

Regie Routman CONVERSATIONS



**Strategies
for Teaching,
Learning,
and Evaluating**

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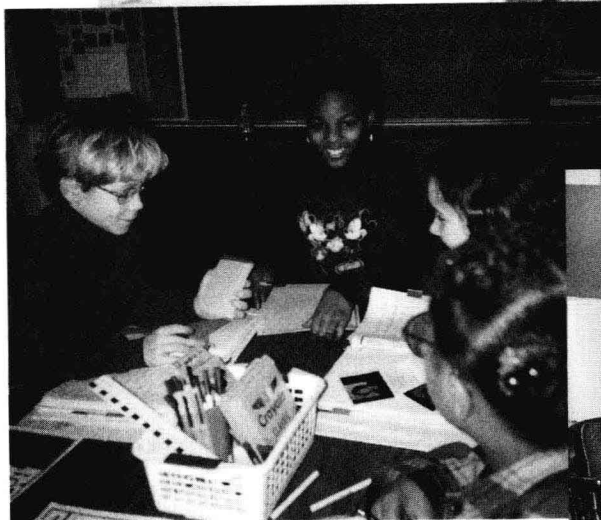
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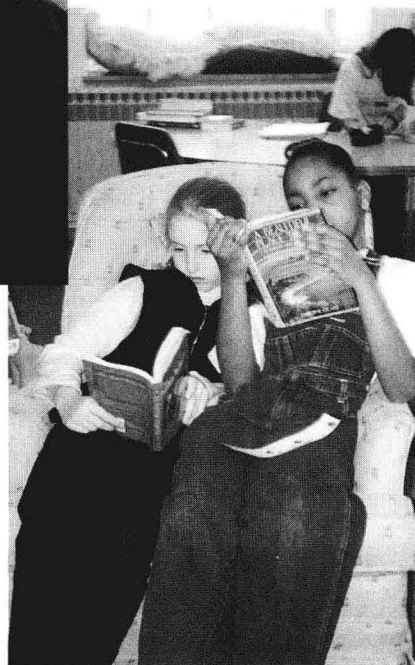
CONVERSATIONS

*"... all learning
involves
conversation.
That conversation
may be
with ourselves,
between ourselves
and an author's
words on the page,
with a colleague,
with a mentor,
with an apprentice,
with a student."*





*"Always, conversations play a major role in
my thinking, learning, teaching, and changing."*



For Frank

A Note on the Use of Pronouns

To maintain a personal and objective tone, the use of he/she and him/her has been alternated and balanced throughout this book.

A Note About References

To keep the text unencumbered, complete references and bibliographic information are listed alphabetically by author at the end of the white pages, in the “Works Cited” section.

A Note About Professional Resources

Annotated professional resources are organized in The Blue Pages to align with chapters in *Conversations*. See The Blue Pages section in the Contents for the specific delineation and location.

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Regie Routman, July 1999

The question came out of the blue at the end of a two-hour workshop at the Colorado Council of the International Reading Association in February 1992: “Are you going to write a follow-up to *Invitations*?” The woman might as well have asked, *Will you be climbing Mount Everest?*

Only a year had gone by since I had completed *Invitations*. I was still exhausted and believed that I would never write another education book. It was too hard, too time-consuming, and I had said everything I wanted to. Now I wanted to balance my life. I remember my response. “No. Absolutely not. There are other things I want to do. For example, I want to stay married.” The audience laughed, but I meant it.

I had written *Invitations* while I was working full time. It had taken two years. I wrote in every spare moment—evenings, weekends, vacations. I wasn’t prepared to make such a sacrifice again. Yet the question from the Colorado teacher stayed with me. A follow-up book? No. Never. Well, maybe. Perhaps. I started thinking about it in bits and pieces. A third book—*Conversations*—would bring full circle the writing I had started with *Transitions* and *Invitations*, would complete the trilogy. It would examine and explain the multiple dimensions of language learning, teaching, and evaluating that we teachers must know and understand. And it would draw from the rich professional conversations that we educators need to guide, nurture, and sustain us.

Then, in the fall of 1995, just as I was about to begin writing this book, the political climate sent me on a detour. The “reading wars” were going strong, and politics was dictating educational policy. I wrote *Literacy at the Crossroads: Crucial Talk About Reading, Writing, and Other Teaching Dilemmas* to clarify all the issues, not just the grievous public misunderstanding that pitched whole language against phonics. My goal was to examine the research and reality around reading and writing practices, the process of change, and what we teachers must do to counteract the continuing media blitz decrying the inadequacy of our schools and our teaching methods.

