

Change Over Time: What Marie Clay Taught Us in Her Writing and in Her Life

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Author's note

Writing isn't always a labor of love, but the summer months I spent writing this essay for a keynote were simply that. I would rise in the morning, spend hours reading Marie or writing about her, and then head out on my bike to clear my head, to let things settle so that I could move back into the writing a little deeper the next day. Because it mattered to me to honor Marie as fully as I could. This was an opportunity for me to slow down into gratitude for the effect that her remarkable life has had on mine.

I thank the Reading Recovery Council of North America for publishing this edited version of my talk. The full talk also explores Marie's theory of the construction of a visual processing system by looking closely at haiku, Matisse's art, and Frank Gehry's architecture. In exploring these analogies, I came to understand Marie's work more clearly and simply.

I first gave this keynote at the Literacy for All and Michigan Reading Recovery conferences. My thanks go to the International Reading Recovery Trainers Organization for then inviting me to keynote their 2013 conference in Australia and for making the full version of the talk available on their website, at www.irrto.com.

There are many, many people who knew Marie Clay far better than I. Marie and I met twice, we had a short correspondence, and trainers from several countries have told me that when they met Marie, she gave them a copy of my book, *Five Kids: Stories of Children Learning to Read*. That is my small particular connection to her.

But there are many ways of knowing; there are different paths we take to common outcomes. I have also read and had my life changed by Marie's writing and by her example — I know I am not the only person who thinks of their life in teaching as before they encountered Marie Clay's work and after. I have not taught in Reading Recovery for 14 years. But each time I work with a teacher, whenever I sit down with a student, Marie is right there beside me. What is this teacher or student's potential? What might I be missing? What signs can I find of how they are constructing their learning? What can I take away with me from this moment to mull over? That fundamental change in who I am and how I see is one more way that I knew and know Marie Clay.

Marie taught us just in who she was. Jenny Clay compiled a beautiful little book about Marie after her mother's death in 2007 — *Memories of Marie*. You find nuggets in it, clippings and photos that you want to linger with a bit. One is an interview in the *New Zealand Herald's* Thursday magazine from June 5, 1975.

Marie says:

When I had my family in the middle fifties, I did some teaching of remedial reading to pupils at home. My whole thinking was challenged by this experience. Our books didn't explain why children didn't read. We were lacking in information on the early stages of reading. I asked the question: "Is it possible to find out more about the early stages of reading and can we see reading difficulties early on?" Previously this area had been left alone. When a child

was seven or eight and not learning to read at the average rate he had been called a slow starter. There was a fear, and an understandable one about pressuring children too early.... Along with fear of pressuring children went the attitude, “Oh, it’ll come right, there’s no real need to look at reading problems till the child is seven or eight. My work has overturned that concept.” (Clay, J., 2009, p. 54–55)

Our books didn’t explain why children didn’t read.

My work has overturned that concept.

These two phrases are quintessential Marie Clay. Searching for reasons, and if they aren’t there, not accepting their absence. A certain uneasiness with the status quo that led her to overturn concepts — the concept, for instance, that acquisition of reading and writing are not intricately linked. Which sounds astounding to us now but it was Marie who opened that door.

My favorite words of Marie’s (and there are many), are from *Change Over Time in Children’s Literacy Development*: “I live in a state of perpetual enquiry” (Clay, 2001, p. 3). Say that slowly: “I live in a state of perpetual enquiry.” That was Marie’s method, to never accept what she knew or what others knew as final understanding. To continue to inquire, to investigate, to want to know. And yet at the same time, much of her enquiry was organized around this one central question: “Is it possible to find out more about the early stages of reading and can we see reading difficulties early on?” Marie tells us in *Change Over Time* that she feels Reading Recovery has been misunderstood, and so to see her responsibility in that, she is going back to the original research, looking for what might have been left out or overlooked. This perspective, too, holds important teachings from Marie’s life:



- Enquire.
- Find and hold your central question. Keep returning to it to deepen your understanding.
- Start with yourself. If there is a problem or a confusion, don’t look outward for other’s responsibility. Reflect on yours.



Marie’s writing is about a journey, about following our individual path in change over time. It is not simply travel, it is journey, a quest to know.

The Particular Words of Her Method

By the time she wrote *Change Over Time*, Marie was drawn to returning to the origins of her theory to consider with a new lens the steps that had occurred along the way. She explains to us that readers of her manuscript contested this decision, but we sense in *Change Over Time* that by this time Marie was considering the journey of her work. And she knew that a true journey, one of transformation, begins with and remembers its origins.

