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# Dora V. Smith: Echoes of a Strong Voice in English Education

Linda M. Pavonetti

Echoes are capricious things. If two or three people call out together, their voices mingle, eventually becoming one echo, projected across the valleys of time. There is such an echo today in the many reform movements of the 1990s. Strong voices proclaim innovations and relevance. But if we were to tease out the voices, those echoes of long ago, we could trace the philosophy through the coterie of Goodman, Atwell, Graves, Smith, and Holdaway to a triumvirate of early 20th-century educators. Those three are John Dewey, Louise Rosenblatt, and Dora V. Smith.

The curriculum theory that Dewey developed affected individual educators, but his voice bounced off tradition-laden disciplines, such as English education. His lab school in Chicago, while stimulating considerable interest, did not become an exemplar for high school literature classes. Similarly, Louise Rosenblatt's literary theory remained largely unheralded until the demise of the New Critical movement. A reader could not memorize facts about a literary work while responding aesthetically. It required a third voice, Dora V. Smith's, to complete the triad and move theory into the classroom.

Dora V. Smith is not a name that is currently heard in the halls of academe. But there are echoes of her voice lingering in classrooms and offices, from schoolhouses to journal pages. For Dora V. Smith (known by many as simply Dora V.) was a woman who bequeathed a legacy to English education, the field to which she dedicated her life. As a contemporary and friend of Rosenblatt and Dewey, Smith's focus on pedagogy contributed the third leg of the triangle, the one which provided form and applicability to their philosophies. Without Dora V.'s voice, Dewey's curricular theories and Rosenblatt's literary theories would have remained

imprisoned in ivory towers rather than having an impact on American language arts education.

Although her acquaintances and admirers encircled the globe, Dora V., dubbed "The First Lady of the United States in the Teaching of English" by one of her fellow NCTE presidents, was as comfortable with "learned colleagues, a group of teenagers, or those young ones for whose good reading so much of her professional life has been given" (Smith 1964, vii). She worked in conjunction with and as an advocate for all of those groups through the multitude of movements she supported. Walter W. Cook, Dean of the College of Education at the University of Minnesota, wrote, "From her hands and mind and heart, her willing and tireless assistance has gone to teachers and students by the thousands" (Smith viii). By contemplating her essays, we can see that Dora V. Smith, the 1936 NCTE President, was a woman whose strong voice continues to echo in the current whole language, response-centered, language arts movements.

In her 1944 essay, "Growth in Language Power as Related to Child Development," Smith stressed the necessity of environmental stimulation providing the "opportunity for wide contacts with objects and experiences from the real world" (1964, 17). But Smith's essay also contains foreshadowing of voices yet to be heard:

Defining lists of words on the blackboard, filling in blanks in exercises, and writing themes on topics which have little relationship to what is going on at the moment in school or at home can never be a substitute for development in the classroom of a wealth of opportunities for exploring the world in which children live and for stimulating them to thought and discussion concerning it. (17)

*Much of what appears as "new" in the English classrooms of the 1990s can be traced to Dora V. Smith.*

Compare those words to ones written in Ken Goodman's 1986 opus on whole language, *What's Whole in Whole Language?*:

Workbooks and duplicated skill exercises are inappropriate in whole language programs. What is appropriate is anything the children need or want to read or write. Lots of recreational books are needed . . . and resource materials . . . and some "real world" resources. (33)

## WRITING AND LITERATURE

During the 1930s and 1940s progressive educators began making inroads into traditional, conservative classrooms through creative writing. Classroom teachers as well as university faculty advocated disregarding the appearance, spelling, even the grammar in student's first drafts (Shannon 1990). Smith, one of the prominent educators who defended creative writing in the classroom, wrote in her essay, "Growth in Language Power," "[Creative writing] involves recognition of individuality and of freedom to express one's own thoughts and emotions" (49).

