

Florida Center for Reading Research

Learning to Read: Beginning Reading Instruction

What is Learning to Read?

Learning to Read: Beginning Reading Instruction (Learning to Read) is an interactive professional development program developed by Performance Learning Systems (PLS). *Learning to Read* combines CD-ROM material with face-to-face facilitator presentations and guided instruction in a workshop format. Presented on the CD-ROM are seven seminars that provide an overview of the following topics: Current Reading Facts and Challenges, A Balanced and Integrated Approach, Phonological Awareness, Learning to Read Words, Fluency, Comprehension Strategies, and Preventing Reading Failure.

Learning to Read is a 40-hour course, with seven seminars ranging from three to six hours in length. Additional hours are spent, outside the regular class hours, completing Action Research Assignments and a Response Journal. The Action Research Assignments are required for graduate level credit and future PLS instructors. It is the recommendation of PLS that all participants complete the Action Research Assignments, however, the final decision lies with each district. The course begins with a self-assessment for participants to analyze their current reading teaching practices. At the end of the course, participants are asked to complete the same self-assessment and to complete an individual professional development plan for reading instruction. Content is delivered with a CD-ROM presentation followed by face-to-face facilitator presentations and guided instruction, related reflection journal questions, action research assignments, and research articles to be read by the participant. The purpose of the reflection journal is for participants to consider the content they are learning, analyze their current practices, and reflect upon possible instructional changes. The reflection journal and research articles are found on both the CD-ROM and in the participant manual. The action research assignments are an essential component in helping to insure the depth of knowledge necessary for classroom implementation of the strategies taught in this course.

Participant materials include a course CD-ROM and a participant's manual. Participants can refer to the CD-ROM for continuous updates. Facilitators are equipped with an Instructor Kit that includes the CD-ROM, an instructor's guide, a participant's manual and the materials necessary to guide a group of participants through the course. Technical support is provided with a troubleshooting guide and a tech support link on the CD-ROM. Although there is not a scope and sequence, a table of contents outlining each seminar's requirements and activities is included in the participant's manual.

The course CD-ROM includes: multimedia seminars with mini lectures presented by national reading experts on reading instruction, classroom demonstrations of teaching strategies and activities, information on initial screening instruments, lesson-plan resources, articles reflecting the latest scientifically based reading research, links to a wide variety of web resources including state standards and reflection journal questions. The research includes information on providing a balanced, integrated approach to reading instruction and details the importance of providing early, systematic intervention for struggling readers.



There are several components considered integral to any successful professional development program: a coaching component to help ensure successful classroom implementation by providing follow-up feedback for participants; special content designed for school and district administrators including classroom observation tools; evaluation and certification measures for determining participants' acquisition of the content in the professional development program. Although these components are not integrated into the *Learning to Read* program, they are offered by PLS, in their Coaching course. PLS encourages districts to incorporate the Coaching course into their overall professional development plan for reading. *Learning to Read* is also available in a Train-the-Trainer model that integrates a train-the-trainer component, with the Learning to Read CD-ROM, Facilitator's Guide, and Kit.

How is Learning to Read aligned with Reading First?

Florida's Reading First Professional Development plan states that facilitators of professional development programs for Reading First schools must be highly knowledgeable in Scientifically Based Reading Research. The overall goal of Reading First professional development is to help teachers acquire a sufficiently deep understanding of reading and reading instruction so they will be able to flexibly use a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of children. Although an overview of each of the five components of effective reading instruction is introduced in the *Learning to Read* program, it is important that participants complete the Action Research Assignments in order to obtain the depth of knowledge necessary to assess, identify, and implement specific instructional strategies.

Learning to Read includes phonemic awareness under the broader heading, Phonological Awareness. The *Learning to Read* CD-ROM emphasizes that the phonological awareness component of an effective reading program should introduce skills in a continuum from simplest to the most complex. Video segments of teachers modeling phonemic awareness strategies are presented on the CD-ROM and participants are given time to practice specific phonemic and phonological awareness strategies in class. Extra practice time is built into the course schedule to hold educators accountable for pronouncing phonemes correctly. Practice teaching phonological awareness lessons within the framework of the program and with peer support would further develop participant's skills in teaching these strategies.

The National Reading Panel (2000) states that systematic phonics instruction typically involves explicitly teaching students a pre-specified set of letter-sound relations and having students read text that provides practice using these relations to decode words. The *Learning to Read* CD-ROM presentation emphasizes the importance of teaching systematic decoding skills and reinforcing those skills with decodable books. The CD-ROM also offers an excellent teacher demonstration of phoneme pronunciation highlighted with expert commentary by Dr. Joseph Torgesen confirming the importance of using accurate phoneme pronunciation. Workshop activities led by the facilitator include a demonstration/practice session building words with word chains and a jigsaw exercise using Dr. Louisa Moat's article, "Teaching Decoding" (1998). Practice teaching a phonics lesson, within the framework of the program and with peer support, would help provide participants with the confidence and experience needed to teach phonics in their classrooms.

