



5-1991

## An Interview With Jerome Harste

Robert King

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal>



Part of the [Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

King, Robert (1991) "An Interview With Jerome Harste," *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-nirp-journal/vol5/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Teaching and Learning: The Journal of Natural Inquiry & Reflective Practice* by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [und.common@library.und.edu](mailto:und.common@library.und.edu).

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JEROME HARSTE

Jerome Harste is an internationally known figure in reading education and the development of whole language philosophy. His Language Stories and Literacy Lessons, with Woodward and Burke, in 1987 won the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English given by the National Council of Teachers of English. He has published many articles and other books, including Creating Classrooms for Authors, with co-writers Short and Burke, in 1988.

He was interviewed by T&L in May, 1991.

**T&L:** Looking back on your work in the last ten or twenty years, how have your research interests changed or grown?

**HARSTE:** That's an interesting question. Carolyn Burke always said to me that as my own kids got older I'd start getting interested in older kids, and in some ways she's right. I was always interested in the underlying processes in literacy, and as we discovered the functions that underlie literacy in young children I was interested in looking at those functions with older readers and writers. In some sense, then, I went from looking at young kids to looking at more proficient readers and writers, looking for the same sorts of processes taking place. But I'm not sure my interest has changed. I'm still very much interested in explicating a theory of literacy instruction and looking at the relationship between teaching and learning in language. Even with young kids I was interested in what they knew about language but I was also interested in the conditions that were allowing them to learn. I was always looking at the interface between teaching and learning.

**T&L:** That phase, "teaching and learning," is interesting. Someone else might have said they were interested in improving instruction or in effective teaching. What's the difference between those phrases and yours?

**HARSTE:** I'm interested in understanding the relationship between teaching and learning. If you push me, I'm interested in it for purposes of "improving" school and education, but right from day one of working with young kids I learned to trust the learning process and to trust learners. My stance is that what learners do tends to make sense and is functional or they wouldn't continue to do it. I don't feel that I have better techniques than the techniques that learners used to learn naturally.

**T&L:** What happens when one *doesn't* trust the learning process?

**HARSTE:** Well, I think you start intervening and you start being very assumptive. You start thinking that you know how to speed things up, or you know how to improve learning, and you're really running with your own set of assumptions as opposed to taking your cues from language learning, from "what's there."

I think we have a tendency to continually do this. We get to thinking we know something about the teaching and learning process that could somehow speed up the whole process but this gets us into all kinds of trouble and it contributes to why school learning looks so different from real learning. You see, what I think schools are good for is improving the *quantity* of encounters that kids have with language. I think we have to be very careful that they have the same quality as do encounters outside of school. I don't think we can improve the quality of natural encounters because outside of school kids engage in language for functional purposes. All the conditions are ripe for language and learning there, or these processes wouldn't have developed in the first place.

**T&L:** How did you get interested in literacy at all? Were you interested in language early, or was it teaching that attracted you, or what?

**HARSTE:** I did my degree in elementary education and library science, so I guess I've always liked children and books. Plus I grew up in a house full of teachers. I didn't know there were other job choices. The thing that pushed me toward making a career of understanding language was being overseas and teaching children how to read in Spanish. I remember being able to get kids to read, but they didn't know what they were reading. Kids could sound out "penguin" in Spanish but they didn't know a penguin from Adam. That anomaly really attracted my curiosity. It struck me that something was wrong with the way we were being told how to teach reading. So, when I came back for graduate school, I began to focus on language.

That's one of the reasons I've always had an interest in multicultural education. I've found that being in an environment where there's a different set of constraints in place makes it easier to get insights. It doesn't mean there is a different set of constraints than those that operate in a monolingual culture, but when you're in a multicultural situation it's easier to put your learning "on edge." It's easier to notice things like air, something we take for granted when all of a sudden it's not there.

I really believe that a theory of difference is a theory of learning—that is, I think we learn on the edges. The real trick in both research and learning is to try to put your learning on edge, to work on things that are anomalous. By going to a multicultural situation where everything isn't the same you have a tendency to notice things that you've taken for granted in the other setting. I think the trick in both good learning and good research is to always try to put yourself in anomalous situations and look at those things that aren't quite predictable. It's at those points that it's new and that you have the most to learn.

**T&L:** Does this contrast to the view that learning is convergent, that it's mainly a matter of kids learning what adults already know? What's the on-edge element in a lot of learning?



