

The Effects of a Single-task vs. a Multi-task Approach to Literacy: a Sociological View

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Most discussions of the relative merit of various approaches to literacy take up the question from a psychological point of view. The discussion usually focuses on which approach is appropriate given the way children learn. I am going to take up the question from a sociological perspective, considering instead, 1) what kind of a classroom situation the approach establishes and 2) what effect that situation is likely to have on the way individuals interact and the perceptions they form of themselves and others. I will begin by describing recent research on the topic of Task Structures, relating that research to two basic approaches to literacy, the traditional basal reader/workbook and the naturalistic language experience/project approach. Then, I will describe related research, and finally, discuss implications for classroom practice.

Research on task structures

Stephen Bossert (1) has conducted some interesting research on the organizational patterns established by different types of tasks children perform in classrooms. He did not concern himself with any curriculum area, yet his findings have implications for those considering the relative merit of different approaches to teaching reading and other language arts.

Bossert made a distinction between the nature of instructional tasks which will be referred to here as "single-task," and "multi-task," and looked to see what behaviors and perceptions were related to each. *Single-task* is defined as group recitation and seatwork requiring the same performance of all students, including cases where individuals are working independently at different levels in a text or workbook. *Multi-task* is defined as numerous individual or small group projects in which children are encouraged to select and organize their own tasks. *Note that the*

traditional basal reader approach, which relies heavily on sets of "readers," workbooks or ditto sheets to determine the student's activity, tends to establish a single-task structure. The language experience approach, which relies heavily on self-created projects which integrate oral, written and visual forms of communication, tends to establish a multi-task structure.

Also notice that there are two major differences between the settings established by the two types of task structures: 1) who/what is in control of (and thus responsible for) the pace and sequence and the content of activities and 2) whether interactions are public or relatively private. Specifically, in a single-task setting, the teacher and/or materials maintain tight control over the content and process of activities. To maintain that control, the teacher must see what is happening at every moment, so behavior must be public. In other words, what each child is doing must be similar enough so that the teacher (and everyone else) can see at a glance that each child is behaving exactly as the teacher intends.

In a multi-task setting, the student and teacher mutually agree on content and process, and skills are developed in the sequence needed to carry out that process. Materials are used as a resource rather than as a means of control. The teacher maintains control over long-term goals but encourages the child to exercise some choice in the selection of the content and process of his daily work. Along with that choice the child assumes responsibility for achieving what is expected of him on a daily basis.

In handing over some of the control and responsibility to the student, the teacher has relinquished the possibility and lessened the need to see exactly what is happening at every moment, and so behavior in the classroom is relatively private. In other words, the manner in which each child decides to select and organize materials and activities will probably not be similar enough so that the teacher (or anyone else) can always see at a glance exactly what each child is doing.

These two factors, who is at the center of control and the relatively public or private nature of activities, have an impact of their own on the interactions between participants and the perceptions they form within the situation. Bossert's research revealed that this impact is independent of the teacher's philosophy and teaching style and independent of the children's personality. That is, when looking at the same teacher and group of students in a single-task and then in a multi-task setting, he

noted very different behaviors from one setting to another. Further, when looking at classrooms which were predominantly either single- or multi-task, Bossert also discovered striking differences. These differences are described below.

*The pace and sequence of activities
and student opportunity to participate*

Bossert found that the point of reference used to determine the pace and sequence of activities was quite different in the two task settings and that this affected the opportunity of various types of students to receive instruction and participate in activities. Specifically, in the single-task setting, the pace and sequence of activities was matched to a segment of the class which was somewhere in the middle. Those able to go faster had to wait or receive other assignments, and those who needed more time often did not have the opportunity to grasp the material. Bossert found that teachers varied in their treatment of the faster and slower students. Sometimes teachers used top performers as models for the group, giving them more time to recite and display their information and skills. At other times, teachers gave these students extra assignments to keep them busy and spent additional time with them to explain those assignments.

Whatever means was used to deal with these faster children, the end result was that they received more time, attention and reinforcement than the slower students. It seems reasonable to assume that in the case where the task is of the same type day after day, as with the single-task basal reader approach, the same students would continue to be the top performers. Thus, it would be the same individuals who would receive more attention and reinforcement over time, which would eventually result in a widening of the gap between the slow and fast performers.

