
Scripted Reading Instruction? What's a Teacher Educator to Do?

For years, Ms. Commeyras resisted teaching her elementary education students about scripted reading instruction. But now she has decided that it is less important to convince them of the superiority of a particular method than to prepare them to enter their first classrooms with the confidence and flexibility they need to succeed.

BY MICHELLE COMMEYRAS

WHY NOT learn to teach reading from a script? What role does improvisation play in teaching reading with a lesson plan or even with a script? Does a teacher who knows more about phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation teach more effectively from a script than one who knows less about these domains of reading?

As an external evaluator for Georgia's "Reading First Initiative," funded under the No Child Left Behind Act, and as a university teacher educator, I find myself pondering these questions. Every school receiving Reading First funds in Georgia must use a core reading program. Some core programs require teachers to read from a script to deliver explicit, systematic reading instruction (e.g., Reading Mastery Plus and the Voyager Core K-3 Reading Program).

The scripted reading instruction of today comes, in one way or another, from Siegfried Engelmann and Carl Bereiter, who in the 1960s developed the direct instruction method of teaching reading to raise the academic success of inner-city children.¹ The pedagogy of a fully scripted teacher's guide has an even longer history. In 1888 Samuel and Adeline Monroe pub-

lished one of the earliest texts for teachers with complete scripts for teaching reading readiness, phonics, and oral reading.²

My observations of scripted reading lessons have

MICHELLE COMMEYRAS is a professor of reading education at the University of Georgia, Athens.

me thinking anew about prior assumptions. My history with the scripted teaching of reading consists of three experiences. The first experience was in 1990 while I was studying for a doctoral degree in literacy education. I was curious to see for myself what a direct instruction approach to teaching reading was, because of the critiques I was hearing. I visited a school where the program, Direct Instruction System for Teaching Arithmetic and Reading (DISTAR), was well established.³ The teacher I observed was reading from a script in the teacher's manual. She was animated, and the children responded confidently, fulfilling their part as the audience. While I admired the lively interactions, I thought the text bizarre. It was about the adventures of a fly. The teacher asked questions about where the fly went and what misadventures he had. It seemed they were engaged in such low-level comprehension as identifying explicit question-answer relationships.⁴ It seemed doubtful to me that reading an anthropomorphic story about a day in the life of a fly was edifying.

My observation of the DISTAR reading lesson occurred at a time when I was researching teaching for critical thinking through dialogical discussions of text.⁵ I was presenting schoolchildren labeled "learning disabled" with stories that had content that allowed us to discuss a central question in which there were at least two plausible conclusions. For example, we read Sheila Greenwald's simple and short book, *The Hot Day*.⁶ We identified reasons to support two possibilities. Did the central character run away because he was scared or angry? Then we evaluated the truth and relevance of our reasons to arrive at a defensible conclusion.

The scripted questions about the adventures of a fly seemed antithetical to teaching critical thinking. These were questions that could be answered directly from the text, and this was a far cry from my interest in teaching a philosophical conception of critical thinking to teachers so they could facilitate discussions of text that elicited "reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to do or think."⁷ I had read a study of a direct instruction approach to teaching critical reading⁸ and found it unsatisfactory because dimensions of critical thinking were taught as separate skills, as opposed to the way they occur in concert in real discussions and arguments.

My second experience with scripted teaching occurred much later. In 2003 I showed my university students a video that profiled teachers at Walton Elementary School in Central Texas using Reading Mas-

tery (formerly called DISTAR) and teachers at Bear-den Elementary in Alabama using Project Read, published by Language Circle Enterprises.⁹ Afterward, my students sincerely asked, "Why don't you teach us that?" They meant Reading Mastery, the program credited with bringing about student gains on Texas' mandated test of reading.

"What's to teach?" I asked, probably with a shrug of my shoulders and an edge of sarcasm in my voice. "That is scripted reading instruction. What would we do? Sit around and practice reading scripted lessons?" But I do understand why preservice teachers wanted to know why they were not being given the structured and prescriptive method of teaching that purportedly had yielded gains on a mandated assessment. I too was once a first-year teacher searching for how to successfully teach a lively group of sixth-graders.

My most recent experience with scripted reading instruction happened during my first observation as an external evaluator for Georgia's Reading First. I went to a school where the core reading program was Reading Mastery. The school had been using Reading Mastery for several years, and both the principal and literacy coach were enthusiastic about the students' progress as readers. In the kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, I observed that both teachers and students were on-task, teaching and learning letter sounds and reading words. The pace was quick. Teachers and students were lively and purposeful.

I now have observed many more classrooms with teachers delivering scripted reading lessons. My interest has been piqued because of the differences I have seen in teachers using scripted lessons. Some teachers taught more expertly, in my opinion, than did others, despite the fact that they were all following a teaching script. Some teachers using a script seemed to be making strategic decisions about what child to focus on for particular questions. They sought to maximize the success for individual students by picking and choosing who would be asked to do what so that everyone experienced some level of mastery. Some teachers allowed multiple responses to a question, while others moved on after one correct response.