Marie taught us to consider words in a whole new way, so let’s begin with the naming, with Marie’s words for her work. When I told my writer friend Norbert Blei about Marie’s book, he thought for a minute and repeated its name: “*Change Over Time*. That’s a good title.” Because it is. *Change Over Time*. But let’s keep going. *Becoming Literate. By Different Paths to Common Outcomes. Change Over Time*. Being, Space, and Time — each present in a title of her major theoretical works. We might pause there.

Say slowly and listen to these words: Observation Survey. Don’t they sum up Clay’s lifespan psychological approach? Marie explains in *Change Over Time* that in “lifespan developmental psychology... individual change must be conceptualized in terms of both the individual in

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context and, over time, the context of a changing society” (Clay, 2001, p. 289). We are observing beings in time, in specific place. No small task. Rather, one that calls for responsibility, for care.

And the Observation Survey’s tasks, like Writing Vocabulary. Concepts About Print. Marie’s titles and labels in themselves are the whole story. Writing Vocabulary: What children can write becomes their vocabulary, and just as in oral language, can be expanded once we attend to it, know what the child draws on. Concepts About Print: Marie drew our attention to the fact that there are concepts and understandings involved in reading text. That very young minds bring knowledge with them that was invisible to us before her work; that it is a *concept* that one page comes before another, that a book is held right side up. Huge understandings whose dignity Marie was the first to recognize and bring to the observation of what it is that children do when they look at text.

Marie’s writing is about a journey, about following our individual path in change over time. It is not simply travel, it is journey, a quest to know. She tells us in *Change Over Time* that she wrote the chapters separately — she didn’t start here and go there in the writing, she took different pieces she was working on and wove them into a book.

Much of what I have thought of in writing this piece comes from pausing at those three titles — *Becoming Literate*, *By Different Paths to Common Outcomes*, and *Change Over Time*. As abstract and theoretical as her writing can sometimes be, there is a narrative quality underneath it, a sense of the individual on a path, coming to change.

Seeing the Invisible

Marie over and over considered language and linguistic theory in asking, “Is it possible to find out more about the early stages of reading and can we see reading difficulties early on?” (Clay, J., 2009, p. 54-55).

Her work on *the visual perception of language* — if we stop at those words, the visual perception of language, it helps us to understand how difficult bringing attention to print can be. The visual perception of language for a child who has not yet learned many letters of the alphabet — what meaning would that have for a child? Because oral language, which the child is accustomed to, is largely invisible. Children do engage in word games which segment language into morphemes and sounds, but in general, up until learning to read, in daily life language exists for children at a meaning level. To see the invisible, children must take part in a necessary segmenting of oral discourse — word from word, syllable from syllable, phoneme from phoneme. This takes place at a structural, syntactic, and morphemic level. This takes practice, attention, concentration, and synthetic understanding.

Our words are an invisible code. When we stop to think about it, we may recognize the code much more easily than its invisibility.

To see and make sense of the invisible, to visually perceive language, children must also begin to learn the names of letters, begin to attach them to symbols, and then devise some system which helps them to discriminate these arbitrary signs. This is visual, graphophonic attention, but at a deeper level, it is the ordering of a sign system. It is many small, unnoticed steps in making

sense, in visually creating order within an already set system. It is working with part and whole and intuiting order.

And children must do this in learning to attend visually under new constraints. Clay wrote: “Teachers are not trying to develop visual perception: that began in infancy. Becoming literate involves making the processes of visual perception operate under a new set of arbitrary constraints which apply only to the written code of a language” (Clay, 2001, p. 149).

Marie signaled to us: “Complexity can easily turn our attention away from the visual perception aspects of literacy towards other things” (Clay, 2001, p. 165). This is a part of her method — to pause at taking things apart. To notice that we don’t tend to notice.

In bringing our attention, for example, to how learning to hear the sounds in words when using Elkonin boxes involves auditory, kinesthetic, and visual perception, to how slow articulation of a word help the habit of attuned auditory and visual perception to develop and how the kinesthetic is a part of this, Marie is showing us her way of thinking. It is a great mind making bullet points in taking apart a simple task and in putting that task back together in such a way that our understanding has now changed.

Marie kept turning us toward attending to all senses as we considered the detail of perception. She taught us that we need to pause at the *complexity* of engagement in authentic tasks.

In *Change Over Time* she quotes Elkonin in a way that gives us a glimpse into how she continued to consider the linguistic complexity of a child first coming to literacy:

While actively utilizing grammatical knowledge and while defining with words the corresponding objects and actions the child cannot make a word... the object of his awareness. During this period the word may be used but not noticed by the child, and frequently it presents things seemingly like a glass through which the child looks at the surrounding world, not making the word itself the object of awareness and not suspecting that it has its own existence, its own aspects of construction. (Elkonin, 1971, in Clay, 2001, p. 26)

Children’s *awareness* of language changes as they begin to read. Marie included in *Concepts About Print*, “show me a word;” “show me a letter” because it is not a given that children understand that what we say can be segmented into words and their signs. Children are unaware of using grammatical knowledge as they speak, but they fluently use their own syntax. Language itself is “like a glass through which the child looks at the surrounding world... not suspecting that it has its own existence ...”

