



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on December 31, 2012

Readingate: The 100-Year Coverup of Educational Malpractice, Part 4

Why has the teaching-methods controversy persisted for so long? Why hasn't it been possible to prove once and for all that intensive phonics — the very method used by Noah Webster to make Americans the most literate nation on earth — is superior to look-say reading instruction? Believe it or not, an attempt was made to do just that by Professor Jeanne Chall of the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1967. Her exhaustive study of teaching methods, [Learning to Read: The Great Debate](#), was conceived as an effort to resolve, once and for all, the teaching methods controversy. But it neither resolved the controversy nor ended the debate. A critic in the *Journal of Reading* (January 1969) wrote:



What prevents Chall's study from achieving respectability is that many of her conclusions are derived from a consideration of studies that were ill-conceived, incomplete and lacking in the essentials of suitable methodological criteria. In her eagerness to clarify these studies she allowed her personal bias toward a code emphasis [intensive phonics] to color her interpretations of the data. ...

It seems rather odd that a researcher intent upon dispelling confusion should have allowed herself to be moored on a reef of inconclusiveness and insubstantiality.

Reviewers in the *Reading Teacher*, *Elementary English*, and *Grade Teacher* were just as critical if not vicious, all of which seriously reduced the impact that Chall's findings had on teachers of reading.

My own experience with the methods problem began more than 60 years ago when, as a college student, I had tried to teach my own immigrant mother to read. Even though she could speak three languages — English, Yiddish, and Polish — my mother, orphaned at an early age and the victim of Old World poverty and neglect, was totally illiterate. So I grew up painfully aware of the terrible handicap illiteracy imposed on an otherwise intelligent person.

I had learned to read in the public schools of New York City and I very much wanted my mother to be able to enjoy the pleasures and intellectual stimulus of the written word. So I started to teach her. I taught her the alphabet, which she learned rather well. But then I had no idea what to do next. So I started teaching her to read whole words in short sentences. She learned to repeat the sentences, but she did not learn to read.

I didn't know what I was doing wrong. I tried to convey the idea that letters stood for sounds, but I did it rather haphazardly, as an afterthought, as if the idea was so obvious that anyone could catch on to it. It's so simple, I thought impatiently; why can't she learn it?



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What I didn't realize — and of course was never taught — is that our alphabetic system is somewhat complicated. We use 26 letters to stand for 44 sounds. We have five vowel letters but 20 vowel sounds — and more than one way to spell many of them. And because the system has many ancient irregularities, it has to be taught in a logical, organized sequence, starting with the simplest regular combinations of vowels and consonants and proceeding to the more complex irregular ones.

Had I known this, I would have known how to teach my mother to read. Unfortunately, my own ignorance was so appalling that I gave up in the attempt and blamed my failure on my mother's inability to learn. What I learned from this sad experience is that one may learn to read very well without knowing or remembering how one was taught to read as a child. Thus, being able to read does not automatically qualify one to teach others to read. It's important to know this fact when considering the idea advanced by former President Clinton of mobilizing thousands of college students as volunteers to teach the illiterate to read. Most of them would not have had the faintest idea of how to go about teaching anyone else to read.

And by now most Americans have no idea that our reading problem is the result of faulty teaching methods. It is assumed that our schools are run by professional educators who know what they are doing. The idea that our schools are deliberately engaged in a conspiracy to dumb-down the country is simply beyond belief. How could an entire respected profession be engaged in something so evil? But what they all recognize is that our graduates are coming out of our high schools with very poor literacy skills and little cultural or historical knowledge.

Indeed, E.D. Hirsch writes in *The Decline in Literate Knowledge*:

In the mid 1980s, American business leaders became alarmed by the lack of communication skills in their young employees. They met to discuss the fact that their younger middle-level executives could no longer communicate their ideas effectively in speech or writing. They wanted to know why, despite the great advances in the technology of communication, the effectiveness of business communication had been slipping, to the detriment of our competitiveness in the world. The figures from NAEP surveys and the scores on the verbal SAT were solid evidence that literacy has been declining in this country just when our need for effective literacy has been sharply rising.

