

WHY NOAH WEBSTER'S WAY WAS THE RIGHT WAY

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June 10, 2004

All the confusing and widely quoted “expert” pronouncements on the teaching of beginning reading have obscured the fact that only two ways (or mixtures of those ways) are possible to teach the reading of alphabetic print.

Teaching the reading of alphabetic print by its “sound” is the correct way.
Teaching the reading of alphabetic print by its “meaning” is the incorrect way.

Obviously, if “sound” and “meaning” methods for the teaching of alphabetic print are mixed, then the mixture is incorrect in direct proportion to the emphasis given to the “meaning” method.

The thesis that there are only two approaches (or mixtures of the approaches) in the teaching of beginning reading is a simple one. Yet, in actual teaching, the distinction between the two approaches is consistently blurred and commonly not even recognized. Authors of so-called “phonic” reading programs (and the teachers using them) usually do not know when they have mixed “meaning” into a “sound” program. They therefore do not recognize the barriers they have placed before beginning readers.

Yet, if they had known the history of alphabetic print, they could have seen that they were erecting barriers.

When the alphabet first emerged in a somewhat completed form in the Near East around 1,000 B. C., it consisted only of consonants. Even though consonant sound was used in writing the sounds of speech, the speech could be read back only by its “meaning” (as in "Th cw jmpd vr th mn") because the vowels were missing. A stone from Israel from about 1,000 B. C. shows dots separating words recorded on the stone, confirming that at that time the inscription could be read back only by the “meaning” of those words, not their sounds.

When the vowels were added to the alphabet, in Greece about 800 B. C., it finally had become possible to record speech by the “sound” of speech, and to read it back by its "sound" (ab, eb, ib, ob, ub - ba, be, bi, bo, bu, - ac, ec, ic, oc, uc, etc.). As might be expected, ancient records show that beginning readers of the completed alphabet were taught to separate print into those “sound” -bearing syllables, not into “meaning” - bearing words.

Once the alphabet was completed by the addition of the vowels, children had to learn to read in regular, patterned tables all the “sound”-bearing syllables that could now be formed, before they could deal with those syllables in connected print. The very first stage of reading continued to be the learning of the alphabet by the names of its letters (which did little to demonstrate their sounds, as alpha, beta, etc.). Yet now the second stage was the learning of the syllables those letters formed (alpha, beta = ab; epsilon, beta = eb, iota, beta = ib, etc.) The syllables to be learned were arranged in consistent patterns and were spelled orally (alpha, beta - ab, epsilon, beta - eb, etc.) Once the syllables had been learned thoroughly in isolation in the syllable tables, children were then given texts and taught how to separate the run-together print in the connected texts into syllables, not words. Until about 800 A. D., texts consisted of such run-together print with no separations into syllables, words, or sentences.

Therefore, after the addition of the vowels to the alphabet about 800 B. C., the “meaning” of print had absolutely nothing to do with learning how to read print. Reading print by its meaning, "Th cw jmpd vr th mn", had become the archaic and inefficient method that had been appropriate only for an alphabet which lacked vowels.

The teaching of beginning reading remained unchanged until the eighteenth century A. D. Children first learned the alphabet, and then learned the syllabary, but they continued to spell each syllable as it was practiced, using the current letter names (which still did little to demonstrate their sounds: ell, oh, gee = log). It was only after they learned the syllabary that they read connected texts, usually Latin prayers after about 300 A. D. They then read those texts syllable by syllable until they became proficient readers.

Until the sixteenth century A. D. in English-speaking countries, beginning reading was taught in Latin, and, in much of Europe, beginning reading continued to be taught in Latin until the eighteenth century. Since beginning readers did not yet know Latin, obviously they were reading print purely by its “sound”, and not by its “meaning” (such as Pa - ter nos - ter for Our Father.)

