In remembering our history, we come to appreciate that educational ideas have social consequences. What we do can easily come undone, so best not lose sight of the reasons and forces behind our teaching decisions. As we resist those who would "teacher proof" our profession, revisiting the work of Nancy Martin (1909–2003) and James Britton (1908–1994) acknowledges one important line of influence that helped determine how we understand teaching and learning in language arts today. Together, in both an immediate and personal sense, their conversations with teachers across three continents made a difference. They brought vision and energy to a growing professional community of English teachers committed to child-centered approaches to literacy development and their central role in learning, wherever situated in the curriculum.

Drawing on the work of linguists, psychologists, and literary critics, Nancy and Jimmy elaborated a comprehensive theory of language use that allowed teachers and researchers to describe how literacy facilitated learning in the schools. Often, of course, the picture of classroom life was found wanting as far as the development of language abilities was concerned. Yet once this barrenness was acknowledged, Nancy and Jimmy’s theory proved generative by inspiring new practices for engaging the natural curiosity of the young. At the same time, they encouraged educators to view the curriculum as a co-construction negotiated between teacher and student.

Building on their theory of language use, Nancy and Jimmy helped pioneer the writing across the curriculum movement. Students, they felt, must be intimately involved in the language work of learning; teachers could not do it for them. In other words, learning was more about language production than about language reception. Pat formulas or exercises, what Nancy and Jimmy termed “dummy runs,” would not do, unless schools believed in silencing students with “transmission” straightjackets. Nancy and Jimmy’s concern was not whether children are properly following adult prescriptions, but how they are using talk and writing for their own purposes.

Primarily focusing on the language behaviors of the learner, Nancy and Jimmy sought to extend democratic practices, and so their legacy is reflected in how well teachers collaborate together. Nancy and Jimmy were always more interested in what teachers might tell them than in what they stood ready to tell teachers. The educational dialogue was paramount, and through it, these wise educators imbued professional development with high standards of inquiry and critical judgment. Their way of being with teachers made teachers feel acknowledged, and this led teachers to experience a new burst of creative possibilities. In the educational world advocated by Nancy and Jimmy, life was rich with potential because everyone was invited.

**A THEORY OF LANGUAGE USE**

The long and productive professional collaboration between Nancy Martin and James Britton began when they first taught together at an English secondary school in 1934. By 1954, the two had become affiliated with the Institute of Education at the University of London. There they remained as teacher educators and researchers until they retired in the late 1970s, only to begin new commitments across a range of English-speaking countries, particularly the United States, as visiting professors and educational consultants.

With their background as English teachers, Nancy and Jimmy naturally focused on the linguistic features of various texts that appear in the classroom, from literature, with its emphasis on aesthetic exploration, to informational texts, which codify and disseminate knowledge. Yet if published texts were the sole object of interest, the story would quickly end. The crucial element that Nancy and Jimmy added to the equation was a fascination with the closely observed child. What were students doing with language, both spoken and written? How were they using language to make sense of the world? How were they communicating facts and desires in the precarious journey of establishing social bonds with significant others? From the beginning, the pleasures of the word meant listening to the sounds a text uttered and, as
listeners, Nancy and Jimmy paid attention to utterances across the vast spectrum of human communication. But just how might these utterances be categorized to bring order and coherence to the educational task faced by the language arts teacher? Some system was needed to mark out the primary uses of language by adults, while not excluding the untutored ways with words evidenced in children’s talk and writing. A language function continuum first appeared as a concept in an essay by Jimmy in 1963, but it was more fully developed in *Language and Learning* (1970). He used recordings of his two daughters to investigate how children tactically employ words to orient and expand their representations of two different worlds, the physical outer world we endlessly stumble upon and the inner world of experience as it relates to self and others.

Jimmy’s close observations demonstrate how talking to oneself and others creates an ongoing set of natural experiments conducted on the immediate environment in order to keep improving one’s predictive capacity. Recognizing that learning is about building mental theories that will help explain the way things work, especially the motives of those around us, Jimmy was one of the first educators in language arts to discover the work of George Kelly (1955), the American psychologist who elaborated a personality theory based on an individual’s need to construe past experience into constructs that allow for the anticipation of events. Such an understanding of language as the medium of education has too often been ignored—when learners actively produce the language of learning, teachers lose their coveted performance time. This also inserts an element of risk into the classroom because student exploration can be messy, unpredictable, and even put error on display.

