A History of Spd Rdng

Ever since people have been reading, many of them have been trying to read faster and more effectively. Oddly, though, apart from some early exploration by the US Air Force who held the first formal speed reading course at Syracuse University in 1925, there has been little or no support from educational establishments or governments. Even though you would think there were academic plaudits or increased educational attainments to be gained by the first organization or country to implement a reading programme which could take students beyond the basics, all advances seem to have been made by committed individuals who have remained outside the formal education system, and that is still the situation today.

Some of these individual innovations have become accepted within the field, but even within the 'field' (if it exists), many individuals remain unaware of the work and advances of others, so it's possible, probable even, that some 'discoveries' have been made by more than one person, some techniques have remained unique to their inventor, and some may have flourished briefly but then been lost. So what follows is a partial, incomplete summary of the ideas which we (Jan Cisek and Susan Norman) have built on, discovered or rediscovered for ourselves, and developed into the reading system we now call 'Spd Rdng'. This is also by way of an acknowledgement of our debt to those who have taught and inspired us. As Isaac Newton said, 'If I have seen further, it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.' *(258 words)*

Earliest references to faster reading
The third quarter of the 19th century saw some of the earliest references to speed reading techniques. Around 1878, Emil Javel, a French ophthalmologist who is remembered for his work on correcting squints, did some experiments into how the eye is involved in reading. It was he who established that the eye does a series of 'jumps' (called 'saccades') along the line and pauses to take in information at each 'stop' ('fixation'). He also established that it was possible to take in information to either side of the fixation, ie that people could understand chunks of text, rather than reading every single word. Some six years later, articles began to appear in journals (including *'The Education Review'*) about enhanced reading skills acquired by reading groups of words without vocalising (saying the words to yourself as you read).

Things then go quiet for a while, until around 1921, John Anthony O'Brien wrote a book called *'Silent Reading: with special reference to methods for developing speed, a study in the psychology and pedagogy of reading'*, which reiterated the point that it was possible to read groups of words without vocalising.

In the 1940s, experiments on 'rapid' reading were done at Harvard University using a tachistoscope. This device, first described by A W Volkman, a German physiologist in 1859, used to be used (before computers) for experiments which involved showing subjects visual stimuli for controlled durations. They have been used to encourage recognition speed (and could therefore be used to help people test or increase their reading speed) and also to show items for too short a period for them to register consciously (which might be useful for experiments on 'downloading', also known as 'photoreading'). *(287 words; total 545)*

Mortimer Adler
It is also worth noting that 1940 saw the publication of a book called *'How to Read a Book'* by American professor, philosopher, and educational theorist, Dr Mortimer J Adler. This was more about how books should be classified and how to read books in depth than it was about reading faster. However, in the revised 1966 edition, he refers to 'syntopical reading' (the basis of the comparative reading of several books with one purpose at one time, which we refer to as 'syntopic processing'), which he defines as 'reading in' the whole set of great books as contrasted with 'reading through' a single work.

The set of great books is those books from which Adler extracted the ideas on which western civilization is based. He indexed these ideas and called it the 'Syntopicon' – which he hoped readers would use to compare the thoughts of great thinkers of the previous 3000 years in a matter of moments. (If you're interested, Adler's 102 'great ideas' are: Angel, Animal, Aristocracy, Art, Astronomy, Beauty, Being, Cause, Chance, Change, Citizen, Constitution, Courage, Custom and Convention, Definition, Democracy, Desire, Dialectic, Duty, Education, Element, Emotion, Eternity, Evolution, Experience, Family, Fate, Form, God, Good and Evil, Government, Habit, Happiness, History, Honor, Hypothesis, Idea, Immortality, Induction, Infinity, Judgment, Justice, Knowledge, Labor, Language, Law, Liberty, Life and Death, Logic, Love, Man, Mathematics, Matter, Mechanics, Medicine, Memory and Imagination, Metaphysics, Mind, Monarchy, Nature, Necessity and Contingency, Oligarchy, One and Many, Opinion, Opposition, Philosophy, Physics, Pleasure and Pain, Poetry, Principle, Progress, Prophecy, Prudence, Punishment, Quality, Quantity, Reasoning, Relation, Religion, Revolution, Rhetoric, Same and Other, Science, Sense, Sign and Symbol, Sin, Slavery, Soul, Space, State, Temperance, Theology, Time, Truth, Tyranny, Universal and Particular, Virtue and Vice, War and Peace, Wealth, Will, Wisdom, World.) The 72 authors from which he took these ideas are listed under 'Great Books of the Western World' (although for most of the authors he recommends more than one book, and for several – including Shakespeare, Hippocrates, Archimedes, Sophocles, and others – he recommends reading 'the complete works'), and these are supplemented by a further 153 listed under topic headings in the section 'Gateway to the Great Books'.