Since that time, I have been increasingly concerned that we are stepping backward, that we are embracing “scientific” research based on a deficit, medical model, that teachers’ voices are absent from curricular decisions on local, state, and national levels, that we are running scared. Pressured by the demand—and the desire—for high test scores, we have looked for simple solutions to complex literacy issues. Instead of functioning as informed and influential professionals, we have been cowed by what we read in the media, by special-interest groups with narrow agendas, by our collective lack of self-confidence as a profession. As in the past, we have become overfocused on methodology, relying on programs and packages instead of our knowledgeable professional judgment. Only by becoming teachers who know and can articulate what we do and how and why we do it and who stand up for what we know and hold dear can we make our schools viable for our most precious natural resources, our students.

I write with the hope that our continuing dialogue will move our practices, principles, and participation in professional life forward. The writing life and the teaching life are similar. The demands, the immersion, the total commitment necessary to do a good job, the ongoing thoughts about ways to do “it” better, do not end at the close of the workday. Pondering over teaching—and writing—is all consuming. Much of my composing takes

the form of conversations with myself. Should I say it this way or that way? What should I leave out? How much detail is necessary? Is this clear? How should I organize? Where should I begin? Should I try this another way?

While writing this book, and thinking about the title, it struck me that all learning involves conversation. The ongoing dialogue, internal and external, that occurs as we read, write, listen, view, compose, observe, refine, interpret, and analyze is how we learn. That conversation may be with ourselves, between ourselves and an author's words on the page, with a colleague, with a mentor, with an apprentice, with a student. We need many opportunities to explore, expand, and develop our thinking and teaching:

- Ongoing interior dialogue
- Conversations with authors on the page (or screen)
- Discussions with colleagues
- Interactions with our students in the various roles we take with them: mentor, guide, facilitator, collaborator, listener, encourager
- Conversations with community members (parents and other stakeholders)

These conversations also need to occur in many contexts: discussions about strategies, reading with a partner, spelling, journal writing, literature, research, collaborative reading and writing—in short, all aspects of teaching, learning, and evaluating.

Conversations need to be relevant, inviting, purposeful, respectful, and thought provoking. As Arthur Applebee states in his exceptionally thoughtful *Curriculum as Conversation* (1996):

Rather than beginning with an exhaustive inventory of the structure of the subject matter, we begin with a consideration of the conversations that matter. . . . The question then becomes, how can we orchestrate these conversations so that students can enter into them? (52)

I would add that we teachers need to initiate and participate in the conversations that must take place for “best practice” to flourish and for our students to thrive.

Much of what I know, I know because I have questioned and thought about ideas with others, tried things out, modified stances, talked with colleagues. Always, conversations play a major role in my thinking, learning, teaching, and changing. So it is with all learners. I would argue that when no conversations are going on, as in whole-class “skill and drill,” it's not learning that's taking place but rather rote memorization.

Conversations denote engaged listening, a keen interest in others' ideas and opinions. For example, one day I happened to be talking by phone with my friend Diane Levin, language arts consultant at the California Department of Education. She asked me what I was working on and thinking about. Sharing my current thinking on integrated learning and hearing her reaction helped me solidify my ideas. Speaking my thoughts aloud and responding to her queries and comments helped me clarify and confirm the direction I was heading.

WHY WE NEED CONTINUING, OPEN DIALOGUE

One of my worries continues to be that there are too few conversations in too few places—no active listening or compromising, no exchanges, no discussion of curriculum, no taking seriously the feedback from teachers. Yet the connections, interactions, reflec-

tions, and new thinking that evolve from rich conversations are the means for defining what we know. I trust, as I believe we all must, that dialogue and debate, accompanied by flexibility and openness, will lead to new insights and substantive learning, not just for our students but for us as teachers, too.

Jargon and labels, in particular, seem to bring conversation to a halt; they divide people and box them in. Confusion and devastation often result. Labels such as *whole language*, *phonics*, and *direct instruction* shut down conversation. Those terms and others like them became so emotionally charged in the nineties that give-and-take became impossible. Are you whole language or phonics? It's yes-no, either-or. Under what conditions and in what circumstances does not arise.

