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THE SPALDING READING METHOD AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARY NORTH

Linda: Spalding Education International has been an oasis of research-based reading long before The National Reading Panel identified the components of successful instruction. Oasis is an apt description because Spalding Education International (SEI) is located in Phoenix, Arizona, on the edge of the Sonoran desert. From there, *The Spalding Method* has spread throughout the United States with outposts in Australia, New Zealand and South America.

Unlike the big publishing houses that embraced each reading fad as it came along, SEI stayed true to the mission of its founder, master teacher/author Romalda Spalding, preserving and spreading *The Spalding Method*. Those familiar with Spalding, know that it is a total language arts program, teaching spelling (with handwriting), reading and composition. However, Spalding is not as well known as it should be, given its wonderful results. So why the low profile? Dr. Mary North, Spalding's Director of Research and Development, has agreed to answer that and other questions about the Method and SEI.

Mary: When Romalda Spalding was in her 80s and still actively teaching teachers, school administrators grew concerned about what would happen to *The Method* after her death. With her collaboration, they set about creating an organization to preserve and perpetuate the method she had devoted her life to teaching. Spalding Education International is a non-profit organization because Mrs. Spalding's primary focus was always on keeping costs low so *The Spalding Method* would be available to anyone who needed it. As per her instructions, everything SEI earns is plowed back into developing and updating courses, creating needed instructional materials and, of course, funding staff and office. There is little money left over for promotion.

Linda: Word of mouth has spread the good news about Spalding, but literacy would take a great leap forward if Spalding was better known. When I started teaching Spalding, I bought *The Writing Road to Reading (WRTR)*, text for *The Spalding Method*, and the phonogram cards and that was all there was. I see that you have more instructional materials now. Is that to increase market penetration? Tell me what changes you have made since WRTR was first published in 1957 and why you have made them.

Mary: *The Writing Road To Reading*, is in its fifth revised edition, making it the longest continuously published textbook in the history of HarperCollins. Much has changed in education since Mrs. Spalding wrote her book, and not for the better. She did not go into great detail because she assumed a background knowledge that, for the most part, is no longer taught to teachers or students. The 5th revised edition makes explicit the knowledge base, insights and classroom techniques that were inferred in earlier editions, making the Method easier to teach and to learn. The revisions made to Spalding teacher courses are designed to do the same thing. So, in answer to your question, the revisions and new materials are to help those who teach Spalding and, by doing that, expand our outreach.

Linda: I was introduced to *The Spalding Method* in the book, [*Turning Back the Tide of Illiteracy*](#) by Marguerite Field Hoerl, so I ordered *The Writing Road to Reading*. In our local library I found an old book, by Mr. and Mrs. Spalding; a guide to teaching oneself the method. I studied both books carefully, then followed their suggestion to study the WRTR for at least 40 hours before attempting to teach it. In addition, I (as teacher) led myself (as student) in making the spelling notebook. Only then did I begin teaching my high school special education students. When I finally was able to take a Spalding course, and even though I had carefully studied the books and followed them as best I could, I was stunned at the amount of additional information and new skills that I gained during the course. I soon realized that I had learned more -- not only about the teaching of reading, but about teaching in general -- in that two week course than during all of my "teaching methods courses" at university. I returned to my classroom prepared and confident that my teens *would* finally learn to read. How do other teachers respond to the courses and content?

Mary: Teachers who take the courses find them enormously helpful and often ask why this information was not part of their personal or professional preparation. SEI provides two 45-hour courses for teachers as well as on-site follow-up. The courses are aligned with the 5th edition of WRTR and are now called Integrated Language Arts 1 and ILA 2.

Linda: I see on your web page that you have added courses for parents.

Mary: Yes, *Spalding for Home Educators* is new this year. It is offered in two parts. Part 1 (15 hours) focuses on basic skills needed for teaching kindergarten through grade 2. Part 2 (15 hours) expands instruction to grade 3 and above. Although we have had many requests over the years for such a course, it has been surprisingly difficult to launch. Home educators are a loose-knit group not easily reached with information. Some home educator sites link to our web site and we welcome others to do so. Frankly, we need help to spread the message that we will offer the course anywhere we have an available instructor and 10 or more parents who want to take it. The details are on our web page www.spalding.org

Speaking of our web page, we have added a forum for teachers and home educators to submit any questions they may have about teaching Spalding. A qualified staff member will usually be able to answer within 24 hours.

Linda: What is the difference between *Spalding for Home Educators* and *A Parent Introduction to Spalding*, your other parent course?

Mary: The 10-hour *Parent Introduction* is for parents of children in schools where Spalding is taught. It is less detailed since they are not the primary educators of their children. Principals and teachers love the interaction between home and school that the course fosters, and parents are delighted to know how to help their children at home.

Linda: What about the other instructional materials I see on your web page. Tell me about them.

Mary The K-6 Teachers Guides are a response to requests from both home educators and classroom teachers for more direction. The Guides are designed to be used in conjunction with the 5th revised edition of WRTR. In addition to providing guidance for lesson planning, the guides elaborate on lesson delivery, assessment and evaluation and contain many tips for more effective teaching. Another reason for the Guides was to meet state and local textbook adoption committee expectations. Teacher Guides have become an industry standard and adoption committees have a hard time understanding a program that doesn't provide them.

Linda: You added something called a *Word Analysis CD* this year. What is that?

Mary: All words listed in sections A-Z of *The Writing Road to Reading* have been analyzed to expedite lesson planning. The CD can be used to sort words by rules, parts of speech, spelling lists, and syllable patterns, all categories needed for teaching the week's spelling/vocabulary words. Teachers and parents tell us it saves a great deal of time.

Linda: That sounds really useful. What else is in the pipeline?

