

Marshall Memo 1045

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 15, 2024

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Quotes of the Week

“A few sentences in, I could sniff out the generic, stale prose of artificial intelligence, the same way I can spot a Costco muffin at a coffee shop, repackaged and sold to me as though I should believe they baked it up that morning.”

Jessica Estep in [“English Is Centering Human Compassion in a World of Artificial Intelligence”](#) in *English Journal*, May 2024 (Vol. 113, #5, pp. 23-26)

“If you emerge from your office scowling, the first person you pass in the corridor may think you are angry with her... Adjust your face.”

Ann Klotz on advice she got in [“For New School Leaders with Love,”](#) June 30, 2024

“The most potent enemy of reading, it goes without saying, is the small, flat box that you carry in your pocket. In terms of addictive properties, it might as well be stuffed with meth.”

Anthony Lane (see item #1)

“Just about any [middle-school] student can decode the words ‘Berlin Wall,’ but they need a knowledge of basic geography (where is Berlin?), history (why was the Berlin wall built?), and political philosophy (what qualities of the Communist regime caused people to flee from East to West?) to grasp the full meaning of an essay or story involving the Berlin Wall. Of course, students aren't born with this knowledge, which is why effective teachers build students' capacity for reading comprehension by relentlessly exposing them to content-rich texts.”

Daniel Buck in [Teacher Voice](#), *Hechinger Report*, July 8, 2024

“The fact that students can do something at the end of today's lesson does not guarantee that they will be able to do it in two weeks' time, but if they cannot do something at the end of today's lesson, it is rather unlikely that they will be able to do it in two weeks' time.”

Dylan Wiliam (see item #2)

“I want students to leave my classroom with the ability to engage with the world with curiosity, empathy, clarity, and intelligence... I want students to know that words can change the world.”

Amber Funderburgh in [“Humanizing English Language Arts Through Student-Centered Teaching”](#) in *English Journal*, May 2024 (Vol. 113, #5, pp. 27-32)

1. Dylan Wiliam on Formative and Summative Assessments

In this article in *Assessment for Learning*, Dylan Wiliam says teachers use formative assessments in several ways:

- As a low-stakes assessment to help students improve performance on ‘the big one;’
- As an early warning to catch learning problems during a curriculum unit – “finding out what is going wrong after it’s gone wrong;”
- To give students feedback so they can monitor their own learning and play a more active part in improving their work;
- As feedback to teachers on which instructional moves and materials are effective and which are not, leading to better pedagogy in real time and better long-term student learning.

“The fact that students can do something at the end of today’s lesson does not guarantee that they will be able to do it in two weeks’ time,” says Wiliam, “but if they cannot do something at the end of today’s lesson, it is rather unlikely that they will be able to do it in two weeks’ time. Better evidence leads to better decisions which in turn leads to better learning.”

Wiliam notes that with the preparing-for-the-big-one approach, there are two strategies for giving grades on an assessment halfway through a unit:

- Giving the grade be based on what’s been taught so far – In this case, it will reflect the quality of teaching and learning on the first part of the unit. But if the second part of the unit is more difficult, the grade for the first part might not be a good indication of the final grade.
- Giving it on the whole unit’s content – In this case, students won’t do as well on the interim assessment because some of the material hasn’t been taught – but their grades should be better on the summative test.

There are trade-offs with each approach, says Wiliam, and teachers should make decisions that best support their students’ confidence and learning.

He goes on to describe a common mistake with formative assessments. A teacher asks a primary-grade class which of these are living: (A) Bird, (B) Rock, (C) Cat, (D) Table. The teacher calls on two students who raised their hands; one says A and the other says C. “It is tempting to conclude that the class has understood what a living thing is,” says Wiliam, but with responses from only two students – those who were confident enough to raise their hands – “the teacher has very little idea about what is happening in the heads of the other children in the classroom.”

