Why Johnny Can’t Read Russell

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# Abstract

Millions of adults who grew up in the United States cannot read well enough to read even the books that Russell wrote for a lay audience. This problem is due in part to the legacy of John Dewey. Dewey discouraged teachers from using an effective method of teaching reading. He also discouraged teachers from providing direct instruction in other kinds of foundational knowledge and skills, such as grammar lessons. So even though Americans generally spend up to 13 years in public school, millions have never learned to read, and millions more have not learned to parse and reason. This deprivation of fundamental knowledge and skills has been described as academic child abuse. The effects of this deprivation can be seen even in graduate schools. To be effective as a teacher, you may have to provide remedial education before you begin teaching the material that you had intended to teach. For a social movement to be effective, it must likewise provide the basic education that people should have learned in school.

# Introduction

Bertrand Russell was many things, including a mathematician, a linguist, a philosopher, a social activist, and an educator. He was also a great writer, as evidenced by his Nobel Prize for Literature. Today, our airwaves and the Internet are filled with the pontifications of ignorant pundits. Russell, in contrast, was a true public intellectual: someone who has made significant contributions to science or scholarship and also works to improve society by reaching out to educate the public.

Unfortunately, millions of the adults who grew up in the United States cannot read well enough to read anything that Russell wrote. It is understandable that hardly anyone can understand his and Alfred North Whitehead’s *Principia Mathematica*. Yet today, millions of adults who grew up in the United States cannot read well enough to read even the works that Russell wrote for a lay audience. I suppose that as members of the Bertrand Russell Society, each of us tries to live in imitation of Bertie. Each of us tries to make his or her own contributions to science or scholarship, and many of us are educators or activists. Yet our work will largely be in vain unless we correct the defects of the public schools in the richest and most powerful nation on earth. To do that, we must strive to overcome some of the legacy of John Dewey.

# Literacy and Freedom

To understand educational policy in the United States, and Dewey’s role in shaping it, you need to know some history. As William Faulkner put it, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” In the 1640s, the members of the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony decided that everyone should learn to read well enough to read the Holy Bible and the laws of the commonwealth. In 1642, the General Court passed a law requiring parents (and masters of apprentices) to make sure that the children under their care learned to read. In 1647, it passed a law requiring towns to hire schoolteachers to teach the children of the town. The law required larger towns to hire a schoolmaster, to prepare the more promising boys to go to Harvard College. In the colonial period, the schoolteachers in Massachusetts used a simple yet effective phonics-based method for teaching reading. As a result of this support for education, Massachusetts eventually achieved practically universal literacy, at least among people who had grown up in Massachusetts.

Things were different in the South. In the wake of a major slave uprising, the legislature of South Carolina passed the Negro Act of 1740. This law declared that every “Negro” was an absolute and permanent slave, made it illegal for slaves to leave their master’s property without a written pass, and made it illegal to teach any slave to write. The rest of the South eventually followed suit. Thus, until the end of the Civil War, it was illegal in much of the United States to teach any black person to read and write.

After the Civil War, the 13th Amendment outlawed slavery and involuntary servitude (except for people convicted of a crime). As a result, the laws against teaching slaves to read became null and void. The 14th Amendment made the laws against educating black people unenforceable. Nevertheless, some powerful people still found ways to prevent black people and poor whites from getting “too much” education. By 1889, William Torrey Harris, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, could assure railroad magnate Collis P. Huntington, “Our schools have been scientifically designed to prevent over-education from happening. The average citizen should be content with their humble role in life.”

