POINT/COUNTERPOINT:
DIRECT INSTRUCTION RECONSIDERED

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How does one elect and how is one elected to membership in a particular community, scientific or not? What is the process and what are the stages of socialization to the group? What does the group collectively see as its goal; what deviations, individual or collective, will it tolerate; and how does it control the impermissible aberration? (Kuhn, 1970, p. 209)

In a symposium four years ago at the National Reading Conference in St. Petersburg, several reading researchers examined varying conceptions of direct instruction in the research on reading comprehension (Baumann, 1984a, 1984b; Kameenui, 1984, 1985; Pearson, 1984; Shannon, 1984). Although direct instruction in its various forms (Baumann, 1983; Becker & Carnine, 1980; Duffy & Roehler, 1982; Gersten, Carnine, & White, 1984; Kameenui, 1985; Zahorik & Kriek, 1983) has prompted much discussion at the National Reading Conferences regarding its pedagogical impact and appropriateness (Anderson, 1986; Carver, 1986; Goodman, 1986; Pearson, 1986), little, if any, discussion has focused on the criteria and decision rules for the acceptance or rejection of any pedagogical approach into a scientific community, in general (Kuhn, 1970), or the reading community, in particular (Mosenthal, 1988). That is, to this point, the underlying assumptions and possible outcomes of direct instruction have not been directly considered.

In the four points and counterpoints that follow, Shannon and Kameenui attempt to examine, in a point/counterpoint format, what they consider to be the basic assumptions and essential points of direct instruction in its various forms. Of particular interest in these papers is the goal and means-end relationship of direct instruction in reading and literacy. Although such brief examinations cannot possibly address the implications of direct instruction, they do provide an important starting point for getting a firmer grasp on the opportunities and the constraints it provides during reading lessons at school.
CAN WE DIRECTLY INSTRUCT STUDENTS TO BE INDEPENDENT IN READING

Patrick Shannon: Four years ago when we first held a discussion about direct instruction, I offered a taxonomy of the various types of instructional methods which use that label (Shannon, 1984). The taxonomy was based on the amount of control each type of direct instruction required over teachers and students during reading lessons. At that time, the gamut ran from Au and Mason’s (1982) Balance of Rights Hypothesis, which required the teacher only to control the content of the lesson while students were allowed to participate as they saw fit, to the University of Oregon’s Direct Instruction Model (Becker & Carnine, 1980), which set the goals, methods, talk, action, and evaluation for both teachers and students. Implicit in that argument is the answer to the question I posed for this discussion: Can we directly instruct students to be independent in reading? I think, and others seem to agree (Alvermann, 1986), that this should be a central concern for all who are interested in reading education. In this short paper, I hope to make explicit my opinion concerning the mismatch between the assumptions of direct instruction and any reasonable definition of independence.

Although at first it may seem inappropriate, I begin with a quote from Andrew Carnegie in an attempt to capture the spirit of good intentions of direct instruction advocates:

This, then is held to be the duty of the man of wealth ... To consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds ... for his poorer brethren, bringing to their service his superior wisdom, experience, and ability to administer. Doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves. (as quoted in Cubberty, 1934, p. 231)

Carnegie’s statement provides a clear picture of the instructional philanthropy that direct instruction advocates would provide for students during reading lessons. First, the advocates decide which knowledge is worth knowing (“trust funds”), which just so happens to be what the advocates know (men and women of wealth). Second, they see direct instruction as their obligation (“the duty”) as participants in reading lessons because of their previous success in school literacy matters (“superior wisdom, experience, and ability to administer”). Finally, the advocates believe that were it not for direct instruction students would not learn to use literacy wisely (“doing for them better than they would or could do for themselves”). Explicit in Carnegie’s remarks—and implicit in those of direct instruction advocates—is the assumption that the poor, however defined, do not have the wherewithal to make sense of their lives or texts without direct aid from their betters.

