Editor's note from Angela Jaggar: For this profile column, I asked two language arts educators, one school-based and the other university-based, who are themselves recognized for outstanding contributions to the field, to write an essay about an educator whose work inspires them and helps shape their "visions of the possibilities" for language teaching and learning. Nancie Atwell and John Mayher both said they would be happy to write for the column. Surprisingly, but really not surprisingly, each named Frank Smith as the person about whom they wanted to write.

Frank Smith is a distinguished language researcher and educator who has worked for more than 30 years to encourage teachers to create classroom environments that are essential for learning. He has written many best-selling books and articles aimed at helping teachers understand the nature of language, literacy, thinking, and learning. More than this, Frank has distinguished himself as a major critic of educational policies and instructional practices that are based on false assumptions about how children learn and, therefore, how reading and writing should be taught. He never shies away from addressing the controversial issues (e.g., the place of phonics in early reading, direct instruction, one-size-fits-all teaching, accountability, high-stakes testing, and "scientific" reading instruction) that confront teachers and teacher educators. As a result, he continues to provide an important voice in the ongoing debates about language teaching.

Frank received his B.A. in cognitive psychology from the University of Western Australia and his Ph.D. in psycholinguistics from Harvard. He has been a professor at the Universities of Toronto and Victoria, British Columbia. He is now a full-time researcher, writer, and lecturer. In 1984, he won the NCTE David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research for Writing and the Writer (1982). Nancie Atwell and John Mayher are also Russell Award winners. Here, then, are their essays about Frank Smith's importance to them.

I'm Reading Frank Smith Again

Nancie Atwell

Somehow it was already August. I was talking with a group of teachers about—what else—getting ready to go back and the requisite physical and mental prep after, in my case, a summer of novels, gardening, and movies on cable. "I'm reading Frank Smith again," I told them. "Skimming around in Reading without Nonsense [1997] and his essay collections."

Frank Smith is my August ritual. After 30 years as a teacher, I continue to find in his work what drew me to teaching in the first place and what keeps me in the classroom. I come away from his writing challenged, refreshed, stimulated, determined, and reminded of the possibilities—for my students, for me, for my profession.

I encountered Frank Smith for the first time in 1974, the winter before my husband and I moved to Maine from western New York. In a graduate course on reading at the University of Buffalo, Charles Cooper assigned the first edition of Understanding Reading (1971) as the central text. An introduction to psycholinguistic theory, the book was heavy sledding. Still, it left me reeling.

According to Frank's analysis, fluent readers don't read every word of a text. Rather, we predict our way through books, eliminating some alternatives ahead of time—based on the knowledge of language we've already developed through the built-in redundancies of syntax and semantics—and sample just enough of the visual information presented on the page to eliminate the rest of the alternatives. When we encounter an unfamiliar word, fluent readers understand that the most efficient and effective strategy for determining its meaning is through context.
What does this mean for us as teachers of reading? First, in order to become fluent, our students need considerable experience engaged with interesting, meaningful texts—with the examples, contrasts, evidence that time with books provides. And their teachers need "a clear understanding of what the skilled reader can do, and of what the beginning reader is trying to do" (p. 230), not more or new methods of reading instruction. The continuing influence of this seminal book is evident in the publication of the sixth edition in 2004.

In almost a dozen books about reading and writing that followed, Frank never described or recommended a method or a program. The goal, always, was for teachers to understand. The central understanding, at the heart of everything, was his constructivist assertion that children’s brains are learning all the time, but that children learn best and most when they view what they’re being asked to do as worthwhile and sensible. Rightly, he characterizes much of what happens in the name of reading instruction in U.S. classrooms as “ritual and nonsense.”

*Reading without Nonsense* (1978/1997) provides a more accessible, teacher-friendly presentation of Frank’s theory that only through reading—continuous, pleasurable, easy, and meaningful encounters with books—do children learn to read. Settled, and isolated, in rural Maine by then and hungry for professional literature that might shed light on children’s literacy, I was especially grateful for his argument, presented in a way I could articulate to parents, about why phonics is an unreliable, not to mention confusing, approach to learning to read. More significantly, *Reading without Nonsense* was the book from which I gleaned the theoretical foundations of reading workshop (Atwell, 1987, 1998). Reading workshop is the context in which every one of my middle school students has grown to fluency over the past 25 years, as kids enjoyed continuous, pleasurable, easy, and meaningful encounters with books they chose and as they read, on average, 40–50 titles each school year.

