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Michael Simpson
Head of Lower School

Literacy at Greenhill: A Balanced Approach

Early in his tenure at Greenhill School, circa 2007–2008, Head of Lower School Michael Simpson met Bernard Fulton, visionary founder of the exceptional School we know today. The single most memorable point of Mr. Simpson's meeting was a quote from Mr. Fulton: "Lower School is all about reading. They've got to learn how to read," he said.

Now, analyzing his words in context, Mr. Fulton was referring to the fundamental skills taught in Lower School that carry students through the rest of their lives. Greenhill's definition of reading is actually much deeper than many of our associations with the subject. Literacy, in the holistic definition that we use at Greenhill, is defined within the four domains of reading, writing, speaking and listening – and we believe that the best way to teach this multi-faceted subject is within contextual relationships and interwoven disciplines.

"Balanced literacy interweaves elements of phonetic knowledge and whole language development, and sets them on a continuum," says Mr. Simpson. "In a phonics-based emphasis, students work with decoding symbols into sounds, attacking word structure, deciphering spelling and developing a strong phonetic awareness. In a whole language approach, students focus on a larger sphere of meaning, absorbing context, analyzing stories and arriving at a deeper conceptual understanding. Balanced literacy combines these two approaches and integrates these skills into everything we do."

New last spring, our Lower School institutionalized a new assessment program, developed by literacy experts Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. This program defines balanced literacy standards across subject matter and grade level to fully assess a Greenhill student's literacy development and analyze each child's ability with customized attention and individualized methodology.



Why are we talking about literacy right now?

As one of the leading PK-12 preparatory schools in the nation, we are continuously examining how to position ourselves at the forefront of innovation and expectation in the classroom. Vertical alignment of subject instruction weaves through the curriculum of each grade level, and requires standards and benchmarks to achieve common threads. "It was time to look at our literacy program," says Mr. Simpson. "We are continuously evaluating our math trajectory after adopting the Everyday Mathematics core curriculum established by the University of Chicago. We have also recently looked at science instruction across all divisions and have made adjustments to align with Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). We are now doing the equivalent with literacy."

The Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) is a kit that every kindergarten through fourth grade teacher will use. The kit provides each child with a portfolio that travels with him/her from grade to grade, level to level. In a one-on-one assessment with a teacher, a student reads a standardized fiction or non-fiction text, and the teacher follows with a running record. The student answers questions, talks about themes, analyzes components and writes. Meanwhile, the teacher is measuring fluency, accuracy and depth of comprehension.

A key factor of the new system is empowering teachers to identify and assess the needs of each student on a more intricate and individualized level. "Even though it's a system, there's no one-size-fits-all. You really have to know the child," explains Mr. Simpson. "And our teachers are trained to identify precisely and accurately where a student falls on instructional level, independent reading level, where they excel, and where they need work. This assessment system goes much deeper than a simple multiple choice structure. It tells us much more, and provides a continuum for constant development."

Lower School teachers began this school year prepared for the new system, having participated in a series of summer literacy training workshops with specialists Alexa Obregon and Erin Ruegge. Also new this year is the position of Lower School Literacy and Learning Support Specialist, Lindsay Stenberg, who is working with teachers and students across disciplines and divisions to provide support and consultation.



Excerpt from Greenhill's Philosophy of Literacy Instruction:

Students thrive when immersed in a literacy-rich classroom. Literacy is defined as the shared domains of reading, writing, speaking and listening. These domains are intertwined within instruction and should not be taught in isolation, but in relationship with each other. Learners are most successful when they can apply the skills and content of literacy and become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Students actively participate in their own learning by partnering with the teacher in taking responsibility for their progress and working toward goals.

How does the new literacy assessment system work?

Third grade teacher Karen Dzialowski reflects on using the BAS for the first time in the spring of 2014. "One of the biggest strengths in adopting a program like this is the vertical consistency it will provide throughout early childhood and Lower School. While we already have many teachers using quality assessments with their students, we have not had enough consistency within or between grades, so this is a definite improvement."

