

Are There Any Benefits To Being 'Dyslexic'?

It would be safe to say that most 'dyslexics' have been, or periodically are subject to periods of low self-concept or depression. Knowledge and information for parents and school-teachers has, to date been so poor, that it has been almost standard that the 'dyslexic' child has been poorly understood, has himself poorly understood and therefore failed, and been blamed for his own failure. The consequence of such a start to life is commonly a fragile self-concept, and a marked tendency to depression – feeling out of control of one's life.

To finally get recognition of their 'dyslexia' as a life-long affliction is a major relief to many adults, but in itself does nothing to change the over-riding sense of failure and anger that many experience. Ron Davis, in his handbook, "THE GIFT OF DYSLEXIA" sympathetically attempts to reframe the 'Dyslexic' state as a gift (as opposed to the curse that so many of us experience) and so continue the exercise here by way of an exploration of the up-side of the pictorial, non-linguistic thinking style.

Some of the possible characteristics that go with 'dyslexia' are outlined in my previous article (Article No. 4; So What Else Goes With Being Dyslexic?), and include a tendency to be pictorial, hands-on, sensitive and emotional.

As adults male 'dyslexics' have historically been drawn to such roles as manual labourers, drivers, tradesmen, work with animals, mechanics, engineers, architects and artists. To some degree they have gravitated to this style of employment as a result of lack of educational achievement, but also because of their hands-on, pictorial skill style. The IT, entertainment and hospitality industries currently have a similar draw to school-leaving 'dyslexics', but sadly our prisons become eventual host to a disproportionately high percentage of our male 'dyslexic' population.

While the term 'dyslexia' refers to the lack of capacity for language, arguably the reality of the 'dyslexic' state, is a predilection to think in pictures. As our educational systems are essentially language-based, the lack of word-sense is a marked disadvantage in childhood, but as the person grows beyond the education system the hands-on, pictorial thinking style can come into its own and provide some marked advantages over non-pictorial persons.

Backyard engineers, innovators and inventors more often than not are dyslexic, as are master-craftsmen and precision artisans such as watchmakers or the builders of violins. Here the ability to visualize minute componentry, magnified many thousands of times, moving or stationary, from any perspective, and in a series of different functions, is a huge advantage.

Men (believe they) seldom get lost, (an example of their pictorial brain in action) and dyslexics in particular tend to have an ability to sense what something would look like if viewed from a range of different perspectives. House design is a case in point with most architects and draughts-men being male, and with their male clients being readily able to sense the 'feel' of a house from looking at a plan – a bird's eye drawing. Women clients tend to have more difficulty with this, and many experience a sense of disappointment with the final product, or they institute repeated changes as the house construction nears completion and they gain more sense as to its real form. Recent computerised design innovation has been invaluable in this regard.

Although some 'dyslexics' are seen to be clumsy and poorly coordinated ('dyspraxia') there is a notable tendency for others to achieve top-level skill in sports requiring a combination of hand-eye coordination, predictive ability, and full-body reflex ability. These lucky individuals seem to have an innate ability to perceive movement, space and time in a manner that allows them to attain remarkable ability levels in their chosen field – be it sport or otherwise. In NZ our top performers in Motor-cross racing, Rally-sport, and Ice-hockey goal-keeping immediately come to mind as examples.

One of the significant 'benefits' of being 'dyslexic' is the absence of constraints to thinking. Although any 'word-thinker' (i.e. normal person) would not consider themselves to be particularly constrained in their thinking, they can really only think in a manner similar to this line of text that you are currently reading. That is, they think in a singular line of words (linear thinking), and can only move to a different line by ceasing the current one. In this writing I can present an idea via a string of words, but to present a different idea I must use a subsequent, and different string of words.

The 'dyslexic' person is not constrained in this way, and has the ability to think several different things at the same time. In this he can compare and contrast anything he can visualize, from material objects, to social situations, actual, supposed or potential. He does this by using a 'split-screen' format in his pictorial brain, so that two or more different concepts are presented simultaneously, and may even be advanced simultaneously in terms of their growth, wear or change over time – forwards, or backwards. The potential for development of ideas, designs or concepts is almost unlimited. It was this style of thinking that allowed John Britten to develop and build his world-beating super-bike in his Christchurch backyard.

