

Reading by Ear

By Harold Henderson

January 1, 1987

See Dick. See Jane. See whole words. Don't sound out. Look, look! Isn't this boring beyond belief? Isn't there a better way? Wasn't it pointed out more than 20 years ago by a small, family-owned publishing company in Illinois?

The wind blows off the lake, scattering flurries of snow over the morning's late commuters. It carries the roar of the Ryan into the Pilsen neighborhood around Canalport and I Halsted. It whistles at the windows of room 105 in Walsh Elementary School a block and a half west of the expressway. But I can barely hear it. Barbara Tullos's first-graders are in the midst of some of the hardest intellectual work of their lives – learning to read.

Above the blackboard in front of the room is a row of large “wall sound cards” in alphabetical order, each with a color picture illustrating an action that produces a sound and the letter(s) that stand for it. Mrs. Tullos points at each card in turn. Her students – on their-feet, in full voice, in fast rhythmic unison – chant with her:

Block A, block A, ay, ay, ay!

Beating heart, beating heart, b-, b-, b-!

Cracking nut, cracking nut, k-, k-, k-!

Knock on door, knock on door, d-, d-, d-!

Block E, block E, ee, ee, ee!

Angry cat, angry cat, fff, fff, fff!

How an American child learns to read depends almost entirely on which of about a dozen “basal reading programs” his or her school chooses to buy. The kids' readers are only the tip of the basal iceberg. Each program includes workbooks, drill sheets, and a teacher's manual, as well as supplementary tests, cards, tapes, and filmstrips. Basal programs are said to determine upwards of 75 percent of classroom reading instruction.

For the past ten years, Walsh School students – the vast majority of them Mexican-American-have learned from the “Headway” series, which is produced by the smallest and arguably the most idiosyncratic of basal-reader publishers: Open Court Publishing Company. Open Court is a division of Carus Corporation, a kind of family-owned miniature conglomerate in downstate LaSalle-Peru that also includes Carus Chemical, Chicago Rail Link, and Cricket magazine; together they employ just under 300 people.

Open Court has been publishing works of philosophy since 1887. Not until 1962 did the firm become one of the first publishers to liberate schoolchildren from the Dick-Jane-and-Sally “look-say” approach to reading, and to return both phonics instruction and literary classics to the classroom after an absence of several generations. Other, larger publishers – Ginn, Scott Foresman – have followed suit to varying degrees. But Open Court remains distinctive in its advocacy of direct teaching and flexible grouping; in its resistance to the idea of tracking elementary students into semi-permanent, high-, low-, and middle-ability reading groups; in its synchrony with the current “educational-excellence,” zeitgeist – and in its ability to inspire devotion in the educators who work with it.

“It’s almost like magic when you watch those first-graders start to read,” says Walsh principal Ronald Clayton. “The program reinforces itself. The teachers are committed to it. The test results come out, and it looks good. [Walsh School students, few of them from middle-class or bookish homes, read better than the average both in their district and in the city as a whole.] I really haven’t looked at another basal program in years.

Croaking frog, croaking frog, g-, g-, g-!

Running girl, running girl, hh, hh hh!

Block I. block I. eye, eye, eye!

Scrub brush, scrub brush, j-, j-, j-!

Cracking nut, cracking nut, k-, k-, k-!

When the Greeks perfected the alphabet they borrowed from the Phoenicians 3,000 years ago, they ensured that marks on paper would become a critical way of passing knowledge and customs from one generation to the next. They also set up in its modern form the problem of passing reading itself from one generation to the next. Accomplished readers know that the written word “chicken,” for instance, stands both for a set of spoken sounds and for the bird itself. But when you are instructing novices, which do you start with, the sound or the meaning?

As far as we can tell from this distance, the Greeks and Romans did not worry much about this dilemma; if anything, they held the teaching of reading itself in contempt. “He is either dead or teaching the ABCs” became a proverb following the disastrous Athenian expedition against Syracuse (415 BC): the defeated warriors had been either killed or sold into slavery. In his engaging book, *Teaching to Read: Historically Considered*, Mitford Mathews tells us that Epicurus complained of Nausiphanes, “He abused me and called me a schoolmaster.” Among the classical peoples, Mathews concludes, “Teaching to read was widely recognized as something anybody could do. There was nothing difficult about it. Its acceptable execution called for neither learning nor talents; no distinction could be attained in such a mediocre occupation.”

