Theory to Practice

Core Presuppositions of the Balanced Reading Paradigm

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the author's transition in theory forma-tion and practice from an embrace of whole language reading theory to a bal-anced reading perspective while managing an LVA-based adult literacy pro-gram in Hartford, CT. This personal narrative occurred amidst a shift within the national LVA Basic Literacy tutoring training program in the 1990s from a theoretically under-defined eclectic reading methodology toward a moder-ate embrace of whole language literacy pedagogy. This transformation took place amid a broader national critique of whole language reading theory, based on what the author refers to as the "phonemic revival." Following Pressley's (2002, p. 59) approach to balanced reading instruction, the article argues for the mutual validity of what is commonly referred to as "contextual" and "de-contextual" forms of instruction, to the extent that each mode contributes to the longer-term goal of enhanced student reading, and also, to literacy de-velopment. I define the latter as the acquisition, expansion, and utilization of meaningful knowledge through the appropriation of print-based texts.

Overview

As a program manager who has spent the better part of his 35-year career at the ground level of adult literacy education practice, I have been personally and professionally invested in how adult literacy students learn to read. I have expended much energy in my practice and research in reviewing the content of what they have read, the vari-ous modes and methodologies of adult literacy instruction, and how the volunteer tutors, who made up the program's primary tutoring pool

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that I managed for 17 years, have sought to assist them. Given the diversity of the students and tutors who participated in the program, the response was varied. Nonetheless, certain trends have surfaced at the level of direct practice that reverberated with broader institutional and theoretical movements within adult reading and literacy pedagogy over the previous two decades. I explore this interface through a historical reflection of my role as a participant-observer in a local program while providing an analysis of the broader institutional factors and academic discourses that have shaped these issues in what follows, specifically, the tension between whole language and phonic-based approaches to adult reading instruction and various modes of mediation between them. What has emerged within my own practice as well as within an important stream of literature on adult reading instruction is a "balanced" approach to instruction as both a fruitful heuristic and a potentially formal theory that proponents draw upon to mediate the polar tensions of the "reading wars" in adult literacy instruction (Reyhner, 2008).

The relationship between reading instruction and the broader field of adult literacy theory is a complex matter, one critical to a comprehensive understanding of the discourse on the balanced reading paradigm. Whether from the perspective of functional literacy, critical pedagogy, or the new literacy studies (Demetrion, 2001), the content of adult literacy instruction and the varied programmatic contexts in which it is embedded matter profoundly in the shaping of the relationship between the written word and the world encountered through the text (Freire & Macedo, 1987). I draw on a model of literacy "that obviously includes reading as a major component, but isn't defined exclusively by it" (Demetrion, 2003, p. 3). I argue that literacy is, at its base, a symbolic sign system (a cultural signifier) in which print text, as one variable, is mediated through various personal, local, and broader cultural factors that give shape to its context. Such mediation is played out in the relationship between power and knowledge construction, in the case at hand, in the interface between the U.S. political culture and the pedagogy of adult literacy education (Demetrion, 2005a). Campbell (2006) argues similarly in her observation that "a balanced approach [does not include simply reading the word, but] addresses the sociopolitical and economic dimensions of reading" the world in the very process of adult learners engaging the text in the classroom setting, "with a view toward making changes within their lives and communities" (p. 2).

Personal Reflections

Before entering the field of adult education in 1983, my only experience in teaching reading was that of home tutoring a 17-year old male who was suspended from high school. Possessing no background in reading theory or instruction, I drew on my intuition and common sense to work with this student, mostly though non-fiction texts, which we discussed. I kept lists of words he had difficulty pronouncing or understanding, which we worked on after completing the assigned narrative text of the day. My student could struggle through basic texts and possessed basic decoding capacity, but his comprehension and pronunciation of certain multi-syllabic and difficult mono-syllabic words, required attention.

This basic approach of building on the core strengths and interests of students while accounting for their gaps served as a guiding framework when I began to work with adult literacy students and their tutors in 1987. In leading what was initially referred to as Basic Reading tutor training workshops at Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH), I became familiar with the LVA-based four-part methodology of incorporating phonics, word patterns, sight words, and language-experience approaches within an instructional plan (Cheatham, Colvin, & Laminack, 1993, pp. 46-75). I viewed these methods as operating constructs that required fine-tune adaptation according to each person's fluency in reading and approach to learning. I based this assumption on the notion that the key factor was not the viability of any set of methods, but the necessity of identifying and building on each student's learning edge and the need to infuse that operational space with a great deal of facilitative, or "scaffolding" instruction.

