

On Being a Teacher

by DEBRA CROUCH

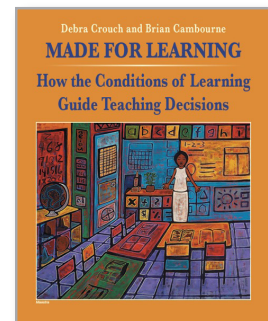
Teachers are in the business of learning.



LITERACY CHAMPION: DEBRA CROUCH

Debra Crouch works nationally as an independent literacy consultant, collaborating with districts and schools in designing professional learning opportunities to empower teachers, principals, and coaches as they envision instruction over time, across texts, and among practices.

As a classroom teacher, she initiated and led the development of balanced literacy practices in her own school district and has been involved in education for the past 32 years as a classroom teacher, coach, consultant, and author. She actively shares her thinking and practices through long-term professional learning opportunities with districts across the country serving children from diverse language and socioeconomic backgrounds. Debra is co-author with Brian Cambourne of [*Made for Learning: How the Conditions of Learning Guide Teaching Decisions*](#) (Richard C. Owen Publishers, 2020). At her website, teachingdecisions.com, educators can view her video series of Shared and Guided Reading, demonstrating lessons with students over time.



The Nature of Learning and Teaching

“*Teachers are in the business of learning.*” This is the first sentence in *Made for Learning: How Conditions of Learning Guide Teaching Decisions*, my book with co-author, Dr. Brian Cambourne. Yes, as a new teacher, I was like most teachers, thinking “teaching” was my business. While this may seem like semantic nitpicking, this belief prompted me to create a learning environment and narrative that put me at the center. And, while lots of kids learned lots of things from me, I have to confess—many didn’t. More than anything, the interactions with those who weren’t learning from me inspired a search for answers because surely someone must have a solution, right?

As I discovered, lots of solutions—professional books, workshops, programs, and other teaching resources—were out there in the educational marketplace. Most offered the same kind of thinking about teaching: “do this, don’t do that.” Many of these ideas were billed as child-centered and developmentally appropriate. All promised results because they had worked for some teacher with some kids, and assured me that, if I just replicated with my kids, I’d be just as successful. But, regardless of how I delivered the latest lesson or used the newest activity, the teaching narrative promised by these different solutions didn’t work out as promised. And then, I was back to where I began—not successful and not really knowing what to do. Because, you see, very few of these teaching solutions ever really explained *why* doing this or not doing that mattered or what to do when things went awry. This meant I couldn’t make the teaching decisions I needed to when I didn’t get the same results with my students.

Fortunately, before too many children *hadn’t* learned from me, I read about a theory which offered something radically different. Rather than starting with what to do, this book began with a discussion of what it means to learn, what learners needed me to do to be successful, and why each of these elements of learning made a difference. This teaching narrative was based on a theory called The Conditions of Learning.

The Conditions of Learning

This brilliant theory, by Dr. Brian Cambourne (yes, my current day co-author; more on that later), is elegantly complex yet uncomplicated. Cambourne posits eight Conditions that interact within a learning setting or environment, and what a teacher says and does affects each of them simultaneously. When a teacher teaches in ways that bring the Conditions to life, learners thrive. Here, at last, was my *why*. So what are these eight Conditions of Learning?

The central Condition is **Engagement**, which is defined by a set of four principles that describe an internal stance of the learner. The learner sees herself as an active learner, a “doer.” She understands the purpose of what she is learning and how and why it matters in her life. This creates caring classroom communities where children take on the roles of reader, writer, mathematician scientist, historian—in other words, living what is being learned in a supportive setting.

In this model of learning, a teacher uses **Immersion** and **Demonstration**, two additional Conditions, to surround children with the learning at hand. The teacher asks, “How does the immersion in this lesson support learners?” and “What demonstrations of meaning making do I need to provide?” So, in a classroom, for example, teachers immerse kids in the language of authentic books as they read aloud texts from brilliant authors; then, over time, study those gorgeous books to see how the author used language in the ways they did to make us laugh and cry and beg, “Read

The Conditions of Learning:

- **Engagement**
 - **Immersion**
 - **Demonstration**
 - **Expectation**
 - **Responsibility**
 - **Employment**
 - **Approximation**
 - **Response**
-

it again!” And then they put those fabulous books in the kids’ hands so so they can read the books themselves.

Engagement is more likely to occur, according to Dr. Cambourne’s decades-long research, when five additional Conditions are applied to the learning setting. **Expectation** is the unconditional belief, shared with the children that she has the highest expectations for their success; in other words, she expects that her students will succeed. And, it’s not surprising then, that the children rise to the occasion and are more likely to be successful. **Responsibility**, another Condition, puts children in the role of doer, which, in turn, supports Engagement. Children take Responsibility as they practice what they’re learning, bringing the Condition of Employment to life. **Employment**, or practice, occurs when children engage with authentic books and make the decisions real readers and writers make. As children read and write, they naturally make **Approximations**, another Condition of Learning. Approximations—or attempts to take on a new understanding or skill—are expected by the teacher and provide great insights into what the student understands and what the student is still learning. The final Condition, **Response**, reflects the teacher’s response to the thinking that a student shares through their Approximations. Together, these latter five Conditions help establish the tone of the learning environment and support students’ full engagement in their learning.

As a teacher, having the Conditions of Learning as a framework allowed me to more clearly appreciate and define my teaching through the lens of a child’s learning. The framework provided me with language to explain why what I was doing was valuable for the children in my classroom. And, if something wasn’t working out as planned, now I could reflect, review, and revise specific factors to strengthen the learning environment Dr. Cambourne had so eloquently described. Using the language of the Conditions, I began to rewrite the learning and teaching narrative in my classroom. My conversations began to sound something like this: *Oh, if I have the kids read and write every day, that will give them lots of time to approximate ... and, Hmm, my responses should help the kids know what they’re doing well and what else is possible ... and I can’t wait to hear the kids’ thinking as we read this book. It will be a great text to demonstrate ...* Over time, my teaching became more consistent and more firmly grounded in this theory of learning. And with that grounding, I finally felt confident to help children learn.

And, as often happens, when we feel successful about what we are doing, we share it with others. I talked frequently and extensively to anyone would listen about the Conditions of Learning and my classroom that brought them to life. That led to invitations to consult within my own district and now at state, regional, and national conferences and with districts across the United States. In each of these situations, I share the kinds of teaching that makes learning more likely to occur. Each opportunity offers moments for helping other teachers appreciate how their own decision-making matters. As I work with their students, teachers come to recognize their decision-making power as they identify the elements of teaching that matter. They learn to shape the learning environment in particular ways to honor the learner, to give students Responsibility for their own meaning making, time to Approximate and to experience a Response. As I Immerse and

Demonstrate for learners and share my Expectations for them, teachers see how their students' Engagement and Employment leads to learning. Dr. Cambourne has shown us a narrative in which all children can be successful.

And, as can sometimes happen in a personal narrative, dreams come true. Several years ago, I began a conversation with Dr. Cambourne about his Conditions of Learning and how they have influenced my teaching through the years, delivered with professional gushing and fan-girl-ing. This interaction led to a successful collaboration on a short article followed by an invitation to write a book with him to bring the Conditions to today's teachers in ways that resonate with today's school climate. *Made for Learning* is that book. It is the story of what it truly means to be in the business of learning. Because, to me, this is what it really means to be a teacher.

More Resources to Support Your Efforts

See Debra's website <https://www.teachingdecisions.com/about/> for her book. You will also find short, practical articles on reading, writing, and professional learning as well as links to her recorded webinars and videos.