

Graduate Studies

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In the mid-1980s, I followed my husband to his new job in Fresno and suddenly found myself living 2,500 miles from home, giving up a job I loved as a high school English teacher in the Cincinnati area.

At a luncheon during my first weekend in Fresno, I indicated to new colleagues that I wanted to complete a masters degree in reading that I had started at Michigan State. Someone said I should check out this Mennonite school called Fresno Pacific College. That very first week in Fresno, I arranged to meet with the Program Director, Jean Fennacy, to develop a plan for completing a masters in reading/language arts.

As an English teacher, I had had the unique opportunity to teach a college-prep reading course. This was the era of popular commercial Evelyn Woods Speed-Reading courses and many students signed up for the class because they wanted to read faster. With little background in this specific area I became a fast learner in reading efficiency and how to help students become more proficient readers. In this context, I also became increasingly curious about engaging adolescents with reading and was quickly convinced that the Evelyn Woods approach was misguided. I changed the course and received positive responses from students who regularly returned voluntarily to say how helpful what they had learned in the college-reading class was to their academic success.

This teaching experience fueled my sense of inquiry about what proficient reading looked like in the real world. I was still unsure about what was making the difference for these students and I wanted to deepen my understanding of reading proficiency for underprepared college first-year students. Yet, I found that my earlier graduate work, focused on early literacy, lacked answers to inquiry questions regarding proficient reading at the high school and/or college level. I was driven to understand the reading process from a theoretical perspective and what its implications were for instructional practices.

Within a month of arriving in Fresno, I started the Reading/Language Arts Master's Program at Fresno Pacific taking the Reading Process and Practice course.

The instructor challenged us as practicing teachers to examine our assumptions about how children become readers and writers. By framing the debate

as a reading-skills emphasis versus a meaning-emphasis with the reading skills embedded in meaningful subject matter, I began to make sense of my past pedagogical practices. Demonstrations that made the invisible reading process more visible helped me understand reading as a process and its implications for appropriate instructional practices built on those insights. As students, we were exposed to evolving theories about the reading and writing process. For homework we were given “self-assignments” that required us to choose an instructional practice to try in the classroom and then reflect on it by tying it back to theories from course readings. I began to understand why some practices were effective and others counterproductive for creating enthusiastic readers and writers.

As a part of the masters program, literacy scholars from around the country came to Fresno Pacific for weekend seminars to present their literacy scholarship and its implications for evolving instructional practices around reading and writing. Spending time with scholars whose research and journal articles we were reading in classes was mind-expanding and pushed us to read more of the emerging research in literacy. In this context linking theory and practice I examined my instructional practices with adolescents as well as young adults. With a focus on broader learning theories about pedagogy as well as literacy, I was able to align my instructional practice by letting go of what was inconsistent with emerging theoretical beliefs about reading and writing proficiency. This was a stark contrast to previous graduate studies focused on early literacy practices without a theoretical background on reading and writing as processes. I thrived in this new academic atmosphere, where inquiry into literacy processes was the focus and my questions were welcomed though they surfaced many new questions.

I began to understand how many adolescents had distorted views of their own competency as readers because of misguided instructional practices in their early schooling. I developed activities that helped high school students understand the reading process so that they could become more confident in their approach to reading. With this theoretical background, I began to understand why my high school students in Ohio had had a positive response to my approach. I was helping them change their reading approach which facilitated their ability to read faster when it appropriately served their reading purpose.

With the theoretical foundation the Masters in Reading/Language Arts provided at Fresno Pacific, my life as a professional educator has been enhanced beyond my wildest dreams. In my early years at Fresno Pacific because of background experience with adolescent literacy, I developed the Learning Edge project. In this two-week summer literacy boot camp, I further explored –with other teachers -- instructional approaches to reading and writing with high school as well as college students. The strong positive response of high school students to the Learning Edge approach fueled my desire to continue evolving the theory-practice alignment. This in turn prepared me to be an effective professor in the teacher credential program at Fresno Pacific, especially the course Reading and Writing in the Secondary Classroom. Here again I was able to help future middle school and high school teachers think about literacy and learning theory and its implications for instructional practices in their varied academic disciplines.

Even in retirement, my inquiry about reading and writing with adolescents and young adults continues to build on the theory-and-practice foundation laid during my time of studying Reading/Language Arts at Fresno Pacific.