Mrs. Dzialowski describes the new assessments as very thorough. "Teachers can glean important information about each student's reading skills and areas for continued growth. Assessments are done one-on-one with a teacher and can take 20-30 minutes per child, so carving out time for each student remains our biggest challenge, but after going through it, and participating in summer training, all teachers will be more efficient and knowledgeable in the fall when we do these assessments again."



Lindsay Stenberg, the new Lower School Literacy and Learning Support Specialist, is looking forward to working with the integrated concepts of balanced literacy, providing support and guidance for the new system, and weaving them into the fabric of Lower School curriculum and culture.

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Michael Simpson
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The new program will also focus heavily on guided reading and writing. According to Mrs. Dzialowski, teachers will be working with groups of readers on the specific strategies they need to strengthen their skills. Teachers will use formal and informal assessments to determine areas of focus in an effort to close skill gaps and target areas of need. “There will be more teacher modeling and shared writing before students are asked to compose their own pieces. In the area of literacy, this is called scaffolding; teachers provide a model and guided practice before gradually releasing responsibility to the students. In simplified terms, this is the ‘I do, we do, you do’ model of instruction.”

To illustrate “I do, we do, you do,” Mrs. Dzialowski uses a classroom example of teaching students to incorporate punctuation into their reading with Mo Willems’ *We Are in a Book!* “After modeling how to read texts with these features in mind, we might begin with small guided reading groups. Based on our formal and informal assessments, I would already know who reads fluently with expression and who does not. I might pull a group of students over who need work in this area and give them each a copy of another Mo Willems book. As we go through the text together, I would reinforce the concepts taught in the whole group read-aloud. As each child begins to read the book silently, I go to each student and ask them to read aloud to see if they are applying the skills I have taught and offer re-teaching as necessary. A bit later, I might give this small group an opportunity to do a reader’s theatre performance for the rest of the class (or a class in a lower grade) based on this book. This would give them the chance to apply their newly learned skills in front of an authentic audience.”



In one early literacy example, Greg Browne-Nichols’ pre-kindergarten students are working on an activity called “sound boxes,” practicing sound-recognition of Consonant/Vowel/Consonant (CVC) words. There are three empty boxes and the child is taught to discern the difference of each sound that makes up a word by putting a different color chip in each box. For the word pen (the child receives a picture of a pen), they might hear a p and put one color, e – another color, and n – a third color. They might then decode the sounds into the letters that spell the word.



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Karen Dzialowski
Third Grade Teacher

What is the trajectory for our earliest readers?

Teachers begin using the assessment system in kindergarten, but foundations for sound, letter and word recognition, as well as whole language development, start in pre-kindergarten. In the play-based early childhood program, “children are playing with language,” as Head of Early Childhood Kim Barnes expresses. “They are naturally curious, exploratory and experimental. They are playing with their abilities and making connections with sounds, words, meanings, their own speech, and their broader understanding of concepts.”

In accordance with physiological development, literacy instruction in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten is primarily oral, focusing on listening and speaking. “We tell stories, we relate details, we answer questions, and of course, we sing! Every day, we are creating the basis for expressive and receptive language, new vocabulary, and the opportunity to read, see, hear and digest environmental cues,” says Mrs. Barnes.

With oral language foundation, there is also ample opportunity to take pencil to paper to write, draw, create and reinforce those environmental cues. It is Ms. Barnes’ personal belief that children learn to read through their own writing because they are mapping out their own understanding. “The more they practice, the more they will make those important connections between words and meaning.”

While the BAS is new, Mrs. Barnes points out that it is very similar to the previously-used Pearson Education DRA2 system. “We’re not reinventing the wheel, but the methodology will change slightly. We like BAS because it gives us deeper detail, and it is highly individualized. There is a different beginning place for every student, and even a defined frustration level.” It will also slightly influence the kindergarten schedule. “The primary difference is that there will be a centered time every day to devote to reading and writing, and each of the four classes will adhere to that schedule.”

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Kim Barnes
Head of Early Childhood





“They’re learning how to be better readers by practices like circling words they don’t know, stopping to re-read certain sections, asking themselves what they just read, answering questions about the text, and looking for clues the author uses to reveal character or plot.”

Susan Palmer
Head of Middle School

How do literacy skills evolve in Middle School?

