



JERRY HARSTE

Still Challenging the Curriculum, Decades into His Career

I've always said that curriculum is metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be. That's what teaching is all about. That's what makes us come back and why we love the title, "Teacher." None of us got into the profession to see how quietly we can march kids to the bathroom, or take them to lunch.

Jerry Harste is still teaching.

After a four-decade career as a language education professor at Indiana University, he has "flunked retirement," according to his wife (and his website). He's turned his Bloomington office into an art studio, is planning his first one-man show and flies to Toronto once a month to mentor teachers in a graduate education program.

"My desk is just as messy as it always was, but with different stuff on it," he said.

Harste, the 2013 recipient of the NCTE Distinguished Service Award, and a past NCTE president (1999–2000), is still learning. He is part of an ongoing study with two other artist-educators on the relationship between art and literacy. One of the group's articles, "Speaking within the Lines: An Autoethnographical Study of Three Literacy Researcher-Artists," uses artwork, found poems, and data to look at what visual art offers that writing and other ways of thinking do not.

And he's challenging himself and his profession to find new understandings of literacy. "One of my biggest problems is I'm a language educator, and I always look at art in support of language development. I'm trying to get over that. I think we need to value visual literacy on its own ground," he said.

"But the reality of school is that language is the key kind of literacy that's being evaluated. I think it's going to take a long while to change that mental attitude."

Learning on the Job

Like many of his research questions, this one started with a classroom encounter.

As a young professor, Harste visited a Navaho classroom to evaluate student language skills. Students on the reservation had "dismal" writing scores at the time. As he looked around the classroom, he saw that the walls were covered with stunning student artwork. "I thought, 'Good God, anyone who can draw like this has more going on than tests can measure,'" he said.

Leap further back in time, and Harste is a Peace Corps volunteer in a small village in Bolivia, organizing its first school, trying to teach reading and math to students with no classroom materials.

The farmer's son turns to materials at hand. He has students tell him stories, which he writes down for reading exercises. He teaches them to read words they've never heard—like "England"—phonetically in Spanish. Students measure taro fields and use a bounce ball to learn how to add and subtract.

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Harste had one year of classroom experience, teaching third and sixth grade in a rural Minnesota school, before he arrived in Bolivia. He was quickly tapped to lead a teacher-training program in La Paz, the capital.

"What I really found out was what I didn't know," he said. "I got very practical. It was really a matter of trying to tie the kind of education to the life that students were living."

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When Harste returned home, he landed in a PhD program at the University of Minnesota, where the work of Ken Goodman drew him into literacy education. "I became fascinated in the ways children understand language," he said.

From Art to Multimedia

In 1984, Harste developed a curriculum model around education as inquiry. That model was later used when he, Christine Leland, and a group of public school teachers helped launch a K–8 school in Indianapolis based on children's literature, critical literacy and multiple ways of knowing the curriculum. The Center for Inquiry is now 20 years old. It has five school sites in Indianapolis and is used as part of the school district's teacher education program.

Harste worked with Indianapolis teachers and one of his graduate students, Heidi Mills, to start the South Carolina Reading Initiative, which also uses a teacher-as-researcher model. "It was a combination of teacher as researcher, Reading Recovery, and whole language [theory]," he said.

The program used mentors in the classroom, taught teachers how to collect and work with data, and helped them explore their own classroom-based questions.

ideas & inspiration

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Harste's inquiry-based model led him to work with a Canadian school, Mount St. Vincent University, where he has been an adjunct professor since 1992. He still teaches at the school in Toronto once a month and helps lead two-week training sessions in the summer.

"I introduce or bring in a strategy lesson; they try it on kids; and then I find out what went wrong," he said. "It's a great way for me to keep my hand in the classroom."

Teachers in the program range from preschool to high school. Harste said having them in conversation with each other is one of the strengths of the program. "I've always thought that any strategy worth teaching should be worth teaching at all levels," he said.

He also said the Mount St. Vincent program offers an antidote to the current testing-heavy model in the United States. "One of the fundamental differences between Canadian and US teachers, is that if a Canadian teacher hears a good idea, she can try it out Monday morning. If a US teacher hears it, she says, 'My principal won't let me do it.'"

One project the group tried over the summer was having students create PSAs on issues they thought were important using materials remixed from the Internet. The kids were very excited about the project, Harste said, and the teachers saw leaps in their ability to communicate, though they're still figuring out how to document the learning.

Similar multimedia experiments are going on all over the US, including at a school in Bloomington, Indiana, where a donor gave every student an iPad. The students used the iPads to shoot and edit video at home, going far beyond the classroom assignments. "Teachers don't understand what the kids are doing; it's sort of wonderful and messy," Harste said. "The arts open a possibility for education that we haven't explored, and technology does, too."

