

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS  
WHO ARE NRC?**

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Maybe I should have said "Who is NRC?" but it is more fun to say, "Who are," besides that, it has the kind of illiteration for emphasis on the "R" which is what we intend to emphasize.

Looking backwards is always easier than looking ahead so let us begin there. The National Reading Conference was founded as the Southwestern Reading Conference by a professor at Texas Christian University named Oscar Causey and a handful of young men who were his graduate students or who were friendly with them and were struggling with the current problems of reading. One of the problems that they addressed themselves to because of personal job assignments was "How do you improve the reading skills of college students?"

It is interesting that to this very day one prominent way that young professionals in the reading field get started is by teaching college reading improvement courses. In this current program, and in virtually every past NRC program, you will find papers being given on some aspect of this theme which varies from descriptions of successful programs to more research oriented evaluations of total programs and on to specific aspects of college level reading course applied methodology.

However, NRC has refused to be limited to college level reading partly because the field of reading refuses to be meaningfully divided by grade level and partly because most of those young men who surrounded Oscar Causey grew up to become professors of reading in many of the nation's prominent universities, and they were faced daily with the realities of teacher training and interests that led more directly into more basic reading research. In this year's program you will see papers continuing a long standing interest into the cloze procedure, measurement, linguistics, comprehension, systems, interests, and process.

On a more practical side we give and listen to papers on teacher training, reading failure, reading readiness, and adult literacy. It is dangerous to call some things "far out" but we have had papers on heart beats, poetry, and astrology, so we can't be accused of being too closed minded.

However, policy in the direction that an organization takes is not often thought out and planned; like many other institutions, it is shaped by decisions on specific instances. I remember one interesting and emotionally charged incident that occurred at this very meeting site several years ago when we had the revolt of the junior college

instructors. As happens from time to time NRC was faced with a budget crunch and our then inventive president, Al Raygor, rose to the occasion by instituting a one-day pre-conference teacher training conference for college reading instructors. This pre-conference was widely advertised to junior and senior college deans and no small amount of them responded by sending neophyte college reading instructors. A certain percentage of these well meaning English literature instructors and upgraded public school teachers were perturbed that in one day they did not quite know enough to run a college reading program so they stayed on for the balance of the regular program. For some reason or other, what Wendell Weaver or Al Kingston were talking about did not seem particularly relevant and they help a rump meeting down the street to attempt to force the NRC program to get in better tune to their problems. We politely suggested that they join IRA which many of them subsequently did and now there is a special division of them which is about three times larger than NRC. I do not mean to imply that junior college reading instructors are not welcome in NRC, but we couldn't have their classroom-oriented tail wagging our research-oriented dog.

NRC has been similarly accused of taking a harsh line toward classroom reading teachers and public school reading specialists. Here again, policy has been made by practice. NRC again, partly for monetary reasons, used to give some sessions aimed at classroom teachers. In fact, the Saturday morning program has some real teacher pleasers on it when the third grade teachers could come in with the payment of a slight fee and say, "Gee, is that really George Spache?" Again, IRA has taken ample care of these kinds of conferences on the international, national, state, and local level. Any fair-to-middling reading specialist can go to a reading conference at least three out of every four weeks and see some "big names" without traveling much farther than the adjacent state.

Let us take a few moments then and see how NRC differs from other professional organizations. First of all, let me state that there is no hostility between IRA and NRC. Probably a majority of our members belong to both. Two IRA presidents have also been NRC presidents and many NRC members are active at all levels of IRA; however, our functions are quite different. As I see it, IRA is a giant professional organization that fills a variety of needs. It is first of all an in-service teacher training organization; a glance at its program and at its list of publications will amply demonstrate that. It is also a marketplace where authors and publishers try to influence school systems to buy their wares and again, I don't mean that this is bad as there is not much evidence that state or public agency-produced-curriculum materials in any way superior to private-enterprise produced materials. IRA also

works at information dissemination and was particularly effective when they had the ERIC/CRIER at Indiana University but even without it, their continual outflow of monographs, journals, bibliographies and news letters helps to keep the field informed. If I would make any criticism, it is that their presses roll too often, but perhaps this is necessary if one views IRA as having a primary objective of teacher training.

Their efforts in the international area are laudable. Bringing together reading specialists around the world is a valuable link in intercultural friendship and information exchange.

IRA also has a research effort. Their national program solicits original papers and they have an excellent program of outstanding dissertation awards. Their *Reading Quarterly* is top quality. It is always dangerous to compare research quality, so I shall avoid it, but if one simply looks at the quantity of research papers given at the national conference on reading, NRC is far ahead of IRA, and all other reading organizations.

