

# Stop the Pendulum

In a survey, 2,000 K-12 teachers were asked, “How many years between pendulum swings?” 22 percent responded every 1-3 years, while 29 percent said 4-6 years. Fifteen percent said 7-9 years, and 33 percent said 10 or more years. None of the teachers said, “What pendulum?” Why is American education plagued by “been there, done that” syndrome? The root causes of the pendulum swing problem are just below the surface and are within the power of educators to resolve.



More than 100 years ago, G. Stanley Hall (author of *How to Teach Reading and What to Read in School*) described the three approaches to reading available in the 1800s. In the past 115 years, America has not developed a fourth approach. The same three are still available: sounds, words, and sentences. In spite of billions of dollars spent on reading research and materials, in 2012 we still start initial instruction in reading with only sounds, words, or sentences. Yes, the approaches are now in color, on television, on laptops, and in interactive games, but the same three approaches remain. The problem is that every 20 years or so, America becomes dissatisfied with the “approach du jour” and swings to one of the other two methods.

The sound approach has the most commercial programs, and is often called *direct instruction* or *phonics*. The most famous of the word approaches is “Dick and Jane.” The history of the sentence approach stems from using the King James Version of the Bible to “McGuffey Readers,” or literature-based reading. So, why does America change direction all of the time?

## Problem-Solving

Each switch is made to solve a problem. With phonics, too many kids learn to dislike reading. With the sentence approach, too many students do not catch onto the underlying phonetic structure, and with the word approach, the advanced readers are greatly constrained by the slow progression of new words. In the 21st century, the pendulum is fueled by confusing research. Is the reported increase in reading proficiency in certain locales because of a change in strategy or because the time allocated for reading tripled?

The problem is that we haven’t reached the goal of 100 percent of students achieving reading proficiency. The pendulum cycle clearly is not the answer to the problem. Maybe we are asking the wrong research question. It is not a question of which program or which of the three approaches has the highest rate of success but of how we can come closer to 100 percent reading attainment. My premise is that all three approaches meet the needs of some students. For the vast majority of students, the

approach does not matter; they will read fine. However, for some students it matters a lot.

Our primary teachers, especially our special education and remedial teachers, must know all three approaches well. If the classroom teachers do not know all three approaches, then the intervention teams must be the ones to use the two other approaches. We do not need special education and remedial educators to think they are attempting a new strategy when, in fact, it is the same approach from a different publisher.

## Background Knowledge and Performance

The same pendulum that swings in reading fluctuates in other subjects. It vacillates between background knowledge and performance (what students know and what they can do). This seems rather absurd since educators are responsible for students learning both. So, why does a pendulum swing between the two major educational responsibilities? The answer given most often is a lack of time, most likely due to review time in the fall and holding students accountable for trivia.

If instruction in the first week of school does not start with grade-level content, teachers will run out of time. Melody Russell, author of *Continuous Improvement in the Mathematics Classroom*, accepted the challenge to forego her fall review process. On the first day of school, she handed her eighth graders separate lists of seventh-grade and eighth-grade math concepts. She told the students they were going to begin on eighth-grade concepts that day. However, if there was something on the seventh-grade list they did not remember, they should come to her and she would explain it. What happened? Students did ask for explanations from seventh grade, and she finished all of the eighth-grade content, even with slower students.

Start the current year with grade level-appropriate content on day one, but inform students that every quiz will include one to three questions from

prior grade levels. This is especially important for geometry teachers. If students answer one to three Algebra I questions on each quiz, they will be ready to start Algebra II on day one.

Any teacher using exams prepared by publishers is probably holding students accountable for trivia. Not all questions on these exams are trivial, for sure. However, too many trivia questions subtract from time for deeper understanding and performance objectives.

The distinction between trivial and essential knowledge is a value judgment that the Common Core State Standards will help to flesh out. My favorite example of trivia is having students memorize states and their capitals. My opinion is that students should be able to write the names of states on a blank map of the United States, but can easily look up the capitals. Students all over the country know that the capital of Nebraska is Lincoln, but would be hard-pressed to point out where Nebraska is on the map. I think that students should not only be able to fill in all the states on a blank map, but also know the location of major cities, rivers, bodies of water, and mountains. You may not agree with my distinction between trivial and essential, but if educators do not distinguish between trivia and essential knowledge and remove trivia from exams, there will most likely not be enough time for performance expectations. And the pendulum continues to swing.

I am not suggesting that trivia be removed from instruction as it is often the minor stories that make the lessons engaging and interesting. However,

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students should only be accountable for what they have been told is essential from day one of school.

#### **Incremental Change**

If America ever gets accountability right, schools will be accountable to document that each year more students graduate from high school either prepared for college or a career with a living wage. Younger students will

have to prove they are on a trajectory for this final graduation requirement. Big pendulum swings will never assist educators in meeting this accountability requirement. Many little improvements, year after year, will give America the desired improvements. **P**

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