More recently, I returned to *Reading without Nonsense* for help in understanding the distress my students felt, and the misgivings I experienced, about instructional approaches rooted in research that claims to show that children learn to comprehend text by practicing the strategies of proficient readers (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Anderson and Pearson (1984) propose that when students are explicitly taught how to activate relevant prior knowledge, make predictions, ask questions, create imagery, and form judgments while in the midst of reading a story, and then practice and apply these strategies, they learn to process text and comprehend as fluent, proficient readers. Several years ago, beguiled by schema theory, I modeled, introduced, and assigned the strategies. My smart, stubborn students rebelled against a “sticky note approach” to reading their beloved stories. So I returned to Frank Smith. My kids told me they viewed the activation of the strategies as intrusive, artificial, and a gigantic waste of their time as readers of narrative. My rereading of Frank’s work reminded me that engaged readers don’t need to be taught how to comprehend.

Frank Smith (1997) theorized that "the basis of comprehension is prediction, and prediction is achieved by making sense of what we already know about the world. . . . There is no need to teach children to predict. It is a natural process, they have been doing it since they were born. . . . Infants summarize their past in order to make sense of the present and to predict the future. Without such a theory, they would be constantly bewildered and frequently surprised. In addition, neither bewilderment nor surprise are conditions that anyone is willing to tolerate for very long. It is a natural propensity of children to make their theories as extensive and efficient as possible" (p. 87). He concluded by stating, “Of course, children’s theories are not as complex as adults’, but then no-one’s theory is ever complete. . . . A child’s theory may be less differentiated than yours, but until you see a child who is constantly bewildered or surprised—and not just by what goes on in school, but by every aspect of life in general—you cannot say that the child does not know how to predict or to make sense of the world. *Children know how to comprehend, provided they are in a situation that has the possibility of making sense to them*” (emphasis mine) (p. 88).

The question for me became not how to teach comprehension, but how to ensure a context for reading “that has the possibility of making sense” to my students. It turned out not to be an instructional approach that required my students to sticky-note their way through novels they loved, practicing “strategies,” interrupting the flow of their vicarious experience of character and plot, and, most crucially, interfering with their comprehension of narratives.
But as powerfully as Reading without Nonsense shaped—continues to shape—my understandings and practice, the work by Frank that means the most to my teaching are the essays published in Essays into Literacy (1983) and Joining the Literacy Club (1988), books that gathered articles that appeared in Language Arts and other journals in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when, it seemed, between Frank Smith, Donald Graves, and Ken and Yetta Goodman, the possibilities for literacy instruction and our knowledge of children as writers and readers were cracking open around us like gorgeous geodes. Frank’s groundbreaking essay, “Demonstrations, Engagement, and Sensitivity” (1983, pp. 95-106), defined three essential components of any learning experience—opportunities to see how something is done; productive interactions of an individual learner with these demonstrations; and the absence of any expectation on the part of teachers or other adults that learning won’t take place or that it might be difficult. He likened engagement with a demonstration to a “meshing of gears” (p. 103) in which a learner assimilates another’s demonstration and makes it, vicariously, an action of his or her own.

One of the examples Frank (1998) cited of this phenomenon is “reading like a writer” (p. 103), that is, an occasion when we pause in our reading to notice how a word is spelled or how a writer has crafted an interesting idea, “in order to learn how to write like a writer” (p. 23). The notion of a reading–writing connection began here. So did the notion of helping children understand the conventions of written language, no longer to be viewed as rules to be drilled and memorized, but perceived by teachers and demonstrated to kids as “mutually accepted and expected ways of doing or expressing particular things” that pervade language and “make creativity possible” (1983, p. 98). My approach in writing workshop to teaching usage, spelling, and proofreading—via minilessons to the group and editorial conferences with individuals as demonstrations of how standard, edited, American English is written and of what readers’ eyes and minds expect of text—began here. And so did the most convincing rationale ever offered for teachers to act as writers and readers—the need to bring our literate behaviors and passions into the classroom. I trusted and heeded Frank’s (1983) warning, “Remember the time bomb: children are learning all the time. What kind of writing do children see teachers doing? What do teachers demonstrate about their interest in reading?” (p. 102). Today, every draft of a poem, memoir, or letter to the editor I show to my students on an overhead transparency in a minilesson, every booktalk I present about a young adult novel I read, loved, and think kids will, too, begins in his theory of demonstrations.