IRA has also made some progress in setting forth professional standards for reading specialists and in publishing a code of ethics. In fact, I am co-chairing a State IRA committee which is attempting to increase the number of required reading courses for elementary and secondary teachers. Previously, the state committee aided in establishing legal minimum standards for reading specialists' certificates.

NCTE, The National Council of Teachers of English, is much like IRA, a real giant with many chapters and hyperactive printing presses, but it has a very broad range with listening, speech, writing, literature, linguistics and reading, kindergarten to graduate school.

IF NRC is passing itself off as a research-oriented organization, how then does it differ from American Psychological Association and others. First of all, the psychologists have a long and honorable history in reading research; we share such giants as Edward Thorndike, and many of today's reading authorities, have basic psychological training. However, if you look at any recent programs for the APA or its regional meetings, you will find relatively few reading type papers. True, some of the verbal learning, psychometric, perception and other papers are directly related, but they are on a more indirect and abstract level. One could argue that psychological research is also directly related to reading success or failure, and this, too, shows us that we must draw the line somewhere just as they, too, draw the line as to how related their research might be to reading instruction.

I am reminded of a debate we had in New Jersey about the advisability of teaching reading in kindergarten in New Jersey. One speaker hoped to garner a little support by wiring Jerome Bruner and solicit his opinion about the advisability of early teaching of reading. Professor Bruner wired back, "Alas, I am not a reading specialist."

Our friends, the linguists, have made many contributions to the reading field; they have changed our terminology and some of our concepts. "I didn't used to know what a grapheme were, and now I am one." However, when they attempt to apply their knowledge directly to reading, it sometimes seems like they haven't done their homework. I don't wish to depreciate the many scholarly efforts of the late Charles Fries, but when he developed a new linguistically-oriented reading series, it had a look strangely like McGuffey's and on application did not work any better than the much maligned traditional basal readers. If you were to look at the program of the Modern Language Association, to which most practicing linguists belong, many of their papers would be relevant to reading, but with about the same degree of relationship as verbal learning or physiology.

AERA probably comes closest to NRC in relevance and degree of sophistication of papers presented. However, AERA covers the total educational spectrum, general curriculum organization, school administration, and learning and measurement in all areas. Reading is there in a small special interest group, but it is almost overwhelmed by so many hundreds of other papers and thousands of conference attendees.

When looking at other organizations we shouldn't exclude the strong and viable college level reading associations like Western College Reading Association, College Reading Association, North Central College Reading Association, etc. . These organizations tend to have a regional character and they tend to be a little like IRA on the college level. While they have some excellent research papers, they have many members who are interested in college reading instruction problems.

It can be said that NRC also has a certain regional character. We seldom meet west of Texas, or north of Missouri, and we seem to like Florida, Georgia, and New Orleans rather well. Part of the problem is that it is easier to get people to go to Florida in December than to Minnesota and affording New York hotel prices is a bit of a chore.

Who then are NRC? We are a group interested in reading as a major lifetime activity. Most of us earn our living teaching reading and one way or another manage to do some research and/or writing about reading on the side, though occasionally we get lucky with grants or deans and get a little clear time for more research and development. Most of us teach in college or are graduate students in reading, but some of us are in the public schools. As an organization we are not competing with the giant IRA and we have a more specialized interest in reading than the psychologists, linguists, or general educational researchers.

As an organization, where are we going? I am happy to report that we are not going broke. Partially, courtesy of our friends at the ERIC/RCS Center who co-sponsored our yearbook, have helped us

break even and our membership is stable. At Vital Issues and the Board of Directors we sometimes discuss growing, and I trust I am reflecting the current majority opinions when I say we do not want to grow in numbers of members. We do, however, passionately want to grow in quality of members. The field of reading needs the best researchers and practioners it can get. We certainly aren't going to kick anyone out, but we do need to replace the natural attrition with the best people in the nation. Professors have been helpful in encouraging some of their best graduate students to join and sometimes they remain. They are the leaders of tomorrow. Our porgram chairman, Jaap Tuinman, has encouraged some fine invited papers and your conversations with your colleagues can help us achieve this quality growth goal. We should all continually seek out top quality reading specialists in the public schools or in other fields like psychology or linguistics and specifically invite them to come to a few meetings.

NRC has a definite psychological approach to reading. Our members tend to be more at home with a test of significance than a Caldecott Award, but this doesn't mean that we shouldn't have a diversity of opinion around. Research study after research study has shown the importance of socioeconomic status on reading achievement, yet we have very few members with even minor sociological interest. We regularly give papers that would be accepted at linguistic meetings, yet we have few members with doctorates in linguistics. We tend to have very few papers dealing with motivation or the affective domain. We don't deny its importance but the research methods aren't too clean, so we tend to avoid them.

