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IS IT NEW?

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Education by hard, cold definition is a drawing, or leading out process—a growing into, from the Latin verb “*educō*.” It would seem then, on the surface anyway, that any process or technique for teaching of reading or any other part of the curriculum would have been a gradual outgrowth of preceding techniques, philosophies or procedures. When news media and public communications systems, therefore, douse a reading and viewing public with buckets of intellectual baptism purported to be new and revolutionary, it would seem advisable for professional people to become acquainted with factual backgrounds of these so-called “new” techniques before becoming “band-wagon jumpers.”

“We need to use every approach we can, every tool available and all the vitality we can muster to start beginning readers on their way.”¹ Supplementary to this statement is the idea that children with a reading problem need all of these approaches for help of a remedial nature. Many times it obviously becomes a matter of the most valuable technique to use for *this* particular person, not whether it is the “newest” thing.

Writers of books on reading usually classify the practice of teachers as belonging to this or that “*method*.” The vagueness of the word *method* becomes apparent when one discovers that an alphabetic method was also called the spelling method, or the ABC method. A method called phonic was referred to as syllabic; a word method has been referred to as the look-say method and the sentence method was labelled the global method. There are some others, too: the phrase method, the experience-chart method, the story method, the phonic word method, the non-oral method, and even the gingerbread method. It did not seem possible or feasible to eliminate the word *method*, but it is necessary to keep in mind that each of these *methods* is amoebic in its power to change shape. There was no single alphabetic method, or phonic method, and the same is true of all the other practices which are called methods. Another difficulty was to make allowance for the difference between theory and practice; between what was advised and what was actually done.

The chronology is very loose, but it is there. From the earliest times of which there is any record until well into the nineteenth century, the alphabet method predominated. Phonic teaching in spite of

1. Helen S. Craymer, *The Instructor*, Vol. 76, No. 3, (November 1966), p. 147.

word method off-shoots dominated the second half of that century and continued into this one. Word and sentence methods have been the twentieth century orthodoxy. During the past decade or so, there has been a strong reaction, at least in theory, against word and sentence methods in their more extreme forms and this reaction is accompanied by a return to the late nineteenth century interest in a *form* of regular spelling as an aid in learning to read.

Sometimes even the diligent student of the history of reading is likely to get the impression from books on the subject that the pupil who was taught by an alphabetic method learned the names of the letters, but not their sounds. Emphasis was placed on the alphabetic method stressing the *names* of the letters and the phonics method, the sound of letters. Some authors neglect to point out that the teaching material of the simple hornbook, to say nothing of the early primer, while alphabetically oriented was designed quite precisely for the purpose of teaching the sounds of consonants when combined with vowels.

Alphabetic methods were subjected to many criticisms during the first half of the nineteenth century. They have the peculiar distinction, however, of not having been shown by some manipulation of statistics to be inferior to all other methods or combination of methods. They went out before statistics came in—went out as a recognized modern method, I mean. Horace Mann's powerful indictment of them in favor of a word method laid the basis for some experiment with word methods in the United States.

In 1908, Huey wrote on the nature of perception in reading, stating that the natural method of learning to read is just the same as learning to talk, i.e. by the method of imitation. Without special methods and devices the child grasps the meaning of words and sentences gradually, a little here and a little there, not troubling about the still obscure parts. A few years later he finds that he is in an environment of books. All of it has at first as little meaning as had the spoken sentences he had listened to. His scribbling is as little like writing or printing as his early babble was like speech. He begins to be interested in these printed and written "things" and to imitate them. The steps from this imitation to facile reading and writing are as certain and as natural as were the earlier ones toward spoken language. Huey suggested in 1908 "That the best way to get a reading vocabulary is just the way that the child gets his spoken vocabu-

lary, by having the new words keep coming in a context environment that is familiar and interesting.”²

Huey’s statement about the word being more than the sum of the letters and the sentence more than the sum of the separate words is somewhat of a reflection of an earlier book written by Farnham in 1881, reprinted in 1886 and 1895. In this work, Farnham wrote of the cognizing of things by wholes and working from the whole to the parts. Both of these works were written long before the rise of the Gestalt school and yet read as if they came from the pen of a Gestalt psychologist. The fact is, of course, that at the time Farnham and Huey were writing, the preliminary work and thinking that were later to develop into Gestalt theory was already being carried on.

