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The purpose of IDA is to pursue and provide the most comprehensive range of information and services that address the full scope of dyslexia and related difficulties in learning to read and write...

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The International Dyslexia Association (IDA) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, scientific and educational organization dedicated exclusively to the study and treatment of the specific language disability known as dyslexia. We have been serving individuals with dyslexia, their families, and professionals in the field for over 55 years. IDA was first established to continue the pioneering work of Samuel T. Orton, M.D., in the study and treatment of dyslexia.

IDA’s membership is comprised of people with dyslexia and their families, educators, diagnosticians, physicians, and other professionals in the field. The headquarters office in Baltimore, Maryland is a clearinghouse of valuable information and provides information and referral services to thousands of people every year. IDA’s Annual Conference attracts thousands of outstanding researchers, clinicians, parents, teachers, psychologists, educational therapists, and people with dyslexia.

IDA supports efforts to provide individuals with dyslexia with appropriate instruction and to identify these individuals at an early age. IDA believes that multisensory teaching and learning is the best approach currently available for those affected by dyslexia.

While IDA is pleased to present a forum for presentations, advertising, and exhibiting to benefit those with dyslexia and related learning disabilities, it is not IDA’s policy to recommend or endorse any specific program, product, speaker, exhibitor, institution, company, or instructional material, noting that there are a number of such which present the critical components of instruction as defined by IDA.
A parachute is of no value without a harness and a rip cord. How is RTI like a parachute? Well, it doesn’t work unless all the components are in place and used correctly. If RTI doesn’t work, it is not because the concept is faulty.

I wrote “RTI and Reading: Response to Intervention in a Nutshell” (Dickman, 2006) to show the simplicity of the concept. Now I am going to indicate that, although the concept is simple, its implementation is challenging. RTI requires that we rethink how and why we do what we do.

Informed Times 3: When we look at educational intervention or remediation, effective instruction requires a minimum of three elements: 1) an informed program, delivered by 2) an informed instructor, in 3) an informed environment. For instance, a wonderful program is of no value if the instructor is not sufficiently trained to deliver it as intended, with fidelity to design. And no matter how good the program and the instructor may be, instruction has limited value if it is not delivered with sufficient intensity and duration with due consideration given to frequency and length of sessions, homogeneity of grouping, and location.

Prevention: As I and many others have written ad nauseam for many years, the aptitude/achievement formula used by most states to identify children for special education and related services is an immoral, wait to fail model that does immeasurably more harm to children than the presumed administrative convenience that it appears to provide. The benefit is not remotely sufficient to justify the cost. RTI can help by minimizing the failure experienced by those who have a deficit that has not yet matured to a disability.

Deficit versus Disability: It is necessary to distinguish between intervention and remediation as well as deficit and disability. RTI provides intervention intended to address an identified deficit that places a child at risk for failing to develop a functional ability. For the student with dyslexia, RTI provides intervention as soon as a deficit in the phonological component of language is identified. If we view an identified deficit as a marker that places a child at risk for developing a disability, then RTI is a preventative measure. Intervention prevents remediation cures.

Scaling: We all recognize that good teachers instinctively use an RTI approach in their classrooms. They identify who is in need and provide extra help with increasing intensity until the intervention provided is effective or the teacher recognizes that the student’s needs exceed her or his ability. However, scaling what is done in the classroom for implementation in the entire grade, building, district, and state requires the institutionalization of a process that is replicable and reliable.

Each step in the RTI process (i.e., screen, teach, intervene, probe, chart, and adjust) must follow a protocol that ensures that the entire process is carried out with fidelity. Micro-environments informed by anecdotal experience are not scalable. Macro-environments must be informed by replicable research-based findings to be effective.

Professional Roles: Understanding RTI requires a significant paradigm shift in defining the traditional roles of educational professionals. The paper “New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children” (IRA, 2006), compiled by 13 professional organizations, including IDA, brought together by the International Reading Association, identifies how various organizations representing educational professionals view the impact that RTI will have on the roles and responsibilities of their memberships.

Clinical Judgment: Increasingly, the advent of administratively convenient arbitrary cut point formulas, such as aptitude/achievement discrepancy, has eroded the prerogative of educational professionals to exercise clinical judgment in decision making. It will take an act of courage for professionals involved in the education of children to reclaim their hard earned ability to exercise clinical judgment. RTI relies on data supported by clinical judgment. The apparent fear that administrators have of being subject to criticism has robbed educational professionals of their ability to use experience and knowledge to express a subjective, albeit expert, opinion in the service of the children to whom their careers are dedicated.

Teacher Training: Assuming that every teacher has the ability to be excellent and effective is like saying that every block of marble has within it Michelangelo’s Pieta. It may be true, but the need for a master craftsman to design, plan, chisel, hammer, sculpt, and polish to realize this intrinsic potential is often overlooked. Professional development is costly in terms of money and time; and the commitment is ongoing. However, this is one instance where the benefit clearly outweighs the cost. RTI is doomed if teachers are not given the tools to deliver instruction as intended: with “fidelity to design.” Good teachers are always receptive to new ways to be more effective. The system must respond to this receptivity by providing opportunities for meaningful training and development.

Marketplace: Many claim to be authorities on RTI and its implementation. How do you tell the real McCoy from all the others? Besides using the “if it looks too good to be true, it probably is” approach, the state or district seeking authoritative direction should not hesitate to go to the source. Who is doing the research? The person who wrote the book is as easy to contact as someone who merely read the book.

RTI can only be successful if it is done right, and it can only be done right if we are willing to question the assumptions that have guided our actions and decision-making in the past.

G. Emerson Dickman, President


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Thinking Differently about Thinking Differently

by Jonathan Green

The year 1440 was a bad one for dyslexics. Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press. Soon after, books were mass-produced, greatly increasing the rapid dissemination of ideas and information. Reading was no longer reserved for monks; anyone could do it. Or, so it seemed. In actuality, some could learn to read more easily than others. Gutenberg, in exposing the masses to the written word, also forever exposed and highlighted the dyslexics’ reading deficits.

For generations, indeed for centuries, people with dyslexia mysteriously struggled to gain reading skills. A variety of causal relationships were hypothesized, the most prevalent being that these people were not intelligent or motivated. In the twentieth century, the so-called “Silent” and “Baby Boomer” generations were largely on their own when it came to navigating their way through school.

Dyslexia is still too often thought of in terms of weaknesses rather than strengths.

In contrast, members of “Generation Y,” people born between 1977 and 1996, were, for the most part, the first generation to be evaluated for suspected learning problems. During the past 20 years, many dyslexics have been diagnosed early and increasing numbers “treated” successfully. When identified and taught to compensate early, many of these children never experienced systematic failure in school.

Today, thanks in large part to the National Institutes of Health who supported research teams throughout the country and parents and teachers who believed in these children, we understand much more about breakdowns in the learning process for these students and how to help them. However, dyslexia is still too often thought of in terms of weaknesses rather than strengths. To a large extent, when thinking of dyslexia, the idea of difficulty learning how to read or reading fluently comes to mind. The focus has been on what is missing from the dyslexic brain or what is not working. This is known as the deficit model. When young children are evaluated and diagnosed with dyslexia or a “reading disorder” they may not be told about their other abilities, such as solving problems in creative and unusual ways. Or, perhaps they can draw and paint extraordinary pictures. The key to any person’s success is more closely tied to areas in which he or she excels, rather than those in which he or she struggles.

For years there has been anecdotal discussion about people with dyslexia and their extraordinary talents, and yet there also appears to be no significant research in this area. At the Hamilton School at Wheeler, where I am director, the majority of students love to express themselves artistically. Many of the children with dyslexia have strong social and problem-solving skills. Many of the children are experts at building models. Still, it is unclear whether these skills are so-called talents or simply compensatory strengths that develop out of necessity due to other deficits.

The articles that follow are meant to create a tapestry of learning profiles created from the thoughts of adults and young people, both male and female. This is not a scientific survey. People were simply asked to comment on their experience with dyslexia, and in particular, how they thought that their dyslexia may have helped them. These articles are presented as they were received with very few changes. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of IDA and its membership.

All of the writers realized at an early age that they learned differently. All of them struggled to understand and to cope with their “disability” in school. In their own way, they all are risk takers. All of them learned to trust and believe in themselves. Most of them remember their academic experience as difficult. By most measures, all of the authors in this issue of Perspectives on Language and Literacy are successful. Indeed, some have reached extraordinary success. Is this success due to their resilience after failure, to neurological strengths, or, simply their courage to risk pursuing their dreams? My hope is that these profiles will provoke more discussion about the talents and unusual abilities of people with dyslexia. Clearly, we understand more about the fundamental weaknesses of dyslexics. Perhaps it is time that we understood more about their strengths. After all, we remember such influential people as Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Pablo Picasso, Orville and Wilbur Wright, Ansel Adams, Walt Disney, Winston Churchill, and General George Patton not because they had reading difficulties, but because they had fabulously creative minds and they each made significant contributions to the world.

Jonathan Green, M.Ed., is the Director of the Hamilton School at Wheeler in Providence, Rhode Island — an innovative school-within-a-school serving elementary and middle school children diagnosed with dyslexia or other language-based learning disabilities. Mr. Green has a Masters of Education from Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is a founding board member of the Bradford L. Dunn Institute, a nonprofit corporation committed to assisting students, parents, and teachers with issues related to learning differences. Jon is also on the board of the Rhode Island branch of IDA and he serves on the national IDA board of directors. Jon has three children. His son, Sam, is dyslexic and is studying art at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, Maryland.
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"I knew I was different in the way that I thought, but I didn’t realize why I was so dumb at spelling . . . and rote memory and arithmetic. . . . The first time I realized how different . . . brains could be . . . was when I bumped into Jim Olds at a dinner party back in the late sixties. Jim . . . was a professor here [at Caltech] . . . famous for his pleasure center work. . . . A speaker talked about the way we think and compared it to holography. Jim was across the table from me. I said, ‘Oh, yes. When I’m inventing an instrument or whatever, I see it in my head and I rotate it and try it out and move the gears. If it doesn’t work, I rebuild it in my head.’ And he looked at me and said, ‘I don’t see a thing in my head with my eyes closed.’ We spent the rest of the evening . . . trying to figure out how two professors—both obviously gifted people at Caltech in the Biology Division—could possibly think at all, because we were so different. So then I took this up with Roger Sperry and I realized that I had some amazing shortcomings as well as some amazing gifts.”

(Interview with William J. Dreyer, Ph.D., by Shirley K. Cohen, 1999)

The above is a passage from the oral history project at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena. The speaker is the late William J. Dreyer, Ph.D., who is increasingly known as one of the major innovators in the biotech revolution that is now washing over all of us. Last year, one of his inventions was placed in the National Museum of Health and Medicine in Washington, DC—the first automated protein sequencer, which he patented in 1977.

A strong visual thinker and dyslexic, Dreyer developed new ways of thinking about molecular biology. Sometimes he was almost entirely alone. He (with his colleague, J. Claude Bennett) advanced a new theory and new data about genetics and the immune system that was 12 years ahead of everyone else in the field. They all had to learn to think the way he did. Then, it was obvious.

Because of this heresy, initially Dreyer could not get funding for his inventions from academic or foundation sources. His department head would get irate phone calls from other professors complaining about Dreyer’s paper and talks. These professors could not see, until much later, that Dreyer had to be right. Consequently, Dreyer went to private companies to make his instruments—something quite unusual and discouraged at the time but now wildly popular among universities hoping for a share of large royalty payments.

Having a hatred of administration and corporate politics, Dreyer was the idea man for seven new biotech companies (including Applied Biosystems) and bought himself a high-altitude small plane with some of the proceeds. Years later, when Susumu Tonegawa was awarded a Nobel Prize (Physiology or Medicine, 1987) for work he had done in Switzerland, it was for proving (through experiments that were illegal in the United States at the time) that Dreyer and his colleague had been correct in their predictions many years earlier.