It was certainly a dull occupation. For a good 2,000 years, in Greek, Latin, or English, the technique varied little. First the children learned the names of the letters in order – often under the mistaken impression that their names are identical to the speech sounds they represent. Then students were drilled in syllables, ‘a myriad of consonant-vowel’ combinations of which words are built: ba, be, bi, bo, bu, by; ab, eb, ib, ub; and so on and on. Only then could they go on to whole words, each of which they had to spell and pronounce before going to the next. This drudgery was made no easier by frequent applications of the cane, the presence of toddlers as young as three years, and, in various Western languages, including English, the way that after about 1600 spelling failed to follow changes in pronunciation.

Reformers of all kinds spent more than three centuries battling the established ABC method. As early as 1527, Valentin Ickelsamer was teaching young German speakers to read beginning with the letters’ sounds rather than their names, but his method didn’t catch on. More suggestive of the future pedagogical establishment was Friedrich Gedike, who in 1791 argued, “It is not only far more pleasant but also far more useful for the child if it learns to read entire words at once, because in this way it will be occupied immediately with whole ideas, [whereas] the ABC’s and spelling supply the child only fragments of ideas.” This, he wrote at the apex of the Enlightenment, was the natural way-to grasp whole meanings first, and only later analyze their components. As a like-minded American put it in 1832, the pupil should “read his lessons as if the words were Chinese symbols, without paying any attention to the individual letters, but with special regard to the meaning.”

Devotees of this method differed over exactly how many words a child should memorize before being initiated into the mystery of their component letters and sounds, but none of them made much headway until around the turn of the century. The whole-word method then attached itself to the Progressive Education movement, headquartered at John Dewey’s Laboratory Schools of the University of Chicago and by midcentury firmly entrenched throughout the land.

Teaching reading was not Dewey’s main interest. (According to Mathews, “Mastering the letters and the multiplication table was merely learning symbols, and he felt that there was not much value in it. Learning to take a piece of wool and convert it into a thread and weave it into a piece of cloth was to him real learning, dealing with objective facts and realities.”) But the whole-word method fit in nicely with the rest of progressive ideology. It bypassed the rote details of letters and sounds. It was “child-centered” in that it gave youngsters something meaningful right from the start instead of brutally whipping them from A to Z. It lent itself to the progressives’ wish to make room in the elementary curriculum for a variety of real-world subjects like science, geography, and drawing. “The true way,” wrote Dewey in 1896, “is to teach them incidentally as the outgrowth of the social activities of this time. Thus language is not primarily the expression of thought, but the means of social communication.” Kids will learn best, not by being taught something in unison, but by having lots of neat things lying around - and when they’re ready they will want to learn the appropriate means of communication. Meanings first, because meanings are the motivation; sounds later.

But what if, in this free-and-easy school environment, some children never get around to learning to read at all? Well, there are worse things, said some progressives: many, indeed most, of the great leaders of history were illiterate. “The knowledge which illiterates acquire,” wrote Dewey’s mentor G. Stanley Hall, “is probably on the whole more personal, direct, environmental and probably a much larger proportion of it practical. More over, they escape much eyestrain and mental excitement . . .” As a Champaign, Illinois, junior high principal put it in 1951, “It is just as illogical to assume that every boy must be able to read as it is that each one must be able to perform on a violin.”

Mixer, mixer, lll, lll, lll!

Ice cream, ice cream, mmm, mmm, mmm! Motorboat, motorboat, nnn, nnn, nnn!

Block O, block O, oh, oh, oh!

Dripping water, dripping water, p-, p-, p-!

Ultimately, the problem with learning to read English as if it were Chinese is the same problem Chinese has: there are a lot more words than there are sounds – too many words for anyone, let alone six-year-olds, to remember more than a handful as arbitrary wholes. The solution was to introduce only about 350 “sight words” in all of first grade – a time when the children’s spoken vocabulary is well up in the thousands – leading to the “See Spot run” school of children’s literature and the corresponding “dumbing down” of other subject textbooks. (“*The Cat in the Hat* was sight-reading produced by a genius,” says Open Court marketing services director Fred Hahn. “Dr. Seuss took a 100 word vocabulary and made a piece of literature out of it. That kept the sight method going made it seem better than it really is.”)