During the early 1990s, the LVA national organization shifted its focus from an eclectic, theoretically underdeveloped, partially deficit perspective on reading to an explicit student-centered whole language philosophy in "bringing" or "constructing meaning" to "authentic texts" in providing adult literacy instruction (Cheatham, Colvin, & Laminack, 1993, p. 16-17). The agency incorporated this pedagogical transformation into their two pivotal texts, Small Group Tutoring: A Collaborative Approach for Literacy Instruction (Cheatham & Lawson, 1990) and Tutor: A Collaborative Approach to Literacy Instruction (Cheatham, Colvin, & Laminack, 1993). This new impetus drew my attention to whole language reading theory, where I gravitated to the writings of Frank Smith (1988, 1997).

Notwithstanding the change in nomenclature and the symbolic importance of the shift from Basic Reading to Basic Literacy (Cheatham,

Colvin, & Laminack, 1993, p. 5), with modest adaptations, Tutor en-
grafted the traditional reading techniques of the earlier training model
(pp. 46-75) into its revised text. While the new edition did not com-
pletely integrate all of the core features of whole language philosophy
into a fully coherent approach, the LVA training moved toward such
a direction in its functional definition of literacy (p. 5), its philoso-
phy on reading instruction based on the importance of meaning mak-
ing (pp. 6-17), and its integrated emphasis on process writing (pp.
76-97). Neither of the LVA texts nor my approach was as radical as
Smith's virtual rejection of phonics instruction. Nonetheless, by the
mid-1990s, I had a language and a working framework in whole lan-
guage reading theory for what seemed like a comprehensive philoso-
phy of adult literacy education to orient what was increasingly becom-
ing, in Hartford, a small group tutoring program (Demetrion, 2005b).
In short, the impetus on whole language reading theory embraced by
LVA and reinforced in the broader literature provided a mode of ex-
plicit theoretical understanding, particularly of the relationship between
reading and literacy that I previously had not possessed.

As documented in Pearson's (1999) Reading in the Twentieth Cen-
tury, the whole language "revolution" hit an unanticipated road block in a
phonemic revival of massive proportions (pp. 28-29), which gained con-
siderable currency through Adam's (1994/2001) widely read Beginning
to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print. The phonemic revival made
a powerful impact not only in K-12 schooling, but also in adult literacy
circles. Programs that heretofore placed phonics in a marginal, or at most,
a modest, position began to elevate its importance, sometimes placing it,
in the dominant role for adult literacy reading instruction.

In LVGH (where I worked initially from 1987-1996), this impe-
tus resulted, in the late 1990s, in an embrace of the highly structured,
multisensory, phonemic-based Wilson Reading System® (WRS). The
Basic Literacy small group tutoring program typically met for two ses-
sions per week. In response to the new phonemic impetus, program staff
structured one session exclusively on WRS instruction for students at all
reading levels. The second session typically allocated one hour for as-
signments from Reading for Today, a text-book series that incorporated
basic skill building reading activities and selected passages designed to
stimulate reading comprehension. Each class had discretion in selecting
supplemental materials for the remaining thirty-to sixty minutes of the
second session. The whole language impetus upon which I structured the
program, particularly from 1993-1996, was fundamentally altered and

replaced by a skills-based reading program where reading the word became more central than reading the world through engaging the word.

When I returned to the agency in 2000, I was assigned to a community-based program management position for several years where I operated various neighborhood tutoring centers. In these sites, I had complete discretion in setting the instructional program, for which I drew on a wide array of texts, mostly those available through the major adult education publishing firms. As I had previously, through these resources, as well as narrative collections of student writing from our program and other locations, in the community-based programs I maintained the focus on the literacy development of students through meaningful texts and a variety of language- and skill-based activities organized around the approximate reading level of each group. I did not embrace the emphasis on phonemic instruction promoted at the main center.

Nonetheless, after viewing numerous phonic-based tutoring sessions, I became increasingly appreciative of the value of helping students develop their phonemic sensibilities. I observed how actively engaged many of the students became in their own learning process through the WRS multisensory instructional process and concluded that real learning was taking place. However, I did not accept the assumption that phonemic mastery was the master key in assisting adults in learning how, or in increasing their capacity, to read. I also did not think that a phonemic emphasis was equally useful for students at the mid-range and higher ends of the pre-GED literacy continuum.

