Triple R Teaching

We're continuing our Change Maker Series today with a conversation with Donna Hejtmanek. She was in education for decades and as she retired, she found herself in a whole new world, the world of a giant Facebook group. It started out small, the "Science of Reading-What I Should Have Learned in College," and grew very quickly because there are many of us who did not learn what we wish we had learned in college about how reading works and how best to teach reading. That group has become a major source of learning for hundreds of thousands of teachers. Let's get started.

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Donna!

Donna Hejtmanek: Thank you, Anna. Thanks for having me!

Anna Geiger: So you are head of the wildly popular "Science of Reading-What I Should Have Learned in College" Facebook group, and we're going to talk today about that group and how you can use it to reach people who maybe are still learning about the science of reading.

We're going to start by going back in time. If you could talk to us about how you got into teaching and then bring us up to why you decided to start that group.

Donna Hejtmanek: Teaching is one of those careers I think that either you want to do it or you don't, and I always wanted to do it. I was just like, "I want to be a teacher."

Although I have to say when I said, "I'm just going to be a teacher's aide. I really want to be an aide," there was a friend of mine whose mom said to me, "Oh no, you don't want to be an aide. You want to be the teacher."

And I said, "Oh, okay." I think it was a confidence thing. I didn't think I had the confidence to be the head of the classroom.

I went to college and that was my focus, and I went for special education. That was my first degree. I think back at that time it was called Educable Mentally Handicapped, EMH degree, back then. So that's where I got my start.

My first teaching classroom was on a naval base in North Chicago. I had a trailer for a classroom outside of the school. It was a classic special ed, keep the kids outside the building I guess, type of thing. So that was my entryway into education.

I taught for a total of thirty-five years in the public schools and six years as a private tutor. I took six years off to be an at-home mom.

My career spanned high school through elementary. My high school career was as a transition specialist, which is getting kids that are special ed kids to the world of work, or the world of school beyond high school. That was an interesting experience; I did that for about seven years.

I also worked for the state of Wisconsin in helping with their transition program, which actually was my gateway into meeting people in Wisconsin when I moved to Wisconsin. I got to know people in the science of reading world, the movers and shakers, Steve Dykstra, Mary Newton, those folks, the backbone of change in Wisconsin.

I started working with those folks, and what you bring to the table helps you develop who you are and who you become, and that's exactly what happened to me. I came to Wisconsin just to work and live, and then I started getting involved in all of the science of reading movement because I had been trained, back in the late eighties, in Orton-Gillingham.

When I got out of college, I didn't know how to teach kids to read. It was basically basils, and it really wasn't that effective when you're looking back on it. Now I see the value of that Orton-Gillingham training, I finally felt like I knew what I was doing.

I was ten years into my career at that point, so a lot of kids had passed through me and I still didn't know what I was doing, and who knows what happened to them. After getting that training, I felt like I had something to sink my teeth into and help kids.

When I came to Wisconsin, I knew there was something that teachers needed to know. That's when all this brain research started coming out and we had better ways to teach reading. I arrived in Wisconsin in '04 and started volunteering for a nonprofit organization called the Literacy Task Force of Wisconsin, and our mission was to train teachers and lay people in evidence-based approaches.

In 2018, the year I retired, I was appointed to a committee that was called the Dyslexia Study Committee. What came out of that study committee were two bills, one never went anywhere, but the other one created a Dyslexia Guidebook for Wisconsin.

It was met with extreme opposition from our State Reading Association; they didn't even want the word dyslexia in it. And so in order to get that legislation passed, there were lots and lots of hearings. I was testifying at one of the hearings in the State Senate Education Committee, and I remember clearly talking to the senators and saying, "I have to write a book one day and it's going to be The Science of Reading-What I Should Have Learned in College."

The next week I was sitting at home looking at my own Facebook site, and I realized there was this thing called groups. I had no idea, and that was four years ago! I clicked on and I'm like, "Hmm, this looks pretty easy. I think I can do this."