But children are not the only ones who use and exist in language, often unaware of its presence. We all do this.

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Meaning, Sign and Sound

Saussure was a Swiss linguist who taught around 100 years ago, and he had a similar seismic effect on linguistics to Marie’s on our understanding of children’s learning and early literacy. He was the first to bring linguistic focus to language as a formal system of elements that help us to represent meaning. It is in part Saussure’s work Elkonin was getting at when he wrote of the child and the glass.

For Saussure brought our attention to the difference between the signifier and the signified, which he represented in this way –

Signifier
Signified

This is exactly the convention Marie Clay adopted in creating running records, and is exactly the relation a child’s error has to a word in a text — they are attempting to signify the word.

Saussure used the example of *tree* — the word *tree* (the Signifier) is not a tree itself, but represents the signified *tree*. Well, at some level we all know that the word *tree*



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isn't a tree. But in daily life, we don't regularly stop and distinguish between language and what it represents. It is a given of the code that we in some way believe that the word *tree* is either a tree or our understanding of tree. If we stopped regularly to remember the sign exists, we would over and over lose the meaning being conveyed, just as our students do when meaning breaks down as they pause at words. And so we accept not just spoken language, but written language as a glass. It's an unspoken, often unrealized societal convention that we do so.

The reason I am pausing here at Saussure is that it is essential to ongoing communication that language regularly become invisible. A key difference between our relation as adults to language and a child's relation is that we are able at will to remember that language represents. To speak of grammatical structures. To understand and analyze phonological properties. To describe complexities and levels of meaning. All of which is approaching language through MSVs.

While others were looking at the deficits of what children who struggle didn't know, Marie paused at the invisible, at the relation of Signifier (Sr) and Signified (Sd). Marie taught us that change over time can be observed. Her

unusual lens was to focus not primarily on beginning and end, but *process* and journey.

How is every child's awareness of language and visual form changing as they begin to read?

For words represent things and concepts, but what about letters? Letters represent sound itself, and sound which is joined in words. But this is tremendously abstract. In learning to sort out and remember letters, the child's visual perception and particular sense of coherence is used for making meaning, even before individually making meaning from text. They must perceive and remember letter shape. They must name the letter, and attach one, sometimes more, sounds to it. Marie pointed this out.

As teachers, we, too, can pause at the invisible of the Sr/Sd relation, of the naming of letters and then words, and in doing so, better understand our teaching. Consider how in coming to learn high-frequency words, especially words that aren't phonologically logical, the letters in some way merge into one recognized sign:

the

 article: 'this one'

Because words like *the* can't be broken down into easily understandable phonemes and signs, these words may well be a part of how children come to understand "wordness" and individual symbols coming together to make meaning. Their irregularity as sign may be a part of how children come to see 'word' and 'order'.

Most children slide right past that invisible connection between representation and meaning, and learn to read — but ours, without support, don't. Marie wrote about the child's growing awareness of the specifics of visual perception needed for literacy. She noted the two necessary *journeys* of visual perceptions: that it is first more detailed, more differentiated, becoming more richly patterned and *then* becoming faster, fluent, surely known.

As the child comes to truly know a letter and its role in a word, that particular knowledge recedes from focus and becomes invisible. As teachers, as our knowledge grows, it follows a similar path — more detailed, more differentiated and richly patterned, then faster. It too becomes invisible and sure. But there is an invitation in Marie's work to remember to linger, to become again uncertain.

For example, because MSVs are so familiar, it can become habit to approach them with quick certainty — yep, V; yep, SM; yep, all three. We can forget that children’s errors, attempts, and self-corrections, especially in early literacy, all are signs of their present awareness of and fluency in language. Of what it is to mean, of how language is structured, of how signs represent. Because we are so familiar with MSVs, they can become our glass. But they represent the child’s present, tentative, flexible interaction with text; the child’s present, tentative, flexible processing.

Marie taught as much by who she was as by how she thought. And her grace and commitment, both of which shine through in *Change Over Time*, are in no small way a part of why Reading Recovery became an international movement. Who you are matters. Who you are with children, with other teachers, with administrators, parents, and politicians. It all matters.

How She Thought

As dense and theoretical as *Change Over Time* is, it is also an immensely and unusually human book.

It seems to me that one thing Marie wanted to do in *Change Over Time* was to give us a way of observing and constructing theory — a way of observing for the process over time, whether as teachers or as researchers. Another was a model for conceptualizing change. And so as she continued to unveil her particular way of thinking, it couldn’t always be contained in tight form.