However, I began to incorporate what I viewed as a more balanced approach, still, with a strong inclination toward more holistic methodologies based on assisted reading, language experience, and the importance of rich content-based instruction. Such an orientation, I believed, was critical in tapping into zones of learning and motivational drives not easily accessed through excessive focus on isolated skill work. I concentrated on what Purcell-Gates (1997) identifies as a "whole-part-whole" (p. 6) approach in teaching phonics, especially through word pattern activities and sight-word memorization of key words from the narratives we studied. I also included, where I deemed relevant, word learning activities, such as sight word memorization — regardless of whether the selected words came from the "authentic texts" that drove the main lesson — attention to affixes, and systematic, as well as analytical approaches to phonics instruction (Pressley, 106-116). While I leaned toward the meaning making continuum of balanced reading theory and methodology, I freely incorporated what is commonly

viewed as "de-contextual," skilled-based activities where I deemed they would be useful. I came to embrace an increasingly metaphorical understanding of literacy in viewing all language-based activities as sign systems of broader meaning-making endeavors. Whether I focused on phonemic mastery, sight word memorization, or took some broader approaches to reading skill development, from word recognition to comprehension, "the critical factor remained the same:"

> That is, the importance of stimulating thinking throughout the learning process, whether of sounds in words, whole words by sight or of the content of what is read. Perhaps this is where syntax and meaning come together, in the mediation of thinking through active learning as a symbol-making process of making sense, whatever the specific learning task may be focused on (Demetrion, 2003, p. 3).

The result was a balanced perspective to reading instruction that I incorporated into the agency's instructional philosophy when I assumed responsibility for the main BL program in 2004. This re-focusing of reading theory provided the framework for a life application curriculum focus that included attention to civic awareness as well as basic skill reading development. For this we created a three-ring binder format of materials gathered from various adult education resources that we constructed for five distinctive reading ability levels. Each level binder contained a section on basic skills in the areas of phonics, sight words, and vocabulary development, as well as sections on employment, family literacy, health awareness, civics, money management, and human interest narratives. In support of the binder concept, I constructed a philosophical rationale that included the following explanation:

> Instructional materials are a means and not an ends. Their value is in their capacity to stimulate important and interesting knowledge and learning. The mastery of the materials in the binders as an end is only important to the extent that any lesson focuses on specific content students actually need, such as accurately filling out a job application. Short of that, the materials serve as a pathway in the stimulation of learning and knowledge creation rather than having intrinsic value in their own right. Materials may be viewed as a symbolic medium that helps to transmit the learning that matters to students in which the goal of instruction remains the mastery of

the latter. Thus, mastery of the material in the binders is not the end point of instruction; they are a medium toward the goal of highly effective and relevant learning (Demetrion, 2005c, p. 2).

The binder-based curriculum provided structure and flexibility to enable tutors and students to determine which aspects of the instructional materials to focus on as well as opportunities to incorporate additional materials beyond the assigned texts. Material utilization and selection required discernment in evaluating how much emphasis to place on basic skill development and how much to concentrate on the contextual areas of work, parenting, civic engagement, health, and money management (Campbell, 2006, pp. 4-5). While those in each group made their own specific instructional selections from the given texts (and had access, as well, to the program's computer lab), I provided strong consultative support by assisting tutors in selecting specific topics, exploring various methodologies, and assessing the learning and motivational dynamics of their students.

Core Presuppositions

It is maintained by proponents that the balanced reading approach provides a more satisfactory framework for interpreting how students learn to read than those presented by the advocates of either whole language or phonemic-based perspectives. This case is succinctly made by Purcell-Gates (1997), who argues that "most reading theorists…have abandoned such all or nothing approaches and embrace some form of interactive theory of the reading process, while prioritizing different parts of it" (p. 5). Campbell makes a similar case that "[e]ducators who implement a balanced approach incorporate many of the principles of whole language, while recognizing the need for explicit [original italics] instruction that integrates meaning and print and is tailored to students' strengths and needs" (p. 4), an argument also supported by Cowen (2003, pp. 8-9).

Whole language theorists link learning how to read to an unconscious process of assimilating textual competency through regular practice of reading "real texts" over time (Smith, 1997, pp.72-74). Such learning taps into the motivational dynamics of students as they encounter what they view as authentic materials of high interest. Phonemic-based methodologies may not be totally rejected, but are contextualized as one cueing system that may or may not be salient in any given

learning situation. In contrast to balanced and phonemic perspectives, a core assumption that underlies whole language reading theory is that learning to read is as natural as learning how to speak (pp. 5-7).

