

Lou L. Labrant (1888–1991) - Teaching Reading and Writing, Educational Leader, Teaching Teachers

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Lou L. LaBrant served as a language arts teacher and a Progressive-education leader from 1906 through 1971. Born in Hinkley, Illinois, LaBrant began her teaching career in public high schools and experimental schools throughout the Midwest during the first two decades of the twentieth century. She completed an undergraduate degree in Latin at Baker University (1911) and, after making a final commitment to education, pursued an M.A. from the University of Kansas (1925), followed by a Ph.D. from Northwestern University (1932). Her professional career spanned eight decades: She was a founding staff member of the University School of Ohio State University (1932–1942), a professor of education at New York University (1942–1953), president of the National Council of Teachers of English (1953–1954), and head of the humanities division at Dillard University (1958–1971), where she implemented the nationally recognized pre-freshman program for African-American students.

Teaching Reading and Writing

An early and consistent proponent of Deweyan progressivism, LaBrant championed holistic and child-centered approaches to teaching reading and writing. She stood at the beginning of the nearly century-long debate between isolated and integrated instructional strategies for language arts classes. Throughout her career LaBrant focused on student choice in reading instruction. From her first years in teaching LaBrant both promoted and practiced free reading programs at experimental schools and major universities. John Dewey (1859–1952) had argued that educators could not know the exact needs of students in their lives, and consequently LaBrant believed teachers had to provide students with conceptual understanding that could be applied in chaotic and unpredictable situations. Essentially, she argued that the reading process was far more important than the specific works students read. She rejected movements such as Great Books and traditional approaches to the canon of required works of literature.

From a late-twentieth-century perspective, LaBrant also spoke for holistic approaches to writing instruction. Isolated grammar instruction, a traditional approach (often taught through text or workbook exercises), had proved to have little or no transfer to student writing, LaBrant emphasized; thus students needed to choose their own topics and writing forms that would be polished after the piece was written—and if the content warranted polishing. LaBrant often chastised teachers who had students correct surface features of empty, mechanical writing. Her ultimate, though not simple, stance was that students learned to write by writing and grew as readers by reading.

Educational Leader

As a writer, editor (*Journal of Educational Method*, 1939–1943), and educational leader (notably as president of the National Council of Teachers of English), LaBrant voiced her support for integrated language arts methodologies; further, she took a variety of stances on the many issues facing education and humanity through much of her career. Paradoxically, she always believed that reading and writing instruction should not be a separate course, traditionally called English, but an integrated part of all content areas. At the center of many of her beliefs was her contention that language contributed directly to mental health; she warned repeatedly against belief in "word magic"—that saying something could make it happen or be true. Her focus on language instruction was a direct attack on provincialism. She offered, as many Progressives did, the scientific method as the touchstone for growing as a learned individual—a focus she contributed to and carried from her years at the University School of Ohio State University.

Further, she advocated experimental education, especially experimental schools that worked to move students toward content instead of imposing content on the student. As a member of the University School's faculty at Ohio State University, she was

directly involved in the eight-year study concerning Progressive education. Her interest in experimentalism included a call for educational methods to be research-based and child-centered. Since she lived through several back-to-basics movements, she also hoped that progressive measures would curb the many moves to standardized education: in her mind, an approach that stifles students' abilities. Her work in research-based and child-centered educational methodologies places her in the constructivist camp of learning theory and in opposition to the traditional behaviorist slant of public education.

A more subtle contribution from LaBrant was her work with disenfranchised and minority students over her career. She applied her progressive methodologies to Native American students in the Midwest, Hispanic and multiethnic classes in New York (P.S. 65), and African-American students entering Dillard University. Her body of work helps to show that traditional education often failed minority students, and Progressive education could and did help bridge the gap left by traditional schooling.

Teaching Teachers

LaBrant was characterized by those who knew her as a demanding person—a teacher with the highest of standards. Many recognized a rigidity and arrogance in LaBrant. She challenged teachers, especially when training them in the teaching of reading and writing.

Whether in her graduate courses or during her many lectures, LaBrant promoted research-based progressive ideas, presenting them assertively, even perhaps excessively so. She appeared to care little for feelings hurt, and was driven to seek and apply the best practices known at that time to ensure that each student receive the most fulfilling and lasting education possible. In the wake of the advocate LaBrant were devoted followers and a sprinkling of angered opponents.

See also: [LANGUAGE ARTS, TEACHING OF](#); [LITERACY AND READING](#).

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P. L. THOMAS

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