



## OBITUARY Richard L. Venezky, 1938-2004

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by E. Jennifer Monaghan

### OBITUARY Richard L. Venezky, 1938-2004

**Dick Venezky**, the Unidel Professor of Educational Studies, professor of Computer and Information Sciences and professor of Linguistics at the University of Delaware, died on June 11, 2004, at the age of 66. Professor Venezky had made remarkable contributions to the theory, research, practice and history of literacy. With his death, the academic world has lost one of its most brilliant minds, the history of literacy and literacy acquisition its most important historian, and the History of Reading SIG a longtime supporter, officer, and friend.

Dick's career sparkled with honors. He was the National Research Director for the U.S. Secretary of Education's Initiative on Reading and Writing (1995-1998); President of the Reading Hall of Fame (1996-97); Director of Computing for the Dictionary of Old English at the University of Toronto and Co-Director for Research and Development for the National Center on Adult Literacy (1990-95); scholar in residence at the U.S. Department of Education (1997-98), and Senior Researcher at the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris (1999-2001). In 1999 he was awarded the Distinguished Service Award by the Society for the Scientific Study of Education.

Single author of two books on English orthography (1970, 1999a), coauthor of four other books, coeditor of another four, sole author of at least 21 articles and coauthor of another 19, author or coauthor of 60 chapters in books, Dick Venezky was astonishing in the breadth and depth of his work. His interests ranged from orthography to pedagogy, from adult literacy to computer-assisted instruction, from the relationship between literacy and political participation to the history of spelling and reading instructional texts. Here we focus only on his contributions to the history of literacy, which are in danger of being overshadowed by his other accomplishments.

Although Dick turned his attention to his other interests over the last few years, his contributions to the SIG were profound and lasting. In fact, the SIG might not now exist had he not steered it in its infancy in the right direction. It was he who suggested that a group eager to find a home within the International Reading Association (IRA) should become a Special Interest Group (SIG); he who put us in touch with IRA Executive Secretary-Treasurer Ralph Staiger to effect this; and he who lent his already illustrious name to the first organizational meeting of the History of Reading SIG, held on May 13, 1975, in New York at the 21<sup>st</sup> annual convention of the International Reading Association. Because the fledgling SIG was a last minute addition to the program, we put up hand-lettered signs

advertising Richard Venezky as our speaker. His name drew a gratifyingly large number of people under the circumstances, 16 of whom signed up for the SIG.

Dick was faithful in his support of the SIG over the years. He declined the presidency, but he served as 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice-President for the 1984/85 year and again in 1985/86, and as 1<sup>st</sup> Vice-President in 1986/87 and 1987/88. News items from and about him crop up almost annually in the SIG's *History of Reading News*. They include his "Researchers' Guide" to 19<sup>th</sup>-century textbook collections (1984a) and a news item on his election to the Reading Hall of Fame in 1991. Reached for comment on this honor, Dick remarked, "I am looking forward to receiving my cane and rocking chair" (Dick Venezky enters, 1991).

Although Dick was so distinguished, he was utterly unpretentious. One of the ways he supported history was in chairing or speaking at history symposia at the IRA organized by others, despite knowing the audience would be small. On Tuesday morning of April 30, 1996, at the IRA convention in New Orleans, he drew such vast crowds as program organizer and president elect of the Reading Hall of Fame that giant rooms could not contain them all. Yet in the afternoon, there he was, speaking on "Historical Research in Literacy: The Future," to the faithful few.

Dick's interest in the history of literacy dates at least as far back as his research for his dissertation, which appeared later in book form (1970). He then published his "historical perspective" on research into reading processes (1977). In an "Author's Query" (1982/1983) in the SIG's newsletter, the *History of Reading News*, Dick reported that he was working on the history of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century reading instruction and that he was "particularly looking for any information on Lewis Baxter Monroe and his wife, authors of the *Monroe Readers*." He had to leave this larger history unfinished, but his discussion of schools and reading textbooks between the 1880s and 1940s will soon be published (in press a; see also 1990a).

