

Phonics and the literacy journey, part 2: Go from the meaningful to the abstract

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Laughing kids learn, curriculum consultant David Hornsby reminded teachers attending the Centre for Professional Learning's course, Understanding the Role of Phonics in the Literacy Journey.

"Look at the children's book *The Really Rude Rhino*. Don't kids love it because he is rude? Every page they go to they're hysterically laughing at how rude he is," he said.

"I want to start with emotion, not just cognition. Learning goes from the heart to the head.

"Learning is affective as well as cognitive ... I've got them engaged in the text so now the text will help me to highlight the /r/ sound and the /r/-relationship.

Mr Hornsby said rich, authentic text provides a meaningful context for explicit, systematic instruction. "We go from the meaningful to the abstract. We go from the heart to the head. We go from the known to the unknown. They are basic conditions for learning."



He suggested a possible teaching sequence:

1. Use a book for its intended purpose: share it with the kids, laugh about it, feel sad about it, enjoy it, act it out, dramatise it, respond to it in all kinds of ways.
2. Talk about characteristics of the text, such as narratives often have a beginning, middle and end.
3. Take a key word (such as dog) and build a word family (such as dog, log, blog, frog).
4. Break words into onset-rime (for example, d-og, l-og, bl-og, fr-og).
5. Talk about individual letters (for example, d-o-g). "I'm doing what the synthetics phonics people want, but I'm doing it as step 5. I wouldn't dream of doing that as step 1," he said.
6. Compare the sound of the in 'dog' with the in other words the students have already met (for example, so, no, go). This reminds them that a letter can represent different sounds.

"Nowhere in our curriculum does it say that you can now teach phonics in isolation," Mr Hornsby said. Even in the Kindergarten syllabus content descriptors it says "read less predictable texts with phrasing and fluency by combining contextual, semantic, grammatical and phonic knowledge". "The key word is combining," Mr Hornsby added.

“Phonics on its own is useless, but phonics with meaning and grammar is powerful.”

The teaching of meaning-driven phonics involves explicit, systematic instruction in context where students learn:

- how grapheme-phoneme relationships operate within the constraints of morphology and etymology
- phonics through writing and reading.

Spelling lists

Mr Hornsby suggests developing spelling lists based on visual patterns, sound patterns and morphemic patterns. “Letters do not always have a phonological function and very often have a morphological function.”

He said the use of word matrices, word sums and word webs turns spelling and phonics into research and inquiry, which helps students with understandings that can be applied to other words they want to write.

— Kerri Carr

- [Phonics and the literacy journey, part 1: Start with quality, literary texts](#)
- [Phonics and the literacy journey, part 3: A compelling case for poetry every day](#)