

Columnists

- Star Principals
Star Teacher
- Alan Haskvitz
 - Christina Asquith
 - Daniel Pryzbyla
 - Dennis Redovich
 - Dr. Hemenstall
 - George Scott
 - Jann Flury
 - Jimmy Kilpatrick
 - Kathleen P. Loftus
 - Martin Haberman
 - Marty Solomon
 - Mike Freedman
 - M.F. Shaughnessy
 - Nancy Salvato
 - Dr. Vassallo
 - Richard Phelps
 - Robert Oliphant
 - Ron Isaac
 - Tom Shuford

Curriculum Support

- Conferences
- History
- Math
- Science
- Home School
- Language Arts
- Reading
- Special Education
- Miscellaneous

International

Books

Jobs

Request for Comments

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Phonemic Awareness

An Interview with Dee Tadlock : About Read Right

Wednesday, December 7, 2005

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Eastern New Mexico University
Portales, New Mexico

1. First of all, when did you first become interested in reading and helping readers?

I was working on a Ph.D. in education with a major in reading when my younger son started first grade. I was finished with course work, had passed the comprehensive exams, and was well into my dissertation when it became apparent that he was experiencing difficulty in learning to read.

I thought I had the knowledge to help him, but neither I nor his very competent teacher was successful even though he wanted badly to learn to read, was very cooperative, had advanced language skills, and had been consistently read to for virtually his entire life.

I concluded that the problem had to be in the methodology, so I began doing research in related fields to search for the answer to two fundamental questions: How does the brain learn a process? and What does the brain do when it is reading well? I investigated communication theory, information theory, linguistics, language acquisition theory, cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, neurobiology, etc. I knew the answers were not in the field of reading. My hope was that if I could shed some light on these two questions, maybe out of that would come ideas about how reading might be more effectively taught. I was operating on a wing and a prayer.

The research took three years. By then my child was in third grade for the second time and emotionally damaged from the constant failure due to the reading problem. I started working with him again—I had been hands off until I knew something different to try. I did not want to add to his damaged esteem by engaging him in instruction that didn't work. I was hoping for an incremental improvement using the new techniques that we now have codified into an approach we call Read Right. ® What I saw was a total elimination of his reading problems in just three months! I was amazed.

2. Can you give us the three main tenets of Read Right?

One: Reading problems are caused when an individual builds an incorrect neural network to guide the process of reading. Because it has errors encoded in, it operates inappropriately

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when it is accessed to read, resulting in less than effective, efficient reading. The only way to eliminate a reading problem is to compel the brain to re-model the network. Brains are “plastic,” but they are resistant to remodeling existing networks.

Two: Process learning operates (and is learned) primarily implicitly—below the level of consciousness, and so processes (like reading) cannot be explicitly taught. Rather, an environment must be constructed that will compel the brain to figure out the process. An easy example is bicycle riding: when one rides a bicycle, he is totally aware he is riding it (the outcome of the operation of the neural network built to guide the process of bicycle riding), but he has no idea what his brain is doing to make it happen. No parent tries to explain to a child the proper muscle movement activity required to learn to ride a bike. Parents know intuitively that the child's brain must figure it out for itself and that the parents' job is to provide an appropriate environment so it can. The same is true of reading: because it operates implicitly, it can't be explicitly taught. Rather, an appropriate environment must be established so the brain can figure out for itself how to perform the complex cognitive act of reading.

Three: The foundation and main event of reading is not word identification; it is anticipating the author's message. The brain must figure out how to integrate various neural systems to enable it to create an anticipatory set. Phonics is necessary to read, but the brain doesn't use phonetic information to figure out what the words are. It strategically samples such information as required to help anticipate the meaning, and once the anticipation is created, to ascertain its validity if there is sufficient uncertainty.

3. What do you mean by “mental force”? Are you referring here to will power, consistency, persistence?

All of that. Mental force is cognitive energy applied directly to the task of building (or remodeling) neural circuitry to produce a particular outcome. It is how to plan, coordinate, and integrate numerous complex neural systems so such anticipation is possible. It is internally generated as a consequence of the intent to figure out. In the absence of mental force, circuitry will not be constructed.