The difference between the language (linear) thinking style, and the pictorial (dyslexic) thinking style is similar to the difference between listening to a live radio report on a rugby match, and watching that game on TV. In the radio version you have only one string of words informing you – in the other your eyes can supply you with a much wider range of information simultaneously from any part of your screen.

The downside of this is the complication involved in answering the question "What are you thinking?" It has been suggested that the 'dyslexic' person has approximately 60,000 more units of information in their head at any one moment than other people. No wonder they sometimes look a little overwhelmed and spacey.

On a more meta-physical basis, there has been the suggestion that dyslexics may not be as enslaved to ego as other people. According to Eckhart Toll (A NEW EARTH) ego has its essence in the use of the names we give ourselves ("I", "Me", "My") which he asserts, are all language concepts. The person without a functional internal language monologue, (the "dyslexic"), is less likely to develop these notions so early, so much, or for their ego-istic notions to become so entrenched. This person is therefore less likely to become stuck in or deceived by ego, and may as a result be more altruistic or philanthropic in their motivation.

Writing this passage just as the Presidential elections in the USA, and the Governmental elections take place in NZ, it is but a simple step (and a huge flight of fantasy) to then suggest that the world may be a better place if we elected 'dyslexics' to positions of national and international power. Barack Obama is certainly left-handed – the style of his thinking also suggests to this writer that he is a 'dyslexic' - although with a turbo-charged V8 under the bonnet!

By definition the 'dyslexic' person does not do language. Herein lies a difficulty. Whereas they may have very highly developed constructions and visual understandings of their pet projects, communicating these usefully to other people may be very difficult for them. (This obviously does not apply to Obama). Theorists prefer to link and express thinking via language, but visionaries may be quietly absorbed in their own picture show and have few useful ways of sharing this or making their ideas overt. Dyslexics often work alone for this reason.

Psychic Societies have long been stating that many of their members are 'dyslexic'. In a similar manner the writer has long noted that many 'dyslexic' children show psychic, and intuitive tendencies. They tend to be afraid of the dark and have a sense of energies and forces (spooks) that others do not. 'Fantasy friends' are often written off as a function of the child's imagination, and children who speak of seeing spirits or ghosts are usually hushed up (by adults who do not share the experience). Similarly people who seem to have 'healing' capability, or a heightened capacity to communicate with animals, and even those with the irritating tendency of constantly saying the very words that other people are thinking, often carry the evidence of a degree of 'dyslexia'.

(Yet to be completed.)

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The Language Of The 'Dyslexic' Child

If as parents and teachers we have some understanding of the child's difficulties, and style with language, we are more likely to be more tolerant of him, and to understand him better.

The specific intermeshing of dynamics that constitute the state of 'dyslexia' that any one individual 'dyslexic' will present, will be unique. Each person will be different, and in a later chapter we will attempt to explain the complexities of this. In the mean-time however, suffice to say that no generalised description of 'typical dyslexic' language will be fully complete, nor fully accurate - but some insights may assist us in our efforts to support this child.

In essence the 'dyslexic' child has a mind full of picture-shows - he naturally thinks in pictures, and differs from most people in that he does not think in words. We must remember that in most cases, (despite what may seem to be overt evidence to the contrary), verbal language, as both a thinking tool, and a means of expression, is not their thing.

There are a number of styles that characterize the way the 'dyslexic' child speaks – ranging from as little as possible, to the absolute opposite of seeming to never stop talking. What is important to note here, is that their manner of speaking is a reflection on the way they think.

For a child growing up within a specific culture, with a specific language, they are generally about 12 years old before they are considered to have mastery in terms of eloquence, structure and vocabulary. A brief (and simplistic) examination of the process of speaking, and effectively communicating, will throw light on how difficult this task can be.

Speaking aloud involves a number of steps that most of us have learned to do automatically, and all of which may cause the 'dyslexic' to stumble.

Prior to any speech is an internal sense or feeling, associated with a thought in our mind. That thought might be in word form, but in the 'dyslexic' it is most likely to be in picture form.

