



Zig Engelmann:

A Passion for "What Works"

A Time of Change

The mid-1960s was a time of deep national unrest. The War on Poverty and the concern for the war in Vietnam were two examples. There were other national concerns. In 1966, Burton Blatt published a photographic essay: *Christmas in Purgatory*. This provided a searing portrait of life in a mental institution and brought national attention to the abuse of people with mental retardation who were committed to America's institutions. Nationally, a "deinstitutionalization" effort had begun, and parents and service agencies were developing programs to support persons with mental disabilities in local communities. The ten years from 1965 to 1975 were the "Wild West" years of community-based services for persons with mental disabilities. This was a time when the institutionalization option was questioned—but before the

federal and state laws of 1976 mandated that public education accept instructional program responsibilities for children and young adults considered "handicapped."

In the late 1960s the University of Oregon and the Pearl Buck Center in Eugene, Oregon, initiated a model program to provide educational and vocational services for teenagers and young adults considered "mentally disabled." The Pearl Buck Center was founded for children with disabilities by a holocaust refugee, Elizabeth Waechter, in 1953. While serving as the first program coordinator for teenage and adult services in 1968, I realized that many clients had spent their lives in a state institution, receiving no academic or vocational instruction. Those with an IQ of 25 to 50 were considered "non-educable" or "trainable." For the person classified as "trainable," the possibility of achieving any level of

vocational or recreational literacy was rarely suggested by educational leaders of the period. One teacher textbook printed in 1965 included the following very explicit statement to new special education teachers:

“Do not attempt to teach trainable children to read by means of phonics. It is a waste of time and effort. The concept and application of phonics requires a greater amount of intellectual capacity than these youngsters possess. It is entirely too abstract to grasp. One might as well teach them the theory of numbers. It can't be done.”

It Can't Be Done: Reality or Challenge?

In 1968, with some financial support for instructional materials from the University of Oregon's Northwest Regional Special Education Instructional Materials Center, a reading program was initiated for teenage and young adult Pearl Buck clients. Two reading programs were available to us. One was a *Project Follow Through* program, known then as *DISTAR (Direct Instruction System for Teaching and Remediation)*. The reading instruction component of *DISTAR* is now known as *Reading Mastery*, and is published by SRA. We acquired a well-worn set of purple ditto copies that provided an instructional script. At that time, my only knowledge of Zig Engelmann was that of the senior author, employed at the University of Illinois. The other program, *The Sullivan Reading Program*, was then published by Behavioral Research Laboratories of Palo Alto. The *DISTAR* program used intensive, direct, oral instruction in small groups. Many of the Pearl Buck Center clients lacked the expressive oral language, and other behaviors needed to participate in any systematic group instruction, or other individual seated activities. The selected reading intervention was a combination of the two programs:

The Sullivan student materials served as extra practice materials and a measure of the degree to which the *DISTAR* program would generalize. The *DISTAR* curriculum sequence and teaching procedures provided the core of the program. We were not concerned with finding the best reading program. The research question was: “Can we teach reading to this population with ANY instructional program?” An initial formative test of the prototype program was conducted with five clients. Contrary to the prevailing professional predictions of the time, there was clear evidence of client progress.

The reading instruction was then expanded to 22 teenage and young adult clients of the Pearl Buck Center. This group had IQ scores ranging from 25 to 47. The question of instructional concern was: “What are the academic and social prerequisites needed to participate in the selected instructional program?” Of all the prerequisite skills, the most important were the academic skills involved in “sound-symbol” relationships. For all practical purposes, the client who could learn the letter names or sounds for the letter symbols could succeed in the reading program. After four weeks, 11 of the 22 students mastered basic sound-symbol skills and required less reteaching as they progressed through the program. The IQ scores which had initially condemned this population to lifelong institutionalization had no significant relationship to reading success. Indeed, the correlation between reading success and I.Q. was slightly negative at -0.11. In contrast, one available measure of sound-symbol skills, the “letter-naming” subtest on the Wide Range Reading and Arithmetic Test (WRAT), showed a very practical relationship of 0.78. Client success continued, and several of the group became avid recreational readers.

For the clients, their parents, and those of us involved in designing and delivering the reading instruction, the implications were positive and lifelong. Contrary to the predictions of the experts, there WAS much that could be done. To break through the ceiling set by IQ scores and “expert opinions,” teachers were needed who cared enough to acquire technical competence, and who had access to a reading program developed by someone who successfully applied the science of instructional design. For us, that “someone” was Sigfried Engelmann. “Zig” resolved the confusion between the traditional psychological assessments of the time, and the science of instruction. For me, I was totally amazed by the fact that not only were the clients achieving vocational and recreational literacy skills, but the further most clients advanced in the reading program, the less reteaching was required to achieve the curriculum-embedded milestones. That finding was a major tribute to the instructional designer—Zig.



When I accepted employment at Utah State University (USU) in the summer of 1969, I found the same confusion between traditional psychological assessment and the science of effective, valid instruction. This confusion led to invalid and pessimistic client treatments and instructional projections based on psychological tests and labels such as “trainable.” To give a valid instructional identity to USU's Special Education Department, the faculty turned to Zig Engelmann for guidance in the design of theoretical and practicum experiences. We found, in Zig, a rare and special blend of passion for serving the most vulnerable students and a deep respect for the science of instruction.

I can think of so many valuable lessons I learned from the “Zig” experience that helped shape my work and increased my expectations of students and teachers. In his own words, Zig shared the following about Direct Instruction:

“The philosophy behind the program is basically simple. We say in effect, “Kid, it doesn't matter how miserably your environment has failed to teach you the basic concepts that the average five-year-old has long since mastered. We're not going to fail you. We're not going to discriminate against you, or give up on you, regardless of how unready you may be according to traditional standards. We are not going to label you with a handle, such as dyslexic or brain-damaged, and feel that we have now exonerated ourselves from the responsibility of teaching you. We're not going to punish you by requiring you to do things you can't do. We're not going to talk about your difficulties to learn. Rather, we will take you where you are, and we'll teach you. And the extent to which we fail is our failure, not yours. We will not cop out by saying, “He can't learn.” Rather, we will say, “I failed to teach him. So I better take a good look at what I did and try to figure out a better way.” (Zig Englemann, unpublished)

On behalf of the many teachers and students who benefited over the past 36 years—**Thanks, Zig**. If the ten-year period from 1965 to 1975 was the “Wild West” of special education services, then Zig was our “Wyatt Earp!” ■