Advocates of phonemic-based instruction argue that high-level mastery of the sight-sound connection (the alphabetic principle) is not merely important. Rather, they consider it as the foundational baseline upon which success in independent reading depends. The phonemic principle requires the processing of individual phonemes (letter sounds and digraphs – e.g., "sh," "ch") and syllable units, typically in a sequential format based on the logic of what first should be learned according to the precepts of the alphabetic principle. Viewed from this perspective, "the reading process is linear, with letters being recognized first feature-by-feature by a visual system and then transferred to a sound (phonemic) system for recognition and held [however briefly] until the next letter is processed in the same way" (Purcell-Gates, 1997, p. 5). Thus, among phonemic-based theorists—particularly those advocating for "systematic phonics" —processing the sound of every letter is critical, through which a great deal of phonemic internalization needs to take place before any serious work on consecutive fluent reading can emerge (Adams, 2001, pp. 409-416, esp. 409-410).

This foundational perspective on phonics represents precisely the opposite position of the whole language perspective based on a schema theory of learning, which places significant emphasis on inferential thinking (Pressley, 2006, pp. 22-23). From the whole language perspective, letters and sounds operate as partial cues that interact with other cues, including meaning and syntax-based ones in providing the needed information to read a given text (Pressley, 2002, pp. 2-26). Viewed from this vantage point, educated guesses — more formally stated, predictions —are encouraged for the purpose of stimulating inference making and reading processing internalization (Smith, 1997, pp. 54-55, 68-69). This approach is categorically rejected by those who identify phonemic mastery as the foundational source of learning how to read.

To summarize, in the whole language paradigm, the primary means of mastering the reading process is based on selecting high-interest texts, probing the context through collaborative modes of learning, and drawing on partial cues to make educated predictions through the scaffolding support of teacher facilitators. In the phonemic approach, the central objective is accurate reading through mastery of the sight-sound relationship between the spoken and written word or word fragment. From this stance, reading depends upon

the accuracy of decoding and the mastery of the alphabetic principle (Campbell, 2006, pp. 15-18; Pressley, 2006, pp. 15-47, 134-180).

The objective in the whole language model is interactive engagement through a dynamic relationship between the text and the reader. The emphasis is placed on expanding the insights of the students through a reader-response theory based on texts that foster high-level student engagement. The content of the text serves as a primary stimulus both of reading development and content knowledge expansion (Smith, 1997, 105-117).

While far from fully explaining the process of learning how to read, proponents of the balanced reading perspective argue that incorporating meaning making and skill-based approaches represent a better approximation of how learning to read takes place. In Popper's terms, it has greater "verisimilitude" (Popper, 1963, pp., 317). In incorporating what advocates view as the best insights from bottom-up and top-down approaches, the key credo is that "learners need to focus on meaning with real, authentic text and to [also] work on skills" (Purcell-Gates, 1997, p. 7). To stimulate the range of needed learning, seasoned practitioners draw on different parts of the lesson for different levels and sets of students, in varying degrees and ways. In short, proponents of the balanced framework seek to draw on the best aspects of whole language and phonemic-based models, as applicable, within the context of the lesson, while rejecting extreme, either/or positions (McShane, 2005, pp. 127-135). According to advocates of balanced reading instruction, learning to read is based on "the reciprocal influence of different levels of knowledge held by a reader — from letter featural knowledge of the features of the letters to semantic knowledge." More to the point, learning to read is based on the dynamic "interaction" (Purcell-Gates, 1997, p. 8) of these features of the reading process in their varied influence with specific students or sets of students. As similarly argued by Pressley (2006), in a balanced perspective "good readers process every single letter" in a manner that requires "fixation on most words," while also "constructing hypotheses about what a text might mean, generating inferences…and initiating strategies to locate portions of the text that are especially likely to be informative" (p. 59).

Moreover — and this is a key assumption with Purcell-Gates (1997) — the balanced reading model flows along the continuum, from a skills orientation to various holistic approaches. Those at the skills-based edge "will not hesitate to teach isolated skills" (p. 8), even though for them, such a focus does not define the complete underlying structure of excellent reading instruction (Pressley, 2006, pp.

