

Two People: A Journey with Thoughtful Literacy

We're often asked what inspired us to become so consumed with the notion of thoughtful literacy and the answer is a rather simple one. Like so many people before us, we were touched by the genius of a teacher, in this case the genius of our mutual major professor, Dr. Marjorie Johnson. In the earliest stages of our doctoral studies, Dr. Johnson drilled into us the idea that children who did not think about what they read were not really reading at all. We instinctively recognized how correct she was and the idea has stuck with us through the years.

We met in a doctoral course entitled "Psycho-Physiological Factors of Reading" (How's that for a tale of high romance?), wrote a paper together, drank gallons of coffee together, fell in love, married, and defended our dissertations on the same day. As a test of our vows, we promptly got jobs at the same university, in the same department, sharing the same office. During the time we spent together, we became the best of friends and our friendship was cemented by our love of reading. We were and still remain avid readers who share books and ideas about books, read to and with each other, and are often awestruck at the ways that reading has influenced our lives for the better. Naturally enough, we hope to share the joy of reading with our students and their students, and central to that joy is the ability to think about what we read. As another of our great mentors, C.S.Lewis, once wrote, "In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself...I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see" (Lewis, 1961, p. 141). Reading has the power to transform us, to broaden us, to change us in ways that can fulfill our lives.

We knew that we loved reading but we would be fools to think that everyone has had the good fortune to discover that same passion for reading. We knew that many teachers and prospective teachers had never encountered inspired instructors or great reading models. Still others have had to carry the burden of years of struggling with the mechanics of learning to read. But all teachers find themselves at some point in the position where they know that they must do their level best to inspire a love of reading in their students. But what if they have no love of reading to share with them? This is the condition we dubbed "the Peter Effect," after the story of a beggar who approached St. Peter and asked him for money (Applegate & Applegate, 2004). Peter replied that he could not give what he did not have and the same is true for teachers who have no love of reading to share. Unfortunately, we found that more than half of the nearly 400 pre-service teachers we surveyed could be euphemistically classified as "unenthusiastic readers," a finding that has been replicated with in-service teachers as well (Nathanson, Prudlow & Leavitt (2008). [For those readers who would like to explore the article on the Peter Effect, click on this link: [Applegate and Applegate, 2004 The Peter Effect.pdf](#). To this day, one of the greatest rewards of our own teaching occurs when we are able to kindle or re-kindle a love of

reading in our own graduate or undergraduate students. But perhaps we need to tell our story from the beginning.

We began our teaching careers in earnest by preparing undergraduate and graduate students to develop questioning techniques that would encourage their students to think deeply about text. We taught all of our students about the importance of determining whether children were inclined to think about what they read. We were then required to teach our students how to use an informal reading inventory (IRI) to assess the reading strengths and weaknesses of their students. And this is where we encountered our first dilemma, for the inventory that we had been using violated our philosophy by utilizing only text-based questions to assess the comprehension of readers. Along with our close friend and colleague, Dr. Kathy Quinn, we set out on a mission to find the best available inventory and even augmented one inventory with higher order questions of our own. Finally we formalized our investigation of reading inventories in 2002.

We analyzed eight of the most widely used and cited informal reading inventories to determine the extent to which they were assessing the ability to think about text as well as the ability to recall details. We were encouraged by the fact that nearly all inventories recognized the need to assess text-based and inferential thinking. But when we analyzed the actual questions from a broad sample of items, we found that many of the questions labeled as inferential were little more than paraphrases of the original text. As such, they measured only translation, a lower level skill very much a part of text-based comprehension. In the final analysis, we found that more than 91% of the items used to assess narrative comprehension were text-based. That is to say that these items could be answered by mere recall of text information. We were discouraged by the results of our study but it most certainly answered our question about why we were having difficulty finding an inventory that assessed thoughtful literacy. [For those readers that would like to explore the study, please click on this link: [Applegate et al Levels of thinking.pdf](#)]

Shortly after the publication of our study of inventories, we were approached by a representative of Pearson Prentice Hall who asked if we would be willing to author an IRI that could tap into higher order thinking. We agreed at once, and eighteen months later, published the 1st edition of The Critical Reading Inventory (CRI, Applegate, Quinn & Applegate, 2004). We based the CRI on the Framework of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and dedicated 60% of our comprehension items to the assessment of thoughtful response to text (higher order inference and critical response). From that point on, we could use the CRI in our research and we began to investigate the effects of thoughtful literacy in a variety of literacy activities.