That’s why Wiliam believes it’s so important for teachers, every 20-30 minutes of whole-class instruction, to use an all-class response process that gets answers from all students while keeping what they say anonymous. He favors small dry-erase boards to check students’ understanding, jokingly calling them “the most important development in educational

technology since the slate.” He prefers low-tech dry-erase boards over high-tech clickers because with the latter, every student’s response is recorded, whereas with the mini-boards, students’ answers are private (yet visible to the teacher), which helps create a classroom climate where students feel it’s okay to make a mistake.

Another key issue with formative assessments, says Wiliam, is the quality of questions. With the Bird/Rock/Cat/Table example above, getting correct answers A and C could mask a common misconception students might have about living things: that they move. An assessment question isn’t doing its job if students with this misconception and students with the correct conceptual understanding give the same answer, he says. A better way of sussing this out would to ask which of these are living: (A) Grass, (B) Bus, (C) Tree, (D) Computer.

The best questions, Wiliam has found, are generated when two or more teachers plan their lessons together. “You can’t think up good questions on your own,” a teacher told him. “You will always be victim of your own way of thinking.”

The most important issue, Wiliam believes, is what teachers do with the data. In that sense, there’s no such thing as a formative assessment; the question is how the results are used – formatively or summatively. If an interim assessment is scored and the score is part of the end-of-unit grade, then it’s summative. That’s especially true if students look at their grades, compare them to classmates’, and draw conclusions about their own ability. In this case, says Wiliam, “summative drives out formative.”

That’s why teachers need to think carefully about how formative and summative assessments are used, since their respective purposes can interfere with each other. “It is generally best to decide at the outset about the purpose of the assessment,” says Wiliam. “Is it to help the learner improve, or to tell them how good they are? It’s very difficult to do both at the same time.”

[“Why There Is No Such Thing As a Formative Assessment”](#) by Dylan Wiliam in *Assessment for Learning*, April 19, 2021; Wiliam can be reached at dylanwiliam@mac.com.

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2. What Happens When Books Are Radically Condensed

In this *New Yorker* article, Anthony Lane says that over the years there have been many reasons to avoid reading books cover to cover: lack of time, a negative attitude toward print media, the lure of other entertainment, and in the current era, cellphones. “The most potent enemy of reading, it goes without saying,” says Lane, “is the small, flat box that you carry in your pocket. In terms of addictive properties, it might as well be stuffed with meth.”

But what if the desire to read books is still alive? Lane suggests some alternatives. A Kindle version of Steven Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now* (450 pages of text, plus another 100 pages of notes, references, and index) makes the formidable task more portable and convenient. Then there’s Audible, but Pinker’s book would require 19 hours and 49 minutes of listening time. A book club could provide the motivation to plow through a long book, but

Lane has concerns about the human dynamics of club meetings, especially in today's contentious climate.

Shorter versions of books have always been a beguiling option. Lane traces the history of summarizing books for people who don't want to (or shouldn't) read the whole thing:

- In the 1700s, sanitized and truncated editions of the Bible for children;
- In the early 1900s, a shortened and expurgated version of *Gulliver's Travels, Retold for Little Folk*, along with other children's classics;
- In 1939, summarizing advocate Samuel Thurber wrote *Précis Writing for American Schools: Methods of Abridging, Summarizing, Condensing, with Copious Exercises*;
- *Readers Digest*, launched in 1950, became enormously popular, shrinking hundreds of books to one-fifth their original length and packaging them in paperbacks containing three or four titles. "Nothing essential is changed," said a study of the editing process.
- In 1972, a Monty Python TV show satirized the British love of the précis in the All-England Summarize Proust Competition, in which each contestant had to summarize *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, first in a swimsuit and then in an evening dress.
- Blinkist, an app launched in 2013, shrinks lengthy books to "Blinks" of about 2,000 words, allowing a 400-page book to be read or listened to in about 24 minutes.
- Sumizeit markets audiobook condensations that are 10-15 minutes long.