181-235).   In contrast, those at the holistic end, such as Purcell-Gates (1997), stress the importance of teaching skills "in the context of authentic and compelling reading and writing" (p. 8), a position also supported by Campbell (2006, p. 2).   What places the continuum in the balanced framework is the rejection of foundational claims that one approach or the other is at the base.   An underlying assumption of the balanced argument is that students learn to read in different ways.   The primary dynamic is the interactive one in the utilization of whatever methodologies, approaches, and sources of materials best tap into the student's capacity to learn to read any given context (pp. 18-21).

In the broad scheme of things, learning to read requires interactive, rich content-driven, "whole-part-whole instruction" (Purcell-Gates, 1997, p. 8) in a manner that also provides scope for "de-contextual" language practice, designed to enhance basic skill mastery and to reinforce automaticity (Pressley, 2006, 134-180).   In support of this latter claim, I lean more toward Pressley's skill-based balanced approach while also resonating with the importance Purcell-Gates and Campbell (2006) place on grounding adult literacy instruction, at all reading level competencies, in interesting, meaningful texts. In this, I freely draw on a wide diversity of "bottom-up" and "top-down" methodologies based on my determination of their potential efficacy in any given instructional context (pp. 15-18).   Further, I maintain that there is no such thing as "de-contextual" approaches to reading instruction on the assumption that all language learning activities are suffused with meaning and symbolic significance based on the ways they are appropriated with any given set of learners. All language-based activities have value to the extent that they facilitate the expansion of student learning in all the realms of literacy development, in which, at their best, skill-based and meaning making processes are mutually reinforcing.   In support of this I draw on Rescher's (2001) "dialectical" concept of a "duly-hedged synthesis" (p. 121) to construct an interpretation of literacy that incorporates the following components:

1.   Literacy facilitates knowledge acquisition in the grappling with and mastery of print-based texts.
2.   Literacy is enhanced to the extent to which individuals gain the capacity to read and write print-based texts.
3.   Growth in literacy i s experienced to the e xtent to which readers progressively comprehend and draw meaning from texts and appropriate them into their lives.
4.   Literacy has a technological component in the mastery of

reading, writing and the comprehension of texts and a meta-
phorical dimension that resides in transactions between the
reader and the text in which meaning making and signifi-
cance lie beyond the text into that of appropriation, how-
ever variously that may be defined (Demetrion, 2004, p. 34).

In a comprehensive balanced adult literacy approach, the core Feirian
dictate holds that one learns to read the word in order to read the world,
in which their relationship is dynamically and continuously interactive.

Further Probes into the Balanced Reading Perspective

In a balanced reading perspective, behaviorist-based stimulus-re-
sponse, cognitive-based knowledge acquisition, and intuitive-inferential
constructivist modes of learning (GSI Teaching & Resource Center,
2014) mutually interact to reinforce a range of corresponding method-
ologies and approaches that lead to the facilitation of competent reading
and literacy development. As in learning anything complex, mastering
the basics (in this case, how print-based literacy works) is indispensable,
in which specific students incrementally expand their phonemic aware-
ness and word recognition skills in various ways (Pressley, 2002, p. 171).
Viewed from this vantage point, an emphasis on the regularities of print-
based English through a systematic — or at least a regularly built-in
phonemic instructional plan, including analytic phonics and analogical
word patterns — is a proper focus of initial instruction, especially for
lower level adult new readers (Cheatham, Colvin, & Laminack, 1993,
pp. 58-73; Pressley, 2002, pp. 157-167, Sabatini and Bruce, 2009, pp.
8-10, McShane, 2005, pp. 33-47, and Adams, 2001, pp. 318-332.).

Phonemic exceptions to the sight-sound relationship need to be fac-
tored into the instructional program; but for lower level readers, such
irregularities can be introduced after progress has been made on some
basic mastery of the regular sight-sound rules to stabilize some basic
automaticity in word decoding, without which any movement toward
independent reading mastery becomes highly unlikely (Pressley, pp. 70,
79, 171-172). Thus, without sustained regular attention, ideally, through
some combination of analytic and systematic methodologies, phonics
can only be taught episodically based on perceived need as it arises in
gaps identified in a meaning making, content-based instructional pro-
gram. For some, if not for many students, particularly at beginning lev-
els of reading ability, this might not offer sufficient phonemic practice

in helping to move toward progressive mastery of basic reading competency (McShane, 2005, 33-47). Except for the more radical proponents of whole language reading theory, a critical point of contention is not over the importance of phonics, but of its functional role as one of the important cueing language systems, in which, from a balanced perspective, its appropriate emphasis depends on specific student need.

