

**Keynote Address Précis: On Predicting Big Things in Literacy Research:
Trendlines, Perennials, Serendipity and Stealth**

George, G. Hruby
Utah State University

Abstract: A Presentation Brief of highlights from the closing general session presentation and open dialogue session on Predicting Big Things in Literacy Education Research and Practice.

Let us acknowledge that a paucity of data makes analysis of the future difficult. Moreover, if a cursory review of the historical record is a fair indication, our field has never been very good at collectively predicting the future. Yet, as a self-confessed scientific instrumentalist (Cacioppo, Semin & Berntson, 2004), I find speculating on the “Next Big Things” in reading and literacy education, as I have been invited to do here, irresistible. After all, we can construct a future with fewer apologies than we can openly construct the past or present, but the goal is the same: fashioning useful heuristics to negotiate our current and impending environment on behalf of a more fruitful and satisfying condition. I will therefore first briefly address some of the reasons for our poor speculative track record, and then nonetheless stick my neck out and make some obvious and some not-so-obvious predictions for the decade ahead regarding future trends in literacy education.

As a field, if fields can be said to have anthropomorphic tendencies, we have never been very good at predicting the future because arguably we are usually rather poor at gauging the present. This is true on several scores. First, we tend to hold the legacies of the past (in which we are typically professionally invested) in higher esteem than the present. As a result, when gauging our “scholarly present”—an echo of yesterday’s ethos—we pay too much attention to less than current phenomena. This is an inherent disability of academe generally. The academy, a graduate student once told me, is a cultural museum, a place where lively new ideas go to die to be embalmed in the rhetoric of evening graduate seminars. Ouch. But he may have been on to something.

Second, as a discipline among disciplines, educational scholarship seems to lag behind the curve of the academy—about 7 years behind the current theory, foci, and concerns of the humanities—and even further behind the state of the sciences, including the social sciences. For instance, when authorizing our efforts in classroom ethnography, we have often heavily cite singular cultural theorists from the early 1970s, even as anthropology since that decade has invested itself ever more subtly and profoundly into the insights of biological and ecological theory. When we authorize our research in reading development, we too often build our models of developmental change on citations of Piaget and Vygotsky from the early 20th century, rather than from the idioms manifestly obvious in the past three editions of the *Handbook of Child Psychology* (e.g., Lerner & Damon, 2006). And when we wish to anchor our thinking about sociopolitical phenomena, we are wont to cite Hegelian and Marxist constructs from the 18th and 19th century, more recently rearticulated in mid-20th-century Frankfurt School motifs. Notably, many critical literacy theorists came loudly out of the closet as dedicated Marxists only after the disbanding of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Such anachronicity seems to suggest a burden on our powers of prognostication.

Third, being American educators and therefore implicitly progressive, if no longer Progressivist, we are far more vibrantly dedicated to our desires about how the world should be than we are with the way the world is or where it is going. It can be argued, however, that getting the world to where it should be is a lot easier when you understand how the world is than when you do not. As the old saying has it, you can get almost anywhere you want on a good horse, but it is easier when you ride it in the direction it's facing. (Lest I sound scolding, allow me to confess to being guilty of all three of these shortcomings, but I will here try my best to outgrow them.)

A final reason for our failure to predict the future with any precision is our reliance, as good researchers ever mindful of the need to quantify anything potentially phenomenal, on the identification and measurement of social, political, and cultural trends. When it comes to trend spotting, the devil is in the data points. Linear, curved, sine-wave, or cyclic, trend patterns can only ever be crude simplifications. Human capacity for academic abstraction and pattern identification is no match for the vagaries of the larger-than-human world. Following Heraclitus, we never really step into the same river twice. When we think we have seen it all before – something we are more wont to claim as we get older – the truth is that we have been forced, both by neurological processes and failing perceptual abilities, to rely evermore on our prior knowledge. (We start this decline, I have read, around age 9 when the secondary receptor sites on the pyramidal neurons in our hippocampus begin to shut down.) Thus, the trends we claim to perceive are probably more a reflection of the patterning of our prior knowledge, or the design of appropriated cultural contrivance, than the mark of a dependable tendency in the natural or social world.

For this reason, in my prognosticating I will not rely solely on trendspotting and perennial pattern-matching. I will also rely on a heightened regard for serendipity in human affairs, and a cautious concern for stealth in human contrivance. (I also have taken considerable time and effort to consult a certain neon-colored inspirational libation at poolside Thursday evening, and that didn't seem to hurt either.) So forewarned, make what you will of my predictions, some obvious, some less so.

Obvious Expectations

1. *We will soon witness the return of meaning-based reading instruction.* I make this prediction not merely on the basis of preference. Nor do I claim that phonics-based reading instruction is unlikely to produce some of the results we seek in post-third grade reading scores.

Rather, I base this claim on trend lines that track a pendulum-swing pattern in reading instruction preferences over the past two centuries. (I thank Dick Robinson, Mike McKenna, and Terry Bullock for the early historical background—although I have also surveyed a number of reading pedagogy texts from the 1890s onward that substantiates several of these trend claims). Although precise methods and rationales change over time, the pendulum essentially swings between indicator-based and meaning-based approaches to teaching reading.

