

Literacy in War and Peace
Tom Sticht's Work in Adult Literacy Education

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My earliest images of learning to read place me in a second grade class at "A" Avenue elementary school in Douglas, Arizona. I am in a classroom looking at an easel with large pictures of Dick, Jane, Spot and Puff as the teacher has us read in unison the words on the large page.

My next images are of reading comic books. I read a lot of those as a kid. Later I read series like the Sherlock Holmes stories, Tarzan, the Zane Grey books, and others, mostly paperbacks. One defining moment came in 1946 when the family moved into a new house and I found a small, red book on a shelf in the closet of a bedroom. The book was *Magic by Barrows Mussey* and I still have it. I read this book and a lots of other books about magic to become an amateur magician. This may have helped me develop skills in reading for following directions.

In 1954 I started college at the University of Arizona, in Tucson. But after two-plus years of partying I decided to move in a more productive direction, so I enlisted in 1957 in the U. S. Air Force. Later that year I married Jan, my high school (and present) girlfriend. After four years in the Air Force I returned to the University of Arizona and completed work in 1965 on my Ph. D degree in Experimental Psychology.

I took an Assistant Professor's job at the University of Louisville that fall. I taught sensory processes and worked with Dr. Emerson Foulke on research projects for the American Printing House for the Blind, studying tactile perception and "reading by listening" with blind students.

In 1966 I took a post-doctoral at NASA's Space Research and Coordination Center at the University of Pittsburgh. I worked on tactile communication systems for astronauts using electrical stimulation of the skin. I stayed in touch with Emerson and we worked on a review of research on time-compressed speech, listening, and reading that was published in the *Psychological Bulletin*.¹ That was my first publication on reading research.

Literacy Research in the Armed Forces

In the winter of 1967 I got a call from a friend working in Monterey, California at a field unit of the Human Resources Research Office (HumRRO) of the George Washington University. He told me the military was joining President Johnson's War on Poverty by inducting 100, 000 new recruits a year who were low in reading ability. HumRRO thought it might be necessary to do more teaching by "show and tell" so that the New Standards Personnel (NSP, as they were called) could learn by listening rather than by reading. With my background working with blind students, HumRRO thought I would be a good person to do research on listening and reading abilities of the NSP.

It didn't take much to convince my wife and me to move to Monterey from Pittsburgh. By July, 1967 I was living on the Monterey Peninsula working on three lines of research for HumRRO. One concerned the listening and reading skills of personnel, for which we developed a test battery to assess adult's listening, reading, and decoding abilities ². For this research I received the [International Reading Association's](#) 1978 Albert J. Harris

Award.

In 1974, HumRRO published an extensive review of listening and reading research we did called *Auding and Reading: A Developmental Model*.³ This was the first adult literacy oriented book to integrate findings from the new fields of information processing and cognitive psychology into a theory of the development of literacy. It introduced ideas such as constructing mental representations of the environment, foreshadowing today's constructivism, the oracy to literacy transfer effect, suggesting that after learning decoding, the oral and written languages draw on the same conceptual base and comprehension processes, and the reading potential concept, in which oral language sets an initial limit for the comprehension of the written language. Though actually an old idea in reading research, in 1996 E. D. Hirsch, Jr. referred to this as *Sticht's Law in The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*.

The second line of the HumRRO research involved determining the listening, reading, and arithmetic requirements of several Army jobs. This work developed what later became known as literacy task analysis in the design of workplace literacy programs. A joint U. S. Departments of Education and Labor report later referred to this type of analysis as a "literacy audit," an unfortunate choice I always thought because what business wants to be audited for anything!

Our research team developed the first readability formula for use with adult, job-related materials, called the FORCAST (FORd, CAylor, STicht) formula. In 1974 the British Association of Settlements used the FORCAST formula in research which initiated the United Kingdom's National Right to Read program.

The third line of research with HumRRO was the development of the Functional Literacy (FLIT) program, a six-week, job-related literacy program to replace the general literacy programs that the Army had put in place to upgrade the literacy skills of recruits. In an independent evaluation, U. S. Office of Education contractors examined 1500 candidates and chose the FLIT program as one of only twelve programs to be declared "exemplary." Data showed that the Army's general literacy programs made only small gains in soldiers' abilities to read job-related materials. But in the same amount of time, the FLIT program made equal or better gains in general literacy and four to five times the gain in job-related reading.

In 1988 the U. S. Department of Education initiated the National Workplace Literacy Program based largely on the work we did at HumRRO and by researchers who built on and further developed that work, such as Larry Mikulecky, Jorie Philippi, and others.

The Intergenerational Transfer of Literacy

In 1975, HumRRO published a summary of our literacy work called *Reading for Working: A Functional Literacy Anthology*.⁴ In that book I noted that the 1971 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that parent's education level was highly correlated with the reading achievement of children and young adults. This got me started thinking about the importance of adult education for improving children's literacy.

In the winter of 1975 I spent a semester as a Visiting Associate Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I worked with Jeanne Chall and we spent lots of time talking about developmental aspects of reading. Later, Jeanne reproduced a couple of the figures from the *Auding and Reading* book in her influential book on *Stages of Reading Development*.

In 1976 I left HumRRO and joined the National Institute for Education (NIE) in Washington, DC as Associate Director in charge of the Basic Skills Unit. There I managed to get a little, but not much, research on adult literacy started.

