

NOT TRIVIAL



*How Studying the
Traditional Liberal Arts
Can Set You Free*

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Laurie Endicott Thomas



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By Laurie Endicott Thomas

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This book is dedicated to the 31 Boston schoolmasters who explained in 1845 that direct instruction in intensive phonics is the only intelligent way to teach children to read English. They were right, and the matter should have been settled then. This book is also dedicated to Rudolf Flesch, who explained in the 1950s that our educational system's refusal to use intensive phonics for reading instruction explained why millions of American children were failing to learn to read.

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This book came about because my steadfast friend Marjorie Winters suggested that I write a grammar column for the *American Medical Writers Association Journal*. Those articles allowed me to pass along lessons that I learned from Caroljean Ellis in my early days as an editor. While I was doing research for those articles, I read David Mulroy's invaluable book, *The War Against Grammar*. That book encouraged me to expand the scope of this book from explaining the causes of bad writing to explaining the breakdown of civility in our society.

For giving me insight into the philosophy of education, I have to thank my friend Howard Ozmon. I had the privilege of copyediting one of the early editions of his classic textbook *Philosophical Foundations of Education*. Bruce Deitrick Price's Improve-education.org Web site and John Taylor Gatto's book *The Underground History of American Education* also helped to shape my understanding.

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I also want to thank the excellent teachers I had when I was a student in public schools in Ohio, Wisconsin, and New Jersey. I hope that this book gives today's schoolteachers the roadmap they need for achieving their mission as teachers.

PART I: *Literacy*

Teaching children to read should be as easy as A, B, C. Young women with little more than a primary school education themselves once had great success in teaching reading, using little more than Webster's blue-backed speller and the Bible. Yet today, millions of people who grew up in the United States are functionally illiterate, even though they have spent up to 13 years in schools that were staffed by college-trained, licensed teachers. What is going on?

Lots of people want to blame the students and the teachers. However, I think we should look at the methods that the teachers have been taught to use. As Rudolf Flesch explained in his 1955 bestseller *Why Johnny Can't Read*, American schools had started using a method of reading instruction that doesn't work. His 1983 bestseller *Why Johnny Still Can't Read* explained that the ineffective method was still being used 28 years later. It's still being used today.

Why would anyone force teachers to use a teaching method that doesn't work? The answer to that can be found in a bestseller from 1845: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read... It would for-ever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.

In short, education can prepare you for either freedom or slavery. The kind of education that was designed for free people was called the liberal arts. To study the liberal arts, you must first learn to read.

CHAPTER II

Learning to Read



In ancient Rome, the liberal arts were the studies that were considered appropriate for free people. In contrast, slaves were taught only the mechanical arts and the servile arts. Even today, debates about education are really debates about freedom and equality. If you want to live in a free and democratic society, then you will want every child to study the liberal arts. But if you want to make sure that slaves stay enslaved and that poor people stay poor, you will allow them to learn only the servile arts and the mechanical arts. The easiest way to keep an unequal society unequal is to make sure that only a privileged few get a liberal arts education.

The easiest way to prevent people from studying the liberal arts is to keep them from learning to read. A person who cannot read cannot study the liberal arts. There are two basic ways to keep people from learning to read. One is to keep them from going to school. The other is to make the schools so ineffective that children could spend years in school without learning to read.

If you prevent children from going to school, their parents quickly figure out that you are their enemy. They might even fight you. At the very least, they'll end up marching in the streets, singing "We shall overcome." If, on the other hand, you work behind the scenes to undermine the quality of their schools, the people might end up blaming themselves, their children, or their children's teachers for the children's failure to learn. A wealthy person could even end up being praised for donating to educational charities,

jurisdiction the equal protection of the law. Yet it took almost 90 years for the Supreme Court to decide that this Amendment meant that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Even after the Supreme Court decided in 1954 that school districts should stop sorting children by race, segregation persisted, especially in the North. Because of problems such as job and housing discrimination, black and white children tend to live in separate neighborhoods and go to different schools. This de facto racial segregation is a serious and persistent problem in public schools in the United States.