As I reread *Change Over Time* for this essay, aside from marking up the book, I kept notes in a small notebook. Several times I created a way of organizing notes and thoughts, but her book repeatedly outgrew them. She thought just like the theory she described — parts form-

ing and becoming temporarily larger new wholes. So I would have categories and take my notes in those ways, and then I would have to create new categories and sections because my initial structures no longer kept up with her thought.

Marie was also the consummate teacher, and in writing as the researcher in *Change Over Time*, she could not seem to help sporadically switching to professional development. Her chapter on learning to look at print over and over had exercises for teachers to complete to sharpen their awareness of perception. In writing theoretically, she suddenly switches to, “Here is a helpful exercise,” speaking directly and in an informal I–you discourse to the reader:

Here is a helpful exercise:

Describe how you perceive an orange.

What nonverbal processes are involved?

You see shape, colour, markings, stalk or leaf.

You smell, taste, feel, use several senses, and receive sensations.

Would you ever use different kinds of information for one decision?

How do you combine different kinds of information?

How do you exclude some possibilities?

Can you mention any other processes you used?

Convince me that what I am holding is an orange.

(Clay, 2001, p. 153)

Marie’s inquisitive mind could easily move to the tangent of teaching and experiencing from the process of developing a theory. Her theory, in fact, comes exactly from questions just like the ones she listed.

I expect she included exercises like this in *Change Over Time* because Marie could not pass up an opportunity to teach. And her teaching took many forms, from overturning existing theories to making people awed by her feel comfortable, valuable, and seen. Because skilled teachers put their students at ease. *Memories of Marie* is filled with stories like these. I gave a small session at the national Reading Recovery conference in Ohio years ago, soon after *Five Kids* was published. Marie, whom I had not met, wanted to attend my session, but more than

that, she didn't want me to be uncomfortable in presenting. And so she came to me and asked if I would mind if she sat in, telling me she wouldn't if it would make me nervous. Consider the kindness in her question, and her willingness to leave if I asked. Marie taught as much by who she was as by how she thought. And her grace and commitment, both of which shine through in *Change Over Time*, are in no small way a part of why Reading Recovery became an international movement. Who you are matters. Who you are with children, with other teachers, with administrators, parents, and politicians. It all matters.

My favorite chapter of *Change Over Time*, its last one, shows her connection to us, her continuing enquiry, and I suspect a desk or office with many piles. It very much has the feel of one pile addressed, then another. As a writer myself, I sense in this chapter that she both wanted to bring the book to a close, and couldn't quite let go. And so the chapter gives us a further window into considering how she thought.

It begins with some biographical history because students had so often asked her about her life. One line into the chapter, it is as if we are reading the first sentences of a Dickens novel:

I entered upon an exploration of early literacy learning because of my work in normal and clinical developmental psychology, following my first training as a teacher. I began to explore literacy processing. (Clay, 2001, p. 287)

After telling us of her life, she overviews two theories based on geographical metaphor that she hadn't explored in the book, but wanted to make sure we were aware of.

She then leaps to setting out five reasons, each based in tentativeness, flexibility, and problem-solving, why Reading Recovery has been successful in different international settings.

This moves to responding to the questions reviewers of her manuscript raised, so that we as readers are included in that small circle of reflection on the text. Since colleagues had raised these questions, she thought it likely we might have the same ones — so she lays out exactly why she did what she did. This section of the chapter ends, in Marie Clay fashion, with her urging us on beyond her work:

Hopefully in the next ten years some of the hypotheses in the progressions table will be discarded and some will be written up as fully as the self-correction chapter in this book. I am only opening up the discussion. (Clay, 2001, p. 304)

A wider lens of ethical obligation takes her beyond her own work.

And then the final section of the chapter, of the book, titled with a strong, clear declarative sentence, a noun defined by three adjectives: "The view is preventative, developmental, and provocative." Here, she one last time positions Reading Recovery in contrast to any simple explanation of children's learning.

And then, not quite letting go, a final section *within* the final section — a subsection of "The view is preventative, developmental and provocative" which she heads, "Some cautions" (Clay, 2001, p. 306). It is a reminder that any research model is biased according to society and belief. And that her model and reflection are based on detailed records of observation of change in historical time. But it is exactly this observation, as opposed to averages derived from heterogeneous groups, that can give teachers information that is useful in day-to-day teaching.

Marie's was a vibrant, rigorous intellect and an unusually generous heart. And so it seems fitting that she end her book, not with her own words, but with those of a colleague — Don Holdaway:

There is no better system to control the complexities and intricacies of each person's learning than that person's own system operating with genuine motivation and self-determination within reach of humane and informed help. (Clay, 2001, p. 306)

Writing a book changes you. It demands daily work and focus and ends up clarifying your thought and purpose in a new way. A writer cares about and attends to the last words in her book, for those words are the end of a long, transformative journey. The final full stop.