Happily, Dick was able to complete his work on spelling and spelling instruction. Beginning with the revision of his dissertation, *The Structure of English Orthography* (1970), and continuing with notes on the history of English spelling (1976), he proceeded to discuss the formative years for spelling instruction and reform in the U.S.A. He identified, as key figures, Noah Webster (who introduced "American" spellings such as "center" and "honor"), the 19<sup>th</sup>-century reformer Dr. J.M. Rice, and Franklin D. Roosevelt, a fan of reformed spelling (1980) (cf. 2001a). Dick's work culminated in *The American Way of Spelling* (1999a), which includes chapters on the history of English orthography and on spelling reform.

Elsewhere, Dick outlined what "a modern history of reading instruction" should look like (1986a), commented on literacy, society and school reform (1996), and reviewed a century of NSSE publications on reading (2001b).

Dick was much in demand for contributing to handbooks, particularly the *Handbook of Reading Research*. He wrote on the history of reading research (1984b), the development of literacy in the industrialized nations of the West (1991), and, for an international handbook, on the impact of Christian missionaries on literacy (1999b).

Of Dick's many journal and newsletter articles on literacy history, his "History of the American Reading Textbook" is particularly important and informative (1987). Dick also reviewed the history of phonics (1981) and the origins of the "chasm" between school instruction and adult literacy needs (1982). He discussed the relationships among literacy, literacy instruction, and the emerging history of the book field (1986b). His encyclopedia entries include the history of reading instruction (1994), spelling (2001a), schoolbooks (2001c) and textbooks (in press b).

Dick was also responsible for a major effort on behalf of the preservation and dissemination of primary sources. He selected the sources and wrote the introduction for *The UPA American Primers Collection* (1990b), for which the University Publications of America reproduced old schoolbooks on microfiche. The collection embraces 844 primary sources, ranging from a 1777 edition of the *New England Primer* to an introductory reading textbook of 1943, *Words on Paper: First Steps in Reading*. Published just as the 1980s boom became the 1990s depression and web reproductions of old books began to supplant microfiche versions, this rich resource can be found in disappointingly few libraries.

No list, however, of accomplishments and publications can convey what Dick Venezky was like as a person. He was the last of the Renaissance men: a man who was master of the humanities and sciences alike. There seemed no limit to what he knew. Yet along with his astonishing erudition, Dick was witty and warm, kind and courageous.

Colleagues and friends of Dick Venezky sought for a way to show their appreciation for Dick and his work. Tom Trabasso and Dominic Massaro conceived the idea of a festschrift, and Roberta Golinkoff and Lou Mosberg, with Massaro's help, organized it from the University of Delaware.

On May 22, 2004, the festschrift for Dick was held at the Winterthur Museum, Delaware, and papers were presented in his honor. (See Trabasso, Sabatini, Massaro, & Calfee, in press). Too ill to attend the festschrift himself, Dick spoke to us all from his hospital bed at the end of the day. He liked to begin his talks with a little self-deprecating joke, and he did so again now. "I always thought," he said, "that festschrifts were given to those who were old and wrinkled and white-haired. And lo, as I look in the mirror, this has now come to pass." As we all craned toward the microphone to hear him, there was not a dry eye in the room.

Dick leaves a devoted family: his wife, Councilwoman Karen Venezky, his son Elie, his daughter Dina, her husband Stephen Hahn, and grandsons Benjamin (born on Dick's birthday) and Nathaniel Read, who was born three days after Dick's death and named after him. (Nathaniel's middle name should be interpreted as "Read!").

Those wishing to honor Dick's memory may contribute to the Richard L. Venezky Award c/o Lou Mosberg, Ph.D., School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716. Checks for the Venezky Award should be made out to the "University of Delaware," with "Venezky Award" added to the memo line. Contributions may also be sent to the Jewish Federation, 100 West 10<sup>th</sup>, Suite 301, Wilmington, DE 19801.

Those who have personal reminiscences and photos of Dick are encouraged to send them to Dina Venezky at for a website that is being constructed in his memory.

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This obituary was generously contributed by E. Jennifer Monaghan.



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