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Book Review of The Languages of Learning

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Review: Karen Gallas' *The Languages of Learning*

by

Darlene Johnson

The Languages of Learning by Karen Gallas provides us with a fascinating description of a teacher-researcher at work in her classroom. Gallas gives an in-depth description of the new role of the teacher, a role that combines teaching with research. She gives us a unique view of the teacher as a researcher when she describes herself as a Margaret Mead-like visitor inside the world of the classroom. She compares the role of a teacher-researcher to that of a missionary in a land of aborigines and speaks of "going native," communicating in a different language. Whereas the researcher is primarily an observer, rarely interacting with the students, the teacher-researcher follows the flow of classroom life, never knowing the direction it will take, while simultaneously teaching, that is influencing, the classroom dynamic.

In Gallas' case we are pleasantly surprised. She manages to uncover a secret world of communication seldom seen by the classroom teacher who is busy with the art of teaching. She focuses mainly on sharing time, a time overlooked by most teachers as wasted space in the teaching day. Gallas has designed her sharing sessions so that each child will have time to speak and be heard. She has also created a space for herself as the teacher outside the boundaries of dialogue. As an observer-recorder, she begins to see dialogues and stories emerge where before she only noticed useless babble. Gallas has used her role as a teacher-researcher to look beyond the stories and events that take place in everyday classrooms to the conversations and arguments that evolve when the freedom of dialogue is allowed to flow.

Gallas reflects upon her sharing sessions as "one of those missing links," a commonplace event participated in by almost everyone, but rarely meaningful and seldom remembered. She has constructed what she calls a "noninterventionist sharing style." These sessions take place around a sharing chair used by the speaker. There are very few rules in these sessions, however, in the beginning the children were asked to talk about "true events." Later there were sessions revolving around "fake stories." Gallas made a conscious decision to be an observer-recorder during these sessions. She places herself inconspicuously in the rear of the group, and spends the time taking notes and using a tape recorder to record the dialogue which she later transcribes.

The dialogues shared by Gallas in her book highlight her ability to observe well and interact at appropriate times. Her stories overlay with the stories told by the children during her sharing sessions. They are set up in a unique format that allows the children, at different times, either to bring an object to talk about, free-talk, or tell a "fake story." The real language of the children begins to show through. The role of the teacher pulls back into that of observer-recorder as she pays close attention to the stories that evolve during the sharing sessions. There is Jiana, "a tall, skinny African-American child" who lives across the street from the school in a shelter. We watch Jiana's natural language emerge as she begins to take control of the sharing chair. Jiana comes to school with a "different language style," one that would indicate a need for referral to ppeech class. When allowed to share uninterrupted, with all her Ummms and Ahhhhs, Jiana communicates the stories of her life to her classmates, providing her teacher, as well as the whole class, with a valuable glimpse into her unusual world. As Gallas herself says, "The new narratives became vehicles for sorting out, most particularly, the separation between the boys and girls for pulling this class of children together through their fictional play."

The chapter on "Bad Boys in the Classroom" is captivating as she profiles four "bad boys" and looks at the ways in which they attempt to control the dynamics of the classroom with their language, "and in that process silence many other children." By silencing her voice during the sharing sessions, Gallas gives control of the sessions to these boys. Where most teachers would intervene and silence aggressive talk and rude noises, she allows the narrative to flow uninterrupted. "By looking carefully at the stories of bad boys, I have been able to change my response to their actions ... from a purely visceral, defensive reaction toward a child who threatens my ability to control a class, to one of examining what that child is telling me about his needs as a learner and his view of the world." This kind of information gives teachers a new view of the reason behind the negative behavior of most "bad boys." Most teachers are primarily concerned with controlling and modifying the behavior of these boys. As Gallas steps out of the teacher role into the observer role, she begins to notice the control issues involved with most "bad boys." From this she is able to adjust the way in which she works with them and is able to see their actions from a different perspective.

The final chapters dealing with science and art provide the most fascinating look at how children discuss their world when allowed to dialogue without the teacher controlling the direction of the discussion. Gallas describes how she initiates her "science talks" by asking the children to contribute questions they have been wondering about in their lives. Questions such as "Why is snow white?" and "What makes the wind?", questions we have all pondered at one time or another, form the basis for the 20-minute weekly science talks. Gallas, who records and transcribes these science discussions, describes how the children's theories come incredibly close to correctness as they discuss the hows and whys of their thinking about science. It is not until she later reads the transcripts that she becomes aware of how powerful these talks are in terms of children and their language. This chapter is so filled with fascinating theories that it provided her with enough information to write her second book, *Talking Their Way Into Science: Hearing Children's Questions and Theories, Responding with Curricula* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1994). The latter part of this title stresses the importance of this book for the teacher. Observing, listening, and hearing are valuable only if the teacher is able to make sense of what she hears and "respond with curriculum." The ability to assess what is going on in the dialogues and stories and take them on to the next step of linking in the curriculum is essential. This is the value of Gallas' book for both the new and experienced teacher.

The Languages of Learning provides more than just a glimpse of a teacher-researcher at work in her "native land." It gives us a next step for teachers interested in children and learning. By setting a format for sharing sessions that would allow her to observe with minimum interaction, Gallas provides a glimpse of what teachers seldom see as they are busy with the job of teaching. She is allowed to see children as they are without adults, discussing the questions that puzzle them and telling the stories that captivate their friends and allow them to deal with their world.

This book is valuable on two levels: it stresses the importance of observation for the new teacher and it gives the seasoned teacher a working model for deeper practice. Information gathered as a teacher-researcher provides a teacher with direction for the next step to take with her students. Such observation functions as an assessment tool that provides a window of information about the child and his thinking about his world. The lesson to be learned from Gallas' book is the importance of observation, the importance of the ability to listen and record and learn from the dialogues and stories taking place with children. In the busy world of the new teacher, it is sometimes difficult to find the time to step back and observe, to take note of the interactions of children as they play and talk. For the experienced teacher, Gallas gives us an invitation to become a teacher-researcher. She invites us to use our years of experience to teach less and watch more; to use what we see to guide us toward a deeper understanding of how children communicate about

their world. She gives the experienced teacher a framework for moving on to the next level. Gallas provides a model for teachers through her vivid descriptions of how her sharing sessions are designed and implemented. Her approach allows teachers to modify their practice using the information they see. This model makes teacher-research accessible to all teachers and allows us to go beyond the mere act of observing and move to the deeper level of analysis and understanding. This rare glimpse provides the teacher with the information needed to take the next step ... to teach.