Students who somehow evaded vocabulary controls and met an unfamiliar word were given a strange and cramped set of tools with which to identify it, perhaps, as a word they knew in speech but not yet on paper. To sound it out was the method of last resort. In a teacher-education text published in 1947, E.A. Betts suggested that a child puzzled by a word might (1) ask the teacher, (2) look at the accompanying picture, (3) “identify the word as a known element in some childhood expression of language rhythm,” (4) figure it out from the context, (5) compare its shape with that of familiar words (“configuration clues”), (6) analyze it into syllables or other parts, or (7) look it up in a dictionary. Under (5), Betts noted that “the height of a word provides another configuration clue to recognition.... For example, notice the height differences in these words: for, get, came, big, milk.” This was English taught as if it were not Chinese but ancient Greek – a dead tongue whose words children supposedly had never heard.

With the hindsight of three decades, it’s not hard to see why such twaddle provoked wrathful outbursts like Rudolf Flesch’s 1955 bestseller, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. Professional educators sneered at Flesch in return, but his flaming arrows ignited a firestorm of controversy within educational citadels, and finally provoked Jeanne Chall’s 1967 research survey, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. In the more measured tones of an insider, she confirmed Flesch: third-graders who had been taught phonics as a first resort read significantly better than those who had had it only as a fragmentary afterthought or not at all.

But one personal experience is worth a thousand public-debates. In 1959, Blouke Carus—then assistant general manager of the Carus Chemical Company – and his wife Marianne, spent half their son Andre’s first-grade year in Germany – inadvertently giving them a chance to compare his German readers with, their U.S. counterparts. In Germany, Blouke Carus recalled later, “his reader was only half an inch thick, yet at the end of the first grade it was challenging. Every story had a point; there were good poems and interesting stories. After he returned to the United States, the contrast ... was unbelievable.”

In 1962 Carus read another of the 49 rising tide of mediocrity books of that era, *What Ivan Knows That Johnny Doesn’t* by Arthur Trace Jr. After corresponding with Trace, he launched Open Court Publishing into the textbook field with a commitment to intensive phonics; good writing; a multisensory teaching approach (seeing, hearing, saying, writing) bringing together reading, writing, literature, grammar, and spelling; and drawing on the experience of master teachers who had succeeded under difficult conditions.

A strange enterprise for a midwestern chemical engineer, by then executive vice president of the family firm? Yes, but it was partly a function of the times. “Curriculum reform” was in the air in those post-Sputnik years. Academics and outsiders like Flesch pontificated and polemicized; “new math” and university-based textbook-development groups proliferated.

Carus’s venture was also a function of family and corporate history. His great-grandfather Edward C. Hegeler came to the U.S. from Germany, and with a partner established a zinc smelter in LaSalle, Illinois (near ample coal beds), in 1858. The Matthiessen and Hegeler Zinc Company prospered, and beginning in 1887 Hegeler poured some of his profits into The Open Court magazine and the publishing company of the same name. He and the editor he hired – another German émigré named Paul Carus – shared an interest in reconciling science and religion by sifting, as they saw it, man-made superstition from various world traditions in search of a few kernels of truth both verifiable and divine.

Carus proved a prolific writer and philosophical activist (he also found time to marry Hegeler’s daughter Mary in 1888): between 1887 and his death in 1919, he wrote 60 books and numerous articles for The Open Court and its scholarly companion The Monist. Open Court made a name for itself publishing philosophical classics both ancient—Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant – and modern – Charles Peirce, Bertrand Russell, Ernst Mach, Georg Cantor. Carus was active in the World Parliament of Religions held at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where he became acquainted with two prominent Buddhists. This led to the young D.T. Suzuki coming to LaSalle, where the future Buddhist scholar spent 11 years translating, typing, writing, proofreading, chopping firewood, and running errands. Paul Carus’ *The Gospel of Buddha* met with approval both East and West, and remains Open Court’s all-time best-seller.

His son Edward founded the current chemical side of the business, Carus Chemical -- now the world’s largest producer of potassium permanganate – in 1915. After Mary Carus died in 1936, the two magazines ceased publication, and Open Court’s book publishing tapered off until the early 60s, when The Monist was revived and the “Library of Living Philosophers” begun.

