

Faith, hope and data: Are they compatible?

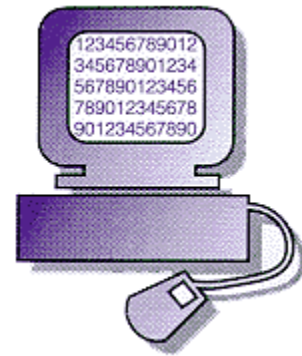
Educators get caught in the middle as the pendulum of popular opinion and policy swings between extremes. But the current environment of legislative action against schools, whether in Ontario or California, has created an environment of hostility and suspicion that are undermining teachers at every level.



Sheridan Blau, the incoming president of the National Council of Teachers of English, used his inaugural address in November to make a passionate plea for respect for divergent theories and for teachers' professional knowledge and judgment. He was responding to recent legislation in his home state of California where whole language has been virtually banned from classrooms and testing for phonemic awareness has been mandated for

pre-schoolers.

He is not alone in pointing out that in parts of the US, literacy scholars have been pitted against one another and one group has been labelled "unworthy of respect, of being heard." "How," he asks, "can politicians declare that one methodology should prevail when scholars are still arguing about it?" Legislators, driven by popular pressure groups, have opted for "a quantitative, behaviourist priority." Or as Stephen Krashen said in another NCTE session, "Skinner has won."



This imperative also touches adult education. Short-term, job-related training is pushing broader-based general education to the margins of an already marginalized field. Despite the rhetoric of OECD governments about the centrality of literacy to society, the priorities remain economic, and like testing, funding also drives classroom practice.

Learning to live underwater As Blau noted, however, regardless of policy, the best teachers have always found ways of balancing divergent philosophies and methods with student needs. He is partly reassured by the past—"almost all policies created in response to public pressure eventually fail." In the meantime, damage is done. Educators, he says, have to take Ken Goodman's advice and "learn to live underwater," while still speaking with a coherent public voice for a diversity of perspectives.

Immediately following Sheridan Blau, author Chaim Potok spoke. He began by acknowledging the "we're living in tumultuous times," but asked, "what's new?... Out of the tumult, the country creates."

This issue looks at some of the tumult and diversity of opinion that reign in adult basic education. Specifically, it contrasts visions that highlight faith and hope with those that privilege hard data.

Like an other branches of education, we have set up a rhetorical frame of "either/or. Researchers rarely cross disciplinary lines. But on examination, their conclusions are often startlingly close.

We have not fully understood or made use of the learning from the past, and we need to be reminded and have it regularly represented to us.

For example, Tom Sticht, working from a base of empirical research and contemptuous of ethnographers, concludes (as did Brian Street, Vol 12, No. 3) that many adult assessments cannot say precisely what they are measuring with functional context test items [Adult assessments, p. 16]. In the Montreal workshop of Sticht's 1997 North American series on Functional Context Education, he began by saying "Let no one say that I have said nothing new; the arrangement of the subject is new.."

In our frenzy for the new, we forget Potok's question: "What's new?" We have not fully understood or made use of the learning from the past, and we need to be reminded and have it regularly represented to us. Sticht's

Compendium of Data on US adult literacy assessments in this century does that. [p. 18].

And with Freire's death, we are also compelled to examine another branch of thinking about literacy—the one that counts faith and hope [pp.4 - 7].

If we can find a balance among faith, hope and data I in education, that would be new. [LS]

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