In June of 1979 I left the NIE and rejoined HumRRO as a research scientist in Heidelberg, Germany. A year later I returned to the U.S. to serve as Vice President for Basic Skills at HumRRO. In 1983 HumRRO published a professional report based on a presentation I had given to the National Academy of Education in 1980. Entitled *Literacy and Human Resources Development at Work: Investing in the Education of Adults to Improve the Educability of Children*,⁵ the report suggested we could get "double value from education dollars," which I later phrased as "double duty dollars," meaning that when we invest in the education of adults we may get multiple returns in terms of both improved productivity by adults at work, and improved literacy learning by the adult's children.

Four years later, in 1987, after I had left HumRRO and started the Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences, Inc. (the ABC'S) in San Diego, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation provided funds to conduct a national conference on the Intergenerational Transfer of Cognitive Skills. This brought together three of the early family literacy programs by Ruth Nickse, Eunice Askov, and the PACE program of Kentucky started by Sharon Darling and Jeanne Heberle. Sharon later went on to found the National Center for Family Literacy in Louisville, Kentucky. In 1992 two volumes of proceedings of the conference were published.⁶

Functional Context Education

In 1983, the Urban Poverty Program of the Ford Foundation asked the ABC'S to study how the armed services had gone about educating and training undereducated young adults over the years. We spent several years studying military R & D that looked at how well undereducated personnel had served in the military and what the military research suggested for educating and training these young adults. This led to the publication in 1987 of *Cast-off Youth: Policy and Training Methods From the Military Experience*.⁷

In 1987 the Ford Foundation provided funds for me to present workshops on the principles and methods of *Functional Context Education* (FCE), which is the name I gave to the military's principles for educating and training undereducated young adults. In 1988 these principles were incorporated into the National Workplace Literacy Program. In 1990-91 I worked on the Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and spoke about FCE at the opening meeting of the SCANS commission. Later I was pleased to find that in agreement with FCE principles the SCANS commission called for teaching "in context" in both the K-12 and adult schools.

Some Other Professional Activities

In 1979, while working in Heidelberg, I received a letter from Amadou M'Bow, Director General of [UNESCO](#), inviting me to serve on the International Jury that selects UNESCO's adult literacy prizes given every 8th September, International Literacy Day. The International Reading Association had offered to provide an annual literacy award and had given three names of people who might serve on the Jury. I was one of those three and became the chosen one. I have continued to serve on the Jury ever since. I missed only once, in 1995, when, at my daughter's wedding, I was struck with acute appendicitis and found myself in surgery the next day when I was to leave for Paris for the Jury meeting.

In 1992, I was invited to London by what is now the Basic Skills Agency (BSA), to speak at its national conference. Princess Anne, the Patron of the BSA attended and sat through my presentation which emphasized the importance of getting "double duty dollars" through the intergenerational transfer of literacy from parents to their children. Newspapers reported that the Princess Royal found these ideas quite sensible. I worked with the BSA for several years on their national family literacy program.

In 1994 I was honored by being elected to the Reading Hall of Fame and in 1997 Timothy Shanahan and Susan Neuman, writing in the *Reading Research Quarterly*, selected the work colleagues and I did in the late 1960s and early 1970s at HumRRO as one of the thirteen most influential lines of literacy research since 1961.

Today, though officially retired, I keep busy doing writing, giving workshops and keynote speeches, and serving on various advisory boards and committees advocating for adult literacy education. My goal in this advocacy work is to gain formal recognition of and public support for the *Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the United States* so it can move from the margins to the mainstream of publicly funded education. Over all these years, I have found working in adult literacy education to be intellectually stimulating and socially meaningful. I hope that in coming years a whole lot more people will decide to work in this field and experience the same satisfaction I have.

Referenced Publications

1 Emerson Foulke and Thomas Sticht, "A Review of Research on the Intelligibility and Comprehension of Accelerated Speech," *Psychological Bulletin*, 72 (1969): 50-62.

2 Thomas Sticht, "*Applications of the AUDREAD Model to Reading Evaluation and Instruction*," in L. Resnick and P. Weaver, eds., *Theory and Practice in Early Reading: Vol. 1* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum and Associates, 1979), pp. 209-226.

3 Thomas Sticht et al., *Auditing and Reading: A Developmental Model* (Alexandria, VA.: Human Resources Research Organization, 1974).

4 Thomas Sticht, ed., *Reading for Working: A Functional Literacy Anthology* (Alexandria, VA.: Human Resources Research Organization, 1975).

5 Thomas Sticht, *Literacy and Human Resources Development at Work: Investing in the Education of Adults to Improve the Educability of Children*. HumRRO Professional Paper 2-83, (Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Organization, February 1983).

6 Thomas Sticht, Michael Beeler, and Barbara McDonald, eds., *The Intergenerational Transfer of Cognitive Skills* 2 vols. (Norwood, N. J.: Ablex, 1992).

7 Thomas Sticht et al., *Cast-off Youth: Policy and Training Methods from the Military Experience*. (N. Y.: Praeger, 1987).

8 Thomas Sticht, "*The Rise of the Adult Education and Literacy System in the United States: 1600-2000*," in J. Comings, B. Garner and C. Smith, eds., *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy* Vol. 3 (San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass Publishers, in press).
