

The Long Road to Literacy: Students Decode Ancient Writings¹

Vera Datsik

*I keep six honest serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and
When And How and Where and Who.*

R. Kipling

From 2000 through 2004, our school was one of Saint Petersburg's experimental sites for the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking program (RWCT). When our teachers began to implement this new educational approach, I, as the school librarian, joined right in.

Now, I regularly apply these strategies when working with library users, and even share my experiences with colleagues. As a rule, I get very positive responses, but once, after a demonstration lesson for the city librarians, a fellow teacher commented:

It is easy to conduct this kind of lesson. The teacher has nothing whatsoever to do; the students do everything. They set the tasks for themselves and carry them out on their own.

I explained to this colleague that she had been deluded by the seeming simplicity; what she observed was only the tip of the iceberg. The invisible part—all the preparation I had done—had taken me two months. This work included

- finding the texts for the lesson;
- verifying the reliability of the selected information;
- adapting the selected materials;
- devising playful activities for exploring the materials (Having fun is essential when working with students);
- preparing the necessary equipment and materials for the class.

Education is, first and foremost, self-education. Therefore one of the major goals of any educator, whether teacher, librarian, or parent, is to prepare students for life and work in the "information society" by teaching them how to retrieve knowledge independently, and how to find their way through the mass of available information. For the past three years I have used RWCT strategies for this purpose during our library circle sessions.

A *library circle* offers a combination of exposure to the theoretical study of literature and immersion in the world of books. Our program is designed for grades five through seven. We meet for two hours twice a week: the first hour is devoted to group work, and the second to working individually.

The library circle brings together students who are keen on books. They learn how to:

- find their way in the world of information (print and electronic);
- work with various of print resources;

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- select and adapt information on a topic;
- logically organize the collected material and present it effectively (this helps them develop their public speaking skills);
- use library tools and facilities (alphabetic and subject catalogues, card files);
- use library reference sources (encyclopedias, directories, dictionaries, etc.);
- use the footnotes, references, and appendices in a book.

In this article, I present a sample library circle session based on the RWCT approach and devoted to the theme *The Long Road to Literacy*.

The goal of the lesson was to acquaint students with the development of literacy and with different kinds of writing: from primitive symbolic objects to modern text messaging (mobile-to-mobile SMS). I didn't want the lesson to be just another boring lecture; I intended it to be a joint quest for knowledge that would provide opportunities for the students to apply their intelligence to practical problem-solving tasks, work together, and prove something to each other. I was aiming for more than simply presenting new knowledge in an engaging, unusual form. Keeping in mind Lurye's (2004) perceptive statement that "the subtlest matter of education is not methods. It is human relationships" (p. 4), I want my students to develop an ability to listen to the opinions of others and not to be afraid to assert their own.

I started this lesson with quite a difficult riddle: *The soil is white, the seeds are black, five are plowing, two are watching, one is in charge*. The students offered a number of answers: a state; a city; workers in the field... I then took a clean sheet of paper out of an envelope and said, "This is the white soil." Step by step, with the help of my prompts—gestures, miming, and the writing on the envelope—the students solved the riddle: *paper, letters, fingers, eyes, and brain*. They realized that this riddle describes the writing process.

Next I divided the class into seven mini-groups (three to four people in each). I had prepared seven "messages," each using a different kind of writing. Prior to the class, the messages had been placed on the desks and covered with a cloth.

Before continuing with my description, I want to acknowledge that a number of highly creative people—friends and colleagues, students and their parents—contributed their talents to the making of these unusual messages.

For the first "message," I singed an ordinary wooden ruler above a gas flame so it would resemble a piece of burnt wood. Then I found a stick on the ground outside my house and my husband, a jack-of-all trades, cut many notches into it with a kitchen knife. A colleague from school contributed a goose feather. Her husband, a navy officer, suggested using a dried fish. So the first message consisted of a stick with numerous notches, with a feather, a piece of burnt wood, and a fish attached to it.

