

## **LANGUAGE AND EXPERIENCE**

***We can all be good.  
We just have to be shown how to be better.***

Through language and experience we learn how to become better; we become educated and learn about the world around us.

In the past, Indians were educated in the art of survival. The classroom was the physical world around them. What they were shown, they could use.

***How to get food...  
How to prepare food...  
How to make clothing...a home...  
How to talk to people...  
How to live.***

Indians had deep interpersonal relationships from which to draw and learn. Families and clan members showed one another how to be good. They gave each other love, security, fellowship and understanding. Through talk – language – Indians told each other of things to make life better. They told stories to help each other become *real people*.

For example, around the fire under a black sky of stars, a grandmother in Warm Springs might have told some children the story of *Coyote and the Stars*. In the story, Coyote heard the stars were dancing girls, so he went up to the sky to join them in their dance. But Coyote grew tired and fell back to earth. When he hit the ground, his blood made the dirt red.

The grandmother might have told this story when the children wondered what the stars are or why the dirt is red. But she also told the children that Coyote tried to go where he didn't belong and wasn't wanted, which is why he fell back to earth. In this way, the children were taught that everyone and everything has its place, and they learned the importance of being with people who cared about them — family, clan members, friends — and the importance of those close, caring relationships.

In fantasy to look at reality, then in reality looking at fantasy, Indians taught their children through stories what they needed in their lives to become *real people*

The real world — the physical world — was expressed through dances, songs and talk. Hand movements created the setting and action of the stories. Birds and animals were imitated in dances and songs. Always, there was active physical imitation and full participation by both young and old alike, playing the many roles of life.

Although some of this style of learning has now been lost, many of its basic principles are found in the language experience approach to reading and language development. Our rationale for a heavy emphasis on language experience activities is based upon assumptions about the importance of physical activity and experience in the development of understanding and meaning.

We assume that verbal learning of vocabulary, concepts, etc., is more generalizable and more efficiently retrievable when it is based on behavior in a wide variety of circumstances; when the responses are physical representations, substitutions, extensions, etc., of physical events. We assume language development and expansion will take place when it is based on life.

We must, therefore, tap the children's imaginations and let them express their thoughts physically as well as verbally. We must touch upon as many of their senses as we possibly can. We must give them the opportunity to experiment with words and ideas, for playing with words and ideas develops language flexibility and comprehension.

The language experience approach builds upon the interrelationship between and among reading and the related language arts of listening, speaking and writing. It is important that a student learning to read realizes the relationship between spoken and written language.

This realization will come as the children read and talk about their own experiences. For example, in one classroom where the students were making their own books using their own words, a little girl described a horse, saying, "He slobbers when he eats." The teacher wrote the word "slobbers" on the board. Then, this same child in discovery said, "Is that how you spell slobbers? I didn't know it, but it kind of looks like ladder."

Because the stories in the *The Indian Reading Series* were written to appeal to the interests and values held by many Indian children, language and experience coincide. The materials are written in the children's own language about their own world.

“Hey, Teacher, I’ve been where this picture is. That’s the Garryowen Store.” Those are the words of one child when she saw the picture in *My Name Is Pop*. In other classrooms where the teacher and students have discussed the book *Indian Festival* (which is about the Shoshone-Bannock powwow at Fort Hall, Idaho), the children have said:

“We have the Browning Indian Days.”  
“We have the Oil Celebration.”  
“We have Pi-Ume-Sha Days.”  
“We have the Tinowit Days.”  
“We have the Crow Fair.”

Yes, the children are just being where they are, not talking about some place they have never been. They know the sounds, sights, smells, tastes and feel of the celebrations they have been to.

***What about the way I talk?  
What about what I have seen and heard?  
What about my experiences and my talk?  
I didn’t know someone could read what I  
say when it’s written.  
I didn’t know I could read what I say when  
it’s written***

Language and experience is not just in parts, but in the whole, and requires full participation in language production while engaged in listening, speaking and writing activities.

Be in the children’s language. Be in their experience. Listen to them speaking and for awhile write it down for them. Help them back into themselves. Help them depend on themselves.

There is much theoretical and research evidence that the language experience approach to reading really works.

It is difficult, however, to make people aware that they, too, have imaginations and that their language and experience are important and relative to the world around them. Often, people feel that in order to possess wisdom and knowledge, one shouldn’t use simple language.

Yet, a wise old man, who knew how people are, once said:

***You see me.  
My talk is one.  
Real things, I say.***