

A PLEA TO RESTORE READING AS A SPOKEN ACTIVITY

By Raymond E. Laurita

(Reprinted from The NEW YORK TIMES, September 28, 1986)

Anyone seeking to better understand why so many of our brightest young people are turned off by reading and turn instead to the immediate and more basic sensory gratification offered by rock videos and inane films about college food fights, need only attend a church service where both young and old take turns at reading. It is rare indeed to find anyone under 40 who can deliver the words clearly and accurately.

What one hears from the mouths of these young representatives of our educational system are the resonating and disastrous effects of changes instituted a mere generation or two ago.

At some point in time, the adults responsible for educational policy decided that because mature reading eventually became an unspoken and unvoiced activity, the most efficient method for teaching the young about our magnificent English language was to put the horse before the cart and literally force them, almost from the outset, to "read silently." No one knows just how speech sounds are suppressed during reading to the point where the activity appears to eventually become unvoiced and unspoken. What is known, however, is that reading was taught and learned for several millennia as a spoken and voiced activity. It is only in the recent past that younger and younger children began to be taught about the wonders of our language as though they were deaf.

What this teacher also knows is that when my own career began about 30 years ago, children in rural, and even in some urban schools in which I taught, were still being taught almost exclusively through oral reading procedures. Such instruction resulted in the development of independence and fluency in both reading and writing, far earlier and with far greater success than presently occurs as this unproven and totally unscientific idea of enforced silence continues to contribute to the production of ever-growing numbers of illiterates.

These opinions come from one who has been intimately involved with this ever-growing population of symbolic illiterates for more than three decades, both in and out of the public schools. Most of my days and nights over that period have been spent trying to understand the causes of the utter devastation confronting me each day as children and adults from all levels of society sat before me unable to read, write or understand their own spoken language after it was placed on paper.

I have watched as the problem has finally been recognized as an impending national disaster, a recognition triggered by the growing presence of more and more children of the middle and upper classes counted among its victims. A society that prides itself on getting things done through the successive application of complex new technologies simply cannot survive with a population of citizens unable to perform any but the most menial and unskilled forms of labor — in short, those forms that are available to symbolic illiterates.

What has occurred over that period on the human level is mirrored in the materials used to instruct the young. Introducing small children to the wonders of language has regressed from using procedures that allowed them to hear the sounds and cadences of their own spoken language through the use of poetry written by poets, stories and fairy tales written by writers, and even the Bible - all of them read aloud to children by the adults around them - to an adult-centered attempt to have them learn about that same language by first developing isolated

“recognition skills” and then practicing these isolated fragments of language by silently reading the stories appearing in their innocuous primers - books lacking any literary merit. In one of these “exciting” storybooks that I particularly remember, two absolutely unreal children are pictured standing behind Father as he mysteriously cuts a hole in the fence separating two suburban backyards. The “suspense” heightens until the children realize that Father has been making, you guessed it, a gate, so the kids (always referred to as the “children”), won't have to go all the way to the end to retrieve the toys that have errantly found their way next door.

Now I ask you, does this sound like the stuff of life that real people are exposed to each day, especially when the characters utter such inanities as, “Oh, look! Oh, look! Father has made a gate!” It doesn't even sound like English when it is pronounced aloud - imagine what it sounds like when it must be read silently.

The teacher-writers who were enlisted to revise and rewrite the classics according to the artificially designated “grade level” of the readers who would use them, somehow managed the seemingly impossible result of making even Robinson Crusoe sound like an illiterate nerd. The following excerpt comes directly from Defoe's classic after transcription for poor reading youngsters:

“He said again that he did not want to kill all the men, just the two men who had started the trouble, but those two we must surely kill because if they were to get away and come back to the ship, they would come back with guns and every man on her and we would lost”.

The use of such drivel to stimulate interest in reading has failed totally in accomplishing the desired miracle of teaching children to associate the print squiggles appearing on the page with the noise squiggles entering the ear, so they can be reunited and recognized at some level of meaning.

Through the use of unproved theories involving such ideas as “basic word lists,” “grade-level readers” and more recently, through the establishment of supposedly sure-fire sequences of “behavioral objectives,” we were all lulled into an acceptance that some level of scientific validity underlay all this educational gobbledygook. The use of clever advertising techniques created the illusion that the developers of reading programs were not “guessing” about the language process.

All of us were presented with a kind of intellectual *fait accompli*, one that proclaimed that children who first learned the “core” or “basic” vocabulary found in the endless series of primers associated with various publishers' reading programs, would be freed from the drudgery of having to learn the “how” of unlocking words, through the use of time-tested and proven procedures.

Because of their lack of independent decoding skill, children taught this way were denied access to anything but their sacred primers and prevented from using the oral feedback they had found so useful during the earlier development of speech by learning from the sounds being emitted from their own and others' mouths.

The truth is that no one, and I mean no one, knows how any individual learns to read. And yet, it is an activity that is disarmingly simple for those individuals lucky enough to develop fluency by utilizing the brain's unconscious capacity to make speech-print interconnections during the first days and weeks of instruction, or even before at the knee of a parent who gently reads to them and explains the words appearing in “Winnie the Pooh,” or “Curious George” or even the Bible.

Making a connection between teen-age pregnancy, welfare mothers and cultural deprivation might be easy here, if it were not for the fact that the population of poor and nonreading children now extends to the schools filled with the children of the affluent.

What is the solution? Simple. Stop trying to teach children about words before providing them with a reason for wanting to look at them and know about the wonders they contain. First things need to be put first and children must be cajoled, encouraged, led, dragged into making the connection uniting those abstractions on the page before them and their own interior voice, the one that any parent who watches can recognize as those same children talk with imaginary friends or their teddy bears.

We adults can no longer hear the answers coming from these friendly and familiar voices of infancy, but they can. The mystery of reading occurs precisely in the same way and once the connection is made, those friendly voices forever more come from the words appearing on the pages of books.

The curse of silent reading forced upon the child too soon remains throughout a lifetime for those who are not helped to learn how to 'hear' word sounds at the interior level of word process. Restoring the magical capacity to instantaneously associate external meanings with the drab letters contained in a book becomes more difficult with each passing day, week, month, that this distinctly human capacity lies dormant. Let's stop denying the joy to so many children that comes with this associative leap. The sooner we learn that the ability to perform this indescribably unique act is not the inevitable end result of teaching per se, but rather an unconscious result of an overpowering need on the part of the learner to extend the power of speech to the external representation of that speech, the sooner we will bring sanity back to instruction.

Print, which is really only an initial ability to project the spoken word to a more permanent medium, should be heard first. Only after the transfer is made and practiced joyfully for a long time should the child be required to internalize his own voice so it can be heard "silently," as his eyes scan the letters that make up the words of his books. Words on a page, divorced from their oral associates, are just that - words.

Note by Internet Publisher, Donald Potter

Mr. Laurita's brief but important article was scanned, and published on the *Education Page* of the donpotter.net web site on May 28, 2004, with permission from the author. Mr. Laurita, creator of *Orthographic Structuralism*, has a lot of valuable instructional material available on his web site: spellingdoctor.com.