Because labels don't describe, the label's meaning is different for each person based on past experiences, personal ideologies, and specific contexts. Just about every educational term offends someone or other. Parents become flustered and disconcerted and have no idea what we're talking about. Labels such as *emergent*, *invented spelling*, *standards*, and even *literacy* are charged terms that carry different, often unclear, meanings for parents, teachers, politicians, and community members. For example, no matter how much time I spent explaining *whole language*, I found most people didn't understand the term: "Isn't that where they don't teach them how to spell, they can spell however they want, and it's not corrected?" So I stopped using the label publicly and went right to explaining clearly what I do as a teacher. It was a painful lesson that took a long time to learn.

Take a recent school conference initiated by two very upset parents of two different first graders. A narrative section on the first-grade report card described their respective children as "emerging readers." Since their kindergarten teacher had used the same term on their final report card the year before, these parents assumed their children had made no growth in reading. Two hours later, after the principal and I had tried to explain the term as well as our philosophy of teaching, they were still confused. That confusion would have been avoided if the children's reading behaviors had been clearly described, without a label.

Or take my nine-month experience writing a short article for *Parents* magazine on teaching meaning-based reading and writing in first grade ("Ready to Read," 1997). The executive editor with whom I worked was smart, articulate, well informed, and open minded. Yet she had no idea what I was talking about in my early drafts. She kept telling me, "Regie, I've heard the language, but I don't understand what actually takes place when you teach reading. Show us exactly what happens, what it looks like." She had gotten bogged down in the labels I'd used: *centers*, *choice*, *reading groups*, *shared reading*. These terms have no meaning for people outside education. Until we not only explain the meaning of the terms we use but also describe how they relate to the teaching and learning we do in the classroom, we will continue to confuse and incite parents and the general public. (Interestingly enough, even though my position was holistic, the published article generated few letters of protest. Because the teaching detailed in the article was rigorous and explicit, it made sense.)

Now another set of labels is causing consternation: *balance*, *the basics*, *explicit instruction*, *phonemic awareness*, *guided reading*, to name a few. Once again, we must explain and demonstrate what the term or practice looks like, how it functions in the classroom, what our purposes for teaching and learning are. All of this I attempt to do in the chapters that follow.

CHANGE AND REFORM

One cannot be a professional teacher without being part of reform and change—in the classroom, the school, and the district, as well as at state and national levels. Though we might wish it to be otherwise, there is no endpoint in teaching at which we finally have the knowledge and the tools to do the job perfectly. What works today gets reexamined tomorrow. We encounter new research or make new observations. We rethink our approach. We have a conversation with colleagues that makes us question something we've been doing. We suddenly see a student's work in a new light. Learning is always fluid, never static.

I am always distressed when I overhear a teacher ask a colleague, "Why are you going to hear so-and-so (a well-known author or some other literacy notable) again? You heard him speak a few years ago." The questioner has failed to realize that learning is not just about getting new information; it's about starting new conversations with yourself and others and reflecting on how that information fits with what you believe. Just as rereading a text is never the same, because you bring different expectations and experiences to it, so hearing a speaker again becomes a new learning experience, because both you and the speaker have changed.

I always feel successful when a participant in my workshop says, "Today reconfirmed what I know. I feel validated for what I believe and do." Or, "I get it now." Or, as one middle school teacher at a recent workshop commented, "This workshop has made me think about how to focus on teaching the strategies students need to apply on their own in other situations. Sometimes I float from activity to activity, and it is so clear now." Confirmation, reconsideration, questioning what you already know and do, and making new connections are what learning is all about.

Some Realities About Change

Change is much more difficult than most of us ever imagine. We're idealistic at first, believing that our colleagues will "come along" if given enough time and opportunity. We learn that some teachers choose not to move forward, prefer to stick with the "tried and true." And it's not just teachers. Parents resist. So do students. Eventually we find out that significant change and conflict go hand in hand and that all voices—students, parents, teachers, and administrators—need to be heard and respected throughout the process if meaningful change is to occur.

There is no shortcut to schoolwide reform. Each of us, individually and collectively, must go through the process. Someone else's checklist, developmental continuum, evaluation forms, or curriculum framework can spur our thinking and get our own conversations going. But another's reform documents and process can only guide us, not direct us. What happens in the process of creating our own curriculum, framework, standards, is far more important than any document. It is the conversations around curriculum that push us to change, not the documents themselves. I am reminded of the insightful comment by a teacher who was part of our district's multiyear process of creating a K–12 language arts framework: "Curriculum is not a document; it's a dialogue." Successful reform depends on competent, knowledgeable, courageous teachers.