This past fall it was a pleasure and a challenge to read Frank’s most recent collection of essays, Unspeakable Acts, Unnatural Practices (2003). My advice to other teachers comes straight from my own experience of the book. Buy it. Get up early on a Sunday morning. While the rest of your family sleeps, make yourself a pot of tea or coffee. Settle in with your copy. Don’t close the book until you’ve finished it—it’s under a hundred pages, so that’s a doable task. Madly mark it up as Smith summons your students, colleagues, and administrators; the meddling politicians of your state and federal government; the impact of computers and of pseudo-science on your teaching; and the unnatural acts of reading that occur in the U.S. in the name of “scientific” reading instruction. On Monday, when you go to school, talk to like-minded colleagues. Form a study group to read, be provoked by, and debate Unspeakable Acts, Unnatural Practices. Then, together, determine how you can take action—how you can demonstrate your engagement with Smith’s final challenge, rendered with generous sensitivity:

Many classrooms are secure enclaves of imagination, identification, and personal relationships despite the storms that rage around, the irreplaceable coexisting with the irresistible. The idea must not die that we live in a world of people, not a world of machines, systems, or lean budgets. The human heart of education must be kept beating no matter how heartless the environment in which we live, teach, and learn. (p. 95)

**FRANK SMITH: A COMPASS FOR MY MIND**

**John S. Mayher**

Nancy Martin often said, “There’s nothing as practical as a good theory,” and Frank Smith is the most practical theorist I know. In the current climate of reading and writing instruction, we need his insights more than ever. The stakes are higher than ever. The United States runs the risk of turning the current fetish for phonics instruction into a recipe for reading disaster rather than the solution it is widely believed to be. While neither Frank nor I would say that phonics has no place in the overall scheme of reading instruction, we are both convinced that an exclusive diet of phonics will limit
children’s abilities to become the mature and powerful readers and writers we know they can be.

We need many voices to help us see the limits of the current use of “scientific evidence” to justify systematic phonics and require it for all readers, and of all of the people I read—and ask my students to read—the one I keep coming back to is Frank Smith. From the 1970s to today, he has been the most interesting and useful interpreter of linguistic and learning research, developing a thoughtful way of understanding the full range of literacy processes and showing the implications of those understandings for practice through books such as Understanding Reading (1971, 2004).

Among the great challenges of English language arts teaching are the decisions about how much and what kind of “teaching” is actually needed. These questions have been framed in many ways over the years, but the root issue seems to be how much direct instruction must be provided if kids are going to learn to read and write. Traditional practice answers, “a lot.” From the traditional perspective, the “basics” of reading and writing instruction are presumed to be the parts of language. “Conventional wisdom” believes that these parts must be explicitly taught, moving from smaller to larger, from parts to wholes, based on a learning theory assumption that conscious control of these elements—letters and syllables, words and structures, paragraphs and texts—is the essential path to literacy.

Chomskyan linguistic theory and widely accepted theories of language acquisition and development challenge those assumptions about oral language. What remains controversial, however, is whether the processes of acquiring reading and writing skills are similar to the unconscious and essentially untutored processes of oral language acquisition. For Frank Smith, these processes are similar, and he has been a consistent explainer of how and why learning to read and write is as natural as learning to speak. He has shown us that we learn to read and write without much direct instruction in a supportive environment, and that reading instruction need not begin with the smallest parts of language analysis. The “basics” of reading and writing are not explicit naming of the parts of speech, but an emphasis on the meanings we are making as we read and write.

There are some virtues in understanding how language works as a meaning-making system even in its most minute details, of course, but it is not clear that such understandings have direct application to the processes of reading and composing. As I am struggling to write and rewrite this text, for example, I am consciously thinking of many things—my audience, what I want to say, and whether I can be engaging or funny (one has to try, especially when one is writing about Frank Smith who is consistently a witty and inviting writer!), but I am not thinking about the subject of this sentence, the parts of speech I am using, or how to spell the words. Similarly, as you read, you are focusing on the interpretation you are building, not the structural details of the text unless something confuses or bothers you, and only then might you look to see if I’ve made some blunder that none of my helpful editors has caught. I can, and will, make mistakes, and now, having reminded myself of this, I have gone back to check on some of these things, finding that Bill Gates and co. have already reminded me of my bad typing by underlining in red the words I’ve misspelled (although spellcheck missed my typing buy instead of by in the last phrase).

The issue remains—What can teachers do to help students become skilled readers and writers? Perhaps Frank’s most precise expressions lay in Joining the Literacy Club (1988), “Why Systematic Phonics and Phonemic Awareness Instruction Constitute an Educational Hazard” (1999) and, my longtime favorite, “Twelve Easy Ways of Making Learning to Read Difficult and One Difficult Way to Make It Easy” (1973). The one difficult way, you ask? “Respond to what the child is trying to do!” This concept cuts through the reading and writing wars and puts the emphasis back on the child’s needs, actions, and desires. It suggests, for instance, that one size does not fit all in reading and writing instruction. Even those of us who are skeptical of direct instruction and systematic phonics must recognize that a systematic explanation of sound–letter correspondences may be essential for some beginning readers in helping them develop the connections they need between their oral language—which they’ve already mastered—and its written versions. Not all children require that kind of drill, however, and giving it to them may be more harmful than helpful—especially for those children who are already successful readers.