References to reading difficulties do not appear in ancient texts when pure syllable “sound” was the threshold to reading (except for one account in which a father found it impossible for his son to learn the alphabet, which indicated an organic, not teaching problem). References to reading difficulties first appeared shortly after the Reformation in the sixteenth century. At that time, reading began to be taught in the vernaculars in many countries. That meant it had become possible for beginners to read by guessing the meaning of the print since it was now in their own languages whose meanings they knew. Yet they had been unable to guess the meaning of the print when it had been in Latin, since Latin was a language they did not yet know.

In the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal suggested an amended way for beginners to spell the syllables, inventing an alphabet which demonstrated consonant sounds more clearly. Pascal consonant names consisted of the fundamental consonant sound followed by a schwa, which is an indefinite, blurred vowel sound. Now, instead of spelling see-aye-tee, cat, which letter names did not suggest the syllable sound “cat,” it had become possible to spell cuh-ah-tuh, which letter names did suggest that sound. (The ancient syllabary had already demonstrated two sounds for the vowel “a”: open “a” as in ba-by, and closed “a” as in ab-sent.) With Pascal letter names for the consonants (and with the already learned vowel sounds), beginners could figure out the sounds of unknown syllables by themselves. As Diderot or one of his assistants wrote in the 18th century Encyclopedie, this amended spelling method was a big improvement, but it was still necessary for beginners to learn every syllable and to spell every syllable. However, as should also be self-evident (but commonly is not), it is absolutely impossible to blend cuh-ah-tuh together to produce “cat.” Pascal spelling merely suggests the syllable sound but it certainly does not produce it, nor was it supposed to do so. The helpful so-called “blending” is purely imaginary.

Some people in France in the eighteenth century promoted the dropping of oral spelling by beginning readers, and it was touted as an “improvement.” Furthermore, the pure “meaning” approach for beginners was openly recommended in the eighteenth century in France by the Abbe de Radonvillers and by Nicholas Adam, who recommended teaching pure sight words. So, of course, did the famed teacher of the deaf, Abbe de l’Epee. Yet, except for de l’Epee’s deaf students, the teaching of pure “sight-words” was very rare until about 1826, after which it became the norm in English-speaking countries.

After the switch in England about 1545 from teaching beginners regularly spelled Latin syllables to teaching them irregularly spelled English syllables, great problems had arisen in teaching the many variant English syllable spellings. The children were first given the horn book, a paddle with a sheet of paper covered with horn, with the simple syllabary at the top and the Lord's Prayer - now in English - at the bottom. Yet, in no way did that brief material prepare children for the complex mysteries of English syllable spellings, even though it had been adequate for the simple Latin syllable spellings when the Lord's Prayer had been given in Latin. Of course, no such thing as a spelling book in English existed in 1545 (the approximate date of the switch from Latin to English for beginners), because there was no such thing as “correct” word spelling in English before 1545. So, before the end of the sixteenth century, the English spelling book had been invented to deal with the beginners’ confusions with syllable spellings in English. (Edmund Coote’s spelling book, written in 1596 was the most widely used for more than a hundred years. R. C. Alston of the British Library published Volume Four, Spelling Books, in his 12-volume series, A Bibliography of the English Language from the Invention of Printing to the Year 1800, listing the hundreds of different spelling books in English up to 1800). The spellings of words adopted in those spelling books almost immediately became the “correct” spelling, with the result that creativity in spelling was no longer acceptable by about 1600. The “spelling book” consisted of lists of English words to be learned, syllable by syllable, after the basic ancient syllabary at the beginning of the book had been learned. (It is worth mentioning that English dictionaries did not arrive until some years after the invention of the “spelling book.”) Of course, the spelling book introduced reading by the “sound” approach, since it began with the “sound”-bearing ancient syllabary. All words following that were divided into syllables and the syllables were then dutifully spelled in the manner of the syllabary. It was not until the middle of the spelling books that a few short texts were finally included with the word lists.