One way to prevent “over-education” was to provide “separate but equal” schooling for black and white children. However, de jure segregation was eventually declared unconstitutional.1 Another approach was to make each school dependent on the local tax base for its funding. This approach helped to reinforce the existing class structure by ensuring that there would be poorly funded schools in poor neighborhoods and generously funded schools in affluent neighborhoods. Yet even that approach runs contrary to the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection clause.2 So there was a desire among elites for some way to go through the motions of providing universal free public *schooling* without actually providing universal free public *education*. The most effective way to achieve that goal is to use a method of reading instruction that does not work. People who have not learned to read cannot read to learn. In this context, note that John Dewey was opposed to direct instruction in phonics, preferring instead an incidental approach to teaching reading. He argued that the emphasis on teaching reading in primary school was a “fetich.”3

# Philanthropy and Pedagogy

To understand Dewey’s role in shaping public education in the United States, you need to understand that he came to prominence by serving in institutions that were founded or at least funded by the world’s richest man, oil baron John D. Rockefeller.[[1]](#footnote-1) By the early 20th century, so much of the economy had fallen under the control of so few persons that those persons started using their philanthropy in a coordinated way to shape the nation’s educational system as a whole. On one hand, they provided generous funding to some institutions of higher learning. Thus, they ensured that there would be an adequate supply of well-trained professionals and technical workers, such as doctors, lawyers, accountants, and engineers. They also funded conservatories and so on to produce a supply of orchestra musicians and ballet dancers and so on to entertain the wealthy. They also encouraged the creation of public schools, including public high schools. Yet those public schools would provide three tracks of education. A few of the more promising boys would be prepared for college, so that they could go on to become professionals or scientists. A somewhat larger percentage of the students would be prepared for some sort of clerical work. However, a substantial proportion would be prepared for manual labor by learning regimentation and obedience and perhaps the mechanical arts, such as carpentry.

From the perspective of the captains of industry, the purpose of the educational system was to prepare the workforce to serve the needs of the captains of industry, not to empower a broad-based political movement that would bring about a worker’s paradise. Thus, industrialists wanted to “dumb down” the public schools, so that other people’s children would learn only enough to make them useful to industry. Meanwhile, the industrialists sent their own children to elite private schools, which would prepare them to take their place in the ruling class. This kind of educational injustice inspired Aldous Huxley to write *Brave New World*. In Huxley’s dystopia, children who are destined for the lower classes are deliberately stunted, from the moment of conception.4

# Why Johnny Can’t Read

A bad method of teaching reading was pioneered in Massachusetts in the 1830s, during a time of labor unrest in the burgeoning textile industry. At the time, the young women who worked in the textile mills in Lowell were using their writing skills to plead their case for better pay, shorter hours, and better working conditions.5 After Horace Mann became the first Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, he insisted that teachers should not start by teaching children the alphabet and then showing children how to sound words out from left to right (phonics). Instead, Mann insisted that teachers should have children memorize whole words as graphic designs (sight words), without regard to the sounds encoded by the letters.6 The sight-word method was originally intended to be a way to teach deaf children to read. Since deaf children cannot hear, they presumably would not be able to grasp the letter-sound relationships in words. (Of course, today deaf children are taught “visual phonics,” so that they can learn to read lips.) Nevertheless, Horace Mann imposed the sight-word method on the “common schools” (public schools) in Massachusetts.

From the perspective of parents and teachers, who wanted the children to learn, the sight-word method was a disaster. A group of 31 Boston schoolmasters published a book to explain that the sight word method was based on a nonsensical rationale and proved to be ineffective in practice.7 Yet from the perspective of the industrialists, the resulting decline in literacy was welcome.

The Boston schoolmasters had their say, but Horace Mann won in the end, as he got to hand-pick the people who went on to teach in the teachers’ colleges. Since the 1840s, the sight-word method has continued to be heavily promoted by some of the professors of teachers’ colleges, even though its rationale flies in the face of reason and its results are consistently poor. In 1929, Dr. Samuel Orton explained to the medical profession that the sight-word method was the underlying cause of “congenital word blindness,” which is now called dyslexia.8 Orton noted that the problem with reading often led to emotional and behavior problems, which would resolve when the child eventually learned to read as a result of receiving direct instruction in phonics.