To see how badly this problem of separate and unequal schooling has infected public education, even in the North, read Jonathan Kozol's classic book *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools*, which was published in 1967. What's especially shameful is that the horrors he described in the book were happening in Boston, whose founders had believed in universal free public education and whose citizens had once played such a prominent role in the movement for the abolition of slavery.

In 1991, Kozol wrote *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, which showed how little the situation had improved in the intervening years. Racial segregation and unequal educational opportunities were still common in the United States. Kozol noted that the schools of Camden, New Jersey, had a budget of only \$3000 per child per year. Meanwhile, school districts only a few minutes away by car had budgets of \$8000 or even \$14,000 per child per year.

The question of who gets to go to school where, and how the schools are to be funded, is still a hot political issue. Another question, one that cuts across race and class lines, is the question of how the children are to be taught. The most hotly debated issue is how children should be taught to read, since reading is the skill that children must learn before they learn nearly anything else. The perennial debate over how to teach children to read has been called the Reading Wars. The opening shot was fired in the 1840s, and the wars continue to this day.

For the past 3500 years, children who spoke languages that are written with an alphabet (instead of with characters that stand for whole words) have been taught to read by learning the sounds associated with each letter of the alphabet. The children are then taught how to blend those letter sounds into syllables. The children could then use that knowledge to read any word they see, just by sounding out the letters. Children could also use that knowledge to figure out how to spell any word that they know.

In many languages, the spelling is so simple and predictable that it takes only about three months for a child who can speak that language to learn to read and write. However, it takes about two and a half years for a young English speaker to learn to read English fluently. That's because each vowel in English can be pronounced several different ways, and because English has many irregular spellings. English also has many loan words from foreign languages. Thus, it's no wonder that spelling bees are held only in English.

Despite the irregularity of English spelling, it is far, far easier for an English-speaking person to learn to read English than it is for someone in China to learn to read Chinese. Instead of using letters that stand for sounds, Chinese uses complicated characters that stand for words. Chinese people are considered literate if they can recognize 2,000 Chinese characters. A highly literate Chinese person may know 20,000 characters. Yet an English-speaking third-grader who knows how to use the rules of phonics can easily read and write tens of thousands of English words.

It's hard enough for Chinese speakers to learn to read Chinese characters, but it would be far harder for an English speaker to learn to read English words as if they were Chinese characters. That's because Chinese characters were originally based on meaningful drawings. In contrast, the shapes of English words are not meaningful or interesting. Furthermore, the shape of an English word can change dramatically because of changes in case and typeface. Consider the word *great*, which looks radically different in different typefaces:

Great *great*
 GREAT **Great**
 great **great**
great **Great**

A child who has been taught to recognize the word as a shape might have no clue that all of those different shapes represent the same word. In contrast, a child who has been taught to recognize letters and to sound out words can easily adapt to different typefaces and scripts.

Many of the children who were initially taught to memorize words as shapes eventually figure out how to break the phonetic code. They may notice that various letters or letter combinations are predictably associated with particular sounds. From then on, they go on to sound out the words, just as if they had been taught to do so from the beginning.

Unfortunately, some children don't realize that they're supposed to analyze the sounds of the words, or they may have trouble doing it. Those children might not notice that letters make up a code that represents sounds. Thus, those children don't break the code on their own. They end up learning only a few hundred words per year, which means that they will end up functionally illiterate. This fact explains why so many millions of native English speakers in the United States remain functionally illiterate despite having spent so many years in school.

In 1998, the National Academy of Sciences published a report titled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Its main conclusion was that "Adequate progress in learning to read English (or any alphabetic language) beyond the initial level depends on having a working understanding of how sounds are represented alphabetically." The authors went on to explain, "There are three potential

stumbling blocks that are known to throw children off course on the journey to skilled reading. The first obstacle, which arises at the outset of reading acquisition, is difficulty in understanding and using the alphabetic principle—the idea that written spellings systematically represent spoken words.”