Dreyer taught molecular biology to a dyslexic grandson who was clever with computers but was having a very hard time in high school. Working as an apprentice to his grandfather, the grandson skipped the latter part of high school, most of college, all of graduate school. He is now doing post-doc level work writing computer programs that use sophisticated scientific information visualization techniques to help link various human traits to sections of the genetic code. He is not only doing high-level work; some argue that the grandson is in fact working at the cutting edge. In recent years, he co-authored three peer-reviewed journal articles. One of the grandson’s work colleagues got his own Ph.D. only because the grandson was able to explain the significance of the colleague’s work to the review committee.

To succeed with such extremely mixed abilities, one needs to have a deep reservoir of confidence and fortitude to carry on in spite of the judgments of others that you are slow, lazy, and stupid.

Dreyer, never one to read many books, did read In the Mind’s Eye and telephoned this writer to explain—“this is the way I think—this is my life—let’s talk.” This contact led to many discussions and a long-term friendship. When Dreyer died of cancer in 2004, one of the enduring passions of his later scientific research was to try to understand the relationships between dyslexia, visual thinking, and the high levels of creativity he had experienced in his own life and work. This writer’s second book, Thinking Like Einstein, is dedicated to—“William J. Dreyer, 1928-2004, molecular biologist, strong visual thinker, prescient inventor, instrument maker, who loved to fly high to see what others could not see, frequently alone.”

Continued on page 10

This article is based on research by Thomas G. West for a new book, currently in process, with the working title: Seeing What Others Do Not See—Visual Thinking, Dyslexic Talents and Creative Pattern Recognition in a New Era of Scientific Innovation. In addition to Dreyer, the new book features material on Mac Arthur Prize winner John R. (Jack) Horner and Nobel Prize winner Sir Lawrence Bragg, among others.
Success Hidden Beneath Failure

The story of the life of William Dreyer and his grandson, Brandon King, brings into sharp focus the considerable advantages of the dyslexic kind of brain—at least in certain variations within the great diversity of dyslexic brains. (It also suggests what sometimes might be possible with non-traditional education.) We can see that this kind of brain—seemingly so magnificently ill-adapted to conventional education—can be a powerful engine of insight and innovation—raising some rapidly to the top, pushing forward past the many who are conventionally successful students but find it hard to conceive of anything really new. These visual-thinking dyslexics see the world differently. They think differently. They see things that others do not see. Yet these same individuals have great difficulty with things that are easy for almost everyone else—especially at the lower levels of education.

To succeed with such extremely mixed abilities, one needs to have a deep reservoir of confidence and fortitude to carry on in spite of the judgments of others that you are slow, lazy, and stupid. To maintain the required drive and sense of mission in the face of almost constant failure and humiliation is often nothing short of miraculous. Only a comparatively small number survive these early days with enough confidence and drive to press on, against all odds, to find success in some area of special knowledge and passion.

Those of us who are trying to help dyslexics must understand that academic remediation is only part of the job—and perhaps not the most interesting or important part. We need to find ways to help dyslexics find and develop their own talents, large or small, so that they cannot be beaten down—defensively hiding their talents along with their disabilities. And, I for one, believe that one of the best ways (perhaps the only really effective way) to do this is to study the lives and work of successful dyslexics (in all their great diversity)—to allow other dyslexics to see what can be done, as well as showing how it can be done.

We need to help dyslexics find and develop their own talents, large or small, so that they cannot be beaten down...

The Other Half of the Job

I believe the time has come to be serious about trying to understand the talents of dyslexics—to do the other half of the job—and try to understand the puzzle that so fascinated Bill Dreyer to the end of his life.

Accordingly, I propose that it is time to build a bold and ambitious program that will focus primarily on talent. The major objectives of this initiative would be—

- To build a program with its primary focus on understanding and developing the strengths and talents that dyslexics have—rather than focusing on areas of remarkable weakness. As dyslexic real estate entrepreneur Barbara Corcoran says, “use what you’ve got.” We would be supplying the missing half of what dyslexics need in life and work—about aspects of their lives that are not yet well understood but should be.

- To build a bold program which would, in time, be as large as all current remediation programs in effort, resources, and impact on the lives of dyslexic children and adults—including funding, research, training, and development of best practices. It took over 100 years for us to arrive at our current position. Now that we know the importance of what we are doing and what is still urgently needed, we should plan to deliver substantial results in, say, one tenth of the time, that is, 10 years.

As a dyslexic myself, I feel a growing sense of personal responsibility to dyslexics as a group. I feel the need to substantially change the course of what we are trying to do. I feel we need to seriously embrace a radical change now or there will be no change at all—allowing another generation of dyslexics to suffer needlessly, wasting talents that are greatly needed. We have done much good over the years, but we have been doing only half the job. A small group of us have been talking about these things for many years. But almost nothing has happened. Indeed, on the whole, in most cases, it has gotten worse.

In the 1980s, talents were often discussed at Orton conferences—especially by the old timers, such as Roger Saunders and Margaret Rawson. In my view, we need to rebuild what we do so that at each step of the way we are helping dyslexic children and adults see themselves as capable and valuable—rather than...
as wounded, broken, needing to be fixed. As we have learned, sometimes the best intentions can lead to further problems.

Looking Again at Old Ideas

Focusing on talents is fundamental to the perspectives provided by Samuel Torrey Orton and Norman Geschwind. But most of us have focused on remediation—on fixing problems—not developing new understandings of special talents—especially talents that seem to have nothing to do with school and conventional academics—but may have everything to do with success in work and life. While all agree that talents are important, usually almost nothing is done. And of course, there is almost no money for research of this kind. We need to change this.

As many of you know, in my talks since *In the Minds Eye* was first published in 1991, I have long advocated a focus on the special talents seen among dyslexics. Through case studies, I have tried to understand how these special talents are linked to dyslexia and how we can help dyslexic children and adults to lead better lives by learning from the lives of highly successful dyslexics.

The areas of weakness are now well enough understood. But when we look at high success in entrepreneurial business, artistic creation, technological design, or scientific discovery, we need to focus on what it is that the dyslexic brain is doing much better than those around them. I do not think we know this yet. How do we identify it? How do we measure it? How do we develop it once identified? One thing seems clear, it is quite different from reading books, listening to lectures, and memorizing long lists of names and facts.

We do not yet understand it—but I suspect it has something to do with having a global view, having strikingly unusual insights, being able to build complex mental models, being able to see over the horizon to see things that others do not see, seeing patterns in nature that others cannot see. These are not easy things to measure or understand. But we have whole families of new tools and technologies to do the job. We just have to be convinced that it is important. As Albert Galaburda pointed out years ago, the brain research done in the 1980s could have been done some 40 or 50 years earlier if only it were thought important to look at the structure of the brain. Orton had lamented in his day the same lack of interest in the structure of the brain. Sometimes old perceptions are more important than new technologies.

Time to Get Serious

I think we need to start dyslexic-centered programs—as if the talents of dyslexics really did matter. We must not be mainly school-centered, as we are now. It is time for all of us to rethink what we should be doing in schools and colleges to prepare students for today’s global economy. Often our thinking is imprisoned by our deep assumptions about what is essential for success in education, life, and work. Careful investigation of the life and work and accomplishments of highly successful dyslexics—where insight and creativity are usually more important than book knowledge—will show us how wrong we can be. Technological change is redefining the kinds of things that need to be learned—trends completely ignored by conventional educational debate. Dyslexics frequently excel at high market value creative and entrepreneurial skills while they often fail on low market value school-based skills.

We need a serious and systematic study of distinctive talents among dyslexics. We need new tests and measures. These would apply to all but the dyslexics who force us to think differently. We may have to deeply reconsider what we think we know about intelligence, talent, ability, and creativity. We should also note current trends in business and economic development literature that emphasize the growing awareness of the high value of the innovative and entrepreneurial skills that many dyslexics exhibit. (See Richard Florida’s *Rise of the Creative Class* and Daniel H. Pink’s *A Whole New Mind*). We need to develop new assessment tools, using new technologies and new perspectives to measure capabilities not possible to measure before. It is possible that we will come to measure things we thought unimportant previously. I hope we will come to understand surprising results, such as the great relative speed dyslexics could recognize “impossible figures”—especially when they are usually much slower at other things.

We need to recruit creative workers who understand non-conventional areas of technology and talent and use them in their own work every day. We need to design conference programs that will be of interest to those working in these fields, such as engineers, designers, architects, scientists, computer graphic artists, and specialists in scientific information visualization. We need to do outreach to occupational groups that contain many dyslexics and fully appreciate the kinds of special talents that many dyslexics have. For example, we could provide talks for engineers, scientists, and architects at their own professional conferences.

We need to establish special grants for highly gifted individuals who exhibit great talents but also have areas of weakness or disability that would normally result in exclusion from conventional forms of grant support. We need to develop mentor programs targeted to dyslexics of several subtypes. We need scholarships designed for talented dyslexics—not to compensate for their low performance but to take advantage of idiosyncratic high performance, that is, to bring out high levels of hidden talent.

We need to assess the institutional changes required so that dyslexics with markedly mixed talents can still work within a larger institutional structure. We need studies of how this works and does not work. For example, we could look at the relationship that dyslexic paleontologist John R. (Jack) Horner has with the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana. The museum staff modified its procedures to allow Jack and his students to do high-level work, making dramatic discoveries, while designing innovative museum displays to communicate with the public.

Finally, we need to be convinced that it is indeed time for substantial change. We need to see the truth of Jack Horner’s observation (in this issue) that dyslexia is “certainly not something that needs to be fixed, or cured, or suppressed!” Indeed, we need to see that, as Jack says, “maybe it’s time for a revolution!”

References


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I come from a family of five sisters and two brothers who are all readers and were good students in school. I was the shy and quiet sister. I struggled in school and could never figure out how to read, spell words, or solve math problems. I was always watching everyone, trying to figure out what they were doing and why it was so easy for them. I remember my parents always reading books, magazines, and newspapers. You would think that because I come from a house full of readers that I would have just picked up the love of reading, but that was not the case. My mom knew something was wrong early on.

It wasn’t until I was 10 years old that my parents finally got some answers. They found out that I had a learning disability (dyslexia) in reading, written expression, and math. That was both a relief and a cause for concern for my parents. They didn’t know what to do for me or how to help me. From the time I was in 4th grade until college, I went to summer school and took both a reading and a math class. I graduated from high school with a 5th grade reading and math level.

I then decided to go to college because everyone else in my family went to college. I loved working with kids and I was good at training new employees where I worked. So, I went for a degree in education. At first I thought I wanted to be a middle school teacher since I struggled so much in 7th and 8th grade, but I decided for elementary. After 5 1/2 years of sweat and tears, I graduated from University of Arizona with a B.A. in elementary education. There were professors who told me that I should not be there. There were times I failed and had to take the class again. But through it all, I wanted to show everyone that I could do it and be a good teacher.

It was in college that I learned about what I needed to do to be successful in school. I started tape recording all lectures. Then I would have to go back and listen to them to finish taking the notes I had difficulty in keeping up with in class. I sat in the front of the class to help me stay active in learning instead of sitting back and being passive. I learned that if I was in a study group, I learned more from group discussion then just reading the chapter. I learned about color coding my notes and writing important information on index cards to study from. I learned that I was better at labs and active learning then sitting in lecture halls and taking notes.

I then got my masters in special education. I knew I wanted to help other students who struggled in school like me. I thought that this would be enough to make a difference. But even after 10 years of teaching experience and a master’s degree, I still didn’t know how to help all students, especially those who struggle in reading and spelling. It wasn’t until I learned about Orton-Gillingham and multisensory teaching that I understood the importance of teaching the structure of our language and the importance of teaching the decoding of words. It was during this time that I found my true love, and that is training teachers.

Since 2003, I have been working at the Arizona Department of Education in Reading First. I have been a part of and have seen a remarkable transformation of schools and teachers in what researchers know is “best practice” in the instruction of at-risk students. I have been able to share my experiences and knowledge with teachers who have never struggled to learn to read or who have not been taught how to teach reading explicitly and systematically. I am truly blessed to have a job that I get to work with educators and share my story and knowledge every day.