Scripted teaching, I now realize, is not necessarily as robotic a practice as the critics make it out to be.¹⁰ Perhaps like talented actors who bring to life the script of a play, there are talented teachers who can breathe life into a teaching script. There has yet to be a study of the different ways that teachers deliver reading instruction from a script. I wonder if there are qualita-

tive differences and whether they result in differences in children's reading achievement. Given that I have taken on the role of external evaluator of Georgia's Reading First and that some core reading programs being used are scripted direct instruction, I feel ethically obliged to adopt an open mind. This is consistent with my commitment to being a critical thinker as a researcher and educator. A critical thinker remains

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open to changing her conclusions based on new evidence and sound reasoning.¹¹

Given the number of schools adopting scripted reading instruction, I find myself wondering: Should I include scripted reading instruction when teaching university students who are preparing to be elementary school teachers? The question surprises me. During the 16 years I have taught reading methods courses, my goal has been to prepare teachers to make informed instructional decisions based on their knowledge of reading as an orchestration of interrelated cognitive processes. I have taught that reading print requires the successful use of multiple cueing systems (graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, and structural). I have promoted the use of student-posed questions in discussions of text to teach critical thinking for comprehension.¹² I have encouraged teachers to be readers and to bring their personal knowledge of reading skills, habits, and attitudes to the teaching of reading.¹³ I have argued that improvisation plays an important role in teaching reading.¹⁴ I have advocated being a literacy animator,¹⁵ which means I embrace an ideology of "sharing, solidarity, love, equity, cooperation with and respect of both nature and other human beings."¹⁶ As a teacher educator, I think of myself as an intellectual and encourage teachers to take an intellectual stance in teaching reading. Scripted reading instruction has seemed the antithesis of what I thought important as a teacher educator. How can I bring scripted reading instruction to preservice teachers while maintaining my commitment to reading teachers as knowledgeable professionals?

I confess that during my 16 years as a teacher educator I have been disturbed by anonymous student

course evaluations because there was always more than one student who wrote, "I still do not know how to teach reading." This seems the worst indictment imaginable. I think what these students meant was that they had not acquired a step-by-step method for teaching reading at every grade level. They had no recipe, no menu, and certainly no script for teaching reading. For this subset of students, it was not sufficient to have learned about the processes involved in reading and methods of instruction that could be adapted to teach a wide variety of students.

As a teacher educator, I have thought it my responsibility to prepare new teachers for a variety of school instructional settings. In some schools, all teachers are required to use the same basal reading program with a teacher's guide. In other schools, all teachers follow the same constellation of teaching methods that constitute an overarching program. And there may still be schools where teachers have the professional autonomy to design reading instruction according to the needs and abilities of their students by drawing on a repertoire of teaching methods.

It never occurred to me that it was my responsibility to prepare new teachers for a scripted reading program. I assumed it was a method of teaching that did not depend on prior education in teaching reading. It was my impression that anyone could use a scripted teacher's manual to teach children to read. But now I wonder. Perhaps those who have learned that reading written language involves accuracy, fluency, self-monitoring, and comprehension are better at scripted teaching.

In Georgia's Reading First initiative, one of the responsibilities of literacy coaches is to organize teacher study groups to learn more about the five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) that are endorsed by the National Reading Panel and that make up its definition of scientifically based reading instruction.¹⁷ Literacy coaches in districts where the core reading programs require teachers to use scripted lessons will be providing professional development on reading and teaching methods. The presumption is that there is more to learn about reading even when one is using a scripted reading program.

Perhaps I *should* include scripted reading instruction when teaching preservice teachers. Perhaps this would provide grounding for those students who currently leave my courses thinking they have not learned how to teach reading.

I have begun using a continuum that represents differences in the locus of decision making with regard to who develops reading lessons and an overall plan for reading instruction. On the left end is instruction developed by those outside the classroom, and on the right end is instruction developed by the teacher. I use this continuum to examine with preservice teachers different approaches to reading instruction. Over a series of class sessions, we look at a variety of reading lessons and watch videos of different types of reading instruction, such as

- a scripted lesson from Reading Mastery or Voyager;
- a guided reading lesson as defined by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell;¹⁸
- a basal reading lesson from one of the major publishers; and
- a teacher-developed literacy lesson, such as the one demonstrated in the video of kindergarten teacher Claudia Taxel of South Jackson, Georgia (http://ctell.uconn.edu/sample_play_anchor.htm).

Each session culminates in a discussion of where the reading instruction belongs on the continuum. In these discussions we explore the planned versus the improvised on the part of the teacher. How does the teacher modify the lesson plan or script to provide differentiated instruction for students? Does the degree of specificity in a planned or scripted lesson need to differ depending on the instructional goals? For example, does a tightly scripted lesson make more sense in teaching letter/sound correspondences than it does when teaching new vocabulary or critical reading comprehension?

My preservice students consider where on the continuum they want to be for their first teaching position. Still, I need to prepare them to teach reading lessons from lesson plans they write, from a basal teacher's manual, and from a script and to consider more practically what matters in meeting the needs of the children before them. I doubt that this or any approach can entirely eliminate the anxiety of preservice teachers who seek certainty that they are ready to teach all children to pass mandated reading tests. But it does create a basis for thoughtful consideration of the possibilities. Furthermore, my students understand more clearly that the way they will be teaching reading is determined in large part by the school district that hires them and how much autonomy teachers are afforded there. During the interview process, I want them to ask about what approach to teaching reading is expected of all teachers and how such decisions are made.

New teachers will soon learn what other experienced teachers know. What holds currency today may be gone in a year or two or three. Pragmatically, I see no sense in preparing prospective teachers for any one approach, whether it is explicitly scripted direct instruction, balanced instruction, or the whole-language philosophical approach. New teachers need foundational knowledge of teaching reading to be ready for whatever mandates or choices await them in the schools where they will be teaching.

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Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
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