Blouke Carus, now Carus Corporation's CEO, compounded this cosmopolitan background by marrying Marianne Sondermann, whom he met while studying in Germany (she now edits Cricket magazine, founded in 1973 and one of the two or three best children's publications in the country). Their son Andre, Hegeler's great-great-grandson, whose primers helped get the textbook operation started, is now Open Court's vice president and general manager.

When Open Court got into textbooks there was not much research on beginning reading, and what did exist was often misleading (like an 1885 study by James Cattell that showed that experienced readers identify whole words almost as quickly as individual letters, a fact with little relevance to beginners). In 1967, the bibliography of Jeanne Chall's *Learning to Read* included just over 200 references from the past 80 years. Many of them promoted a particular method or were popular tracts like those by Flesch and Trace. How children were taught had more to do with ideology and authority than with science, and although the ideological pendulum was starting to swing back away from progressivism and the whole-word approach, it hadn't swung very far. "We were almost like the plague [at professional gatherings] before Jeanne Chall's book came out," recalls Blouke Carus. "After that, people were no longer afraid to talk to us at exhibits."

To judge from citations, there has been considerably more reading research since 1967 than before; Charles Perfetti's *Reading Ability* (1985) cites nearly 400 research reports published since Chall's book appeared. And uncannily enough, Open Court's reading program coincides with most of their results. This research was summarized in the 1985 report of the Commission on Reading, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, an unusually readable product of the U.S. Department of Education. Many of the report's conclusions read like a summary of Open Court methods:

"Phonics instruction improves children's ability to identify words," including "teaching children the sounds of letters in isolation and in words, and teaching them to blend the sounds of letters together to produce approximate pronunciations of words. . . . Phonics should be taught early and kept simple."

With the whole-word method now, unfashionable and on the defensive, almost all basal readers teach some phonics. Unlike most, Open Court takes a "synthetic" approach, where children learn the sounds of individual letters and then blend them into words. I watched Irma Acebedo's first graders do just this as she wrote the word "blame" on the blackboard. She wrote "b" and asked, "Sound?" "B-," they chorused. Then "bl": "b-lll, b-lll, b-lll". . . and finally, 'blame.' "What does it mean, Joaquin?" "It's something when you do something and you blame somebody else." Joaquin and his classmates will have completed all the sounds and letters – and hopefully "broken the code" – before they leave first grade.

"Reading primers should be interesting, comprehensible and instructive," that is, containing "many words that can be identified using phonics that has already been taught."

The commission compared brief stories from two different programs designed for first-graders to read in approximately November.

From Ginn:

“We have come, Grandma,” said Anna.

“We have come to work with you.”

“Come in,” Grandma said.

“Look in the book,” said Grandma.

“Mix this and this.”

From Open Court:

Ray loads the boat.

He says, “I’ll row.”

Neal says, “We’ll both row.”

They leave, and Eve rides home alone.

What’s the difference? The rules that the Ginn kids had been taught up to that point would enable them to decode only 3 of the story’s 17 words. The Open Court students, on the other hand, could apply their phonics skills successfully to 17 of the 20 words in their story.

“Both these programs teach phonics,” concludes the commission. “At the point where the children would read the selections excerpted above, both have introduced about 30 letter-sound relationships. But only the second program gives the child a good opportunity to use phonics in actual reading.” Without that, it’s Just ab, eb, ib, ob all over again.

“Children would be helped to make the transition to textbooks if early basal readers contained more high-quality nonfiction.” The commission points out that ‘particularly in the early grades, made-for-school stories are not as complex as the literature intended for children in the same grades on the shelves of libraries and bookstores. This fact has caused some authorities to wonder whether school reading programs adequately prepare children for genuine literature.’

Open Court has long prided itself on using good un-watered-down literature in its readers – “classic fairy tales and folk tales,” says reading director Catherine Anderson, “Bible stories, Buddhist stories, lots of poetry, selections about science and nature and history and geography, and contemporary literary classics.” When I visited Barbara Corcoran’s third-grade class at Walsh, the students were going over a reading selection on Gutenberg and the invention of movable type. “Many other publishers’ upper-level readers are being filled with selections a lot like ours,” Anderson adds. “We can’t be as critical of them as we were ten years ago.” The difference is that once Open Court first-graders have “broken the code,” the vocabulary in their readers is limited only by the spoken words they understand.