You would think that because I come from a house full of readers that I would have just picked up the love of reading . . .
I’m Colin, a card-carrying dyslexic. Dyslexia is one of the greatest gifts I have been fortunate enough to be blessed with. Of course it is an inseparable part of my being and hard to know what parts of who I am can be attributed to the big “D.” I would not trade my gift for those few perks non-dyslexics seem to have. The idea of being a non-dyslexic is too scary to contemplate.

I hear people say things like, “I remember twenty years ago. I confused my left and right and got lost on the freeway…I must be dyslexic.” It seems cute and in vogue to an outsider, but there is often a heavy price for this gift. Yeah, of course there is a downside. There are things that are so challenging that they are not worth the effort.

My spelling is creatively haphazard, generally phonetic, and occasionally readable.

Dyslexia manifests itself differently in each person. I can’t remember names. Don’t bother introducing yourself; the likelihood of me remembering is remote. Of course people hear this and think that I will remember their name because they’re special. Yes, everyone is special, but I am still unlikely to remember. Even people who are close to me say things like “you should try harder.” I am sure these same people look at a paraplegic and say “come on, get out of that wheelchair…all you have to do is try harder.” I have tried throughout my life. Years ago I moved to a new town and thought I could get a handle on this name thing. I focused, I concentrated, and I repeated the name and did word association. The results? Well, here is an example: I met a guy named Ken; I repeated his name when he introduced himself. He was dating a girl who looked like Barbie, so every time I saw him I thought “Barbie and Ken.” A week later I was ready to try out my new prowess with names, so when I saw him I said, “Hey Ken, how’s it going?” He replied, “Fine, but my name is David.” Amusing sometimes, but usually frustrating. Books I have just read, restaurants that I have been to dozens of times, relatives I have grown up with, girlfriends that are always less than charmed when I blank on their names (Colleen’s name would have seemed like a no-brainer—but the similarity to my own had to be pointed out to me). I have gotten to the point that I usually say, “Sorry, I don’t do names.”

My spelling is creatively haphazard, generally phonetic, and occasionally readable. I have even managed to mis-spell my name on an SAT. When I read
the Lewis and Clark journals, the author mentions that standardized spelling was not commonplace and that one word was spelled more than 20 different ways. Personally, I am far more versatile and spell most words in an infinite number of ways. The University of Nebraska’s website refers to the “charming peculiarities” of Lewis and Clark’s spelling and in another place describes the misspellings as “delightful and ingenious.” My teachers were not so glowingly complimentary about my spelling. My word usage is often contorted to work around words that spell-check can’t catch (area/aria; message/massage). When I handwrite notes, I use my personal scribble, which is designed to disguise spelling indecisions. A few other things that I have challenges with: Dates—hopeless. Birthdays—ditto. I still don’t know my parents’ birthdays. Holidays—same. I have no idea if Memorial Day is at the beginning of the summer or at the end of it and no clue what day or month. Phone numbers—ick. My best friend has had the same number for over 20 years, and I could not even tell you the area code. Toss in a little sprinkle of ADD and the frustrations multiply.

So, why wouldn’t I trade all this crap in for what is behind door number 2? This gift also has serious perks. How I create, think, process information, and view the world around me are all tied in.

When I was in school I wondered why I didn’t understand; now I wonder why “they” don’t understand.

Thanks to ADD, multitasking comes naturally. I listen to books on tape while I work (over 3,500 so far) and can comfortably toss in other activities without even realizing it. Sifting and condensing information is part of understanding it, so I can explain the theory of relativity in a sentence or express the essentials of form and imagery. My focus, both consciously and unconsciously on the visual and tactile world, has become another priceless ingredient in my artwork. I think effectively in 3D which comes in handy when I am reconfiguring a Corvette suspension system or troubleshooting a glass manufacturing production line. This is also an invaluable tool in the creation of my sculptures, some of which are fully formed in my mind before they become reality. The 3D viewpoint also plays a strong roll in my paintings.

When I was in school I wondered why I didn’t understand; now I wonder why “they” don’t understand. My life and my viewpoint are distinct, and I love it this way. Dyslexics are often the inventors, the artists, and the creators. We are the different people who make a difference.

Some of my earliest memories were of sculpting in my grandmother’s studio. The renowned sculptor Una Hanbury was not only my grandmother but my also my mentor, hero and the one who introduced me to the world of art. Ever since those childhood days my work has been infused with a certain amount of serious play and I continue to create in her Santa Fe atelier. I still think of sculpture as my first love.

When sculpting, I am simultaneously building and developing the form while carving and discovering the shapes within. Often the creation of sculpture is something my hands do innately. Throughout my lifetime I have focused both consciously and unconsciously on the visual and tactile world that surrounds me.

There is a strong link between my work and my lifelong passion for Greek sculptures. The ancient Greek marbles are often worn by the passage of time into the simplest of forms. I am searching for the essence of the figure and how this nucleus can evoke the exuberance of dance and motion or the silence of tranquility. Accentuating the quintessential characteristics of the figure is an exploration into the spirit, strength, and vitality of the body.
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I’m in the school gym with 175 students in front of me. They’re leaving in 15 minutes, only to be replaced by a second group of that size. I have students standing with me, waiting to turn the “magnificent whirly twirly character machine, while the others wait to see if their names are drawn. Students know that they could be chosen to stand up here with me, their principal, describing how they demonstrated the character traits. This lunch hour, in which “character” is featured, is one of five a week. I am there for each one, taking in the big picture as well as the minutia that often draws my attention, while running the “show.”

We move from lunch sessions where students entertain each other by displaying their talents, telling jokes, playing music, to those where I read to them. I sometimes try to imagine what my former principals and teachers would think if they saw me in this role. One reaction that comes to mind is disbelief.

While I was always a kind child, I was also the one that struggled through most subjects, a source of bafflement and frustration for both school staff and my parents. In elementary school I went through countless public school teachers and many principals as my parents tried to find the “right fit.” By junior high, they had me visiting private schools and I was enrolled in one as a high school student. Even with more individual attention I was challenged and challenging in high school. If it weren’t for parents who were committed to having me attend college, I am not sure I would have gone and decided to teach. While I was always aware that my learning was different, I never entirely understood it until my son was diagnosed with dyslexia and AD/HD. The psychologist’s interpretation could have described me. My testing followed and confirmed that my son and I have much in common.

In my early years of teaching I gave up the façade of being a competent speller. I could never spell, so my students took over; they became my “dictionaries,” looking up words and writing them on the board. Before it became a common teaching practice, I often paired my students to share and critique each other’s work. Initially, I did not broadcast my learning differences, but over time my students learned that I had some challenges. They learned to appreciate my ability to cope with them, including my ability to talk about and approach my differences with humor.

As a principal I have been clear with others and myself about my strengths and challenges. I have created teams to support my work and count on a school secretary who shapes my thoughts into words on paper. I talk openly about my learning differences and realize that there is no hiding my attention deficit or continual motion. While I may not focus for long, I take everything in and can assess a cafeteria or playground situation in short order. I take pride in taking in countless details, while maintaining a big picture perspective. I walk thousands of steps each day, overseeing my building and students. My learning and attention differences have made me a better teacher and principal. I am sensitive to students who struggle or have disabilities and can maintain high expectations for them, for I know that what are perceived as “deficits” are often great advantages.
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Meet Susan Barton

Susan Barton is a popular speaker on Dyslexia at conferences throughout North America and teaches at the graduate and undergraduate level. In 1998, Susan founded Bright Solutions. Her mission is to raise awareness of Dyslexia by educating parents, teachers, and other professionals by sharing the latest research in parent-friendly language.

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One Determined Dyslexic Mind
by Jennifer Smith, Middle School Student

When I was nine years old, I still couldn't read. My two older brothers teased me because of it. One brother didn't believe in dyslexia and thought I was just lazy. The other brother teased everyone. I kept on trying and kept on struggling, but still no progress. My mother wanted to get me tested, but the public schools said that they didn't test until the student was in the 4th grade, so I would have to wait.

At that time, I attended a school called Grace. I took a number of classes including keyboarding and reading comprehension. My mom was hoping that the comprehension class would help me read, but it just made me more frustrated. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't catch on to the reading. I would check out the reading assignment in advance, take it home, struggle to decode it, and then memorize it. I would pretend to read it in front of the class.

My breakthrough person was my keyboard instructor. It turns out that she had a son who was dyslexic. One day after school, my instructor pulled my mom aside and said, “If I have ever met anyone who has the signs of dyslexia, it is your daughter.” On the way home that afternoon, my mom told me what the instructor said. I don't know if my reaction was typical or not, but I was thrilled. I had an answer to my troubles, I knew I was smart, and I knew my brothers were wrong! I went to the right doctor for testing, and it turned out that I did have dyslexia. Dyslexia is just a fancy term for someone who has difficulty reading. The typing instructor also told my mom about a program at the Masonic Learning Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The program is very unique and much in demand. After a year of waiting, I was finally able to go and learn how to read. It took a long time, but after being in the Masonic program for three years I was able to graduate.

It was an amazing day. All the people I care about were there. My mother and I were asked to make a small presentation in front of the graduating assembly. My mother had everyone in tears. When I was done I had everyone cheering. Because I did so well, they wanted me to do another speech in Grand Rapids before 4,400 people. I was scared out of my wits, but I ended up enjoying the experience.

Now, after all that has happened to me, I am a much stronger person. I realize not everyone is able to do what I did. Some people don't have the drive, the hope, or the dedication. So what makes me different, and what keeps me going? The answer is simple, I was tired of feeling stupid when I knew I was smart, and I decided to do something about it instead of complaining or letting it beat me. I was determined to prove I could learn. When I start something, I finish it, no matter how hard it is.

I have written a book entitled Dyslexia Wonders to help people understand the life of a dyslexic from a child's point of view. This book helps children and parents understand how a reading difficulty can affect more than just education. It will let the parents know more of what the child is going through. This is a unique book that was written, not when the dyslexic is an adult but still fresh from overcoming the challenge of learning to read. It is an encouraging and truthful book; I wish it had been available when I was going through my struggles.

People can do whatever they put their minds to, it doesn't matter what it is. I graduated from high school, even though I kept on hearing that I was stupid and should just give up. But I didn't, and it made such a difference in my life. I will NEVER go back. I have become a straight A student, I play basketball, and I am the leader of my band. I am part of a video and dance team, and I am an author. There are so many other things that I have accomplished because of dyslexia that I would never have even had the opportunity to do. I do get discouraged, but I have been given a gift.

Having dyslexia is truly a gift for me. If you can take that attitude, you can learn from it, and apply those advantages to your life and prosper. It takes time and an attitude adjustment to realize that. I will not lie; dyslexia is a true test for yourself. It will test your patience and commitment to learn to read. If you give up, you will feel like something in your life is missing. You will always think, if only. Don't let that happen to you; live life to its fullest.

There is no one stopping you other than yourself.

There are so many people out there who want to help dyslexics learn to read and to take the stress off of their shoulders. Some of these people are so committed; they devote their lives to helping dyslexic and others. And who says that you cannot become a successful dyslexic? We have even had presidents who have difficulty reading. If you decide that you are committed, and want to truly become someone successful then you can. There is no one stopping you other than yourself.

We need to be examples to others. I have grown in strength of will and want to help others develop confidence in themselves. When I started to read, I wanted nothing more in the world than to make others feel like they weren't alone. It feels like you are in a prison cell if you are at it alone, like there is no one in the world that seems willing to help you. I want that to change. If people work together at it, there will be no child that will have to suffer.

Dyslexics are individuals who have been given a different way of thinking. They have to learn to think outside of the box. Dyslexics have to go through twice as much trouble in learning than others. This means that they are twice as likely to work harder at life in general. I believe because of these challenges, dyslexics can become more successful than the average person. We may have to work harder to become successful, yet opportunities are all around us to help us to become successful. As a dyslexic myself, I say that if we put our minds to it, we can do anything.

