

The discipline of reading

“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.” – Dr Seuss, *I Can Read With My Eyes Shut* (1978)

It should come as no surprise to anyone that, as Manager of the MultiLit Literacy Centre at Macquarie Park, I am a fan of reading. Reading is an essential skill for children and adults alike. It provides opportunities to increase vocabulary knowledge, as texts present new words in a written context. It has the potential to open the door to academia and analytic thought. Sustained reading of longer texts allows us to gain the full picture and see the world through different perspectives. It is essential for deep learning. It is also a great way to relax on a lazy Saturday afternoon.

When I began teaching in the early 1990s, it was a different time. My students had started to enjoy the availability of screens and games, but they were nowhere near as pervasive as they are today. Screens now appear to be such a big part of our existence both at school/work and in our leisure time. A major source of knowledge is now YouTube or Google. Connections are often sought and developed through social media. And why wouldn’t we choose these options? They are quick, visual and we can quench our ever-growing curiosity about just about any subject at all in a much shorter time.

As educators we have responded to this change. We have incorporated more screen-based activities into our classrooms. We use smartboards to present content with summarised information, pictures and videos. Students use laptops to ‘research’ (often choosing the first search result on Google) and type assignments using spell-check, reducing the need for handwriting and spelling skills.

I fear that student ability to attend to and read in detail large sections of text appears to be decreasing. I worry about our endless efforts to innovate and make teaching relevant to 21st century learning. Are we losing sight of the very purpose of reading – to motivate and inspire further investigation and deep learning? Are we failing to provide students with the opportunity to extend themselves and grow into discerning, informed investigators of truth? I worry that we and our younger generations are losing the discipline of reading.

I have had an increasing interest in the term TL;DR (Too Long Didn’t Read). Originally coined as an acronym used on blogs to encourage more succinct written entries, it can also reflect the attitude of many readers today when faced with a more lengthy document or text. In a recent article written for the Journal of the English Association, author and English professor Lahiri laments the ever-increasing trend from younger generations to use skimming or simply not reading prescribed texts at all.

Our undergraduate students specialise in skimming, not because they are young and lazy (which of course they may be) but because they specialise in the vertical, extractive, rapid reading that is crucial to functioning in an internet-based environment (p. 2).



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Lahiri suggests a possible solution in her article (p. 5):

As we teach our students the forms of reading that we hold dear, in which we have staked our personal and professional lives, perhaps we can teach them, as well, to seek out the long texts that are most worthy reading – more worthy than an endless stream of inflammatory and addictively short tweets.

We are living in a time when we are surrounded by a 24-hour news cycle. Hitting saturation point with information, we are often convinced by a news headline or sound bite. I am a big fan of Twitter and enjoy flipping through a wide range of opinions but how often do we stop and actually read the article? I am increasingly aware, when I take the time to do so, that contributors can, intentionally or unintentionally, misinterpret and misrepresent information. More and more our society requires less explanation and detail. We can all be guilty of forming an opinion without doing our homework and reading the details. Misinformation can thrive in an environment that does not require evaluation and thoughtful response.

Australia's new Children's Laureate and award-winning author, Ursula Dubosarsky, has [recently criticised the growing trend](#) toward renaming school libraries as 'information and resource centres' and making them paperless work spaces. She has expressed concern that younger readers may not develop a lifetime appreciation of reading and therefore lose the opportunity to develop creativity and enjoyment of reading through fiction. In her two-year term titled *Read For Your Life*, she hopes to raise awareness that reading often drops off after primary school and that it needs to be developed as a lifelong habit.

Reading is a dying art, that's the sad possibility ... Reading is a lifetime project, it's not something you learn, and that's it. To be a good reader you have to read all the time. It's like learning to swim but only doing one lap. You won't be able to save yourself.

According to recent [Organisation](#)

[for Economic Co-operation and Development data](#), students who read for enjoyment score an equivalent of one-and-a-half years of schooling above those who do not. An analysis by the Australian Council for Educational Research of [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study \(PIRLS\) data](#) reported that over *one third* of participating Australian students in Year 4 were not confident readers and indicated that they did not like reading. Students have the opportunity to make substantial gains through frequent and sustained reading. Many are missing out on this opportunity.

We know through the ever-growing body of evidence in support of the science of reading that reading development is not natural. While spoken language develops for the vast majority of children incidentally by listening to and conversing with others, reading needs to be taught and taught well. As stated by [Castles, Rastle and Nation \(2018\)](#), reading is "a learned skill that typically requires years of instruction and practice" (p. 8). From novice readers learning to crack the code through to skilled readers conducting expert-level analysis, effective classroom instruction is key to student literacy.

