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Author(s): RUDINE SIMS BISHOP

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# PROFILE: SHIRLEY BRICE HEATH

RUDINE SIMS BISHOP



This month's "Profile" features a cultural anthropologist, a linguist, a social historian, a student of American literature, and a teacher—all embodied in one individual, Shirley Brice Heath. To readers of *Language Arts*, Heath is best known for her study of how children in two working class communities in the Piedmont Carolinas learned to use language at home and at school. This work is described in her 1983 book *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, the 1984 winner of NCTE's David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English.

Although Heath is not a published writer of children's books, she has in common with the two authors profiled in *LA* this academic year, Walter Dean Myers and George Ella Lyon, in addition to a tripartite name, a clear recollection and recognition of the power of literacy and the importance of stories and books in her early life. Like the other two, Heath had at least one family member who told stories—in her case the grandmother with whom she spent much of her childhood. And as happened with the other two, the

discovery of the magic of books—for Heath, some time around fifth grade—"opened up a whole new world." But while Lyon and Myers found a home in the world of books and were drawn in to the extent that they became writers of fiction, drama, and poetry, Heath, a self-described rebel with a consuming curiosity, took a different path. Neither Myers nor Heath grew up in a book-filled home. For Myers, the books he discovered were a sanctuary. But Heath, who never remembers seeing either of her parents read, imagined that books and learning were a "sort of privilege and a secret kind of detective work that would lead you into all sorts of places you really had no business going. That was why there wasn't much of it there in my life, and when it was there, you made the most of it. That has been the pattern of my life."

Following her curiosity and doing this literary detective work meant that Heath ended up attending five different undergraduate schools and exploring eight different majors. (Even so, she was graduated from Lynchburg College magna cum laude with specializations in English and Spanish). Among her fascinations was anthropology, and one of the schools she attended as an undergraduate was the University of California at Santa Barbara, where she went to study with a famous anthropologist whose work she had read about. While in California, she supported herself in school by teaching Spanish-speaking students. At the time, around the early 1960s, California students who did not speak English as their native language were labeled "special education students," and the state permitted people with as little as two years of college to teach them for twenty dollars a day. It was then, Heath believes, that she "got hooked onto the life path I have chosen, which is to spend most of my time working with kids in non-mainstream communities, thinking about and researching how people learn language and how they link their language with

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the different cultural backgrounds that they are born into or enter into as they go through life.”

Although she mentions her experiences with Spanish-speaking students as likely being responsible for her interests, Heath herself grew up in non-mainstream communities. In describing why it was relatively easy to gain entry into the Piedmont communities she studied, she writes,

I had grown up in a rural Piedmont area. . . . I am white, but while I was growing up, my family's nearest neighbors were black families; the black church was across the road from my house, and the three black school teachers in our area lived just down the road. In our area, both white and black children lived too far from the nearest school to walk, so we took buses to our respective schools, but in the afternoons and the summers, we joined each other for ball games, bike-riding, and trips to the creek to look for "crawfish." In the summers, we all worked for local tobacco farmers, black and white. (Heath, 1983, p. 5)

Whatever the incentive, her life path eventually led Heath to the Midwest for a master's degree in linguistics and English as a Second Language at Ball State, to Columbia University

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for a doctorate in cultural anthropology, and to her current position as Professor of English and Linguistics at Stanford University.

In the late 1960s the path also led back to the Piedmont Carolinas, close to where she had grown up. Heath was teaching part time in a state university where many of her students were teachers, business people, and mill personnel working in recently desegregated schools and work places. Aside from the townspeople, two other communities existed in the area: Roadville, a white working-class community whose members had for generations worked in the local textile mill, and Trackton, a black working-class community whose members also worked in the mills but whose older generations had grown up

farming. The social changes of the times had thrown together these three groups in the schools and in the mill, and Heath's students expressed concerns about what they identified as "communication problems." In the schools and the mill people were working, often in newly defined ways, with others whose "ways with words" were clearly different from their own and presented new challenges. Teachers, parents, and mill personnel—both black and white—wanted to know more about "how others communicated: why students and teachers often could not understand each other, why questions were sometimes not answered, and why habitual ways of talking and listening did not always seem to work" (Heath, 1983, p. 2).