That thing about not learning this in college really, really resonated with me because I had gone through one of the UW programs in Wisconsin in order to get my reading certificate, I had to have it for the job that I had. My final job was as a Title I Interventionist, but I needed a reading certificate for that.

So I went to a UW school, got everything online, and it was a complete program based on Reading Recovery. This whole thing was Reading Recovery basically. If you ask my husband, those were the two most painful years of my life. It was bad for me and it was probably worse for him because he had to listen to me!

I got through that, $7000 later, and realized that this still exists, this non-coursework that does not lead to any advanced knowledge of using the science at all! What a waste of time! When you're a reading specialist, you are the last straw for these kids. You're the last stop, those kids need you. If you can't give them what they need, they're out of luck, basically.

We have to have teachers, knowledgeable teachers, teachers who know the science, teachers who have resources, teachers who can do very good diagnostic work and

prescribe the best intervention for that student. If we don't, we're failing those kids. We NEED to be learning this in college. It just has to happen.

Anna Geiger: So I think the big question for a lot of people is, how do I share this with people who are resistant to it? We're seeing the resistance still in some colleges and then also state groups like you mentioned. What, in your opinion, is causing that resistance?

Donna Hejtmanek: Oh, lots of things. In schools of education and professors in education, and I don't want to make this a general statement but overall, there are many individuals who when they get to the level of being a professor, may think, "I learned it. I learned everything I needed to learn in my schooling, and now I'm the person that needs to instruct."

Whether that training involved science-based reading intervention information, it doesn't matter. They will teach whatever they are familiar with and comfortable with. You only can teach what you know. So if they're not learning that in their studies, they can't pass that on to the teachers that they work with.

I think there are some egos involved there where people are having difficulty accepting that they may not have learned everything they needed to learn.

Change is very hard.

I think part of it is lack of understanding of what the science is telling us, and so they're not willing to either understand it or embrace it. I'm not sure what causes that in individuals, but it's very much alive and well.

Even school districts and administrators, if they don't have an understanding, then they can't make good choices for curriculum.

I mean, it's just this complete cycle of failure on everyone's part to move things forward. If you don't know, and you're not willing to learn, then you're going to stay stuck in where you're at.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, and I think fear, like you said, is a big part of it. For me it was, although I don't think I would've admitted that.

For one thing, like you said, I was taught a certain way, especially in grad school, and so I held onto that because I TRUSTED these people that taught me this. I mean, they were confident in what they were saying, so to turn my back on that wasn't something I was even willing to consider, at least at first.

Then also as I started to learn more about it, it was definitely a fear, "If I dip my toe into this water, how much do I have to let go of? How much do I have to take back? How much of what I did was wrong?"

There is a fear that everything you thought was true is wrong, and that's usually not the case. Mostly it's understanding the basics, how reading works in the brain and how learning works, and then you can build off of that.

Donna Hejtmanek: Exactly.

Anna Geiger: But yeah, I think it's fear. I think we have to figure out ways to share with people in a way that doesn't play off of fears, but shows maybe what we have in common. We have to go back to the beginning.

When you started your Facebook group, how did it catch on initially? Did it grow quickly from the get-go, or what's your perspective on that and why it caught on?

Donna Hejtmanek: It grew like crazy! I will never forget, I was sitting in my living room and every day I reported to my husband, "There are another couple hundred people! It's a thousand people! It's two thousand people!" I had no idea.

Then people were telling me, "Facebook groups don't grow that way. They don't grow that fast. This is like a phenomenon." What did I know? I didn't even know there were Facebook groups, so it's all new to me.

What happened was I really think the title spoke to people, it certainly spoke to me, and it was the truth. I mean, I was just being brutally honest, we didn't learn this in college,

so I guess people were intrigued maybe by the title and came to it for that reason.

If they were at a conference, the organizers or the speaker at the conference would say, "Hey, and if you haven't heard, join this group, blah, blah, blah," and I think that's how it started spreading.

Anna Geiger: So when people started sharing in that group initially, what were the things you were hearing the most that people were struggling with or had questions about?

