



Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast Episode #16 - Donna Hejtmanek & Pam Kastner (Science of Reading Facebook Group)

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Jessica Hammond: Hi, and welcome to Glean Education's Research to Practice Podcast, where we talked to education experts from around the world about their latest work and bring their fascinating findings out from the journal pages and into your classroom.

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Jessica Hammond: I'm Jessica Hammond, founder of Glean Education. And on the show today is Donna Hejtmanek and Pamela Kastner, moderators of the Facebook group Science of Reading: What I Should Have Learned in College. Donna Hejtmanek worked in education for 41 years as a special education teacher, reading specialist and head of tutoring centers for students with dyslexia in Wisconsin. Pam Kastner is the state lead for literacy at PaTTAN, the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, where she supports the state's school districts with training related to dyslexia, literacy instruction, intervention, and MTSS. She's the president of the Reading League, Pennsylvania, and one of eight moderators on that Facebook group. So welcome Donna and Pam. It's great to have you here today.

Donna Hejtmanek: Thank you.

Pamela Kastner: Thank you very much. We're happy to be here.



Jessica Hammond: I first found out about you guys because I, myself am a member of the Facebook page that Donna created and Pam helps to moderate. And I was kind of amazed one day when I saw there were 43,000 members.

Donna Hejtmanek: Today, we are going to have 64,000 members. In looking at the analytics, I see that we gain about a thousand members every 10 to 14 days.

Jessica Hammond: So that's a pretty amazing thing to have so many people which points to the demand and the interest in learning more. Before we talk about that Facebook group and what motivated you to create it, I would love to learn more, for our listeners about what the science of reading is and why it's important for teachers to know about it.

Pamela Kastner: Well, Jessica, I always defer to Dr. Louisa Moats, when I think about the science of reading, and I'll just share how she defines the science of reading. It's the emerging consensus from many related disciplines based on literally thousands of studies, supported by hundreds of millions of research dollars conducted across the world in many languages. Their studies have revealed a great deal about how we learn to read, what goes wrong when students don't learn to read, and what kind of instruction is most likely to work the best for most students.



Pamela Kastner: So Dr. Moats really, encapsulizes this settled science that she talks about sometimes in a sense that the research has been around for more than 40 years, we've known for a long time about the best methods for teaching reading, but, and speaking for myself and one of the reasons the Facebook group started, and Donna elaborate on is, I didn't learn this in college. I learned it through letters and it was such a revelation to me. And I always say as a national letters trainer as well, when I do train letters, I find teachers going through very similar processes that I did when I learned about the science of reading, almost like these seven stages of grief that this knowledge is kept from us. More than kept from us. We were taught the exact opposite. And so it's so important that teachers have many ways in which to be informed about the science of reading. And Donna will elaborate on how this Facebook group has really met that need in many ways.

Donna Hejtmanek: So for me, the science of reading is connecting research to practice. We don't hear about structured literacy teaching in an explicit, systematic, and sequential way. And we don't have that in schools. We're not taught that in our graduate or undergraduate work. And so when we get to the classroom, we look around and we go "Now, what? How do I do this? How do I teach reading?" At least that's my story of when I first got out of college, I called my mother up and I said, "How do you teach kids to read?" And she wasn't a teacher, but everyone calls their mom. And she said, "Well, you start with the sounds, you start with the letters." And that was really good advice, but I didn't know for 10 years what to do until I took training from Project Read from Minnesota. And it was like the biggest aha moment for me. And it changed my... It changed my career. It really did because then I had something to hang my hat on and say, "Hey, now I know what to do with these kids."



Pamela Kastner: There's no shame in not having known. There's a saying that has been going around for quite some time, when we know better, we do better, right?

Donna Hejtmanek: The craft of teaching, it's an art, but it's also a science. And so you have to combine the two to be effective and to be the best teacher you can be. And if you don't have the science behind you, when you're teaching, you may be leaving out some things that are necessary for development of all learners.

Jessica Hammond: Tell me a little bit about the Facebook page that you created, Donna.

Donna Hejtmanek: Sure. I'm the legislative chair for Wisconsin IDA and I often have to testify during legislative hearings. So after several hearings, I just said that I'm going to write a book and it's going to be called the Science of Reading: What I Should Have Learned in College. And last August, I'm sitting around and I'm looking at Facebook and I didn't even know what a Facebook group was and I'm looking on Facebook And I see, "Oh, look, there's these groups here. Oh, wow. Oh, this is easy. I can do this." I probably invited 20 people. And then people started joining and it just kept growing. And what we're seeing now is it's become a community that people feel safe there.