Visit Jennifer’s website at www.dyslexiawonders.com
Learning Differences or Advantages—It Depends on How You Look at It

by John F. Fish, CEO, Suffolk Construction Company

I recently spent the day at the Hamilton School at Wheeler in Providence, Rhode Island, and I had a chance to meet with young adults who are working hard to overcome their learning differences. That night, I delivered a scripted speech to hundreds of school officials, students, alumni, and school supporters. Ten years ago, that moment would not have been possible for me.

I think back to my high school days, lowering my head and praying I wouldn’t get called to the blackboard or get asked to read out loud to the class, because the words on the page just didn’t make sense to me. I understood the meaning and concepts behind my teachers’ lessons, but reading was a huge challenge. I couldn’t decipher sentences. I looked at a page of words and just saw a bunch of letters—letters without meaning that didn’t connect to anything.

Having difficulty reading can be devastating to a young person, especially during adolescence when you are trying to realize your strengths and fit in with the rest of the crowd. For me, dyslexia was a threat to my confidence, so I had to look for an outlet. A place that could help me define myself and give me guidance and direction. I turned to the competitive world of school athletics.

Starting my freshman year at Tabor Academy, I played on the varsity football, baseball, and hockey teams. I quickly learned the plays and the importance of teamwork, and I practiced hard. I also learned to challenge myself, and to never give up, regardless of what the scoreboard said. Sports challenged me not only physically, but mentally. Playing as part of a team proved to me that I had the drive and the smarts to succeed. But even more importantly, I started to realize that I had big dreams and that I refused to let my dyslexia hold me back.

Playing sports was critical to gaining confidence, but I was also very fortunate to find people along the way who recognized my learning difference and were committed to helping me overcome it, even though dyslexia was an unknown entity at the time. How could I ever forget my ninth grade teacher at Tabor Academy, Mrs. Sanderson, who would sit at her kitchen table with me for hours and guide me through my homework assignments?

After Tabor Academy, I moved on to Bowdoin College. Bowdoin was a logical choice for many reasons, but mainly because it was one of the first schools to challenge the merits of the SAT, an impossible measurement for any young person with a learning difference to overcome. At Bowdoin, I continued to seek support from teachers, friends, and even my poor roommate! Over time, I began to understand my strengths, sharpen my skills, and realize my potential. And, for the first time in my life, I saw that dyslexia was actually an advantage for me. It was no longer a disability, but a gift.

Although reading was difficult, problem solving and abstract thinking always came more easily for me. I saw things from different angles. I had a knack for seeing the big picture without getting bogged down in the very fine details. I came to realize that the methods I used to “cope” with dyslexia actually enhanced my ability to think outside the box. Acronyms, word associations, visuals, and graphics—I started to treat them as tools rather than just aids.

Today, as CEO of Suffolk Construction, I use those same tools often and they have contributed to the strength of our company. I often use visuals to communicate. For example, the company’s strategic plan is not a written document.

My daughter believes that anything is possible, and she’s absolutely right.

John F. Fish visits Hamilton School. Photo by Megan O’Hara.
It is a symbol—a pyramid that graphically shows our core values, our strategies, and our vision. The simplicity of this visual icon helps all employees better understand our strategic plan and how it fits into the company strategy. Through this effective visual, our strategy is easily communicated and understood by everyone on the team.

The visual representation of our brand, both externally and internally, has also been critical to the success of Suffolk. Whether it is adding a visual component to our office space, running marketing campaigns with icons, or creating a graphic for an internal working group, these graphic tools reinforce the brand of our company in unique ways. And, they have brought us great success.

Today, Suffolk is one of the leading privately held building contracting firms in the country. Just recently, our company celebrated its 25th anniversary, marking an incredible period of growth—we reported revenue of $1.22 billion in 2007 and our total number of employees has risen steadily over the past decade because of our move into new sectors and regions of the country. Communicating our company vision and strategy through simple messaging and visuals has clearly allowed our employees to march to the same beat and work as one cohesive team.

Throughout my life, I worked hard to manage around my dyslexia and deal with its challenges. But the most important part of this journey was recognizing that dyslexia and other learning differences can also bring great opportunities.

The day I visited the Hamilton School, I was truly inspired by what I saw. It was exciting for me to hear the stories from so many talented students—about the challenges they have faced and some of the learning differences they were working hard to overcome. These were gifted young people with big dreams. And, they are truly lucky to have found places like Hamilton and Wheeler because at these institutions, students can begin their journey at a place that took me decades to reach. Academic support, understanding, and acceptance are all part of the culture at these schools. With the help of these institutions, these students are reminded that their learning differences are just that—differences. And that they are the furthest thing from disabilities.

I cannot stress enough the important role we can all play in these kids’ lives. I have seen for myself the positive impact that others can have on kids with learning differences. I have seen it in my own life. And, I have seen it through the eyes of my own daughter, Caroline, who shares many of the same learning differences that I had to overcome when I was her age. Caroline has grown to cherish her amazing gifts and to feel proud about her differences or, as she calls them, her advantages. With the support from my wife Cyndy, family, friends, and an incredible school, the Carroll School, my daughter believes that anything is possible, and she’s absolutely right.

As you read this article, there could be a shy high school student sitting in a classroom who is afraid to step up to the blackboard because of a learning difference. But with the support of others, that student could be standing up at a podium tomorrow addressing an audience of hundreds and thanking them for their dedication and unconditional support.
Having attended an independent school for students with learning differences, there are many needs and expectations that I, and other students with learning differences, have for their teachers. Rather than the regular middle school or lower school system, we need something different. As an 8th grader and a student with learning differences, this is what I expect from my teachers.

The main supports children with learning differences need in order to learn are small classes, full attention from the teacher, and different teaching techniques. First, having small classrooms is a big part of why a student in a specialized school concentrates better and is well behaved. Also, with small classes, the students can pay better attention because there are not so many distractions in the classroom. With the small number of children in our classroom, students usually get along and appreciate each other's company.

Next, when you are in a small classroom, the teacher has his or her full attention on you. There is a better chance you will be able to ask any questions you have and be able to concentrate better. Children with learning differences need small classes because they need the full attention of their teachers, and if they were in a regular classroom, they would get stuck and possibly left behind.

Finally, teachers of students with learning differences have been trained how to treat and teach children with learning differences. They know that they cannot treat those kinds of children like they are just “regular students;” they have to make it fun and understandable. Students with learning differences learn better when they can touch and feel what they are learning. A regular education teacher cannot expect to walk into a classroom full of children with learning differences and write a bunch of information on the board and expect the students to understand it. It does not work that way for them. They need to be exposed to many different kinds of techniques for learning different materials until the students find what fits them best.

Students with learning differences learn better when they can touch and feel what they are learning.

I am very fortunate and appreciate being at a school that understands my learning style. Even though I only attended an LD school for two years, I feel as though I improved so much. I have been to many different schools, and not one was as fabulous as my school. This school helped me understand what I am reading and how to study for big tests and not forget the information the next day. Most importantly, it taught me that having a learning difference is not so bad; it can even help when I am older because with each disability comes a hidden gift. I don’t think about how unfortunate I am to have a learning disability, but how lucky I am to be able to go to a school that understands my learning difference.

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A Teacher’s Difference

by Christopher Freeman, High School Oceanography Teacher

When I was studying to become a teacher, a significant amount of emphasis was placed on catering to a student’s uniqueness, while the teacher’s individuality was largely overlooked. As my education progressed, I became increasingly cognizant that society, or at least the teaching world, has come to realize that students are individuals with different strengths, weaknesses, and many different learning styles. Emphasis is placed on addressing individual student needs by diversifying lesson plans and curriculum guidelines. Addressing these learning differences in children is paramount to their success; however, as we architect the infrastructure and ideology of a working classroom, it is important not to forget the individuality of the teacher.

I have struggled with my disability both as a dyslexic teacher and as a student labeled with dyslexia in the first grade. This dual experience has provided me with keen insights into the effect of different learning styles of students and teachers in the classroom. I have been teaching high school science classes in the public school setting for the last five years, and it is what I have learned about my own strengths and weaknesses in the classroom that has allowed me to become a successful teacher. Incorporating and compensating for my unique learning styles within my teaching philosophy and daily lesson plans enables me to better assist students and work to fulfill their individual needs.

Though reading and writing are passions of mine, I am an abysmal speller and a slow reader when under pressure. This makes writing in front of the class a serious problem, and in all candor, it is usually a complete failure. On top of this unsettling reality, I am distracted easily and have appalling time management skills. I also possess a tremendous amount of energy that borders on hyperactivity. If it were not for my aptitude for creative problem solving and my personal awareness of and motivation to work with my learning disability, I would not be able to teach at all.

By accepting my differences and utilizing my strengths, I have become a “rockin’ teacher” and not just because I teach about geology or because I incorporate music in the classroom. I have constructed a teaching philosophy that caters to different student learning styles while also accommodating for my own differences. I have nearly eliminated writing on the board altogether, and I use PowerPoint presentations in place of handwritten notes. This allows me to incorporate images and other effects into “note time” which helps keep the students engaged and gives me more time to move around the classroom helping those in need. Music has become a time management tool for me, and music is almost always on in my classroom at varying degrees of loudness. I keep time by looking at a clock and by what song is being played. My students have become accustomed to me saying things like “when the next three songs are up we are going to start a new exercise.” These simple modifications were the start to my successful teaching strategies. These strategies have helped me compensate for skills that I lack, namely time management skills and the ability to write under pressure.

By accepting my differences and utilizing my strengths, I have become a “rockin’ teacher.”

Instead of trying to eliminate or fix my behavioral traits, such as hyperactivity and distractibility, I put them to use. I incorporate role playing, storytelling and hands-on, lab-based activities into my classroom lessons. Such activities create an active, energy rich environment that is suited to my high octane personality. I also use multiple activities each class period. This keeps the students and myself on task and focused. By shifting gears frequently, I keep myself, as well as the students, perpetually distracted with other pertinent activities.

Working with and compensating for my individuality has shaped my lesson plans and teaching philosophy for the better and made me a more dynamic and organized teacher. This self awareness of my strengths and weaknesses has resulted from my lifelong struggles with dyslexia and my efforts to overcome and embrace it. My disability has always set me apart from my peers, both as a student and as a teacher, and it is a constant reminder that I am different from those around me. These differences have been my catalyst for creativity and have made me the empowered teacher that I am today. Because of the extreme nature of my disabilities, I have always had to compensate for them and have become quite good at creative problem solving.

On my path to becoming a teacher, I was not taught to develop techniques to compensate for my unique learning style. Instead, I developed these strategies on the go and out of necessity. Training programs for teachers have begun to embrace learning differences and individuality in students. The ideology that governs teaching is beginning to provide adequate support for a range of students with unique learning styles. However, more effort should be made in such education programs to also help teachers with different learning styles to effectively utilize techniques that will optimize their strengths and weaknesses, making a richer learning environment for everyone.
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Up from Illiteracy

By David Clemons, D.C. Literacy Council

I was 47 years old. I had no job. My 25 years of experience as a carpet layer were worthless because my knees were shot. I was living with my uncle, who clearly didn’t want me at his house, but I had no money for rent. This was the lowest point of my life.

I had never learned to read, and that was another reason I was hopeless. And when I say I didn’t know how to read, I am being literal. I had to ask someone else to read my mail. I couldn’t read enough on a job application to know where to write my name, much less any of the other information. I could recognize only one of my three sisters’ or two brothers’ names. I could tell when I saw Betty because it had two t’s. I knew my mother’s name when I saw it because Maggie has two g’s. Of course, I wouldn’t have been able to tell Betty from batty or Maggie from muggy, but I didn’t know that then.

As long as I could lay carpet and had someone to do the paperwork, I could make a good living without knowing how to read. But at 47, after my third operation on my knees, it was clear I was never going to lay carpet again. Vocational rehabilitation helps people in my situation get work. My counselor told me that I needed to learn to fill out an application and then found a place for me to take lessons with a private tutor to learn to read. I even got paid to attend those lessons. Believe me, I needed the $70 a lesson that I got.

