

Two Solitudes

The three-cueing system is popular with teachers but researchers are barely aware of it.

By Marilyn Jager Adams

Over the last few years, I have spent much time in schools around the country, working with teachers and administrators. At some point during such sessions, I am almost inevitably asked how what I have said relates to the three-cueing system.

The first time I was hit with this question, I naïvely asked what, specifically, my audience meant by “the three-cueing system”. It would be difficult to overstate the dissonance in the room that day. When I asked these people what they meant by the three-cueing system, they looked at me as though I were from Mars.

For indeed, how could I not know? How could I present myself to them as an expert on early literacy and not know? It turned out that the three-cueing system took the form of a Venn diagram showing that the meaning of text depended on semantics, syntax, and graphophonemic cues.

From that day on, it seemed that I encountered the three-cueing system (a at every turn. Though the schematic differed slightly from one source to the next, the common ancestry was apparent. Casually, at first, I began to collect examples in-service materials across the country.

Idle curiosity it might have remained, except that I soon found the three-cueing system getting in the way of my efforts to communicate with practitioners. The problem, to my mind, was not the schematic but some of the interpretations that had become attached to it.

Given the widespread familiarity of the schematic in the community of practice, I wanted to correct and clarify its intent. To do so, I needed to find the original.

I began to search in earnest. In addition to tackling the literature, I took to asking audiences everywhere for the source. People gave me copies of the schematic instead, and my collection grew. But still, I couldn’t find the source.

Turning to the Internet, I posted a query to the TAWL (Teachers Applying Whole Language) listserv. A number of people responded, indicating their familiarity with the schematic. Some had hypotheses as to its original author; however, nobody was sure.

In addition to asking practitioners, I probed my colleagues in educational research, beginning with those whom I have long revered as having near-encyclopedic knowledge of the literature. As it turned out, the schematic was unfamiliar to most of them, as it had been to me.

After a very long search, I tracked down a rudimentary version of the schematic in a 1976 article by respected scholar David Pearson. I did not find this article on my own. Instead, it was sent to me by Pearson himself in response to one of my end-of-talk queries.

He too had been unaware of the schematic’s present-day ubiquity, and he seemed wholly bemused by the thought that it might have been he who started it. In any case, if this article by Pearson in 1976 is the original source for the three-cueing schematic, then insofar as I can tell, it lay dormant for over a decade.

My concerns with the three-cueing system relate not to the schematic, which I find wholly sensible insofar as it goes. My concerns relate instead, and in two major ways, to the interpretations so broadly attached to the schematic.

First, the three-cueing schematic is sometimes presented as the rationale for subordinating the value of graphophonemic (phonics) information to syntax and semantics and, by extension, for minimizing and even shunning the teaching of phonics. In the context of instructional guidance for teachers, such marginalization of the role of phonics is alarmingly discrepant with what research has taught us about teaching children to read.

My second major concern is that the discussion of the remaining two of the three systems – syntax and semantics – tends to be unproductively superficial. Given the extreme, if inappropriate, share of the reading load that is ascribed to semantics and syntax, this lack of guidance with respect to the instructional support that each warrants is all the more troubling.

If the intended message of the three-cueing system was originally that teachers should take care not to over-emphasize phonics to the neglect of comprehension, its received message has broadly become that teachers should minimize attention to phonics lest it compete with comprehension.

If the original premise of the three-cueing system was that the reason for reading the words is to understand the text, it has been oddly converted such that, in effect, the reason for understanding the text is in order to figure out the words.

How did this happen?

The sobering revelation of this story is the profound breach in information and communication that separates the teaching and research communities. In the world of practice, the widespread subscription of the belief system that the three-cueing diagram has come to represent has wreaked disaster on students and hardship on teachers.

While teachers widely believe that the lore of the three-cueing system is based on the best of current research, researchers are barely aware of its existence, nature, or influence.

The lesson of the story is thus clear and urgent. We must work together to rebuild the bridge, socially and intellectually, between those involved in research and practice.

(Adapted with permission from “The Three-Cueing System”, <http://readybygrade3.com>. Dr. Adams is a visiting scholar at Harvard and the author of Beginning to Read.)