“Teachers need to teach comprehension strategies directly.” “We don’t believe in making unfounded assumptions about what kids already know,” says Andre Carus. “When progressive education was in favor, direct teaching was out. It was considered old-fashioned to tell students something; you had indirect approaches, ‘discovery’ learning. The basic point of view was that if we create the right environment, if we love kids, they will want to read by themselves. But the result of that approach runs counter to their overall social aims – it perpetuates existing stratification,” possibly because children from advantaged households are usually better able to take advantage of the opportunities being offered, but not thrust upon, them. “We find we have to draw the conclusions out more explicitly,” Walsh principal Ronald Clayton says. “If they read, ‘and so Hawaii finally became a state,’ and later on you ask, ‘Is Hawaii a state?’ you can get some blank looks. Our children can read that sentence perfectly, every one. We have to make sure they pull the meaning out of it.”

“Students should do more extended writing.”

“You can’t go into the classroom and drop pieces of paper on the desks and say, ‘OK, kids, write,’” says Open Court’s Catherine Anderson. “We give topics from the reading selections, like ‘Why do you think Peter Rabbit went into Mr. McGregor’s garden?’” This opens a unique five-day composition cycle. The students write and turn in their papers on day one. On days two, three, and four, the teacher “lifts sentences” (four or five per day) containing typical errors from students’ papers and puts them on the board for discussion.

“First the class is asked to say something good about the sentence – its mechanics or content. Before it’s criticized it’s praised. Then they’re asked what could be done to improve it. No one is put on the spot.” On the fifth day, students get their papers back not corrected by the teacher, but with an R at the top (if necessary), meaning “remedy.” The students proofread and rewrite their papers, and turn them in again. The students get lots of writing practice, nonthreatening feedback on their work, and some quasi-adult experience with revision. The teacher is spared some of the paperwork involved in the usual red-penciling of student themes. “It’s not any less work for the teacher,” though, argues Walsh assistant principal Maryanne Burke. “The children proofread themselves, but you had to do it first. You don’t put C’s and X’s on their papers, but you have to know what the errors are.”

“Grouping by ability may slow the progress of low-ability students.... the child in a group designated as low-ability will receive less instruction and qualitatively different instruction.... [and] it is difficult for a child to move from one group to another...”

“That constant labeling is what our workshop sessions are designed to combat,” says Andre Carus. Open Court uses more whole-class instruction than usual; the composition cycle is one example of how class time is arranged so that students at various levels can all benefit. “The slow child is not isolated and put in the corner with flash cards,” says Anderson. “They’re all writing [and correcting sentences on the board] together, engaged in the process at the same time.” During ‘workshop,’ the class does break into smaller groups, usually one to work independently, another to work on workbooks or other activities as the teacher directs, and a third to work with the teacher on a particular sound or blend that’s giving them trouble. The groups change daily depending on the lesson and who needs extra help. Open Court education director Carl Bereiter: “We don’t believe in having certain children make papier-mâché Liberty Bells while others study the Constitution.”

Coffeepot, coffeepot, kw-, kw-, kw-!

Angry lion, angry lion, rrr, rrr, rrr!

Flat tire, flat tire, sss, sss, sss!

Ticking clock, ticking clock, t-, t-, t-!

Block U, block U, you, you, you!

But being right about reading research is not enough. “This is what the curriculum projects of the 1960s really missed,” says Blouke Carus. “The National Science Foundation spent more than \$2 million developing them, brought in brilliant subject matter specialists. But they had no effect—there’s nothing left of them now – because they took no account of the culture of the classroom.”

“Open Court grew up at the same time, but we were much more empirical. We tried things out bit by bit. Our math program was field-tested for ten years before being published. Kids had been through all seven years of it before it came out. That’s totally atypical. Nobody does that.”

Direct teaching is a case in point, adds Andre Carus. “It’s one thing to say direct teaching is good, and another to do it in the classroom. We found you could direct-teach about 10 or 15 minutes at a time, and then you had to break it up with practice or some individual attention.”

Nor is being right a big help if your salespeople and your teachers are too enthusiastic. “A lot of them become fanatical partisans: ‘I never really taught reading until I taught Open Court.’ It’s like a conversion experience. But that can be a marketing handicap. To come in and tell teachers, in effect, ‘You’re doing everything wrong’ is very threatening. So the program gets the reputation that it’s a lot of work, or that it’s only for good teachers.” Likewise, the endorsement of a notorious gadfly like Rudolf Flesch is at best a mixed blessing. “His books are like a red flag to teachers. The rhetoric is inappropriate. He’s one of our best friends and worst enemies.”