Lane decided to do an in-depth study of Blinkist, which gives subscribers access to 6,500 nonfiction books with many more on the way. He signed up and his first summary was of Pinker's book, delivered to his phone in nine chunks, covering the whole book in 24 minutes. "No contest," he says, which explains why the app has been downloaded 31 million times.

When he started with Blinkist, Lane was asked to choose which types of books he wanted to read: History, Philosophy, Society and Culture, Productivity, Mindfulness and Happiness, Motivation and Inspiration, and more. A Daily Blink started pinging his phone first thing every morning with an introduction to the first chunk of the book he'd chosen, giving him the option of reading on his phone or listening to a recording (70 percent of Blink subscribers choose the latter).

To learn more about Blinkist, Lane traveled to its headquarters in Berlin, where it's housed in a modern office building with this slogan in the wall: *We Exist to Spark Understanding*. Freelance subject-matter experts read and take notes on each book, then the Blinkist staff of 160 works with artificial intelligence to produce the Blinks. The recordings of front-list books are done by people, others by AI. The CEO said Blinkist was realistic about people's addiction to their cellphones and felt his company was doing an important service by luring them into something more substantive than Candy Crush.

How good are Blinkist summaries? In the case of Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*, Lane had concerns: "Broad brush," is how he describes it. One passage toward the end: *If you look at any number of graphs and hard factual data about the state of the world over the past hundred or more years, you can see that we're still in the process of adding energy and greatly improving*. Lane says this might be enough for readers to hold their own in a conversation with

a morose friend over coffee – “Well, there’s this guy, Pink-somebody, who says that infant mortality is *way* down” – but not much more.

Another problem: the Blinks don’t have any of the graphs that are one of the strongest parts of Pinker’s book. “None of them are reproduced by Blinkist,” says Lane, “the purpose of which is to save us the bother of poring over finicky things like graphics and charts, and to steer us away from the confounding weeds of minutiae.”

How did Blinkist do with *Crime and Punishment*? Here’s the wrap-up of the half-hour summary: *The novel ends with Raskolnikov heading to a Siberian prison and experiencing a moment of divine grace – the beginning of his redemption. Thanks so much for listening. If you’d like, leave us a rating or a comment. We always appreciate your feedback. See you in the next Blink.*

There’s another problem inherent in this process, says Lane: a “struggle between the overarching and the tactile.” Vivid sentences in *Crime and Punishment*, like *His face looked as if it had been smeared all over with grease, like an iron lock*, didn’t make it into the Blink, but there’s a comparison of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. The problem: Nietzsche is never mentioned in *Crime and Punishment*. “What shortening seems to encourage,” says Lane, “is the temptation to edit as one cuts and, weirder still, to smuggle in additions to the original where one’s avowed duty is to subtract.”

He continues: “Canon to the right of us, canon to the left of us, what belongs in the ranks of lasting literature, whether it deserves to last, and why we ought to pay heed, let alone homage, to such weary classifications are all part of a debate that will never (and should never) draw to a close. It may be beside the point. Furnished with compelling ethical objections to *Huckleberry Finn*, we can in good conscience skip it altogether and avoid the toil and trouble of wrestling with its merits, or its alleged want of them for ourselves. What with all the competing cultural forces raining down upon us, we need no second invitation *not* to read.

“So one has to ask: If Twain’s book, or Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, can be scrunched down to a near-minimum, for speed-reading and easy listening, is that a travesty or a useful prop? Do little bits of literature retain the power to provoke us, and even spur us on to grander things, or are they, in fact, worse than no literature at all?”

[“Abridged Too Far”](#) by Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker*, May 27, 2024

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3. The Three-Cueing System and How It’s Been Understood

In this book chapter, literacy expert Marilyn Jäger Adams says that visiting schools in the 1990s, she was frequently asked about the three-cueing system. Teachers had heard about it in inservice meetings, workshops, and conferences, most commonly in the form of a Venn diagram showing the intersection of three interdependent components of reading:

- Phonics: visual cues and letter-sound relationships;
- Semantics: cues from background knowledge, context, pictures, and meaning;
- Syntax: cues from structure and language patterns, what sounds right grammatically.