In contrast, in the multi-task settings, the pace and sequence of activities were geared to the individual student's performance. Bossert found that the teacher allowed those who were doing well with their task to continue and gave more attention to those having difficulty. It also seems reasonable to assume that in this case, where the activity is mutually agreed upon by the teacher and student, the tendency would be to modify the task when it proved to be too difficult for that student. As a result, the same children would not continue to have difficulty day after day. Thus the teacher would be less likely to be giving more attention and reinforcement to the same individuals over time.

Sanctioning of behavior

Bossert found that teachers in the different settings used different means for controlling student behavior. In the single-task setting, the teacher tended to rely on equitable, impersonal sanctions, i.e., "desists." Bossert recorded an average of 19.2 desists/100 minutes in group recitation and 12.6/100 minutes when students were working individually in workbooks as compared with 9/100 minutes in the multi-task setting. In addition, teachers and students in the single-task setting reported feeling socially more distant than those in the multi-task setting.

It would seem that the use of a quick, impersonal means of control in the single-task setting is due to two factors. First, in this public setting where everyone can see and hear the exchange, the teacher needs to appear to be applying the rules equitably. But more importantly, once established as the center of attention and control, there is an urgent need for the teacher to remain free in order to keep things going. The teacher must not take time out to deal in depth with a student, for fear that the rest of the class may get out of control.

By contrast, in the multi-task setting, Bossert found that the teacher tended to covertly "bend the rules" to fit the particular situation and needs of the individual. Students and teachers reported experiencing a strong sense of rapport.

It appears that a multi-task setting allows for this in two ways. First, few will observe the exchange, as the setting is relatively private. So the question of equity is not such a problem. Second, there is not the same urgent need to stay in control, to keep things moving, because the teacher has shared some of the control and responsibility with the students. So it is possible to take more time and thus be in a better position to observe and judge what is actually occurring and to make adjustments accordingly.

Evaluation of performance and social status

Individuals used a different reference for evaluation of performance in the two settings. Bossert reports that in the single-task setting, evaluation was group referenced and based on the few skills required in the single task. In multi-task settings, evaluation tended to be referenced to individual growth and based on a greater variety of skills.

It appears that this difference is due to the relatively public versus private nature of the settings as well as the difference in

complexity of the tasks. For example, in the public, single-task setting, it is relatively easy to see and thus to rank students on common criteria and establish a status hierarchy accordingly. Conversely, in the multi-task setting, where performance is relatively private, it is more difficult to see and thus to judge how each student measures against the others. In addition, with tasks involving many kinds of materials and skills there are more facets of behavior to evaluate and thus more ways to measure and achieve success. For example, compare a spelling test or work sheet to designing and producing an art or science exhibit accompanied by a piece of writing. So it is less likely that one student will be rated "top performer" over all the others and treated accordingly.

Bossert found that the ways students evaluated one another and chose friends were linked to the task structure predominant in their classrooms. In classrooms which were usually single-task, there was a tendency for students to compete with one another to establish performance status and then form cliques with others of similar status to win special privileges. There was solidarity within these cliques but a high degree of between-group competition on the playground as well as in the classroom. The result was the development of a competitive status system within the classroom and a decrease in overall group cohesion.

In contrast, in multi-task settings children were much more cooperative. They formed friendships based on mutual interests and worked well with alternative subgroups even when friendships were not involved. Perhaps when there is so much going on simultaneously in a classroom, so that evaluation and thus status are not based on comparison with the group, it is simply not as possible, or necessary, for students to join together to compete with others for status and rewards. Instead, it is possible for a feeling of cooperation to develop. (This effect of the task structure, more than the use of special materials, might account for a phenomenon that Montessori repeatedly witnessed. She has reported that in her classrooms, which were multi-task, a feeling of cooperation and group spirit spontaneously emerged.) (2)

Generalization to other settings

What is particularly important to note here is that Bossert found that these characteristics appeared to generalize to other settings. For instance, art and science teachers who dealt with these students outside of their regular classrooms reported similar

differences in behavior between the students from the different task settings. They noted that the children from the multi-task settings were more self-directed, more cooperative while working on group projects and more open to exploring new forms of expression. In contrast, the single-task students were quieter, easier to control and showed less initiative.

