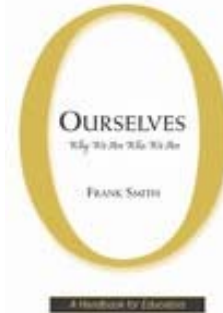




***Ourselves: Why We Are Who We Are***  
by Frank Smith (2006)  
Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates  
Pp. xiv + 121  
ISBN: 0-8058-5955-1  
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*Reviewed by Karima M. Almazroui*



Frank Smith is well known for attacking some educational practices and systems. In *Insult to Intelligence* for instance, he suggested that it is time to move from focusing on tests and grades for teaching purposes to engaging students in meaningful activities and student-centered learning. He is also well known for fighting phonics with determination. Smith (1979) explained why the phonics approach does not work in teaching reading by stating, “No one who is afraid of the consequences of reading will be able to read, and no one who is afraid of failing to read will learn to read. A sure way to give learners a reading problem is to tell them that they have one” (p. 41; see also Smith, 2003). In his latest book, *Ourselves: Why We Are Who We Are*, Smith tackles the essence of the education problem when he questions, in successive chapters, the structure of our personality, starting with our myths, and then moving on to certainties, ideas, limitations, differences, stupidities, language, consciousness, technology, and finally how we come to terms of ourselves.

The aim of the book is to describe the limits for thinking, learning, understanding, and remembering. Smith differentiates between *describers* who write poetry or a novel about what they see, and *explainers* who find reasons for what they see and generate hypotheses. *Ourselves* leans toward describing rather than explaining what forms us.

The central consideration of *Ourselves* is language. Language is not viewed in terms of communicative networks but in the “largely unsuspected framework for thought that lies within language itself” (p. viii). *Ourselves* outlines the possibilities and limitations in all of us. It explains that what makes people different is the knowledge and amount of experience one has.

The book targets teachers and educators who deliver instruction and information to others. In the first chapter, “Our Myths,” Smith explains that the sequence of learning is not gathering, storing, and then organizing data but rather a more holistic and dynamic process of meaning construction. Smith asserts that since students grow as thinkers and learners who are able to remember and understand, teacher can best detect students’ competencies by the way they behave, not by clinical analysis of their potential. Teachers know their students best. If they don’t, they should try to remedy the situation in one-to-one work before referring the student to doctors or other outside consultants.

Everyone has limitations in terms of perception, attention, remembering, learning, thinking, looking ahead, and certainty. Smith claims that every aspect of perception and thinking has its limitations. Sometimes, we are not aware of these limitations because we have lived with them all our lives. Teachers themselves are not aware of their limitations when they sometime create confusions in others. This occurs when they think that what seems to be comprehensible to them is incomprehensible to others. Teachers need to remember that students have multiple intelligences, learning styles, and funds of knowledge. These differences in experience, knowledge, and learning styles affect each student's ability and motivation to interact with the subject matter. Thus, Smith argues, in the last chapter of the book, for every student's rights to good schools, teachers, and teaching environment.

Frank Smith's new book concludes his ideas about learning and acquiring knowledge. In his previous books, Smith provided a scientific background for his claims about learning, reading process, and memory. In this book, Smith takes a more philosophical approach, but one that is suiting to an aging proponent of whole language.

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