

DR. JOHN DOWNING - BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Qualifications

Dr. Downing qualified in Education at Oakley College, Cheltenham, England, and earned his Psychology B.A., Ph.D., and D.Lit degrees at the University of London, England.

Academic Positions

He has been Professor in Psychological Foundations in Education at the University of Victoria, Canada since 1970. Earlier, from 1960-69, Dr. Downing was the Director of the Reading Research Unit and Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of London Institute of Education, except for the year 1967-68 which he spent in the United States as a visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1981 Dr. Downing was the Distinguished University Visiting Professor at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.

Research and Publications

In research, Dr. Downing's chief contributions have been in two main directions. The first direction has been in investigating how children think about spoken and written language. His curiosity about children's ideas about reading and writing was aroused in observing children's reactions to English printed in the initial teaching alphabet (i.t.a.). His book, Evaluating the Initial Teaching Alphabet (London: Cassell, 1967) is recognized as the definitive scientific work on i.t.a. After completing a seven year study of i.t.a., Dr. Downing began a series of investigations focussed on children's thought processes in learning to read. These have culminated in the publication of his two books, Reading and Reasoning (Edinburgh: Chambers, and New York: Springer-Verlag, 1979) and Language Awareness and Learning to Read (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1984). These books describe Dr. Downing's "Cognitive Clarity Theory" of reading and its application in the classroom. Another application of his theory is in Dr. Downing's Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness (LARR) Test (Windsor, England: NFER-Nelson, 1983).

The other main direction of Dr. Downing's research has been in investigating how children learn to read in different languages and varying cultural backgrounds. Dr. Downing created the idea of "Comparative Reading" as a new field of study. His book, Comparative Reading (New York: Macmillan, 1973) is a report of his cross-national study of reading in 14 countries. In this same area of study, Dr. Downing is in the final stages of preparing for publication a comprehensive survey of theory and research on reading by Russian authors. - Cognitive Psychology and Reading in the USSR. (Amsterdam: North-Holland (1988)).

In 1982 Dr. Downing combined these two research interests in his investigation of metacognitive readiness for literacy learning in children from multilingual societies in Papua New Guinea. His second fieldwork expedition took place in 1985.

Dr Downing published about 300 articles mostly in English. Some in Danish, French, German, Japanese, Spanish, Serbo-Croatian.

Dr. Downing's more general books on reading include: Reading Readiness (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), and Psychology of Reading (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

Another research interest Dr. Downing has is why girls differ from boys in their achievements in reading. He conducted an international survey in seven countries. He found that American and Canadian adults and children perceive reading as feminine, but in some other countries reading is accepted as appropriate for both males and females. ("A cross-national survey of cultural expectations and sex role standards in reading," Journal of Research in Reading, Vol. 2, 1979, No. 1, pp. 8-23)

Dr. Downing was the founding Editor of Reading-Canada-Lecture, the first journal on reading to be developed in Canada.

In 1973 Dr. Downing's distinguished contributions to research in the psychology of education were recognized in his election as a Fellow of the British Psychological Society. In 1975 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. In 1978 he was elected a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, and in 1981 he was named Fellow of the Canadian Psychological Association. In 1984 Dr. Downing was awarded the International Citation of Merit by the International Reading Association.

Classroom Teaching Experience

Dr. Downing is particularly proud of his own practical record as a classroom teacher. He spent nearly ten years teaching students at various levels from age five upwards. His practical experiences of teaching children to read were combined with his theoretical understanding and research experience in the basal reading series of which he is the author; The Downing Readers (London: Pitman, 1963). He is also co-author of the Young Set Dictionaries (Edinburgh: Chambers), the first dictionaries ever to be designed to satisfy the child's wishes as to what information a dictionary should provide.

Dr. Downing gave evidence, both written and oral, to the British Plowden Commission on primary education and to the British Bullock Commission on reading and the use of English.

Memberships

Dr. Downing was the first President of the United Kingdom Reading Association. He has been a member of the International Reading Association's (IRA) International Development Committee, the Chairman of the IRA Special Interest Group for the Language-Experience Approach, Chairman of the IRA Special Interest Group for International Cooperation in Research and Development in Reading, and Chairman of the IRA Committee on Voluntary Service for Literacy in Third World Countries. Dr. Downing served also on the IRA Committee on Comparative Reading. Dr. Downing was elected to the Board of Directors of IRA for a three-year term commencing 1981. Currently, Dr. Downing is President of the Simplified Spelling Society.

Dr. Downing received Visiting Scholar Awards in Britain (1975), Soviet Union (1976), Australia (1976), Finland (1978).
1987 - Honorary Life Fellow CPA
1987 - Reading Hall of Fame (IRA).

Educational background:

1947-48 Oakley College of Education, Cheltenham, England - 1948
Teacher's Certificate

1953-57 University of London, England - 1957 B.A. Honours in
Psychology (cum laude)

1966 University of London, England - Ph. D. in Psychology

1982 University of London, England - Doctor of Literature

Professional experience:

1949-57 Classroom teacher, various grade levels K-12, England

1958-60 Communications research officer, Unilever Ltd., England

1960-69 Director of reading research unit and senior lecturer
in psychology, University of London, England

1967-68 Visiting Professor, University of California at Berkeley

1981 Distinguished Visiting Professor, Ohio State University
at Columbus

1986-87 Visiting Professor, Université de Toulouse-le-Mirail,
France

Also shorter terms as visiting professor in Australia, Chinese
People's Republic, Finland, Soviet Union

Major areas of professional interest:

Psychology of learning to read; language awareness and reading
development; reading readiness; bilingualism; sex differences;
reading disabilities; literacy development in third world countries.

Dr. Downing gave IRA World Congress presentations in Paris (1966)
Buenos Aires (1972), Vienna (1974), Singapore (1976), Hamburg (1978),
Dublin (1982), Hong Kong (1984), London (1986).

He was on the Singapore World Congress Program (1974-76), French
Language Reading (1982-84), Multiliteracy in Multicultural Settings
(1982-84), German Language Reading (1983-84).

Dr. Downing's last publications were on the Papua New Guinea Research:

1983 Megacognitive readiness for literacy learning.

1986 Experiments in Linguistics and Literacy in Papua New Guinea.