Next my husband cut notches on a wide wooden plank (a scrap of a door left over from a renovation project) and split it lengthwise. This was the second message: two wooden planks with matching notches.

The third message was a white cord with thinner multi-colored strings (green, yellow, black, red) of different lengths attached to it. The head of the school's macramé circle supported the project by investigating quipu (knot writing) at my request so that she could tie the complicated knots I needed.

The fourth message was a stone with images of an upside-down deer, a pole-axe, two half moons, and several small lines to the right and left of the deer. This message was prepared by a seventh-grade art student, who based it on a description in *How Humans Learned to Write* (Zvonitsky, 1994). This stone message is now a treasured exhibit in the reading room of our library. (The stone itself has historical significance. It was brought from the shore of the Gulf of Finland, just outside Saint Petersburg, by the parents of one of our senior students. Saint Petersburg is built on marshland, and stones delivered from other parts of Russia have been used to shore it up since it was founded by Peter the Great in 1703.)

The fifth message consisted of tablets covered with plasticene, with rectangles and triangles resembling ancient Sumerian cuneiform writing pressed into the surface. One of our elementary school teachers gave me the idea of "engraving" them in ordinary plasticene.

For the sixth message, the talented seventh-grader mentioned above copied a relief depicting an Upper Egyptian Pharaoh from a textbook on Ancient History (Vigasin, Trukhina, Samozvantseva, 1997, p. 43).

The seventh message was made by our art teacher. It was a sheet of a paper with two letters, with a zigzag line (the so-called *titlo*) above them, and the word МАИЎ below.

A former student gathered descriptions of various kinds of writing from the Internet. The mother of one of the students, a chemist by profession and our "resident poet," wrote some verses about the different forms that writing has taken (incorporating key words I suggested). We also found appropriate verses and illustrations in a book by Zvonitsky (1994).

Not surprisingly, the decoding of these messages turned out to be a fascinating activity. Each of the seven groups had to guess what type of writing was represented in their message and, on a large sheet of colored paper, write down what they thought it might say. I allotted five minutes for this activity, and then each group presented their speculations orally. The "translations" were displayed on the blackboard and walls.

The students truly appreciated the messages they were given to interpret. Their initial bewilderment soon gave way to expressions of fascination and delight. During the discussion, I could see their imaginations take flight.

The participants in the first group began by counting the number of notches on their stick. There were forty. Some students thought the message meant that if a person walked for forty days in the direction indicated by the branch, he would reach a lake with lots of game and fish. Others interpreted the message as a call for help sent by people who had been wandering in the woods for forty days. They survived only because predators were not hungry in summer. Sometimes they managed to bring a bird down with a stone, or catch a fish and cook it over the fire. But more often they had to eat tree bark.

Having considered a range of possibilities and clarified for themselves where fish could be caught in the woods, the first group presented the results of their discussion as follows:

It has been forty days since we lost our way. We have had only two decent meals during this time. One was a fish we caught in a forest lake, and the other a bird cooked on the fire. Save us!

The second group received what was literally a “weighty” message—a sevenkilo stone. First they tried to set it upright. Apparently the stone could be balanced only on one side, which put the deer engraved on it an upside down position. Their interpretation of the message was as follows:

This is a stone from a cave where people lived long ago. For seven years a deer lived nearby. Once in winter, when food was scarce, a hunter killed the deer with an axe and fed the whole tribe of nine people.

The third group worked with the message made of multi-colored strings. They offered the following “reading”:

This is the flag of an ancient country. The green color represents the bounty of nature, the yellow means the kind and gentle sun, the black stands for fertile soil, and the red indicates the fighting spirit of the people defending their lands. The knots and length of strings represent the amount of available riches.

The fourth group received the two identical planks with four notches on each. Here is their version of the message:

Workers ask for help in reconstructing a road that has been broken in half.