To start with the indicator approach, in colonial America, reading was taught “by the letter” with spellers. If you knew how to spell a word, it was thought, you could recognize it in print. C-A-T spells cat. And that was reading. In the 1820s and 1830s people like Noah Webster, Horace Mann, and some New England Transcendentalists,

argued on behalf of an alternative approach they thought was better suited for the needs of a democratic citizenry: reading for meaning by the word. Mann was particularly anxious that the frontier mobocracy that had elected Andrew Jackson be domesticated through ideas, rather than rote recitation. Interestingly, Webster's clear conflict of interest in this recommendation was arguably the beginning of a history of financial influence on American literacy instruction that would continue to this day.

By the late 19th century, the era of robber barons, unbridled immigration, industrialization, and spreading urbanization, America was back to reading by the letter through proper pronunciation and the "science of phonetics" (Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* was a specialist in this field). Again, the idea was that to recognize the words on a page, you had to know how they were spelled; proper pronunciation (the pronunciation of the better educated classes) was supposed to be an accurate indicator of the spelling. But at the very least, this approach allowed you to sound as if you were well read, and purportedly allowed you to be passed off as a duchess at a royal ball.

But by the 1920s and '30s the US was back to reading for meaning by the word, this time with Dick and Jane. John Dewey, William Elson, William S. Gray, and other experience-oriented pedagogical theorists all had a hand in this shift. Gray developed an extensive range of readers for meaningful reading experiences. At the early reading level, this turn toward reading by the word manifested itself as the famous "look and say" or whole word approach, where the entire shape of a word would be taught, often with the assistance of encircling lines around the word, or colored backgrounds emphasizing the shape of the word. Later psychological research revised this method toward developing students' recognition of salient aspects of the word shape, such as the first letter, salient consonants, and word length. Explicit analytic (whole-to-part) phonics instruction was developed at about the same time (e.g., the Orton-Gillingham method), informed, in part, by Gestalt psychology.

By the 1950s, America was back to reading by the letter for sound with what was now finally being called phonics instruction (the part-to-whole variety). This was not quite what we mean by phonics instruction today, however. If you consult the materials from the time, this approach to phonics, like the previous proto-phonics approaches, was chiefly rationalized as a way to improve spelling and pronunciation ability (e.g., Horn, 1954). Explanations for how to use phonics methods in the reading pedagogy materials of the time was often included in the sections on vocabulary development (Wardeberg, 1963). Still, it was clearly a bottom-up, part-to-whole approach to alphabets, it involved lots of drilling to skills, it tended to neglect meaningful reading of authentic texts, and was supposed to improve automatic response (response to letters without much thinking about them). This approach was also rationalized in Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* (1957/1982) as a means of inculcating the future citizenry against the dangers of communism.

By the late-1970s, the reaction within education and teacher colleges against behaviorist skill-drilling (and the ever declining ITBS scores that haunted public education from the early 1960s to the late 1970s) led to a re-exploration of experience-based constructivist pedagogy, bringing America back around to meaning-making reading approaches, a rediscovery of Dewey's progressive educational theories, and analytic phonics methods. Thanks to the influence of the cognitive revolution on educational research, and the psycholinguistic research base, whole language, a highly

meaning-centered approach, began to catch on in the 1980s. (For the record, ITBS scores turned around in 1979 and continued to rise into the late 1990s.) Despite its promise, whole language seemed to run afoul of its own unacknowledged contradictions and especially its reluctance to foster a well-structured approach for training prospective teachers in necessary concomitant skills and methods (Pearson, 2004).

In the 21st century we are again back to phonics, and for pretty much the same arguments, methods, and ideological rationale as before. But it will not be long, I suspect, before we are back again to reading for meaning. The sashaying of history encourages us to expect it. And I see two tangible causes for the coming shift. First, it turns out that fluency of decoding ability to automaticity, contrary to the claims of testing materials designers, may not be a correlate of comprehension, after all (Paris, Carpenter, Paris, & Hamilton, 2005). Fluency is a constraint on comprehension, but it does not actually foster it. The correlation between fluency and comprehension is a moderate one – about .45 – and it disappears after second grade. So good DIBELS scores will not alone translate into good adolescent readers (although I fear the upcoming “Striving Readers” proposals in Congress will lead us to try DIBEL-ing adolescent readers for a few years before we acknowledge the reality of these recent research analyses).

Second, the academic publishing industry will soon saturate the market with their phonics skill-drilling materials and they will then require a new set of materials to maintain sales figures and stock valuations. After all, it is not as if they are going to shut their doors and go out of business once they are done selling us what is once and for all scientifically proven to work. By the way, I also predict that Instruction #1 for use of these new materials will read – as did the last set – “throw out all your old materials...”