The concern includes the capacity to learn through phonemic-based methodologies in a manner sufficient enough to attain reasonably fluent reading of basic level reading material. Such fluency depends, in part, on "overlearned knowledge about the sequences of letters comprising frequent words and letter patterns" (Adams, 2001, p. 410). For this reason, it is critical to exercise caution before "put[ting] off phonics instruction waiting for [a level of] perfection" (McShane, 2005, p. 38) that will never come while simultaneously drawing on different reading strategies for adult learners, both for those who can learn through phonemic-based methodologies and for those exhibiting special difficulty in doing so.

With many adult literacy learners, a recursive (or spiral) methodology consisting of the various modalities of reading instruction may be effective (ibid., 127-135), which many of those who place phonemic mastery at the foundational center downplay, even as many whole language advocates tend to dismiss the viability of regular phonics instruction for some students (needed for more than a few, one might argue). Still, a program that focuses on only phonemic instruction, or one that requires phonemic mastery before incorporating other aspects of the reading process (based on a variety of whole language and balanced methodologies, including a broad array of word attack skill-based activities, in addition to phonics) would, in my estimation, be extremely short-sighted, even with low-level readers (Pressley, 2006, pp. 333-356, Sabatini and Bruce, 2009).

Where some phonemic advocates are off mark is in viewing the phonemic unit (the letter or blend within the context of the syllable) as the underlying foundation for mastering the reading of written language., a position clearly rejected by Adams (2001, pp. 421-422). It is one matter to point out that the written code in the English language is based on the alphabetic principle. What also merits consideration is the highly symbolic nature of the alphabetic principle, in which there is no inherent relationship between the sounds that comprise the word and the meaning of what is being signified. Because it does not make intrinsic semantic sense, the phonemic unit can be perceived by the learner as a mere abstraction, in which a too-exclusive focus could impede the learning effort.

More concretely argued, while each language system builds upon the other, each represents a transformation of the other. Hence, syllables are qualitatively distinct from the sounds of the individual letters in the alphabet, even though, according to the alphabetic principle, they are structurally based on some amalgamation of them. Words are qualitatively different than syllables, even though they are comprised of them. The meaning of a sentence cannot be grasped by the definition of its individual words, even though it consists of them. The meaning of a paragraph extends beyond that of its individual sentences. A narrative cannot be defined by the cumulative meaning of its individual paragraphs, although they represent core building blocks of its structure. This overlaying perspective of the interacting components of reading development needs to be factored into facilitating modes of adult reading literacy instruction, in which each language "system" contributes to the building up of reading and thinking skills in the very process of extending paradigmatically beyond the preceding one. As observed by Sabatini and Bruce (2009), while "[i]n skilled reading these components are integrated to support literacy performance,

> [e]ven during acquisition of reading skill, the components do not strictly develop hierarchically. One learns to understand basic sentences and paragraphs, even as one learns individual words and how to decode. One does not wait to 'master' decoding skills before learning to construct meaning (p. 7).

It is one matter to argue that the capacity to read print-based text fluently will be stymied if independent phonemic mastery is seriously lacking. I agree. How adult new and emerging readers achieve such mastery and its role in facilitating the broader literacy learning process, is another matter of the most profound consequence in relation to programmatic and philosophical priorities on the interaction of reading the word in order to read the world. Matters of the fundamental definition remain in the balance.

As a result both of my study of the literature on balanced reading and direct observation of the Wilson Reading System,® I had sufficiently shifted my thinking to consider the value of phonic activities as a critical component in its own right within a comprehensive adult literacy reading program, particularly for beginning and intermediate readers, for which "a foundation of decoding and word recognition skills is necessary (albeit not sufficient) to enable growth in proficien-

cy of meaning/comprehension level skills" (Sabatini and Bruce, 2009, p. 7). As I had done so previously, I incorporated analogical phonics through word pattern activities based on words encountered in the assigned text of the day. Based on new insight on the intrinsic value of phonic-based learning activities, I freely to incorporated word pattern drills that included words students did not encounter directly in the main text that shaped the given lesson of the day. I also incorporated synthetic approaches to phonics based on sounding out every letter in words that students would have difficulty decoding, regardless of whether such words were part of the content-based portion of the lesson. I drew as well on analytic approaches based upon the easier mastery of working through the onset-rime relationship by first sounding out the initial consonant sound followed by the vowel(s) and the remaining consonant sound in a given syllable (Adams, 2001, pp. 314-322).