Adler was also a proponent of holistic reading or

'global to detail' reading (although he didn't use either of those terms). He wrote, 'To understand a book, you must approach it, first, as a whole, having a unity and a structure of part; and second, in terms of its elements, its units of language and thought.' And he encouraged keeping an open mind: 'Understanding an author must always precede criticizing or judging him.' *(432 words; total 977)*

Evelyn Wood names 'speed reading'

It wasn't until the 1950s that the phrase 'speed reading' was coined by Evelyn Nielsen Wood, who published her book, *'Reading Skills'*, in 1959. Originally a school teacher, she studied exceptional readers (including President John Kennedy), and discovered people who could read between 1500 and 6000 words per minute, often by reading down the page rather than from side to side (what we call super-reading), reading meaningful groups of words rather than individual words and avoiding rereading texts (regression). She also noticed that faster readers were also more efficient and effective.

Together with her husband, Evelyn Wood created a system which increased a reader's speed on average from a rate of 230 to 300 wpm (words per minute) by a factor of two to five times that, with increased retention. They named the system Evelyn Wood Speed Reading Dynamics and taught the programme throughout the USA. White House staff members took her course and her classes were taught on college campuses until the late 1990s. She is credited with introducing the use of a 'pacer' (a finger or capped pen which encourages the eye to move quickly down the text) and she discouraged subvocalisation. *(199 words; total 1178)*

Tony Buzan and mindmapping

Although *'Speed Reading'* by Tony Buzan was published in 1971, his greater contribution to the Spd Rdng system was the development of mindmapping as a way of taking non-linear notes which he write about in numerous other books. However, in his speed reading book, his 'Mind Map Organic Study Technique' (MMOST) is made up of two sections: Preparation (setting a time for your study period, deciding on the amount of material to be covered, checking how much knowledge you already have, and setting down goals in the form of questions) and Application (Survey, Preview, Inview and Review). Buzan gives some interesting insights into reading and some of the problems which hold back slow readers, but much of his book is given over to mechanical number-spotting exercises and textual comprehension tests. He recommends building vocabulary, and, to that end, lists the meanings of 80 prefixes and 51 suffixes.
(151 words; total 1327)

The non-conscious mind

The next giant leap in the history of spd rdng was the focus on the amazing abilities of the non-conscious mind. In 1966, Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian doctor, psychotherapist and educationist, founded his Suggestology Research Institute in Sofia. He developed a method of teaching which he called Suggestopedia (suggestion + pedagogy) in which learning became a pleasurable, natural experience which reflected the way children learn while drawing on the huge capacity of the non-conscious mind. When Lozanov's approach was taken up in the west, it was referred to as Accelerated – or Accelerative – Learning. Many of these ideas have been incorporated into the Spd Rdng approach with its emphasis of putting reading (the taking in and processing of ideas) into the wider context of learning (putting those ideas into practice).

Norman Dixon's book *'Preconscious processing'* was published in 1981. It details his work on the ability of the brain to take in information without conscious awareness and the effect that 'priming' can have on a person's behaviour without their knowledge. One of his conclusions, which is particularly relevant to the downloading (photoreading) technique where the 'reader' looks quickly (approximately one second per page) at every page of a book without consciously reading it is that 'Words … do not have to be consciously perceived in order to be recognised'.

This conclusion had been previously recognised by Richard Welch, the self-styled 'father of mental photography' who went on from running Evelyn-Wood-type speed-reading courses to develop 'Subliminal Dynamics'. He made incredible claims for the system which involved eliminating subvocalisation completely – including a 16-year old dyslexic boy who could take in 606,000 wpm and then scoring 90% on a 100-question in-depth test. Welch said that it was not necessary to read and reread information until it 'sinks in'. Sinks in to where? He asked. He said that participants on his courses were regularly taking in information at the rate of two seconds per page, or faster, sometimes holding the book upside down, since the subconscious mind knows no bounds. Although the 'readers' had no sensation of 'reading', the information found a direct path through the brain to the part of the subconscious which 'gets it'.

