

Knowledge translation in early years reading instruction: a tale of two paradigms

Pamela
Snow



Why simply putting phonics ‘into the mix’ does not constitute effective reading instruction.

I have written and spoken many times about the knowledge translation crisis that prevents findings from cognitive psychology research on early reading being delivered to the hands of the profession that needs this information more than any other: teachers. The reasons for this are no doubt multi-faceted, but at the top of my list would be that:

- This research is not carried out by education academics, who, in the main, have selected a cosy space in the empirical shade when it comes to using evidence derived from studies that may appear to them to be ‘remote’ from classroom practice, and so able to be dismissed as having low classroom relevance.
- Education academics typically focus on conceptualisations of reading as a ‘meaning-based activity’ embedded within such postmodern constructs as critical literacy and socio-cultural influences on the learner, but without sufficient attention to the individual cognitive and linguistic processes at work and skills that the reading novice needs to master. This manifests as an ideological divide between education academics on the one hand and health and psychology academics on the other. Let’s be clear: reading has no socio-cultural significance or currency for people who cannot access the code.
- Education academics are not typically schooled in or favourably disposed towards the scientific method as this pertains to quantitative research. I suspect this makes it difficult for them to critically appraise the merit of studies that employ complex study designs and statistical analyses, so it’s easier to simply reject the entire paradigm and be busy in a space that feels more familiar and comfortable. Focusing on important but intellectually less rigorous aspects of early literacy, such as ‘quality children’s literature’ is a fig-leaf that does a poor job of covering up this lack of regard for the knowledge that needs to be made available to pre-service teachers. This manifests as an epistemological divide between education academics on the one hand and health and psychology academics on the other. It’s also sadly ironic that the only group that seems to blame parents (via their socio-economic status) for low literacy levels is education academics, thereby diminishing the professional and social/public health importance of the work of classroom teachers everywhere.

One would have to wonder, however, who this cognitive psychology evidence is being created for, if not for classroom teachers? Perhaps cognitive psychology researchers have been complicit in the knowledge-translation crisis, naively assuming that strong findings from well-conducted research and reviews would be enthusiastically and *automatically* picked up and used by academics in teacher

pre-service education. Sadly, this isn't how it works. The shift in recent years to more open-access publishing and sharing of research via social media undoubtedly helps to overcome the invisible divide between disciplines, but relies on teachers being active on social media platforms and open to different ways of conceptualising and approaching their work (which, of course, many are).

Paradoxically (and frustratingly) pseudoscience has been fast-tracked into schools, often via teacher pre-service education, where it has in many cases been welcomed with uncritical open arms. I've blogged about this previously, but obvious examples here include learning styles, multiple intelligences, coloured lenses and overlays for struggling readers, Brain Gym, and a range of non-evidence based ideas about learning (every child learns differently; we only use 10% of our brains; notions of left-brain, right-brain learners). What do these ideas have in common? A superficial face-appeal that does not require in-depth knowledge about human cognition and neuropsychology. In fact, they are incompatible with such knowledge bases. So failing to provide pre-service teachers with some rigorous foundations in these fields creates the fertile conditions in which pseudoscience can flourish and charismatic ideas are transferred into practice.

Whole Language-based reading instruction (and its more recent metamorphosis, Balanced Literacy) is a good example of an idea that found its way into the education water-supply and is now extremely difficult to eradicate. I sometimes hear people say, "No-one promotes Whole Language any more", but this is at best naive and at worst, a wilful misrepresentation of the lineage of instructional approaches in modern classrooms, many of which are simply a re-branding of Whole Language.

I wonder how many pre-service teachers learn about the contested history of reading instruction, and are taught about the fact that many of the approaches that are presented to them as lore, have weak or non-existent scientific evidence to support them? If you don't know this history (and everyone with a stake in this space should know it), I recommend you read this [excellent summary by Stephen Parker](#).

