

## Problems Court Session:

# HOW DO WE PICK OUR HEROES: A SECOND LOOK

## THE SHOE THAT FITS

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The question that we're addressing here was first raised at the 1986 Forum meeting. We were troubled that reading educators seem inclined to accept the reported results of certain studies as inspired truths and to reject — or worse, to ignore — perfectly reasonable critiques or alternative interpretations of the same, or similar, data. Our case in point was the almost total acceptance of Durkin's (1979) conclusions about comprehension instruction in contrast to the almost total dismissal of Heap's (1982) cogent critique and sensible alternatives. The discussion that followed led us to make two summary statements.

First, there are many other instances where valid results and sensible alternatives are rejected or ignored even as others are embraced and assimilated into the folk beliefs and ways of the profession.

Second, we believe that there must be identifiable reasons why reading educators are willing to accept certain pronouncements without so much as a raised eyebrow and to summarily dismiss other, perfectly sensible suggestions.

Building on last year's base, then, we shall attempt to identify factors that impel us to embrace certain ideas at the expense of others and to examine the effects of such factors in selected instances. My remarks are directed to the identification of factors and my colleagues consider specific instances. Perhaps through discussion of such matters we will move toward more discriminating ways to select our heroes.

In the first place, I think our hero-selecting routines are, at the very least, convoluted by our less than robust conception of reading education as a proper discipline. I've addressed that concern elsewhere:

I've always been dazzled by the ability of reading educators— be they engaged in research, model building or instruction— to find important implications for the teaching of reading in virtually every field of human endeavor. We extract inferences for the development of reading proficiency and for the remediation of reading problems from such diverse areas as psychology, sociology, social psychology, neuro-psychology, neurophysiology, internal medicine, pharmacy and computer science. I suppose we're inclined to grab whatever we can wherever we can because "reading" itself has neither substance nor product. Anyway, sensible and justified or not, all the seeking and extracting from diverse areas does add spice to the literature of reading education and vigor to the lives of reading educators (Otto, in press).

My cynical side says that we're irresistibly drawn to those we perceive as our betters when we seek our heroes, just as we're irresistibly inclined

to accept any words that are spoken with a colonial British accent as undeniably scholarly and unquestionably authoritative.

Yet my rational side sees a strong alternative to my observation from the cynical side. When they pick their heroes, I think that reading educators — at least the ones who see themselves more as practitioners than as researchers — are drawn to researchers who address practitioners' concerns and who speak in the parlance of teachers. By and large, researchers tend to be content to pursue issues that best serve their interests, without particular regard for application; and practitioners, by and large, are content to practice what seems sensible — or, at least, expedient — without particular regard for what the research says. Yet, when a researcher addresses their concerns and speaks their language — as Durkin has done in her now classic study of comprehension instruction — reading educators roll out the red carpet.

Greg Myers (1985) speaks to this point in an article titled, *The Social Construction of Two Biologists' Proposals*.

Myers' stated purpose in the article is "to read two scientific texts as products of a community of researchers, to see what they can tell us about composing as a process of social construction;" he chose grant proposals for analysis because proposals are the most obviously rhetorical writing scientists do and the writing that has the most immediate effects on the structure of the discipline. While he does not contest the view that peer review of proposals is like a murder trial with a jury of ax murderers from the same gang, he argues that proposal writing is part of the consensus-building process essential to the development of scientific knowledge. The proposal-writing process, Myers says, shapes both the writers and, to a lesser degree, the discipline.

While Myers' analysis is worth pursuing for its own sake, one can find two particular inferences that help to explain reading educators' apparent preference for Durkin over Heap. First, in spite of the *Journal of Reading Behavior* article that he prepared specifically for reading educators, Heap still stands outside the community of reading educators. That is, he has not convinced reading educators that his work gives sufficient attention to their words, ways, beliefs, and aspirations to be taken seriously. Second, to find credence in a given community, writers must make their texts fit in two ways — with their citations and with their

terminology. That is, to gain wider acceptance by reading educators, Heap would need to make more use of their parlance and their literature in stating his case.

So how do we pick our heroes? Fats Grobnik summed up for me, like this: You'd like to be able to walk in the footsteps of your heroes . . . so you look for shoes that fit.

Now, I'm not sure that finding a comfortable fit is a **proper** basis for choosing our heroes; but I do think, at least for now, that it's an important consideration. It would be nice, then, if we had a bigger pool of heroes to choose from.

One possible approach to increasing the size of the pool is described by Jeanne Fahnestock (1986). Her analysis of what happens as scientific observations pass from research reports intended for peers into popular accounts for a general audience is the basis for suggestions that could help researchers and practitioners to accommodate new knowledge to existing beliefs and practices in ways that would be acceptable to both the researchers and the practitioners . . . and assure a more comfortable fit.

## REFERENCES

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