

A frank truth: All instruction guides and supports implicit learning

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After recently spending time at a conference, catching up on some reading and enjoying the company of brilliant minds, I believe we need to confront some demons.

The dirty little secret of reading instruction is that no matter how much time we devote to it, a huge part of what readers learn occurs implicitly, not explicitly. We develop many skills without complete awareness of them in the same way that we learn to ride a bike without really knowing how we do it. Experts and parents who expend time trying to identify future struggling readers during infancy look for the neurological signs of a slight delay, a glitch, in how infant brains accumulate this implicit knowledge. If explicit instruction is the backbone of teaching and remediation (and it should be), implicit learning is still the biggest part of learning to read.

Is instruction necessary?

None of this diminishes the role of instruction. We know that even the most naturally gifted implicit learners, those who seem to pick up reading without any explicit instruction, still benefit from instruction when it meets their needs at the time and when it reinforces past learning. Less-gifted implicit learners are utterly dependent on instruction. Unfortunately, instruction often doesn't match the implicit learning it should be trying to support.

Implicit versus explicit learning

We need to appreciate the interface between implicit and explicit learning when we consider what to teach, when, and in what dosage. All instruction serves to guide and support implicit learning. Kids don't learn to decode because we teach them to decode. They learn to decode because their brains have certain insights, make certain connections and establish certain patterns and networks that allow them to decode. Those networks are built, refined and fine-tuned through practice and experience. Within those experiences are critical moments of explicit instruction, but we would be wrong to think that children learn to decode simply because we teach them to decode. Most of that learning, that network development, is implicit and far from consciousness. Instruction is important, even essential, but we cannot come close to teaching everything students need to learn about reading.

Those who support the scientific view of reading, as I do, are often reluctant to make this admission because they fear, as I fear now, that the habitually ill-informed will misread and misrepresent these facts to mean that kids learn to read all on their own and explicit instruction should be minimised. If implicit learning is the bigger part of the equation in learning to read, and in some ways the key to successful learning, it may seem reasonable that we should reserve learning for an implicit insight rather than to teach it explicitly. Implicit and explicit learning have been placed in a false competition with each other by widespread misunderstanding – and the effects of that are all around us still.



Our support for explicit instruction should not be a denial of implicit learning, but it can seem that way to people for whom implicit learning is a denial of explicit instruction.

Clearly, readers learn a great deal about oral language, orthography, morphology, semantics, and other aspects of linguistics from experience. Some learn more, and some learn less. The more we teach and the better we teach it (including our choice of what, when, and how we teach), the more implicit learning will occur. In economic terms, we want an explosion in implicit learning, not a monopoly. That requires explicit instruction.

Explicit instruction bolsters implicit learning

I don't think we need to worry about instruction interfering with implicit learning. I don't think that's an issue. I don't think teaching phonemes and rules and morphemes and etymology squelches implicit learning. I think it ignites it. But I do think there are only so many hours in a day and some many days in a school year.

Where do we get the most bang for our buck with any given child at any given stage of reading development? Answering that question requires us to understand how reading works and develops, how the pieces

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work together, and the needs of the child in front of us. That's a lot to know. Do we teach the minutiae of phonics? Is that a good use of our time? Do we teach deep morphology early or save it for later? Do multi-sensory techniques have major effects on average readers or only on those who are struggling the most? Do we teach lots of etymology – or just enough for readers to understand that there are reasons for things that seem unreasonable – and some of the weirdness of English isn't so weird after all? What do we teach as the canon of knowledge and what do we trust will emerge from the foggy process of implicit learning? When should we stop trusting and take action?

Most of learning to read will happen implicitly. It must. No one lives long enough for it to work any other way. Most of it will go better

with skilled instruction to support and promote that implicit learning. It may help if we are willing to admit that implicit learning is the real goal, even as we plan and promote robust explicit instruction. We shouldn't be afraid to concede the critical place of implicit learning just because so much of what is wrong in reading instruction is, in some way, an overreliance on it.

In a world of limited resources, spending our instructional effort to the greatest benefit of the student is always the goal, and that means we need to understand that it isn't the knowledge we teach explicitly that leads to skilled reading. It is how that explicit teaching feeds the process of implicit learning. That's how children learn to read. Even if some folks get implicit learning all wrong, we shouldn't miss that point.

Steven Dykstra is a psychologist, advocate and troublemaker in the reading world. While he may be best known for his comments on SpellTalk and in other forums, he has worked with the most severely traumatised and mentally ill children for more than 25 years. His passion for reading comes from the recognition that the thousands of children he has served often pay the highest price for our failures and mistakes.

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