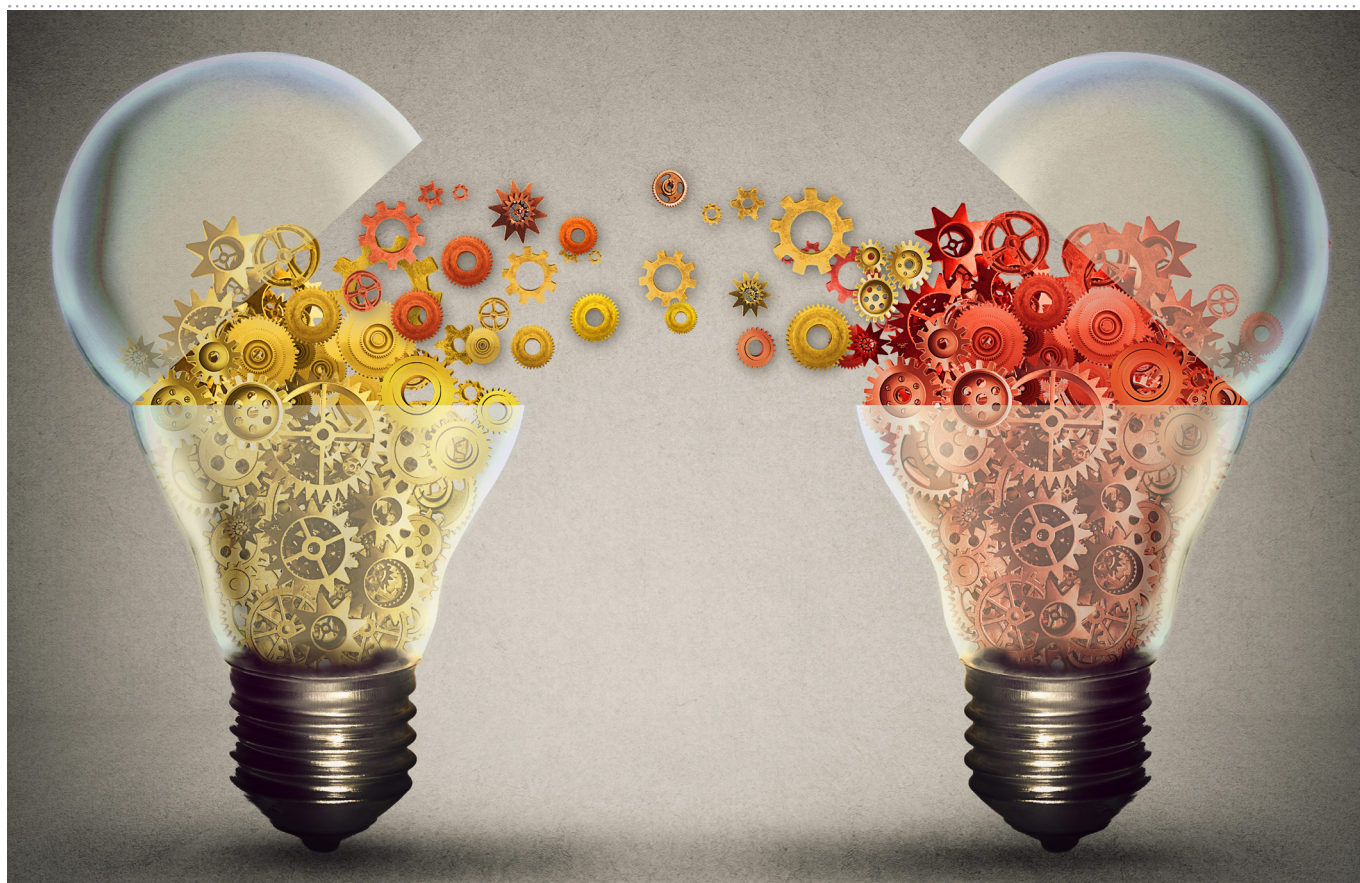
Examples of such approaches that are

*Paradoxically
(and frustratingly)
pseudoscience has been
fast-tracked into schools,
often via teacher pre-
service education, where
it has in many cases been
welcomed with uncritical
open arms*

often promoted in pre-service education and by government departments of education, include Three Cueing (also known as Multi-Cueing, or Search Lights), the Four Resources Model, and Balanced Literacy. None of these approaches were mentioned in any of the recommendations arising from three international inquiries into the teaching of reading (USA in 2000; Australia in 2005, and UK in 2006), yet they are treated as lore in many education pre-service and policy arenas. I am frequently struck, too, when I give presentations to teachers, by the fact that so few of them (maybe one or two in a room of 100) are aware that there was a national inquiry in Australia into the teaching of reading. Rather than airing the report and critically appraising its basis and recommendations, education academics would prefer, it seems, to pretend that the inquiry didn't take place. Interestingly, when [I wrote an open letter to student teachers](#) "outing" some of these difficult truths in 2018, this became my most accessed post since I commenced the blog in 2013.

Lest anyone think otherwise, it's important to note that knowledge translation is a dynamic rather than a static process. It requires us to play the probabilities with respect to where we focus our energies, recognising that we can't call on high-quality published research to support every decision and every practice. We do, however, need to base policy and practice recommendations on a sound theoretical understanding of what the process of reading is (cognitively and linguistically, as well as socially and culturally), so that teaching practices meet the needs of as many children as possible, regardless of their starting point on school-entry.

What knowledge translation does not look like, however, is selective cherry-picking and quote-mining of scientific research and reading inquiries, sprinkling key documents with words such as "phonics" and "decoding", as a form of appeasement to those lobbying for greater rigour in early reading instruction. The question is not whether phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, morphology, comprehension, and fluency are "in there somewhere", but rather how they are positioned in relation to each other with respect to scope and sequence



of instruction and the level of background teacher knowledge required for effective reading instruction.

The “phonics is in the mix” argument results in massive confusion for teachers about the role of context and inferencing in early reading instruction, with Whole Language/Balanced Literacy advocates effectively positioning this as a “decoding strategy” (aka “psycholinguistic guessing”, as per the writings of [Kenneth Goodman](#)), while advocates for empirically-derived cognitive psychology research agree that context is important, but in most cases, as a means of accessing meaning, after initial decoding, as conceptualised in the [Simple View of Reading](#).

Reading instruction is not a fruit-cake – it is not OK to throw a range of tasty, multi-textured ingredients into the bowl and then present the finished product of “my favourite recipe”.

It is impossible to control the quality of children’s pre-school experiences, but we do have some control over what goes on in early years classrooms, and we need to exercise that control for the benefit of all children. Rather than issuing children and their parents with lottery tickets on school entry, this means providing a level, high-quality playing field, based on the best possible interpretation, at this point in time, of the available research evidence.

Knowledge translation is taken for granted in medicine, engineering, aviation, architecture, and a raft of other fields, but is not yet business-as-usual in education, where, as [Dr Louisa Moats](#) observed in 2000:

Unfortunately, lack of rigor and respect for evidence in reading education are reinforced by the passivity of education leaders who feel that any idea that can muster a vigorous advocate is legitimate and deserves to be aired. (p. 12)

Even more unfortunately, not a great deal has changed in the nearly 20 years since these words were penned.

Professor Pamela Snow is Head of the La Trobe Rural Health School, at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University. She is both a psychologist and speech pathologist and her research interests concern early oral language and literacy skills, and the use of evidence to inform classroom practices.

In January 2020, Pamela is taking up a new appointment as Professor of Cognitive Psychology in the School of Education at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University.

Teaching reading is an intellectually challenging activity that needs highly trained professionals who have engaged, and keep on engaging, with the research evidence