To find answers to the corporate leaders' questions, a major grant was made to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The academy spent 20 years trying to come up with the answers, but only came up with more questions. Here's the Academy's description of what had to be done:

The project is assembling teams of scholars and practitioners from a wide variety of fields to begin the preliminary study of the rationale, means, and consequences of providing universal education. Participants will offer informed but fresh perspectives on the magnitude of the challenge, the opportunity costs, and the potential benefits of such an ambitious undertaking.

"Teams of scholars" means jobs for members of the academic establishment.

Economists, developmental psychologists, demographers, statisticians, historians, cultural anthropologists, public health workers, business leaders, and others, working with representatives from the World Bank and the United Nations, will join with educators to study the environmental, demographic, economic, and cultural impact of universal education. They will develop a set of thoroughly researched, multidisciplinary, and well-integrated reports that will be published, along with critical commentary, by the Academy.

The project included everything and everyone except those who actually knew what the problem was all



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about. All they had to do was read Flesch's book [Why Johnny Can't Read](#), or my own study [The New Illiterates](#), and they would have known what had to be done. But that would have been too easy. The Academy's project became known as the Universal Basic and Secondary Education (UBASE) study and was finally completed in May, 2005. It had been expanded to include education worldwide and never did answer the question posed by the business leaders in the 1980s of why their younger middle-level executives couldn't communicate their ideas effectively. The final report stated:

Five changes are essential to achieve universal primary and secondary education by mid-century: (1) Open discussions, nationally, regionally and internationally, on what people want primary and secondary education to achieve — that is, the goals of education; [Believe it or not they still hadn't decided what the goals of education are!] (2) A commitment to improving the effectiveness and economic efficiency of education; (3) A commitment to extending high-quality secondary education to all children; (4) Recognition of the diverse character of educational systems in different countries, and adaptation of aid policies and educational assessment requirements to local contexts; (5) More funding from rich countries for education in poor countries. [Pleas for more funding are always the first and last resort of establishment researchers.]

In other words, the research team delivered no answers but simply asked new questions, totally irrelevant to the reading problem. That's how the establishment manages to make everything more complex than it has to be. By burying their musings under a mountain of irrelevant data, they made sure that lucrative foundation grants will continue to support the academic researchers in their pursuit of the unknowable. And that is why there is such widespread, self-inflicted ignorance among the top leaders of this country. Those of us who have the answers are simply relegated to a form of social and professional exile that never before existed in American history.

But independent scholar E.D. Hirsch apparently knows the source of the problem. He writes of his son John's experience as a teacher of Latin in high school and eighth grade:

In one of his classes he mentioned to his students that Latin, the language they were studying, is a dead language that is no longer spoken. ... One girl raised her hand to challenge my son's claim. "What do they speak in Latin America?" she demanded.

At least she had heard of Latin America. Another day my son asked his Latin class if they knew the name of an epic poem by Homer. One pupil shot up his hand and eagerly said, "The Alamo!" Was it just a slip for *The Iliad*? No, he didn't know what the Alamo was, either.

Hirsch then quotes Ben Stein, who has his own stories to tell about ignorant youth:

I spend a lot of time with teen-agers. Besides employing three of them part-time, I frequently conduct focus groups at Los Angeles area high schools to learn about teen-agers' attitudes towards movies or television shows or nuclear arms or politicians....

I have not yet found one single student in Los Angeles, in either college or high school, who could tell me the years when World War II was fought. Nor have I found one who could tell me the years when World War I was fought. Nor have I found one who knew when the American Civil War was fought....

Only two could tell me where Chicago is, even in the vaguest terms. (My particular favorite geography lesson was the junior at the University of California at Los Angeles who thought that Toronto must be in Italy. My second-favorite geography lesson is the junior at USC, a pre-law student, who thought that Washington, D.C. was in Washington State.) ...



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Only two could even approximately identify Thomas Jefferson. Only one could place the date of the Declaration of Independence. None could name even one of the first ten amendments to the Constitution or connect them with the Bill of Rights...

It's all very funny to point out the appalling ignorance of our youth. But it is more a tragedy than a comedy. For these ignoramuses are the leaders of tomorrow, and America never became the freest and richest nation on earth out of ignorance.

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