I went to the lessons and the teacher would show me how to spell some words and give me a writing assignment. Remember, I could only read and write two words, my first and last name. And now I know that I have a poor memory for strings of letters. As I went to each lesson, I felt more and more defeated. The tutor kept giving me writing assignments, such as write about something I want to do or a happy time in my life. I would do my best to write, but now I know that I didn’t even know every word has a vowel. There was no way I was prepared to write a word, much less a sentence or a paragraph.

After about three months, I went to my lesson after having worked on my paper for about three hours. I knew my spelling was poor, and I wanted to use the dictionary to fix the spelling errors, but I didn’t know how to use a dictionary and I couldn’t read the words even if I had known how a dictionary works. My tutor looked at my paper and said, “David, you should know this by now.” I couldn’t hold the tears back. I was 47 years old and I felt as if I was in the second grade again, being the stupidest kid in the class. Those words cut me to the bone. I was 47 years old, trying as hard as I could, and I couldn’t do the assignment or please the teacher. I never went back to those lessons, even though I could read. All I had to do was learn the letter sounds, learn to blend them into words, and I could read. Actually, it wasn’t that easy. It took a lot of work, but nine years later I can read now because of several tutors who were patient and always encouraged me. First, they taught me the consonant sounds and the short vowel sounds and how to read easy words like jab, Beth, strap—but those words used to be very hard. Then they taught me to read long words like establish and Wisconsin. I thought I would burst with pride when I first read a four-syllable word, which was accomplishment. Next, I learned about open syllables and long vowels. And, I kept learning more and more about how to read. I’m not a fast reader, but I can read a map, directions, street signs, stories, the newspaper, and anything else I want or need to read. What is really funny is that I just wanted to learn to fill out an application. I had given up on learning how to read and that is when it finally happened.

You may laugh when I tell you that someone gave me about 10 easy-level adult interest books to read about a year after I started my “letter sound” lessons. I would choose a book to read based on what the cover looked like. All my life I had heard the saying “You can’t judge a book by its cover” and it was only when I got that box of books at age 49 that I understood that saying.

I used to be bored all the time. I would sit and watch TV until I couldn’t stand it anymore. Now I am never bored because I can always read a book or a magazine or a newspaper. I ride the metro around the city, and I often miss my stop because I am so interested in

Those (reading) lessons were harder work than any job I ever had picking cotton or laying carpet.

Continued on page 28
the book I am reading. I never thought that would happen to me. Even though it is frustrating to miss my stop, I always laugh when it happens because I am so happy I can read well enough to miss my stop. Walter Mosely is my favorite author, and I enjoy reading the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. I always have a book with me. Right now I am reading Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

I had always been a manual laborer. I picked cotton when I was a boy and I laid carpet as an adult. Both those jobs are backbreaking, physical work. I would hear people who worked in offices say “I am mentally drained” and I thought they didn’t know what they were talking about. How could thinking while sitting make someone tired? Boy, was I wrong. I would be exhausted after my reading lessons, and all I did was sit at a table, read aloud, and spell. Those lessons were harder work than any job I ever had picking cotton or laying carpet.

But the payoff for those mentally draining lessons is a life I never imagined.

I now work at the adult literacy organization that helped me learn to read as a student support specialist. I help adults who call and want to learn to read. I teach classes to adults who are new readers, I do paperwork, and I use the computer. I am enjoying a life that I never thought was possible.

I wish I could stop with how proud I am to know how to read and to have an office job, which is true. But I can’t end my story without telling you that not knowing how to read has many consequences. I was held back in school every other year. I felt stupid, but I knew I was strong. I was big for my age and huge for my grade by the time I was 12 and in the 5th grade. When kids would tease me about not being able to read, I could shut them up by beating them up. Eventually this behavior led to me being a gang leader when I was 16. I desperately wanted to be a good kid, but good kids knew how to read and the only role for me was with other kids who showed their superiority with brute force instead of brains. Fortunately, before I died or killed anyone, the police sent me away from the city where I lived with my brother back to the small town where my mother lived. My mother didn’t know how to read, but she did know how to keep me in check. With my mother’s help, I got a job laying carpet and I got on the straight and narrow path of responsibility. Even so, I carried the stigma of not knowing how to read with me every single day. And although I am now a reader, I still have physical and mental scars from my experiences as a non-reader. And, I often wonder how my life would have been different if I had learned to read in first grade instead of at age 47. I have a recurring dream that I learned to read in first grade. When I wake up, I very much wish that had happened.
I could tell my sister was barely holding back her tears. Even over the long-distance phone line and the sound of her friends in the background, I recognized it.

“I just needed a little more time!” She explained. “I studied so hard; I knew all the equations. I just needed more time.” She was trying to use anger to conceal her disappointment in herself. But her voice wavered.

“Did you ask for more time? Does the teacher know that you have dyslexia?” I asked her, beginning to realize where the conversation was leading.

“No. She doesn’t know. I tried to tell her that it just takes me a while to work the problems out, but she said I should have studied harder and if I want extra time I need to get tested for a learning disability.”

I imagined the way my sister’s math teacher had probably said the words learning disability. I wished I could have defended my sister against that sympathetic yet condemning tone of voice. There was a long pause. “I don’t know if I want to get tested,” she admitted.

**She had reached the point in life where she had to decide if, and in what ways, dyslexia was going to define her.**

I had been tested in high school, but my sister’s last testing was so long ago she didn’t even remember it. She would need to get tested again, this time initiating the testing herself as a young woman making decisions that will define her adulthood. I wanted to comfort her. I wanted to tell her that things would get easier if she just kept studying and working hard, but I knew she had to do more than try even harder. She had reached the point in life where she had to decide if, and in what ways, dyslexia was going to define her. This journey would be a battle.

Dyslexia is about difference. The difference is subtle and striking, painful and beautiful, frightening and exciting all at once. While a struggle with language underlies most definitions of dyslexia, that struggle manifests itself in a mosaic of patterns and people. Trouble with math, difficulty learning Spanish, challenges in reading—all are traits and challenges that may or may not be a part of a dyslexic individual’s life. However, one cannot stop at simply listing our academic weaknesses. A keen business sense, a unique ear for music and rhythm, an extraordinary talent for writing—these, too, are traits many dyslexics share. At some point I came to understand and love that the variety of struggles we share mirrors the variety of our strengths.

All this variety, however, makes defining and explaining dyslexia nearly impossible. It is especially challenging for a sixteen-year-old girl in a prestigious and rigorous preparatory high school that, not so long ago, insisted that learning differences did not exist behind their great walls. “We don’t have those here,” my mother was told when she asked about their support services for learning differences during my own admissions interview. Amazingly, even with my low math scores in middle school and my mother’s near brawl with one admissions counselor, I was accepted and spent the most valuable and demanding four years of my life at the school my sister now attends.

Not only was my passion for education ignited within their gothic buildings, the challenge I faced there—both nourishing and devastating—sparked my passion for understanding my own learning difference. The school’s inspiring academic atmosphere and questions from intelligent students (who thought dyslexia was reading backwards) inspired me to master the subject of dyslexia just as I was being asked to master Hamlet and the periodic table, subjects I found not nearly as vital or personal. This passion for dyslexia led to a broader passion for the brain, and ultimately my major in neuroscience at Barnard College.

Where would I be without dyslexia? While my sister’s school has come a long way since the days of my enrollment, the challenge of teaching students and teachers about dyslexia, even in a progressive prestigious institution, can be exhausting. Halfway through the phone call, I began to think about the fight my sister had ahead of her, whether she decided to be tested or not.

This fight, along with maybe a deep love for Microsoft Word’s spell check, is the one thing that we all share. No matter how dyslexia expresses itself in each of us, as individuals with learning differences, we all know what it is like to fight—to fight for our difference or against it, to mask its weaknesses or to unearth its potential—we have all had to fight. And, through this battle, we discover how dyslexia defines us and how we, in turn, define dyslexia.

In another phone call a few weeks later my sister said, “Abby! I got tested yesterday and I am like crazy good at short-term auditory memory! I could list back like twenty numbers to the assessment lady and she was so impressed! Some of the other stuff was hard, but it wasn’t so bad.”

So maybe the lesson here is that not every test is meant to bring out dyslexia’s weaknesses. Some tests, even those we struggle with, help define where our strengths lie. These strengths, while maybe not the direct result of dyslexia, might never have been discovered if we did not have to fight. My sister showed courage in embracing her difference and seeking to discover its role in her identity. Just knowing that she had the courage to ask these important questions and seek this knowledge gave her confidence. This confidence will stay with her throughout her life. Where would she be without dyslexia?
I am dyslexic.
I began in an intimidating world of spoken words, letters, and numbers
I confused the letters
I saw jumbled words
I heard different sounds
I spoke my own language
I spun in bewilderment
I fought to focus
I struggled with their tedious tasks
I felt different from my classmates
I tried hard
I feared I was stupid
I am dyslexic.

I am dyslexic.
I grew unsure of myself
I avoided being called on
I wrote “incorrectly”
I heard my words come out jumbled
I confused myself
I stayed in for recess
I believed I was stupid
I stumbled in my own awkwardness
I saw the puzzlement of my parents
I felt the irritation of my teachers
I cried tears of frustration
I am dyslexic.

I am dyslexic.
I watched my peers succeed
I wanted to be successful
I dreamed of being smart
I studied with determination
I found my voice in stories and poems
I worked hard
I hid the pain
I found laughter
I created mischief
I discovered peers liked my humor
I listened to their voices
I made friends
I am dyslexic.

I am dyslexic.
I questioned myself
I watched my mother look for answers
I doubted her faith in me
I loved her for it so
I took the tests and
I felt my whole world begin to change...
I wondered if it could really be true...
I read the words “Janine is dyslexic.”
I touched the page “above average intelligence with attention deficit disorder”
I was flooded with a wave of disbelief
I landed in relief
I am not stupid
I am dyslexic
I felt gratitude for all who had believed in me
I let compassion go to those who did not
I found my answer
I am dyslexic.

I am dyslexic.
I went into higher education not once but twice
I won national awards
I took risks
I asked for help
I did what others said I could not
I refused to give up
I wanted to make a difference
I heard them say “when I was young I too wanted to change the world...you can’t”
I remembered all my dyslexia had taught me
I surged forward with clarity
I have a purpose
I am dyslexic.

I am dyslexic.
I am empowered
I act on my concern for our world
I reach out in compassion to others
I identify with the pain and determination of my own clients
I laugh with myself
I reveal my resilience
I enjoy the scrambled way I hear things
I find entertainment in my dyslexic mistakes
I focus on the joy of the journey
I find others accept what I accept in me.

Yes, I am dyslexic.
I changed my life when
I let go of who I wanted to be
I became who I am and have always been
I learned a great deal about myself from my teacher Dyslexia
I am determined
I am passionate
I am creative
I am confident
I am assertive
I am powerful
I am intelligent
I am successful
I am dyslexic.

I am dyslexic and now
I am educated
I am a professional
I am a wife
I am a mother
I have the life I have always dreamed of
I am proud
I am dyslexic.

I am dyslexic Poem
by Janine Loughrin
Social Worker Who Specializes in Therapeutic Adventures

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I have the life I have always dreamed of
I am proud
I am dyslexic.
I was asked to write about my experiences as a dyslexic. As I sit down to do that, I find it difficult to define those experiences and separate them out from all the other facets that make me who I am. The simple fact is, I am dyslexic. It is hard wired in my brain, just another part of me, like being female, having brown eyes, or feeling a deep compassion for animals. Being dyslexic has helped shape me into the person I am today in ways that are both subtle and dramatic.