Donna Hejtmanek: Basically, what is it? What's the science telling us? What should we be doing?

Anna Geiger: When you see people that are new to the group, what are they asking?

Donna Hejtmanek: The same thing. It amazes me, I shouldn't be amazed by it, but it does amaze me, that we get new members all the time, five or six hundred a week, and it's the same story, "I'm new to the science of reading, where do I start?"

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Someone just did that the other day, and I responded because I totally knew what she was talking about. She went to grad school in the early 2000s, which is when I did. She said she followed all these people, and she listed all the people who I followed in the books I read. She's like, "I don't know! What do I do now? Do I have to rethink everything?"

I talked about how it can feel like that, and mainly you just have to understand how reading works and how learning works, and then that's our foundation and we can build on that.

Donna Hejtmanek: That's right.

Anna Geiger: It's not so scary after that. Do you know, as of right now, about how many people are in it?

Donna Hejtmanek: I'm thinking 214,000? It might be more, I don't know.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. That's a lot of people. Of course, people are in there at different stages of their journey, so some people come in and ask a question, and some people are very helpful and other people are not very helpful.

When I first joined, I saw someone ask a question, and someone else just very much basically said, "You have no excuse for not having known this. Research has been around for forty years." It's unfortunate that there are people like that in the group. I feel like most people are encouraging, but that really turns some people off.

So maybe we can talk about best practices for answering people's questions in real life too, or helping people see that what they're doing maybe isn't the best.

Donna Hejtmanek: Social media gives people the courage to be rude, just rude. I don't know what that's all about. You bring up a good point because that's been a challenge of ours to keep people kind and considerate, and so we do a lot of monitoring of that. I don't understand human nature if they're getting ... And to hear a comment like that, there's no excuse.

There are professors all over the country and world who still believe that what they're teaching is absolutely correct. That's part of our big problem here is that the instructors that are producing thousands of teachers are still teaching it wrong.

Anna Geiger: Yes.

Donna Hejtmanek: That's our issue. It's like, "How do you stop that? How do you stop that pipeline?"

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Donna Hejtmanek: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: What would you say to a teacher who says, "I'm the only one of my staff who's interested in the science of reading, but I still have teachers using leveled books in kindergarten and doing running records. I don't know what to do. Nobody's interested in hearing this."

Donna Hejtmanek: Yeah. Oh, I hear that every day. So you can't control other people for sure, but the only one you can control is yourself. If you have found that you need to investigate a better way, then you need to arm yourself with that information. Do what you can in your classroom because that's the only thing you can control. Share the good results that you're going to get, and hopefully through those, you can influence people.

Most teachers are going to want to know what the neighbor's doing, if the neighbor is getting better results than they are. If you can show that you're getting better results with what you're doing, then that's all in your favor.

It's a human nature thing, right? You have to really tiptoe around and do what you can without being aggressive. It's not easy, but it can be done. You just have to believe what you're doing is the right thing for your kids.

Just keep working it in a kind way, in a non-threatening way, showing your data, saying this is what I'm doing, and see what happens.

I've known teachers who have done that, and it doesn't matter what they're doing and showing good results, it's still falling on deaf ears.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, I know that's hard for teachers because, of course, everybody wants to see everybody see the light and make a shift immediately. Unfortunately, that's not how change works.

I think another tricky thing is when you think about showing data, they have to be using the right measuring tool, which the other teachers might not be using. If you're with teachers who are using the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark, your students in kindergarten may not show the same growth on that assessment because that assessment's measuring how well they do with three-queuing, basically...

Donna Hejtmanek: That's right.

Anna Geiger: ...and you're not teaching that.

Donna Hejtmanek: Right.

Anna Geiger: So helping other teachers to see that the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment doesn't really tell us very much, and there are good articles that you could share about that. Matt Burns has talked about that quite a bit, explaining what research has told us about how those measures really don't even predict in a reliable way who's going to be successful with reading. You can talk about how Acadiance, or DIBELS 8, or something like that is research-based and those benchmarks are predictive.

