spent with her father. On Sundays he would take her to the Bremen Arts Museum where they would choose one painting to
study and discuss. They would then go home and paint together. As a young child she learned to make a practice of choosing a visual field to study closely; to come to know it better through conversation with a knowledgeable other; to make it further hers by creating something visual that was influenced both by her observation and conversation; to do this through close connection to another. Doris’s work nowadays involves leading scientists from three continents as they collaborate in close observation and documentation of Antarctic change. They choose specific fields to study and document closely; they collaborate in discussing the findings and then write up the findings to share with the scientific community.

Doris’s colleague, Victor Smetacek, grew up in the Himalayas. He told me his earliest memories of observation were from the time he spent alone as a child in the mountains. He loved passing hours on bluffs, watching the animals and birds around him and trying to move just like them. This attuned observation involved creative repetition and an intricate merging of imagination and kinesthetic awareness. In order to closely imitate the animals, he had to develop a keen perception of being in space and of connection to others. He extrapolated over and over again from focused observation of complexity.

Victor’s article in Nature, “Mind-Grasping Gravity,” began this way:

Imagine yourself standing at the edge of a precipice, looking down at its foot and then crouching at the same place on all fours. The difference between the two sensations is the difference between being human and being a quadruped. (Smetacek, 2002)

Starting with one of his first remembered experiences of observation, Victor then went on to explore how the mind’s balance and function is related to the human body. His method of scientific inquiry has clear roots in his childhood.

Victor’s, Doris’s and my early memories of observation are all positive, with close connection to other beings — but not all are. I have a friend whose mother died when she was an infant. Members from her father’s church kindly supported her father in taking care of her, but this meant that she was constantly being tended by a new person. Her first memories of observation involve the wariness of trying to figure out who she was with and what she needed to do in being with them. Her first memories of observation do not include trust — and yours and your students’ may not either.

But whether positive or negative, how you early-on learn to observe can shape how you think — and what you think and perceive. Clay reminded us that observation is not only in the visual or auditory domain, but involves (at least) three different modalities:

When the eye and the ear and hand are jointly involved in the management of a task, they send three different messages to the brain, messages picked up by different senses. (2001, p. 16)

Caine and Caine first described their principles of learning in Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain. The seventh principle states, Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral perception. The brain absorbs information of which it is directly aware and to which it is paying attention. It also directly absorbs information and signals that lie beyond the field of attention…. The brain responds to the entire sensory context in which teaching or communication occurs. (1994, p. 91)

Both we and our students are responding to much more than we are aware of. The more we hone attention, the more aware we become of observing, the more we will observe.

To observe how students are taking in these messages, we can begin to increase our awareness of how we send and receive visual, auditory, and kinesthetic messages. The closer attention we pay to each, the more we perceive, the more we can become aware of two or three at once, and the more information we can receive and consider. Observation is built from prioritizing and making sense of what we observe. But we also communicate what we observe.

The communication axis, a construct in semiotics, gives a simple representation of the complexity of how we communicate with each other. (see Figure 1). There is a sender and receiver of information. It matters to stop and realize that both the student and we are receiving and sending information. It can be easy to think in observing that it is only the student who is observed. But the students observe us, and we also can observe ourselves. In remembering this, we can come to a new understanding of the complexity of Read-
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Clay drew our attention to the interrelation of these modalities:

Reading Recovery theory is based on a complex theory which includes both reading and writing and hypothesizes that simple initial behaviours of various kinds (visual, motor, auditory and verbal) become interrelated. (2001, p. 237)

The implications of this for us as teachers are that the more we observe for auditory, kinesthetic, and visual involvement in the child’s reading and writing—and equally in our observation of them—the more we can come to understand and support children’s construction of understanding literacy.

So how do we heighten our awareness of observing in these modalities?

