Understanding the Code.  
An Effective Remedial Reading Program.  
An Interview with Lanni Donaldson:  
The Beacon Literacy Program  

Lanni Donaldson and Raymond T. Chodzinski

**Lanni Donaldson** is CEO and President of Beacon Literacy Canada. Her program, developed as an outgrowth of work done by Canadian Psychologist, Philip MacMillan provides some very interesting evidence that students who have difficulty learning to read in traditional programs can find success at Beacon. “Instructors at Beacon are intent on helping children regain confidence and self esteem lost due to being diagnosed as 'experiencing reading difficulties'. In fact Lanni cites evidence “that at Beacon we see an average improvement in reading rates equivalent to 2.6 grades in only 20 hours of instruction”. Based on a philosophy that states that Beacon Literacy people believe that “literacy is a fundamental right to which all people are entitled” it is appropriate that Lannie Donaldson speak to our readers about Beacon literacy initiatives.

**Chodzinski:**

Your logo at “Beacon Literacy” is an invitation for those seeking help and assistance. Please share with our readers what the Logo represents and how your program offers help to those experiencing difficulty learning to read, write, spell and communicate in meaningful ways.

**Donaldson:**

The logo represents a beacon to safety, something that lights the way from danger to a safe haven. The Beacon Program offers all these things, a light in the darkness of illiteracy, shining the way to a brighter future for all.

As one of our clients wrote:

“The rough seas are behind us now that we have found our beacon in the storm. Thank-you for all you do, thank-you for all you are, and thank-you most of all for all you have helped our daughter become. Words are not enough...”

Trudy Reynolds (parent)

Many poor readers lose their belief in themselves and assume that they are the only ones who have this particular difficulty. These individuals need to be motivated and empowered so that they can learn to read effectively and put themselves on the road to success in this fundamental survival skill.

The program is now being used in three different countries. Research findings consistently show significant improvements in students' reading and spelling skills in as little as ten sessions. In addition, the program is so powerful that it is effective, in the same time period, with those dysfunctional readers suffering from various types of learning differences including, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADD/ADHD and various other non-specified learning disabilities. When a bilingual instructor is used, the system has proven to be equally effective as a means of teaching English as a second language.

**Chodzinski:**

In your opinion, why is reading so important to all aspects of education?

**Donaldson:**

Reading is the most important educational attainment. Without the ability to read, and read well, one cannot hope to cope with the exponential growth of knowledge that is taking place in today's world. Without the ability to read, all other areas of educational attainment will suffer.

**Chodzinski:**

You mention in your literature that the system is based on a “proven, innovative and uniquely effective, yet simple, cognitive learning therapy designed to improve literacy”. Could you please explain this in more detail and demonstrate to readers why parents should consider your approach and your company as a proactive alternative.

**Donaldson:**

The Beacon Literacy Development program is, in part, based on the self voice teaching work of Philip MacMillan and others and relies on an understanding of how persons decipher the codes and use established rules to turn speech into print. The smallest segment of the speech sound is the phoneme and an understanding of how this works in the decoding process is fundamental to understanding how individual learners learn to read. In the Beacon program we use the learners
own voice as a teaching mechanism by employing a variety of kinesthetic and acoustic feedback mechanisms to help build an understanding of how the printed word matches the spoken word. That is the sounds the learner hears, acoustic and the process of articulation, kinesthetic. Reading is a code that must be explicitly taught. For a variety of reasons, many children have great difficulty cracking the code. We at beacon try to improve a student’s ability to make more efficient connections between sound and text. For a more in depth research overview consult Dr. Philip MacMillan’s article “Self Talk: Learner Voice As Teacher”. LIRA Spring, 1996 18-20.

Chodzinski:
I read with great interest some of the success stories you share in your articles. In your opinion, why are teachers in schools unable to achieve the same types of successes with the students that you are able to reach? And, why do you think so many children have difficulty learning to read in schools?