It is not insignificant that Marie gave someone else the last word. For her work was not about herself, it was about as she wrote, "young, low-achieving children" and their teachers. Since Don Holdaway summed up for her well the relation of the individual learning best with a humane and informed teacher, she left us with his words, not hers.

Marie recognized the dignity of children who struggle — she looked to see strength, to unlock potential. And we recreate her theory each time we work with a child and observe their processing. Each time we pose questions about what we notice instead of being sure.

You sense in reading her how Marie felt a keen responsibility to us as the teachers of these young, low-achieving children, and it seems to me that is a major part of the organization of this last chapter. My husband and I, after 30 years of child rearing, a few years ago sent our youngest child off to college. This chapter reminds me very much of that experience, the final week of *I meant to tell you this. I've cooked a special meal for you — let's linger over it. Remember what I've taught you.* And then finally the day comes that you drive your child to the university, and take that last look back in the car's window, pulling away, letting go.

To me what we take from this last chapter is the importance of remembering our humanity. Of being human while holding impeccably high standards. We teach best when we see our children individually; see the possibility in their tentativeness. We are best with our colleagues when we see their possibility and intention.

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If *Change Over Time* were a work of literature rather than of literacy, the reader would note that an author who titles her books with words of being, time, and space, in bringing her book to a close, turns to studies in child development that use geography as a metaphor. Marie emphasizes with italics, “*New learning at any one time must depend on the nature of the landscape formed by the past experiences of the learner up until this moment in time*” (Clay, 2001, p. 293).

Navigating the Landscape

With my children now grown, I've returned to cycling, and spend hours in the summer riding country roads on my bike. Wisconsin has this remarkable, unusual region that begins a few miles west of my home, called the Driftless Area.

The Driftless Area is a small pocket in the northern United States that the glaciers missed over 10,000 years ago in their last North American movement. And so while eastern Wisconsin is quite flat, slowly scraped by glacial movement, the Driftless Area is filled with rolling hills, long valleys, and sudden steep escarpments. My first summer cycling again, a good friend of mine, Mary Michal, charted weekly rides for the two of us near her home in this region.

I was a newcomer to serious cycling, and I thought about Marie and geography often on our rides: *the nature of the landscape formed by the past experiences of the learner up until this moment in time.* The Driftless, this area hidden among all the other regions, is like the child's internal processing, hidden, and yet clearly there. Like our children — their possibility hidden to many adults and to themselves.

I was learning to navigate geography that had been formed by the past geological experience of the region, and I had few skills for elevation rises of several hundred feet in less than a quarter mile. But with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other, I learned first separate strategies — gear down *before* the incline starts, sit back on your seat, don't worry about going only 5 miles an hour, and alternate sitting and standing to ride because it uses different muscles and gives your quads a rest — that started slowly to be merged in practice. As a beginner in difficult landscape, I would consciously use and name my strategies. As the season progressed, I was using them more fluently and with more ease; their integrated presence was there, but now with fluency rather than separation.

