

## WSRA Advocacy Committee Talking Points

A response to “New Study Shows Phonics is Critical for Skilled Reading” an article in *Medical News Today* summarizing a study “Computing the Meaning of Words in Reading: Cooperative Division of Labor between Visual and Phonological Processes” published in *Psychological Review* (July 2004) by Michael Harm (Stanford University) and Mark Seidenberg (UW Madison psychology professor) available at <http://lcnl.wisc.edu/people/marks/pubs/HarmSeidenberg.inPress2003.PsychRev.pdf>

The article was recently highlighted in the electronic newsletter *Reading Rockets*. It may receive local attention since its co-investigator is from UW Madison.

**Despite the title, the study states that phonics gives readers an edge early on. The researchers conclude however that skilled readers use multiple strategies.**

*Get your audience to read beyond the title. Inform them the study stresses the importance of phonics for beginning readers. It does not recommend the exclusive use of phonics for beginning readers or overemphasis of phonics for skilled readers.*

**In reporting the study which concludes that teaching young children the relationships between spellings and sounds (phonics) not only makes learning to read easier, but also allows the flourishing of skills that lead to faster, better reading, the article seems to imply that most teachers don’t agree with this. The researchers offer no evidence that teachers don’t believe this.**

*Be able to tell others that your instructional programs build on this principle.*

**Seidenberg suggests there is a disconnect between educational practices and basic research. He offers no evidence of this disconnect.**

*Be able to demonstrate to others that your instructional programs use practices based on research.*

**The researchers use computer simulation which “learns to read just like children” but admit “it may not simulate everything that goes on in a classroom.” This marginalizes the impact of context on interaction between the reader and text.**

*Show your audiences the Wisconsin Model of Comprehension to explain the more complex interaction between text, reader, and context that is not addressed in computer models.*

**\_Seidenberg and Harms are primarily focused on the reading and understanding of words. It does not focus on the understanding of text (comprehension and response) beyond the word level.**

*Be able to demonstrate that your instructional programs are focused on outcomes other than the reading of words such as comprehension, response and enjoyment -- outcomes not addressed by this model.*

**\_The research often sets up an artificial distinction for the sake of testing the hypotheses. For example, technique one is better than technique two when a teacher might actually use or borrow from both techniques blurring the distinction in the research.**

*Be able to demonstrate to others that your instructional programs encourage the teaching and learning of multiple practices (sound and visual strategies.)*

**\_Despite the title, the researchers conclude that combining the two approaches (sound and visual) help the computer hone in on meaning much more rapidly. The researchers talk about the need for balance with the proportion of attention to sound vs. visual shifting as the reader becomes more skilled. They conclude “skilled readers use both sounds and spelling at the same time for reading almost all words.”**

*Remind audiences that the study says that balance is still the key even though emphasis may change as readers change. The study does not suggest a one-size-fits-all model for all readers.*

***Bottom Line...***

**This study basically cautions about the use of teaching methods that discourage learners to make connections between sound, spelling, and meaning in learning to become skilled readers. If your instructional program encourages students to make these connections as they are learning to read words, this study actually supports that more balanced approach.**

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