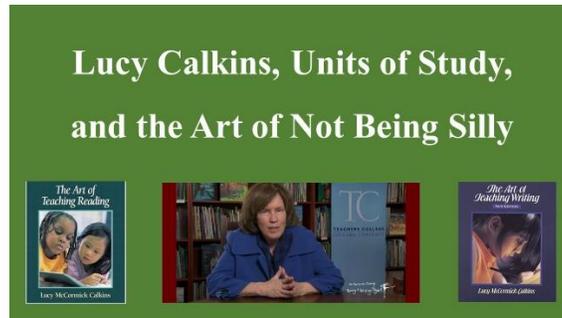


Lucy Calkins, Units of Study, Balanced Literacy, and the Art of Not Being Silly

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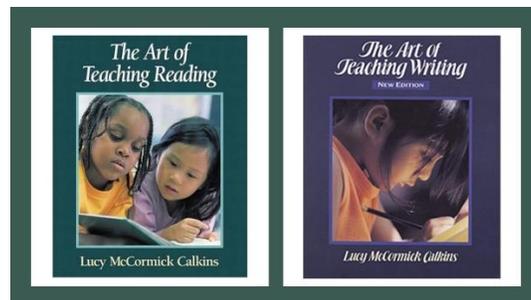
It's always good to have a boogey person if you're trying to create a story line. Every protagonist needs an antagonist. Christ needs anti-Christ. Dudley Do-Right needs Snidely Whiplash. Bugs Bunny needs Elmer Fudd. Luke Skywalker needs Dark Vader. Harry Potter needs Lord Voldemort. Dorothy needs the Wicked Witch. Snow White needs an Evil Queen.

And the Science of Reading community needs Lucy Calkins to carry the plotline. In this two-dimensional morality play created by American Public Media and The Reading League, Emily Hanford has become Luke Skywalker to Lucy Calkins's Darth Vader.

Before the force is with us, a bit of context may be helpful.

The Art of Teaching Writing and Reading

Lucy Calkins wrote the first edition of her book, *The Art of Teaching Writing* in 1986. She wrote, *The Art of Teaching Reading* in 2000. Lucy has made tremendous contributions to our understanding of how to teach literacy ... along with many others such as Donald Graves, Constance Weaver, Frank Smith, Ken and Yetta Goodman, Louise Roseblatt, Nancy Attwell, Brian Cambourne, Richard Allington, Marie Clay, James Gee, Jerome Harste, Don Murray, Jane Hansen, Ann Haas Dyson, Peter Elbow, Stephen Kucer, Robert Tierney, and P. David Pearson – among others.



Calkins's early work provided insight in how to best enable all children to achieve their full literacy potential – But at the end of the day, Lucy Calkins does not represent balanced literacy or meaning-based approaches to literacy instruction. At the end of the day, Lucy represents Lucy. She

speaks for Lucy Calkins. She is promoting her books, her programs, her products, and her Units of Study. And that's good. That's the way it should be.

Lucy Calkins doesn't represent the International Literacy Association, the International Literacy Educators Coalition, or anybody else. She doesn't represent meaning-based educators. She doesn't represent those who opposed the Science of Reading mandates. And she doesn't speak for those of us who advocate teacher empowerment, smaller classes, better pay and working conditions for teachers, adequate health care, and economic opportunities. Her voice has been silent on issues related to equity and social justice in education. These are all variables that impact literacy learning far more than any program or method. Focusing on Lucy Calkins merely diverts attention from addressing the root causes of literacy learning difficulties. Focusing on Lucy Calkins or the Science of Reading serves only to reify the blatant inequities and injustices inherent in our educational, political, and economic systems.

Units of Study

Many in the Science of Reading community are critical of Lucy Calkins and her Units of Study program used for reading and writing instruction by New York schools. Some call Units of Study a curriculum, some a method, some a project, and call it some a series. It really doesn't matter what you call it. It is a thing that teachers in Brooklyn are supposed to use to teach reading and writing. It's an external thing imposed on them by somebody outside their classroom. This thing came from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, part of Teachers College at Columbia University.



Three things to consider about any product, program, curriculum, or series that's purchased for educational use:

1. Any product, program, curriculum, or series that requires special training to be used should not be used. That includes Orton-Gillingham, LETRS, as well as Units of Study. If it's so gosh darn complicated, it's most likely to be too cumbersome to be practical. The best ideas in education are the ones that are practical. The most practical ideas are the ones that are simple.

2. Any product, program, curriculum, or series that requires you to use it with "fidelity" should not be used. If you don't use it with fidelity, you are by definition and infidel. Authoritative dictators and kings have infidels. Reading programs should not.

Using a program with fidelity usually means following a script or recipe exactly as written. This is educational malpractice. Students are not standardized products. They vary greatly based on levels of poverty, ethnicity, race, environments, and experience. Teachers should always ... **ALWAYS** adopt and adapt any program, methods, approach, strategy, or lesson to the learners with which they are working.

Always. To do otherwise is to engage in educational malpractice. Yet, that's what the for-profit reading programs want you to do. They offer scripted programs to hide the voice of the teacher, and separate teachers from their own expertise and experience, and in so doing force teachers to commit educational malpractice on a daily basis.

3. There are no magical one-size-fits-all programs, curriculums, methods, or approaches. Sorry. There is no best method. To think otherwise demonstrates an arrogance of certainty that is certainly unwarranted. This arrogance is brought about by a naïve understanding of science. Reading research is not a settled science. Real science is never settled. The field of literacy continues to grow and evolve. There are no simple answers to complex issues. One or two studies never settles an issue for all students, for all times, for all situations, and for all purposes. Doing research with real children in a classroom is much different from doing research with bacteria in a petri dish.