Casting a web of language over experience is a primary act of cognitive control that learners can only fashion for themselves, but some form of communion always exists in these language acts. Learners need to be nurtured and validated—adults have a responsibility to be in attendance through their powers of listening. As Jimmy suggests, “If we listen hard enough, there may be hints of the child’s view of the world in many an unexpected twist given to an utterance” (1978, p. 36). This contrasts with what is often the path of least resistance taken by teachers and adults—imposing meanings from outside the child’s perspective rather than attempting to ascertain the child’s inner outlook.

In playing with the possibilities of language forms and functions, Jimmy devised the important notion that initially the child’s desire is for a tuning connection. Thus the language generated and played with is very much about simultaneously “commenting” on the object/action, pressing on one’s attention, and conveying one’s feelings about that object/action. As such, the world of things and motion, of people and interactions, invites a kind of “miming” on the part of the infant, which in turn leads to “routines or formats” that become recognizable, emerging “as distinct from the meaningless flux of other, unfamiliar events” (1993, p. 1). Most important, these ongoing acts of discovery and exploration exist in a sea of language, an urge to speechify, reaching outward to the guiding talk of the caregiver that surrounds human encounter.
From an adult perspective, control of the language functions of society involves differentiating two significant types—stance and form. Not wanting to devise a system based on quality judgments of performance, Jimmy first distinguished between the roles individuals find themselves in when acting on and making sense of the world. Creating a continuum between participant and spectator allowed him to emphasize how we use words instrumentally to get things done. In the participant role, we relay messages, word-process reports, offer directions, and carry out an endless number of language acts in order to solve problems and keep activities moving to their completion. At the other end of the continuum, contemplation rules: in the spectator role, we reflect on the meaning and significance of the activities in which we, and others, have participated. From this stance, we use our words to generate and revise our values, and, characteristically, what we create is an evolving narrative of our lives spun out of the themes that define our identities.

In order to classify the language forms that are generated when the participant and spectator roles are in play, Jimmy offered a parallel continuum. On the transactional end, the message predominates. In producing and receiving transactional texts, our concern is with seeing through the language to what it is telling us. As Jimmy suggests, we are attempting to match the meanings and referents of transactional texts with our pre-existing knowledge in a piecemeal fashion. In contrast, the poetic text that defines the opposite end of the continuum calls attention to the art characteristics of its forms. Making and interpreting such texts is never utilitarian; rather, as with music, we immediately apprehend overarching patterns and repetitions, beauty and pleasure. The world created in poetic texts is seen as a whole, or, to use Jimmy’s phrase, it is globally contextualized.

The spectator role we assume in creating poetic texts, of whatever quality, signifies our human need to extract meaning, to make sense of our varied existence, even as we seek confirmation from multiple audiences, beginning with ourselves. Together, the function and form continua capture how language manifests itself in individual and social contexts, but, as Figure 1 indicates, a center is needed. Thus originated what is really Jimmy and Nancy’s key theoretical proposal, their rich descriptions of the centrality of expressive language in connecting the language creator with the language act, especially in the developing competence of children and adolescents.

Nancy and Jimmy linked the expressive function to “the language of ordinary, informal face-to-face talk” (Britton 1993, p. 28). When writing is the mode of investigation and communication, expressive writing “reflects the ebb and flow of a writer’s thoughts and feelings and takes for granted that the writers themselves are of interest to the reader, so expressions of attitude are an integral part of this kind of writing. It is often relatively unstructured and assumes a reader willing to take the unexpressed on trust” (Martin 1983, pp. 157–58). In school, expressive talk and writing provide a student’s unconscious processes with time to contemplate meanings and to work out assignments that cannot be self-contained in short class periods. Instead, as the student connects to the inquiry at hand, the whole task gradually informs and shapes the parts. What this category system particularly emphasizes is “that expressive, informal face-to-face speech may hover uncertainly between participant and spectator roles—gaining from aspects of both” (Britton 1993, p. 28).

To illustrate the expressive function, Nancy and Jimmy frequently mentioned a chemistry lab report written by a girl in secondary school. After detailing the procedures she and her partner carried out to make oxygen, the girl ended with a triumphant exclamation: “And glad of it!” Such outbursts also marked the shared talk of the two girls throughout the experiment, for such feelings find first expression in speech. Scientists no doubt experience similar emotions, but it wouldn’t occur to them to include them in their official write-ups, yet it is this very connection between the self and the material being explored that permeates learning with the learner’s intentions. Being encouraged to express feelings at the moment of discovery serves as a bridge into the formal language used in the grown-up world.