2. *We will see continued and possibly increased federal control of educational curriculum.* Much to my amazement, the Republican right has finally federalized American educational policy in a way that more moderate and reasoned legislators of the past had never dreamed of doing – and given a possible future Democratic administration or Congress precisely the tools it will need for articulating social policy through the school house. The possibility for a re-emergence of neo-progressive education may be upon us. I have qualms about any party trying to use the school house as a locus of political indoctrination for ideological purposes – but, on the other hand, I doubt it will ever translate into much of an effect on the body politic. However, such efforts could well distract from and thus hamper effective teaching.

3. *The money thrown at reading instruction in grades K-3 via Reading First may well demonstrate no discernable improvement of student literacy abilities either before or after third grade.* This will be because we already had the best 3rd grade reading scores of any educational system in the world before Reading First. What’s was there to improve? The real problems in reading, as we know, start in fourth grade and extend beyond. As the government turns its attention belatedly to grades 4-12, demonstrating success will not come so easily. And when it does not come easily, calls for jettisoning “the failed policies of the past” will help foster our friend the pendulum swing (see #1 above).

But prior to that, we can expect to hear how this new initiative or that will essentially duplicate the “success” of Reading First by using the same instructional methods in middle and high school content area classes. All problems are fluency problems, it will be sagely observed. Early reading specialists will be drafted into secondary schools as reading coaches. Frankly, I know fluency is a problem with

struggling adolescent readers, but I doubt graphophonemic processing skills and literacy coaches are viable answers to the causes of poor fluency for most adolescent readers. We tried something like this back in the 1970s, and those who recall say it did not seem to help. For that reason I predict...

4. *In the years ahead, we will see increased attention to comprehension improvement methods and content area learning.* I expect a reappraisal for cognitive and social constructivist theories of learning and literacy abetted by psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic, and sociolinguistic research. The conundrum of just what the heck comprehension is will be an area of intense theoretical speculation and model building – which is to say, the past will continue to repeat itself.

Less Obvious Prognostications

1. As the nation tires of federal rhetoric and policy that destabilizes public education by bashing and defunding the schools, school districts, teachers and university-based teacher education programs, we will see a return to the issue of measuring individual student (rather than grade level) performance, and measuring teacher (rather than school) effectiveness. This last will be resisted, of course, but because it will be a trade-off on behalf of saving the schools, it will probably pass through. But given teacher shortages, jettisoning less good teachers is not a politically or administratively feasible solution. Increased teacher pay, financial incentives, and better teacher professional support will be required as part of a comprehensive solution. And up the road I see a truly national education system with plentiful and requisite teacher professional development, social and political respect, and adequate pay. No, really!

2. The increased use and occasional misuse of the new technologies by students for academic fraud has already received much media attention. I predict a firestorm will erupt regarding similar misuse by educational scholars and theorists. Accusations of plagiarism and invasion of privacy will be the headline makers, but the more substantive concerns will be unreliability of Internet sources (think Wikipedia), the foreshortened shelf-life of published research studies (the aversion to citing anything more than five years old), the evaporation of access to some “published” research journals, and the reduction of scholarship to the mere marketing of ideas. Also on the horizon, the pirating of public university teacher education course materials of the sort now offered by professors in online formats, by for-profit private companies trying to offer quicker, cheaper teacher training directly to those schools suffering teacher shortages – for a profit.

3. Teacher bias, especially regarding anti-minority and anti-male pseudo-psychiatric labeling, will be a future hot button issue. The use of personality trait psychology (the so-called Big 5 personality continua) for raising awareness of interpersonal bias between teachers and students in classrooms (and between school professionals regarding assessment of performance) will displace the current fascination with “learning styles” based on sensory-motor modality and multiple intelligences. This will probably start at the secondary level first.

4. And here’s a scary prediction for 20 years out: Systems-based models of literacy development (and of school administration and operation) anchored in life-science models of ecological systems will expand in tandem with neurobiological educational interventions such as genetically modified viruses for brain re-development

training, and clinical (or even teacher-administered) biochemical assays for emotional and intellectual difficulty. If this occurs in sync with an increased appreciation and tolerance for human diversity, it could bring an end to the “special segregation” of students, but otherwise it will nonetheless be a field day for class action attorneys. Systems-based modeling, by the way, is something I think classroom researchers should not dismiss out of hand, but I am less certain about the psychopharmacological interventions. Perhaps we will get one without the other.

5. Lastly, an economic downturn will put an end to half-baked arguments for disassembling public education. Private, for-profit companies are not up to the task of educating America’s children and adolescents in any event, but during times of economic adversity it is hard to imagine how they could even be viable as business models once the tax divestiture to support them is pulled out. Moreover, during such economic adversity, the value of education as a social as well as an individual good will never be so obvious. In a word, the future for education could be brightest if bubble-based economics goes south. Your retirement portfolio won’t be worth much, but you can console yourself that it is for a good cause—possibly with the assistance of neurobiological interventions like those neon libations down at poolside.

So those are my predictions. Only time will tell if they are fair assessments of the future or academic elaborations of the past. I will only say it is not as easy as it looks. So now you try it. I look forward to hearing from you.

George G. Hruby
Utah State University
George.hruby@usu.edu

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