**HARSTE:** Well, I think that understanding or comprehension is a process of finding patterns that connect and a good deal of our world is essentially that—the search for patterns that connect. The mind tends to gravitate toward the new because it finds the patterns it has already sorted out moderately boring. A lot of growth is finding patterns that we haven't seen connected before. So anomalies aren't a different form of learning, they're just patterns that don't connect yet. And, remember, it's not a matter of picking up what's out there; it's a matter of working it through so it connects with the patterns we've already got formulated in our heads. That's one of the contributions Piaget has made. That active process of finding those patterns is clearly a key element in understanding learning and how to set up environments that are effective learning environments.

**T&L:** As far as literacy research is concerned, are there areas that need to be developed more? What areas need to be addressed?

**HARSTE:** I often think I was lucky in that I happened to have predicted directions that were profitable for research to move the field forward. I got into early literacy before everyone else did, and I got into the reading/writing connection before everyone else did, and into reader response. When I look back at my own work—and it's always interesting to look back and ask what kinds of things you still believe that never really got picked up on—I still have a sneaking suspicion that I was right about development despite the fact that my ideas never seemed to catch on.

In *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* I tried to attack Piaget's notion of development, arguing that experience was more of a factor in development than cognitive stages. Obviously, that argument hasn't been made because there are still a lot of people who believe what I do but who have not abandoned some form of a developmental-stage philosophy. I see "developmentally appropriate whole language programs" abounding and it bothers me. I think it's really dangerous when you think you know what cognitive stage a student is in and you start preparing environments for that stage—I think it has a dampening effect. Curricularly the notion is that little minds need simple, little environments. In reality language learning occurs best in whole, functional, complex language environments for all of us.

I also think that in *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* we began to talk about the multi-modal nature of language learning. I believe it's when you make a metaphor or you see connections between what you're doing in writing, taking what you know from one sign system and transposing it into another, that you experience a key process in growth. We still have a tendency to want to look at reading development and only look at reading—we don't look at what's happening in writing, we don't look at what's happening in drama. We've got a very ill-defined notion of what development looks like because of our tendency to stay within particular sign systems. That's why for me a semiotic position is still a very powerful one. Semiotics is the study of

how we mean using a variety of sign systems. Obviously, I'm going to have to do some more research before I can convince other people of the importance of a semiotic perspective for understanding key functions underlying literacy. A good language arts program has to include drama, art and music, as well as encourage kids to move across sign systems to make connections.

**T&L:** Sometimes we've seen other art forms, drama or art, in reading classrooms, but they're so secondary to the reading that they're barely drama or art.

**HARSTE:** That's why I think it's important to continue to develop semiotic theory. If you look at good whole language teachers, you see them encouraging drama and art, but you don't see them giving these activities the same kind of attention as written language. There's no editing process in the art cycle or in the music cycle. Music and art are seen as diversions. That's why it's extremely important to continue to develop the theory along with the practice. That's why a lot of progressive movements die, even though they are right. If we can't protect the movement theoretically and we don't continue our development of theory, we lose in the long run. One of the reasons why the whole language movement has been so successful is that both theory and practice are developing hand in hand. Whole language is a grounded theoretical approach. We've got to start with "what's there," and we've got to develop the theory and practice based on what we learn.

**T&L:** Some of us have been a little surprised at the school acceptance of some of this theory and practice. Are there any dangers in the fairly quick growth of the implementation of whole language?

**HARSTE:** Well, I think a lot of people are nervous that it's being done poorly in a halfway fashion, or not being done "right." I guess I'm not as nervous as some other people might be. As I understand the comprehension process, we try to interpret the world from our particular frame and in that process distortions and creativity take place. We try to make connections with what we currently know. Sometimes the process leads to creativity, when you get a better connection than what was intended. Sometimes the process leads to distortion, but I don't think you can have one process without the other.

We need to remember that it's taken us twenty years to be whole language people and *we* made a lot of mistakes in that process. We've got to get over this idea of perfection. One of the big hang ups in the language arts has always been the idea that if you're going to use language, you should use it right. The same thing is carried over into teaching: if you're going to teach, do it right. Instead of perfection we have to develop an education-as-inquiry perspective. That is, we've got to try things out and learn from the process of trying. We've got to use the grounded theory approach—take the best of what we know, try it out, and, when it isn't working the way we expected, back off and learn from our mistakes. I think we should be *thankful* that this many



people are trying whole language. We've got to get our attention away from whether or not they are doing it right, because two years from now we'll look back at what we were doing now and we'll be at a different point.

We've got to learn that we're learners, that teaching is a process of learning. We have to stop assuming that someday we will do it right. We are just learners, the same way we expect children to be lifelong learners.

**T&L:** That's a good perspective. But what about some of the current problems in implementing whole language? Are there some basic ones?