Visual Awareness
Several years ago I visited Claude Monet’s home in Giverny, France. Two things struck me then and have stayed with me since. First, his home. Monet, who saw and could represent color in a way no one ever had before, lived in its simplicity. His kitchen is primarily blue. His dining room, yellow; his studio and bedroom are both brown. That he created a home where he could return each day to color’s bare bones, signals for us the importance of being aware of essence in observing. What do you see of the essence of the child as you teach? What of this child’s essence do you become aware of if you walk out to the playground at recess or before school?

Second, I learned that Monet painted, in part, by not painting. His good friend, French statesman Georges Clemenceau, wrote of the time Monet spent simply sitting in his garden:

This is where Monet came to refine his sensations, making them as sharp as possible. He would remain here in his armchair for hours without moving, without speaking, peering at the undersides of passing, sunlit things, trying to read in their reflections the elusive glimmer where mysteries are revealed…. Is this not understanding? (Van der Kemp, 1998, p. 34)

By settling in the midst of his subject and refraining from immediately painting, instead spending time truly observing what he saw, Monet could know and paint in a much different way. What if you took the time in Roaming Around the Known to consciously observe not the child’s reading and writing behaviors, but who the child is and the dignity of how the child sees herself or himself in

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Figure 1. Communication Axis

Sender

Message

for example, Visual Auditory Kinesthetic

Receiver
the world? How different would the rest of your teaching be, grounded in that understanding?

Reading poetry closely can help to develop visual awareness. Ted Kooser, the U.S. Poet Laureate from 2004–2006, tucks implicit lessons on observation in his writing. Kooser’s poetry is known for its revelation of depth in the ordinary. Be aware of seeing as you read this poem. What images do you get in your head? How much can you see?

An Abandoned Stone Schoolhouse in the Nebraska Sandhills

These square stone walls are of sand, too: blocks of cut sandstone, stone yet sand like all sands, always ready to go, always showing their glittering sails. Someday, with the work of the wind, this will all be gone – the hollow school, its hollow in the changing hills, the fallen door with its shiny black knob. Touch the wall with your fingertips, and a hundred thousand years brush away just like that, exposing no more than a faint stain the color of coffee. Put your palm flat on these stones. Something is happening under the surface: even in sunlight, the stone feels cool, as if water were trickling inside, flowing through darkness, a silent, shadowy river, cleaning itself as it eases along through the sand, rubbing away at our names and our voices.

(Weather Central, p. 45)

Hold those images, and then read the poem, slowly, one more time. Did you see more connections and detail, understand it in a different way the second time? Did it touch you more, and did that help you to better understand it?

Apply this to seeing children. See them. Then see them again. Look for the intimations of who they are in what they show — and don’t show. Look at that child every day to see her. To see him. And then see again.

Imagine the child as you work with him. Are you aware of this child in space? Are you aware of your relative distance from him? Do you see relation with the child? Do you sense who you are seeing? The poet Jane Hirshfield writes, “Human meaning is made by seeing into what is” (1994, p. 17). Consider how you can deepen your understanding of the child by looking closely.

I have come to understand more about observation by simply asking people, “What do you do when you observe?” My friend, the artist Eileen Potts-Dawson, wrote me this in response to that question:

As I thought about seeing in terms of my drawing, I reflected on what I already knew about how and what I draw. Since earliest childhood I have always drawn the figure, which is such an enigmatic thing if you think about it, since for most of my life I’ve been a loner, not necessarily lonely, but alone a lot. And as I started thinking about why people see differently and why I draw the way I do, I realized that I draw some things more skillfully than I draw others (I’ve always known this part), so then I started to think about why is this so? Shouldn’t it be, either you can draw or you can’t? And if you can draw figures and animals and trees and plants well, shouldn’t it follow that you draw everything equally well? I don’t do well with mechanical things like cars and complicated schematic things. David McCaulay who ‘knows’ architecture and can deconstruct a building with lines and magic cannot draw the human form very well at all. I could not begin to do what he does. So why is that?

