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Paul Witty and Learning to Read With Private Pete in World War II

[Paul A. Witty (1898-1976)]

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During World War II the armed services faced the need to utilize hundreds of thousands of men who were illiterate or poorly literate. Paul Andrew Witty, with an M.A. (1923) and Ph. D. (1931) from Columbia University in Psychology, specialized in understanding the process of learning to read and in developing methods for helping students who were having difficulties in learning to read. With this background, he was called upon to serve as an education officer in the War Department.

In his work for the Army's Special Training Units for literacy instruction, Witty directed the production of numerous adult literacy education materials which today would be known as developing "multiple literacies":

(1) The first film media materials including a 1943 film strip entitled Meet Private Pete which introduced 40 sight words. . In this film strip, soldiers were introduced to Private Pete, a fictional fellow member of a Special Training Unit who was also learning reading, writing, and arithmetic. The idea was that soldier's would be able to identify with Private Pete and understand what they were reading about him because they shared common experiences, such as living in the camp, sleeping in the barracks, eating in the mess hall, and so forth. Witty was apparently the first adult literacy educator to use this approach of trying to motivate adults learning to read by providing a fictional counterpart with whom they could identify.

(2) Witty introduced Army Technical Manual TM 21-500, entitled the "Army Reader" which provided practice in reading the words used in the film strip. The Army Reader was divided into four parts, from least to most difficult, and dealt not only with reading but also writing and arithmetic for daily camp life and meeting family obligations for insurance, allotments for spouses, and so forth.

(3) The first systematic approach to assessing progress in learning to read was introduced by Witty in TM 21-500 by the use of pre- and post-unit tests for each part of the four part manual to determine if the soldier was ready

to progress from one part to the next, more difficult part of the reading program.

(4) A comic strip which appeared in a special newspaper for soldiers learning to read called *Our War* featured Witty's Private Pete and his buddy Daffy in various activities that were frequently aligned with major holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years Day, Valentine's Day and so forth.

(5) The first photo novella for teaching adults to read used real people as models for Private Pete, Daffy, and other fictional soldiers portrayed in materials for soldiers who were getting ready to be discharged from the Army but who had missed entry literacy education in the Special Training Units. In this approach Witty used real people as models for Private Pete, Daffy, and other fictional soldiers and took photos of them engaged in various activities as they prepare to get discharged and as they travel home. The trip home includes a ride aboard a ship that passes the Statue of Liberty. One photo shows a group of soldiers passing the skyline of New York City and a second shows a group looking at the Statue of Liberty. One of the soldiers says, "It is hard to tell how I feel. Everybody has this feeling when he first sees the Statue of Liberty. She has welcomed many human beings to this country. She has furnished hope for many men. To some, she stands for justice. To others, she represents freedom and a kindly feeling for all human beings." In the final pages of the photo novel Private Pete, now civilian Pete Smith and back home again, marries his pre-war sweetheart Mary on Christmas day and they build a home together.

Witty's approach reflected the influence of William S. Gray, one of the founders of the famous Dick and Jane series for children, which provided a model for Witty's use of Private Pete in the Army's literacy programs, and Arthur I. Gates, a leading reading professor at Columbia University. Both of these men were advocates of the "meaning emphasis" approach known as the "word" method. In this method students first develop readiness to read by discussing illustrations from the readers. Then they learn a basic store of sight words used in the readiness training. Then they move on to simple sentences made up of the sight words. In this approach, phonics instruction is postponed until the student can do quite a bit of reading based upon discussion and whole word recognition training.

Positive Outcomes From the World War II Literacy Education

Among the major outcomes of the teaching of illiterates in World War II was the demonstration that hundreds of thousands of adults whom many thought were not capable of learning to read were, in fact, capable of acquiring at least rudimentary reading ability in a fairly brief time, generally less than three months. Furthermore most of them went on to learn and perform

their Army duties in a satisfactory manner.

There are lessons here regarding factors important in teaching reading for children, adolescents and adults. In World War II the functional nature of the material, relating as it did to the daily lives and needs of soldiers, created motivation for learning that may be missed in many instructional contexts. For reading teachers, the main lesson may be that what makes the most difference in teaching reading may not be reading methods such as the so-called "meaning" or "code" methods, but rather an emphasis upon the interests of the readers and an understanding of the factors underlying their desire for learning.