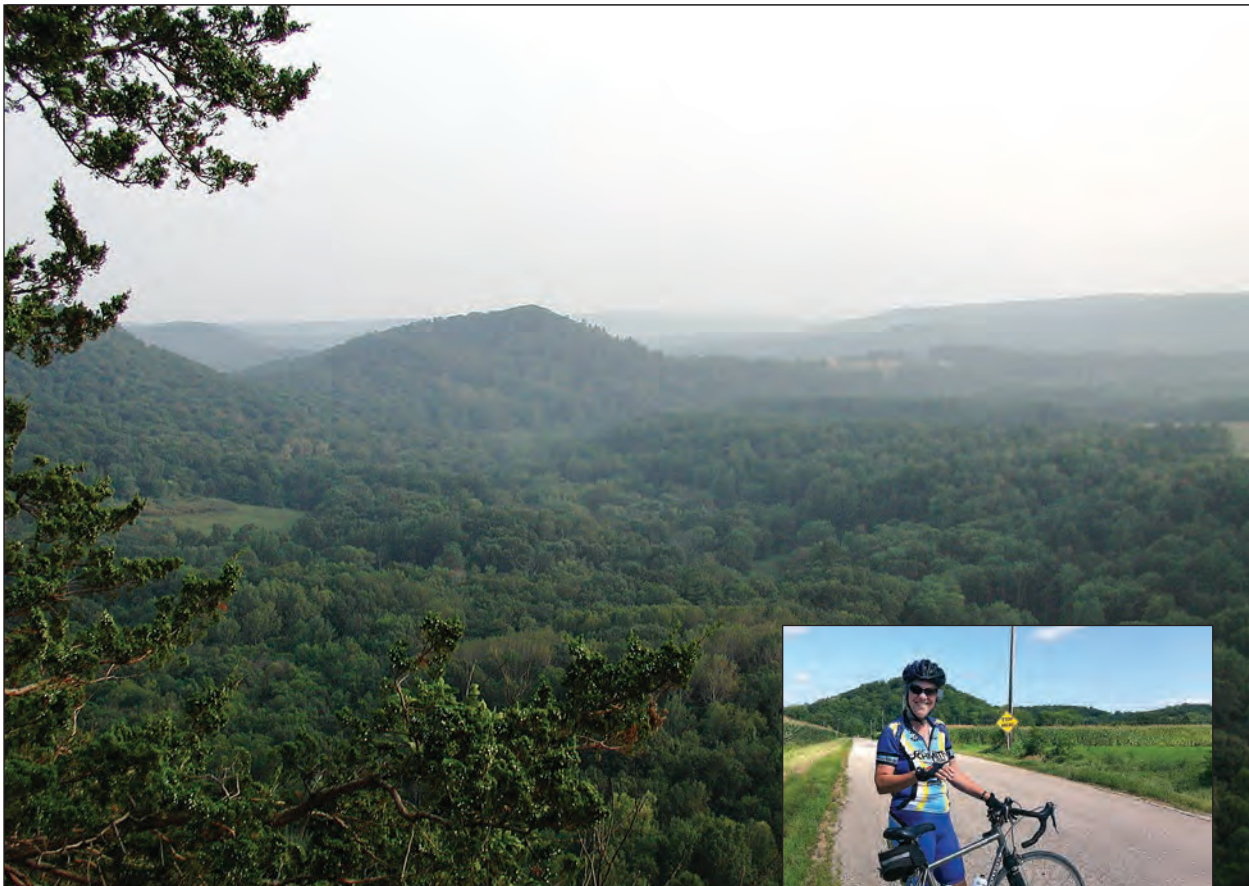
I began to experience success — I climbed one of the steepest hills, Pikes Peak, twice that summer, and it was easier the second time. I also felt frustration and failure. I ended up walking up a particularly difficult hill, relieved to accept defeat, while Mary continued riding, probably at 4 miles an hour — steady, slow, focused, engaged.

After that ride, Mary told me a story about herself as a less experienced cyclist, struggling in climbing a mountain in British Columbia. An older man pedaled next to her and asked if she minded a bit of advice. When she answered that would be fine, he said, “Don’t give the mountain more than it needs.” What he meant was, the mountain is there — sure, solid, strong, and deep. If you force into it in pedaling, you run smack into something stronger, bigger, and more solid than you. Ride *with* the mountain, giving it the energy it needs, not forcing. When you are engaged in hard effort, relax. It shifted riding for Mary, and it shifted riding for me.

Think of that for your students who are the most challenging to teach. Don’t give the mountain more than it needs. Don’t give *the student* more than she needs. Pedagogically, this is in Marie’s writing about teacher talk. Find *just* what the child needs, not the surplus. It also

has an affective part to it. As you are engaged in difficult effort, relax. That will be a different relation between you and the student. Ride up the hill, not into the hill.

As we cycled each week, I wanted to know more about this beautiful region, so I researched books and came on *The Physical Geography of Wisconsin*, which was written in 1916 by Lawrence Martin. As northern North America was covered by the glaciers, there was this one enclave near the Mississippi River in what is now Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois that its reach simply bypassed. A black and white map of North America in the book demonstrated visually how unusual it was that this one discrete area was missed by glacial movement. I would think of that geological, that spatial and temporal quirk in land formation as I rode. And I showed perhaps a few too many people that map in the book and how it amazed me.



A good friend of mine, Mary Michal (inset), charted weekly rides for the two of us near her home in the Driftless Area. I was a newcomer to serious cycling, and I thought about Marie and geography often on our rides.

I tell this story in part to return to Marie's "I live in a state of perpetual enquiry." We cannot experience or completely understand the processing that continues to transform itself as a child learns to read. But we *can* experience learning something new. We can understand what draws us in, what confuses and defeats us and how it feels to not be competent, to not succeed.

In my curiosity and relation to that page with the map, I was that child leaning into text, into illustration. A child's curiosity about and engagement with the page hold great possibility as a generative force in their learning. Notice when they lean forward, when they linger with an illustration, and use that as your starting point in true conversation for writing. Be curious about their curiosity, and with the right support they will enter into more complicated syntax, more-precise vocabulary, and more engagement with the task as they write.