When looking at individual students from one year to the next, Bossert found that students who remained in the same type of task setting (even though they had all changed teachers) displayed the same behaviors. He also found that the behavior of students who moved from one type of setting to another changed accordingly. Students, parents, teachers outside the regular classroom and the school counselor all reported changes in attitude and behavior from one year to the next in cases where students were assigned the second year to a different task setting. They noted, in particular, that students who had been in multi-task classrooms developed a competitive feeling and began to select friends based on performance status when moved to a single-task setting. They also reported that the reverse was true. So it did not appear that these attitudes were a result of the child's personality, but rather, were related to the task setting in which he operated.

Similar research

Interest in the issue of control is not new in educational research. For example, in 1943 Lippitt and White (3) published the results of experimental studies they and Lewin conducted to explore children's reactions to the different types of control exercised by adult leaders. Of particular interest here is the difference in response they found between authoritarian and democratic settings.

In the authoritarian setting, the leader dictated the task and working companion and informed the children of the activity one step at a time, so that future steps were always uncertain to a large degree. In the democratic setting students and leader shared in the establishment of goals and general steps toward reaching those goals. The leader provided technical advice along the way by posing alternative procedures from which a choice could be made.

The findings in these studies are compatible with and expand on what Bossert found. Specifically, when compared with the authoritarian setting, these behaviors were found in the democratic setting:

Greater spontaneous group cohesion formed. Children worked together for common goals and showed more friendliness and less hostility. They exhibited less ego-centered, competitive behavior and were more inclined to recognize with approval the work of others. This "cohesion" was a result of attitudes which the group formed, rather than those induced by the leader and were not dependent upon his presence in the group.

Fewer expressions of discontent. Children made an average of 1.6 remarks expressing discontent with the situation during each 1-hour meeting in the democratic setting as compared with an average of 9.8/1 hour in the authoritarian setting.

Less change in the quantity of time spent on serious work when leader left the room. The quantity of time on task remained virtually unchanged when the leader left the democratic setting. Work related behaviors dropped by approximately two thirds in the authoritarian setting when the leader left the room.

Lower quantity/higher quality of work. Children in the authoritarian setting produced a greater quantity of work. Children in the democratic setting took greater care for detail, and there was less "slopping of paint" in their approach to their work.

More recently, other researchers have made a distinction between task structures similar to those made by Bossert. They refer to them as "unidimensional" and "multidimensional." Their findings are also compatible with his. For example, Carl Simpson (4) reported that when compared with unidimensional classrooms, multidimensional classrooms differed as follows:

Fewer students rated "below average" in reading. Teachers in unidimensional classrooms rated 50% of their students "below average"; teachers in multidimensional classrooms rated 25% of their students in that category.

Less inequity between teachers' perceptions of minority and non minority students. Teachers in unidimensional classrooms rated 15% of the minority students in the bottom ability category, while teachers in the multidimensional situation rated 3% of their minority students in that category.

Lower degree of peer consensus of individual students' ability. When students were asked to select who is "best" in math (reading and social studies) and who is "worst," there was greater agreement in unidimensional classrooms.

Rosenholtz (5) also found that a higher percentage of students

were judged to be average or above in multidimensional classrooms. In addition, she found a higher polarity of social power between individual students (as reported by the students) in unidimensional classrooms and a significant relationship between perceived reading ability and social power in those classrooms.

Finally, these researchers also report that students in multidimensional classrooms had a higher self concept of ability. Specifically, Simpson found that 74% of students in multidimensional classrooms rated themselves as "about in the middle or above" as compared with 58% in the unidimensional classrooms. Rosenholtz found 83.2% and 72.8% respectively.

Implications for classroom practice

Viewing the issue in light of these research findings, it becomes obvious that there is more to the question of the relative merit of the traditional versus naturalistic approach to literacy than is generally recognized. The usual discussion of which is more appropriate, considering the way children learn, addresses only part of the issue. What must also be considered is how the behaviors, perceptions and attitudes of individuals might be affected by the classroom situation related to the approach.

Clearly, the findings presented here add to the argument supporting a naturalistic, multi-task approach to literacy. Now, it is important to add a few notes of caution and encouragement to those who set out to establish such an approach.