In championing the expressive as the life force behind transactional and poetic writing, Nancy and Jimmy in particular concentrated on extending our understanding of the spectator role stance. Keen listeners, they focused
on the young learner employing the tools of sense making, whether in the zone of narrative and the imagination or the world of the concrete and the abstract, including everyday encounters with people and material reality. For them, the value of the poetic text grew out of its ability to capture the quality of living. The view of literature that Jimmy and Nancy encouraged was non-elitist at its core. Much as Louise Rosenblatt (1995) argued for response-centered, not text-centered, criteria for determining what is read in schools, the description of language use developed by Jimmy and elaborated by Nancy honored the process of reading literature, and this meant no works were excluded from a student’s possible repertoire. Indeed, as Nancy wrote, “We are still entangled in a view of literature as something ‘out there’ that other people write. This puts the focus on a ‘trained elite’ who aim to distinguish even among contemporary writers those who will ‘last’; i.e., literature is seen as something that has been” (1983, p. 43).

Literature is a process that provokes thought and clarifies experience in ways that enhance students’ lives. Work in language arts celebrates the essential place of literature in human affairs, though this work is everywhere under attack. As Jimmy noted, “. . . while everybody supports the importance of learning in its accepted sense—learning about the world, a participant role activity—there is no similar emphasis upon the kind of learning associated with reading and writing in the role of spectator . . . our present intense concern for what is known by those who go through our educational systems needs to be balanced by a similar concern for the degree and manner of their caring. And it is that concern that lies behind all I have said about activity in the spectator role” (1984, p. 329).

APPLYING THE THEORY IN CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS

The language function continua served as the theoretical lens for a seminal study of school writing in Great Britain carried out in the early 1970s by the language research team spearheaded by Jimmy and Nancy at the University of London’s Institute of Education. Published in 1975, The Development of Writing Abilities 11–18 reported a rather dismal picture regarding the kinds of writing being asked of secondary school students. Little expressive or poetic writing was detected in the survey that included over 2000 scripts; the majority of cataloged pieces involved writing that was low-level transactional—outlining factual information rather than speculating or theorizing about concepts and ideas. Yet in compiling their audit, the research team added an important consideration to our understanding the dynamics of the communication environment within which school writing operates.

Jimmy and Nancy, along with Harold Rosen (Britton, Martin, & Rosen, 1966) had begun speculating about “the way the writer’s expectations, both of the task and of the reader, affected how he wrote—and also how the different tasks . . . demanded very different language operations” (Martin, D’Arcy, Newton, & Parker, 1976, p. 10). Thus, in conducting the 1975 survey, the research team began to pay close attention to exactly what audience function was revealed in the student writing. This range of audiences included:

- Child, or adolescent, to self.
- Child, or adolescent, to trusted adult (teacher or others).
- Student to teacher—senior partner in a dialogue.
- Student to teacher—who shares a special interest with the student.
- Student to teacher—as Examiner.
- Student to other students or peer groups (known or unknown).
- Writers to their readers—public audiences. (Martin, 1983, p. 58)

It quickly became clear that much of this school-based writing was composed with a single teacher in mind and that all too often, the teacher was acting as examiner. Much less was seen of writing for a general audience, or writing for one’s self as a way of figuring out something, or writing as part of an ongoing conversation with a peer or teacher acting as a trusted figure. In short, while Nancy and Jimmy’s language continua emphasized the expressive mode, such writing was not evident in the schools. Thus, not surprising, the wider range of audience possibilities also was seldom exploited. Provoked by these revelations about low student writing attainment, a major initiative to change the approach to writing in the schools took shape. Nancy and Jimmy did not, of course, lead this revolution single-handedly, but as a team they were instrumental in bringing more of a different kind of writing into the curriculum. Nancy and Jimmy encouraged numerous teachers to see that writing was not just
about writing instruction but functioned as a foundational learning tool, like talking, to stimulate and direct the pathways of cognition and feeling.

Building on the finding that "school writing generally gives few opportunities for students to reflect about their own learning, to think about thinking, and to begin to know themselves" (Martin 1983, p. 141), Nancy and Jimmy recognized that impersonal transactional school writing remains difficult for both adults and children. Without being able to "draw on everyday language or personal experience which are the chief means of access to thinking" (Martin, 1983, p. 127), school writing can actually inhibit learning. So why not turn more aggressively to real world texts? As Nancy suggests, "Outside school thousands of models in informational writing crowd at us from printed instructions, guide books, technical magazine articles, advertisements, etc., where the criterion is concerned with the ability to cram the most information into the least space, and where there is no feedback from the audience. So teachers who could search out powerful informational writing to be available as indirect models for the children who read them would be breaking new ground" (Martin, 1983, p. 128).