Nonetheless, I remained firm in my view that, however valuable in any given learning context, phonics is only one of the components of the reading process, which, particularly for beginning level new and emerging adult readers, is difficult to master in a sustained direct, linear manner.   Given the importance I placed on the role of inference and indirection, I took a spiral methodological approach to adult literacy reading instruction in building on what students were learning to reinforce higher level mastery and teaching new skills and concepts through carefully scaffolded approaches. In this, I assumed that learning best occurs when all the major components of learning how to read are incorporated into each lesson through a process empowered by intense student engagement stimulated by tapping into pivotal teaching opportunities that sometimes do not come to the fore until students are directly immersed in the learning activities.

Assignments included a main text of some intrinsic interest, round robin reading, discussion, comprehension activities of both a text-based and a tutor-created basis, and a variety of language-based activities, such as cloze activities, word unscrambling, crossword puzzles, and built-in word pattern work. I also kept track of words with which students had difficulty while reading that I introduced toward the end of the lesson through sight word memorization, affix analysis, or multi-syllabic word attack skills that included sounding out activities. For a concrete example, I refer the reader to my essay, "Teaching the Word 'Restaurant': A Deweyan View" (Demetrion, 2003), which includes the following extract based on a small group of intermediate adult literacy learners:

In the lesson at hand, I started out with a tentative hypothesis that it was within the student's capacity structure to identify the word "restaurant" exclusively through phonemic prompts. Note, my experience and theirs did not prove that that was false. However, it did disclose certain problems that were not easily resolvable simply through isolating sounds of syllables even if the individual sounds of the syllable unit were correct. (They still had difficulty with that second syllable.) They had most of the parts to the word…. Yet, they couldn't put the sounds together into the integrated whole of the word. An element was still missing. What was that? In part, it was limited phonemic dexterity (even of what they knew) at a high level of internalization…. [T]hey knew the word "restaurant," that's not the point. Yet they were limited in their capacity to play with written language in the use of a broad range of logic to figure things out…. I don't know this, of course, but that's a working hypothesis that would still require confirmation in the ongoing process of critical engagement with this group of learners (p. 4).

I present these summary statements and examples as a crystallized summation of my approach. Such methods included using the identical lesson with the same group of students, in which I would switch the instructional focus between a meaning making and skill-based emphasis to work on different aspects of the learning process.

In Quest of a Formal Balanced Reading Theory

A broad, practical consensus has emerged on the importance of a generalized, four-part methodology in support of adult literacy instruction that includes alphabetization, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension (Krudenier, 2002; McShane, 2005). This practitioner oriented research resulted in a flourishing of new ideas and useful handouts which teachers and program developers incorporated into many aspects of adult reading instruction (STAR, 2007). This pragmatic resolution at the level of methodology to a long-seated cultural war on how reading is best taught is most welcome. It helps break down more extreme claims by proponents of whole language and phonemic-based theory against one-sided approaches on how best to teach reading to adults with limited reading ability.

What has been less attended to is a thoroughly developed balanced theory of reading instruction, particularly for adult literacy,

upon which such a methodological framework can be firmly anchored. Without this, large questions remain in terms of how the methods work together in a coherent instructional manner and, more fundamentally, in the content focus and purpose of adult literacy education, both of which are inherently theory-driven, regardless of whether so grasped.

An argument put forth in this essay is that a well-constructed hypothesis in support of a balanced paradigm of adult literacy instruction can help the field move forward in significant ways in its theoretical development and teaching practice. This is so, I maintain, even as one cannot prove the validity of the balanced reading theoretical construct in any strictly conclusive sense. What is plausible is that of viewing what Pearson (1999) refers to as an "ecologically balanced" (p. 33) perspective as a compelling theoretical construct of how enhanced reading and literacy competency emerges among adult students. Doing so would, logically, expand the range of practice grounded in its core assumptions. The degree to which future research discloses the extent and manner by which literacy development is enhanced among adults through a well-constructed utilization of balanced methods would serve as important next steps in the refinement of adult literacy theory construction and critically informed practice, as Pearson (pp. 31-33) has presented in a highly provisional manner for school age literacy. Even in the unlikely prospect that the balanced theory becomes ultimately falsified (Popper, 1979, pp. 13-14), the result of such work, if cogent and well-researched, is that a better understanding of how reading among adults emerges would surface. As Popper (1963) explains:

> The criteria of relative potential satisfactoriness… is extremely simple and intuitive. It characterizes as preferable the theory which tells us more; that is to say, the theory which contains the greater amount of empirical information or content; which is logically stronger; which has the greater explanatory power; and which can therefore be more severely tested [original italics] by comparing predicted facts with observations. In short, we prefer an interesting, daring, and highly informative theory to a trivial one (p. 294).