After studying their plasticene tablets, the fifth group came to the following conclusion:

This is a message from an ancient people. The yellow tablet describes their life before a war, when their lands were rich and everything flourished there; the brown tablet depicts their lands after a devastating war. They need help.

The sixth group, recalling their world history lessons, immediately recognized that their message came from ancient Egypt:

A convicted criminal is being punished in the presence of a pharaoh and his men. The souls of the dead, who could not endure such terrible punishment, are shown below.

Skillfully and confidently, the seventh group came to a unanimous opinion:

The message we received is a page from the historical record. It is written here that on May 27 the city of Saint Petersburg was founded, by decree of Peter the Great.

For the next stage of work, no less interesting, the students were asked to think of questions they needed to answer before they could understand what was actually written in their messages. I reminded them of the Kipling poem that serves as an epigraph to this article. The students came up with many questions: *What was written here? When, Where, and How was the message written? Is this kind of writing still used today?* Then, using their questions as a guide, students looked for answers in the texts I had prepared and distributed.

I had spent so much time and effort compiling those texts because I knew that the success of our library lesson would largely depend on my preparatory work. I had to keep in mind that the selected texts should be short (our time was very limited), comprehensible, and highly informative so that, using only those texts, students would be able not only to interpret the “messages” correctly but also to answer all their own questions about them.

I suggested that they write down the answers they found on a new sheet of colored paper. They would eventually compile the information into a brief report about the kind of writing they had analyzed. The time allotted for this task was 15 minutes. Because of the condensed time frame, I suggested that participants enhance their presentations with appropriate graphics and poems from Zvonitsky’s book, *How Humans Learned to Write*, or with the poems that had been written especially for our session by L. Novikova, the mother of one of our students.

You should have seen the students’ delight! They put so much passion and enthusiasm into decoding their messages! Without any intervention on my part, they efficiently distributed the roles of author, editor, scribe, designer, and presenter among themselves.

What was the actual meaning of the “messages”?

Probably, dear readers, you are as eager to find this out as my students were.

The first, a symbolic object message, was sent from the Lutzu (or *Lutze*, a small indigenous people in Tibet) to the Chinese as a declaration of war. It was a notched stick with a feather, a piece of burnt wood, and a fish attached. The notches meant that many soldiers would take part in the war; the feather indicated a quick attack; the burnt piece of wood promised that the Lutzu would destroy everything in their path; and the fish signified that their enemies would be drowned.

Having answered the questions they had set for themselves, the members of the first group presented the correct interpretation of the message and finished their presentation with a poem written by L. Novikova:

A branch across your way

means take to your heels and flee,

A branch along your way –

you will win and dance with glee.

We inherited dozens of methods

from those primitive ancient letters:

Friends are to be welcomed

with symbols of friendship

which in Russia are bread and salt.

And Native Americans

smoke a pipe

meaning peace, no grudge, no fault.

The second message, a *pictogram*, was actually a tombstone. The image signified that a tribe leader called Deer had participated in seven campaigns and nine battles, and was killed with a pole-axe during a campaign that lasted two moons. Here the inverted deer tells us the leader's name, and the lines to the right and left tell the number of campaigns and battles.

The third, knotted message is also called *quipu*. Each color in quipu symbolized a certain concept. For ancient Incas, white symbolized potatoes, yellow stood for gold, green for grain, and red for soldiers. Using the information from the handouts, the students were able to calculate not only the Incas' riches, but also the number of tribesmen who died, since black symbolized misfortune or death. In the course of their research, these students made another discovery. Knotted messages may also have been used by the Slavic peoples. This notion is supported by the Russian proverb "tie a knot to remember."