In 1912 Wertheimer, who is regarded as the founder of Gestalt psychology, defined a *Gestalt* as “a whole, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of its individual elements, but in which the part processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole.”³ He called the type of thinking that builds from parts into wholes, “atomistic” or “brick-and-mortar” and insisted strongly that it was an unproductive activity of the mind. It was not the Gestalt idea that was new, but the matter of its formulation. Thirty years before Farnham had been writing about “cognizing by wholes” but was also going on to ask in the context of reading, “what is the whole, the important whole which should engage the attention of the teacher of reading at the earliest stages of instruction.”⁴

The configuration method developed as an outgrowth of Gestaltist belief that, generally from infancy we perceive the world in the complex, fully articulated way that we do as adults. Gestaltists advocated teaching reading by a method in which general shapes of words were recognized and compared or contrasted with others to note similarities and differences. One curious result of the configuration idea of teaching reading was to be seen in the design of books to fit the theory. These books were to release the teacher from the narrow restrictions of a regularly phonic vocabulary. The cat was no longer going to be on the mat. All that was necessary was to find the words that interested children most and that was easy. They would be the names of things and actions that the child showed the liveliest interest in.

2. Hunter Diack, *The Teaching of Reading*, Philosophical Library, New York, pp. 56-73, 1965.

3. *Op. cit.*

4. Huey, “The Nature of Perception in Reading”—1908—Reviewed by Diack in *The Teaching of Reading*.

Away back in the nineteenth century, Horace Mann had said that a child could learn to read twenty-six words in less time than it took him to learn the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. The reason he gave was that the words had meaning and interest very different from the queer algebra of letters.

However, in spite of the fact that most five year olds have a speaking vocabulary of 2,000 words (some authorities have given higher estimates), it did not follow that children would learn to recognize very easily the few hundred or more words necessary for the telling of an interesting story. So the compilers of reading books turned to the problem of designing books with as few different words as possible without spoiling the story. Thus was born scientific vocabulary control. From the selling point of view, it was better to say that the vocabulary was scientifically controlled than to say that the book contained as few different words as possible, or to claim that they were designed to teach children by keeping as many words from them as possible, but that *is what happened*.

Now, the pendulum swings again to try to correct the lack of vocabulary in a child's early reading experience. The feeling of many reading experts is that a quick, simplified alphabet or code to break the English language is essential if the early reader is not to become discouraged. The seeds of i/t/a were planted more than one hundred years ago (1825) when Sir Isaac Pitman, schoolmaster from Somerset, England invented Pitman shorthand which is phonic. In 1843, he met Alexander John Ellis, a scholar whose book, *The Alphabet of Nations* was the first serious work on scientific phonetics. Ellis wanted to create a new phonetic English, while Pitman applied phonetics to his shorthand.

In devising his shorthand Sir Isaac made a close study of the phonic basis of English. His phonotype was one of the early alphabets used to decode English for beginning readers. Experiments began in 1844, although the really large experiment with phonotypy did not take place until 1852. In ten schools at Waltham, Massachusetts, between 1852 and 1860, phonotypy was used for beginning stages of learning to read, followed by a transfer to conventional spelling. This two-stage technique set the pattern for subsequent experiments.

The notes Sir Isaac made on the phonic basis of English were preserved and came into the hands of his grandson, Sir James Pitman, publisher and member of Parliament. "Sir James points out what everyone knows, that our printed English is phonically phony. Our standard spelling is full of booby traps. Unfortunately our printed

English became fixed long before linguistic experts appeared on the scene.”⁵

Sir James claims no ambition to change the standard alphabet or English spelling. Reading his grandfather's notes, he wondered if the beginning reader might not make better progress if the alphabetical symbols could be made to represent exactly and distinctly the sounds used in everyday speech. His forty-four symbols include all but two letters of the regular alphabet. He tries to retain as much of the original spelling of words as possible to ease the transition to regularized or “grown-up” spelling.

To make a test in the schools, books were needed. These came from a number of London publishers. Already there are more than two hundred books (1964) transliterated into i/t/a or initial teaching alphabet. With books available, pilot test programs began in the schools under the watchful eyes of researchers. Classes using i/t/a were matched with classes taught by traditional methods. Among the most encouraging features of the i/t/a movement is the teaming of classroom pilot programs with research check, and the cautious claims of the proponents. There have been some implications of good results among the mentally disturbed and those who are being trained to use English as a second language.

No, the idea of a phonetic approach to teaching reading is not new. Several times it *has been* tried and has been dropped from the curriculum. Possibly this time, with improvements made, it will really catch fire. Let's keep a cautious, watchful vigil and an open mind. Maybe this time we have arrived. If so, it will be a very great innovation, for reading experts do not believe there is any *one right* way of teaching reading to everyone.

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5. Boutwell, Wm. D., “An Easier Way To Learn To Read”—i/t/a, *P.T.A. Magazine*, Chicago, Illinois, September 1964, 59: pp. 11-13.