Adams was curious about the academic provenance of the three-cueing diagram. Months of research and queries to colleagues revealed that, although “cueing” was part of several researchers’ studies of students grappling with unfamiliar words, the Venn diagram was virtually unknown in academia. Adams finally found it in a 1976 article by David Pearson – who was bemused that his idea was so widely used. What was striking, says Adams, is that “while teachers widely believe that the lore of the three-cueing system is based on the best of current research, researchers are barely aware of its existence, nature, or influence.”

The graphic, she believes, is “wholly sensible insofar as it goes,” clearly showing the necessary synergy of the three components for novice readers. “The Venn diagram,” she says, “succinctly asserts that the meaning of a text depends on all three; all three of these types of information are necessary, all three must be properly processed, and not one of them can be safely ignored or finessed except at the risk of forfeiting or distorting the meaning of the text.” The original intent as it was rolled out to teachers, she believes, was to encourage them not to overemphasize phonics to the neglect of comprehension. As one researcher put it, “Letters are not the only clues to unknown words.”

But that’s not how the diagram was interpreted. Many teachers, drawing on “whole language” PD and teacher conventional wisdom that distorted the original idea behind three-cueing, took it as a call to minimize or even shun phonics lest it compete with comprehension: *Don’t sound it out. Look at the picture. What makes sense?* “In the context of instructional guidance for teachers,” says Adams, “such marginalization of the role of phonics is alarmingly discrepant with what research has taught us about teaching children to read.” Adams was also concerned that teachers were using the other two components – syntax and meaning – in ways that were “unproductively superficial.” Too many teachers seemed to assume that students had those two areas under control, which Adams says is not the case.

She believes that students – especially those struggling with learning to read – need their teachers to implement all three components of the three-cueing system in an integrated, creative, effective manner:

- *Phonics* – Explicit, systematic instruction in the alphabetic principle, including phonemic awareness, spelling-sound patterns, the conventions of English, and “an active emphasis on practicing and using that knowledge both in isolation and in the context of meaningful reading and writing.”

- *Semantics* – Readers using meaning cues to “bring their knowledge of the meanings of words and of the world, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs to the printed page.” The questions for readers: *Does it make sense? Do I understand what the author is referring to?*

- *Syntax* – The focus here: *Is this the language that should be used in this situation? Have I misidentified a word? Does this word make sense given my understanding of the text?* “Syntax is language’s formal means of communicating the intended relations between concepts and events,” says Adams, “as in the difference between ‘Students who like school get good grades’ versus ‘Students who get good grades like school.’”

The lesson from the distortion of three-cueing and the lack of communication between classroom teachers and researchers “is clear and urgent,” Adams concludes. “We must work

together to rebuild the bridge, socially and intellectually, between those involved in research and practice. Toward regaining respect for, as well as the productivity, morale, and forward momentum of our educational system, there may be no more important effort we can undertake.”

[“The Three-Cueing System”](#) by Marilyn Jäger Adams in *Literacy for All: Issues in Teaching and Learning* by Jean Osborn and Fran Lehr (editors), Guilford Press, 1998; a shorter version of the article is [“Two Solutions”](#) in *Organization for Quality Education*, December 2004, p. 8.

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4. Teachers’ Options with Students Who Read At or Above Grade Level

In this online article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/Chicago) answers a teacher’s question about how to handle students who have already mastered that year’s skills and content. Shanahan describes some possible strategies:

- Teaching the same lessons to the whole class – Giving high-achieving students the same curriculum as everyone else seems efficient and the teacher can still differentiate, scaffolding for students who are below grade level. The downside is that high-achieving students are bored and don’t achieve their potential, which strikes some educators and parents as unjust.