After attending a course with Richard Welch, Paul Scheele developed his own system which he called 'The PhotoReading Whole Mind System', which again depended heavily on downloading, which he called the 'photoreading step', although in his system the information which had gone direct to the non-conscious mind then needed 'activating' in order for it to be useful. The five photoreading steps were: prepare (set your purpose and get into a good state), preview, photoread (including going into photofocus), postview (similar to preview), and activate. The challenge for people learning this system was to understand the 'activation' process, which seemed to be of equal value to the other four steps, but which in reality can take more

than twice as long as the other four steps put together. It starts with 'incubation' – which means waiting at least 20 minutes, and preferably overnight for the non-conscious mind to process the information, after which readers work with the book using super-reading, making mindmaps and rapid reading. After doing this people typically expected to remember the book in the same way as they might do after traditional reading, whereas downloaded information tends to come back piecemeal as it is needed. Secondly, although in reality versions of many of the spd rdng techniques are mentioned in Scheele's PhotoReading book (published 1993), the system seems to imply that it should be applied rigidly to any and every book. Learners typically spend a disproportionate amount of time worrying about 'getting the system right' rather than focusing on getting the information they want from the text, and they worry about deviating from that system, even though one will clearly use a variety of different approaches depending on the type of material, the reader's existing knowledge, their purpose, the time available, etc. A one-size-fits-all system just doesn't.

(663 words; total 1990)
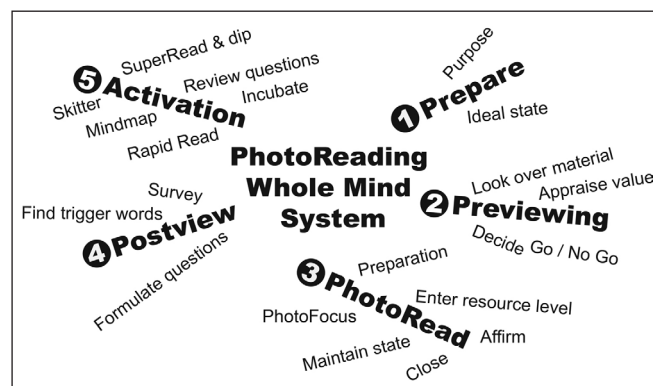
Additional contributions

Numerous other people need to be mentioned in this 'partial history'. John Duns Scotus was the 13th century monk who asked children to focus on the concentration point above and behind their head to help them read. This point was rediscovered by Ron Davis who taught it to people with dyslexia and helped them to read (his book *'The Gift of Dyslexia'* was published in 1997).

The 80/20 rule was posited by the management consultant Joseph M Juran (1904-2008), who named it 'the Pareto Principle' after the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923). Then Dr Russell Stauffer's book *'Teaching Reading as a Thinking Process'*, in which he states that 4-11% of words in most books carry all the meaning, was published in 1969.

'Rhizome' and 'rhizomatic' are terms used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to describe the philosophical concept they developed in their 'Capitalism

and Schizophrenia' project (1972-1980). The botanical rhizome was used as an analogy for a non-hierarchical organizational structure which can be entered and exited at any point. Additionally all points within it have the potential to be connected. This is in contrast to the more common arboreal (tree-like) structure which implies hierarchy and binary (yes-no) choices. We (Jan Cisek and Susan Norman) used the concept to develop a freer note-taking alternative to mindmapping, for which the name 'rhizomapping' was suggested by Susan's husband, Hugh L'Estrange.

Norman and Cisek also added the idea of the 'joker' to syntopic processing (which was first posited by Adler – see above) which we came across in our work on accelerated learning and creative thinking.

The 'fizzical' challenges and eye exercises were taken from Brain Gym (developed by Paul and Gail Dennison), Hatha Yoga and NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming).

Additionally, although we didn't take the idea of collaborative learning from Howard Stephen Berg, it is something he recommends to students in his Maximum Power Reading system – and it gives us the opportunity to mention the man who claims to be the fastest reader in the world. *(334 words; total 2324)*

Detractors

We are well aware that speed reading and photoreading are somewhat controversial and have their detractors. Despite excellent results and a proven track record, some people don't believe speed reading works, or don't believe it can work for them. Some fail to 'get it' (usually because of a rigid mindset, or because they have unrealistic expectations or won't try something more than once before giving up), or they fail to keep it up (usually because their old habits feel more comfortable) and then blame whichever system they have chosen to learn. Claiming that something doesn't work is more comfortable for some people than accepting that they haven't persevered with learning something new. But it's also worth noting that some techniques work better for some people than others.

Some people just can't see the need – either because they have worked out a satisfactory system for themselves, or because they don't want to try it (in case they fail?), or can't spare the time.