Noah Webster improved this basic spelling book method by what amounted to the addition of Pascal phonics in his American Spelling Book, which first appeared in 1783 and which was revised in 1804. (Webster revisions after 1804 should be disregarded.) Webster's incredibly complete and easy to use phonic table was apparently inspired by Thomas Sheridan's brilliant 1780 phonic dictionary, and not directly by Pascal, of whom Webster very probably never heard. Documents from the late eighteenth century up to the 1820's establish that Webster's brilliant "sound" method speller was not only massively used for beginners in America from 1783 to 1826, but was unfailingly successful in curing the "disease" of illiteracy.

Unfortunately, by 1826 in English-speaking countries on both sides of the Atlantic, a very large and loosely organized opposition was in place to promote the teaching of beginning reading by the "meaning" of print instead of by its "sound". The use of spelling books for beginners was attacked, and, in particular, Webster's speller was attacked - sometimes viciously. Although the movement from "sound" to "meaning" had really surfaced only about 1826, it was astonishingly successful by about 1830 (although those facts are virtually unknown today, and can only be confirmed by checking materials printed at that time). Therefore, by about 1830 on both sides of the Atlantic, spelling books had been pushed up to the upper grades, and beginners were given little sight-word primers instead (John Wood's in Scotland being one of the famous ones, and in America the Franklin Primer and Worcester's).. Sight words had arrived, to stay, in the teaching of beginning reading in English. The movement to "meaning" for beginners was so successful that poor old Webster even wrote a primer himself in 1832 to precede his wonderful speller, although he gave phonic directions for its words.

However, it is painful, indeed, to read what Webster wrote in his "Appeal to the Public" in March, 1826, when the opposition to his speller had still been limited to the writing of competing spellers with watered-down phonic keys. Until 1826, the prospect of omitting a spelling book for beginners had been, quite literally, an unthinkable thought. In reviewing large numbers of beginning reading materials before 1826, I did not find a single sight-word primer published before 1826. It was in 1826 that two famous sight-word primers arrived (which were not true primers like the New England Primer), and by 1830, sight-word primers had become the norm for beginners. Yet the movement to displace Webster's speller from its near control of the market had actually begun with the writing of such watered-down spellers, starting about 1818, Webster wrote the following concerning that spelling-book opposition up to 1826. Of course, he did not yet know that the opposition to his spelling book for beginners would only greatly worsen in 1826, the year in which the flood of sight-word primers began. Webster said in 1826:

"In order to accomplish their object, it has been expedient to depreciate my work and to charge me with innovation and with introducing a system of orthography and pronunciation in many respects vague and pedantic... Surely if this is true, if my book is really a bad one, I have been very much deceived, and I have done not only an injury but great and extensive injury to my country."

Some people certainly were in the very act of doing "great and extensive injury" to America in 1826 by the promotion of sight-words, but it was certainly NOT Noah Webster!

By 1830 in English-speaking countries (not just America), progress had marched dutifully backward, to 1,000 B. C. Spelling books for beginners were dropped on both sides of the Atlantic. Beginning reading was once again being taught by the "meaning" of whole words in print. By about 1860 in America, even the oral spelling of those whole words was dropped. The movement back to "meaning" and the dropping of oral spelling (whose only purpose had been to fix the visual memory of "sound"-bearing syllables) were presumed to be great improvements by the know-nothings who were oblivious to history. The near universal literacy that had been produced by Webster's speller and those like it was fading into the past. Instead, and predictably, reading and spelling disabilities exploded in the wake of the "improvements." Again, only a review of materials printed in those years can demonstrate the truth of that statement.

Today, although "phonics" is presumed to be taught in some places, the meaning of the word, "phonics," has become as shifting as the meaning of "democracy" in the constitution of the Soviet Union. Whether or not the "phonics" is good or bad can only be judged by the two sentences which appeared at the beginning of this essay:

Teaching the reading of alphabetic print by its "sound" is the correct way.
Teaching the reading of alphabetic print by its "meaning" is the incorrect way.