In selecting words to represent that thought we clarify it internally, then select words from our available vocabulary (which may be extensive or not) that are calculated to communicate that thought to a particular listener. (This also involves recognition and presumption of the listener's relevant vocabulary).

These words then need to be mentally sequenced, prior to being clearly pronounced through a coordinated series of muscle movements of the lips, tongue and mouth.

Somewhere in this complicated process is the dynamic of breath and volume control, which results in tone, emphasis and accent, all of which can dramatically alter the meaning of the sentence.

Beyond this again is a basic understanding of nouns, verbs, adjectives etc (the mechanical structure of the language) and their appropriate placement and use within the spoken sentence.

Spoken language is thus a remarkably complex process in itself for any growing child to master - but even more difficult for the 'dyslexic' child than most.

Faced with such difficulty there is little wonder that many 'dyslexics' choose to remain silent. When they do speak, or are forced to communicate verbally the embarrassment from their errors will so often confirm for them the safety of silence. This lack of willingness or ability to express themselves has a direct impact on their social skills, their social involvement, and on their self-perception. The child will often feel inadequate, and this becomes a self-perpetuating dynamic.

Others will have a huge need to share the excitement and complexity of their creative and perceptive mind, but will be frustrated by the transience of thoughts not caught immediately in verbal form. Their speed of speech (matching that of the flow of pictures in their mind) and clumsiness will predictably frustrate their listeners - and then themselves - and anger, resentment and depression may be the result. Our request for them to slow down may be potentially helpful to us, but not to them as it causes them to lose track of the passing river of visual thoughts and the desired communication is thwarted.

This is the very same cause of the spontaneous style these children have, shouting out in class, or interrupting while others are talking - they simply cannot wait, as the movie in their head is unstoppable, and they have lost the pictures that lay behind the comment they wanted to make. When the picture is gone, so too is their comment, and they simply cannot remember. Comments to them that it cannot have been important, or that 'it must have been a lie' are emotionally crushing for this child.

They may speak far too fast, trying to do justice to the multitude of moving visual images in their head - and speak largely in descriptive language - without nouns. Names of people and of things may elude them, and they may well resort to descriptive language in order to identify their subject. At the same time, it is often the case that the style of their 'picture show' will simply preclude the use of words, and they cannot begin to give it description.

The language style of these children is often rapid, but stilted, with stops and starts, and is characteristically disjointed to the point of total confusion. "It's like, it's got, you know, uh, like wheels, like, cos, and round, yeah round, and they like go, you know, go round."

In others, a prime characteristic is that each sentence remains unfinished, and is superceded by a new sentence which has a different angle of attack on the same topic. But this sentence itself will remain unfinished, and superceded by yet another, from yet a different angle or perspective. "Yes, when I got there I wanted to.....well, if I had thought of it at the time I might have..... you know, they didn't even expect some-one like me...but sometimes , you know, it's not worth the risk...."

Yet others will give no hint of any verbal dysfluency or apparent difficulty with language at all. More often these are particularly intelligent 'dyslexics' who use sheer intellect to strategise and mask their areas of difficulty. They will seldom let on how hard they have to work just to appear average, and normal.

In some children the 'dyslexic' style presents as being unable to remember nouns, or other more complex words unless, or until he can get the relevant picture (either of the object, or of the word itself) to appear on his inner screen. This particular writer is simply unable to remember the names of his own children, his own siblings, and indeed his own wife, unless he can bring their names up on his internal screen. This has huge capacity to stress certain relationships, as well as a person's own self-concept.

Some adult dyslexics identify not one, but several 'video screens' in their mind's eye, each of which may simultaneously be presenting on quite different topics. When asked 'What are you thinking about?' – a perfectly legitimate question – their first task is to assess the focus of each, and then choose which to comment on. Which of their multiple screens will they pay attention to at any particular point, and which will they share with a particular listener? Older 'dyslexics' will often (unconsciously) quickly appraise the complex presentation on each of their screens, recoil at the thought of attempting to put meaningful words to this moving mass of information, and simply reply "Nothing".

