

TEACHING READING

A blend of art and science

By **Timothy Rasinski, William Nichols, David Paige, William Rupley, Chase Young, & Meghan Valerio**

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“It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”

—Albert Einstein

Recently, in the mainstream media, there have been renewed calls for the application of the science of reading in developing effective reading curricula and instruction. But the science of reading has been known for 20 years, since the report of the National Reading Panel in 2000, and yet, according to the Nation’s Report Card of 2019, we have barely budged the needle in terms of reading achievement.

We fully embrace the need for reading instruction to be guided by the science of reading. However, we feel that a scientific approach to instruction is not sufficient for reading instruction that aims to develop proficient, engaged, and lifelong readers. Although science informs us about *what* children need to learn at various stages of their reading acquisition, it does not fully answer the question of *how* the teaching of those learning outcomes should occur. We suggest that scientifically based reading instruction can and should be delivered in artful and authentic ways that engage students. We propose that successful teaching of reading blends both science of reading and teacher art or craft.

Arranging reading instruction artfully

What do we mean when we say that teaching is an art? Art can be defined as the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their emotional power. In its broadest sense, *art* means “to arrange.” Art is created when someone arranges things found in the world into a new or different design or form. Thus, teachers are artists when they arrange instruction to evoke an aesthetic or emotional response from the audience: the students.

In a recent journal article entitled “Drawing on Reading Science Without Starting a War,” Benjamin Riley argued that although scientific insights should inform teaching practice, teachers should still have space for making pedagogical decisions about how reading instruction actually occurs. Similarly, science of reading scholar Mark Seidenberg acknowledged in a recent *New York Times* article entitled “An Old and Contested Solution to Boost Reading Scores” that “the science that you need to know [reading acquisition] is good. The science on how to teach [reading] effectively is not.”

So how can teachers create reading instruction that is scientific, artful, and effective? Let’s take a scientific reading competency that we have spent a fair amount of our professional lives studying: reading fluency. Fluency is the ability



to read the words in texts automatically and with a level of expression (prosody) that reflects the meaning of the text. Two of the scientifically validated methods for developing fluency are assisted reading and repeated reading. Assisted reading involves students reading a text orally while listening to a fluent rendering of the same text. Repeated reading involves multiple readings of a text until students can read it at a level that achieves or approaches fluent reading. In many current fluency programs, students engage in assisted and repeated readings for the primary purpose of reading faster (improving their words correct per minute score). We argue that although such instruction may be supported by science, it is certainly not art.

To take an artful approach, we need to ask: Are there authentic situations in which students engage in assisted and repeated reading for the dual purpose of increasing automatic and

expressive reading of the text? The answer lies in performance. Whether actors rehearsing for a theatrical performance, poets practicing their poems for a performance at a coffeehouse, or authors reading over a selection of their book in anticipation of a public reading, the rehearsal often involves assisted and repeated reading. The difference is in the purpose of the assisted and repeated readings: to communicate with and engage the audience.

Creating artful situations in the classroom

So why don't we create artful situations in our classrooms where students engage in assisted and repeated reading in anticipation of performing a script, a poem, or a selection from a book? Actually, we have. And the results have been promising. We found that developing fluency instruction using Readers Theatre and poetry

leads to significant and substantive improvements in fluency, word decoding, and even comprehension. Choral reading, an assisted reading strategy where students read in unison with the teacher, allows students to support one another and provides a sense of the rhythm and feel for the language of a text, reflecting the author's art.

Art and science are not mutually exclusive endeavors; for example, mathematics and music are intertwined in the science of physics. The great challenge is for teachers of reading to find ways to make the science of reading come to life in artful, authentic, engaging, and effective ways. The goal is to develop teachers who can become instructional artists able to translate (or arrange) the science of reading into instruction that is not only effective in terms of scientific outcomes but also artistic in terms of aesthetic value. This is not a small task but, given our lack of progress in students' reading achievement, one worth pursuing. ■