Jessica Hammond: Well, and I think one thing that seems really unique about the culture that you've cultivated in the forum is that it's very, very collaborative. And I've seen people sharing tools and tips and webinar links. And it really is a PLN. It's really a place where teachers can come to share what they know, admit if they don't know something and seek answers, or just explore in different ways and share tools.

Donna Hejtmanek: And I tell people that you will get so much support on this site from so many members. It astonishes me when I see 40, 50, 60, 70 comments on one post, one question. The members out there are willing to give so much of their time and expertise to share with others. One example that comes to mind, I just thought it was so cute. This one lady posted, "I need a lesson plan. What would that look like?" And someone just created it and gave it to her and said, "Here you go. I'll just make this for you." I mean, the generosity of our membership is just so overwhelming. It just makes me so out to see how generous teachers are, because that's part of our nature as teachers, to be nurturing. And so we see that in our Facebook members.

Jessica Hammond: And I think, you're hitting an interesting time too, because this is being recorded during the COVID pandemic, where a lot of schools are closed. And if they are open, a lot of teachers are not allowed to congregate and have those old chats in the lunchroom where they would share knowledge and share resources. So you may be tapping into a thirst for community that isn't being quenched in the live spaces.



Donna Hejtmanek: I feel like it's an extended family and I'm hoping others feel that way too. We want it to be a safe place to be.

Jessica Hammond: One important element of the Facebook group you guys created is that there's a host of expert moderators that oversee the chat and support discussion. So Pam, tell me a little bit about your role as moderator and how you bring your research backed knowledge to support the discussions happening in this forum.

Pamela Kastner: So there's eight of us. There's eight amazing moderators. So they bring so much to their moderation. We all, I think have different areas of expertise. So it's great to have... Not only do we have a community of learners and part of the Facebook group, but we have a community of learners with the moderators and with Donna too. So that makes it really powerful. I think that I use my experiences from all my work at PaTTAN to be accurate because you have to base your feedback on science, but you also have to remember your own self years ago. I'll reflect on myself maybe a year or two or three or four years from now and say, "Wow, I wish I would have known, or I could have helped someone better." So we're all on that journey. And I think I'll be on that journey until the day I die. So sharing that with others too saying, "Well, I've been where you are and I'm not finished."

Jessica Hammond: Well. And it seems like the fact that there are eight moderators, that was a very conscientious thing. I imagine that you created, and it



does make it a true learning experience. It's not a place where people come to kind of air grievances or display frustrations only, but it's clearly a place that is carefully monitored, watched by very experienced trainers and coaches. And that alone is an asset to our education community. Donna, can you tell me a little bit about how you thought through the role of moderating or how you came upon it?

Donna Hejtmanek: At the beginning, it was me. Again, I didn't know what I was doing. So it was a learning experience. It's a learning curve all the time. And as the group grew probably around 20,000, 23, 25,000, I thought, "You know what? This is crazy. I'm going to have to get some help." And so I started recruiting and it's amazing, the people just that volunteered and I vetted them according to their expertise. And I think we have a nice, well-rounded group of people that bring to the table all of their years of experience. And we have professors, Pam herself is an instructor. We have another instructor. We have just a wide range of people that come and bring their skills to the table. And like Pam said, this is a place where people feel safe and they come to get advice and so it's a great place to be. And so it's been a fun experience. I'm not done. I have lots of ideas of what we should be doing. We do lots of trainings. We're offering books studies now. It just keeps going on and on. So because there's so much work to be done.

Jessica Hammond: You had mentioned a little bit about the legislative work that you do. And I just... I think it's very interesting that the two of you and I imagine the other moderators as well span the experience of supporting students with dyslexia and reading difficulties from being a teacher yourself, from being trainers, from moderating



groups and PLNs all the way to pushing, supporting, and creating policy around what's happening with students. So it's kind of very global your experience. I think the policy work is sometimes unseen to educators, but oftentimes absolutely the wheels that kind of push along what they're doing. And it's a critical part of the work that is done in education. Can you tell us a little more about your work on the legislative front and what you've learned from it?

Pamela Kastner: I really want to point to the parents in terms of that legislative movement, because they are the ones who made the difference, not only in Pennsylvania, but many states. But when our legislators hear from parents whose children have struggled and their needs have not been met. And it's just perhaps because of course, as teachers, we just didn't know, right? We are moved by that because as Donna had said earlier, it's not only the academic outcomes that are influenced by not being able to read well and accurately it's emotionally impactful and impacts their entire life. And so when I think about our legislative work, I really want to not only not call out my work specifically, but the work of parents, and then that's where our legislation started in Pennsylvania. It started with some very committed parents and it continues as well.

