FASCINATIN WITH PSYCHOLOGY AND TEACHING OF READING

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When I look back at how I happened to get into my long involvement with reading and literacy, it seems to have been a combination of deliberate choice and sheer accident. My choice of teaching as a career was deliberate. I thought I would like teaching, and also that it would make possible a college education and a profession in just four years of undergraduate study. Medicine and law require much more time and money.

My four years at City College of New York were the peak experience of my life and my student teaching in the Bronx confirmed what I had expected. I loved teaching. But I had to wait for a teaching position. The year of 1941, when I was seeking a teaching position, was still in the midst of the Great Depression. There were practically no teaching positions available.

By luck, I was offered an assistantship to Irving Lorge, the Director of the Institute of Educational Research at Teachers College, Columbia University. I had no idea, before then, that one could work in education doing research. Nor do I recall that any of my undergraduate instructors in education were engaged in research.

My job was to take notes and to calculate means, standard deviations, and correlations -- it was before computers. Although the work was tedious at times, I found it exciting to be working with people who were helping children and furthering knowledge in a disciplined way. I knew, then, that I wanted to do the same. I was smitten with research.

Thus I came early to my two loves in education: teaching and inquiry. Although research and practice are often seen as different pursuits, I found that for me they had great similarities and were intimately related to each other.

At Teachers College, the project on which I worked sought solutions to one of the pressing educational problems of that time and today: how best to educate juvenile delinquents and how best to prevent delinquency to begin with. Specifically, we investigated whether it was better to place them in separate schools or to provide them with psychological services and an improved curriculum in regular schools. Among the findings (which are still being confirmed today, 50 years later) were that counseling and social services and a curriculum that had a better match with students' achievement were effective in decreasing the number of delinquents in the regular schools -- more effective than placing them in special schools. I realized early how practical research can be.

Several years later I learned a similar lesson at Ohio State University as Edgar Dale's research assistant. Our task was to assist the National Tuberculosis Association by finding

ways to make their pamphlets and other print media more readable for the layperson. This very practical mission led to basic research on readability and vocabulary (the Dale-Chall Readability Formula was developed to help assess the difficulty of the pamphlets). Research and practice were intimately related, with research leading to good practice and real problems leading to useful research. Throughout my long career I have engaged in both practice and research -- usually at the same time. Since educational practice does not leave tracks as does educational research, I should like to mention at least some of the practice I have engaged in. I have taught students of all ages for a half-century. Much of it was at the college and graduate level, but much, too, has been with students at all levels who needed special help with their reading and writing.

I have also worked as an advisor and consultant on children's encyclopedias, on an educational comic book, computer programs, and educational T.V. (Children's Workshop's "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company"). I have consulted with schools and school systems to help them ask and answer various educational questions. I have established and directed the Harvard Reading Laboratory for twenty-six years and the Harvard Adult Literacy Center for seven years.

These practical assignments helped me gain perspective on the important questions asked by teachers, administrators, educational publishers, and the media; and they kept me from being too removed from reality. I learned to make the most out of the knowledge that existed and, unless absolutely necessary, not to say "we need more research" in answer to a question. I realized early that even the most theoretical studies ultimately boil down to such questions as: Is this or that idea more useful? Should this or that be done? If neither, what should be done?

As a member of various investigative and policy-making committees and commissions organized by professional associations and state and national departments of education, and as a member of the boards of directors of various professional groups, I had further opportunity to blend research and practice and to broaden my educational perspective. Also, serving on these committees brought me together with professionals from other areas -- from medicine, sociology, cognitive psychology, industry, etc. -- from whom I learned a great deal.

Focus on Reading. Most of my work, both research and practice, has focused on reading. But this has included a broad range of interests. From time to time I have wandered off to mathematics or to the non-print media. But I soon came back to reading. For me reading offers great challenges related to vast and almost endless issues for research and practice. At the same time, I found reading to be very basic, the bread and butter of education. It is the oldest and most enduring of subjects taught in schools and is an essential foundation for learning almost all other school subjects. It is essential for most jobs in an advanced, technological society.

Studies in Readability. My first research efforts were in readability and vocabulary, an interest I acquired from Irving Lorge at Teachers College and Edgar Dale, my teacher and mentor at the Bureau of Educational Research at Ohio State University. I worked with Edgar Dale on the development of the Dale-Chall Readability Formula and on various studies of vocabulary during my four years at Ohio State. These formative years were followed by 40 years of collaboration on research and writing.

I found readability a fascinating subject for research and application. It was an excellent vehicle for understanding how reading develops by studying the changes that take place in the complexity of texts. Readability draws from many disciplines (humanities, psychology, statistics, language, semantics) and in turn can be applied to textbooks, newspapers, magazines, comic books, and other print media.

The four years of working closely with Edgar Dale also taught me lessons about research that still remain with me. One of the first lessons was the value of past research. After a year as his research assistant, Dale suggested that I write an article reviewing existing research on readability. Although I had been working on readability for a year, I did not feel quite ready to write such an article. To be more accurate, I was terrified. I protested that I didn't know enough. "That is why you should write it," he said. "You will learn from your writing."

I started the research with much anxiety and much agonizing. Why should I do this, I thought. Reviewing past research is not original; I wanted to get on with the new. But after all the fussing, I finally finished it and had to admit it had been a good assignment after all.

I became comfortable with the ideas of earlier researchers. I was exposed to different viewpoints on the topic, some of which were unpopular at the time they were first proposed but later were accepted and became the dominant view. I felt I knew the researchers whose work I had read -- and how they thought. When I met several during the ensuing years, I felt that we had been friends for many years.

I had beginner's luck with that first article. "This Business of Readability" was reprinted in two other journals. But more valuable was the taste for historical synthesis that I developed. My love for this style of research lead to Readability: An Appraisal of Research and Application. My books, Learning to Read: The Great Debate and Stages of Reading Development, also have strong research views. Syntheses were out of fashion for a long time but have come back in favor during the past decade. Becoming a Nation of Readers is a more current synthesis by a commission of which I was a member.

Knowing the past research keeps one from being too swept up with the current fashions. One can assess trends in a field only from a deep grounding in its past theories, research, and writing. It is sad, therefore, to see that current publications tend to refer only to recent writings, omitting even the classic research on a topic.

I learned another important lesson from Edgar Dale: the importance of knowing the related research from fields other than one's own. When we planned a project, he asked if I had checked it out with the psychologists, the statisticians, the sociologists, the linguists. Today, there seems to be little reference in the field of reading to work of others rooted in other disciplines. Perhaps because the reading field itself is so rich in research and publications, no one person can keep up with all of it within reading and in related fields.

Another important lesson I learned from Edgar Dale was to ask for whom one does educational research. For Dale the answer was always clear. All of his studies, including his more theoretical, were designed to be useful in the practice of education in school and out of school. I remember vividly how he helped me realize this after I had written one of my early research reports. He read it, made several editorial suggestions, then said, "Very nice, Jeanne. It is very scholarly. What do you think it will mean to the super- intendent in Winnetka, the fifth-grade teacher in Oklahoma City, the English teacher in Cleveland?" I knew then that I was far from finished. I had much rewriting to do.

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