It is important to note at this point that these same picture screens are the mechanism the pictorial thinker uses for memory – and that they may well have a very accurate and extensive pictorial memory, but a very poor verbal memory. This pictorial memory is often mistaken for 'long-term' memory, and the (lack of) verbal memory for poor short-term memory.

Experience has demonstrated that it is seldom useful to ask a 'dyslexic' child "Do you think in pictures?" Inevitably they will look confused and answer "No", whilst giving you full evidence via their eye, head and hand movements (as well as their visually descriptive language) that this is exactly what they do. From their point of view they just think, and they have never considered that they do this differently from other people.

Some 'dyslexics' speak in spasmodic bursts, as a product of the way the words come to them. For these children, some or all of the words to speak must first appear in visual form inside their picture show. In one child's words, "When I'm stressed or upset I see the words coming out of a sausage-machine in my mind. The harder, and the longer words take longer to come out of the word-tube, and sometimes I have to wait to be able to see what the word is – it's a bit like karaoke ". With this child the difficulty was compounded by the fact that the words appeared from his left, and the latter end of the word appeared first – making it difficult to even begin to guess what they might be. Brief consideration of this difficulty would suggest a real trap with words that have common endings (e.g. 'ation') and may go some way to explain the frequent 'malapropisms' and 'spoonerisms' typical of the 'dyslexic' speaker.

A lisp, a stutter, an r/w confusion and/or a th/f confusion are common in the 'dyslexic' speaker'. With these 'speech impediments' we need to be very careful that our 'assistance' does not further penalise the child (receiving 'help' means that you are not doing well enough – that you are failing) and we need to be aware that our 'motivational' comments such as 'stop this baby-talk' can be hugely destructive.

(With these children avoid correcting their speech, but help build up the appropriate muscular skills by getting dad to take the child's hands each morning before breakfast and slowly and clearly say together "Three, thick, things", and "No worry, no cry". Do this just once, first thing each morning, and allow the child to progressively implement the skills in their speech when and as they can.)

(Editor; should I delete this paragraph??? If granny has difficulty with such a 'soft' approach, take her by the hands, look into her eyes, and ask her to repeat after you, "No knickers, no twist".)

Your local Speech and Language therapist will also be able to help directly or give you tips – but as with any remedial help programme take your cue from the child. If the child is enjoying the assistance and goes willingly, then keep it up. However if the child resists and resents the 'help', be very careful of backfire and damage to his self-concept.

Finally, on a preventative note, it is highly recommended that right from birth (or even before) we minimize the volume and use of TV, radio and Hifi in the household, and maximize the amount of talking we do with the child. Although for the first few years this will be a one-way conversation ("Now we will just pop you up here on the bench, while I put the plug in, in this little hole here, and turn on the tap, and then we'll get the dishes done. A wee squirt of this stuff here – see the bubbles coming"), this will have the effect of exposing the child to a wide variety of language, it will normalize spoken language as an interpersonal activity, and it will implant a wide vocabulary in the child. By doing this we stand to extend the word-toolbox that the child will have in his head when he arrives at school – probably the single most useful educational lift you could give any child.

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Dyscalculia

In essence Dyscalculia is the name given to the difficulty children have with recognizing numerals, and working with number concepts. Although these children are not usually seen as being dyslexic as such, in this writer's view the dynamics and the origins are the same, while the actual presentation is different.

To understand, and dismantle the child's difficulty, we first need to get a break-down understanding of what the child is attempting to learn. "Number" is a complex mixture of visual/perceptual, practical, and verbal skills.

Initially we must recognize that there is a difference between what we call 'numbers' and 'numerals'. In essence we generally use the word 'number' incorrectly, where we should be using the word 'numeral'.

A 'number', is a specified, or unspecified number of items. A 'numeral' is the written, printed or typed digit representing the number.

If we are presented with a number of items, we can determine how many there are by item-counting. The numeral written down then represents this identified, verified number of items.

Common usage has led us to blend these two concepts (words) – and although this does not present a problem to most people, it does to the person who displays the presentation of DYSLEXIA known as DYS CALCULIA.