Mary: A couple of things. In response to home educators' requests for decodables aligned to Spalding phonogram introduction, 8 Kindergarten decodable reader will be available for the 2008-09 school year. They are specifically written to provide phonogram practice. These handsomely illustrated readers, used with WRTR and the Guide, will be introduced at weekly intervals, beginning with week eight. They will incorporate the phonograms taught that week, along with those already taught. The complete set will include 8 narratives, 8 informatives and 4 informative-narratives. They will also be sold individually. Providing nascent readers with books is important. Their excitement over being able to read a real book is wonderful to behold. In addition, we believe the decodables will help with textbook adoption committees who have frequently cited our lack of readers as a reason for rejecting *The Spalding Method*.

Linda: And after Kindergarten?

Mary: First grade decodables are in the planning stage. Mrs. Spalding said children have no need for special readers after first grade. They can read the good literature recommended in WRTR. We provide a grade level reading list and leave it to the teacher or parent to select appropriate books.

Linda: I read in *The Spalding News* that you are engaged in a research study. What is that all about?

Mary: This research project is a four-year study by Arizona State University to establish the efficacy of *The Spalding Method*. We have plenty of evidence that Spalding-taught children progress faster and have higher test scores than students taught by other language arts programs, but we need the kind of scientific study outlined in NCLB. So far we are delighted with the Kindergarten and first grade results. We publish each year's report in *The Spalding News* and on the Internet as it becomes available.

Linda: That is exciting, but not surprising. Spalding has been my best tool for remediating reading problems in older, discouraged students. I even used Spalding at the local jail, where I was forced to do some of the fastest instruction ever! Since the turnover in a local jail is great, I usually had new students arrive, and others leave, each week. Since I was only allowed in one evening a week, I targeted spelling with rapid testing/teaching/testing. I now use Spalding at the university level, putting my freshman composition classes through rapid remediation in handwriting and spelling before we move on to developing higher skills for using the three types of writing. Now tell me a little about yourself.

Mary: I am here because of the amazing progress my 7th grade remedial students made with Spalding. That was some 30 years ago when as a new teacher, I was desperate to help my students. On the advice of a friend, whose son had been tutored with Spalding, I bought the book. I taught my students and myself almost simultaneously. The results were amazing. My colleagues wanted to know what I knew that they didn't. The word got around and the

administration asked me to bring Mrs. Spalding in to teach other teachers. One thing led to another and Spalding was eventually adopted district-wide.

Linda: And you retired from the district and went to work for Spalding?

Mary: It was about that time that my administrator asked me to assist with the creation of what is now called SEI. Mrs. Spalding brought her nephew, Warren North, to Phoenix to help. Warren had just retired from NASA where he had been involved in the selection of the first seven astronauts. Knowing that improving literacy was the key to improving education, he agreed to serve as president. We met and the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

Linda: You were obviously in the right place at the right time. I envy you! I assume, because of your last name, that Spalding served as Cupid in introducing you and your husband. What about the rest of your staff? How many are there, by the way?

Mary: There are 11 of us.

Linda: Only 11? The big publishing houses have departments bigger than your whole crew.

Mary: We are all dedicated to perpetuating *The Spalding Method* and have become very good at multi-tasking! We need to keep expenses down to keep doing what we do. The research study, as important as it is to the future of Spalding, is an enormous drain on our budget. It required that we identify five experimental schools and provide all the training and materials they need at our expense. Finding control schools with matched populations was a big investment in staff time and effort as well. Of course, the real key to Spalding success is the highly motivated cadre of Spalding Teachers and the Spalding Teacher Instructors who teach our courses. They are the real future of Spalding. Seven of them serve with me on the Curriculum Development Committee. The Committee wrote the 5th revision of WRTR, and designed the Guides and our other instructional materials. All committee members are Spalding Certified, some, like me, by Mrs. Spalding herself.

Linda: Those of us who have been Spalding partisans over the years have wondered how your organization survived whole language and the other fads that periodically blow through colleges of education and into elementary school classrooms. It cannot have been easy.

Mary: It wasn't. My class of 7th grade remedial children, most of whom read below a fourth grade level, were the flesh and blood victims of those fads. Finding Spalding was the answer to my prayers. At the time, I didn't know why it worked. It was enough for me that it did. Later, I wanted to know why. I read the research and I got my doctorate because I thought that having higher credentials would help me persuade others of the need for research-based instruction. Much later, the National Reading Panel studied the research and concluded that successful reading instruction requires certain components, phonemic awareness and phonics key among them. Those of us in the trenches said "at last."

Then, when NCLB passed, the big publishing houses turned on a dime, sprinkled a little phonics holy water over whole language, and claimed to be "phonics based." After being shunned for teaching phonics all those years, Spalding suddenly had a bunch of well-financed competitors. Who said, "Be careful what you wish for!?" Yet, as you noted, despite everything, Spalding has persevered. I wish you could read the grateful letters from parents and teachers. They are the reason that we work on. We are continually reminded of the

difference Spalding makes in children's lives. Speaking of that, the friend who told me about Spalding is now editor of *The Spalding News*. When she retired from *The Phoenix Gazette*, where she was an editorial writer, I asked her to come to work for SEI. Because of her experience with her son, she felt it was something she had to do. Her son had been in a dreadful first grade reading program and thought that reading was a mystery he would never solve. After a summer of Spalding tutoring, he was reading and loving it. He couldn't believe it could be so easy. He asked his tutor, "Are you sure this is all there is to it?" And "Does everyone know this?" 35 years later, we are still working on it.

Linda: Thank you, Dr. Mary North, for giving me, and my readers, so much of your time. I hope that all parents, whether homeschooling their children, or not, will do much reading and learning at the [*Spalding Education International*](#) website.