For me it seems to be about understanding. I’ve always been able to understand what I see when I look at a figure or most things in nature, but I don’t understand things well that are human-made. It doesn’t seem to have to do with learning, because I started out with the preference at a very young age. So, after all these words, what I’ve come up with is that understanding informs the seeing, and the understanding seems to come, in part, with what interests the heart as much as the brain. I’m not at all interested in the curves of a car, but the curves of a jaw line or the shadows around an eye. …

(Eileen Potts-Dawson, personal communication)

The heart focuses perception. Remember this as you teach.

I asked my then 8-year-old son, Tom, what he did when he took photos and he responded, “I try to sense what is important about it.” I asked my older son Nate, who is an engineer, what he does when he observes and he answered: “I look for a problem and think about how to solve it.” My daughter, Nora, observes for the meaning of a situation in order to know how to enter into it. For my daughter, observation begins with awareness of social interaction. My younger son focuses observation through his sense of it. My older
son looks in order to solve problems. It is helpful for engineers to frame perception so that they look for and solve problems. But maybe sometimes in Reading Recovery we’re looking too quickly for the problem and thinking about how to fix it. Maybe we would understand more if we observed more closely and in different modalities before honing in on the problem.

Go back to what Eileen said about the curves of a jaw line or the shadows around an eye. See your student again, but see the student close up, just a part of the student. Are you drawn to the student’s hands? Is it that the students’ shoulders are tight? Is it the look in your student’s eyes? What are you learning from what you are seeing?

**Auditory Awareness**

The auditory mode—speaking and listening—is the mode we use the most in teaching in Reading Recovery. We listen to children read. We use particular phrases to convey teaching points. We engage in conversation in formulating a written message every day. We orally describe the new book as we introduce it.

But how aware are you of what you are saying as you teach? Of the extra words that you might be using to introduce explicit language? Of the words that you use with the child in daily conversation. Do you use yes-and-no questions instead of how, what, why, when? And how closely do you listen to the child? What interests does the child have? Why? What parts of school does the child like best? Why? What type of learning appeals to the child? Who are the child’s friends?

How does the child use language? Control language? How long are the utterances the child usually speaks? Have you been teaching in a way to support longer, more-complicated sentences on the part of the child? Do you hear the child speak?

What do you remember that a student said to you in the last few days? If you remember what one student said, do you remember what more than one said? Integrating with found language; how you’ve heard people use language well or in an interesting way. This assignment each year has helped my students develop a writer’s awareness of language, an awareness of hearing it and its meaning. The assignment for the last day was to bring awareness of being somewhere — of the physical and sensory, of the whole. And then to come back and tell the class about it.

In this particular year John, a retired psychology professor, had lost his flashlight, which meant that after an evening class he had to walk through the woods to his car in the dark. He eloquently described overcoming fear in the walk, and when he had finished his story, the other students responded to the tale by repeating its phrases back to him. In less than a week their ears had become attuned to the use of language.

You said, “We hear things differently in the dark than through the sun.”

You said, “The lost flashlight served me well.”

You said, “The sounds of the forest took my fears away.”

In Zen esthetics, what these writers were doing as they listened is called ‘bare attention.’ It is the ability to be aware of doing this while being aware of doing that. They were listening to the whole of the story, to the sense of the story, while at the same time they were aware of how language was being used. You practice bare attention every day in Reading Recovery. You do it in taking a running record, in writing notes while you teach. This is not the hurried sense of multitasking; it is bringing awareness to more than one thing or level at once.
Give yourself the task of listening closely each day for what the child says — perhaps just one student. Write down at least one utterance a day. Over days, look closely at their words for voice and identity; sentence length and structure; the child’s particular vocabulary.

As you bring bare attention to listening to this child, your ear will change, your ability to hear language and your sense of the child will change. Construct teaching points around what you find. In doing this, you will enter into daily writing with a deeper understanding of the child’s individual relation to and use of language.

Be aware of developing the power of bare attention.