I've shared a free training with schools who have asked me to called, "Why I Embraced the Science of Reading After Twenty Years in Balanced Literacy." I've given it to different schools.

There was one school where I basically felt like I was talking to myself because I couldn't see anybody, and I really didn't know how it was landing at all. Afterwards the teachers that headed it up said, "Oh, people loved it. They said it was the best PD they've had. They were really excited. It was one step in their movement." It was not the only thing, they'd been educating their teachers, and this was a piece of that.

There was another school where a leader was interested and I shared it, and the teachers were cleaning their classrooms while I was doing it. Nobody was paying attention. So it was very much like, this is somebody else's idea, and they weren't interested.

Donna Hejtmanek: It's true.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. It's hard because you can't just force something on people.

I don't know how many schools do book studies, but Lindsay Kemeny's new book, "7 Mighty Moves" would be a really good one because it's very teacher friendly. It's a beautiful book, and teachers like beautiful books. It's short, and it's not judgmental. I

think somebody who was on the balanced literacy train could look at that book and still want to read it because it's very practical.

I think that might be a first step, starting with a short book like that and then discussing the chapters would be a good thing.

Maybe you could talk about how you use the group to point people to PD and other things.

Donna Hejtmanek: So not even a year after the Facebook group got started, one of the members said, "Let's do a book study!"

I'm like, "Ohhhh, that's so much work," and I didn't really want to do it.

Well anyway, we ended up doing a book study on David Kilpatrick's, not the "Essentials" book, the other one, his ...

Anna Geiger: "Equipped For Reading Success."

Donna Hejtmanek: Yes, that one. And it was wildly popular, just wildly popular.

I thought, "Okay."

Then the next thing I did was a book study for Dr. Susan Smartt and Dr. Hougen, their book. That was a ten-week commitment, but once I got into that, that was my second year, I thought, "You know what, this is what's bringing people to the page."

So I started finding people in PD. I try to focus a lot of the PD that I choose on things that teachers can sit and get, and take it to the classroom the next day. I feel like it's a service to teachers that are new to the science, and we charge very little, a nominal fee for that, and it's affordable for teachers. That's why we do it that way.

Anna Geiger: That is one of the big ways I use the group. I try to check in most days, or every couple of days, and I'm always looking for new workshops and things that people are sharing. Then what I do is I send myself a link to the video, and I put it in a folder in my Gmail to read or watch. Then usually on Fridays I start going through that.

If teachers are wondering how to keep track of these things, that might be a good practice, just to put it in a folder and then you can take a look at it when you have time. Because even if you don't feel like you're moving the needle at your school, I just find that the more you know, which you keep learning more when you're hearing these people say the same things over and over in a different way, then the more you're ready to talk about and answer questions that people have.

Donna Hejtmanek: That's true.

Anna Geiger: And the more educated you are, the more educated you'll sound, and that's more convincing to people too.

Donna Hejtmanek: And it gives you more confidence in what you're doing.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Donna Hejtmanek: And this is not a one and done thing, right? We all can go to conferences. Even though you might be considered the expert, you're not the expert because there's SO much to know. And research is always evolving, and so there's so much new stuff that's coming out.

Anna Geiger: Exactly.

Donna Hejtmanek: That's something that you need to consider, and so just go and take in knowledge. This business of education and being an educator should not be a one and done thing. When you get out of college, that's just the tip of the iceberg, right? There's so much to learn.

Anna Geiger: Thanks for saying that, because that is so true! I know people maybe

would like to know that they could just learn the science of reading and be done with it, but because it's science, of course there are constantly things being added or new approaches that are maybe more efficient that would be beneficial to learn about.

Donna Hejtmanek: It's true.

Anna Geiger: What are the ways that you keep your toes in? Are there specific journals or anything that you follow in particular that helps you stay aware of what's new?

Donna Hejtmanek: Sure. I try to keep up with The Reading League Journal and things like that. There's a site that has current research that comes out. Neena, I forgot her last name.