To ease the transition from Lower School to Middle School, fifth grade English teachers have also participated in literacy training. “I wanted to have a better understanding of Lower School literacy fundamentals, because they become our kids in fifth grade,” says **Natalie Nihill ’00**, fifth grade English teacher. “Fifth grade is an obvious continuation, since guided reading and leveled reading are still relevant.” Ms. Nihill looks forward to working with the BAS. “It will be so helpful for our reference point to know the levels of our students’ reading, writing, etc. We will know from day one where a student’s skill level is and can immediately start to grow that student from that point.”

“Students come to Middle School ready to take their skills to the next level,” says Head of Middle School Susan Palmer. One example of the transition means going from short stories, picture books and practice readers to novels and literature with more sophisticated (yet still age-appropriate) themes. In fifth grade students read, among other books, *Esperanza Rising*, which is the story of a Hispanic Catholic migrant family during the Great Depression. “They’re learning how to be better readers by practices like circling words they don’t know, stopping to re-read certain sections, asking themselves what they just read, answering questions about the text, and looking

for clues the author uses to reveal character or plot. They start to understand context – like what it means to be of Hispanic or Catholic origin, and what the Great Depression was like. They look for themes, author’s intent, and head to bigger ideas through their reading.” During fifth grade they also explore the concept of schema, or what students bring to their own reading through their unique perspective, and what they need to further develop that understanding.

In a holistic curricular design, these same fifth graders hone their writing skills through the study of books like *Esperanza Rising*. “Writing about what we read allows us to explore sentence structure, form, tone, voice, and, of course, grammar,” says Mrs. Palmer. “In our writing, we are looking for well-developed sentence structure, paragraph structure, proper mechanics and editing. Students learn to write with more polish.”

Beyond English classes, there is also substantial writing in history, science and even math classes. Mrs. Palmer explains that writing is the basis for all forms of student expression across all subjects. “Writing happens everywhere and takes on many forms. Students respond to prompts, use different tones and explore ways to express their knowledge and/or opinions.”

"Proper grammar is a necessity in writing," Mrs. Palmer asserts. "Students need to know the terms for proper usage and be able to identify order, structure and patterns in our language. English classes cover this in many formats, and we even partner with modern and classical languages to create synergies across language. We might be talking about direct objects or prepositions in English class, and we'll do the same in Spanish or Latin."

In the arc of Middle School, from fifth to eighth grade, we see students learning to read and write across a wider range of subjects and courses. We see texts evolve in complexity and themes become more sophisticated. We also see a wider variety of voices and tones, from fiction to non-fiction, male to female, old to young; across ethnicities, perspectives, subjects and courses.

How do these skills converge in Upper School?

When students reach Upper School, they are well versed in the four components of literacy. They understand that knowledge occurs through listening and reading, they can write well-developed essays, their vocabulary is established, and they can speak to fully represent their own goals and opinions.

A fascinating example of literacy convergence happened in Joel Garza's freshman English class last spring. As the final exam for English 9, Mr. Garza facilitated, with several volunteer students from different grades, 20-minute conversations about the material covered in class.

"About two weeks before the scheduled exam time, I assigned my freshmen this essay prompt: Does English 9 reinforce Greenhill's core principles, and should we care? They were restricted to a 300-word response, focusing on Satrapi's *Persepolis*, the last text in my English 9 class, and two other works of their choice. During the last week of class and exam week, the volunteer students and I would use those freshman essays as the springboard for conversations. We were all literally on the same page, but the freshmen would have had time to prepare a better piece of evidence, or to sharpen an interpretation. In turn, the outside-students and I would have determined where to challenge the student to probe deeper, where she/he could consider different texts, where she/he could revise or hone the argument."

For more information on balanced literacy and whole language research, visit:

www.haskins.yale.edu

www.heinemann.com/fountasandpinnell

www.fountasandpinnellleveledbooks.com

The freshmen prepared for the exam in a different way, working on evidence related to their own perception of the course. "Instead of trying to anticipate my test questions, students sought to make sense of the material on their own terms," described Mr. Garza. "Not surprisingly, during the last weeks of the course, many students paired up during their free periods to converse about the course, reminding each other of motifs, minor characters and important episodes; they even warned each other about possible 'holes' in their arguments."