4. How do we know that Read Right works to help struggling readers construct new neural networks to guide reading? What kind of proof or evidence do you have for this statement?

The evidence is through a combination of research from neuroscience and applying logical constructs to the field of reading. We know from neuroscience that neural networks are the physiological representation of that which is learned. We know that specific neural networks are accessed to perform specific tasks. We know that the brain is very plastic and that it can change itself by remodeling neural circuitry. (Dr. Cathy Price, a neuroscientist from the Institute of Neurology, University

College London has expressed interest in doing some neuro-imaging studies of Read Right students before and after tutoring to verify neurological change.)

Symptoms emerge during oral reading when the network that guides reading is operating inappropriately. Read Right creates an interactive environment that compels the brain to figure out the reading process. As it does so, symptoms very quickly begin to become less frequent and less intense and eventually disappear. It is obvious as this occurs that the brain is reading differently than it was before. Such change in performance has to be preceded by a change in the neural circuitry or it could not be happening.

5. How do you determine how to structure the tutoring environment? What does this mean exactly?

We look to neuroscience, learning theory, and reading theory to provide guidance in how to structure the environment. Since what the brain must figure out operates primarily implicitly, we can't know exactly how it forms anticipatory sets. All we can do is build an environment that is reflective of what a brain needs to learn any process: a concept of the end result, intent, and opportunity to figure out implicit aspects of the process. Each brain figures out for itself how to plan, coordinate, and integrate numerous complex neural systems to make excellent reading happen.

The Read Right methodology (US Patent 6869287) consists of four components. Students participate in the first three components four times per week. They participate in the Critical Thinking component once per week. One trained tutor (para-professional or certified teacher) works with four students at a time in sessions lasting from one-half hour to one hour.

The Excellent Reading Component

A student must build an accurate concept of excellent reading so he knows when he is achieving excellence and when he is not. The methodology includes a prescribed system for assisting the student to internalize an accurate concept of excellence. For excellence to be achieved, the student must anticipate an author's intended message. To "seduce" the brain to implicitly figure out how to create anticipatory sets, the predictability of the text is enhanced through a series of well-defined steps that we call cycling. With each additional cycle, the brain experiments with an implicit predictive strategy to make excellent reading happen. Failing to achieve excellence means the implicit experiment didn't work, and the brain needs to try again. Achieving excellence means the implicit experiment worked, and whatever just happened needs to keep happening. Over time, the Cycling and Judging Excellence Process helps compel the brain to construct a neural network to guide reading excellently, thereby eliminating the reading problem.

The tutors are trained to enforce excellent performance, to identify performance blocks that prevent the student from

achieving excellence and know what to do to remove them, and to enforce productivity guidelines

The Coached Reading Component

The student reads out loud from unfamiliar text. Symptoms emerge because the neural network constructed specifically to guide the process of reading is operating inappropriately. Whenever a symptom emerges, the tutor analyzes it and gives immediate feedback designed to

- Confront the brain with the reality that it isn't doing the process correctly thereby creating cognitive disequilibrium which strengthens internally-generated intent (the brain is eager to quiet itself)
- Nudge the brain towards experimentation in an arena of anticipating the author's meaning as it strives to figure out what it must do to produce excellent reading.

The Independent Reading Component

Students create for themselves a laboratory for further experimentation on their own to fine-tune their newly-discovered implicit reading strategies. They are asked to check books out from the Read Right library so we can control the complexity of text they are reading. If the text is too complex for the current state of the neural network, the brain could abandon its attempts to continue figuring out what it needs to do to produce excellent reading.

The Critical Thinking Component

Students are guided through a process of improving critical thinking skills. They independently answer questions requiring critical thinking and then interact with other students to analyze errors in thinking that have yielded incorrect answers.

6. Can we train parents to deliver timely and appropriate feedback to the student? Can we train teachers to better deliver timely and appropriate feedback?