I have always been adamant, even when I was young, that I am dyslexic, I do not have dyslexia. To another that may seem like just a difference in syntax, but to me it’s a concept. Dyslexia is not something I caught in first grade while trying to learn to read. It is not something that anyone needs to cure me of either. My learning difference has helped shape me in my personal and professional life, and although there have been trials and deep frustration associated with it, I strongly believe it has also endowed me with great strengths. Like many young students, I was continually frustrated by wanting to learn and read but not being able to do it in the conventional way. My family has always been supportive, and they sacrificed to send me to a school designed to teach dyslexic students. I started at the Hamilton School in the 4th grade. I learned to read through nonconventional teaching, a method that combined tactile, auditory, and visual cues to lay the foundation for understanding written language.

I worked very hard throughout my schooling, supported by my family and dedicated teachers. As I began college, I realized that my generation is probably the first to start entering higher education and professional lives with the full knowledge of being dyslexic and having the advantage of early intervention in our learning. That has been of the utmost value to me. I learned to be my own best advocate, to talk about my dyslexia, and to let others judge it as they may. I generally found that people who judged me based on whether I could spell weren’t worth bothering with. Those who looked past my difficulties on the surface found that I could accomplish the same tasks as my peers; I just needed to do it my own way. Since middle school, I learned to approach my teachers on the first day of class to talk with them about how I learn best, through multiple modalities. Like any student, I had weak and strong points, but unlike many, I understood them. As a result, I had uncommonly close relationships with my teachers. They came to understand that my difficulties with reading and writing did not deter me from learning the material and understanding the underlying concepts. I have gone through 8 years of higher education. I studied biology at Bard College and went on to veterinary school at Kansas State University. Throughout that time, I was amazed at how receptive, curious, and supportive most of my peers and teachers were. I remember when my biology teacher in college shuffled over to my desk and handed back my first exam. He said, “You really are the worst speller I’ve ever seen.” I also scored highest on the test.

I am now a practicing veterinarian. Going through the intensive veterinary curriculum was the hardest, most taxing thing I’ve ever experienced, but what a gift to be in a profession I love! Being dyslexic taught me to be creative and persistent with my learning. Some students could read the material once and process it. I read the texts several times, drew pictures, created layouts and sang songs to help remember and process the information. I excelled at labs, the hands-on part of my training. It was the most rewarding. I thought of the vascular system in anatomy class like a complex road map, the aortic highway with a renal artery exit and tiny little back roads, arterioles. The heart and pulmonary vessels form a complex overpass where oxygenated and deoxygenated blood circulates through their complex commutes. I believe that being dyslexic forced me to process information differently. It sharpened my deductive reasoning skills and caused me to rely on different modes of processing, from tactile, to visual, to auditory. Because nothing came easily to me in school, I developed determination and a persistent work ethic. So even though I’m an abysmal speller, I can perform surgery and see with my fingertips.

Continued on page 32
I'm a very slow reader, but I can piece together the clinical signs and history of my patients to diagnose and treat them. I have a deep fear of reading out loud, but I can look a person in the eyes and explain the disease process affecting his or her animal.

I definitely had considerable trepidation going into my first veterinary job. Here I was a doctor, and I couldn't spell simple words. I was most nervous about how the rest of the staff and doctors would react when they discovered that I had such profound difficulty with spelling and reading. I was afraid they might think I wasn’t smart enough to be a doctor. I stand out whenever I have to write because my errors are so glaring, and my spelling is completely phonetic. But just like when I was in school, I didn’t try to hide it. I told my boss, the other doctor, and the staff. They respected me for my medical and surgical skills, my compassion and dedication. They didn’t pass judgment based on something as trivial as my spelling. One of the staff members even looks over my referral letters for me before I send them to another clinic. And while I cannot expect everyone to understand, I don’t need them to. When it comes down to it, I don’t really let the difficulties that my dyslexia pose get in the way of the combined strengths it has given me. I am convinced that I am a more confident, articulate, determined, and open person because I never fit into the normal academic system. I had to adapt, and adaptation is the key to survival and growth.

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**I Am Dyslexic, But That’s Not All**

continued from page 31
My first grade teacher called me stupid in front of the whole class because I couldn’t spell my last name. The shame I felt at that moment is still with me today. This year I’ll turn 60. On that day, long ago, I didn’t go home and tell my mom or dad that my teacher had called me stupid. I kept it inside and I didn’t tell anyone. If you truly believe you’re stupid, it is not something you want others to know. Instead, I became extremely creative in finding ways to accomplish what others seem to do with ease.

I learned that if I could find a recording of a Shakespearean play I’d get an A, however, if I had to depend on my ability to read my grade would be a D or F. I had enough skills to get me through high school with C and D grades. My high school counselor recommended I join the military. My father encouraged me to try college. I found out that college was actually easier than high school. For one thing, I majored in broadcasting and took a lot of radio and television production classes. I quickly learned to balance my hands-on and creative production courses with my required academic courses. I would get As in my production courses and Cs in my academic courses. I discovered that I had more control of my life as a college student than as a high school student. For example, in high school you were stuck with whatever teacher you were assigned. In college, if I got a teacher who took points off for spelling, I’d drop the course.

All during this time I did not know I was dyslexic, but I still knew I had to find ways to compensate for weakness in reading and writing. I was 36 before I was diagnosed with dyslexia. My daughter was in second grade and her teacher determined that some of her skills were advanced, but her reading was several years delayed. When my daughter was evaluated we learned she had a learning disability and eventually she was diagnosed with dyslexia. I told my daughter “I think you got what I got and it’s terrible. You’re going to have to work really hard.” My wife and I got her to a tutor outside of school with a proven track record of teaching dyslexics to read. At the same time, I shared with my daughter all the compensation skills I had developed.

This was the same year I started my own company with a business partner who was a strong reader and a professional writer. I think, subconsciously, my choice of a business partner was to compensate for my dyslexia. As a team, our partnership has grown and prospered. Much of our business depends on out-of-the-box thinking and my dyslexic mind has been an asset. I enjoy considering a client’s problem from many angles.

This can often lead to a creative solution. Another advantage of my dyslexia is my ability to listen. Because I wasn’t a strong note taker during college lectures, I had to develop the ability to listen and accurately remember what was being said. This has come in handy during client meetings. I’m not sure if it is because I’m dyslexic; however, I have a very good ability to read people. I think having grown up struggling with my dyslexia has given me empathy for others. I am hypersensitive to a client’s feelings. This has allowed me to be more “tuned in” and responsive to our clients.
The Lewis School is a nurturing, co-educational, traditional day school serving grades PreK through College Preparatory levels.

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The Extraordinary Characteristics of Dyslexia

by Jack Horner, Paleontologist

Those of us with dyslexia share a common thread of growing up in a society that judges us. In some cases, we have been judged as retarded in our abilities to read or do math. In others, we are seen as less able or less intelligent. In most cases, though, the judgment is usually wrong.

Each of us can narrate an early experience of failure in schools. Because of it, most of us have known some form of peer persecution. But what most non-dyslexics don’t know about us, besides the fact that we simply process information differently, is that our early failures often give us an important edge as we grow older. It is not uncommon that we “dyslexics” go on to succeed at the highest of levels.

I don’t care much for the word dyslexia. I generally think of “us” as spatial thinkers and non-dyslexics as linear thinkers, or people who could be most often described as being dys-spatics. For spatial thinkers, reading is clearly necessary but over-rated. Most of us would rather write about our own adventures than read about someone else’s. Most spatial thinkers are extremely visual, highly imaginative, and work in three dimensions, none of which have anything to do with time. Linear thinkers (dys-spatics) generally operate in a two-dimensional world where time is of the utmost importance. We spatial thinkers fail tests given by linear thinkers because we don’t think in terms of time or in terms of written text. Instead, our perception is multidimensional, and we do best when we can touch, observe, and analyze. If we were to give spatial tests to linear thinkers, they would have just as much trouble with our tests as we do with theirs. It is unfortunate that we are the minority and have to deal with the linear-thinkers’ exams in order to enter the marketplace to find jobs. Even though we often fail or do miserably on these linear-thinker tests, we often end up in life achieving exceptional accomplishments. From the perspective of the linear thinkers, we spatial thinkers seem to “think outside the box,” and this accounts for our accomplishments. However, we think outside the box precisely because we have never been in one. Our minds are not clogged up by preconceived ideas acquired through excessive reading. We are, therefore, free to have original thoughts enhanced by personal observations.

In 1993, I was inducted into the American Academy of Achievement, an organization started in 1964, that annually brings together the highest achievers in America with the brightest American high-school students. The achievers included United States presidents, Nobel Laureates, movie stars, sports figures, and other famous people. The high school students were winners of the best scholarships like the Rhodes, the Westinghouse, the Truman, and so on. In other words, it was supposed to be a meeting of the best of the best according to the linear thinkers who “judge” such things. The idea was that the achievers would somehow, over the course of a three-day meeting, influence the students, and push them on to extraordinary achievement. Interestingly, however, most of us “achievers,” admitted that we would never have qualified to be in such a student group. The largest percentage of the achievers were actually people who had difficulties in school and didn’t get scholarships, or awards, or other accolades. Most of the achievers were spatial thinkers, while most of the students were linear thinkers. From 1964 until 2000, less than half a dozen students broke the barrier to be inducted at the American Academy of Achievement’s annual get-together. How could it be that so many promising students, judged by the linear thinkers themselves, failed to reach the highest levels of achievement?

I think the answer is simple. Linear thinkers are burdened by high expectations from everyone, including themselves. They go out and get good jobs, but they seldom follow their dreams because dream-following is risk-taking, and risk-taking carries the possible burden of failure.

We think outside the box precisely because we have never been in one.

We spatial thinkers have known failure our entire lives and have grown up without expectations, not from our teachers, often not from our parents, and sometimes, not even from ourselves. We don’t meet the expectations of linear thinkers and are free to take risks. We are the people who most often follow our dreams, who think differently, spatially, inquisitively.

Personally, I think dyslexia and the consequences of dyslexia—learning to deal with failure—explains my own success. From my failures, I’ve learned where I need help, such as reading and math. But I’ve also learned from my accomplishments what I’m better at than the linear thinkers. When I’m teaching linear thinkers here at Montana State University, I know to be patient, as they have just as hard a time with spatial problems as I have with linear ones. We both have learning talents and learning challenges, but I would never think of trading my spatial way of thinking for their linear way of thinking. I think dyslexia is an extraordinary characteristic, and it is certainly not something that needs to be fixed, or cured, or suppressed! Maybe it’s time for a revolution! Take us out of classes for special ed, and put us in classes for spatial ed, taught of course, by spatial thinkers!
by Sandra Johnson, Recent Graduate and Recipient of an External High School Diploma

"Why me?" “Why couldn’t I learn to read when I was in school?” “Why couldn’t I read as an adult?” I have asked myself these questions repeatedly.

They say that reading opens doors to your future, and reading gives you the opportunity to follow your dreams. However, what about the ones who cannot read? Are their hopes and dreams less important? The answer is “yes,” because by not knowing how to read, your hopes and dreams are limited.

Growing Up Not Knowing How to Read

I grew into adulthood not knowing how to read. Sometimes, I sit back and wonder, “What if I had learned to read while I was in school?” I think back and have no good memories of my school years—that’s right, not one single good memory about my school experience.

My mom sent my brothers and me to school every day hoping that we would achieve something that she did not. I didn’t know this until a few years ago, but my mother isn’t a very good reader. She hoped that her children would get the gifts that an education brings, like maybe going to college, a good job, and a better chance of being able to support oneself in the world. A wonderful plan, but unfortunately, that was not in the plans for my future.

I knew that reading was hard for me by the time I got to the third grade, but I thought I did okay. It’s true that I always sat behind the tallest person in class so that the teacher didn’t call on me. I was well-behaved, and I passed every grade in elementary school. I didn’t know how far behind I was until I got to 7th grade. It was then that I knew I couldn’t make it through school. I couldn’t read any of the books in my classes. I failed 7th grade, passed 8th grade, and failed 9th grade.