Mentoring, Collaboration

Harste's work mentoring new teachers will come as no surprise to those who worked with him at Indiana University. Over a 42-year career, he's mentored many students who later became colleagues. His collaboration with colleague Carolyn Burke, who has co-written articles and books with him for decades, began before the two even gained tenure.

Harste and Burke collaborated with Early Childhood Education Professor Virginia Woodward at Indiana Uni-

versity on a 10-year study of three-, four-, five- and six-year-olds learning to read that helped them jointly win the David H. Russell Research Award from NCTE in 1987. It was the first time the award had been given to more than one person, Harste said.

"I think most of what we know, we learn about being in the presence of others," Harste said. "I think it's by interacting with others you learn what you believe ... Collaboration not only elevates ideas but also clarifies how your own personal thinking differs from someone else."

Harste, who has been involved with NCTE at almost

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every level, from serving as president, to leading the Literacy Task Force and the Commission on Reading, sees NCTE as a place to find that collaborative community.

One of NCTE's strengths is the way it brings together teachers at every level of the profession, from elementary to graduate school, to discuss literacy, he said.

"It isn't always a happy fest," he said. "There's a lot of discussion that takes place that really sharpens ideas and moves them. It isn't just a matter of pushing your ideas on the profession. You're opening up your ideas to a conversation."

Harste said he's most proud of the work he did as chair of the Commission on Reading and with NCTE's Reading Initiative, which took the best ideas of professional development worldwide and put them together in a program that supported schools, teachers, and children on a national level.

"I thought that was an important period. We really changed the face of how reading was taught," he said.

"We now know enough about supporting the reading process so that no child should fail," Harste said. "We can set up an environment to support readers at any stage in development." NCTE's Reading Initiative (which has since been discontinued) "took that kind of information and gave teachers a strong theoretical process to make success for all possible."

He said NCTE's Reading Initiative drew in many aspects of the whole language movement, including the use of children's literature, supporting children in using

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all of the cue systems available to them in reading, focusing curriculum on meaning-making in both reading and writing, honoring what children already know, and building curriculum from these bases.

"I still think a fundamental element of teaching is to build from what kids know," he said. "One thing Carolyn Burke says is, 'Just because you think you know something, doesn't give you a right to teach it.' Kids might already know that material. It's an important concept to keep in mind.

"Her other quote is that curriculum should be written in pencil," he said.

"Pockets of Resistance"

Even in retirement, Harste is a restless thinker. A lifelong doodler, he now has two painting studios and uses both to challenge himself to learn new techniques. Recently, he's been thinking about art as abductive reasoning, as a medium that encourages leaps in logic that can be creative, even revolutionary, before all the pieces are laid out.

After a career challenging curriculum and his own ideas about literacy, Harste said he is often discouraged by current trends in the US education, the testing- and performance-based curriculum that takes decisions away from classroom teachers, something he calls "teacher-proofing."

"I've always said that curriculum is metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to be," he said. "That's what teaching is all about. That's what makes us come back and why we love the title, 'Teacher.' None of us got into the profession to see how quietly we can march kids to the bathroom, or take them to lunch."

"We have to remember what we're about. Even in times like this when the whole world wants to dictate what we should be doing. We can't let their small minds close down our imaginations. Curriculum is about imagining possibility and that's the kind of world we have to create for kids."

Minneapolis writer **Trisha Collopy** is a journalism instructor at Anoka Ramsey Community College.

"Red-Flagging" = Censorship

In an effort to avoid book controversies, some school districts have begun the practice of rating or "red-flagging" books that have been challenged in other schools.

Read why the NCTE Standing Committee Against Censorship believes these actions are a blatant form of censorship and undermine the process of book selection based on educational criteria, in this position statement approved by the NCTE Executive Committee in July 2013:

NCTE Position Statement Regarding Rating or "Red-Flagging" Books

<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/rating-books>

DATES & SITES

NCTE Annual Convention

2013: Nov. 21–24 (workshops: Nov. 25–26), Boston, MA, "(Re)Inventing the Future of English"

2014: Nov. 20–23 (workshops: Nov. 24–25), Washington, DC, "Story as the Landscape of Knowing" (program proposal deadline: Jan. 15, 2014)

2015: Nov. 19–22 (workshops: Nov. 23–24), Minneapolis, MN

CCCC Annual Convention

2014: Mar. 19–22, Indianapolis, IN, "Open | Source(s), Access, Futures"

2015: Mar. 18–21, Tampa, FL

WLU Literacies for All Summer Institute

2014: July 17–19, Pasadena, CA, "Making Meaning: Teaching and Learning Together"

2013 Web Seminars

Nov. 6: Teaching Synthesis with Interactive Read-Alouds of Informational Texts (3-8)

Dec. 10: Close Reading: The Assessment-Instruction Connection (6-12)

For details on professional development, including Web seminars and conventions, see the NCTE homepage at <http://www.ncte.org>.