Anna Geiger: Saha.

Donna Hejtmanek: Saha. Yeah, she has a service where you can get current research sent to you every month.

You can watch webinars and that sort of thing, because again, it's professional development. Every time you watch something you're like, "Ah, I never thought of it that way!" There's so much to learn, so much to learn. I go to conferences once in a while and things like that.

Anna Geiger: I think for me, when I finally embraced the science of reading, that was so exciting to me because I thought I knew balanced literacy, but there's only so far you can go with balanced literacy because a lot of it's just the structures like getting used to reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. But there wasn't a lot of depth to it.

Donna Hejtmanek: Exactly. It's kind of like, there's nowhere to go from there.

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Donna Hejtmanek: I mean, it is what it is, right? With the science, you're always being diagnostic and prescriptive, and so there's so much depth to it. There really is.

Anna Geiger: There is, and yet there's also really good ways to learn about it without feeling like you're drowning.

What are your specific recommendations for people who are new?

Donna Hejtmanek: Take it slow. We put out a welcome letter to new members. Our welcome letter has what I feel are gateway pieces of information, webinars, and resources that will kind of get you started. There are just so many different webinars out there that, or even podcasts, that are so informative. Again, like you say, just take those bits of information and start putting pieces together.

If you really want to dip your toes in, you had mentioned "7 Mighty Moves" or "Shifting the Balance" by Jan Burkins and Kari Yates, even though there's some controversy over that one, that it didn't go far enough. It certainly came from the perspective of someone who, like yourself, didn't know about the science.

These are two authors, Burkins and Yates, who realized, "Okay, there's more to this. There's another way." And you want to talk about fear, their whole first chapter is about the fear and the intimidation and the vulnerability of starting this new process and what that all entails. And so for that purpose alone, it is worth reading that book because it really helps teachers who are hesitant, reluctant, and threatened. They do it with such grace. You feel validated.

Anna Geiger: I also think you can start with a book like that, which is just getting yourself into the water, and the more you read, the more those harder books are going to make sense to you.

I know when I first started, I was trying to read "The Comprehension Blueprint" by Nancy Hennessy, which was recommended by lots of people. Actually I also tried to read Mark Seidenberg's "Language at the Speed of Sight."

Donna Hejtmanek: Oh, that's a tough one.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. It always surprises me when people are like, "That's the first book you should read!"

I'm like, "What?" Or that you should read "Reading in the Brain" by Stanislas Dehaene, as your first book. I got both of those, and they sat on my shelf for a couple of years because I just couldn't make sense of them. But once I had lots of background knowledge and a lot under my belt, I could read those books and understand most of them.

Donna Hejtmanek: Exactly.

Anna Geiger: It's good to recommend to people that are getting started, let's start easy. We don't have to scare people off by these books that really assume a lot of background knowledge that you might not have.

Donna Hejtmanek: Right.

Anna Geiger: But anyway, thank you so much for heading that group. I know it's got to be a huge endeavor. How many moderators do you have right now?

Donna Hejtmanek: I think we're up to twenty.

Anna Geiger: Yeah, that's a lot, because I know you approve the posts before they go out. Otherwise, you'd probably have SO many gazillions of posts about all sorts of random things...

Donna Hejtmanek: We do.

Anna Geiger: ...and it would be hard to be able to control it.

Donna Hejtmanek: Yeah, and we're trying to. I put a frequently asked questions

document together, which we're constantly updating. It's the same questions because our audience is the same people. They come to the group because they don't know, and so that's our mission is to enlighten them in a very kind way, a non-threatening way, and we hope we accomplish that. I know it's not always, but we try.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. I would encourage anyone who's listening, I would guess most people listening are already a part of that group, but if not, we'll certainly have a link to that group in the show notes, as well as to Neena Saha's place where you can learn more about research that she shares, and anything else we mentioned, including the books. Thank you so much, Donna. It was so nice to talk to you!

Donna Hejtmanek: You as well. Have a great day.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much for listening. You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode141. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching

episode of Triple R Teaching.