As you develop your awareness of auditory communication, remember that we don’t communicate orally in a void. There was one student who was by far the most difficult for me to teach in Reading Recovery, and he taught me something I’ve never forgotten. He said one day, “What’s that way you look at me? You always look at me like you’re going to smile.” I wrote down his words and put them up on the board over my Reading Recovery table — and I’m still trying to figure out what he meant. Notice he didn’t say you smile, it’s you’re going to smile.

But what I did come to understand from his question is that they see our face while we talk, and we don’t. You might be using exactly the correct language for a teaching point, but what if your face shows frustration or a lack of belief in the student? What if the student can sense that you don’t believe in him or her? Be aware of how you are communicating through who you are and what you believe about this child.

**Kinesthetic Awareness**

As teachers, we often speak of the kinesthetic as if it is a disorder or a social difficulty. “He’s really kinesthetic” as a descriptor of a first-grade boy can mean he can’t pay attention, he’s always moving around and I’m about to refer him for evaluation.

The kinesthetic can actually be deep grounding of concentration. Hirshfield writes,

> The experience of concentration may be quietly physical — a simple, unexpected sense of deep accord between yourself and everything. It may come as the harvest of long looking and leave us, as it did Wordsworth, amidst thought ‘too deep for tears.’ Within action, it is felt as a grace state: time slows and extends, and a person’s every movement and decision seem to partake of perfection…. In the whole-heartedness of concentration, world and self begin to cohere. With that state comes an enlarging: of what may be, what may be felt, what may be done. (1998, pp. 3–4)

Most of us have had an experience of kinesthetic awareness in nature: at the ocean, a prairie or forest, or simply in our own garden. That sense of being there is experienced in part through the kinesthetic. In remembering that feeling of calm awareness in nature, you can begin to increase your awareness of the children you teach by becoming more aware of how you feel being with the child and also of how the child feels in being there.

Neuroscientists are now basing much of their inquiry, of their observation and study, on the realization that they know so little. In teaching and observing, we should remember this — remember how very little we know about the child’s processing and perception — and constantly be shifting what we think, and trying to find more.

Victor Smetacek reminds us in “Mind-Grasping Gravity” that there are only three forces commonly measured in science: light, sound, and gravity. Balance is to gravity as vision is to light, or hearing to sound. “As balance is central to every directed movement, evolving fine motor skills is synonymous with fine-tuning the sense of balance” (2002, p. 481).

As teachers, we tend to pay attention to what we see through light and what we hear through sound, but we have perhaps ignored the importance of gravity and balance in observing children. In teaching writing, in teaching tracking text, or moving magnetic letters, we are working in the realm of balance and gravity. What if you observed a student for his balance in his body? His containment in space?

When Victor and I talked that summer afternoon in Bremerhaven, he said, “Language is movement.” I played with that later: language is sound traveling, mouth and tongue moving, ear vibrating, mind considering, eye tracking, hand writing, body inclined or withdrawing in communication. The movement of language creates and solidifies meaning.

This complexity reminds us that it is not just words that pass between us in communication, and that our awareness of others is not separate from the intricate communication we create. Monet wrote, “The subject is of secondary importance to me; what
I want to reproduce is what exists between the subject and me” (Van der Kemp, 1998, p. 12).

What existed between Monet and the garden was not just the visual, not just the birds and water he heard in the garden; it was those, plus his sense of the place; it was his understanding and awareness that he was capturing on canvas. It was the all of being there (see Figure 2).

In Asian psychology, this awareness is referred to as *vijñana*, the subject and object of knowledge. In Reading Recovery, this would be awareness of the whole that is created by the teacher, the child, and the teaching and learning in each instant of teaching.

Understanding, awareness, sense — all of these are a part of deep observation.

How then, within the structure of the lesson, can you increase awareness of the student and of your teaching? Here are a few possibilities. In the familiar reading, bring awareness to your relation with the child. While taking the running record, attend also to the child’s sense of self. During word work, observe for the relation of the visual, the auditory, and kinesthetic for this child. During writing, focus on what the connection is that you and the child have through conversation. As the child works with the cut-up sentence, notice her physical presence. During the introduction of the new book, attend to your discourse, your choice of words and how you are expressing them. And as the child pulls all this together in the daily new independence of the first read, bring bare attention to one thing and another — to the child’s words and physical presence, or to the child’s reading and to *vijñana*, ‘what exists’ between you and the child as the child reads.