If these two statements are considered to be true, then no connected, “meaning”-bearing texts should EVER be given to beginning readers until they have become adept at reading long lists of multisyllabic words in isolation. Furthermore, each word in such lists should be learned by concentrating on the sound (or absence of sound) of ALL its letters, and, most particularly, on the sound of its vowels. It is noteworthy that Noah Webster did not introduce connected text in his fantastically successful 1783 and 1804 phonic “sound” spelling books (any later revisions should be disregarded) until a high degree of competence had been reached. Webster’s very first “meaning”-bearing sentence did not appear until well into the body of his speller. It was, “No man may put off the law of God.”

So, today, just as was true in Webster’s speller, words should be presented with no attention whatsoever to their meaning, but with great attention to syllabic divisions. Further, as was true with Webster’s speller, beginners should orally spell each word as it is learned, syllable by syllable, (but with Pascal letter names, not alphabet names). Attention should be focused on the sound of every letter, regular, irregular, or silent.

I suggest that every beginning reading program, and most particularly those assuming a “phonic” label, should be judged as outlined above, by comparison to Webster’s “sound” approach speller. Any “phonic” program which introduces any “meaning” bearing sight words, and most particularly which introduces connected “meaning” bearing texts, before beginners have become proficient readers of the “sounds” of syllables and words, should either be discarded or revised.

It is entirely possible to revise many “phonic” programs by removing the objectionable “meaning”-bearing sight words, and by postponing the reading of the programs’ “meaning”-bearing texts until the beginners have become proficient readers of the programs’ “sound”-bearing word lists. Beginners should learn to read those word lists purely by their letter “sound” and with absolutely no reference to word “meaning.” Furthermore, just as in Webster’s speller, they should be given lists of multi-syllable words to learn. In the beginning stages of reading, the emphasis should always be on the syllable sounds in words.

Phonic programs which introduce “meaningful” texts for beginners to read, before beginners have become proficient in reading word lists containing ALL phonic elements, are fostering the very bad habit of “meaningful” context guessing. Giving connected texts to beginners to read, EVEN IF THE TEXTS CONTAIN ONLY THOSE PHONIC ELEMENTS TAUGHT UP TO THAT POINT (“short ‘a’ words,” for instance) fosters the production of reflexes for reading by “meaning” while it simultaneously weakens reflexes for reading by “sound.”

Noah Webster was right. The first thing to teach little children is how to spell orally and then how to read, by their letter “sound”, long lists of multisyllabic words in English. “Meaning” should have nothing whatsoever to do with the initial stages of literacy. However, once the children’s decoding has become automatic, they have become independent readers and are then ready for reading “meaningful” texts. As was true for little Webster-taught children before 1826, children can then pick up the Psalms in the Bible and read them fluently - or can read anything else, for that matter.

Note: “Sound” or “meaning” approaches result in different and opposite conditioned reflexes in the brain, at the associative level. The nature of these reflexes is discussed in my recent paper, [The Born Yesterday World of the Reading Experts, a Critique on Recent Research on Reading and the Brain](#). That paper can be downloaded without charge from the Education section of the [donpotter.net](#) website, or can be bought in paper form from [AuthorHouse.com](#).

From the Author

My above five-page article is self-explanatory. Please feel free to quote the complete article or any portion of it. I think the facts need to be known.

Comments from the Internet Publisher

Donald Potter

6/11/04

It gives me enormous pleasure to publish Ms. Rodgers' enlightening article on the donpotter.net web site. Fourteen years of classroom experience working with beginning readers and dyslexics convinces me that Ms. Rodger's perspective on Noah Webster and teaching students to read "from the sounds" instead of "from the meaning" is without a doubt correct.

Good copies of Webster's *Spelling Book* are available for FREE download on the Education section of my web site: donpotter.net. Several different publishers are making the 1824 edition available. Inexpensive facsimiles of the 1783 ed. are available from *The Noah Webster House*: <http://noahwebsterhouse.org/>