Mr. Garza summarizes the exam: "Generally they were surprised at how much they had read over the year, and were surprised at how quickly the conversation went. The sophomores, juniors and seniors who participated were excited to be asked to help out, and were proud of how much of English 9 they remembered. Ultimately, the freshmen's culminating English experience truly became a Greenhill experience. The community interlocutors, the interactivity, and the terms of the conversation reinforced our mission, our principles and our special Greenhill essence.

This is what it means to be an Upper School student at Greenhill. This is the convergence of knowledge, the communal application of human expression, the true balance of literacy skills. This is the study of reading, writing, speaking and listening at its best.

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Literacy for Life

Almost everyone uses reading, writing, speaking and listening in their careers every day, but here are a few exceptional alumni who have honed and elevated literacy to the forefront of their careers.



John Eisenberg '75

John Eisenberg is an award-winning sports journalist and author of eight books of sports nonfiction.

How have the four fundamental skills of literacy – reading, writing, speaking and listening – shaped your education so far? Whenever students ask me about my craft, I tell them that it starts with reading. That's the fundamental building block of writing, as far as I'm concerned. You can't write unless you read and expose yourself to different stories, and different styles. Inevitably, what you read influences your own style as a writer, creeping onto the page. It's up to you to decide what to keep and what to discard. Gradually, you discover and develop your own writing voice.

How have they informed your career and/or developed within your career? Listening is an underrated skill that has been hugely important in my career. I'm a journalist, so the first commandment of my job is getting out in the world and asking questions. (The story never comes to you; you have to go to it.) In the beginning, I merely jotted down the answers to my questions in a notebook, but quickly learned that the answers were more useful if I taped my interviews and played them back later, listening carefully, for you learn things not

just from what people say, but how they say it, when they pause, which words they emphasize, etc. It's not an exaggeration to say you learn new things every time you listen to an interview, no matter how many times you hear it. When it's said of a good reporter that he or she has "a good ear," it means they pick up the small detail that others miss, the key inflection, the meaning of the long pause. It's a high compliment.

How do you think your Greenhill education helped to hone these specific skills? When I was younger, I read all the time, both for school and on my own. I started out reading both Dallas newspapers every day. Later on, Christine Eastus stretched my boundaries in her English classes, introducing me to Shakespeare and other classics and teaching me about structure. (To this day, I recall her brilliant deconstruction of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* as the perfect novel.) I read a lot of youth sports fiction and nonfiction along the way, and as I grew older, found myself a fan of "out there" (for that time) authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, whose experiments with style thrilled me and encouraged me to take chances. Meanwhile, many of my Greenhill classes incorporated writing in their curriculum, going all the way back to Middle School – poems, essays, history projects, fiction, you name it. The end result was I was familiar with a lot of writers and different styles, and unafraid of the blank page that stares back at you when you sit down to write. That's the perfect starting point for a writing career.

What do you think is the most important thing current students and recent alumni should come to understand about literacy in life beyond school? I'm unsettled if I don't have a book by my side, in my satchel, on my bedside table. What I love most about reading is that it takes you to places you would otherwise never go – not just as traveler, but as a visitor to the hearts and minds of their characters, both fictional and

otherwise. Quite simply, literacy is a gift that gives you the rest of the world and allows you to interact with it as you want. As important as it is to your education, it is even more important when you're done with school and building your adult life. It broadens your boundaries, enables you to make informed decisions, and quite simply, makes life more interesting.

As someone who is naturally reserved, I did little public speaking for the longest time, letting my written work do my talking for me. But I had to speak once I started going on the road to promote my books, and I learned I could connect with readers in a new and different way – by producing what amounted to an oral advertisement. There is a long, great tradition of authors "spinning a yarn," going back to Mark Twain and the folklorists. I wouldn't begin to compare myself with them, but I have discovered the value in learning to express yourself and your work in a compelling fashion. Some readers are visual learners who just want to see the written word, but there also are oral learners who want to hear you as well as read you.



Jill Rashdi '94

Jill Rashdi is Learning Strategy Manager at Interstate Batteries, with a background in library science and information studies.