**HARSTE:** Well, I think there *are* some problems that are particularly salient today. One of the issues that a lot of people are trying to get at is what evaluation should look like. I'm not really excited even with what whole language people are doing, because I think the real problem is they haven't really examined the underlying assumptions in evaluation. The old notion of evaluation was based on a certain conception of knowledge—that it's "out there" and that we can use "out there" standards to judge what we're doing here and now. Even in a lot of the portfolio assessment going on in whole language there's still the notion that there's some abstract criteria "out there" by which we can judge how well our whole language program is doing. One of the things we've learned is that knowledge is socially created and it changes according to the social and historical context in which we find it. Knowledge is not only contextual, but what we know depends on the company we keep. When you apply that to evaluation it means that the criteria for judging literacy has to come from the participants themselves. To me this means we have to alter our basic view of evaluation. As long as we do not challenge the underlying transmission-of-knowledge view of evaluation in place, we're not really getting at the problem.

When I first started in whole language, the question was always "What about phonics? What about phonics?" I thought I was going to go nuts with that stupid question. Now it's "What about evaluation? What about evaluation?" But there's a big difference between those two questions. "What about phonics?" was a direct challenge to the whole notion of whole language. "How do you evaluate it?" is really giving us the territory. It's saying, yes, it's there, but how do you evaluate it? It does reflect growth. And we've got to learn to value our own progress too.

One of the things I've found in doing workshops is that there's a lot of difference between the questions that people ask. There's always a group of people who ask questions that are almost academic, and then there are other questions like, "How do you really run an Authors' Circle?" There's a real difference between those two questions. The second one has already made a commitment to try what you're talking about and wants some very specific information. The first one is still treating it as somebody else's knowledge that they're standing outside of and evaluating.

**T&L:** The next question was going to be about where should whole language theory and practice *go*, but maybe that's too linear.

**HARSTE:** Well, I think you always have to ask where we should grow next, where the forefront of our thinking is going to be. That's always an important question. We don't tend to answer our own inquiry questions—we're always trying to answer somebody else's. Even the evaluation question is somebody else's question. When whole language teachers are doing kid-watching, they're not really that concerned about evaluation. That question is coming from other people looking into their classrooms. My own advice is that when you're dealing with bureaucracy, just go on with your own agenda. The bureaucracy will tend to follow you. Don't let it lead you. My experience with universities is that you can't wait around until they push you. You take the lead and they'll follow.

But about the current situation? Sometimes people say, "Oh, look at whole language and how poorly they're doing it and aren't you nervous?" No, I'm not. First of all, that assumes we *came* from someplace that was really great. Secondly, I think it really *is* an exciting time. We're involving a lot of disciplines—there's much more exploring of disciplines now. And we're getting out of this business of limiting our genetic pool in terms of research methodology. There are a lot of new invitations to explore in lots of different ways. The combination of the interdisciplinary nature of literacy these days—looking at literacy much more broadly, even to include music literacy and art literacy—and the inter-methodological nature of literacy gives us lots of points of difference, lots of ways of looking, so it's an exciting period.

**T&L:** It's encouraging to hear you say that. And we don't want to dwell on the problems, but I'm remembering an anecdote about you that I heard only part of at the latest NCTE conference. It was something about a teacher and crockpot and how she ended up saying she hadn't plugged in the crockpot that morning and the other teachers cheered. What was that story?

**HARSTE:** Oh, the crockpot story. Well, we were working with a group of teachers. We'd done an in-service and had then gone out to see the teachers in the classroom. In some ways what the crockpot represents is a moment of self-reflection for a teacher. In this particular classroom, it *looked* like a whole language classroom but it didn't *sound* like one. The kids were discussing literature, but most of the discussion was coming through the teacher, and there was not a legitimizing of the kids' voices. I was leaving the classroom with my head in hand wondering what I was going to do at the next inservice and how I had contributed to the misunderstanding I saw taking place. The teacher came out and got in front of me and put her hands on her hips and said, "You are talking to someone who puts on the crockpot every morning before she goes to school and puts a load of wash in the laundry. Did you think I was just going to let my classroom go to hell in a hand basket because you said so?" I looked at her and said, "No. But the day you unplug that



crockpot is the day we might well be able to make some progress with your curriculum."