Parents of very young children can create an environment so their children build an appropriate network from the beginning. Children who have not yet learned to read and so are totally "neutral" about reading—that is, they aren't yet doing it wrong or right—can be easily led into reading right from the beginning, but the parent has to know what to do and what not to do. It is unlikely to happen by accident, but it can. Some children learn to read at home before they go to school without receiving instruction of any kind. My book, *Read Right! Coaching Your Child to Excellence in Reading*, gives parents the information they need to purposefully create the right environment.

Compelling the brain to remodel an already-built network that is guiding reading inappropriately is a much more challenging task

than inducing the brain to build one correctly in the first place. Brains are highly resistant to such remodeling work, thus it requires absolutely appropriate and precise interventions, and those interventions are always based on the student's performance in the moment. Tutors must know precisely what to do in every interaction with the student, no matter what the student does. To develop the competencies required to earn Read Right Tutor Certification requires seven weeks of all day, every day hands-on training (with students present). Once tutors develop the required competencies, they can effectively facilitate the brain in its remodeling work, and virtually every brain can figure out how to consistently produce excellent reading.

7. Can you briefly tell us what you mean by an interactive constructivist model of learning?

An interactive constructivist model acknowledges that all learning results from an interaction (assimilation or accommodation) between the individual's current structural state and the environment. We don't "open up the brain and pour knowledge in" Rather we construct for ourselves all the knowledge—both declarative and procedural—that we have. And that construction is the direct result of the interaction. We have to build knowledge in any field in exactly the same way as the first person who ever built it did.

8. Let's just supposed that I personally wanted to be trained in Read Right. How would I go about this and how much time and money would be involved?

Because it requires seven weeks of all day every day training with students present (hands-on training) to be able to develop the competencies required to receive Read Right Tutor Certification, the only way to receive the training is if a school or corporation contracts with us to train personnel. In that case, we bring everything needed for a successful start: 900+ books in a library sorted for text complexity and housed in color-coded bins, placement kit, evaluation kit, student management system, project management system, monthly reporting on each student's progress, etc and, most importantly, the intensive training previously referenced. We can train up to 4 staff members—certified, instructional assistants, or some combination. Most of our schools opt for a train-the-trainer model in which one of the tutors trained in year one is trained to be a trainer in year two.

We do offer telephone tutoring so individuals can access the program even though their school (or corporation) does not have a Read Right project. The telephone tutors are employed and trained by us. We also periodically train new consultants to meet client demand or to replace staff turnover. And, of course, parents of pre-school children can learn how to work with their children to help them build a correct neural network in the first place by implementing the activities described in my book, *Read Right! Coaching Your Child to Excellence in Reading* .

9. Have you done any long range studies with for example first grade students and later tested them in say 12 th grade to see how they have fared in the long term?

We have one longitudinal study conducted by one of our clients. 3rd and 4th graders (mostly third graders) and 7 th and 8 th graders (mostly seventh graders) were pre-tested, tutored, post-tested and then re-tested four years later. No student had any reading intervention after Read Right tutoring. The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test was used as the measuring instrument. The chart below summarizes the results (Total Reading Score).

Student Group	Pre-Read Right Tutoring	Post-Read Right Tutoring	Four Years Later
3 rd and 4 th graders (at time of initial tutoring)	2.1 Grade Equivalency	4.7 Grade Equivalency	9.1 Grade Equivalency
7 th and 8 th graders (at time of initial tutoring)	5.9 Grade Equivalency	11.7 Grade Equivalency	12.5 Grade Equivalency

We also hear from former students who let us know what they are doing and from both parents and tutors. This anecdotal information verifies that the results are permanent. We have to be getting a physiological change in the brain; otherwise the reading wouldn't become excellent. The change will not go away. Brains are resistant to remodeling neural circuitry, and they certainly wouldn't go to all the work to change a network that is working wonderfully well. Nor would it make sense to hypothesize that the brain could be compelled to remodel a properly operating system so it would no longer operate properly.

10. Having taught for three years in the Nebraska State Penitentiary, I can attest to the massive problems and numbers of inmates with reading problems. How exactly do you intervene with these individuals?