The initial difficulty for the dyslexic reader is that the numeral on the page does not in any direct way indicate the number it represents – it is simply a code (as are the letters of the alphabet) that we use. Whereas the Roman numerals can be seen to go some way to demonstrating the actual number of items (I, II, III), the Arabic system does not. It uses an agreed shape, a squiggle, that is accepted as representing a number, but there is nothing in terms of its shape, or its form that would tell the reader what number it represents. As a numeric code it has obvious benefits when recording number information, particularly when the number itself is large, but it can be problematic to persons not previously familiar with this numeral system.

Shape

When the Phoenicians developed the encryption system that we currently use to record words and numerals, (known as the Arabic system) they did so with insight and foresight. Most of the letters of the alphabet still reflect their original template – a shape-base that could be described as a figure-of-eight lying on its side for letters, and the figure-of-eight standing on end for numerals.

This template of origin can be most readily understood by visiting your local petrol station, and examining the large price-display sign on the fore-court. There, displayed in electronic digit form are the numerals – all based on the squared-off version of the figure -of-eight. We are all too familiar with this one.

Having determined that the numerals take their form from the basic figure-of-eight shape, we now need to look at HOW this shape is formed – what hand movements are typically used to create this shape, as this can have significant implications for some people.

Here another set of dynamics comes into play – that of the hereditary left or right handedness of the individual concerned. Although some authorities still question this notion, forty years of observation has convinced this author of the significance of a family history involving some left-handedness as a major causal factor in terms of the presentation of DYSLEXIC or DYSCALCULIC difficulties.

Whereas the right-hander naturally prescribes the figure eight starting at the top with an anticlockwise movement, and finishing from the bottom with a clockwise lower loop then connecting to the top, the left-hander has a natural style that follows the opposite direction. (Note that many left-handers will have learned to use the 'right-handed' technique in their primary schooling). The 'left-handed' form will often be used by apparent right-handers who carry some degree of left-sidedness in their gene-pool – a legacy from a left-hander, perhaps some way back in the family tree.

Apparent or not, this difference in natural style will sometimes cause significant confusion at a visual/perceptual level to the point where the child is unable to readily learn and retain the significance of the various numeral shapes.

For these children repeated attempts at rote learning are unlikely to work, and their repeated failure will predictably lead to frustration, anger and eventually to depression. It is therefore very important that the child's teacher understands the complexity of the learning task, and has some insights into the reasons why the child may find the task difficult.

Method

The following approach is presented as a guide only, but is designed to sequentially take the child through the steps required to acquire a full understanding of our number/numeral system.

- We start by first assisting the child to count by rote to ten as an oral exercise. In this, what the child is reciting is the names of the numerals. "One, two, three..."

- Having achieved comfort in this, we then teach him to apply this oral information to visual groups of items displayed in reality – e.g. a group of three chocolates, five apples, seven marbles, etc. In this the child is now applying the oral information on a perceptual basis, and verbally expressing the name of the numeral that represents the number of items they see before them.

- Having achieved this, our next step is to rearrange these same items into visual patterns – three items presented as a row (or a triangle), four items presented as a square, five as a square with a central point etc. This pattern-recognition allows the child to readily identify numbers of items (up to ten) without having to actually count the items – introducing the notion of shape representing actual number.

In order to reinforce the 'representational' element of the numeral system, our next move is to repeat the previous steps using pictures of items, as opposed to using real (e.g. an apple) items. This step should be fairly readily achieved, then repeated in a third form, using just dots to represent the items.

All the while the child is orally telling the number.

The next step is to record in print the word representing the number – ONE, TWO, THREE etc and helping him associate the written word with the spoken word, both of which represent the original visual pattern of items – that is, a number of items. (NOTE; this exercise may be made easier for the child by printing the words in CAPITAL letters).

Finally, when all of this is happily mastered (and this may take a matter of some days), we then add in the hardest piece – the numeral that represents the word that represents the item-count of objects. In executing this step, the Ron Davis (THE GIFT OF DYSLEXIA) technique of forming each of these numerals out of modeling-clay, or plasticine may greatly facilitate the child's mastery.

This is really what our counting system is all about, and truly it is quite remarkable that all of this is mastered very quickly by most children, and that only a few show difficulties at all.