**T&L:** So it was a symbol of--what?

**HARSTE:** It represents a moment of self-reflection for both of us. I see research in terms of Stenhouse's definition, as "systematic self-critical inquiry made public." We had been working with these teachers as inquirers and I was saying that this wasn't just *my* self-critical inquiry--you've got to be self-critical too. And it was an invitation to be a participant in this process of grounded theory. In that project, I ran into a teacher who said she wanted help with this "problematic child"--I never know what that means--so I went to visit and afterwards was recommending what she might try. The teacher said, "Well, I'm not ready for that." I suggested something else. She said, "I'm not ready for that," and a third suggestion and, "I'm not ready for that." So I finally said, "What do you think? This school was built for you and what you're ready for? I mean, there are thirty other individuals in this room who may be ready for things!"

Again, we have to understand that teaching and learning is a relationship. I didn't know until that moment that I don't buy the argument that "I'm not ready for it" as a legitimate criterion to work from. It makes change only the teacher's decision. We've got to understand that we're learners too and we don't have a right to stop that learning process either for ourselves or others.

**T&L:** What are your thoughts on the new Marilyn Adams' book, *Beginning Reading*, and its emphasis on phonics? Does that disappoint you?

**HARSTE:** Yes, it really disappoints me. If she had entitled her book *The Role of Phonics in Beginning Reading: What a Bunch of Experimentalists Know*, I could live with that. I mean, they did not look at all the other systems of language operating. The stuff in her book is what we do know when you isolate the graphophonemic system of language and force people to deal with it in isolation, under strange considerations in which language doesn't normally operate. It isn't "Beginning Reading."

When you're talking about beginning reading, you're talking about lots of different codes that kids have to break or come to understand. There are lots of different access points to literacy. The one thing whole language people have learned is that no one becomes literate unless they become personally involved in literacy. We need to find out in what ways kids *are* personally involved and support as well as extend that involvement. That gives us a lot more options than drilling on phonics.

I've been invited to write the foreword to a book that's coming out through NCTE by Heidi Mills and Tim O'Keefe and Diane Stephens that's looking at the role of phonics in the whole language classroom. It'll be a sort of



counterpoint to Marilyn's book, but both books bother me. The foreword really bothers me to write. I'm disappointed by the need to look at whole language classrooms in terms of how phonics is handled because in some ways that legitimizes Marilyn Adams' stand. Whole language has always accommodated phonics. Phonics has never accommodated whole language.

I'll say something else. The fact that Marilyn Adams' book was motivated by the Federal Government because they wanted to ram some political agenda down our throats bugs me. I like Pat Shannon's comment—he says that if the Federal Government ever wants to show how we give voices to kids who are silent, he'd be happy to write that book. I'm with him.

**T&L:** That brings up the next question I was going to ask. What *is* the connection between American politics and American literacy? Has it changed in the last twenty years?

**HARSTE:** I think what we're about is very political. I don't know that we've ever made the political agenda as explicit as we should have. The one thing I'll say is that from the very start we knew we were political. I don't buy the argument that whole language is politically naive; I think we knew from the start that we were attempting a very political act. And I do think lots of groups could learn from whole language. Whole language is a grassroots movement, and that's the way it should be. It's got to begin with hearing voices that haven't been heard before. Teachers are taking charge of their classrooms. The Whole Language Umbrella and all the TAWL groups show there is a critical mass of teachers who are willing to take a collective stance. I think we are making progress. Adams' book is a direct response. It shows that the people in power are concerned with the progress we're making.

**T&L:** Education as individual empowerment seems threatening?

**HARSTE:** The real question is, "Does our society really want critical thinkers?"

We have to understand the role that language plays in learning and the role that language plays in a democracy. Whole language is a theory of voice. Schools have silenced lots of voices and whole language is an opportunity to hear from voices that haven't been heard before, including both teachers and children. We're hearing more and more of those voices. It is very much a political agenda that's ahead of us and it's not going to be easy. It hasn't been easy to get the power away from the basal authors, and it's not going to be easy to get the power away from standardized testers. I think we have our work cut out for us, but it's good work.

I believe that, in the final analysis, whole language is a very moral movement. That is, I think we have to decide what kind of people we want to be, and on the basis of this decision, everything follows—our theory of language, our theory of learning, our theory of schooling, our theory of knowledge. Whole

language provides the framework for operationalizing a different set of relationships in schools. In the final analysis, if your theory doesn't alter social relationships—because education is about altering social relationships—it isn't much of a theory. I think whole language has proven itself to be "some theory," in Wilbur the Pig's terms, and we have to remain cognizant of what we're about or we lose the edge and we lose what's new about the movement.

You know, that's why I think we both have the right to screw it up as well as the responsibility to keep learning. I think that's the bottom line for all of us, teachers and kids and researchers. You have both the right to mess things up or make mistakes as well as the responsibility of inquiry, or to learn from your efforts.

\* \* \*