Heath and her students set out to answer one central question: "For each of these groups, what were the effects of the preschool home and community environment on the learning of those language structures and uses which were needed in classrooms and job settings?" (Heath, 1983, p. 4). Initially, Heath led the students in her classes, the townspeople, to use some of the basic tools of ethnography to examine and record, as accurately and objectively as possible, their own ways of using and valuing language with their children. She recognized, however, that they also needed to compare their patterns of language use with those of communities similar to the ones from which the new students and mill workers came. And so, Heath states, "between 1969 and 1978 I lived, worked and played with the children and their families and friends in Roadville and Trackton" (Heath, 1983, p. 5). *Ways with Words* describes what she learned in that near-decade of anthropological study.

The selection of *Ways with Words* for the Russell Award was one recognition of the importance of Heath's work for those concerned with literacy and literature in our multicultural society. It reminds us of the complexity of language learning and of the importance of understanding the social context of language development and use. Heath's work is also valued because it demonstrates the benefits of interdisciplinary perspectives on educational problems and fits with the current emphasis on naturalistic research as an appropriate research paradigm in education.

Although many naturalistic studies using interviews, observation, field notes, case studies, and other such techniques are labeled ethnographies,

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few classroom studies are true ethnographies in the sense of *Ways with Words*. In such a study an ethnographer becomes a long-term resident and participant in a group and attempts to describe “the ways of living of a social group, a group in which there is in-group recognition of the individuals living and working together as a social unit” (Heath, 1982, p. 34). It is a long and difficult task and requires, in addition to major time commitments, a willingness to give up preconceived notions of how classrooms ought to run. This last aspect is especially difficult because it is in the very nature of the profession for educators to have some sense of how classrooms should run. One of the things educators can profitably borrow from ethnography, however, is a perspective on learners and learning.

During her time in the Piedmont communities, Heath was able to help the teachers in her classes see ethnography as an approach to learning and to incorporate some of what they learned about ethnography as a learning tool into the ways they operated their classrooms. Teachers began recognizing and building on the strengths the learners brought to their classroom and on the resources available in the students’ communities. The second part of *Ways with Words* describes teachers creating innovative learning opportunities and adjusting their classrooms and teaching strategies, both to take advantage of the resources the students bring and to expand the students’ knowledge, skills, and learning strategies. It also describes the students taking on the role of ethnographers and learning to recognize their own means of inquiry as valid.

Even though her work made an important difference in the communities and schools of the Piedmont, Carolinas, it is important to note that Heath emphatically states that she does not do ethnographies in the classroom, nor does she set about to solve problems. Rather, her concern is to understand how things work. In working with teachers and classrooms, what she contributes is her knowledge and expertise as an anthropologist and linguist.

One of the factors that adds to Heath’s effectiveness with classroom teachers is that she is no stranger to the daily tensions (and the daily joys) of elementary and secondary teaching; Heath herself has been a classroom teacher. She has six years experience at both elementary and secondary levels—having taught English, Spanish,

English as a Second Language, and primary-level reading. It was in part her teaching experience, beginning even before she had been certified, that lead to her strong determination not to go into classrooms with the idea of trying to solve problems. She remembers hating the experience of being “bound to go to inservice programs under education professors who had never been in the classroom and would be terrified in a third-grade classroom that had ten different language groups and five groups that were only recently in the country. They didn’t know about being in classrooms, and I swore at some level that I would never put myself in that position if I moved up through the academic ranks to have that possibility. I have always tried to go into a situation in schools only when I was asked to come in by people at what I considered the root levels. That’s how I connected with teachers in *Ways with Words*—through people who were in my classes, who were learning to trust me, and who invited me into their classrooms as teacher assistant or aide. That’s the way I work with kids in districts now.”

As a respected anthropologist and linguist, Heath’s advice is often sought by university faculty interested in links between education and ethnography and in learning about language and

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culture. In November of 1989, she spent about a week at The Ohio State University, visiting schools and talking with faculty and students in several university departments. (All otherwise unattributed quotations in this piece are culled from transcripts of conversations and presentations recorded during that visit.) Her interests, led by her consuming curiosity, are wide-ranging, and her answers to questions posed to her are

sometimes a bit unconventional or even surprising. When asked, for example, what advice she would give to graduate students just starting out in research, one recommendation had to do with selecting research questions: "Find questions in which you're interested and pursue those questions no matter what. The key to those questions that would make the most difference would be that you have a real curiosity. . . . I've always had enough rebellion that I would say to students, 'If you can't get something that you're really curious about through your committee,

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then pick up and go somewhere else.' Obviously, that's not very practical advice, but the issue seemed for me the wasted time and brain power on questions that you really don't have a passionate curiosity about. I think it's safe to say in everything I've done, I have had a passionate, naive in some cases, and often, in fact, consuming curiosity."