Of course, the form that this aid takes varies according to the specific type of direct instruction one selects. Clearly, the aid with the most strings of dependence for both teachers and students comes from the University of Oregon’s Direct Instruction Model because it makes the teacher rely completely on curriculum programmers; it ignores the experience and knowledge of students altogether with its standardization of methods, making students dependent on lessons to learn to read; and it analyzes actual acts of literacy use into numerous preliteracy skills, having students wait to use literacy for their own purposes. However, the aid offered in less standardized forms than Direct Instruction also includes strings of dependence. For example, reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), which has students model teachers’ questioning behaviors in order to develop a greater understanding of text, does not promote independence in reading—yet at best it perpetuates the status quo in which someone asks others known fact questions (see Weber, 1986, for a full explanation of this point). I do not dispute that students can learn such things, but this is not an independent use of literacy. Independence in questioning is the courage to ask the questions for which you do not know the answers. Such questions are not a request for direct instruction, rather, they are a sign of trust: the questioner trusts the person asked enough to spend time with them while trying to develop answers through reading and other means in order to promote the questioner’s goals. Advocates of direct instruction in any of its forms seem to have little to say about this type of independence.

There is clear evidence that teachers can foster such independent use of language and literacy while at school among students of all ages, intellectual abilities, and social class backgrounds (e.g., Arwell, 1987; Elsasser & John-Stemer, 1977; Finlay & Faith, 1979; Heath, 1983; Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1984; McLeod, 1986). Contrary to the assumptions of direct instruction, these teachers recognize that independence in literary use requires that the production of knowledge and the process of knowing must happen simultaneously; that is, that students’ learning to read the word should be a natural extension of learning to read their worlds. These teachers promote independence of expression and the independent use of literacy directly from the beginning of their work with students, rather than make students dependent on the stages of direct instruction in which curriculum planners set the knowledge of value; then, students are taught to know this knowledge, and finally a teacher or test allows students to use literacy independently. Underlying these successful alternatives to direct instruction is an abiding faith that teachers and particularly students can do for themselves and that their struggle to express themselves and to understand that which they find important is what builds both knowledge of literacy and the independent use of it.

Rather than attempting to devise more expedient and efficient ways to have students model our actions and repeat our knowledge, our time could be better spent searching for ways to help children, adolescents, and adults recognize that learning to be literate can be a direct outcome of their everyday lives; that it can help them to recognize and evaluate their own interests, values, and cultures; and that it will enable them to judge whether or not they wish to value teacher and school knowledge. But really we must do more than this. For what will these people use their new independent literacy? Clearly, we must help them to push beyond the celebration of self that is so often promoted in our culture and is one possible outcome if we stop with whole language learning, process writing, and the like. While we must certainly help students to use their literacy to read and write about themselves in order to better understand their lives, we must also help them to see the connections between their lives and the larger social structure which provides opportunities and places constraints upon their lives and those of others (Shannon, 1988). As our goal, we should work toward helping them to read, to write, and to act upon their new knowledge and new independence to create a better—that is, a more just—world.
RESPONSE TO SHANNON

Kameenui: The questions and concerns raised by Professor Shannon regarding direct instruction and commercial reading programs are bold bites, not public nibbles that attempt to ingratiate. As always, Shannon dares to challenge the status quo, and in this case, the challenge strikes at the numb convenience of commercial reading programs. His argument is that commercial reading programs that house instructional approaches, like direct instruction, are doomed shelters of literacy: If teachers and students take shelter in these programs for too long, they will lose their ability to think and reflect freely, let alone deeply. Specifically, teachers will lose their historical memory of the true rewards of their work and will forfeit control over the goals and methods of reading lessons. Students also stand to forfeit the opportunity to gain their own independence and ways of knowing and, in the process, a better understanding of themselves and their lives. According to Shannon, reading programs represent historical constructs that are never neutral and are always nested in an historical context. To embrace a reading program is to nurture a particular social interest and to accept, unwittingly, the values of others. In the case of commercial reading programs and direct instruction, the values promoted are not in the best interest of teachers and children, who as individuals are free to choose the window from which they will observe the sunrise.

