

13. You become what you read?

It usually takes about 30 hours to learn the mechanics of reading, according to Paulo Freire, based on his work with adult literacy schemes in a variety of countries. This is confirmed in the experience of various home-based educators, though some would say it can take up to 60 hours with children. If learning to read takes longer than 60 hours, or fails altogether, there are several possible reasons. The first is that the learning situation is learner-hostile. A second is that the learner is not yet motivated to learn to read and has been forced to learn too early. A third is that the learner is dyslexic.

Robert Owen, the industrialist who founded an early infant school in 1816, inclined to the view that children should not be troubled with the mechanics of reading until they were about ten years of age. Until then they should be engaged in collecting a wide range of experiences of the world and in purposive conversation and debate, to develop their powers of critical thinking. In modern psychological terms, they were to develop deep learning of understanding before the shallow learning of mechanical operations.

Rudolph Steiner, on the other hand, was inclined to think that the age of seven was appropriate. The current orthodoxy is to start much earlier than this, ignoring the evidence that this risks early failure, feelings of inadequacy, and a general reaction against learning. But in London recently, Pat Farengo, a prominent USA home-schooler, explained how one of his daughters had learnt to read early, one at about seven years of age and the other much later at 10 years of age. All three were now competent and voracious readers. The flexibility that home-based education allows means that such individual differences can be accommodated.

Alan Thomas, in his recent book, *Children Learning at Home*, indicates how many home educating families experience this variety and cope with it positively. Parents, however, need the courage to resist any current orthodoxy, and also to deal with their own anxieties. My own son learnt to read early, and when he chose to try school at five years of age, he already had a reading age of twelve. I was, at the time, somewhat anxious that he had learnt to read too early, but not foolish enough to have discouraged him. A colleague who had the same 'problem' told me how the head teacher had thrown up her hands in horror, and told him that he and his wife had completely ruined his daughter's infant school experience by allowing her to read early. The disease of orthodoxy can strike in many forms!

Another current orthodoxy is to promote the teaching of reading by phonics, often confusing two variations, synthetic and analytical approaches, as the one right way. When my son was learning to read, I was also running reading workshops for young student teachers, and laid due stress on the need to pay attention to phonics, as did everyone I knew who was training teachers at the time. My son took to the *Breakthrough to Literacy* reading scheme with its personal word folders and personal word-building folders - this last being the analytical phonics element of the scheme. My son was politely but persistently dismissive of the word-building folder, and seemed to think this was a device to hold him back. He just wanted to know what any new word said and he would memorise it. From this experience, I began to learn to be more cautious about the use of phonics.

Another note of caution sounded. A colleague who went blind demonstrated his new reading machine to me. He would open a book, place it on the machine which would then read it to him. He explained that the development of the machine had been held up for several years

because they tried to use a phonics-based approach. As a result the machine could not attain fluency. Only when they switched to whole word recognition approach, with phonics as a backup to attack unfamiliar words, did the machine gain fluency. The machine appeared to be in sympathy with my son!

A recent experience has reconfirmed my caution. I began to learn Esperanto, an entirely phonetically regular language. In consequence I can read out loud to you a whole page of the language, but have only a little understanding of what I have performed so convincingly.

It may be that the general obsession with reading is becoming dated. The sale of books in the USA is in decline as more and more people get the information they need by electronic means. This includes television, radio, video, and telephone. Mobile telephones that link you to a data-bank, that then talks the information back to you, are increasingly becoming part of our experience. Telephone banking is but one example of this. Another is telephoned directory enquiries, and the telephone speaking clock has been with us for many years. Moreover, I am writing this article with a voice-driven computer. With an additional piece of software, the computer would read it back to me, to save me the chore of reading the screen. A long-standing friend who is severely dyslexic, Geoff Harrison, has been liberated by this technology, and now spends some time helping edit a magazine.

Looking ahead, the flight deck of the Star Ship *Enterprise*, does not utilise reading because all decisions are based on voice-dialogue with the ship's computer. The commander might be dyslexic - it would be of no consequence. We are moving steadily into a new age of oracy. Reading will continue to be useful, and for many a source of enjoyment, but probably less and less decisive. Even now, the gypsy culture in our midst manages without reliance on reading. We, ourselves, are often illiterate the moment we set foot in a foreign country, but somehow we get by.

We can often forget the dangers of reading. You can easily become what you read. If your reading does not go beyond the tabloid newspaper level, you become enslaved to the tabloid mentality, which has been described as superstitious, dogmatic, nationalistic and inclined towards racism, sexism and ageism. This idea was explored in full in Richard Hoggart's book *The Uses of Literacy*. Unless learners have developed the skills and habits of discrimination, or 'crap detection', as Postman and Weingartner put it in their book *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, they are at the mercy of self-interested persuaders. Most learners pass out of school just literate enough to be conned, to be spun by the spin doctors, and to watch the more mindless shows on television.

We need to go way beyond mere mechanical literacy, to critical literacy where people can see through the linguistic, semantic, intellectual and other deceptions which now dominate our culture. Hoggart restated his points in a *Guardian Education* article (2nd December 1997):

"In a democracy, people have a right to read the Sun, and only the Sun, if they wish. But would you be happy if, by the time your own children are grown-up, they too 'read' only the Sun, watched only the more idiotic television programmes for almost 40 hours a week and, if they bothered with books at all, read-only formulaic market fodder? The founding principal of critical literacy ... must be to develop understanding of the nature of democracy itself, of the duties it lays on us and the rights we may then claim; the two are inseparable."

Hoggart is not impressed by the results of the reading industry so far: "*But the great majority, insofar as they read at all, go round and round, wooed on to that carousel of repetitive rubbish ceaselessly operated by the two-syllabled press and the stereotyped paperbacks.*" Perhaps Robert Owen was less zany than we might think in wanting to leave the mechanics of reading until much later and develop the powers of critical thinking first.

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