

*Diane Stephens, Heidi Mills, Kathy Short, and Vivian Vasquez*

## Jerry Harste and Carolyn Burke: Winners of NCTE's Outstanding Educator in the English Language Arts Award



When professors retire, it is often the responsibility of the department chair to ask them what type of retirement party they would like. The most common response is “a luncheon.” The chair (most often with a great deal of help from the department secretary) then organizes the luncheon. It is a short affair lasting no more than 90 minutes and includes brief complimentary remarks given by faculty who know the professor well. These commentaries are about what the professors have accomplished over their careers. Many times these remarks sound a bit like eulogies. The luncheon concludes with a gift and applause and the professors subsequently pack up their offices so that someone newly hired can move into them.

When Jerry Harste and Carolyn Burke retired from Indiana University in 2005, however, they wanted not a luncheon, but a conference; and, for the most part, they organized it themselves. It lasted two days and it ended not with gifts to them, but with gifts to the attendees (most of whom were their former doctoral students). The focus was on the future, not the past, and while Burke and Harste indeed subsequently packed up their offices, their intent (which they have continued to fulfill) was to remain

very active and therefore continue to make visible contributions to the field of literacy education.

There are two other unique aspects to this scenario. One is that at this retirement celebration, it was the attendees who were expected to share their new thinking—no one was solely a member of the audience, but rather everyone was simultaneously a speaker. In this way, while there were substantive speeches about Harste and Burke, the primary function of the conference was to provide a learning opportunity for all the attendees. Consistent with the way Burke and Harste led their professional lives and encouraged others to live theirs, the focus was not about looking back at accomplishments but about looking forward.

Second, the retirement celebrated two people who were academic partners, two people who early in their careers became collaborators who theorized together. Together, Harste and Burke supported hundreds of undergraduates and master's students and dozens of doctoral students. The doctoral students then took positions all over the country, and each subsequently supported hundreds of undergraduates and master's students, and dozens of doctoral students—all of whom also were encouraged to collaborate and theorize with others.

### “WHAT YOU ALWAYS NEED IS SOMEONE TO PUSH YOU THAT NEXT STEP”

This partnership, however, did not have a smooth beginning. All of us who were doctoral students of Burke and Harste heard the story about how they “got together” in the same way that children learn about how their parents met. But it is a story best told not by us, but by Jerry and Carolyn themselves. The context was this: Jerry had come to IU the year before Carolyn. His degree was from the University of Minnesota. His expertise was quantitative methodology, and his theoretical orientation (although he did not claim it as such) could be described as “skills-based.” Carolyn had done her degree at Wayne State University under the direction of Ken Goodman, and had spent days, weeks, months coding miscues and developing the *Reading Miscue Inventory* (Burke & Goodman, 1972). She very solidly named her theoretical orientation as “psycholinguistic.” His second year at IU (Carolyn's first), Jerry was asking a variety of individuals to rank reading objectives in order to document differences among groups of participants (elementary teachers versus secondary versus administrators versus university faculty). He had asked Carolyn to participate, but she had

not done the task. Jerry went to talk to her:

*My thinking was that I was going to have to say something about the missing piece of data and probably, if I were lucky, I could get a quote that I might use in the article.*

*When I met with Carolyn and asked her why she hadn't completed my questionnaire, she said, "I had real trouble with what you asked us to do. . . . take, for example, this 3x5 card on vocabulary. It isn't a matter of words being known or unknown, it depends on the context that you are in."*

*"What are you talking about?" I asked. "Of course, words are known or unknown."*

*"No, I'm saying it depends on the context. Why don't you collect some data from a real language learner and then we'll talk."*

Carolyn explains what happened next:

*What was interesting, and what had never happened before outside of the miscue thought collective, was that Jerry kept returning to continue the conversation. I was confronting, for the first time, two of Jerry's most valuable traits as a learner and researcher—his willingness to confront new ideas, and his ability to expose his own rough draft thinking to the argument. In fact, he and I are so good at this that Stephen Kucer, a doctoral student at the time, was known to step into the conference room where the two of us were meeting and beg us to stop. I'm not sure that he or any of the other people who could hear us argue recognized the sheer joy and comfort of our confrontations. After a period of drought, I had found the beginnings of my second thought collective. I*

*wish such alarming and stirring encounters on my best friends.*

What happened after this rather rough but ultimately magnificent beginning is well known. For over 30 years, Jerry and Carolyn have been pushing each other's thinking in their individual work as well as in their shared endeavors.

