

Structured Literacy is Really Controlled Literacy:

Units of Study is Not a Balanced Approach

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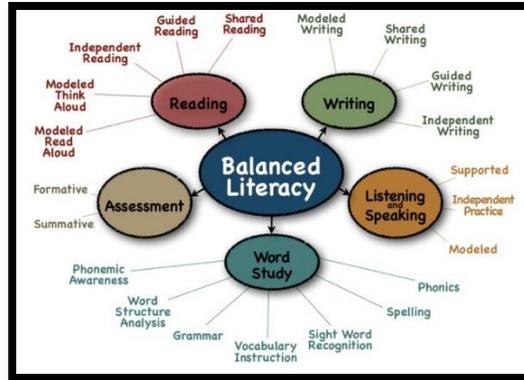
The Science of Reading community identified balanced literacy as a bad thing. They often identified Lucy Calkins' *Units of Study* as an example of balanced literacy. Let's clear up a few things: *Units of Study* does not represent balanced literacy. Yes, it could be used in a balanced approach to literacy instruction, but so could the McGraw-Hill *Wonders* program. These are tools. Any tool's effectiveness is determined by how it is used. You could adopt and adapt even the most scripted program and create a balanced approach to literacy instruction if you refused to follow the script and instead follow your students.



Balanced Literacy Instruction

A balanced approach to reading instruction is not a scripted thing. It's not a method, program, curriculum, or series. A balanced approach is one in which skills instruction is balanced with opportunities to use those skills in authentic reading and writing experiences. What that balance is, is dependent on your readers. Some students need more of one thing and less of another. Some need less of one thing and more of another. Children are not standard products.

Units of Study does not represent balanced literacy. Balanced literacy is a description, not a thing. Again, balanced literacy is a balance of skills instruction with opportunities to use those skills in authentic reading and writing experiences.

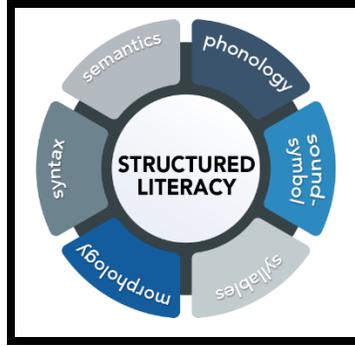


Skills instruction, in a balanced approach to reading instruction should include things such as: phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, vocabulary, word identification, and word recognition. If fluency is a problem, activities to develop fluency should be included. If word recognition is a problem, maze and cloze activities should be included along with simple writing activities. There should also be (a) daily reading practice [the more the better], (b) daily writing activities, and (c) talk and social interaction around books and writing. That's what balanced literacy is. It's not *Units of Study*.

No matter what product, program, curriculum, approach, or series you use, you can make it balanced by including a sufficient amount of daily reading practice in which children choose the books they want to read. You would also include daily writing practice in which children choose their topics and write about their experiences. In the same way, you can make any program unbalanced (sometimes called structured), by focusing overly much on reading subskills at the expense of reading real books and authentic writing experiences.

Controlled Literacy

The Science of Reading community calls for structured literacy. The term sounds good. Structure is always a good thing. Nobody likes chaos. There's a continuum with chaos on one end and control on the other. Structure is a sliding scale between these. Unfortunately, when the Science of Reading community uses the term "structured literacy" they really mean controlled literacy. Here, every element of reading instruction is controlled.



These are the elements of controlled literacy instruction:

1. Teachers are controlled by giving them tightly scripted curriculums that must be followed with fidelity.
2. The content is controlled. All students are taught a prescribed set of skills in a predetermined order in a specific way.
3. Learning is controlled. Standardized tests are used to determine achievement. Learning is defined only by test performance.
4. Reading material is controlled. Students only get to choose their reading material when they're done with their work – meaning when they've completed their worksheets. Otherwise, they're forced to read what's in the program, whether they want to read it or not.
5. Vocabulary is controlled. Students are given books that use “decodable” texts with controlled vocabularies to reinforce letter sounds.
6. Knowledge and what counts as knowledge is controlled. Only a very narrow range of research methodologies are deemed appropriate science. Knowledge generated by controlled experimental research is deemed the only knowledge that counts.
7. What is taught at universities is being controlled. Reading laws and policies determine what is taught, not a wide body of research. We can and cannot be taught is reinforced through accreditation and licensing of teacher candidates.

Big Ideas

Balanced literacy instruction is a good thing. It enables teachers to adopt and adapt any program, curriculum, or method to meet the individual needs of their students. In theory, structured literacy is a good thing, but most Science of Reading practitioners really mean controlled literacy instruction. Controlled literacy instruction represents a one-size-fits-all approach to reading instruction. The one thing that most literacy researchers and scholars agree with is that there is no one-size-fits-all program that works best for all students. The students in front of you should be your scope and sequence chart.

Podcast: The Reading Instruction Show

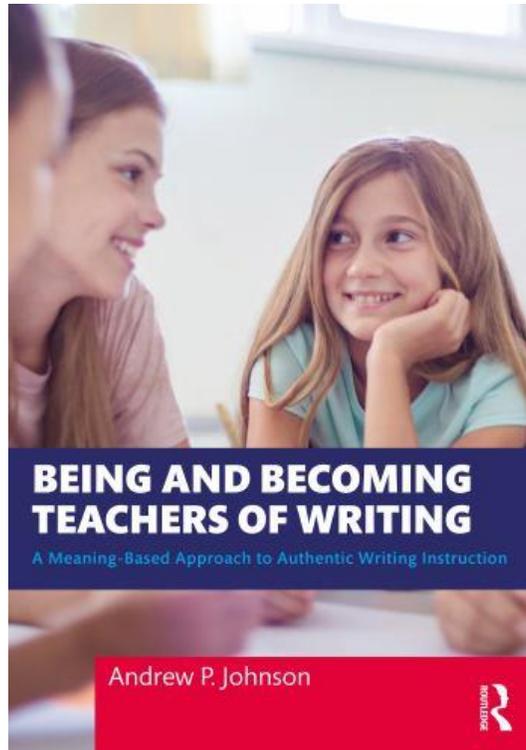
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Being and Becoming Teachers of Writing