If we have a major conflict, it is probably how much we should emphasize the college and adult level instructional programs to the exclusion of elementary or secondary. You can look at this year's program to see how we are resolving this, or should I say what the balance is becoming. Personally, I feel equally at home in a first grade or a college freshman reading lesson. I have recently been advocating study skills, cloze, and reading rate improvement in an elementary teachers methods textbook. It seems to me a large number of papers here apply at all levels. If I might hazard a generalization, NRC tends to be a bit more applied at the college and adult level but researchers across the board. Whether or not NRC will remain in this posture doesn't depend on my opinion but rather the membership who largely build the program by submitting papers and symposia. I suppose the Board of Directors could order the program chairman to be more selective or to exclude certain levels, or the program committee could undertake such a definite policy, but so far it hasn't.

Whether or not NRC will outgrow its slightly regional character depends partly on the resulation of the above college level program. When we did go to Los Angeles some years ago we did not have a very

good attendance. This may have been because the Western College Association was fulfilling the college level function.

And now if I might indulge in a few opinions about the more general state of reading:

The Right to Read Movement is finished. Hopefully, it won't die but be transformed into a more basic national and local effort to support reading research and development but the notion of having everybody literate by 1980 is simply not viable. Former U. S. Education Commissioner Allen had his heart in the right place, but he slept through his educational psychology class. You can't take the bottom 20% of the normal distribution curve and move it up to the 50th percentile or even chop off the curve at the 25th percentile and have a big bulge there, when you are dealing with a population the size of the United States. What you can do is to move the mean up a little bit, and this in effect causes nearly everybody to read a little better, but it increases the standard deviation which means that both the bottom and top are farther away from each other, and both are farther away from the median. If through diligent research, and a lot of darn fool luck, we were able to come up with a super hot shot reading method for the bottom end of the curve, in all probability it would work just as well for the middle and top of the curve, and just how pray tell, would you be able to deny that method to all those screaming middle class mothers' children. Preschool enrichment only started to show a faint glimmer of promise, when they were demanding it for all children. The Electric Company was designed for inner city intermediate children and it is watched most dilligently by suburban primary children.

In any event, the funding amount is ridiculous. The current Right-To-Read annual budget of \$17 million is less than one dollar for every elementary child. We might be able to make substantial headway with existing knowledge upgrading adult illiterates, but it would cost more like a battleship than a fighter plane.

If the government is going to make any significant effect in reading research, it has to stop changing its mind and funding sources every year or two. The Targeted Research was just getting started and "wham," it was chopped out of funds. The First Grade Studies might not have been the best research in the world, but they were pretty darn good compared to anything done before that. They, at least, had standard research design procedures, large populations, and consistent statistical procedures. As some of the methods were beginning to be refined and design errors corrected, the government gas ran out. We probably need a variety of long term research centers; some that do curriculum development like the successful Wisconsin Design; some that do large scale studies; and some that do and fund small studies.

The problem of models or systems continues to plague us, not because they aren't potentially valuable but because they are based on

too few facts. Everybody, or at least a lot of us, want to be the Einstein of the reading field and have the model or system or theory. I don't think the field is ready for that yet. We need more facts. To get those facts we need better instrumentation. We are improving our paper and pencil reading achievement tests and that is all well and good, but we need a lot of other avenues; probably some of it psychbiological, such as EEG, EKG, EMG, etc. We have peered into eye movements about as hard as possible, but other than that, physiology is pretty much untapped. Motivation and personality research related to reading is all but a waste land. We have looked at language independent of people, but we haven't looked very much at environment--noise, air quality, food quality, home conditions.

Fortunately, those hard working teachers out there in the schools don't wait for the researchers to come up with the system; they are in there at eight o'clock every morning teaching reading by "conventional wisdom." It is possible that we can tinker with the system or give them a few more tools to get a little more efficiency out of it. Maybe improvement will be evolutionary, not revolutionary.

The National Reading Conference has a solid base upon which to build. Our yearbooks read little a scholarly study of the history of reading research for the past 25 years, not all of the history, of course, but such a significant amount that no future historian could ever omit us. We have a respected and established journal, *The Journal of Reading Behavior*, that is refereed and indexed. But our secret power is the glue that holds us together with common interests and mutual respect. We might be exclusive, but it is self-selective; anyone with a few dollars can join, and if you can stand listening to those boring papers, you are one of us. We are proud that we were racially integrated before some of the meeting places we selected, and though the hotel management frequently sees us as a bunch of characters who are always trying to sneak our own liquid refreshments onto their premises, we view ourselves as knights with shining textbooks out to slay the dragon of illiteracy.