

Advocacy for Evidence-Aligned Instruction in an Ed Prep Program: A Pre-service Teacher's Story

Martin Plemel, Teacher Candidate at University of Saskatchewan
On behalf of USASK Right to Read.



My name is Martin Plemel, a teacher candidate at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education. I came to teaching after spending over a dozen years working as an engineer. Because I have been away from school and from English courses longer than some of my fellow teacher candidates, I eagerly listened to *Sold a Story* as a way to get ahead of my English curriculum classes. Having listened to the podcast, I was surprised when my class was assigned a textbook that seemed biased towards Balanced Literacy, telling us things like "to read requires the use of all the cuing systems" (Heydon and Bainbridge, 290). I am writing this not to teach you about reading instruction, but to try and convince you that as a student or teacher candidate, you can help make things better at your institution.

Once I saw the issues in my own classes, I started talking to other students and staff. My course was not unique, another class focused on pre-kindergarten to grade 3 has a primary learning outcome to "use a repertoire of teaching and learning strategies... that reflect knowledge of language cueing systems" (ECUR 308 Syllabus). For both students and staff, there were a variety of responses. Some students were eager to learn more about evidence-based reading instruction and were equally eager to get it into the university classrooms. Other students held onto their teachings that early literacy is best served through an invitation to play through engaging books, and not through systematic instruction. Likewise, some of the instructors at the college were keeping up to date on the research and were happy to talk about evidence based reading instruction, while other undergraduate and graduate level instructors fell on a spectrum from ignorant, to dismissive, to outright hostile towards anything called "science of reading". After some initial conversations with the administration failed to move towards improvement, some of us started working together to improve our knowledge and build our power.

As a student in a classroom or in a college, it is easy to feel powerless when you disagree with the institutional authorities. So we found our power in each other. That is why we started by reaching out and finding each other informally. Then, we reached out to our instructors and to our student society. We compiled our shared knowledge into a website, laying out the issues with the current instruction and the evidence for a better way forward. We wrote an open letter to the administrators requesting that our reading instruction be informed by evidence. We handed out QR codes, and spoke in the front of classrooms to inform our fellow students. We talked to language consultants and other staff at the local school divisions. As we built our power and relationships, we learned so much.

We learned by reading and listening, by teaching each other, and by sharing resources. If you are looking for some resources to start sharing, here are some of the places where we started:

- Scarborough's Reading Rope and the Simple View of Reading are simple visuals that encode a lot of understanding;
- Sold a Story by Emily Hanford is a great podcast and it is where many of us started, but for people who are on the fence about spending the time, Reveal News adapted a shorter 1 hour version.
- The Knowledge Gap by Natalie Wexler is an accessible book that compiles a lot of evidence building a knowledge base across curricula.

Because we are in Canada, we also have precedent-setting documents. Canada's Supreme Court formally recognizes that the learning to read is a fundamental human right, and Ontario's Human Rights Commission has affirmed that whole language approaches to reading instruction fail to provide this fundamental human right to many students. We also reached out to the Human Right Commission of our own province of Saskatchewan, and are eagerly awaiting their upcoming findings on the intersection of reading instruction and human rights.

There are more of us talking, and we know more than at the beginning of this year when we started, so how can we turn this into action? Our goal remains the same: to improve the quality of instruction at our institution and to align it with the evidence. With this in mind, we are currently working with the college to provide a series of professional development sessions on the science of reading from an expert outside of our university. We are reviewing curricula from reading and literacy courses so teacher candidates can respectfully challenge their instructors on what is being taught. We are preparing to do more outreach at the start of the semester so that students in our college are aware of these issues and can get involved. Finally, we are keeping the administration informed so that we can keep a pathway open to work together in the future.

I decided to change careers and to become a teacher in my 30's because I wanted my work to make a meaningful difference for the next generation. I thought that I would be making this difference after I convocated and once I was teaching in a classroom. However, seeing the

gap between what is known and what is taught about reading instruction means that right now, with my fellow student, I have an opportunity to make a meaningful difference. If you are a teacher candidate reading this article and struggling with where to begin, the most important thing you can do is to start talking to colleagues. We build understanding and power when we work together.

If you are curious about how to advocate for the science of reading at your own institution, please reach out to us at UsaskR2R@gmail.com.

If you want to see what our website looks like, you can find it here:
<https://sites.google.com/view/righttoreaduofs/home>.

Or, if you are looking for inspiration for your own petition, you can find ours here:
<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfVc7h3fUEx5lqrMpq3F7u2eU5j4wCXFUsjfezRpbl-prhvJQ/viewform>

Work Cited

Heydon, Rachel, and Joyce Bainbridge. *Constructing Meaning: Teaching the Language Arts, K-8*. Nelson Education, 2012.

ECUR 308 Syllabus (Cilimdzc) Reading and Writing Development, Prekindergarten to Grade 3 (<https://usask.instructure.com/courses/48949/assignments/syllabus>)

ECUR 308 Syllabus (Danyluk) Reading and Writing Development, Prekindergarten to Grade 3 (<https://usask.instructure.com/courses/55273/assignments/syllabus>)

