

# THE CONVERSATION

12 January 2015, 6.27am AEDT

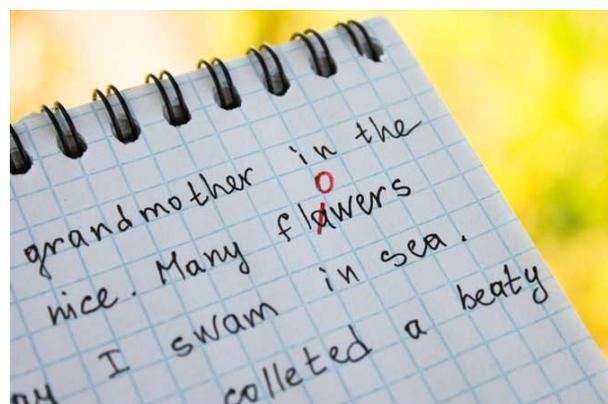
## A teacher's spelling doesn't necessarily affect their teaching

### AUTHOR



Stewart Riddle

Senior Lecturer at  
University of Southern  
Queensland



Teachers don't have to have perfect spelling to teach kids how to spell. Shutterstock

According to recent media reports, a new study shows an alarming number of aspiring teachers have lower literacy levels than the school students they will be teaching.

This coincides with a series of articles in *The Australian* last week on a report by the NSW government into universities preparing teachers for the teaching of reading.

The argument is compelling: kids (allegedly) can't read or write, so it's the teachers' fault. Teachers themselves have poor literacy skills, so it must be the universities' fault. The argument is followed by a call for a return to the basics, which will supposedly take education back to some fabled time when everything was better.

This tired old argument has been recycled for decades. Bronwyn Williams, a Professor of English, wryly notes:

*Every generation, upon reaching middle age, finds itself compelled to look at the literacy practices of young people and lament at how poor the work produced today is compared to that of idyllic days gone by.*

Despite the best endeavours of conservative think tanks and tabloid commentators to create a moral panic, there is no literacy crisis in Australia.

The argument that beginning teachers' literacy levels has any meaningful impact on their own students' literacy is not supported by evidence.

Of course that doesn't mean there isn't room for improvement, particularly for students from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds and those for whom English is a further language. However, buying into the rhetoric of crisis and moral panic is unhelpful and will not improve outcomes.

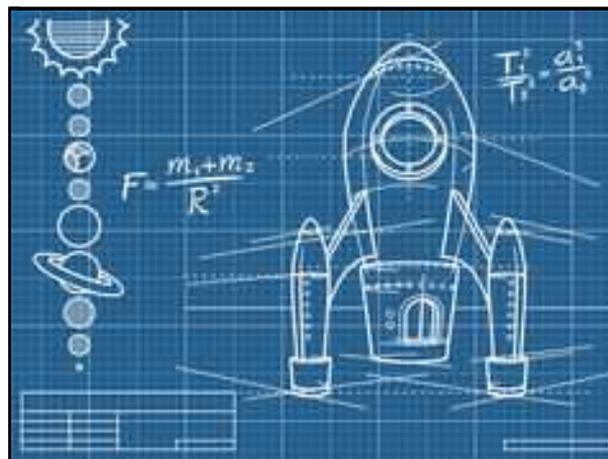
## Teaching literacy is rocket science

Teaching children to read and write is complex work. Any attempt to narrow the focus to a one-size-fits-all approach is not going to work.

A mix of methods is needed to assist children in tackling the demands of literacy, which includes developing: grapho-phonetic knowledge (understanding the relationship between print and sounds); phonemic awareness (being able to identify sounds that make meaning); the semantics and pragmatics of reading comprehension; fluency; vocabulary development; as well as controlling the syntactic and grammatical conventions of language.

The Four Resources Model, which brought together the very best in literacy research is widely used as a literacy framework in schools and teacher education courses.

Learning the alphabet and how to put these letters together to make words is necessary, but insufficient. Students also need to engage meaningfully in text production and making meaning from the text, along with learning to appreciate and understand the social and cultural practices that are undertaken through reading and writing.



Teaching reading is like rocket science, actually. Shutterstock  
Click to enlarge

The complexity of literacy needs to be reflected in the training that teachers undertake, and highlights the importance of making connections between theory and practice.

## Reading between the lines

One of the things we teach students when learning to read is inferential comprehension - reading between the lines. It is interesting to apply this technique to the treatment of literacy research and education policy in the media.

The research study in question presents a rather different picture from how it has been portrayed in the media. First, it deals specifically with secondary teachers. Second, it deals with one university and a narrowly defined literacy test. It would be like getting one school to sit the NAPLAN tests and then claiming it is representative of everywhere.

Dr Brian Moon, who conducted the study, explains:

*No representation is made here as to the general validity of the results in relation to students at other Australian universities.*

Interestingly, the paper also refers to earlier studies from the 1980s on low literacy levels of student teachers and comments on how little has changed over the intervening decades.

Literacy and numeracy testing of teaching graduates is on the cards, with NSW committed to a test program by 2016. What effect this may have is anyone's guess.

It is assumed that teaching graduates who are better spellers will be better teachers, but there is little evidence to suggest this is actually the case.

Having a firm grasp of the basics is important, but it is only the very beginning of what a teacher needs to be able to do.

We know that good teachers need to be many things and have qualities well beyond those of proficient language use.

I was a teacher for seven years and do you know what I did when I didn't know how to spell a word or what it meant? I grabbed a dictionary and used the opportunity to build it into the lesson.

Teaching is not about knowing everything but rather how to provide meaningful, contextualised and appropriate learning experiences for young people. And yes, sometimes not knowing can actually be useful.