At the end of the summer, Mary and I were cycling beyond the Driftless Area, expecting flat elevation. And suddenly, ahead of us on the road was one of the steepest, longest hills I had seen. I felt like the rules had been changed and that the geography wasn't fair. When I told this to Mary, my more knowledgeable teacher said, "Sometimes a hill looks worse than it is."

Mary has years of cycling in the Driftless, and quadriceps I can only aspire to, so I've learned not to believe her when she says a hill won't be hard. But she was right this time. As we drew closer to the hill, you could see it was a series of rises with short plateaus; it could be parsed into meaningful chunks. I also by now had been biking for months and had experiences that had integrated my hill knowledge. And so what I thought was going to be frustratingly difficult turned out to be the right level of challenge. The hill was less than I had thought, and I was now more than I had thought. I was very similar to

our students who have taken on processing and are moving toward discontinuing. Almost there, but not quite. Encountering new challenges they don't think they're up to. Still in need of that more knowledgeable other. And, oh, so ready to move to a new level, when prompted with just the right economical words.

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The Chair, the Child, the Conversation

For her opening remarks at the 1992 IRA convention, Marie wrote, "Ideas that challenge what we are not comfortable with can open up new possibilities. From small cracks in the massive land formations, much of the geographical beauty of today's world emerged: it is the challenge of what we hear and discuss, and often the disquiet we feel, that can open up new insights and opportunities" (Clay, J., 2009, p. 124).

As the elder, the more-knowledgeable other, as Merlin to Arthur, we give the child, not how to be meta-cognitive, but to be *aware* in the world, to notice what is around them and to shift what they think because of what they notice. Marie gave researchers clear directions to investigate in *Change Over Time*. For Reading Recovery teachers, the returning message I found in *Change Over Time* was The Chair, the Child, and the Conversation. We need to remember that we are there with them. Sometimes in the pressure of teaching, of fitting it all in, of finishing reports, we can forget that we are in their presence and they are in ours. Reading Recovery teachers have an unusual relation in the schools — one adult, on a small chair next to a child on a small chair, for focused instruction whose intent it is to change the child's life. To, as Marie explicitly stated in her goal, diminish predictive correlations.

Marie made a point in *Change Over Time* that she was going back to the origins of the theory to reflect on how it came about and where it needed to go. I find great meaning in the fact that this theory was created from the stance of a chair and a child. From days of sitting next to 100 children and taking notes as they read, looking for patterns of how children who became proficient in reading came to be those fluid proficient readers. This whole new theory now internationally recognized began with one woman sitting next to one individual child, just as you sit next to one child at a time. She created a theory with great respect for the teacher, one which sees that it is in the interaction between teacher and child that a whole world can open up. This particular child's world — not a world determined by a sequenced program. *This* child's world. *This* child's way of understanding.

Invite Marie into your room the next time you teach. Pull up a real or imaginary chair for her and see that child as she would. Invite the year 1963 into the room and in observing, imagine that you and that child are constructing a new theory.

Anonymous Generosity

So, more than 2 million children in the United States have now learned to read in Reading Recovery. Imagine what it would feel like to know that you had changed 2 million children's lives — children you had never met. That you had changed, had diminished predictive correlations on such a scale. She responded to a question once on how that felt and she said, well, this will surprise you, but I'm not satisfied. There are so many more children. That was true Marie Clay.

And yet, 2 million children. Even if you weren't satisfied, it still had to feel pretty good. Maybe on a Saturday night in March, when the seasons were just changing, and you felt autumn's first crisp air, one of those days you've spent getting things in order, doing chores and errands, and at the end of the day things are now organized, maybe on a night like that; or maybe on a plane flying to another continent to inspire teachers, meet with and inspire trainers, and strategize administrative needs; or maybe when she was writing or revising yet another book, I expect she had to feel tremendous joy, knowing that she had changed the lives of children she had never met, at a number size that we can't really comprehend.

This whole new theory now internationally recognized began with one woman sitting next to one individual child, just as you sit next to one child at a time. ...

Invite Marie into your room the next time you teach. Pull up a real or imaginary chair for her and see that child as she would. Invite the year 1963 into the room and in observing, imagine that you and that child are constructing a new theory.

Marie's was in many ways an anonymous generosity, for the children whose lives she changed for the most part knew nothing about her.

So what else can we learn from Marie? I turned 60 a few years ago, and in doing so, I followed a bit of Marie's example of anonymous generosity. People I know in Madison have built and continue to support five schools in a rural, very poor part of Cambodia. In 2009, their first students graduated from sixth grade, and without help, the poorest students would have to end their schooling because they would not be able to daily walk the 12–15 kilometers to the village with a high school. The Cambodian School Project's newsletter that year told that they had given reconditioned bikes to eight students and they hoped this year to be able to raise money for more bicycles.

