



America's Best Kept Educational Secrets

Recently I gave a lecture at our local Senior Center on "How to Teach Your Grandchildren to Read." Since many grandmothers spend a lot of time taking care of their grandchildren, I thought many seniors would be interested in the lecture. Five seniors showed up, which was pretty good for a weekday afternoon. And that's okay. I didn't expect many more. But these seniors were eager to teach their grandchildren to read and they wanted to know how to do it. They themselves were excellent readers, and they were aware that many children acquire reading problems in school.



I handed each one of them a copy of *Alpha-Phonics*, my reading program, so that they could follow me as I taught them our English alphabetic system. But first I gave a simple overview of how our writing system developed, from the primitive picture writing of the cavemen, to the very complex hieroglyphics and ideographs of the ancient Egyptians and present-day Chinese, to the invention of alphabetic writing, which permitted human beings to do so much more with so much less. The invention of the alphabet seems to have taken place at about the same time that the Israelites embarked on their momentous exodus from Egypt and threw off the chains of slavery.

As we all know, Moses, their leader, was raised by an Egyptian princess and was undoubtedly taught to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. Yet when he went up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God, the tablets turned out to be written in alphabetic Hebrew script, not Egyptian hieroglyphics. The burning question is: Who taught God the alphabet?

Obviously, it's an unanswerable question, but I believe I am the only one who has ever asked it. And that is because the French neuropsychologist Stanislas Dehaene wrote in his book *Reading in the Brain*:

The first traces of an alphabetic system, called Proto-Sinaitic, date from 1700 B.C. and were uncovered in the Sinai peninsula, close to the turquoise mines first worked by the Pharaohs of the Middle and New Kingdom. The writing system borrowed the shapes of several Egyptian characters, but used them to represent a Semitic language. Signs no longer referred to meaning, but to speech sounds alone, and in fact solely to consonants. In this way, the inventory of written symbols were dramatically reduced: two dozen signs were enough to represent all the existing speech sounds with perfect regularity.

Obviously, the inventor of the alphabet had discovered that the language he spoke consisted of only a small number of irreducible speech sounds, and he created a set of symbols to represent most of them. Thus was a phonetic way of writing and reading created.

I explained that the English alphabet consisted of our well-known 26 letters. But then I asked how many sounds were there in the English language. I explained that the answer to that question was the best kept secret in America. None of the five grandmothers knew the answer. "Only 44 sounds," I said. "You



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have just learned the best kept secret in American education.” That always provokes a laugh. But it’s true. The simple fact that our 26 letters stand for 44 sounds has never been taught in our schools. Why? Because of professional ignorance and a progressive agenda that is not interested in imparting knowledge but only in promoting its pro-socialist, dumbing-down agenda.

I then explained that because 26 letters must stand for 44 sounds, some of our letters stand for more than one sound, and some sounds are represented by more than one letter. For example, the letter “a” stands for the “long a” as in *April*, the “short a” as in *cat*, the “au” sound as in *tall*, and the “ah” sound as in *car*. The way you learn to articulate the correct sound of the letter is by learning the words in their spelling families. And, of course, we are all familiar with sounds represented by two letters: “th” as in *the*, “sh” as in *ship*, and “ch” as in *chop*.

I also made them aware that the reason why our alphabetic system has these peculiarities is that when the Romans conquered the British Isles, they imposed the Latin alphabet on the people who lived there. Those inhabitants adapted the Latin alphabet to their own language and came up with our present way of representing the sounds of English. And with that alphabet, the English have managed to create some of the world’s greatest literature.

My audience followed me as I went through the *Alpha-Phonics* book, pointing out the irregular spellings. We covered all of the consonants with the short vowels, then the consonant blends, and finally the long vowels. The reason why we teach the vowels in that sequence is because our long vowels have multiple spellings. For example, “long a” is represented by simple “a” as in *apron*, a-consonant-e as in *ate*, “ai” as in *main*, “ay” as in *day*, “ei” as in *vein*, and “eigh” as in *eight*. I pointed out that in such spellings as *vein* and *eight*, the letter “a” is not even used. But then I asked the grandmothers if they knew the French word for water. One of them did. I spelled it out on the board: e-a-u, pronounced “o.” Those three letters stand for the “o” sound in French. So if you think that English spelling makes no sense, try French.

There is no reason why three letters can’t stand for one sound in French, and that our English word *though* sounds like “tho” — with “ough” standing for just one sound, “o.” Because of our spelling peculiarities, some language reformers, including Noah Webster, tried to reform English spelling. Webster succeeded in changing *honour* to *honor*, and *centre* to *center*, but not much else. The reason our spellings remain true to their origins is because we have many homonyms in English: *ate* and *eight*; *main*, *mane*, and *mein* as in *chow mein*; *read* and *reed*; *meat*, *meet*, and *mete*; *see* and *sea*; *bread* and *bred*; etc. These variant spellings immediately convey the meaning of the word when we see them.

In other words, the English alphabetic system is best learned as a system and should not be taught haphazardly. If you learn to read by learning how the system works, you are then able to teach someone else to read.