The fourth type of message was a message stick, a plank with notches representing unpaid debts. The number of notches indicated the amount of the debt. After the notches had been carved into the plank it was split lengthwise so that each of the two halves had the same number of notches. The message stick served as a receipt for financial obligations. One half was kept by the creditor, the other by the debtor. As the debt was paid off, the notches on each half were cut off. The participants learned that the indigenous peoples of Australia and New Zealand used message sticks with various notches and signs to designate a variety of concepts. A messenger usually pointed to the signs and "read" the message to the addressee. Similar message sticks were also once used in Scandinavia, to call up warriors to fight in a war.

As I mentioned earlier, each group could choose images and verses to make the presentation more engaging. Here is a poetic image of stick messages:

*When they had to send a message
to a friend or to a neighbor,
Ancient peoples carved some notches
'cross a common stick of wood.
And this simple notched message,
read by those living near-by
Would encourage, warn or threaten,
and be quickly understood.
(L. Novikova)*

The students were intrigued to discover that the Slavs called their stick messages *memory boards*, or *nos*, from the verb *noseet* meaning "to carry," because people carried them around and used them to take down information, the way we now use a notepad. The word *nos*

resembles the word *nose*, in Russian as well as in English. This explains the Russian saying “Cut it on your nose” (“Don’t dare forget this!”), which has nothing to do with the noses we have on our faces, but means “make a notch on your memory board”. While the clay was still damp, signs were pressed into it with a sharp stick. In Mesopotamia, archeologists have found many geometrically shaped counting tokens made of clay and stone—spheres, cylinders, disks, and cones. A cylinder might represent a sheep, and a cone stood for a jug of oil. At some point in history these tokens were replaced by clay tablets with images of these figures. By counting the number of cones and cylinders on the tablet, the fifth group found out how much olive oil and how many sheep were owned by some ancient Sumerian.

The sixth, *hieroglyphic* message related events of 5000 years ago, when the Pharaoh Narmer ruled in Egypt. He won many battles and wanted his victories to be preserved forever in stone. Skilful artisans worked day and night on the reliefs. Their carvings depicted the pharaoh himself, the enemies he had killed, and the captives he had seized, and even specified the number of captives: 6000. But the most important thing was to let future generations know the name of the pharaoh, and this was achieved through hieroglyphics. Each glyph designates a word or part of a word. For Narmer the artists inscribed a fish and a chisel, as the word *nar* meant catfish, and *mer* meant chisel.

In the seventh, *alphabetic* message, letters were used to represent numbers, in the manner of the ancient Slavs. A number would have dots on both sides to distinguish it from a word, and above it there would be a special sign, the *titlo*. The students not only figured out the date in their message, May 24, but also learned why this day is now celebrated in the Slavic world as the Day of Slavic Literacy and Culture.

What happened after the presentations?

When all the groups had taped their reports to the blackboard and walls, next to their initial guesses, everyone realized that we had the makings of a book, with seven chapters, each devoted to a different kind of writing. All that was missing was the cover.

I confess that I had already asked our art teacher to prepare a book cover. Her design showed a long twisting road, symbolizing the development of writing over many millennia. In the background was the monument to Cyril and Methodius, the founders of Slavic writing, which stands in the center of Moscow. The title of the book was the theme of our lesson, “The Long Road to Literacy.” The road on the book cover had a beginning but no end—writing continues to develop,

as the students realized when they considered modern text messaging (where Latin and Cyrillic alphabets are used along with pictograms). In the sidebar are cinquains written by my students at the end of the session, which, significantly, they sent to my mobile phone as SMS-messages.

I have described this library lesson in such detail here in an effort to demonstrate the efficiency and effectiveness of the interactive teaching approaches used. Despite the amount of time and effort required for preparation, it proved a more than worthwhile investment as these methods made it possible for me to discover a researcher and a self-educator in every one of my students.

I began this story with a comment from a colleague. I'll end with another. After this library lesson, a group of Saint Petersburg librarians who were visiting our school also wrote a cinquain:

Library lesson
unusual, dynamic
solved, argued, presented
students studied the history of literacy
delight!

References

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