I wrote a letter to friends asking them to help me raise money for 60 bikes for the project as a way of celebrating my birthday, and pledged to match the donations for the first 10 bikes. (I then enjoyed dedicating each of those bikes. There is a Marie Clay bike somewhere in northwestern Cambodia changing lives. There is also a Joy Cowley bike and I expect Dan the Flying Man enjoys hovering over it.)

My friends and their friends have now contributed over \$10,000 (part of it through grant writing) for bikes. Around 200 children and their families have received bikes because of my letter, more than three times what I had hoped for.

So, of course, it's not anonymous generosity if I'm telling you about this. But the children will probably never know who my friends or I are. I am telling you about my small decision to make change on a larger scale to encourage you to continue, too, the amazing, generous gesture that was Marie Clay's life. To incorporate that, too, into your life.

Two million children. Marie Clay anonymously changed the lives of 2 million children, and that number will only continue to grow. We can't have that enormous effect, but we can have our own small one. Take her example with you. Create change in the world that comes from your heart.

To Take Away

So what might there be to take away from considering how Marie thought? That we and our children are on a journey that Marie specifically mapped out. That there is story to this. Let us think not only of the story in our children's books. Let us remember Marie's story, our story.

And remember, too, that there is an invisible nature to the task of the child. If we investigate that invisibility, we can help them better on their way. And question. Question in such a way that you don't stop questioning. Hold your larger question as you enquire, enquire, enquire. And learn from Marie's generosity. That, too, can be what she continues to teach.

Matsuo Basho, considered the master of haiku, lived in Japan in the 1600s. He was beloved by his students and well known for developing their skills. At a party sending him on his way as he started out in old age for a long journey across Japan, Basho composed this verse to begin a *renku* — a spontaneous group poem that continues a beginning haiku that has just been offered to the group. This would have been a traditional way of celebrating Basho's departure.

Hatsu shigure are the first rains of winter, and Basho is about to begin a journey on foot, west to east, across Japan from Iga, near Kyoto, to Edo, which is now called

Let my name
be "Traveler";
first rains.



A Zen Wave
(Aitken, 1978, p. 80)

[Art by Kazuaki Tanahashi]

Tokyo. He will take with him his clothes, outer garments, a hat, a walking staff, a bowl for food, and calligraphy supplies. That is all. This will not be an easy journey.

Basho was both loved and revered as a teacher. Imagine this night — your teacher setting out on a journey that will take both strength and conviction, that has well known danger. You have been changed by him, and you know that his writing and his teaching are a gift.

In *A Zen Wave*, a beautiful collection of Basho's haiku and close commentary, Robert Aitken explains, "You cannot meet today; you cannot meet this moment if you go around consuming secondhand truths" (Aitken, 1978 paraphrased, p. 81). Again, Marie. Aitken ends the chapter quoting a verse that is sometimes given as a eulogy at a monk's funeral. "First I went following the scented grasses; then I returned following the falling blossoms" (Aitken, p. 84). He explains why this particular verse is used — that "it is the life of the mature Zen student, never astray amidst all the coming and going." This was Marie Clay, focused and intent, aware in life, of the scented grass at the beginning, of the falling blossom at the ending.

It seems fit then, to finish an investigation on what we can learn from Marie's life with specific eulogy. Because in many ways all I have said here is meant as eulogy, for even though it's 6 years now since we lost Marie, I expect many of us still feel that loss. As Marie did, follow the potential and possibility in that one innocent little 6-year-old girl you teach who faces failure

without you; follow the tentative, flexible learning of that little 6-year-old boy who is just starting to show he is consolidating, understanding, and guide them in forging their different paths.

Just as Marie, with absolute piercing intent, follow the scented grass; follow the falling blossoms.

And one last thing for you on your path: “The view is preventative, developmental, and provocative.”

Take those words with you, and prevent, develop—and with Marie Clay grace, wisdom, decorum and eyes on the prize—provoke.

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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.

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About the Cover

As he enters the third grade, Jessie Rodriguez loves reading about animals and sports and he's even trying to teach his little brother how to read. But when he began his Reading Recovery lessons as a second-round first grader, Jessie was performing well below his peers. By the end of his lessons in May, Jessie had raised eight reading levels and was successfully integrating sources of information to read text. Jessie's second-grade teacher, Mrs. Deaton, remembers that Jessie had lost some of these skills when school began in the fall but quickly regained the strategies with small-group instruction. He got excited, she said, about being able to choose his own books from the class library and often chose “Super Fly Guy” books. She said she loved his smile when he got the meaning of the text. Jessie's mother shares that he is a loving boy who is helpful around the house and is especially kind to others. She says that he likes football and loves to play with his friends.