For my own working model of balanced reading theory, I draw on the concept of "verisimilitude," which Popper (1963) defines as "approximation to truth" (p. 317). In Popper's view, the goal of such research is "maximum verisimilitude," an aspiration that a commu-

nity of inquirers moves toward to the extent to which the truth claims of any argument "corresponds to all the facts" (p. 317) in any specific line of inquiry. Popper acknowledges this as an unattainable reach, but a critically important aspiration for the legitimization of the concept of truth as a regulative ideal underlying any given research project. I have also drawn on Rescher's (2001) dialectical concept of knowledge expansion in his "duly-hedged" search for "a higher synthesis of opposing views" (p. 121) through which, as stated, I constructed four underlying principles of balanced reading theory that is supported by nineteen propositions (Demetrion, 2004, pp. 34-36).

In drawing on both Popper and Rescher, I have grounded my own work in balanced reading theory within the post-positivist philosophical tradition (Demetrion, 2004), which interprets science as both fallible and theory laden while the best means available of seeking truth as a regulative, yet perpetually elusive ideal (pp. 1-4). While space constraints preclude a sustained summation of this work, by way of closing this section I highlight three of the nineteen propositions of the underlying principles of literacy that I developed through interaction with Rescher's Hegelian-informed theory of knowledge development; namely:

- While both learning to read and learning to learn are valid indicators of literacy, educators need to determine where priorities should be placed in terms of various student need and ability and what focal points of concentration stimulate what aspects of learning for any given student or groups of students (p. 35).
- Even if little in the realm of [societal and economic] opportunity structures is attained, being able to read, write, and comprehend print-based texts and appropriating such knowledge for one's own purposes has a certain value in itself (although how much so remains in question) as a form of self-development that may or may not have broader societal impact (p. 36).
- Literacy is a cultural metaphor of considerable pluralistic range and scope of knowledge acquisition that includes the technical capacity of reading and writing as an important, but undetermined variable of the broader definition encapsulated in the term, "multiliteracies" (p. 36).

In the goal of moving toward a more compelling theory and better practice in adult literacy education, the current work on the emerg-

ing field of balanced reading theory will have served a critical mid-wife function to the extent that it integrates the best insights from phonemic-based and whole language reading theory. However much the balanced perspective remains theoretically underdeveloped, it serves as a powerful heuristic that has the capacity to expand our knowledge of adult literacy reading theory and practice in a potentially integrative manner. Such a prospect holds the potential of at least partially transcending and synthe-sizing the culture wars within reading theory and practice over the past century (Pearson, 1999). The extent to which a balanced heuristic trans-forms into a formally developed theoretical paradigm remains to be seen, in which the reach of absolute coherency invariably exceeds the grasp that needs to account for the complexities of on-the-ground practice.

Concluding Remarks

Assisting adult new readers expand their reading capacity — which, often, is highly incremental in scope — takes considerable time. Throughout the learning process, certain principles, approaches, and emphases emerge as more salient than others with any set of students in any given context. Keeping students highly engaged at the critical edge of their ongoing learning capacities through methods, approaches, materials, and motivational strategies that draw out, as much as reason-ably can be attended to at any given time, may be the most efficacious approach in moving toward an effective model of adult literacy reading instruction. It is such interactive learning (which expands beyond en-hancement of reading ability to knowledge expansion and self-expres-sion through engaging texts among adults at all reading levels) rather than the intrinsic viability of specific methodologies, per se, that leads to the most stimulating dynamic in adult literacy learning, in which all the components of reading and literacy development creatively interact. This I posit as a core tenet of a balanced reading approach (Demetrion, 2004). This hypothesis — which has emerged for me through years of site-based practice and theoretical work on the nature of adult read-ing and literacy theory — requires a great deal of testing and ongoing refinement (Popper, 1963, pp., 291-338).   By incorporating top-down and bottom-up approaches to reading instruction through carefully developed student-centered approaches, the balanced paradigm, as a compelling heuristic, offers much in advancing the field's understand-ing and practice of adult basic reading and literacy development.

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