Education, to Dora V., could only succeed if it were pertinent to the child's life. Endless drills and meaningless exercises encouraged a negative backlash. In a 1948 essay on curriculum-making, she referred to several important studies with writing. The findings indicated that "the group which grappled with the clear expression of its own and related ideas improved infinitely more than the one which engaged in the intricate diagramming of sentences" (384).

In virtually every essay Smith wrote, she railed against the obsession with grammar in the United States. Furthermore, she emphasized that American grammar instruction had been mistakenly grounded in Latin grammar, which confused and complicated an already muddled process. She felt that through linguistics and other methods of simplification, English educators were learning "that usage is a matter of convention rather than of grammatical rule . . . [which has] helped disentangle the English problem of agreement from the intricate Latin pattern" (1964, 257). Language to Dora V. Smith was a social process. The message was primary, followed closely by consideration of audience and the intended effect, and lastly by organization, word choice, and structure of the message.

Repeatedly, Smith emphasized the need to relate school to the child's development and life outside of school:

The child's growth in language power is intimately related to the total pattern of his growth. This pattern in turn is determined by the innate capacity of the child and by the nature of the environment in which he lives—an environment involving school, home, and community. (Hook 1979, 170)

Further, "as a progressive, Smith saw composition as a means of socialization—of enriching the experience and broadening the interest of students" (Monseau 1991, 74). The techniques she advocated included "a classroom where writing assignments grew out of natural situations" (Monseau 74) and where the students worked in small groups, assisting each other in the process of writing socially relevant essays.

## READING AND LITERATURE

Most of Smith's career was spent lobbying for the boys and girls, as she always called them, regardless of their ages. Every ounce of her energy was devoted to discovering more about child development, then converting that knowledge to pedagogy.

In 1939 Smith wrote an essay that stands as a monument to progressive reading education. She listed four elements essential to the development of a lifelong reader: 1) "Personal interest or drive"; Smith stressed that a teacher's greatest responsibility was to know her students' interests and capabilities so that she could recommend books and guide the child on a personal reading ladder; 2) Satisfaction of personal interest while creating a hunger for more books; 3) Encouragement of new interests leading to extended experiences in related, but different directions; 4) Development not only of literary values but personal values for living (Smith 1964, 98–100).

Smith expressed concern that teachers ignore students' individual ability levels when group readings are assigned. Once again, she championed the underdog:

It is difficult to understand how anyone seriously concerned with the development of young people's reading interests and tastes can oppose the preparation for over-age, low-ability pupils of materials adapted to their

level of maturity and to their stage of progress in reading. (1964, 106)

The brightest students are likewise stymied by group assignments. One of Smith's strongest statements repudiated the concept that there are books everyone "ought" to read. She unequivocally stated that "no single book is so important as to warrant reading at the expense of the development of a voluntary habit of good reading" (1964, 115). Smith's goal was a classroom in which students read individually, conferred with teachers about their books, and were guided up a reading ladder based on their personal abilities and interests. Authentic writing was incorporated into this ideal classroom, and reading and writing were integrated throughout the curriculum.

In conjunction with these elements, Dora V. articulated aspects of reading and literature instruction that were unique. Probably the most important of her innovations was the separation of adolescent literature from the field of children's literature. Arthur Applebee (1974) credits Dora V. as the first educator to seriously address the reading interests of teens:

The first serious professional attention to "adolescent" or "transitional" literature stemmed from Dora V. Smith's concern that the literary preparation of teachers gave too little attention to the literary interests of high school students. (155)

G. Robert Carlsen recalled that her first adolescent literature class convened in 1939. "Dora V.'s course was centered on the implied readers" (Sherrill and Ley 1991, 161). There were three important aspects to her course. First was the order of presentation, beginning with subliterate, then teen books, followed by adult books teens would like to read, and finally biography and poetry. The second component of the course was the number of books introduced and read by the students. Everyone was to read widely and make note cards for the books. Finally, the "third distinctive aspect of Dora V.'s teaching was her concept of reading ladders. . . . Through reading guidance a teacher was to move readers from one level to a higher one" (Sherrill and Ley, 162).

## RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

In some respects, especially because their concerns were so similar, Smith and Rosenblatt were more like soul-mates than contemporaries. The primary difference was in the thrust of their work: Rosenblatt generally remained on a theoretical level while Smith always boomeranged back to the classroom. Smith compared the development of literary values to the development of life-values through the metaphor of a race. Through this metaphor, she stressed the necessity of patience because a race cannot be foreshortened. This concept has important implications for learners who are moving slowly up their reading ladders: it is dangerous to skip rungs, for the child who falls from the ladder may never get back on it.

Dora V. considered personal response to be the foundation of any aesthetic experience. She chided educators for approaching literature from the opposite perspective:

We have begun with the word "simile" as if it were the important aspect of the situation . . . the result is not increased appreciation but facility in . . . literary stunt[s] . . . Books are not written to illustrate literary techniques but to bring intimate revelation of human experience. (1964, 107-108)

In an *English Journal* article (November 1984), G. Robert Carlsen describes the similarities he heard in Smith and Rosenblatt's voices:

[Smith] looked at literature as a transaction taking place between the work and the reader so that the reader was every bit as important as the work. Louise Rosenblatt had just written the first edition of *Literature as Explanation* [sic] echoing the philosophy that Dora V. was presenting in a more concrete form. (Sherrill and Ley, 161)

In a 1930 essay titled "The Presentation of Poetry in the Classroom," Smith warned teachers that they need to expose students to the "qualities of greatness" in a poem without demoting the child's personal, *emotional* response to it. Furthermore, the child's own interpretation, based in her experiential background, is paramount. "In the end the teacher wishes to leave the poem with the total impression uppermost" (173).

*If there is a lesson in the history of English education it may be that fresh voices proclaim "original" theories on a regular basis.*

## CONCLUSION

Rosenblatt, Dewey, Smith were all monumental educators whose voices have mingled to inform today's "innovative" practices. If there is a lesson in the history of English education it may be that fresh voices proclaim "original" theories on a regular basis. All they really do, however, is echo tenets of the same fundamental philosophies Smith and her contemporaries struggled with in the early part of the 20th century. There is the same tension now as there was in 1935. Whole language, free reading, individualized instruction—whatever the nomenclature, the question remains the same: how can we best inspire students to embrace literature and become lifelong readers? Dora V.'s own words seem to answer this question quite well:

The fact remains, however, that the reading interests with which pupils come to school are our opportunity but that the reading interests with which they leave school are our responsibility. Only when we give to the psychology of childhood and adolescence its rightful place in the determination of the program in reading, can we hope to influence permanently the interests and tastes of boys and girls. (Smith 1964, 102)

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## EJ FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

### Humor and the Humanities

"If we have our wits, we want our kids to laugh. They have enough problems without being saddled with humorless English teachers. English is one of the humanities which implies being humane, and that is in part to cry, in part to laugh. I have no faith in either 'yuk-a-minute' teachers or teachers who can't laugh. We need teachers with a sense of humor and a sense of the ironic, the kind of person Rafael Sabatini described in opening his best book, *Scaramouche*, 'He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad.' We need more people like that. We may not deserve them, but Lordy, how we do need them. So do kids."

Ken Donelson. 1981. "A Gift of Laughter and a Sense the World Is Mad" (Editors' Page). *EJ* 70.6 (Oct.): 15.

## YOUNG ADULT CONFERENCE

The Tenth Annual Young Adult Conference, sponsored by the Department of Library Science of Sam Houston State University, will be held on Saturday, **November 2, 1996**. Keynote speakers for the conference include YA authors Robert Cormier, Chris Lynch, Virginia Euwer Wolff, and featured presenter Ted Hippel. Workshop sessions will deal with various topics such as storytelling, book talking, and programming. For more information, please contact: **Teri S. Lesesne** at (409) 294-1151; fax (409) 294-1153; e-mail [tsl@tenet.edu](mailto:tsl@tenet.edu)