However there is yet another individual style factor that may need to be considered.

There is clear evidence that some people process number as a language concept – while others see it as a visuo/spatial notion - they see specific number-groups as blocks, or even as rods. Some people, especially savants, even add colour!

Some of us (whose age may be presented in grayish tones) were schooled in the use of coloured rods to represent specific number groups. The tallest rod may have been red, and represented 100. A rod half of this height may have been green and represented 50. The next down represented 20, the next 10, the next 5, then 2, then 1.

This author – being specifically dyslexic – still does all his mental arithmetic by visually shuffling an assortment of these rods in his pictorial mind in a very fast and accurate manner.

It is worth locating or making a set of these (fine, square, wooden rods) so that your dyscalculic child is able to then start to process number (add, subtract, multiply) in a tactile (hands-on), visual (relative size, colour), spatial (relative position), verbal (the names), written (the numerals) manner.

This description of dyscalculia may not fit every child, nor may this remediative approach work with every student. It pays to consider that every child is different, will have different needs, and will respond differently to any one approach.

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Where Does 'Dyslexia' Come From?

The word 'dyslexia' means 'not-language', and refers to what the dyslexic is not – the 'dyslexic' is not able to do language very well.

The 'dyslexic' doesn't do language very well because his brain is wired with a slightly different bias from other people's brains. Just as the female brain has a different style from the male brain, the dyslexic brain is different yet again. The 'dyslexic' brain is not wired in favour of words and language, but rather is wired with specialty skills in visualization and pictorial processing skills. In short whereas most people think mostly with words, the 'dyslexic' thinks mostly with pictures, and has a diminished access to words.

This is not because of low intelligence, and neither is it because of 'brain injury'. It is not 'wrong' and it does not need fixing. The 'dyslexic' way of thinking is a perfectly normal and useful way of thinking – it has its own characteristics, its weaknesses and strengths - the difficulty arises when we create an educational system that focuses on reading, writing and thinking in words as the preferred style, thus putting the non-word thinker at a considerable disadvantage. This difficulty is then compounded when most of our teachers are 'language thinkers', and are unaware that the perfectly normal-looking child sitting in front of them thinks in a manner they are unaware of, and in a manner that is generally incomprehensible to them.

Although 'dyslexia' has been recognized as a difficulty for a considerable time now, and has been studied by academics in recent years, the value and effectiveness of the research may well have been limited by the fact that it has largely been conducted by academics – who think in words and have never experienced the difficulty of not thinking in words. In effect they are attempting to study non-language via language.

Historically 'dyslexia' has been a male domain. Thirty years ago few girls presented as 'dyslexic', but some observers now see the rate as rising in girls, as well as in boys. Whether the evidence is now becoming more clear as our understanding grows, or the incidence is truly rising remains unclear, but more and more both educational and behavioural difficulties are being seen as the direct result of a degree of 'dyslexia' in the individual concerned.

The writer of this article has not studied 'dyslexia' as a scientific research topic – but he has lived with a 'dyslexic' father, has a 'dyslexic' son, and has been 'dyslexic' himself for 59 years, and has spent the last 30 years working with 'dyslexic' children, their parents and their teachers. His direct experience and observations from a life-time of exposure allow him some insight and clarity - but he also quickly acknowledges a considerable degree of confusion regarding the range of form and degree in which the 'dyslexic' style is presented.

Observations from 30+ years of working with children with both learning and behavioural difficulties suggest strongly that one of the significant common factors is that of left-handedness somewhere back in the family tree. Although it is often very easily traced (mother, father, uncle, grandparent) sometimes there is no 'overt' evidence, because in the not-too-distant past 'lefties' had their dominant hand tied behind their back by well-meaning teachers, and were required to learn to be 'right-handed'.

Although this was done with the best intention, it was not effective, generally leaving the child very confused. This intervention style completely ignored the fact that left-handedness is a genetic factor, and as such is accompanied by a 'brain wiring-diagramme' that is both intact and functional. Although it is different, there is nothing wrong with this brain-style, and it does not need to be 'recalibrated' nor 'fixed'. It is the case however that European society down through the ages has had a cultural bias against left handedness, ('sinister', comes from the old word for left, 'sinistral'), perhaps as an implicit recognition of some of the differences in style and ability, and as a group left-handers have long been the victims of certain social prejudices.