In 1955, Rudolf Flesch’s best-seller *Why Johnny Can’t Read* brought this message about the importance of phonics to a lay audience.9 The proponents of the sight-word method reacted with scorn, and many of them vilified Flesch personally.10 In 1956, some of the publishers of sight-word–based curricula created the International Reading Association, which heavily promoted the sight-word method of teaching reading, along with lessons on how to hide the fact that one cannot really read (e.g., children are encouraged to guess the meaning of the words that they cannot recognize by sight). One of these methods was the “Whole Language” curriculum that was imposed on the public schools of California in the 1980s, with disastrous results. Occasionally, scientists speak out against the sight-word approach. In 1995, forty of the world’s top linguists and psycholinguists wrote an open letter to the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education, to object to the incorporation of Whole Language approaches into the state’s curriculum standards.11 Yet such warnings have gone largely unheeded.

Even when a school uses the sight-word method, many children somehow manage to learn to read. Some are taught to read by a parent or grandparent or by a tutor. Others figure out the letter-sound relationships on their own, as I did. Unfortunately, the rest remain functionally illiterate. Often, these children are given the diagnosis of a brain disease whose only symptom is the failure to learn to read in school. Yet unlike any other brain disease, this one can be cured by a short course of instruction in phonics. Yet to Dewey and his followers, direct instruction in foundational knowledge and skills was anathema.

# Academic Child Abuse

Dewey’s disparagement of the effective way to teach reading was only one aspect of a pedagogy that discouraged teachers from directly teaching facts and skills of any kind. Instead, children were supposed to develop academic skills naturally and automatically, in the context of doing other tasks, such as weaving cloth or baking cookies or whatever struck their fancy. Dewey and his followers presented this abandonment of academic instruction as an advance, and even as a liberation from the drudgery of traditional schoolwork. Yet the abandonment of direct instruction in fundamental disciplines has had such bad results that it has been described as abusive. In the 1990s, the International Institute for Advocacy for School Children defined academic child abuse as “the use of practices that cause unnecessary failure in foundational skill and knowledge areas.”12

In 1963, the National Council of Teachers of English published a famous report that claimed (falsely, in my opinion) that grammar lessons were not only pointless and boring but probably harmful.13 Yet just as schools all over the country started following the NCTE’s advice to jettison their grammar curriculum, the verbal SAT scores began a long, steady, and unexpected decline.14

# An Epidemic of Bad Writing

As an editor in medical and academic publishing, I have seen the damage that the neglect of grammar instruction has caused. Early in my career, I was shocked to discover that many medical doctors are terrible writers. Later on, I was even more shocked to discover that many people with a bachelor’s degree or even a master’s degree in English were also bad writers. Unfortunately, the bad writers generally did not realize *that* their writing was bad, much less *why* their writing was bad. As a result, they could not improve through mere practice.

Bad writers write badly for two simple reasons: they choose the wrong words, and they put their words in the wrong order. When bad writers write about commonplace subjects, readers can use their common sense to compensate for a writer’s sloppy word choice and nonsensical syntax; but when bad writers write about difficult topics, or topics that are simply unfamiliar to the reader, their bad writing is incomprehensible.

Over the years, I worked out a simple method to help bad writers become competent writers. First, I teach the person how to make full use of a dictionary. Then, I review the eight parts of speech and teach the person how to diagram sentences. Then, I give the person a few pointers on word order and some general advice on how to organize an essay. This simple, straightforward method works so well and so fast that I was recruited to write the grammar column for the *American Medical Writers Association Journal*.

When I offered to let the English teachers in my local school district use my grammar columns without charge, as course materials, I was told that the schools did not teach grammar because grammar lessons are a waste of time and probably harmful. Yet how could one possibly teach people how to stop misplacing or dangling their participles without telling them what a participle is, or explaining what a modifier is, or giving them some rules of thumb for where the modifiers should and should not be placed? To explain why grammar lessons are important, I wrote my book *Not Trivial: How Studying the Traditional Liberal Arts Can Set You Free*.15 Grammar is one of the seven classical liberal arts. It is the first leg of the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. These three subjects must be taught in that order. By studying grammar, you learn lessons that you need to master before you can study logic. By studying logic, you learn lessons that you need to master before you can study rhetoric.