At age 16 I was in the 9th grade. School was dreadful because I failed every class. I started hooking classes until I was kicked out of school. The truant officer caught me hooking school. They labeled me as retarded because they did not know how to teach me to read. After I was caught hooking school, they gave me a choice, which was to go to a school for handicapped kids or to go reform school for one year. I was scared of reform school, so I chose the school for handicapped kids. Now I realize they thought I was dumb. I thought I was dumb, too. But now I know the schools did not label me correctly. They just did not know how far from the truth they were in calling me retarded. I am dyslexic, not retarded.

I would have done anything just to be able to read a book, a birthday card, or my mail.

Shame and Hurt

Until I was well until my thirties, I was so ashamed of myself for not knowing how to read that I just kept my secret to myself. I would have done anything just to be able to read a book, a birthday card, or my mail. This secret stayed mine until one day a commercial came on TV about the Literacy Council having a free program to teach adults how to read one-on-one. For a while, I had been wondering what I could to about my reading problem. Learning to read was just what I needed. I really wanted to call the number. But I was scared to tell anyone my secret, so it took me two years to make the call after I got the number.

Thinking that I was the only one who couldn’t read hurt me more than anything. Knowing that I went to school every day and that the school system denied me my education by passing me with all failing grades still hurts. I was never a bad kid in school, but at an early age, I knew that I was different from the rest of the kids because they were reading and I was hiding the fact that I was not a reader. I must say that, although I am a reader now, when I think back, the hurt is still there.

None of my family and friends knew anything about my reading problems until I was in my early thirties. My cousin found out about my secret. I was so scared that she was going to tell someone. I asked her to please keep this to herself, yet in the back of my mind, I knew that it was impossible and how right I was. She told her mother and a friend of hers. At that time, I was just beginning to learn to read, but I had a long way to go. I was so ashamed that even a few people knew I couldn’t read.

Disappointment When Trying to Learn to Read

I met the first tutor the Literacy Council matched me with at the library. After our first lesson, we made a plan to meet every Wednesday night. I showed up three more times, but my tutor never showed. I was very, very, very devastated. I decided at that time that it just wasn’t meant for me to read.

About a year later, I was still desperate to learn to read, so I called the Literacy Council again. They assigned me a tutor. Unfortunately, the same thing happened. I had three sessions with my tutor, and then she stopped showing up. After that I was positive that I would never learn to read.

I now understand that it is hard to teach adults with dyslexia to read. My tutors weren’t given training or materials that worked for teaching people with my problems. It has to be frustrating for them to plan a lesson and see it not work. And I am sure it was easier to not show up for our lesson than to tell me that they couldn’t teach me to read.

A Tutoring Relationship that Works

About two years later, I still wanted to learn to read. I got up my nerve to call the Literacy Council again and ask for another tutor. That was one of the best decisions that I have ever
made in my life. This time they matched me with a volunteer tutor named Linda Farrell. Linda and I were very dedicated as to what we both wanted out of the program. I wanted to learn to read and Linda wanted to teach me to read.

Linda and I hit it off right away. Linda was nice and she tried really hard, but I wasn’t learning to read. Linda knew it and I knew it. But Linda asked me to stick with her because she would keep trying to find something that worked. I can’t even remember how many different books and programs Linda tried. As soon as she knew that one wasn’t working, she would bring in another one. After about three years, I really wanted to quit, but Linda was so enthusiastic that I didn’t know how to tell her, so I kept going to our lessons. That was very lucky!

After four years, Linda finally found a program that worked with me. The program is used mostly for school kids who have trouble reading. With this program you start at the beginning learning the sounds for every letter. You learn that there are vowels and consonants. First, you learn the short vowel sounds and then you learn the long vowel sounds. Linda came across this program through a friend of hers and as soon as she had a chance to review it she knew that was exactly what I needed and would work perfectly for us.

The first day that I was introduced to this program, I knew this was what I needed because I never knew that letters made sounds. Yes, I knew all of the letter names, but I did not know that the letters had sounds until my first lesson. And let me tell you that learning the short vowel sounds was hard, especially telling the difference between short i and short e. I read words, sentences and passages that only had one syllable words with short vowels for about 25 lessons before I finally could do it easily, without sounding out every letter. I need to tell you that one of the hardest things I did was learn not to guess.

That program was such a huge success for me that I wanted to pass on the gift of reading with my brothers, just like my friend Linda passed it on to me. Four of my brothers are learning to read with the Literacy Council, and they are doing well.

My Life Now

Linda not only taught me how to read, but we became good friends. She got me out of the box that I was living in as a non-reader and showed me that I can do whatever I want to do. I can never repay Linda for the gift of reading that she gave me. She changed my life. Because of her and so many other wonderful “angels,” I am a better person.

I now travel around to different states sharing my story about how I struggled with reading as a child. I talk to teachers and principals letting them know how I was passed through school with all Fs and the shame that I had to carry with me into adulthood. Although I am now a reader, the pain is still there and no child should go through what I went through. I also talk to kids in schools to let them know it is not okay if you cannot read, and it’s never too late to learn. I tell them that I did not learn until I was in my late thirties and I say, “If I can do it, you can too.”

I volunteer as a basketball coach at a local recreation center. One of the rules I have is that the kids must bring me their report cards. I look at all of them and any class that they are failing in, we work on bringing that grade up. Two of my 10-year-old kids were having reading problems. They both knew the rules.

One boy was scared that the rest of the team was going to find out that he could not read. I took him aside and told him my story. I also told him that if he wanted to continue to play for me that he and I would work on his reading together before practice. He told me that he wouldn’t play. That is just how scared he was that he quit the team. That took me back to my school days and I felt all the pain all over again. I’m happy to say that the other kid was okay with the rules. We worked on his reading together. He is now 18 years old and is still in school.

One other thing has changed about my life. I take the metro most of the time to get around Washington. I can tell you that I never once missed a stop before I learned how to read. Now I miss stops too often because I am reading a book and I get so into the story that I forget to listen my station is announced.

Reading is the most important tool for anyone’s future. I am not saying that reading cannot be a struggle for people with reading difficulties, because it is, but it is not impossible with the right tools.

I talk to teachers and principals letting them know how I was passed through school with all Fs and the shame that I had to carry with me into adulthood.

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The International Dyslexia Association

*Perspectives on Language and Literacy*  Summer 2008  41
My Teacher

by Janine Loughrin, Social Worker Who Specializes in Therapeutic Adventures

They said I was stupid.
They said I couldn’t.
I believed them.
I couldn’t.

Then my teacher told me
I could.
She showed me
My intelligence.
She illuminated
My strengths.

She said
You Can.
You do it differently.
Believe.

So I decided
To try her theory.
I took what I could not
And persisted.

I was unsure of my academic potential
So I went to graduate school.
I was uncertain of my own ability to risk
So I specialized in Therapeutic Adventure.
I was hesitant to believe in my intelligence
So I graduated with a 3.98.

I couldn’t dance
So I took up dancing.
I was afraid of heights
So I learned to climb.
I admired those who climbed mountains
So I became one of them.

In all avenues of my life
My Dyslexia has taught me
I Can.

Learning to Succeed

by Sam Garfield, College Senior

I have been dyslexic my whole life. Therefore, I have never had the luxury of going through a day or even a moment without dealing with my learning difference. As a result of this, I have the opportunity to observe how others around me learn and compare the differences. First, organization and the ability to study are inevitably linked. Without one, I cannot accomplish the other. This led to multi-colored binders, colored pencils, and an excess of three-hole punches. Because I learned differently and struggled through hard and intense situations, I learned to use a light-hearted approach with my peers to put myself and others at ease about our differences. This skill developed over time, and I did not realize its value until quite recently. Last February, I was appointed the Cadet Chief Mate of the training vessel, State of Maine. One of my many duties was to train and operate a 45-man fire and emergency response team. I trained and operated the team for eight months, two of which were spent crossing the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Until this leadership role emerged, I had not realized what a skill I had developed as a result of being dyslexic. The calm air I brought to intense situations, the self-confidence gained from years of self-advocacy, and the ability to organize myself and others were the building blocks for a successful team—a team that I trained! The members of this team were very willing to risk their lives for their shipmates and each other. All the skills that I utilized over the last year had their foundations poured at a small independent school for students with learning differences; they set and hardened when I graduated. My learning disability turned into an unexpected asset and one that has proven to be critical to my success.

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I usually don’t like to say I am dyslexic because it makes me stand out in a negative way and it sounds like I have a disease. I feel like my mind sees things differently than others but in a positive and unique way. In school, instead of coming up with the standard answer, my mind travels all around the answer and usually comes up with a solution somewhere outside the box. I hope this helps me as an adult to come up with ideas when everyone else is stuck in the same place.

Many people without a learning difference probably wonder how dyslexia affects others and how hard it must be to learn. I am fortunate to have gone to schools that understand how I learn and that emphasize my strengths. My greatest strength that helps me do well in school is my ability to organize my work. This is something I have been taught and it is now second nature to me. I keep a detailed planner to organize my work and assignments. Since it takes me a long time to get through all the reading and spelling, keeping a planner makes it easier for me to do a good job and to complete my work on time. I like things to be visual and this is my preferred way to present what I have learned. Although many people might think dyslexia is bad and affects you greatly, I have never found this to be true.

I use these organization skills not only in school work but in all aspects of my life. For example, I compete with my horses in competitive/endurance trail riding which requires a high degree of focus for long periods of time. I can be riding for as long as 12 hours in a day, with distances of up to 60 miles. Let’s face it, not too many teenagers have the ability to focus on every detail for this many hours. This is evident by the few numbers of juniors who participate in this sport. I have to be on task all the time, from the days and weeks planning and conditioning my horses for a competition, to taking care of my horse after the event. If I forget something while riding, it could result in a big problem. The skills I have learned to overcome my dyslexia give me the ability to maintain the level of focus that makes me one of the top junior riders at this sport.

Often times I wonder what it would be like not to be dyslexic. Where would I be going to school? What activities would I be participating in? What goes through the minds of students who do not have dyslexia? I have to spend a great deal of thought process and time organizing my work. So, I wonder what other students do in their mind with this time. I have an older brother who is not dyslexic. He always had good grades but never puts as much time and energy into preparing and completing his work. If he had the skills that I have learned, would he perform even better with his studies? On the flipside, I know that if I organized and prepared for my studies as he did, I would probably not do well in school.

Although many people might think dyslexia is bad and affects you greatly, I have never found this to be true.

But, if I were not dyslexic and were in a normal school setting, I think studying would come very easily to me. My reading and spelling may not be as strong as many other students, but as I continue to polish my skills, I am getting better at these required skills. But, the skills that I have learned to compensate for my learning difference are something that other students do not have and may never develop. That puts me at an advantage in many different ways, especially when I am older and get to focus my studies and time on mastering what is important to me.

My mind sees things differently than others but in a positive and unique way.

I Take Advantage of What I Have
by Katherine Gardener, Grade 9

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Isn’t the world lucky they do?
An Eye for Opportunity

by Paul Orfalea, Entrepreneur

Dr. Mel Levine says, “Teachers must realize that the very qualities that trip up a child may be the source of his success as an adult.” That was sure true in my case. I couldn’t read and I couldn’t sit still. What blessings these turned out to be!

Dyslexia and hyperactivity make school difficult today, but imagine how it was in the early 1950s—in Catholic school. I still have ruler imprints on my knuckles. I flunked the second grade because I could not learn the alphabet, and I got kicked out of school repeatedly. It was hard on me and it was hard on my parents.

But I was very lucky to have parents who saw me as an individual. One day after I was expelled from school at the age of 13, the vice principal told my mother not to worry about my future: “Maybe someday he can learn how to lay carpet,” he said to console her. I remember my mom came home crying that day and said, “I just know Paul can do more than lay carpets.” Mom knew me. She talked to me and she listened to me. The teachers and administrators only knew what I couldn’t do; Mom saw with her own eyes what I could do.