First, I am not suggesting that teachers never bring children together for large group activities, to sing, be read to, take part in planning sessions, etc. What I am suggesting is that this should not be the predominant situation and that when it is appropriate to pull students together for large group activities, the teacher should be aware of the probable effects and do whatever possible to guard against them.

Second, group size is not the key factor. The function of materials is also critical. That is, the alternative to large group activity should not be taking students lock-step through sets of materials, either individually or as part of a small group. Instead, materials should be used as a resource by students as they select and organize their own activities and make decisions about the management of their time. This is as they do, for example, when they plan, write, illustrate and act out their own stories, select their own reading materials according to their interests and share their creations with others.

Further, neither of these two factors, group size or function of materials is the central issue here. Responsibility and control are the critical factors.

When establishing a multi-task setting, the teacher must be absolutely clear on the issue of responsibility and control. Recall that in the single-task setting the teacher and/or materials are in tight control of the content, pace and sequence of activities. When this control is shared with the students, as it is in the multi-task setting, the teacher must not make the mistake of relinquishing all responsibility and control. The teacher must maintain control over and responsibility for the ultimate outcome, saying, for example, "These children can become literate, and it is my responsibility to see that they do." The teacher must also maintain control over the mutually agreed upon outcome of each day's work, saying to the student, for example, "This is about what you and I have agreed that you will have accomplished by the end of this day in school. I hold you responsible for it." Having retained control over and responsibility for the long-term goal and established a mutually agreed upon daily (short term) goal, the teacher can then allow the student to assume control over and responsibility for the minute-by-minute decisions which lead to the realization of that daily goal.

To accomplish this balance of shared responsibility and control, the teacher must build into the situation a structure which will make it possible to monitor and guide the student as he operates within the mutually understood parameters. A discussion of this structure, which I have described elsewhere in detail (6) is beyond the scope of this paper. What it is vital to emphasize here, however, is that an effective multi-task approach to literacy does not "just happen," but is well planned and carefully orchestrated so that each child receives the support and guidance he needs to help himself become literate.

Finally, we must keep in mind what attributes we need to develop in children who are being socialized to take their place in a democratic society. We must recognize that experience within a carefully structured multi-task setting can empower the child with more than the ability to read and write. By assuming responsibility within that structure, the child has the opportunity to develop, in addition to literacy skills, the ability to make responsible decisions regarding the use of time, to plan and organize activities which lead toward a preestablished goal and to work with others with an attitude of mutual concern and cooperation. These are attributes which we would surely all agree

are vital to the maintenance of our democratic society and thus essential to consider as we address the question of the relative merit of the traditional and naturalistic approaches to literacy.

NOTES

- 1 Bossert, Stephen, *Tasks and Social Relationships in Classrooms: A Study of Classroom Organization and Its Consequences*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- 2 The argument over how to develop a cooperative group spirit within the child accounts for much of the difference between the practice devised by Maria Montessori and John Dewey. Dewey contended that this would best be accomplished by having children work as members of a group and Montessori insisted that by encouraging them to work on individually paced tasks she was allowing a group spirit to spontaneously emerge. See: Kierstead, Janet, "Montessori and Dewey: The Best From Both," in M. Douglass (Ed.) *The Claremont Reading Conference Forty-Fifth Yearbook*. Claremont, CA: 1981.
- 3 Lippitt, R. and R. White, "The 'Social Climate' of Children's Groups," in R. Barker, J. Kounin and H. Wright (Eds.), *Child Behavior and Development*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1943.
- 4 Simpson, C., "Classroom Structure and the Organization of Ability," *Sociology of Education* 54:120-32, 1981.
- 5 Rosenholtz, S, "Organizational Determinants of Classroom Social Power," *Journal of Experimental Education*, 54:2, 83-87, Winter 1981-1982. See also: S. Rosenholtz and B. Wilson, "The Effect of Classroom Structure on Shared Perceptions of Ability," *American Educational Research Journal* 17:75-82, 1980.
- 6 Kierstead, Janet, "Recommendations for Structuring Effective Classrooms: How to Organize and Manage the Classroom to Promote Literacy for All Students." This paper appears as an integral part of the training materials for Workshop #5 of *The Effective Classrooms Training*, California State Department of Education, 1982.