# Bad Grammar, Bad Thinking

The problems that result from ignorance of grammar go far beyond bad writing. In his excellent book *The War Against Grammar*, classicist David Mulroy explains that the neglect of grammar lessons in public schools can explain some of the peculiarities of American political life.16 Because of their lack of training in grammar, many Americans find it hard to understand the literal meaning of any complicated sentence. So instead of addressing the literal meaning of what someone else has actually said or written, many people they tend to free-associate on some of the more colorful words that the person used. In my book *Don’t Feed the Narcissists!* I explain that such loosening of associations is a feature of some major mental illnesses, such as schizotypal personality disorder and schizophrenia.17 Thus, people who have been deprived of grammar lessons may end up sounding crazy, even if their brain is biologically normal.

Most parents worry that a poor education in K-12 could prevent a child from getting into college. Yet academic child abuse has had noticeable effects even among some college faculties. The postmodernist movement, in particular, has produced a flood of supposedly scholarly prose that is often unreadable, possibly meaningless, and occasionally ludicrous.18 The poor quality of much of this work results from a simple underlying problem: lack of training in metaphysics. Specifically, much of this work is riddled with silly mistakes with regard to ontology, epistemology, causality, and so on.18

# Grammar Makes Us Human

Many educators dismiss grammar as just a bunch of pointless rules that are important only to persnickety people like me. Yet the ability to understand and apply grammatical principles is the thin bright line that divides human beings from all other living species. It explains why human beings can talk but chimpanzees cannot, not even in sign language.19 It also explains why human beings can reason in ways that no other animal can. Chimpanzees cannot express subject-verb-object transactions. Nor can they express the mood of a verb. Thus, even if you taught them signs that you think mean “Laurie,” “banana,” and “give,” no chimpanzee can ever tell you, “Laurie gave me two bananas yesterday.” Chimpanzees cannot grasp the mood of verbs. Thus, no chimpanzee can understand the “is-ought” distinction or say, “I would gladly pay you Tuesday for some bananas today.”

The study of grammar provides the fundamental concepts that you will need for studying logic and ethics. In Aristotelian logic, a proposition is a sentence that affirms or denies a predicate of a subject. Thus, the verb in the predicate must be in the indicative mood. The logical operators are mainly conjunctions, except for *not*, which is an adverb. The study of ethics deals with other kinds of grammatical concepts, such as the person of pronouns (e.g., I and thou, us and them). It also involves predicates with a verb with deontic modality. In fact, the difference between laws of nature and natural law is a matter of the grammatical mood of the verbs.

# A Classical Education

The seven classical liberal arts (grammar, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy) were intended to provide the basic intellectual skills that one needs in order to study practically anything else. To be able to make sense of the world, students also need some training in the humanities (e.g., history, philosophy, languages, literature, and art) and the physical and social sciences. Yet before students can begin to study any of those subjects, they must learn to read.

If you want to be effective as a teacher, at any level from second grade to graduate school, you must consider the possibility that at least some of your students are victims of academic child abuse. They may lack the fundamental knowledge and skills that you may have assumed that they would have. Thus, you may have to backtrack and teach some of that foundational material, so that your students will be able to master at least some of the material you intended to teach, rather than failing to learn anything at all. The other practical implication is that if you want to promote any of the social causes that Russell championed, you must pay careful attention to what is going on in the public schools. The dumbing down of the schools was no accident. Any attempt at real reform will be resisted fiercely, but in a plausibly deniable way.

# Conclusion

If we wish to help other people appreciate the works of Bertrand Russell and to promote the causes that he promoted, then we must work against the academic child abuse that has become commonplace within the public schools in the United States. We must ensure that all children are being taught the foundational skills and knowledge that are essential for meaningful participation in democratic politics but that are being neglected or deliberately suppressed within many public schools today. Yet to achieve that goal, we must struggle against the legacy of John Dewey.

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1. Many conservatives insist that Dewey was an agent of the Worldwide Communist Conspiracy. However, Dewey’s famous trip to the Soviet Union took place during break in diplomatic relations between Britain and the Soviet Union, and at a time when Rockefeller interests (especially Standard Oil) were dramatically expanding their business dealings with the Soviet Union (See Sutton AC. *Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development, 1917 to 1930.* Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution; 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)