- Ensuring that whole-class literacy lessons are high-quality – Making reading lessons rigorous, content-rich, and worthwhile increases the value of reading lessons for all students, even if some have been exposed to it. “That’s not nothing,” says Shanahan.

- High-flyers working independently for part of reading lessons – More-advanced students engage in self-chosen reading, literature circles, book clubs, project-based instruction, concept-oriented reading instruction (CORI), computer work, or other activities. Since these students are usually able to work independently, the time can be productive. It does take teachers time to prepare these independent activities and introduce them to students, and being off on their own can make high-achieving students feel neglected and out of the mainstream of the class.

- Differentiating by group – The class is divided into leveled groups, each working with material that is appropriately challenging, with the teacher rotating among them. This requires more teacher prep time and cuts down on the amount of time students are getting direct instruction. A variation: the teacher spends less time with the higher groups and more with below-level students.

- “Walking reading” – This involves sending high-achieving readers to a classroom one grade above for reading lessons. “If done right, this works,” says Shanahan – but it does require close coordination of curriculum and scheduling with the other teachers.

“None of these choices is perfect,” he concludes, “but any combination of them is likely to be better than just ignoring that some students can already read the instructional texts well.” Click the article link for a list of resources.

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5. ChatGPT and Rumpelstiltskin

Using ChatGPT to answer questions sometimes conjures up thoughts of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin; it feels as though a magic elf is spinning straw into gold – in seconds! ChatGPT was asked what to make of this analogy, and here’s what it came up with, starting with a summary of the tale (verbatim):

A miller, in an attempt to appear important, lies to the king, claiming that his daughter can spin straw into gold. The king, intrigued and greedy, locks the girl in a room filled with straw and demands she spin it into gold by morning, or she will die. The girl, desperate and unable to perform such a feat, is visited by a mysterious little man who offers to spin the straw into gold for her in exchange for something of value. She first gives him her necklace, then her ring, and finally, when she has nothing left, she promises her firstborn child.

The little man spins the straw into gold, and the king, delighted, marries the miller's daughter. When their first child is born, the little man returns to claim his payment. The now-queen is heartbroken and begs to keep her child. The little man, feeling some pity, agrees to a deal: if she can guess his name within three days, she can keep the child.

The queen sends out her servants to find all the unusual names, and on the third day, one of them overhears the little man singing his name: *Rumpelstiltskin*. When the queen guesses his name correctly, Rumpelstiltskin becomes furious and disappears, never to be seen again.

How it relates to ChatGPT:

- *Mysterious Helper* – Just like Rumpelstiltskin, ChatGPT acts as a helper that provides solutions and answers to complex problems. Users come to ChatGPT for assistance with various tasks, much like the miller's daughter sought help for spinning straw into gold.

- *Knowledge and Resourcefulness* – Rumpelstiltskin had the magical knowledge to spin straw into gold. Similarly, ChatGPT has access to vast amounts of information and can generate responses based on that knowledge, assisting users in creative and valuable ways.

- *Exchange of Information* – In the fairy tale, there is an exchange of valuables for Rumpelstiltskin's help. While ChatGPT doesn't ask for tangible items, there is an exchange of information between the user and the model. The more specific and detailed the user's input, the better and more tailored the assistance from ChatGPT.

- *Mystery and Discovery* – The miller's daughter needed to discover Rumpelstiltskin's name to save her child. Users often seek to discover new knowledge or solutions to their problems through ChatGPT, relying on its ability to provide accurate and helpful information.

- *Ethical Considerations* – Rumpelstiltskin's demand for the queen's firstborn child highlights a moral dilemma. Similarly, the use of AI and ChatGPT raises ethical questions about data privacy, consent, and the implications of AI in society. Both narratives involve considering the consequences of powerful tools and knowledge.

While the contexts are different, both Rumpelstiltskin and ChatGPT serve as powerful aids with certain conditions and implications tied to their use.

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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 54 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Kappan (Phi Delta Kappan)
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance)
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education