We ourselves would like to add a warning about online and computer-driven exercises which claim to improve reading speeds. By definition, these tests are mechanical. The brain on the other hand thrives on meaning. Although it is possible to improve reading speeds by working at mechanical exercises, what you tend to get better at is doing mechanical exercises and that skill does not necessarily transfer to the task of deriving meaning from a text. This may also be the reason why some independently-run tests of speed reading

do not produce exceptional results. It may not seem to work particularly well when people are given objective tests on information which has no intrinsic value to the reader. What they miss is that it works in practice. It works when people have a real need for the information they're looking for. *(302 words; total 2626)*

Promoters

On every Spd Rdng course we run, you can be sure that at some point at least one person will say something like, 'How I wish I'd known this when I was younger,' usually followed by 'Why on earth isn't this a compulsory course in schools?' Occasionally there is some follow-up by an individual working within education who tries to run a Spd Rdng course, and yet not one of them has come to fruition. Even when courses are offered free to university students, the people whose lives could be transformed by using these techniques and strategies, there is never enough take up from the students to make it worthwhile. Perhaps it's badly presented. Or perhaps the students just see it as 'one more thing to do', without realizing that this one thing could save them hours and hours of time. So spd rdng still remains the private secret of those with the wisdom to know that, in a world where everything is changing at an ever-increasing rate and where almost no aspect of life can be taken for granted any more, those who will survive are the ones who are able to access, process and react to new information in the shortest possible time. *(206 words; total 2832)*

Spd Rdng

Jan Cisek was the first qualified PhotoReading instructor in the UK and he started teaching PhotoReading in 1999. Courses generally went quite well, but in 2004 he approached Susan Norman, an expert in accelerated learning, to see if they could be improved. Jan and Susan regularly ran courses together over the next five years, during which time we took note of all the difficulties different individuals had and devised new approaches to make it easier for people to learn the new skills. Within a year the course was significantly different enough for us to rename it VIP (Visual Information Processing), since the biggest shift we ask people to make is to change their thinking from reading to information processing. As we started writing the course in book form, it evolved into the 37 separate techniques and we (at the suggestion of a friend, Holly Craigs) renamed the new system Spd Rdng.

Spd Rdng includes the best aspects of everything that has gone before, takes advantage of the latest research and insights into reading and learning, and is presented in a unique format which allows it to be applied to any reading material. One key difference with the Spd Rdng approach is that it is flexible. It allows for people to use different techniques with different material, people are free to combine the different techniques to produce their own system, and they are actively encouraged to find better ways to do things.

The first version of the book 'Spd Rdng - the Speed Reading Bible' was published online in a Kindle edition in 2010 and has been selling well ever since. This revised edition of the book was published as a paperback book in 2012. Translations into seven languages are completed or in preparation. *(295 words; total 3127)*

What's next?

We are aware that the world is changing in unpredictable ways at an ever-increasing rate. Spd Rdng is a flexible, dynamic approach to reading which takes account of the different ways in which the human brain works, while being ready to adapt to whatever changes occur in reading, learning, technology and human understanding in the coming years. We are particularly watching the development of visual language, the singularity and direct learning.

Robert E Horn's book *'Visual Language'* (published 1998) explains and shows how through infographics (information graphics) where images and words can be combined to express ideas much more clearly and directly than either images or words can do alone. You can already see these ideas at work in certain TV commercials, and all the spd rdng techniques will work even more effectively if and when these ideas become more widely adopted. At the very least we are encouraged to see that more books are now being published with clearer navigation, descriptive titles, more subtitles, helpful glossaries, summaries, and more – all things to help the reader extract the message more easily.

Technology is also developing at an exponential rate, and it is possible that the 'technological singularity' (a greater-than-human superintelligence) will emerge in the foreseeable future. The term was popularized in science fiction by Vernor Vinge, who proposed that this superintelligence might come about through the development of artificial intelligence, human biological enhancement (genetic engineering?) or some kind of brain-computer interface. Read more in *'The Singularity is Near'* by Ray Kurzweil. But we can only imagine what that might mean for reading and learning. Could we realistically expect books – or knowledge, information, skills – to be downloaded directly to our long-term memory via biological micro-chips implanted in the brain? (Think of the scene where someone learnt to fly a helicopter in the film *'The Matrix'*.)

Or maybe the future is the perfection of direct learning. It has already been proved that our non-conscious minds have tremendous capacity, far beyond anything we accept today. Work is already progressing on the ability of human thought to be passed to machines. But could it be that the next step is for our thoughts to pass directly from human mind to human mind? Maybe humans will be able to tune into any morphic field of knowledge and acquire skills

implicitly without going through any conscious learning process. Maybe we can already do that and all that's holding us back is our beliefs. And just maybe the way to move towards that is to practise downloading and direct learning as described in this book.

As you develop your reading and learning skills and have greater successes with the techniques we offer here, please let us know. We would also like to hear of your struggles and perceived failures – they're part of the learning process, and our own learning about reading has grown just as much from understanding what people couldn't do as from working out what exceptional readers do naturally. And as you go on to discover new ways in which reading and learning can be enhanced, please do get in touch. We'd love to work with you.

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(532 words; total 3659)