Their brains work like everyone else's, so our methodology is equally effective with this population. No one wants to have a reading problem. As soon as it becomes evident to the student that Read Right is working (after 3-4 sessions or sooner), virtually every student becomes an eager participant. We have done work in juvenile detention centers and with juveniles in adult prisons who were tried as adults. We also have worked with female adult prisoners. We have not yet had a project with incarcerated adult males. We would like to.

11. You have a Reading Improvement Program and a Critical Thinking Skills program. What is the difference and why the addition of the critical thinking skills program?

In the Read Right methodology, the Excellent Reading Component, the Coached Reading Component, and the Excellent Reading Component work together to cause the

student's brain to figure out all the implicit aspects of the reading process, to integrate the implicit and explicit aspects, and to remodel the neural network that guides the process of reading so it produces excellent reading every time it is accessed to operate on text. When a brain reads right, it feels comfortable to the individual doing the reading, if he happens to be reading out loud it sounds like natural, conversational speech, and most importantly the reader understands on a literal level what the author is saying (assuming enough prior knowledge to create anticipatory sets and an intent to understand).

Once the information in the text is in the student's brain, he may ask his brain to think critically about the information. Making inferences, applying criteria to evaluate, analyzing, synthesizing, etc. (critical thinking skills) are controlled by different neural networks and really have nothing to do with reading (even though we may ask our brains to access those networks and operate on information we have just gained from reading). The brain doesn't care where the information it is thinking about came from: listening, experiencing, observing, or reading, but if it wants to think critically about the information—regardless of source—it must access the neural circuitry specifically designed to perform those operations. The Critical Thinking component in Read Right is designed to help the student improve in these skills.

12. How would you say your program is different from, for example, Reading Recovery?

Our program is different from every other reading program I am aware of because they are all based on an assumption that the basic foundation of reading is figuring out what the words are and they don't acknowledge the implicit nature of procedural learning. These programs advocate explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (recommended by the National Reading Panel and reflected in State and Federal legislation). Explicit, systematic instruction is impossible when that which has to be learned is implicit!

We think reading words and reading passages are separate cognitive acts. Neuro-imaging studies performed in the US seem to support a conventional skills-based view of reading, but in these studies, the subjects are asked to read word lists—not connected text. Neuro-imaging studies from the Institute of Neurology, University College London in which students read connected text support our view. Do you see how assumptions of the researchers inadvertently taint the research?

13. Your web site indicates “once students' reading problems are eliminated, they may want to consider enrolling in the Critical Thinking Skills component of READ RIGHT to insure their ability to score well on standardized tests”.. At what point do you consider a students' reading problems to be eliminated?

The reading problem is eliminated when the network has been

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remodeled so that it operates appropriately. The outward sign that this has happened is when the students' oral reading is absolutely symptom free.

If the neural network that guides the process of reading is doing so correctly, literal comprehension is inherent in the process. This is because it is impossible to create anticipatory sets regarding the author's intended meaning if you aren't "trucking" with the meaning. Each anticipatory set contributes to the formation of the next one. It isn't possible to invoke a system like this without knowing what the author is saying. (If the reader doesn't have enough pre-existing knowledge relative to the author's topic, it is impossible for him to form anticipatory sets, and so he can't comprehend the message. Also, if the reader has no intent to know what the author is saying, his brain may "tune out.") The reading act ends when literal comprehension has occurred. Frequently, though, the reader asks his brain to process that information in some way: make an inference, evaluate, synthesize with other information, analyze, etc. We call those "mental gymnastics" critical thinking. The process of making inferences, etc. is guided by different neural circuitry than is the basic act of reading. Thus, if a brain isn't so good at different aspects of critical thinking, then an environment must be constructed that compels the brain to work on those neural networks. Read Right is designed to compel the brain to remodel the neural network that guides the act of reading. The Critical Thinking component is designed to compel the brain to work on improving the network that guides aspects of critical thinking. We integrate this component into our school and corporate projects because the students and the program are often evaluated by how well students perform on reading tests. And to do well on those reading tests, students have to be able to think critically about the information they acquire from reading the passages in the test. Thus, we feel an obligation to spend some time on the development of critical thinking abilities. It should be obvious, that one cannot think critically about information unless he first acquires the information. So, the first step is to eliminate the reading problem so students can easily and comfortably get information from reading.