The shelter analogy drawn earlier is not intended to make light of Shannon's analysis. It is intended to point out both the problem and the solution to Shannon's criticisms of direct instruction. The known remedies to doomed shelters are numerous—the shelters can be abandoned, razed and built anew. The shelters can also be repaired, room by room, board by board. Shannon's call to those who listen carefully is not shrill, but deep and revolutionary. It is a call for the brave and the visionary. I respect this call and I think its message is slowly being heard, although I doubt that such slow progress pleases Professor Shannon. However, lest my faint heart change, I see a different challenge for reading educators in the immediate future, and it is a paralyzing one. The challenge is that of repairing our current shelters of literacy, one board at a time, to provide all children—from barefoot Hawaiian, Samoan, and Filipino children in the poor housing projects of Kalahi, outside of Honolulu, the black and Hispanic children in the high schools of New York City, where it is rumored that only 6 of 10 students graduate—with at least "the basic floor of opportunity" supposedly protected by the United States Constitution (Kameenui, 1986). It should be noted that this same Constitution does not, unfortunately, explicitly guarantee children the right to an education, the right to reach their full potential as human beings.

I worry that if we rush to raze the shelters of literacy that we currently have, many children—primarily the poor, disadvantaged, and disabled—will be without reading, language, and mathematics programs that work for them, at least according to the present standards of measuring achievement. I also worry about the shelters of literacy that will be built in their places. What assurances do parents and children have that these shelters will be better or more robust and liberating educational experiences for all children, advantaged and disadvantaged, gifted and retarded? There is much work to be done, and the task facing us as reading researchers and practitioners is immense.
determining “more valid instructional practices” makes no objective or subjective sense. Subjectivity, in practice or theory, is its own gatekeeper and kingdom dweller; it dictates who comes, who goes, and who is privileged enough to stay. It alone decides what is valid.

My point is rather obvious. Reflective teaching is not benign. It too has a cost, and I argue that the cost students must pay is potentially greater than that of direct, objective instruction. In the world of the reflective practitioner, the teacher’s reflection—not the child’s ability to read—is clearly the primary concern. This teaching is driven as much by the teacher’s reflection as direct instruction is driven by its explicitness and teacher direction. The conceptual difference between the two approaches to teaching reading is that reflective teaching offers no advanced public record of its teaching. That is, parents and children do not know where they are going, where reflection ends and instruction actually begins (if, indeed, it does), or how the journey will result in children becoming better readers and thinkers. In a very real sense, the reflective practitioner is free to engage in a private, personal narrative in teaching reading. This narrative or discourse is created on the spur of the moment and carries the potential of being powerfully rich or selfishly indifferent to the literacy and literary needs of children. In general, it falsely assumes independence where some direction may be necessary. By its very nature, it is an approach to teaching reading that is forever fated to defining or redefining its subjective self.

In the Foreword to Bloom’s (1987) recent book, The Closing of the American Mind, Saul Bellow writes that “the sources of the truest truths are inevitably profoundly personal” (p. 12). Accepting membership into a literary community as posited by Kuhn (1970) requires reading researchers, teachers, and parents to make profoundly personal decisions—personal, because each individual must decide on the kind of literacy that he or she values or does not value. Some may decide there is no price too high for an education that, as Saul Bellow writes, opens a “channel to the soul” of their son or daughter. Still others, like Bereiter (1973) have argued that schools should not be in the business of tampering with the souls of children. And all of us would like to believe Bloom (1987) when he writes, “There is no real teacher who in practice does not believe in the existence of the soul, or in a magic that acts on it through speech” (p. 15).

Is Direct Instruction the impermissible aberration of the reading community? I do not think so. My answer is based on at least two considerations; one empirical, and the other, personal. First, in the current fibrous but nevertheless predominant empirical tradition of reading and teaching research, direct instruction (most forms, no matter what size) is indeed robust. Its empirical robustness as an educational model in its third decade and as a set of inflected forms of instructional interventions in language, reading, mathematics, and higher level thinking (Kameenui & Simmons, in press) does not raise a significant challenge. Its membership in the current community of researchers and practitioners concerned with improving children’s academic performance in general and special education settings appears secure, for now.

