



Reading and the Brain

In a recent article on whether one should be optimistic or pessimistic about America's future, I quoted the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts who wrote in *Commentary* magazine: I remain optimistic in general terms about the United States.... I am far less confident, however, about the nation's cultural and intellectual future. There has been a vast dumbing down of our public culture that may be irreversible. There can be no doubt from the many detailed and reliable studies available that Americans now know less, read less, and even read less well than they did a quarter of a century ago.



As I have been telling my fellow Americans for the last 35 years, in print and in lectures, the way our educators have been able to impose this dumbing-down process in our schools is by changing the way children are taught to read in the primary grades. They got rid of the alphabetic-phonics method, and put in its place a whole-word, or sight method of teaching reading. In short, they decided to teach American children to read English as if it were Chinese, an ideographic writing system. A reader of the above article who was taught to read that way commented:

As I was being taught to read 45 years ago, I can remember being taught to recognize words by their shape; that is, a box was drawn around the word that traced the contours of each letter. For instance, the word "value" would end up having a box around it that looked like a long rectangle with a small square on top of it, halfway along its length, to accommodate the height of the letter "l". I don't know what this method is called, but it seems to have had some effect on me, in that I believe I grew up being a much more image-based learner, which I also believe was detrimental. My wife learned to read much more phonetically and excels me in literary skills. Is there some correlation?

Yes, there is a correlation. The whole-word method used to teach this individual to read was indeed detrimental to his brain's development. It started in the first grade and turned him into a life-long "image-based learner." His wife excels him in literacy skills, because she was taught to read phonetically. We now know through brain scans that the whole-word method of teaching reading does deform the brain.

Stanislas Dehaene, the French neuroscientist, wrote in his book, *Reading in the Brain*, "When children learn to read ... their brains will never be the same again." He writes (p.209):

The literate brain obviously engages many more left-hemispheric resources than the illiterate brain — even when we only listen to speech. Most strikingly, literacy did not only alter brain activity during language listening tasks, but also affected the anatomy of the brain. The rear part of the corpus callosum, which links the parietal regions of both hemispheres had thickened in the literate subjects. This macroscopic finding implies a massive increase in the exchange of



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information across the two hemispheres — perhaps explaining the remarkable increase in verbal memory span in literates.

The brain, as we all know, is divided into two hemispheres. The left hemisphere is the seat of our language function. All human beings are born with this language faculty which permits us to develop speech. The right hemisphere is the seat of the visual function. It is where we develop art, design, perspective, architecture, and visionary functions. When written language first consisted of cave drawings, which were then followed by more complex hieroglyphics and Chinese ideographs, the right brain was used to translate them into language. Thousands of these ideographs had to be memorized in order for one to become a proficient reader. But when the alphabet was invented all of that changed.

The inventor of the alphabet had discovered that human language consisted of only a small number of irreducible language sounds — in English only 44 — and he created a set of symbols to represent those sounds. Thus was created a phonetic way of writing and reading. The invention of the alphabet did for the ancient world what the computer has done for the modern world. You could now do much more with much less. The result was a massive gain in knowledge.

What we have discovered is that the key to brain power is language, and that the key to language power is phonetic reading. The alphabet permitted man to greatly enlarge his vocabulary by inventing new words which could be easily written. With the explosion of vocabulary also came an explosion of ideas that set Western civilization on its course to great inventive development. Dehaene writes that learning to read phonetically “induces massive cognitive gains.”

One of the reasons why the West forged ahead in science and literature and the Chinese remained so far behind was basically because their writing system did not easily permit the kind of powerful language development that took place in the West. But once the Chinese learned to use Western language — English in particular — they have demonstrated that they have the brain power to catch up with the West.

Meanwhile, the American brain continues to shrink in its power because of the way Americans are being taught to read. You cannot use the right brain to perform the language functions of the left brain. When the whole-word Dick and Jane reading program was introduced in the public schools in the 1930s, children were taught to read such literary gems as: “Dick. Look, Jane. Look, look. See Dick. See, see. Oh, see. See Dick. Oh, see Dick. Oh, oh, oh. Funny, funny Dick.”

The children were expected to memorize those words as little pictures. That did nothing to develop their vocabulary or their brain power. Indeed, this method of teaching actually had a detrimental effect on children's brains, which has been demonstrated by the brain scans of dyslexics by neuroscientists. In other words, if you want “massive cognitive gains” you’ve got to teach children to read phonetically.

Eventually, Dick and Jane was replaced by a more sophisticated sight-word method called Whole Language. It even has a philosophy to explain its workings. In a book entitled *Whole Language: What's the Difference?* written by three professors of education in 1991, they explain (p.19):

From a whole language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process, reading is not a matter of “getting the meaning” from text, as if that meaning were in the text waiting to be decoded by the reader. Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provide and the knowledge they bring with them (of language subsystems, of the world) to construct a unique interpretation. Moreover, that interpretation is



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situated: readers' creations (not retrievals) of meaning with the text vary, depending on their purposes for reading and the expectations of others in the reading event. This view of reading implies that there is no single "correct" meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings.

Would you buy a used car from anyone who actually believed in the above? Those three professors know how to read their teaching contracts. They don't want to know their "plausible meanings." They want to know their actual meaning. These three educators are no fools, but they obviously believe that parents are.

The damage done to the brains of little children in our schools can be likened to a non-surgical pre-frontal lobotomy. That is why so many teenagers at the mall look brainless. They comport themselves and even dress as if they were brainless, incapable of a conversation of any depth with an adult. Had they been taught to read phonetically and experienced "massive cognitive gains," do you think they would dress like that or seem so purposeless? Yet, this has been done to them deliberately by their "educators."

What will it take to restore sanity in teaching reading in our schools? Sanity will be restored only when all of those tenured professors in the colleges of education, responsible for the miseducation of American teachers, no longer have the power to continue indoctrinating their students with illogic nonsense.

But if you are a parent who can't wait for that to happen, you'd better remove your child from the public school and do the teaching of the three Rs at home. Several million parents have already done just that, and the result is an army of homeschooled youngsters whose brains are intact and who can read. We must now count on them to save American culture.



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