As we gathered more and more test protocols from the CRI, we began to gather together the most creative and challenging item responses, both to develop a scoring rubric and to create scoring tutorials to give students practice using the CRI. As we mulled over the thousands of responses we had gathered, we began to perceive a number of regularities or patterns which we believed could be used to identify thinking profiles and clue teachers in to requisite instructional strategies. As a consequence, the Profiles in Comprehension were born, a set of eight more or less distinct ways of responding to higher order, open-ended questions. We described each of the Profiles in detail and suggested a

number of well-established strategies to help teachers sharpen the focus of their instruction and promote the ability of their students to respond thoughtfully to text (Applegate, Quinn & Applegate, 2006). For those readers that would like to explore the study, please click on this link: [Applegate Quinn Applegate 2004 Profiles in Comprehension.pdf](#)

Needless to say, one instructional activity that we found particularly distressing was the development of reading fluency for its own sake. Our immediate geographical region was a veritable hotbed of fluency drills and repeated readings and students who had learned to race through text at breakneck speeds with little or no idea of what they had read. And so in 2009 we collaborated with another close friend and colleague, Dr. Ginger Modla, in a study of fluency and its links to comprehension. We identified 171 children ranging from grade 2 to grade 10 who had been identified by their teachers as “strong readers.” Each of the students in the sample had been assigned to the highest reading group in their classroom and all were highly fluent readers, scoring at least 16 out of 20 points on the Fluency Rubric that is included in the CRI. Our suspicion was that at least some teachers were judging the efficacy of student reading on the basis of fluency (defined as a combination of speed, accuracy and prosody). Naturally, if one tests strong readers with two passages at their current grade level, it would be reasonable to expect strong comprehension of text. Instead we found that more than one third of the “strong readers” experienced serious comprehension problems, to the point of frustration. These findings call into question the widespread assumption that fluency is a direct correlate of reading comprehension and that if we increase a child’s fluency, all will be well with that child’s comprehension. The article is aptly titled “She’s my best reader; she just can’t comprehend.” For those readers that would like to explore the study, please click on this link: [Applegate Applegate Modla 2009 She's my Best Reader.pdf](#)

In 2009, we gathered a group of colleagues that included Dr. Cathy McGeehan, Dr. Cathy Pinto, and Dr. Ailing Kong to take on the issue of how state literacy accountability tests stacked up against the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). We had noted the huge difference in the number of children judged as proficient readers on the basis of state tests versus NAEP. When we investigated further, we found significant content differences between NAEP and a sample of state tests. NAEP was far more likely to address issues of thoughtful literacy and open-ended items while the state tests often focused on low-level skills and literal comprehension of text. For those readers that would like to explore the study, please click on this link: [Applegate Applegate McGeehan Pinto Kong 2009 The Assessment of Thoughtful Literacy in NAEP.pdf](#)

In 2009 we had the good fortune to be asked to collaborate with Dr. Jennifer Turner to co-author the Literacy Leaders column that appears twice a year in *The Reading Teacher*. In Jen we found a kindred spirit with whom we spent many hours, discussing the field of literacy education and agreeing instinctively on what we wanted to say to literacy leaders. We first spoke to teachers as literacy leaders (see [Turner Applegate Applegate 2009 Teachers as Literacy Leaders.pdf](#)) and then addressed some of the misconceptions surrounding the nature of reading itself (see [Applegate Turner Applegate 2010 Will the Real Reader Please Stand Up.pdf](#)). Finally, we addressed the need to exhaust all of our pedagogical resources before we declare children learning disabled (see [Applegate Applegate Turner 2010 Learning Disabilities or Teaching Disabilities.pdf](#)).

It is difficult to talk about thoughtful literacy for very long without crossing paths with the notion of the engaged reader, for the engaged reader represents the ultimate goal of all literacy teachers. Engaged readers are intrinsically motivated to read and read for a wide variety of their own purposes. They tend to be strong students who play an active role in their own education. It is immensely gratifying to think that we have played a role, however small, in inspiring teachers to reach for the goal of populating their classroom with engaged readers.

We need to acknowledge and thank the International Reading Association for granting us their permission to reproduce the articles we have authored or co-authored for the benefit of visitors to this web site.