There is no such thing as *“thee”* most effective method for teaching reading or anything else. There are effective methods or effective strategies and effective approaches – but the effectiveness of any strategy or approach is determined by how it's used as well as the students and situation. What's best for some students in some situations for some purposes may not be best for others. At the end of the day, *“best”* is determined by what best enables students to create meaning with print (read) and use print to create meaning (write) to address real world issues and circumstances.

It's the Teacher Stupid

It's not the product, program, curriculum, methods, or series. It's the teacher. The teacher is the most significant variable in determining the quality of education our children receive, including reading instruction. You can't buy your way to good reading instruction. You can't mandate your way to good reading instruction. You can't “standards” your way to good reading instruction. You can't test your way to good reading instruction. You can't legislate your way to good reading instruction. You can't bully your way to good reading instruction. You can only educate your way to good reading instruction. This means educating teachers.

Teachers need, and should be held accountable for, continued legitimate professional development. This is different from LETRS or Orton-Gillingham or Units of Study training.

Legitimate professional development occurs over time and includes opportunities for teachers to interact, experiment, assess, and reflect. It also includes opportunities to continue to develop bodies of knowledge related to learning and human development, the research process, reading research, pedagogical strategies related to literacy, reading instruction, and assessment, among other things.

Purchase a Program

Meaning-based literacy educators are not reliant on any external products. If New York city or Brooklyn schools any school purchased Units of Study thinking it would be the answer for all problems related to teaching reading and writing, we can conclude that they need legitimate professional development for administrators and curriculum directors. How ignorant of you. How ignorant of you. You merely substituted one for-profit thing for another for-profit thing. Any for-profit program is ultimately for profit and not for people. In other words, if it comes down to including a research-based perspective that would limit sales but enhance literacy, or a sketchy perspective (like the Science of Reading) that would enhance sales but limit literacy, for-profit publishers will *always* choose the sketchy perspective. That's just the way it is. And then they'll pay some experts to have a sketchy perspective and print their sketchy perspective on the inside cover of their products to promote them.

This is a fact of life in a market-based economy without proper restraints: If it comes down to profit or people, for-profit entities will always put profit first. That's just the way it is.

Balanced Literacy and Units of Study

Units of Study is something you buy. It does not represent balanced literacy. Yes, it could be used in a balanced approach to literacy instruction, but so could the McGraw-Hill Wonders program. These are tools. Any tool's effectiveness is determined by how it is used. You could adopt and adapt even the most scripted program and create a balanced approach to literacy instruction if you refused to follow the script and instead follow your students.

A balanced approach to reading instruction is not a scripted thing. It's not a method, program, curriculum, or series. A balanced approach is not Units of Study. A balanced approach is one in which skills instruction is balanced with opportunities to use those skills in authentic reading and writing experiences. What that balance is, is dependent on your readers. Some need more of one thing and less of another. Some need less of one thing and more of another. Children are not standard products.

Units of Study does not represent balanced literacy. Balanced literacy is a description, not a thing. Again, balanced literacy is a balance of skills instruction with opportunities to use those skills in authentic reading and writing experiences.

Skills instruction, in a balanced approach to reading instruction should include things such as: phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, vocabulary, word identification, and word recognition. If fluency is a problem, activities to develop fluency should be included. If word recognition is a problem, maze and cloze activities should be included along with simple writing activities. There should also be (a) daily reading practice [the more the better], (b) daily writing activities, and (c) talk and social interaction around books and writing. That's what balanced literacy is. It's not Units of Study.

No matter what product, program, curriculum, approach, or series you use, you can make it balanced by including a sufficient amount of daily reading practice – in which children choose the books they want to read. You would also include daily writing practice – in which children choose their topics and write about their experiences. In the same way, you can make any program unbalanced (sometimes called structured), by focusing on reading subskills at the expense of reading real books and authentic writing experiences.

Structured Literacy is Really Controlled Literacy

The Science of Reading community calls for structured literacy. The term sounds good. Structure is always a good thing. Nobody likes chaos.

There's a continuum with chaos on one end and control on the other. Structure is a sliding scale between these. Unfortunately, when the Science of Reading community uses the term "structured literacy" they really mean controlled literacy. Here, every element of reading instruction is controlled.

1. Teachers are controlled by giving them tightly scripted curriculums that must be followed with fidelity.

2. The content is controlled. All students are taught a prescribed set of skills in a predetermined order in a specific way.

3. Learning is controlled. Standardized tests are used to determine achievement. Learning is defined only by test performance.

4. Reading material is controlled. Students only get to choose their reading material when they're done with their work – meaning when they've completed their worksheets. Otherwise, they're forced to read what's in the program, whether they want to read it or not.

5. Vocabulary is controlled. Students are given books that use “decodable” texts with controlled vocabularies to reinforce letter sounds.

6. Knowledge and what counts as knowledge is controlled. Only a very narrow range of research methodologies are deemed appropriate science. Knowledge generated by controlled experimental research is deemed the only knowledge that counts.

7. What is taught at universities is being controlled. Reading laws and policies determine what is taught, not a wide body of research. We can and cannot be taught is reinforced through accreditation and licensing of teacher candidates.

[Podcast: The Reading Instruction Show](#)

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