## RECONCEPTUALIZING TEACHING

One of their first shared endeavors was an exploration of the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices. A second was a study with Virginia Woodward about the literacy knowledge of young children. During this time, Jerry, we would argue, was in the process of coming to understand that the theory he used to hold no longer explained what he was coming to understand. As he explains:

*I always say that I got my second doctorate from Carolyn. What is not so evident is that I got my third and fourth doctorates by hanging out with her friends, some of the best teachers I had ever met—Ken and Yetta Goodman, Dorothy Menosky, Dorothy Watson, Carole Edelsky, to name just a smattering of some of [my] influential teachers. . . . While theory has always fascinated me, these teachers taught me about both practical theory and theoretical practice.*

Two very important ideas emerged from these early years. The first was that the teaching of reading was theoretically based (Harste & Burke, 1977). Carolyn offered the initial nudge into the exploration of the relationship between beliefs and practices. Once Jerry embraced the notion that literacy instruction is theoretically based, a new theoretical lineage emerged in our

field. Those of us who have had the privilege of living and learning in-front-of, along-side, and behind Jerry and Carolyn over the past 30 years have a deep appreciation of the notion that our actions reflect our beliefs. Carolyn and Jerry demonstrated in word and action, to us and to the field, that the moves we make reflect the beliefs we hold (implicitly and explicitly) as teachers and researchers. As their doctoral students, we began a lifelong practice of being conscious of our beliefs and reflecting on our actions in relation to them. Because of their work, all across the country, legions of pre- and inservice teachers and those who teach them make a habit of noticing and naming beliefs and practices. We grow professionally through intentional and systematic efforts to envision new beliefs based on current research, which we then align with our previous beliefs and practices. This work helped reconceptualize teaching as a profession and laid the foundation for professional development as an act of inquiry into one's beliefs instead of one-shot "make and take workshops." Jerry and Carolyn made it clear that if teachers were to "outgrow their former selves" (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984), it would be because they had interrogated their beliefs in light of new knowledge and constructed new theories, not because they learned some "cute" thing to do come Monday morning.

The second early idea and major contribution to the field was the understanding that children are readers and writers long before their reading and writing are conventional. This research was reported in *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984)—a book that challenged conventional notions about when and how children become literate. Debates that began

between Carolyn and Jerry soon took hold in the field. Because they asked new questions as researchers, engaged young children in authentic literacy tasks, and used a semiotic lens to interpret data, their work challenged long-held assumptions about literacy, teaching, and learning. Key findings that emerged from their study included:

- It is experience with print, not a developmental stage or age, that accounts for differences in written language acquisition;
- The underlying processes involved in unconventional reading and writing are similar to those used by proficient readers and writers;
- Children learn written language through the process of using it;
- Children access the unique structures of their own names when constructing initial texts through written language;
- Children expect print to make sense and begin reading environmental print early in their literacy careers;
- Children understand the multimodal nature of literacy and use multiple symbol systems such as art, mathematics, and written language in concert to construct and share meaning.

These findings caused teachers across the country, then and now, to form a new theory about how children learn written language, and, as a consequence, teachers re-envisioned what “best practices” with young children looked like and sounded like. Teachers whose theory aligned with these (and subsequent) findings about written language acquisition abandoned their belief in 1) prerequisites for literacy learning; 2) skill lessons packaged in a hierarchy to teach

children to read and write; 3) deliberate attempts to restrict children’s sketching when writing; and 4) practices that privileged conventional language and dismissed children’s inventions. Based on their new theory, teachers replaced these ideas with what they learned from *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* (1984) and built (and continue to build) their practices on an understanding that organization, intentionality, risk taking, context, text, and demonstrations are key psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic processes involved in literacy and literacy learning.

Jerry and Carolyn’s early research on young children and their belief that teaching was theoretically driven was the start of a collaborative journey into language learning and curriculum development. As they worked collaboratively to construct a theory based on the writing samples gathered from young children, Carolyn and Jerry began to conceptualize written language learning as an authoring process. Their next step was to work with teachers interested in exploring and creating supportive classroom environments for authoring meaning. Those of us who were graduate students at the time became part of these efforts, particularly the early experiences of exploring authoring within summer programs. This work with teachers convinced Jerry and Carolyn that an understanding of curriculum is at the heart of what we do as educators.

While curriculum is often seen as a course to run, a list of skills to be taught, or a set of activities or lessons, Carolyn argued that curriculum involves putting our beliefs about learning, language, and social relationships into action. She believes that curriculum gives perspective—a

perspective that supports educators in making predictions about how people learn, what should be learned, and the contexts that support learning. Jerry argued that curriculum is a metaphor for the lives we want to live and the people we want to become. He believes that how we envision children, define literacy, and see education makes a difference. Teachers who interrogate their beliefs and integrate these new understandings about curriculum make thoughtful decisions about and with students. Such decisions enable them to create powerful learning environments supporting all children as readers, writers, and inquirers. Because of the work of Jerry and Carolyn, curriculum became not a paper document, but an invitation to imagine a different future and to create a new reality for children in classrooms.