Second, it is difficult for me not to draw on the almost 20 years of experience I have had working with the one group of children who ultimately pay the highest price for instruction that is incidental, indirect, and ineffective; instruction that holds teacher reflection as its ideological centerpiece. Those students are the academically at-risk, the “permissible aberrations” of today’s educational system. It is their failure that concerns me most because failure is a peculiar experience with insidious consequences. Perhaps the most insidious consequence of failure is that it creates a fundamental ambiguity—an ambiguity that makes clear only the child’s failure, while leaving the teacher’s, the curriculum’s, and the school administrator’s failure fundamentally ambiguous. In summary, I want to note that Direct Instruction (or direct instruction) is but one impulse to the Great Twitch. Direct instruction is not the whole of education, nor should it be. Neither, I suspect, is reflective teaching.

RESPONSE TO KAMEENUI

Shannon: In Professor Kameenui’s remarks, we are treated to several classic examples of the rhetorician’s devices for debate. First, he recognizes that the best defense is a good offense, and thus he largely neglects the assumptions and consequences of direct instruction to discuss my work. Second, Kameenui damnus me with praise in his response—an obvious ploy to get me to acknowledge the humane side of direct instruction. And third, the most obvious trick, and therefore the most effective, he claims the low ground—the impermissible aberration—for direct instruction in order to evoke the sympathy of any careless readers. I know you were not fooled by any of this sophistry. Despite these diversions, the traditional content of Kameenui’s remarks left me cold.

In his musings about my work, he offers a curious discussion concerning the validity of reflective teaching. Specifically, he wonders how it can produce “more valid instructional practices” without contradicting its dialectic essence. Since reflective teaching requires teachers to consider carefully the context of a lesson, the particular students engaged in learning and what they are trying to do, the content of that learning and where it came from, and the immediate circumstances of the interaction between teachers and students, reflective teaching cannot help but be more valid than direct instruction, which more or less ignores these factors. Because reflective teaching is subjective—that is, it is within teachers’ and students’ control—it is more sound, just, and well-founded for both teachers and students than any prepackaged program or any standard instructional sequence can possibly be.

Of course, reflective teaching is not benign; it manifests the philosophical position that workers—teachers and students—should control their lives and their work. It suggests that workers have an intrinsic dignity that should not be dismissed because someone or some group think they have found a more efficient, standardized method that de-skills the participants in the process. Although teachers often acquiesce to these scientific ideas, many resent the loss of control over their work as I documented in the study Kameenui cites. However, their internalization of the tension between their need for independence in their workplace, on the one hand, and the bureaucratic structure and logic of direct instruction, on the other, provides the dialectic that can lead to new freedom for teachers and students in literary programs at schools.

This is the crux of the distinction between our two positions on direct instruction—Just who should control reading programs? Apparently, Kameenui and other direct instruction advocates believe that curriculum planners and basal authors should control
the goals, methods, and content of reading lessons. They fear that some teachers might indulge in "selfish indifference to the literacy and literary needs of children." Be clear about this, they do not fear subjectivity per se; they are more than willing to offer their subjective goals and interest in efficiency to both teachers and students in the name of greater achievement scores. What they fear is teachers’ and students’ subjectivity, and they seek systematically to reduce its effect on reading and writing lessons.

Kameenui concludes his remarks with a statement about students academically at risk. I take his remarks as a qualification that direct instruction is appropriate only for the poor and minorities—the two groups who are overrepresented in low reading groups (Shannon, 1985) and learning disabilities classes (Gebil & Mizokawa, 1986). But just what do these groups risk if their fate is left to direct instruction? Because of the inherent dependence of direct instruction, these students risk the development of their own written voice, their ability to make considered choices about what they will study and how they will study it, and they risk the ability to use literacy like white, middle-class students seem able to do. That is, they risk, just as teachers do in some forms of direct instruction, some control over their lives.

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