And being right is no good at all if you go broke. Open Court is now, according to the Caruses, in the somewhat unnerving position of being the last small fish in the textbook pond. “The market has really changed. There used to be a couple of big companies, and a number of small- and medium-sized independent houses.” Mid-size phonics-leaning competitors like Economy and Lippincott have been swallowed up by larger firms. The big five – Houghton Mifflin, Silver Burdett and Ginn, Scott Foresman, Macmillan, and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (including Holt) – control about 90 percent of the reading market. Estimates of Open Court’s share of the \$380 million annual reading market seem to range between 3 and 6 percent.

In basal readers, as in farming or auto manufacturing, size is an advantage regardless of merit. The business requires a lot of up-front capital: a new basal reading program costs between \$15 and \$20 million to develop. In the U.S. most textbooks are not sold to students (as they are in Europe): instead, school systems buy the books themselves and then rent them to students for six or seven years until the books are worn out. This means that the publisher must be able to sell workbooks and ditto-masters known in the trade as “consumables” each year to the schools in order to survive between big orders for textbooks. Unfortunately, according to *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, most workbooks offer only dull and irrelevant busywork. But they fill both the publishers’ need for income and the teachers’ need to keep kids busy while they work with smaller groups.

Most crucially, publishers have to pay attention to the “adoption states” – the south and west, plus Indiana – in which local schools can buy only textbooks OK’d by a central state authority. This can heap even heavier capital burdens on a firm: Open Court dropped out of contention in Texas recently because it couldn’t afford to send the required free samples to every school district in the state. The company has had its biggest successes out east – Pittsburgh, Rochester, New York City – rather than in the Midwest. Open Court has a small beachhead in Chicago public and private schools, including remedial and gifted centers; an anonymous donation has enabled the company to try a pilot program in ten more Chicago schools beginning this past fall.

On the plus side, the Caruses feel that the big adoption states – California, Texas, Florida – are asking publishers for math and reading texts more in line with what Open Court produces. Typically, adoption states order books for a given subject every five to seven years, and Open Court’s current reading-program revision is geared to the big 1989 “purchase year” in California, Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, Indiana, and West Virginia, and 1990 in Florida. Adoption decisions in California and Texas are disproportionately important, since a textbook publisher denied a “hunting license” in those two states is shut out of almost one-quarter of the national market. As Catherine Anderson puts it, “The big adoption states are the powers that be. If Texas says, ‘We want yellow suns on the front of every book,’ they will get yellow suns on the front of every book.”

Airplane, airplane, vvv, vvv, vvv!

Lariat, lariat, w-, w-, w-!

Pop bottle, pop bottle, ks, ks, ks!

Baby birds, baby birds, y-, y-, y-!

Buzzing bee, buzzing bee, zzz, zzz, zzz!

And yet, from a strictly scientific point of view, all this may be a tempest in a teapot. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* equivocates on the vexing question of which matters more – teachers or textbooks. It emphasizes how basal readers “drive” classroom teaching. It also says, however, that “studies indicate that about 15 percent of the variation among children in reading achievement at the end of the school year is attributable to ... the skill and effectiveness of the teacher. In contrast, . . . about 3 percent of the variation in reading achievement at the end, of the first grade was attributable to the overall approach of the program.”

And even that 3 percent is not clear-cut. The longest-term comparisons of phonics versus whole word approaches end at sixth grade, where differences between the two groups of students are shrinking. The notion that grade-school miseducation produces adult illiterates is strictly conjecture with no basis in research. (Jean Osborn, associate director of the University of Illinois' Center for the Study of Reading, says no such connection can be made: "So many variables impact on why a person is not a reader.") "We have anecdotal evidence that things happen when schools switch to Open Court," says editorial director Dale Howard. "We've been told that library use goes up and discipline problems go down after we're adopted. I'd love to check it out, but we don't have any statistical data."

The "wrong" basal readers may slow down grade-schoolers' development and waste their time. But if the kids eventually do catch on, so what? "It's not scientific," says Andre Carus. "But I think there's a feeling in the profession that if you learn to read fluently at age six, your life is going to be different than if you learn to read fluently at age ten. It's rare to pick up the habit of reading in high school."