Donaldson:
Research into the cognitive and neurological mechanisms of reading and speech has presented us with, at times, very complex data. However, careful study of these findings has resulted in a broad measure of agreement at least in relation to the etiology of reading difficulties in many otherwise normal individuals. The areas of agreement center around the part that phonological awareness and phonemic processing skills play in the acquisition of reading and spelling attainments. The complexity of the English orthography can be dealt with as long as we lead the learner (educate comes from the Latin; meaning to lead) from the simple to the complex and seek to keep everything as simple and clear as possible, in days gone by this was done by controlling the reading vocabulary according to reading attainment. A very clear and useful history of the development of writing can be found in Coulmas (1989).

Chodzinski:
Your program reaches out to students who have been identified with particular educational challenges but there are many other children not “identified” that have difficulty reading or at least appear to have difficulty learning to read? What does your program do to address these needs?

Donaldson:
As the program deals with the sub skills that all readers need to acquire to master our writing system it will work with the ‘garden variety’ of poor readers just as well as it does with those with identified reading disabilities eg. dyslexic, dyspraxic, ADD etc.

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Chodzinski:
What do you have to say about the unmotivated reader? It appears true that many children have returned to reading due in part to the success of Harry Potter series. Do you think it will last?

Is this type of reading which actually improves literacy? And if so, how can teachers and parents capitalize on this phenomenon?

Donaldson:
Unmotivated readers (K - 8 / 9) usually find reading difficult and will avoid it. Beyond grade 9 other attitudinal factors come into play. If we could make reading an easier task then motivation will improve; none of us likes doing what we know we don’t do well.
Only as long as Harry Potter or similar books come out, the publishing hype seems to be very effective in terms of selling books to children, the films have also increased interest, if the upshot is that only these kinds of books will appeal then it is of limited utility in the sense that the desire to read will not generalize to other less interesting or appealing books so motivation for what might be termed 'hard' reading will remain low.

It might also be interesting to note that books sold does not necessarily equate to books read.

**Chodzinski:**

*Given that you have found the solution for many students who find learning to read difficult, how can interested teachers in schools become involved in this program?*

**Donaldson:**

Because the program requires specialized recording equipment, as well as our specifically developed lesson material, instructors must be involved in either a pilot project through a partner school or be contracted by one of our Centre’s of Excellence.

**Chodzinski:**

*How can individuals become instructors? Can regular teachers become certified as Beacon Literacy advocates? Please explain the program and what they have to do and who they should contact.*

**Donaldson:**

Individuals can only become “Beacon Instructors” by taking the training and using the program with students. The training involves a great deal of 'hands on' learning, working with a range of reading disabled students. The program basically uses the student's own voice recorded in a very specific way; the student's main task is to listen to all that is on the tape and write it down to dictation. All lessons involve analytic and synthetic phonics, phoneme manipulation, along with the use of proprietary specialist tape recording machines. It should be noted that instructors are only trained if their school is entered into a pilot project with Beacon corporate or if they are contracted to a Beacon Centre of Excellence.

Interested individuals should visit our website: www.literacycanada.com, read about the program and then contact our corporate headquarters using the links and/or numbers on the website.

**Chodzinski:**

*Your material states that the Beacon Literacy program can be used as a supplemental tool to any reading curriculum. This is an important point. What I believe you are saying is that Beacon besides being a recovery program can also be used as an enrichment program. How so?*

**Donaldson:**

The techniques and strategies used allow readers to improve their reading by:

- increasing eye voice span
- involving internal speech processes
- encouraging verbal encoding
- building a secure knowledge of the orthographic rules

It can also be used to improve learning and retention by using school text book material as dictation exercises, for example the chapter summaries from say a physics book could be used as supplementary or standalone material and in practice we have found that this improves student grades significantly in subjects that they may have some difficulties with from the point of view of remembering and understanding the material.

**Chodzinski:**

*I understand that schools in fact families of schools can somehow buy into this program and incorporate it into a regular reading curriculum. How can this be done and who should teachers or administrators contact if they are interested in more information.*

**Donaldson:**

Schools should contact Beacon’s head office in Calgary. Schools can contact us through our website: www.literacycanada.com, email: info@literacycanada.com or call our toll free number 1-866-270-2641. Individuals interested in opening a Centre or Excellence can contact us via the same manner.