Responding to what children are trying to do is difficult because it does not rely on a pre-formulated “method” of instruction. As Frank stresses, “joining the literacy club” requires an environment where members are participating in literacy activities because they are
meaningful to them and are welcoming to newcomers who want to join the growing circle of readers and writers. This requires a teacher who can identify and support a wide range of children as they move toward literacy including—crucially—a teacher who is a reader/writer among students. If we are not reading and writing ourselves, our words of instruction will ring hollow. If we don’t create classrooms where pupils can share their literacy experiences—interpretations and creations—then we cannot expect literacy to spread from kid to kid as it does in a genuine club.

Following Frank’s advice is more difficult than ever in an era of what is touted as a “scientific” approach to reading instruction, high-stakes tests based in part on phonemic analysis, and pressures on teachers and principals to conform to this approach or risk losing essential federal and state funding. But Frank’s recent book, Unspeakeable Acts, Unnatural Practices (2003), gives us renewed strength. This trenchant and powerful analysis of the current climate is combined with a powerful plea for individual teachers to regain autonomy in their classrooms so they can provide the humane and supportive environment needed by children to become effective writers and thoughtful readers. For Frank, such teachers must be able to “foster the imagination, facilitate personal identification, and promote social interaction” (2003, p. 95) if children are to learn to read.

The pressures are on teachers (and teacher educators) to trim teaching to the prevailing wind from Washington where pseudoscience seems to dictate a scripted approach to literacy instruction. Such approaches have many virtues in the bureaucratic world of schooling. They permit schools to hire relatively unskilled, untrained, and therefore low-salaried teachers, and they require massively expensive purchases of phonics books, reading series, and disposables—worksheets and the like—which must be repurchased every year. They can be shown to “work” because test scores will inexorably rise as teachers and students learn what really counts in the brave new world of No Child Left Behind and “high” standards. The fact that most of the text publishers are also test publishers gives rise to questions of conflict of interest, but more important, it shows that the whole system is complicit in narrowing what is taught to what is tested.

Some systems have struggled against this tide even as they have been forced to buy into the prevailing wisdom that teaching is test prep and that test scores reveal success (or failure). Schools and districts with strong test scores can afford to be somewhat resistant and to try to continue to provide more meaningful instruction for their pupils. But the “conventional thinking” that lies behind what I call “educational common sense” (Mayher, 1990) permeates the discourse surrounding education and leads even media voices that are otherwise relatively progressive into positions supporting teaching for testing and dissing teacher education. Of course, at the base of all of these trends is massive disrespect for teachers. We are too soft, too ignorant, and too lazy—done at 3:00 pm! Summers off! And fundamentally, we just aren’t very smart because if we were, why would we choose such a low-prestige and low-paid profession? Once again, Frank’s sure sense of direction about the “flaws and fallacies of ‘scientific’ literacy instruction” shows that human beings are the central players in the teaching and learning transaction (Smith, 2003). If we hope children will learn to read and write well, we need to empower teachers, not de-skill them or try to replace them with programs or computers. He warns us not to be taken in by the apparent research basis of many claims for better teaching through controlled learning environments. Without a better understanding of how theory informs practice and more extensive preservice and inservice teacher education, the deeper problems of American education and especially of its inequalities will not be resolved. That has been Frank’s greatest contribution—to make theory practical.

The tide is running very strongly in favor of the “conventional wisdom” that teachers are the problem, not the solution, and that teacher education compounds the problem by continuing to fight against phonics, by refusing to recognize that more subject content is what teachers really need, and that the best teacher education is no teacher education at all. It is not hard to get paranoid as one reads newspapers and watches television, but with the guidance provided by Frank and others we can persevere. We can continue to help the children we teach and their parents come to understand that the learning they want and need doesn’t come in a box—it comes in the human transactions between readers and writers, teachers and learners, and above all, parents and children. Children can’t wait to join the literacy club, as the Harry Potter phenomenon has shown. It’s our job to help them become full and productive members, and we are lucky to have Frank Smith to show us the best ways to do so.
References


Author Biographies
Nancie Atwell is the first classroom teacher to receive the NCTE David H. Russell Award and the MLA Mina Shaughnessy Prize for In the Middle (1987; 1998). She is the founder of the Center for Teaching and Learning, a K–8 demonstration school in Edgecomb, Maine. Her work includes Lessons That Change Writers (2002) and The Personal Art: Reflections on Reading (2006). John S. Mayher is professor of English Education at New York University and received the David H. Russell Award for Research in the Teaching of English in 1992 for Uncommon Sense. He was given the Distinguished Service Award from NCTE in 1998.

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