In a similar vein, the realm of literature was seen by Nancy as improperly harnessed when it only serves up information for an examination, and so she cautioned educators not to "underestimate the somewhat mysterious power of story writing, which provides a drive which just is not there in transactional writing, a drive which gives greater length and fluency to slow learners and which carries them over some of the language barriers. . . . If story writing could be recognized as a mode which synthesizes experiences, preoccupations and emotions rather than as fanciful fictions, it could become as important in the development of writers as expressive writing is becoming" (Martin, 1983, p. 166). But perhaps the biggest danger lurking in language arts instruction was the unmediated reliance on skills. Nancy describes an East London secondary school "where the English teachers decided to make a concerted effort to teach the use of the apostrophe to show possession. Only this. It wasn't difficult, they thought, and it should be possible to teach this to everyone in the fourth year if all the teachers concentrated on it. They did not succeed.

All the writing came in peppered with apostrophes. Some were right, but most were wrong. After that, they declared a moratorium. No one was to use apostrophes until enough time had gone by to forget the instructions" (Martin, 1983, p. 155).

By allowing the parts to be taught in isolation and writing to be conducted as practice for some unspecified future use rather than in the context of an immediate purpose, teachers were perverting the natural purposes behind this unique tool of civilization. Thus Nancy concluded in no uncertain terms: "I want to suggest that we need a moratorium on the very notion of skill as the basis of language development in the mother tongue. True though this notion is—as an aspect of language—and useful though it is in a broad sense, I think the connotations of the term skills have come to dominate teaching in a way that is detrimental to learning" (Martin, 1983, p. 155).

With these views firmly grounded in the careful observation of language work in the schools, the London group next sought to document exactly how talk and writing supported learning in all subject areas when teachers are open to providing room for the entire spectrum of language use (Martin, Williams, Wilding, Hemmings, & Medway, 1976; Martin, D’Arcy et al., 1976). As this team’s leader, Nancy went on to become a major advocate of the writing across the curriculum movement, which brought the message to teachers in all disciplines that language was integral to both learning and communication. This effort encouraged all teachers to be responsible for their students’ language development, not only in their own subjects, but also in coordination with other teachers in the school (Martin, 1984).
The language education project that Jimmy and Nancy carried forward from the seminal Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching of English held at Dartmouth College during the summer of 1966 promoted personal and democratic uses of literacy (Dixon, 1967). By questioning the social order, they sought to empower those who traditionally have been underserved in Western societies. If there is to be fair and equitable access to the fruits of our economic culture, then each student must be able to exercise the cognitive powers made possible by actively deploying language, both talk and writing. What Jimmy and Nancy tirelessly cultivated in England, and eventually around the globe, involved listening intensely to all students and then providing rich materials and a wide range of engaging performance opportunities.

Thanks to their efforts, for almost 30 years we witnessed an expansion of enlightened approaches to language arts instruction, including an emphasis on process and whole language classrooms—but now this trend is meeting fierce resistance. Battered by a resurgence of skill-centered instruction enforced by high-stakes testing, the creative language arts teacher is increasingly missing from the education equation. The drive for accountability correctly notes our continual failure to educate poor children, particularly those trapped in urban areas, and how this failure manifests itself in a growing achievement gap. The solution, unfortunately, once again reinforces the fact that what we know about best practice is frequently sacrificed to political and ideological ends. The rhetoric, of course, falls on the side of angels; what better goal than that represented in the slogan, “No Child Left Behind.” The political will and resources, however, are mostly otherwise consumed. Rather than spreading good teachers and best practice to underserved areas already identified, the current effort at “reform” often translates into an attack on public education and teachers across the board. And the attack intensifies despite the many schools that continue to over-supply colleges and universities with qualified students. In such a climate, the best way of honoring the memory of Nancy and Jimmy is to continue the struggle for democracy and the kinds of engaged literacy that make it possible.

References


Author Biography

Gordon M. Pradl is professor of English Education at New York University and authored Literature for Democracy: Reading as a Social Act. He worked closely with Nancy and Jimmy and is the editor of Prospect and Retrospect: Selected Essays of James Britton.