14. Let's face it. Some kids love to read Harry Potter but are repulsed by their social studies text. Is this a problem, a preference, or just an anomaly?

Narrative text is easier to process for most people. I believe there was a natural selection advantage for brains that were good at processing and remembering stories. Before written language systems were developed, cultures depended on stories passed down from generation to generation to preserve their collected wisdom. Those who could remember, for example, the stories that revealed the correct medicinal herbs were more likely to survive.

Other factors bear upon the seeming preference for narrative. Intent to know is a huge factor in comprehension, and many students have a stronger intent to follow the antics of Harry Potter than to know the causes of the American Revolution. Comprehension occurs when the reader successfully anticipates

the author's intended meaning. Doing so depends on information already in the reader's brain. Often time a student doesn't have a lot of prior knowledge from which to ground the anticipation. Comprehension becomes difficult or perhaps even impossible. Another factor: hierarchical thinking to discover what is more important and less important in the author's message is an essential skill to understand school texts. Students frequently have not developed these text analysis skills. Finally, kids with reading problems—those who can't comfortably get the information in the first place—are more likely to “put up with” the discomfort and struggle to read something they find enjoyable. And most kids would agree that Harry Potter is intrinsically more enjoyable than social studies!

15. What is the single biggest reading problem that you encounter in the schools?

Every reading problem is caused by the erroneous operation of the neural network built to guide the process. The network is either operating appropriately or it is not. If it is not, the consequent reading problem can be severe or mild—depending on how far “off” the network is as compared to what it is supposed to be doing. The more severe the reading problem, the longer it takes the brain to remodel it because the more remodeling there is to do. We cannot know the particular character of any given reading problem because the process is implicit (operating below the level of consciousness) and therefore no one has access to or control over what the brain must do (or is not doing) to make excellent reading happen. Each brain must figure it out for itself. The Read Right methodology compels the brain to do just that.

16. What is your take on the whole language versus phonics issue? Are the whole language people “holier than thou”?

In my opinion, whole language people were on the right track in their emphasis on prediction as being the basis of the reading act (prediction, or anticipation, is the basis of all cognition). However, they viewed the process as primarily linguistic rather than cognitive. As a result they didn't know how to eliminate reading problems. Also, they saw word identification as being fundamental to the process though they advocated that reading always be in a linguistic context, so they would not advocate word lists, nor would they advocate putting more emphasis on word identification and recognition than on meaning in very early reading instruction.

17. Does the word “dyslexic” serve any useful purpose or should it be abandoned?

The whole area of dyslexia is, in my view, very confusing because students who simply can't read are “in the mix” of those who may have serious cognitive issues that might warrant a label as dyslexic. We have worked with many individuals (both adults and children) who have been either clinically diagnosed or self-diagnosed as dyslexic—virtually all responded very

positively to the Read Right methodology. They became excellent readers, which isn't supposed to happen with dyslexics.

18. How does your program differ from say, Sylvan Learning Centers?

Again, our theoretical construct and our approach is totally different. We believe reading theory to be flawed—not teachers, not students, not cultures, not neighborhoods. We have extremely high expectations. Elimination of the reading problem is the goal and can be achieved in a quick hurry. Incremental progress should not be satisfactory. Yet it is. Schools are happy with dismal scores—just so they represent an increase over previous scores. School cultures have come to expect, at best, incremental improvement with struggling readers. Why should we be happy with these statistics from the government: 1 child in 3 will have reading problems; 2 of 3 7 th graders will be 2 or more grade levels behind; 75% of 9 year olds with reading problems will ALWAYS have them.

19. What question have I neglected to ask?

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How can an interested person learn more? Check out the website at www.readright.com. Dr. Tadlock can be contacted at 360-427-9440 or deet@readright.com

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