The importance of curiosity was a frequent theme in Heath's remarks to students and faculty. For her, however, curiosity is a generative force, "not an empty can." She speaks of the "importance of having lots of worms in the can—that is, lots of theories. A lot of people look at children learning to talk and say 'How wonderful; what marvelous powers of imitation.' That's their can, and they have one worm in it. They have made a comment, and that's it. But then the child says *foots*, and you either close your eyes and don't think of it as an aberrant case, or you have more worms in the can, and you say, 'Wait a minute. I don't think that kid ever heard anybody say *foots*. Something is going on here. How did that come to be?' There's the willingness to take

in the outlying, the aberrant, and to have to change the theory or to bring theories together."

Heath's own curiosity about language and culture is a can full of interconnecting worms. Joking, she confesses that it is to the detriment of anthropologists that they do not know the limits of where they need to stop in pursuit of some possible explanatory information. She currently has an interest in the new research on the human brain, for example, and the kind of information neuroscience, with its sophisticated technology, can provide about learning. She has studied and written about language policy in the U.S. and Mexico. She has also created curriculum materials for use in research projects and classrooms.

When asked what theoretical perspectives might be useful for educators interested in ethnography, she replies that today's ethnographers must be aware of literary theory or interpretation theory. Further, she asserts that "work on interpretation theory is absolutely essential to improving our understanding of how reading, writing, and oral language interpretive strategies work. If we're into reading and writing, and we haven't begun to dig our heels into reader response theory, then in a few years we're going to realize what we missed. In a few years, I think that will be very much a part of the background preparation for people in reading."

Heath's interest in literary theory is not surprising, since she teaches courses in American literature in the English department at Stanford. For almost a decade, she has also taught American literature during summers at the Breadloaf School of English in Middlebury, Vermont. "That's not an area of my life that many people know anything about because the publishing that I do in that area never touches the worlds of anthropology and linguistics."

When one adds to Heath's list of professional roles and interests her roles as wife and mother, it is not surprising that she advises students to recognize that a real scholar does not have seams in her life. "If you're a real scholar, you don't have times when you work and times when you play. Your curiosity is there all the time. There aren't seams in my life; there never have been. That doesn't mean you're working all the time. You have to learn to ignore the pop psychology about Type A's or the need for having space, or recreation, or whatever. If you read biographies of scholars, you'll see they have no seams in their

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lives. It all blends and merges together in a series of questions and answers, searches and occasional finds."

Perhaps it is this seamlessness that has enabled Heath to accomplish all that she has. The popular media would likely refer to her as a "Superwoman," one of those who manages to "have it all"—career, family, international respect. They would no doubt point out her attractiveness—she is tall and slender with a shock of prematurely white hair framing a youthful, pretty face. They would surely highlight the fact that she was a 1984 recipient of one of the highly publicized MacArthur Foundation "genius awards." She would demur at such descriptions, but she will admit to being a creative person, in the sense of someone who puts things together in unex-

pected ways. Recent research suggests that one essential ingredient in the lives of such people has been the reading of literature or a strong immersion into the world of music and art. The worlds of art and music were not open to Heath at an early age, but she did discover the world of literature, and it has made all the difference.

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## AN INVITATION TO MEMBERSHIP

The Assembly on Science and Humanities of NCTE (ASH) was founded to collect and share ideas and information among teachers who are interested in interdisciplinary, holistic learning through language. The Assembly publishes a quarterly newsletter that reviews ideas in science/humanities learning, sponsors workshops at the conferences of NCTE and the National Association for Science and Technology, and is developing plans for a clearinghouse and resource center on interdisciplinary teaching units. Membership in the Assembly is \$10 per year, and teachers K–college are welcome to join. Send dues to:

Judith Gilbert, ASH Treasurer  
Interdisciplinary Resource Consultant  
Colorado Department of Education  
201 East Colfax Avenue  
Denver, Colorado 80203

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