Influenced by Carolyn’s belief in making conceptual frameworks visible, Jerry and Carolyn created the Authoring Cycle, a framework grounded in their theory that authoring was a learning process (Harste & Short, 1988). In this cycle, they drew attention to the significance of life experiences as the basis of communicative events, the situational contexts in which all authoring is embedded, the culture-specific contexts in which literacy events are enacted, the multiple sign systems that students move between to expand the range of meanings they can express, and the regenerative nature of authoring. Their first framework focused on writing and publishing; it was subsequently expanded to include reading. Ultimately, the focus expanded to include the process of inquiry and of learning, within which all modes of literacy—reading, writing, drawing, etc.—are embedded (Short & Harste, 1996).

Carolyn and Jerry's theory of authoring as inquiry provided a lens that helped all of us, then and now, re-envision our beliefs about teaching and learning. They conceptualized inquiry as a search for the tensions that matter in the lives of learners, as a way for teachers and children to stay alive as learners. Just as they named for the field the key aspects of written language acquisition, they named for us the key processes of inquiry: connection, invitation, tension, investigation, demonstration, re-vision, representation, valuation, and action. This theory was transformative. Teachers who use these ideas as their foundation understand inquiry as the means by which all of us, including teachers and children, transform themselves and the world.

The vision of curriculum as inquiry provided not only for new possibilities in how educators might enact their beliefs in classrooms, but also opened up curriculum to Freire's (1970) notions of problem posing as a means of transforming the world as well as oneself. At the heart of inquiry is the belief that education needs to be transformed from *learning about to learning to be*; from asking "what is" to asking "what might be." It needs to be a process of becoming. Their belief that powerful learning environments create the conditions for motivation, invitation, and empowerment, combined with their commitment to education for democracy, led them to new questions. Jerry explained:

*If we are to make the kind of educational progress we need to make, it is going to have to begin in the language arts classroom. . . . We [more than others] can help children understand that they haven't really finished reading until they have taken some form of social*

*action by mentally and physically repositioning themselves in the world.* (Harste, NCTE presidential address, 1999)

In true Harste/Burke fashion, Jerry and Carolyn think differently about transformative action. Jerry argues that the field needs Critical Literacy—a perspective that focuses on the ideology of language use and learning and not just on language use and learning. He believes that critical literacy supports an expanded definition of literacy in that it highlights nonlinguistic-centered texts and the role they play in 21st century literacy. He believes critical literacy supports diversity, inquiry, reflexivity, and social action as key dimensions of a literate citizenry.

Carolyn agrees with these key dimensions, but argues that critical literacy requires adjusting our lens to focus on pragmatics—the rules of language use in a particular situation as it relates to power. She cautions, however, that this does not mean she is anti-critical literacy. Instead, she is merely "anti the way in which Harste and some of my other friends seem to treat [critical literacy] as an independent entity and an alternative theory." She worries that in "the joy of learning and teaching the new Critical Literacy, my buddy fails to continue to consistently teach how the other systems of language work and transact. Predicting and confirming are as much of the Pragmatic system as they are of the Phoneme/Grapheme, Syntactic, and Semantic systems." As she explains:

*I view Pragmatics as the fourth system of language and of all semiotic systems. As such, every semiotic act involves what Ken Goodman, years ago, called "Comprehending"—accommo-*

*dating and embedding new understandings and interpretations into the readers' already enacted world view. Every time a person reads (draws, dances, sings, computes), he/she is putting their total intellectual life at risk of change.*

*I think that Critical Literacy is a model that starts to make reflective and formal our understanding and application of this fourth, Pragmatic, system. I am not convinced that Critical Literacy as currently developed incorporates all that is inherent in a Pragmatic system. Questions of the Personal Self, how we come to consciously and purposely understand ourselves as individuals, questions of beliefs and ethics, and how alternative philosophical models come to embed our cultural and social actions are not yet addressed.*

As this latest Burke/Harste argument perhaps makes clear, one of the greatest gifts that Carolyn and Jerry offered their graduate students, and the field as a whole, was a vision of how to live and learn in wide-awake ways. The passion they continue to have for theoretical explorations was and still is contagious. It was Carolyn who taught us to get comfortable being uncomfortable, and it was Jerry who lived that model out loud. Together, they shared their rough draft thinking and current passions while simultaneously inviting their collaborators to contribute to the evolution of a thought collective. Although they made remarkable advances in theory, they didn't simply hold tight to their thinking or expect others to passively receive it. They pushed and continue to push others as hard as they pushed and continue to push one another. Indeed, as doctoral students, we remember growing into a new insight or idea just in time for them to problematize it for us. Jerry

and Carolyn didn't reserve such responses for their advanced graduate students. Because they hold teachers in such high respect, Carolyn and Jerry continue to challenge them as well. As Jerry explains:

*Literacy education must be continually changing in response to what we know. . . . Teachers who are always asking questions and are aware of the limits of their own knowing have a far better chance of making a difference than those who think they know everything.* (Leland, Harste, & Shockley, 2007, p. 142)

Carolyn emphasizes that the need for deep thinking always continues:

*In the early stages of our paradigm—theoretician, researcher, teacher, and student—all were studying much the same thing because it all was new to everyone. Now in the mid-life of our paradigm, we might be in crisis if we are not alert to the differing needs of the people functioning in these varied roles. Initiates into the paradigm need the opportunity to explore, test, and develop their knowledge of basic premises. There are no shortcuts. Our past theoretical learnings cannot become our student's received facts. The only way that a learner may give considered preference to one theory is by understanding the totality of its working systems and how it contrasts to the opportunities presented by competing theories.* (Burke, retirement speech)

Since they retired in 2005, Jerry and Carolyn have continued to make significant contributions to the field. Both have been actively involved with NCTE's Reading Initiative and other professional development efforts. Both have been involved with

social action projects. Jerry has been working with teachers, helping them learn to make social statements about something they would like to see changed using the techniques of artist Jacob Lawrence. In doing so, he hopes to help teachers take a more political stand and engage in social action. He also has been investigating what children already know about advertisements and how those ads act on them as a way of rethinking curriculum. Carolyn, meanwhile, has been tutoring in a local GED program. She is focusing on individuals who have made two or three attempts but have not passed the GED. She reports, "I now have a young man in chef's college, a mother working full time and off welfare, and an executive's wife in her late seventies who is now socially and intellectually comfortable with herself."

By actions large and small, and by the way they live their lives, Jerry and Carolyn's legacy will live on for generations; for that we are all deeply grateful. Because of their work, hundreds and thousands of classroom teachers and teacher educators now understand Carolyn and Jerry's contention, borrowed from Lewin (1952), that "nothing is as practical as a good theory" (p. 169). Because of their work, many educators now live their professional lives engaged in a continuous cycle of inquiry for themselves and their students. Because of Jerome Harste's and Carolyn Burke's work, educators everywhere create contexts in which theory is practical and practice is theoretical and in which every participant is able to go about the business of outgrowing their former selves (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984).

Receiving NCTE's Outstanding Educator in the English Lan-

guage Arts award is but one small acknowledgement of all Jerry and Carolyn have done. Our deepest appreciation goes to them for the way they push themselves, push us, and push the field, and by so doing, make the world a better place.

## References

- Burke, C. (2005, May). *The paradigm shift*. Speech at the Harste/Burke Retirement Conference: Research and Teaching Language in These Critical Times, Indiana University, Bloomington.
- Burke, C., & Goodman, Y. (1972). *Reading miscue inventory: Procedures for diagnosis and evaluation*. New York: Macmillan.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Harste, J. (1999, November). *Curriculum, multiple realities, and democracy: What if English language arts teachers really cared? (Part II)*. Presidential address at the annual convention of the National Council of Teachers of English, Denver, CO.
- Harste, J. C., & Burke, C. L. (1977). A new hypothesis for reading teacher education research: Both the teaching and learning of reading are theoretically based. In P. D. Pearson (Ed.), *Reading: Research, theory, and practice* (26th yearbook of the National Reading Conference). Minneapolis, MN: Mason.
- Harste, J. C., & Short, K. G. (with Burke, C. L.). (1988). *Creating classrooms for authors: The reading and writing connection*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harste, J., Woodward, V., & Burke, C. (1984). *Language stories and literacy lessons*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Leland, C., Harste, J., & Shockley, C. (2007). Literacy Education, Equity, and Attitude. *Language Arts*, 85, 134–143.
- Lewin, K. (1952). *Field theory in science: Selected theoretical papers by Kurt Lewin*. London: Tavistock.
- Short, K., Harste, J. (with Burke, C.). (1996). *Creating classrooms for authors and inquirers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

**Diane Stephens** and **Heidi Mills** are professors of Language and Literacy at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. **Kathy Short** is professor of Language, Reading, and Culture at the University of Arizona in Tucson. **Vivian Vasquez** is associate professor of Teacher Education at American University in Washington, DC. All received doctorate degrees from Indiana University.