Children firstly need to understand how written text relates to sounds in order to decode text. This requires explicit instruction. Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension are the keys to reading success. But our responsibilities as educators do not end there.

Students then need to make the transition from decoding text to orthographic mapping through frequent reading practice. This process is described as phonological recoding by [Share \(1995\)](#). To facilitate this process, students need to develop and maintain good reading habits. They need to read worthy and notable texts, and then to analyse those texts with the aim of gaining author's insights and perspectives. All very well in theory, but how does this play out in classroom practice? In my opinion, we need to ensure classroom programs include the following non-negotiables:

1 Systematic, explicit instruction in how the alphabetic code works

(including syntactic and grammar conventions) [should be a key focus](#) for early learning in the first three years of schooling.

While it is estimated that up to 5% of students enter schooling with knowledge of letter-sound correspondences, [the majority of students require](#) systematic, explicit phonics instruction to learn to read effectively. Without this, students will find reading difficult and be more reluctant to read. We should not make reading a guessing game that requires hard work and negative attitudes. I have heard teachers express concern about directly teaching phonics, grammar and syntactics because they are worried they will turn students off reading. The opposite is actually true. Give them the beginning tools and foundations they need to succeed. Students who do not obtain these basic skills in the first three years due to learning difficulty or complexity of learning profile should urgently have access to small-group or individualised explicit instruction. All students should have the best chance to learn to read.

2 Students then need to regularly apply these foundational skills in context.

Early-year instruction is important but our work as educators does not stop here. Application of these foundational skills is essential to reading at a higher level because it leads to the [development of orthographic mapping](#). We need to ensure students keep reading. Orthographic mapping refers to the process of learning letter strings and is developed through applying initial letter-sound correspondence knowledge to increasingly complex text. These important skills are not likely to develop unless students are reading widely, deeply and often. Reading should focus on finding information that is relevant and contextualised so students can see direct relevance of building knowledge through reading. The ever popular activity in classrooms 'DEAR' (Drop Everything and Read) is only of value if students have sourced or are provided with meaningful and suitably levelled texts – both fiction and non-fiction.

3 We should continue to have these expectations with progressively



harder texts as students move into higher grades and beyond primary school.

Teachers need to have high expectations of what and how often students read in their classes. Set background reading as a homework activity and discuss it in class. Share reading in all its different forms in all subject areas. Expose students to different genres and authors. Read to learn. Read for fun. Hold students accountable for reading and set expectations. If students have an opinion on a particular topic, require them to produce evidence and further information, arming themselves with information against opposing perspectives. Without reading, students are missing an opportunity to develop deep knowledge of their subjects including specialised vocabulary. Background knowledge is the key to comprehension. Deep subject knowledge is the key to inquiry and high-level analysis.

4 Model a love of reading yourself.

In an examination of the cognitive basis of reading development [Willingham \(2017\)](#) describes the behaviours that are most likely to create expert readers. There is a cycle in play – the more a

person reads, the better reader they become and the more they enjoy reading. Enjoyment leads to more reading, and positive experiences in reading lead to recognition of the value of it. It is common to see reward systems for reading, particularly in primary school settings. Willingham expresses concern about these schemes because they may undermine the development of intrinsic motivation to read.

5 Set yourself reading goals, both professional and for pleasure.

Increase your knowledge of best practice instruction through journal articles and professional readings. Often as educators with limited time we skim through readings because they will be the subject of our next professional learning group or staff meeting. Reading regularly and in depth allows you to make informed choices in your own professional practice. Reading for pleasure can also provide you with the opportunity for relaxation – something we tend to forget to do as we complete marking, programming and any number of administrative tasks in our time away from students. It is difficult to communicate the importance of reading to students if you do not value and prioritise it yourself.

Reading is a discipline. It does not come naturally and it takes years of instruction and a lifetime of reading to be an expert. We often, as educators, want to instil a love of reading in our students, but it is through skilful teaching and continued high expectations that students will get there. Gone are the days when most students will choose to read for fun out of school hours on their own. It is up to us to make meaningful opportunities within our classroom programs, including providing a range of texts, to inspire students to read for pleasure and for meaning. We need to ensure that we, as a profession, value and prioritise reading ourselves to ensure we are providing the best quality instruction for our students.

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