There is a mistaken belief that if you are a good reader, you should be able to teach someone else to read. Unfortunately, that is not the case. For example, when I was in college, I decided to teach my illiterate mother to read. She was an immigrant who had never been taught to read as a child in her native Poland. So I thought that I could give my mother the gift of literacy, for she certainly wanted to learn to read, even though English was her second language.

I started by teaching her the alphabet. This she learned very well. But then I didn’t know what to do next. I was taught to read with phonics, but in that haphazard way along with sight words. So I wrote out little sentences: “My name is Sara. Sara is my name.” I expected my mother to memorize these



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words. But, of course, I was simply leading her into reading failure, the kind that afflicts millions of American children. The sight-word method does not teach anyone to read. Only those children with photographic memories are good at it.

Thus, I learned another educational secret: Even though you may be a great reader, that doesn't mean that you can teach someone else to read. And that is actually the reason why I created *Alpha-Phonics*. I wanted to create a reading program that anyone could use to teach someone to read. If I had had a program such as *Alpha-Phonics* when I was trying to teach my mother to read, I am sure she would have learned the system, because basically it is simple and easy to memorize with a bit of drill.

Another best kept secret is that learning to write in cursive script helps you learn to read. The teachers in the old days knew this, but today's teachers who teach print-script or ball-and-stick don't even know why we should teach anyone to write. After all, we have computers and word processors, so why bother teaching a child to write when he or she will be using a keyboard to write?

The only problem is that, while you can carry a tablet or cellphone around wherever you go, using a touch-screen iPad or typing text messages on a cellphone are not ways to do any serious writing. If you are going to keep a diary or journal, as so many people do, cursive writing is the easiest way to do it. While letter writing was once a great art, it has been replaced by text messaging or e-mail, which are easy, convenient ways to exchange notes. But they have by no means taken the place of the hand-written or typed letter. And hand-written letters have been throughout history a wonderful way to convey life as it was being lived by the very individuals who were living it. That is why diaries being kept today will have great value in the future. It will tell future generations what it was like to live in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

How does learning to write in cursive help you learn to read? One of the biggest problems children have when learning to read primary-school print and write in ball-and-stick is that so many letters look alike — such as “b” and “d”; “f” and “t”; “g”, “q”, and “p” — that children become confused and make many unnecessary reading errors. In cursive, however, there is a big difference between a “b” and a “d.” In cursive writing, a “b” starts like an “l” while a “d” begins like writing the letter “a.” In other words, in cursive, children do not confuse “b” and “d”, because the movements of the hand make it impossible to confuse the two letters. And this knowledge in the hand is sent to the brain which conveys it to the reading process. Thus, learning to write cursive helps learning to read print.

Another aid to reading is that cursive requires children to write from left to right so that the letters will be joined in proper sequence. The blending of the sounds is made more transparent by the joining of the letters. In ball-and-stick, some children write the letters backwards, and often the spacing is so erratic that you can't tell where one word ends and another begins. Thus, cursive teaches both spatial and directional discipline.

Another important benefit of cursive is that it helps the child learn to spell correctly, since the brain acquires knowledge of spelling patterns through hand movements that are used again and again in spelling. This is the same phenomenon that occurs when pianists or typists learn patterns of hand movements through continual repetition.

My senior attendees were very pleased with my lecture, and three of them bought the *Alpha-Phonics* book. They all learned the best kept secrets of American education, and thus could become especially competent in teaching their grandchildren to read in ways that no public schools and few private schools know of.



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But perhaps the best kept secret in American education is the existence and works of this author. While I've been invited to lecture at several Christian colleges, and Bob Jones University thought highly enough of my work to award me an honorary Doctor of Laws degree, the education establishment has avoided me like the plague. I am never mentioned in the dozens of books written by liberals on education. No college of education has ever invited me to speak on such relevant topics as the reading war, the history of public education, or the importance of homeschooling. Speaking of homeschooling, over the last thirty years I've lectured at countless homeschool conventions. But as a senior, I am being left behind by the younger generation, which is natural and to be expected. But I often hear from homeschoolers who taught their children to read with *Alpha-Phonics* and are grateful for my influence in their lives.

A couple of years ago I received this e-mail from an *Alpha-Phonics* student, which cheered me to no end:

I learned how to read using AlphaPhonics when I was four years old, and for over six months, I carried that red book with me everywhere. I want to thank you for your contribution to my life, for without that book, I don't think I would love reading, and writing, as much as I do now. (Oxford Hills, Maine).

Apparently, I am not a secret to a whole lot of people like the writer of that e-mail. A California father wrote me the following:

I have wanted to write you a note for some time. Many years ago, I heard you on a radio program talking about the evils of "sight reading." I was convinced that you were completely right about the subject. At the time my son was only a baby. But I bought Alpha-Phonics, and your book was the only book used to teach Michael to read. I would like you to know that Michael graduated from High School as a National Merit Scholar, and has accepted an Appointment to the United States Air Force Academy. Your book and your educational philosophy were key components in his education. My copy of your book was used so much, it disintegrated. So I bought another copy for my daughter. She is currently in the fourth grade, and is a straight "A" student. Mr. Blumenfeld, you are a prophet. Everything that you said would occur, in regards to sight reading, occurred. When my children get married and have young ones of their own, one of the first things that they will receive is a copy of your book, Alpha-Phonics.

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