How have the four fundamental skills of literacy – reading, writing, speaking and listening – shaped your education so far? After graduating from Greenhill, I went on

to get a bachelor's in English from The University of Texas at Austin, because I had developed such strong reading and writing skills. I did so with the sound advice from Dr. Stewart, who told me that no matter what you want to do in life, you will always be well-prepared if you have strong communication skills. My love of literature ultimately led me back to UT, where I earned a master's in information studies to prepare me for a career as a librarian.

How have they informed your career and/or developed within your career? After a few years at the New York Public Library, I returned to Dallas and began a new career as an Instructional Designer/eLearning developer. At Interstate Batteries, I have the privilege of building online training for internal team members, as well as independent business owners who are franchisees or distributors of our batteries. On a regular basis, I use literacy skills gained at Greenhill to listen to the needs of our learners, convey those ideas in clear and concise messages, and narrate the scripts. I also get to edit the work of others on my team, a skill that I definitely picked up from all the writing and grammar training I received at Greenhill. Currently, I'm working on building leadership training, so, I've shifted away from reading fiction to reading books on leadership. It is very fulfilling to be at a place in my life where I'm constantly growing and learning. The book that has inspired me most in my career is *Conscious Capitalism* by John Mackey and Raj Sisodia.

How do you think your Greenhill education helped to hone these specific skills? I attribute all of my literacy skills to my Greenhill education. From grammar lessons with Julian Smith to research papers with Becky Daniels. I think everyone in my class will remember Mr. Degener's paradox box and love seat. I will forever associate the word "epiphany" with *Dubliners* and "alacrity" with *Jane Austen*. Dr. Stewart had us reading Toni Morrison before even Oprah had heard of her.

What do you think is the most important thing current students and recent alumni should come to understand about literacy in life beyond school? Leaders are learners. No matter what path you choose, continue to learn and improve. To earn respect, you have to be able to communicate your ideas effectively. Even in email, a well-written message speaks volumes. When written text is your main avenue for communication, always use correct grammar and clear language. This will show that you are professional and have taken the time to get it right, because you care about the message and the person receiving it.



Emily Comisar '03
Emily Comisar is a playwright and producer, currently pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Management at Columbia University.

How have the four fundamental skills of literacy – reading, writing, speaking and listening – shaped your education so far? I majored in Performance Studies at Northwestern University – an academic area that requires not only close reading of various literary materials, but interpretive performances of those materials and analysis of the performances of others. The ability to engage with texts in a variety of ways was really the basis of my studies. After leaving Northwestern, I completed a M.A. in Italian at Middlebury College – I think it goes without saying how important literacy is to the study of foreign languages.

How have they informed your career and/or developed within your career? Literacy, especially when it comes to dramatic work, is at the

core of my business. On a broader level, however, the management of a large project – whether it is a work of theater or any other form of product development – requires the ability to read, write, speak and listen in a way that helps to bring together diverse personalities representing a variety of skills and backgrounds and guide them to work as a team. I found this to be just as true when I was working in non-profit management before returning to graduate school as I do now that my work is focused on literature and art.

How do you think your Greenhill education helped to hone these specific skills? One of the fundamental aspects of my Greenhill education was the one-on-one attention that I got from all of my teachers, which allowed me to talk through and understand how to improve. I credit Synthia Rogers and Barbara Graves for whipping my public speaking and writing skills into shape, but to this day I tell people about a project that Wells McMurray assigned to my Nature & Uses of Language class when I was a junior. For every letter of the alphabet, we had to use the *Oxford English Dictionary* to find a word that came directly from a different language: 26 words, 26 languages. At the time it felt like an incredibly tedious task, but I think the result (deeper engagement with language and understanding of its evolution), provided a greater context for my studies in college and graduate school.

What do you think is the most important thing current students and recent alumni should come to understand about literacy in life beyond school? The ability to use and understand language is one of the most important skills that you can possess as you try to navigate school and career because it is the basis for all of your interpersonal relationships. Being able to hold an intelligent conversation with a stranger is just as important as being able to give a speech or write a dissertation, because that stranger could be your next boss, your next collaborator, or your next roommate.