

Think on This

A comment from Kirsten Duncombe on the public stance of the NSW Teachers Federation on the teaching of reading.

It is notable that the NSW Teachers Federation has recently weighed in on matters of effective literacy instruction.

Specifically, the NSW Teachers Federation commissioned Sydney University Professor Robyn Ewing to write a report on the teaching of reading. This report, published in mid-2018 and entitled *Exploding Some of the Myths about Learning to Read*, was commissioned after a departmental research paper was published that supported an emphasis on synthetic phonics when teaching reading.

In her paper, Robyn Ewing makes clear her belief that phonics in context, as already embedded in most initial teacher training programs, and as currently practised in the majority of primary schools across Australia, is enough.

It is not my intention here to weigh in on the specifics of this ongoing debate.

Instead, I wish to come at this from the perspective of a subject close to the heart of all of us in education: critical thinking.

Carl Sagan wisely noted that “science is a way of thinking much more than it is a body of knowledge”. This quotation dovetails nicely with the Oxford dictionary’s definition of critical thinking as “the process of analysing information in an objective way, in order to make a judgement about it”.

One of our 21 Century teaching objectives is to foster and reward critical thinking in our students, preparing them, in as much as we ever can, for the unique challenges that the coming decades will bring. It is only fitting, then, that we hold ourselves, and each other,

to high standards in this domain also, actively engaging in, and acknowledging, critical thinking methodology.

If the NSW Teachers Federation, or anyone else for that matter, wants to comment or advise on the place of systematic synthetic phonics in early reading instruction, it is imperative that they first acquaint themselves with the research and the theory on both sides of the debate.

To understand the theory and supporting data of advocates of phonics in context, I recommend reading the work of Stephen Krashen, Kenneth Goodman, Frank Smith and Margaret M Clark.

For information supporting the claim that phonics needs to be taught systematically, following a clear scope and sequence, see the work of Mark Seidenberg, Louisa Moats, Stanislas Dehaene and Maryanne Wolf.

Good critical thinkers will familiarise themselves with both sides of a debate, and in addition will seek out intelligent criticisms of each side as well.

Good critical thinkers use evidence-based reasoning, and do not confuse opinion with fact.

And good critical thinkers are on guard for common thinking errors, which include:

- Cherry picking – glossing over alternative perspectives
- Anecdote – using a personal experience instead of a sound argument or compelling evidence
- Appeal to authority or consensus – attempting to justify the conclusion by quoting an authority in its support or on the basis of how many people hold the same view
- Circular reasoning – where the premise of an argument or a conclusion is used as support for the argument. Usually this happens when evidence is missing or glossed over
- Cognitive shortcut bias – doggedly sticking with a favoured view, when other more logical possibilities exist
- Jumping to conclusions – using only a few facts for a definitive conclusion

This is not just an appeal to the NSW Teachers Federation, but to any one of us who is prepared to step in and comment or advise on the role of systematic

synthetic phonics instruction in early reading. Effective literacy instruction is too important an issue for any of us to take a public or professional stance on

without having done our homework.

Have we engaged in wide reading and research on this issue, from both sides of the divide?

And are we modelling best practice critical thinking methodology that would do our students proud?

This comment has been abstracted from Kirsten’s open letter to the NSW Teacher’s Federation on her blog post at <https://kirstenduncombe.wordpress.com/author/kirstenduncombe/>

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