**Chodzinski:**

*World Literacy day will be celebrated on September 08, 2005. Are you doing anything specific to coincide with this initiative? If so please explain.*

**Donaldson:**

To correspond with World Literacy day, Beacon is putting together some expansion releases, launching our much awaited, “Teacher Tools” section of our website, as well announcing some very exciting partnerships.

**Chodzinski:**

*Over the years, I am sure you have provided advice to countless parents and teachers. Could you provide us with some tips on how to encourage literacy in the classroom and home?*

**Donaldson:**

The evidence is by now quite clear, to be able to read and write using a phonetic alphabet effectively involves the ability to 1) discriminate the sound patterns within words. 2) ability to catego-
rize these sound patterns, many phonemes have allophones, that is sounds that are similar but not exactly the same, for example the sound /p/ in the word pit and the word spit are slightly different but are both represented by the same graphical convention. Humans learn by generalizing from examples and can deal effectively with subtle degrees of difference around a central concept or category, Gibson (1969). The learner needs to be able to segment, blend and manipulate phonemes within words and then acquire a detailed knowledge of the letter sound correspondences and rules for combinations, spelling etc. This knowledge needs to be internalized through practice with the eventual goal of becoming able to perform these activities automatically, that is out of immediate awareness, in order to be able to become an effective reader, that is, to be able to extract meaning from print, Chall (1967) (1979), Adams (1990), Snow et al (1998), NRP (2000). The upshot from this is that guessing on any basis is to be avoided as it disrupts the acquisition of the logic that underlies English orthography. Avoid teaching the alphabet song. Letter names are effective in decoding, but the incoming speech, the learner is in control of the learning, we all prefer to call it has several distinct advantages at low levels of cognitive processing.

Chodzinski:
Why is this program so different from many others?

Donaldson:
Beacon is the fastest developmental reading program on the planet. The program averages a 2.6 grade increase in only 20 hours of instruction.

This program is different in that it directly addresses the major problem for some learners, that is the fact that speech is built out of co-articulated syllables, each phoneme in a syllable affects all the others. Some children find it hard to become aware of individual phonemes due to co-articulation and the research is very clear that this is a major source of reading difficulties. The program deals directly with the sub processes of speech perception, another unique aspect of this program is that it uses the medium of the learner’s own internal voice so that there is instantaneous recognition by the brain of the incoming speech, the learner is in control of the learning, we all prefer the sound of our own voice and the own or self-voice as we prefer to call it has several distinct advantages at low levels of cognitive processing.

References


Calgary and District Council of the international Reading Association.


Lanni Donaldson received her initial training at the University of Calgary and worked as a teacher/administrator for a large Alberta school board. After leaving the school system, she engaged in an intense, five-year study into how the human brain acquires literacy skills. Currently, Lanni is the President and CEO of Beacon Literacy Canada and lives in Calgary with her husband and three daughters.

Risk factors that work against achieving literacy in English

“Literacy is about reading but it’s much more too. It’s about opportunity, giving people the tools to make the most of their God-given potential. It is about preparing people for the 21st Century, when a fully literate work force will be crucial to our strength as a nation. Without literacy, the history books and the job manual are closed, the internet is turned off, and the promise of America is much harder to reach.

President William J. Clinton. *Address to the Nation, December 21, 1996*

The following is a selection of more than fifty factors defined by The Centre for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence CREDE Talking Leaves, Vol 2, No1, Fall, 1997.

- Living in a household with sustained and periodic poverty
- Living in a high poverty and high crime neighbourhood
- Being a speaker of a non-mainstream dialect
- Having learning or other disabilities
- Dropping out of school
- Being diagnosed with a developmental delay before age 3
- Receiving educational services that are mostly limited in scope, quality and time
- Having limited proficiency in English
- Failure to develop basic reading skills by age nine predicts a lifetime of illiteracy.

National Centre for Educational Statistics 1998