See with Your Own Eyes

This is an important theme in my life. I believe something I read in a fortune cookie, that “your eyes believe what they see; your ears believe others.” Well, reading is just listening with your eyes, right? Good readers collect other people’s words and dyslexics tend to see things for themselves. Who is more likely to repeat others, and who is more likely to be creative?

Because I couldn’t read, I learned from direct experience. Experience is a harsh teacher because the test comes first, followed by the lesson. But lacking the ability to learn by reading, I embraced every chance to participate in life. I started businesses, like my vegetable stand. I skipped school to watch my father’s stockbroker at work. One thing I saw for myself was that to succeed in school, you had to be good at everything, but to succeed as an adult, you only had to be good at one or two things.

When school had me down, Mom used to tell me that “the A students work for the B students, the C students run the companies, and the D students dedicate the buildings.” My experience and observations suggest that she was absolutely right. I’m not recommending that parents say this to a child who’s getting As and Bs, but the child who can’t play by the same rules needs to know there’s much more to life than what goes on a report card—like personal relationships.

Look People in the Eye

To be successful in life is to be engaged with other people. We need people skills. We need to know how to talk with them, argue with them, build with them, and introduce ourselves to each other. Yet when I suggest that the college students in my seminar at UCSB ask each other out on dates, these young adults do not know how to express themselves, or look one another in the eye. They may read very well, but they don’t know how to talk to each other. They do not want to take chances, but life is full of risk. Since dyslexia prevented me from doing things the conventional way, I grew up experimenting and trying new things. Taking chances became second nature. By forcing students to ask each other out, I give them a crash course in surviving rejection and handling unexpected success.

I learned early that I would only get through school with a lot of help from a lot of people. This dependence taught me how to ask for help, and how to provide what help I could. I learned to appreciate people’s strengths and forgive their weaknesses, as I hoped they would forgive mine. This was important when I hired my first coworker at Kinko’s. How important were people skills when we employed 25,000 coworkers?

My longtime coworker Mike Fasth says Kinko’s succeeded because nearly every coworker in the company knew the owner. I traveled continuously, visiting stores all over the world. I personally greeted coworkers when they arrived for the company picnic, and personally bid them farewell when the event ended. I believe I owe my people skills to dyslexia. With my love of numbers, as a good reader I might well have spent my life as an accountant in a little office somewhere. Instead, I trusted and engaged with other people to imagine and build something larger than ourselves.

Use the Eye of the Mind

In college, I gathered with friends after a lecture and discovered that although they took detailed notes, I remembered the lecture better. While they were frantically scribbling, I was listening. Coming from the oral tradition, I have developed a good memory.

Plato didn’t care much for the rise of literacy in his time: “If men learn this... they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks...by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wis-
dom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows.” If you’ve ever been in a meeting where executives must consult notes to tell you what they are working on, you know that Plato had a very good point.

On the other hand, I know a fellow who says, when he cannot remember some detail, “My brain is a factory, not a warehouse.” Like Sherlock Holmes, this man prides himself on his thinking skills, and does not want to treat his brain like a dusty attic full of accumulated bric-a-brac. But good readers have the choice to store information outside their own heads. They can easily look up details they have forgotten. I cannot. Dyslexia made me develop my brain into both a factory and a warehouse.

A former Kinko’s executive tells this story about my memory. We were dining with some store managers in San Antonio. As I went around the table to greet people, I asked a woman if she had completed her degree, and if her husband had fulfilled his dream of starting a game ranch. After I moved on to talk to others, she turned to my friend and excitedly confided that she and I had only spoken once before, for about five minutes, three years earlier. They were both impressed. He said it showed that I care about people and pay attention to them—two critical traits of leadership.

Other business partners used to comment on how well I knew the numbers. Well, I take that for granted; you have to know the numbers. But it took me a long time to realize how hard it was for others to retain details.

I think that filling my brain with so much information stimulates my imagination in a very productive way. The warehouse supplies the factory, so to speak. The facts, figures, and physical observations stored in my brain mix together in creative ways, but keep my creativity grounded in reality. In other words, I have a practical imagination. I don’t just have dreams; I have ideas.

See Beyond Labels

Remember that scene in The Matrix, when the little boy bending spoons with his mind tells Neo that he mustn’t try to bend the spoon, because that’s impossible? Instead, the boy explains that you must try to recognize the truth: that there is no spoon. Well, that’s how I feel about “the box.”

After I became successful, I was praised lavishly for “thinking outside the box,” even though as a child I was ridiculed, shunned, or even struck for not fitting into “the box.” Lately, I’ve heard it said that dyslexics, like me, think out of the box because we’ve never been in the box. I say, “Enough! There is no box.”

For people with dyslexia, expressions like “learning disability” or “learning difference,” or my own choice of “learning opportunity” are simply new boxes to fit people into. How differently would we view the world and ourselves if we saw that the human race consists of seven billion unique individuals? If we did, we’d have to see everyone else more objectively, and we could better appreciate everyone’s individual strengths.

In The Matrix, the little boy eventually tells Neo that if there is no spoon, it is we who must bend. He means that Neo must open his mind to unlimited possibilities, and I believe we all must do the same. Dyslexia helped me see with my own eyes, learn to look others in the eye, fuel my imagination with everything I saw, and look beyond the labels that others applied to me. What I ultimately saw, and believe you can see as well, was a world of endless opportunity.
Theme Editor’s Conclusion

Telling Stories Out of School

by Michael Ryan

This is a unique issue of Perspectives on Language and Literacy. Obviously, we have many more authors than is usually the case. They are also very diverse. They come from different generations, locations, and walks of life. Furthermore, these are not linear essays meant to simply convey information, but stories of people’s lives. I am touched by how genuine and real they are and tickled by their creativity. From Rich Miller’s painting a picture in words of his lunch room to Jeanne Loughrin’s poems and Colin Poole’s astounding pictures, these authors have found innovative ways to express their experiences. As Jonathan Green pointed out in the introduction, this issue is truly a rich tapestry of personal narratives written by gifted individuals with the common thread of their dyslexia.

B. P. McAdams is this country’s preeminent researcher in the area of personal narratives. He believes that personal narratives (the stories we tell about our lives) are critical to our self-image and our ability to function as successful adults. He has studied the personal narratives of thousands of individuals and found that the most socially minded people in our society share common themes in their personal narratives. He labels these themes “the Redemptive Self.” These stories of redemption are not necessarily religious in nature, but their essential theme involves overcoming a struggle or a tragedy and growing from it. McAdams asserts that much of these individuals’ successes are due to these redemptive narratives. In fact, he goes as far as to suggest that part of our success as a nation grows out of the fact that we have, as a group, many redemptive narratives, such as taming the wilderness and overcoming discrimination and segregation.

I am struck by how similar the present stories are to McAdams’ redemptive narratives. Almost all of the authors identify their struggles and how their struggle with dyslexia helped them succeed later in life. McAdams has identified some essential themes to these redemptive narratives. First, these narratives often begin with a sense of being privileged or blessed—not financially, but by significant people in the individual’s life or talents he or she might possess. Rich Miller, Jennifer Smith, and Mary Wennersten all write about how important their parents’ encouragement and support were to their success. Jack Horner, Paul Orfalea, and John Fish write about how lucky they were to have the special abilities that they believe grew out of their dyslexia. Finally, many of the authors in this issue write specifically about how grateful they are to have had teachers who understood their dyslexia and knew how to remediate it.

The importance of learning an ethic, whether it be persistence, helping others, or self-discipline was another theme in these redemptive narratives. Katherine Gardener, Mary Wennersten, and Jennifer Smith all write about how important it is to never give up. Clearly, this ethic learned early in their lives, helped them to overcome their dyslexia and continue to succeed.

Many of the authors speak very cogently about how difficult dyslexia was for them and the obstacles they faced. Abby Wilpers writes about the shame of being dyslexic and the pressure in a competitive school. The poem “My Teacher” speaks to the impact we have on our students if we don’t understand their difficulties. Mary Wennersten describes beautifully the pain of wanting to read and failing.

Overcoming these obstacles is a key element in all of the narratives in this issue. Jack Horner’s ability to make ground-breaking discoveries in paleontology in spite of his reading and spelling deficits, Jennifer Smith’s accomplishment of learning to read and succeeding in school, and Samuel Garfield’s success in teaching and leading his rescue team members are all examples of these individual victories. However, in stories of redemption, victory is not enough. Our heroes and heroines must grow and develop because of their struggles. They clearly do in these articles. Our protagonists not only learned specific skills, such as organization, persistence, and ability to work the system, they also developed exceptional abilities such as empathy for others, courage, and altruism.

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This ability to profit from their struggles is particularly evident in the stories of the three entrepreneurs, Paul Orfalea, Cameron James, and John Fish. They were able to use their abilities and tools that grew out of their experiences with dyslexia and use them to produce innovative services and products. Their ability to think out of the box allowed them to see opportunities and provide solutions that other, more linear thinkers might not have considered. Furthermore, overcoming obstacles gave them strategies and skills, such as working with others and developing innovative ways to organize their businesses and provide services and products. It is not an accident that a 2007 study by Julie Logan, a professor of entrepreneurship at the Cass Business School in London, reported in The New York Times that of the entrepreneurs she had surveyed—35 percent—identified themselves as dyslexic. The study also showed that dyslexics were more likely than people without dyslexia to delegate authority and excel in oral communication and problem solving; and they were twice as likely to own two or more businesses. For a group who often were voted least likely to succeed in school, this is an astounding statistic.

Our knowledge about brain development and brain functioning has expanded many fold over the past generation. While there is still so much to learn, we can diagnose and recommend successful treatments for many different learning disabilities. Just as the mother who senses that her child is not stupid, if we listen to these people describe their experience with learning,
we can sense reservoirs of strength that undoubtedly will continue to help us solve future challenges.

As teachers, therapists, parents, and mentors we must help young people with dyslexia write their personal narratives as success stories rather than tragedies. Teaching them to read is essential. However, as Tom West states; “this is only part of the job.” We must accomplish two things: First, help each child craft his or her personal story and second, change societal attitudes concerning talents and potentials.

To help children live and write success stories we must value and encourage their talents, allowing them to see past video games and motorcycles to careers in computer programming and engineering. We must encourage and enjoy their quirky sense of humor and unusual way of looking at things. We must confront perfectionism while promoting excellence. Young dyslexics need to understand that mistakes are not their enemies. Thomas Edison often ended up learning far more from his mistakes than he did from his successes. In fact, persistence, innovation, and insight are far more valuable than A+s. As a Nation we take great pride in overcoming obstacles and facing adversity. Young dyslexics need to understand that their battle to overcome their learning disabilities takes that same persistence and courage.

For dyslexics to truly value their abilities and strengths, it is important for society to shift its attitudes concerning success and competency. I have watched for 35 years as we tried all the obvious solutions. We taught special classes in universities, we conducted teacher in-services, we developed experimental schools which stressed all kinds of intelligences; however, these activities had very few effects on society as a whole. I believe we should start is by shifting our own attitudes. In our community it is not the teachers, clinicians, or researchers who are the true superstars. It is dyslexics. The time has come for us to enlist the help of dyslexics from many different walks of life to think outside the box and solve this dilemma.

Individual dyslexics must, also, change their behavior. As a dyslexic, I know it seems easy to hide. Actually, it is not easy at all. It takes a lot of work to blend in and not be yourself. It is also lonely. Our fear and shame keeps us prisoners. I applaud these authors for their openness and courage. As dyslexics, it is our responsibility to reach out to each other, speak more openly about our gifts and struggles, thereby, giving younger dyslexics the gifts of encouragement, persistence, ethics, and redemption.

Reference

Michael Ryan, Ph.D., is a Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Grand Rapids, Michigan. For over 25 years he has diagnosed and treated children and adults with learning disabilities, depression, and anxiety disorders. He is the President of the Michigan Branch of IDA and a past Vice President of IDA. He has authored many articles and chapters on dyslexia and psychiatric disorders including The Other 16 Hours in the Emeritus series. He is presently a member of the faculty of the International Individual and Group Psychotherapy Association.
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