Information about scientific research in reading and links to journal articles that support the importance of fluency in attaining comprehension are presented on the CD-ROM. A follow-up activity includes a jigsaw exercise for participants to examine

and present Rasinski's seven fluency strategies (Rasinski & Padak, 2000). Repeated reading and assisted reading instructional techniques are demonstrated by the facilitator and practiced by the participants. In a partner activity, two research articles establishing the link between decoding and fluency are read, evaluated, and presented.

The comprehension seminar includes a KWL activity (what we Know, what we Want to know, and what we want to Learn), several awareness activities, and questioning techniques to enhance comprehension. A reading center activity that introduces seven reading strategies to use before, during, and after reading is presented. Included in the seminar is an effective homework assignment: reading Stanovich's article "What Reading Does for the Mind" (1998) in preparation for a follow-up classroom discussion. This type of assignment allows participants to absorb the great wealth of knowledge that is presented in this article.

In the final seminar, "Preventing Reading Failures", participants are asked to participate in a small group activity. Their task is to review a scenario that involves a struggling reader, then identify and diagnose the problem. Next, they are to provide the rationale for their diagnosis, identify goals for increasing the deficit reading skill and finally, describe a plan using SBRR for an appropriate intervention. In addition participants are asked to design a 10-minute role-play, to portray a conference including a teacher, the struggling reader, family members, a reading specialist, and an administrator. For the purpose of the role-play, they are to also add recommendations of strategies that the parents can implement at home. Twenty minutes is allotted for participants to diagnose, plan, and prepare the role-play.

Although a crosswalk between *Learning to Read* and Florida's Reading Endorsement Competencies is not included in the program materials, PLS did provide a general outline linking Florida's Competencies with five PLS courses, including *Learning to Read*.

Research Support for Learning to Read

PLS conducted a study that involved 34 teachers and administrators and over 700 students in five schools: three elementary, one middle school, and one high school. The study took place in a small, rural school district in central Florida during the 2002-2003 school year. A quasi-experimental, treatment-control group design was used to measure the impact of *Learning to Read* on participating teachers and their respective students.

For measures of attitudinal impact, teachers and their students participated in post-test only attitude surveys. When analyzed collectively, teachers showed no difference in the control vs. experimental groups. Further analyses for individual grade levels showed significantly higher ratings for Kindergarten and First grade teachers and higher, though not significantly higher, for 2-5 grade teachers. When analyzed collectively, student's attitudinal impact survey showed no significant difference. Statistically reliable differences did exist favoring *Learning to Read* based on grade level analyses with the students in grades 2-5. However, using only a post-test with no pre-test results for comparison, the outcomes cannot be positively attributed to the *Learning to Read* program.

Additionally, a pre-post, control-treatment design using a self-assessment instrument was used to determine gains in the reading instruction capabilities of educators who participated in the *Learning to Read* program. Substantial and significant gains are reported for the *Learning to Read* group. The self-assessment

instrument is very closely patterned after the course objectives, indicating that the teachers learned the material that was presented in the course.

Learning impact for students was also measured using district progressive, skill based tests that were administered two or three times a year to students in elementary, middle school, and high school. Significant differences favoring the students taught by teachers in the *Learning to Read* group, for Language Arts, are reported. However, because teachers were not randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups, and no data are provided on the measurement instrument used, the findings are inconclusive. In other words, we cannot attribute the gains reported to be the direct result of the *Learning to Read* program.

In light of these issues (the lack of random assignment at the classroom or school level and the lack of information about the assessment tools) the validity and reliability of the study conducted by PLS is diminished. The research articles and the information provided in the formal reading instruction on the CD-ROM are consistent with scientific research on reading. We conclude that the effectiveness of *Learning to Read* as a Professional Development Program to help teachers improve their teaching skills in a way that leads to stronger student outcomes is not yet demonstrated in research. However, there is evidence that the program is effective in communicating a specific body of knowledge about reading and reading instruction to teachers.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strengths of *Learning to Read*:

- Customized course formats are provided to accommodate the varying needs of districts and schools.
- The content of *Learning to Read* is consistent with the most recent and well-established findings from scientific research on reading.
- The *Learning to Read* course emphasizes and affords practice for the accurate pronunciation of phonemes.

Weaknesses of *Learning to Read*:

- Facilitator's Guide needs to be edited for typographical and content errors.
- Insufficient time is allotted for some of the workshop activities, which could impede participant's acquisition of knowledge.
- Follow up support, administrator support, and content knowledge assessment are found in the PLS Coaching course, and are not an integral part of *Learning to Read*.

Which Florida districts have schools that implement Learning to Read?

Desoto	863-494-4222
Lake	352-253-6510
Leon	850-487-7147
Marion	352-671-7702
Orange	407-317-3202

For More Information

<http://www.plsweb.com/sec05.htm>

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