Nevertheless, many educators over the years have argued that children *shouldn't* be taught the alphabetic principle. In 1844, Horace Mann, who was First Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, argued, “No thorough reform will ever be effected in our schools until this practice [of beginning with the alphabet] is abolished.”

Why did Mann come to such a bizarre conclusion? Mann had never taught primary school and thus had never taught anybody to read. Furthermore, he evidently misunderstood some of the strategies and tactics that had been used successfully for 200 years to teach children in New England to read English. After all, the 1840 census showed that only 1.1% of the Massachusetts residents over 20 years of age were illiterate.

In his *Seventh Annual Report to the Massachusetts Board of Education*, published in 1844, Mann said that German and Dutch children are not taught the names of the letters of the alphabet but are taught the sounds of the letters. Then the children are taught to sound out the words letter by letter. Mann claimed that this method, called phonics, would not work in English because English vowels can have too many different sounds. Thus, he thought that children should be taught words first, then letters. Mann got this idea from Thomas Gallaudet, who was using what are now called “sight words” to teach deaf-mute children to read.

It's hard to believe that Mann thought that phonics wouldn't work. Phonics was the method that had enabled Massachusetts to achieve nearly 99% literacy. *The New England Primer* had started out by teaching children the sounds of the letters and then included a *syllabary*, which showed the children how to combine letters into syllables. After the Revolutionary War, Noah Webster's blue-backed speller used the same approach. It became a bestseller, second only to the Bible.

The Association of Boston Schoolmasters responded politely but firmly to Horace Mann's theory: "We love the secretary but we hate his theories. They stand in the way of substantial education. It is impossible for a sound mind not to hate them."¹ They explained,

Education is a great concern; it has often been tampered with by vain theorists; it has suffered from the stupid folly and the delusive wisdom of its treacherous friends; and we hardly know which have injured it most. Our conviction is that it has much more to hope from the collected wisdom and common prudence of the community than from the suggestions of the individual. Locke injured it by his theories, and so did Rousseau, and so did Milton. All their plans were too splendid to be true. It is to be advanced by conceptions, neither soaring above the clouds, nor groveling on the earth—but by those plain, gradual, productive, common sense improvements, which use may encourage and experience suggest. We are in favor of advancement, provided it be towards usefulness.

The Boston schoolmasters were right. Mann's method did not work nearly as well as the traditional method. The matter should have been settled right then and there. Unfortunately, Mann had the last word. He had enormous influence on who got to teach at the normal schools that were being established to train teachers. Thus, the whole-word method never really died. It was like embers that continue to smolder unnoticed, just waiting for the opportunity to burst into flame.

To understand why Horace Mann was so influential and how he used his influence, it's important to understand the politics of his day. The 1830s were a time of social reform movements in the United States, and particularly in Massachusetts. A temperance movement to fight alcoholism sprang up, as did a movement for the abolition of slavery. During the 1830s, Massachusetts also undertook a major reform of its educational system, largely because the Congregational church was disestablished in 1833.

About the Author



Laurie Endicott Thomas taught herself to read at age four, by studying the rhyming words in *Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss. Thanks to that head start in reading, she was able to get an excellent education in the public schools of Ohio, Wisconsin, and New Jersey. Her classmates who did not figure out the phonics code on their own before they entered school were not so lucky.

After receiving a bachelor and master of arts degree in regional science at the University of Pennsylvania, Thomas spent more than 20 years working as an editor and writer in medical and veterinary publishing. She has also copyedited college textbooks on education and philosophy.

Although Thomas has never worked in a school, she has essentially taught remedial writing to some of the most highly educated people in the United States: medical doctors. She is also the author of a column on grammar and usage in the *American Medical Writers Association Journal*. Thomas is a popular speaker on education and healthcare reform.

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