What the Caruses see behind reading methods is cultural literacy. Phonics is the first step – that helps children move quickly and smoothly from "Ray loads the boat" to Aesop, A.A. Milne, and the Bible. The critical thing to understand here is that no piece of writing is self-explanatory. The reader must bring some of his or her own "background" knowledge to the text. "Not only have I gotta use words to talk to you, I gotta assume you know something about what I am saying," writes E.D. Hirsh Jr., in a 1983 American Scholar article. "If I had to start from scratch, I couldn't start at all." And in our culture some kinds of background knowledge are worth more than others. Andre Carus: "'The Pied Piper' and 'Snow White' are the kind of thing that is likely to have more leverage than Dick-and-Jane stories." A few years' head start can't hurt.

Linguistic-literacy is being able to read and understand words; cultural literacy is being able to recognize a common cultural fund of phrases "First Amendment," "alderman," "DNA" – without which you have trouble following the daily paper or broadcast. As Marianne Carus put it in a promotional letter for Cricket, "We want to preserve for our readers the best of our western and eastern civilizations, the great events of our past, our history, and our traditions."

People of good will may disagree over the exact list of "the best"; but somewhere, somehow, there has to be one. "Estimable cultures exist that are ignorant of Shakespeare and the First Amendment," writes Hirsch. "Indeed, estimable cultures exist that are entirely ignorant of reading and writing. On the other hand, no culture exists that is ignorant of its own traditions."

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

www.donpotter.net

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I discovered this well researched essay by Mr. Henderson today while studying material on the Internet concerning the old Open Court Language Arts Program. It brought back a lot of warm memories of the time I taught the program to my son.

Anyone who has ever taught or been taught the original or the later Open Court Headway can testify to the effectiveness of the program. I had the privilege of teaching to my own son back in 1982 when his first-grade teacher informed me that he could use some help. I took him through the Blue and Gold Books. For anyone that never had the opportunity to teach the old Open Court, the Blue book taught the long vowels, and the Gold book taught the short vowels. The original Open Court was developed by Priscilla McQueen as a simple phonics' program. She based it on the Association Method of Mildred McGinnis, which in turn was based on the turn of the century linguistic work of Caroline Yale. Ann Hughes made a few minor changes to the program, and with the help of Kathy Diehl of Lima, Ohio, wrote the decodable readers that accompanied the program. It remained virtually unchanged until it was purchased by SRA/McGraw-Hill, not long after Henderson wrote this essay - so this essay makes no reference to the new program. This is the program with which two of my children learned to read. I can testify to its effectiveness. I have also corresponded with several experienced teachers who, without exception, felt that it was the best reading program they ever taught.

I will make no comments on the SRA/McGraw-Hill Open Court program other than to say that it is a significantly different program. The new one reversed the presentation of the vowels from beginning with the long vowels to beginning with the short vowels. The sound-to-symbol pictures no longer represent physical sounds of actions, a unique feature of the old Open Court. The new program uses words that contain the sounds. The pace of the new program is dramatically slower: the old program was completed before the new program even starts the long vowels. The old program was completed by midterm, allowing students to start reading significant literature the second half of first grade.

A detailed analysis of the original Open Court program that I made a few years back is available on my website, www.donpotter.net

Writers formerly associated with Open Court, when it was still owned by the Carus' family, have published a fully articulated phonics-first program that preserves all the virtues of the original Open Court program. The authors had the advantage of consulting with Priscilla McQueen as they crafted their program to make sure it maintained the integrity of those features that made the Association Method so very effective. Although I am in no way associated with this new program, I am happy to recommend it to anyone who would like a program like the one Henderson describes. The program is called, *School Phonics*. It is available from Didax: www.didax.com/schoolphonics/.

I accessed Henderson's article, in a less than perfect OCR form, from the following URL: <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/reading-by-ear/Content?oid=926989>. It was published in the "News and Notes" section of *The Chicago Reader*, January 1, 1987.

This document was last updated by Donald Potter on June 19, 2014. Mr. Paul Wigowsky, a former teacher of the original Open Court, has made available the *Millie & the Cowboy Story* and scanned copies of the workbook pages: <http://wigowsky.com/school/opencourt/opencourt.htm>