

Back Page: Reading and Believing

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David Rapp leads the [Reading Comprehension Lab](#) at Northwestern University, where he is a professor in the School of Education and Social Policy and in the Department of Psychology, as well as a Charles Deering McCormick Professor of Teaching Excellence.

How did your upbringing inform your academic journey?



David Rapp, Northwestern University

Everyone in my family worked nonstop. My grandparents worked in factories (often in very dangerous conditions), and my mom worked in an office. Because of their experiences, and the opportunities they didn't have when they were young, they hoped (and expected) I would take on school subjects and find a career that was intellectually rewarding. They also encouraged me to seek out opportunities that involved supporting people, believing the key to a better life meant helping and being helped by others. That was a big influence on me, and it's something I think about in my research activities by asking questions like "How can this project speak to the challenges people are facing?" and "Can these theories and findings be applied in practical ways?"

What led to your interest in investigating learning and knowledge failures?

I became a voracious reader as a young kid, picking up paperbacks, graphic novels, whatever was around. My first consistent job was at a public library, and I started thinking about texts, authors, genres; about why some stories worked for me and some didn't; how some ideas are stated clearly while others less coherently; and the kinds of decisions that authors, journalists, and even editors might contemplate in preparing their work. My career has allowed me to consider these questions empirically. In graduate school I also began to think about how people possess rich understandings and literacy practices but sometimes seem to exhibit behaviors that suggest those understandings and practices are being

downplayed or ignored. This led to my specific interests in identifying when and why people might fall victim to inaccurate information—or, conversely, when they might take up ideas to engage effectively with the world. These investigations connect with contemporary concerns about [fake news](#), information dissemination, the influence of social media, and other theoretically and practically important issues linked to misinformation.

What interventions can help mitigate the effects of exposure to inaccuracies?

My lab and other research groups have seen success when people are encouraged and motivated to interrogate ideas, which could mean explicitly evaluating what they read and hear about, cross-checking across different sources to confirm claims and accounts. Overcoming the influence of inaccurate information involves not just reducing exposure to it but taking into account people's dispositions and their discourse practices. My lab examines how the routine cognitive processes associated with learning can contribute to the influence of inaccurate information, and also seeks to determine the ways literacy experiences, text supports, instructional designs, personality characteristics, and learning contexts guide our comprehension.

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How can interventions succeed even when readers' beliefs appear to be entrenched?

That's the million-dollar question. People's confidence about what they think they know and understand can prevent them from engaging with sources that run counter to what they believe is true. Changing what people know and believe necessitates connecting with broader systems of knowledge. This includes understanding how people's beliefs connect with their identities and support communities. My work in the learning sciences also examines how people's understandings are made up of constellations of ideas, which suggests that knowledge revision often requires confronting interconnected belief systems rather than compartmentalized claims. The hope is that even the most strongly entrenched beliefs might at least be called into modest question when people are supportively motivated to think about them.

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