Donna Hejtmanek: Well, in Wisconsin, we've been challenged. Our legislation has not moved forward. We just passed one bill for a non-binding dyslexia handbook. That's our first entry into the world of dyslexia. We are having even difficulty having the word dyslexia in the title for the handbook. So it's been challenging that way, but we stuck to our guns and that's how the bill was written and that's how the bill was passed. So we have a committees that are working on that. So we're hoping that will come out within the next two years. Our legislative



session will start next January. So we're going to be writing some new legislation. We would like to get some early screening that is a little more beefier than what we have now, which is very limited. We want... We'd love to have some teacher training. We would love to have it infused into... Maybe the IDA standards infused into the teacher training programs.

Donna Hejtmanek: So we've got... We had eight bills on the table and we just ran out of time. So we're talking about revisiting those. Our decoding dyslexia here in Wisconsin is pretty strong and gaining momentum. That's really important. IDA is getting stronger to gain gaining momentum. Again, Wisconsin has a history of pushback on any sort of legislation for just basic core instruction using the science of reading or for identifying and recognizing dyslexia. So it's... We were one of the last four states to have any legislation at all. So it's been very, very challenging.

Jessica Hammond: Well, and I think you point to all the intricacies of the details of the legislation and what was passed and what wasn't passed. And I think it's a great opportunity to point teachers to get to know what their legislation is within their own state. And then take a look at the legislation in other states too, because some are more robust in supporting guidance for literacy instruction or requiring certain types of literacy instruction, requiring certain type of assessments and others are less robust. But when you take a look of it at it all as kind of globally, you get a better sense of what we're aiming for. And it's really important that teachers become aware of the legislative element of this and how it guides, what they do in their classroom.



Donna Hejtmanek: Yeah, that's for sure.

Jessica Hammond: So in closing, I'm just curious what your plans are moving forward for the Facebook group or beyond. It's clear that you've managed to get a group of educators really kind of working in community together. And I'm curious how you're going to support them, or if you have any ideas for supporting them in the future.

Donna Hejtmanek: That's a great question. I've had to really sit back and reflect on where we're heading and how we're going to get there, and what we're going to do. This is... I'm supposed to be retired but I've just been really consumed with this project, just because the need is so great. And I've just really taken it on. And I feel like I want to conquer the world and do what has to be done, but it's not a... I have to remember, it's a journey and we're not in a race and I have to pace myself because I can easily burn out. But what I'm thinking about is eventually maybe getting some sort of national organization. I like to call our science of reading the mothership. We've had other Facebook groups created from them.

Donna Hejtmanek: And there's two of them that are pretty... That stand out in my mind. One is the Science of Reading for Administrators, what my teachers would want me to know that one just started. And the other one is Training Reading Rocket Scientists by Dr. Stoler. She started that, Stephanie Stoler. And that one really is intriguing to me because there's a group of individuals there. They're all



professors that are teaching and we're getting together just to discuss some strategies of what we can do to promote the science of reading at universities and colleges beyond the small schools that are taking it on. There's a lot of small schools that are doing it, but we would like the major universities to start embracing it and taking it on. And how do we go about doing that?

Donna Hejtmanek: So those are two groups that really intrigue me. We've had other science of reading states form their own chapters, so their own Facebook page. So that's great. But again, I think I have to really think really hard about how I'm going to do this, because this is a massive undertaking. But I think it's well worth it. And so with the help of my moderators and other people... What I find so great about the Facebook page is that there are so many people on there that are very dedicated to this mission. We have lots of professor researchers, the top names in the field that are on this page and I'm honored and I'm humbled that they're part of it. And I know I can count on any one of them, any one of them to help out in any way. So that's been very comforting to me, but I think as we keep growing the sky's the limit as to what we can do. I really believe that.

Jessica Hammond: Well, I'm really glad that that one day you decided to press the group button because it's had an impact and it will continue. So thank you for being the catalyst that started this community.

Donna Hejtmanek: You're welcome.



Jessica Hammond: To learn more about this Facebook group, visit [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) and check out Science of Reading: What I Should Have Learned in College. Thank you to you both for joining us on the podcast today.

Pamela Kastner: Thank you.

Donna Hejtmanek: Thank you so much.

Jessica Hammond: Thanks for listening to Glean's Research to Practice Podcast. If you're interested in learning more, head over to gleaneducation.com to listen to more episodes, access teacher resources, and join the movement to make in-service teacher education more dynamic and accessible. Bye for now.