As you attend in teaching, place your observation, too, in the context of culture, for many of us are likely communicating in some way across culture. How aware are you of that in teaching? Of what you expect, and the child expects? Of cultural beliefs about how adults act with children, and children with adults? About what it means to listen? About how children speak to adults? What a child’s responsibility is?

A Mexican student once told me she was tired, and I asked her why. She told me she gets up at 4 o’clock every morning because that is when her mother leaves for work, and her mother wants to be sure that she and her sister are awake when she leaves so they are sure to get to school on time. This is culture — the importance of family and mothering, the mother taking a job with terrible hours so that she is sure to be home when her children arrive home from school, and the importance of education to a migrant family — the necessity that the children profit from the family’s move away from home. My awareness of this child changed with this understanding of her daily life.

Figure 2. Monet’s Communication Axis

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sender</th>
<th>Receiver</th>
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<tr>
<td><img src="image.jpg" alt="Figure 2" /></td>
<td>“what exists between the subject and me”</td>
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So how do we bring all of this together? I asked Donald Graves, mentor to us all in the study of children’s writing, how he observed, and this is what he said:

> The key is to look through the child’s eyes. What does the child attend to? What causes the child to react? What does the child initiate — with words, with hands, with making? When the child begins an operation, how does the child sustain it? What does the child repeat, go back, move ahead? What does the child transform to her own ends?

> What nonverbal cues in others does the child use to extract meaning from a situation — touch, closeness, gesture, expression. How does the child appear to translate the communication of others?

> These are a few of the things I look for in an observation. The first is the most important — I must look through the child’s eyes.

(Donald Graves, personal communication)

Where Monet settled in the exchange itself, in awareness of what existed between the subject and him, Graves tries to move as close to the...
student as possible, to almost be the student in what he sees. His focus in communication (see Figure 3) is as close as possible to the person he is observing, yet his intent is to find more than simply who is observed. “I try to sit where the child sits and that immediately creates the ‘in between’, a chance to discover what is actually there. I am there with the child, but I am not the child, nor am I myself.”

There is a whole range of awareness that you can bring to communication.

Remember the story I told about teaching at The Clearing? How in 5 days, the students learned to listen with a new ear. For a group as a whole, I felt like that was the best teaching I had ever done. And my teaching there was shaped by Marie Clay: Focus. Specific goals formed through observation and awareness of the student. Belief in the student. Fostering independence. Accelerating learning.

You can move to a different level in teaching by paying attention to who your students are and who you are with them. By seeing. By listening and being aware of speaking. By sensing.

We sit at small tables with one child at a time, intent each day on understanding as much as we can about how that child learns. Understanding what needs to be untangled and what is just beginning to develop. Understanding how our questioning can nurture or impede processing. And as we sit, chair next to chair with that one child, thousands of other teachers across the country, across three continents, are leaning into their conversation, chair-to-chair with their one child.

Hirshfield speaks of poetry with these words, but they remind us of the gift that Clay’s inquiry and dedication brought to literacy and to each half hour we teach a child: “Here, as elsewhere in life, attentiveness only deepens what it regards” (Hirshfield, 1994, p. vii).

References

About the Author
Susan O’Leary is the author of the Reading Recovery book, Five Kids: Stories of Children Learning to Read and co-author of You Can Make a Difference: A Teacher’s Guide to Political Action. Her most-recent publications are “Teaching Essential Vocabulary” in RRCNA’s Achieving Literacy Success with English Language Learners and the Teachers Edition of Wisconsin: Our State, Our Story, for which she and co-authors won the 2009 Independent Publishers’ IPPY Award for Education/Teaching/Academics. This article is drawn from a keynote she has given at regional Reading Recovery conferences.