

The 'Phonics Debate': a lesson in irony

A comment on the ACE/CIS Phonics Debate by UK blogger **Monique Nowers**, published on her blogpost *How to Teach Reading* at howtoteachreading.org.uk/

Irony can be a difficult concept to explain, so I am always delighted when I come across something that exemplifies it so well as to serve as a masterclass.

The setting was the recent 'Phonics Debate' on 31 July 2018 hosted by the Australian College of Educators and the Centre for Independent Studies.

The proposition, 'Phonics in context is not enough: Synthetic phonics & learning to read' was supported by:

1. Distinguished Professor, Anne Castles, Macquarie University
2. Dr Jennifer Buckingham, The Centre for Independent Studies
3. Mr Troy Verey, Marsden Road Public School

Whilst speakers against the proposition, the so-called 'negative' team, were:

1. Professor Robyn Ewing AM, University of Sydney
2. Dr Kathy Rushton, University of Sydney
3. Mr Mark Diamond, Principal, Lansvale Public School

The full debate is available on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=725&v=snUNsYfrxjY

So, what was so ironic? Actually, many of the 'negative' contributions were positively steeped in the stuff, but my jaw did drop when the second 'negative' speaker, Dr Kathy Rushton, opened her remarks by quoting the first few lines of Lewis Carroll's wonderful *Jabberwocky*,

first published in *Through the Looking-Glass*.

*'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

*"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!*

I don't wish to misrepresent Dr Rushton so I include her remarks. She said of the poem:

"...of course there are nonsense words, they're in context, a context that can make sense. And we feel that is what children should be able to do, read texts from the very beginning, and the beginning is, as Robyn [Professor Robyn Ewing] said, at birth, that have meaning for them.

Now, while *Jabberwocky* enthusiasts may delight in analysing the origins and roots of Carroll's word-crafting, the whole point is that we don't know the precise meaning of the pseudo-words in *Jabberwocky* and no amount of considering the context is going to help us. Carroll did not want us to know, it is all about the sounds of the words as they roll gloriously off our tongues. It is the very sounds, the 'slithy toves', that paint the picture most vividly. In fact, Alice herself says:

"It seems very pretty," she said when she had finished it, "but it's rather hard to understand!" (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!"

The irony is of course, that unless a child is a fluent and confident decoder, one who eschews guessing and assiduously blends the sounds all the way through the word, it would be impossible for them to independently read *Jabberwocky* at all. It could be of course that Dr Rushton thinks this doesn't matter, as she was at pains to say that real reading was 'silent reading' where the child is free to construct their

own meaning from the text, but personally, I think they'd be missing out.

Moreover, Dr Rushton's words were doubly ironic as her colleague, Professor Robyn



Ewing, had earlier criticised the UK's phonic screening check, particularly for its use of pseudo-words. Professor Ewing correctly informed us that the check consists of 20 real words and 20 pseudo-words, but then despaired about the children "disadvantaged" by it because they could already "read". By this she meant the sort of child who couldn't meet the standard because they 'have to make meaning' of the words they are trying to read which will lead them to resolve any word they don't immediately recognise into one they're more comfortable with, typically one which is visually similar. Therefore, when faced with a pseudo-word they guess, e.g. the storm-to-storm example so often bandied about. It is just such a child who could not then read *Jabberwocky*.

However, Professor Ewing's criticisms were either woefully uninformed or deliberately disingenuous because the phonics check, in fact, provides a very clear, child-friendly context for the pseudo-words it presents:

"All pseudo-words in the check are accompanied by a picture of an imaginary creature. This provides a context for the child (naming the type of imaginary creature) to ensure that they are not trying to match the pseudo-word to a word in their vocabulary."

It is always made absolutely clear to each child whether the words they are trying to read are real words or made up 'alien' names.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/phonics-screening-check-sample-materials-and-training-video>

But, as fabulous as *Jabberwocky* is, reading it (or Roald Dahl etc.) isn't why

we need to check if children's phonic skills are secure enough for them to be able to read pseudo-words. It is necessary because it is vitally important to know if, for example, they can read:

- new vocabulary
- words they haven't seen in print before
- syllables of multisyllable words
- words they know but with new-to-them suffixes
- people and place names
...and so on.

Of course, English has many obscure words that we could possibly use instead, an unknown word is the same to the child as a pseudo-word, but as individual vocabularies vary so much we couldn't be certain that the chosen words would be unknown to every child. Using pseudo-words is also the fairest to the child, as it is a clear signal that they need to carefully decode, and not guess.

In later comments, Dr Rushton said of her experience of teaching reading:

"I've taught kindergarten...I've watched children struggle...it [the reading problem] happened before I got to meet the child. It happened in the home."

Like her colleague before her, Dr Rushton was keen to lay the blame for reading failure at the door of parents and children. To be fair, I understand why she might think this. If a child hasn't been explicitly taught to read (and they won't have in Ewing/Rushton's model classrooms) then they have no choice but to use the 'compensatory strategies' that only poor readers use, such as guessing from context, to try and identify the words before them. And should that child suffer the double disadvantage of having more limited spoken language skills, then you can see why they might struggle to learn to guess as fluently as their peers.

Rushton was correct in identifying that competent adults do use context to help them understand the meaning of new words, but what they absolutely don't do is to use context to decode or identify the words, particularly not of words that they know the meaning of. They don't use context to guess at "slithy toves" or "borogoves", they decode. That is the fundamental difference that she and her colleagues have stubbornly failed to grasp. And, frankly, I still haven't decided quite what 'context' makes any sense of what the 'negative' team had to say at all.

Monique Nowers has been a specialist dyslexia, reading and maths tutor for over 20 years, and also a school governor for over 15 years. As well as tutoring she provides phonics training to schools and parents and teaches English as a foreign language. She is a member of the UK Reading Reform Foundation and has established a blog on How to teach Reading at howtoteachreading.org.uk. Email nowers@nowers.net.

The Phonics Debate

The Phonics Debate, *Phonics in context is not enough: synthetic phonics and learning to read*, was organised by the Australian College of Educators (ACE) and the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), and was held in Sydney on 31st July 2018, with speakers Distinguished Professor Anne Castles, Macquarie University, Dr Jennifer Buckingham, The Centre for Independent Studies, and Mr Troy Verey, Marsden Road Public School, who spoke for the proposition, and Professor Robyn Ewing AM, University of Sydney, Dr Kathy Rushton, University of Sydney,

and Mr Mark Diamond, Principal, Lansvale Public School, who spoke against the proposition.

The presentations of the participants in this debate, together with comments on the debate, were subsequently published in a Special Issue of the ACE publication *The Professional Educator*, which is available online to members of ACE, or can be purchased in print from ACE by non-members of ACE.

There is also a video of the debate that can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snUNsYfrxjY>