'Dyslexia' tends to be predominantly a 'male thing'. We mentioned above that the male and female brains differ in their wiring, with the female brain being more attuned to the functions of verbal language. Any social commentator and many neurologists would accept that both women and girls tend to be far more verbal than are most men and boys. On the other hand, we can fairly safely generalize that most men and boys are more physically orientated than are women and girls. Boys tend to be more 'hands-on', more kinesthetic and more visuo/spatial than their female counterparts - who apparently have up to eight times as much brain space dedicated to the functions of language, and who use maybe four times as many words per day.

Those of us working in primary education are generally aware that young girls master the art of spoken language at a younger age, and more readily than do boys, and that they then use this language facility as a learning tool in school in an advantageous manner. That boys are more often our slower learners at this level is also clearly evident, as is their later tendency to close this achievement gap as they get closer to their 'teen' years.

The evidence strongly suggests that boys tend to be more orientated to some of the factors that we associate with 'right-brain function' (visuo/spatial, tactile and pictorial) in their pre-teen years, and that it is often only around the age of 12 years that boys really discover, develop, use, and take advantage of their verbal capacity.

In the opinion of this writer, a gender-based tendency to function as a 'pictorial' thinker, together with a genetic inheritance of some degree of left-handedness (also linked to pictorial thinking style) is the background setting common to the incidence of 'dyslexia'.

But there is more.

A range of other dynamics will then have an interplay that determines whether this potential 'dyslexic' child will experience learning difficulties or not; and therefore will show as 'dyslexic' or not.

Sheer intellect will have a large part to play in the educational success of the child – meaning that the child with less intellectual power will be more susceptible to learning difficulties than the child with greater intellectual resource.

The amount of exposure to language in the very early years (and sustained through childhood) will also have an impact, with the child with extensive exposure to language in their home-life predictably having a wider and more extensive verbal tool-kit via which to achieve their early educational building-blocks.

The attitude of the home to the child's potential learning difficulties will similarly be a significant factor in their achievement. Predictably, the father of the boy will have had similar experiences at school. If his attitude is dismissive of school and of formal education, this will have an effect on the child. If his attitude is one of intolerance of the child's difficulties, this may have a destructive impact on the child. If the father is tolerant, supportive of the school and of the child, the child's self-concept may be preserved, and the child may not succumb significantly to the difficulties of 'dyslexia'.

Adult gender can also play a role. If the child has an active, verbal, participating father, the necessary language foundation may be laid down in the crucial formative years. However, if the father is absent (remember that the father of the boy is highly likely to have been 'dyslexic' himself, may have had learning difficulties, may have a poor self-concept, and consequential difficulties in holding relationships together) and not an active player in the child's life, the only significant adults in his life may all be female (including the class-teacher) and be users of a thinking style that is to some degree foreign to him.

The point of expanding on this array of possible dynamics is to demonstrate why it is so difficult to determine why some children present as 'dyslexic' and others do not; why it is so difficult to define what constitutes 'dyslexia', and why it is so difficult to 'test' for 'dyslexia' in any meaningful way.

And so we come to the 'testing' process. In this writer's experience too many 'dyslexic' children have been dismissed as being of 'low intelligence' after being assessed via the formal testing process. Internal school assessments are useful in that they measure clearly and accurately the educational achievement of the child. What they do not tell us however, is why a particular child may not have mastered a particular skill. It is too easy for us as educational professionals to make deductions about cause and effect here, and great care needs to be taken to ensure that we do not read more into these test results than they validly tell us.

Recognising this, schools frequently refer children on to educational specialists for more specific evaluation. However when it comes to diagnostic testing caution is essential. Some 'dyslexics' don't handle IQ tests well - even when so-called 'non-verbal' tests are used. Directionality can be a significant issue. One of the more widely used 'non-verbal intelligence' tests incorporates strategic and sequential left-to-right processing as part of its deductive process – its designers and users being apparently unaware of the natural tendency of left-handers (whether they be apparent or not) to move right-to-left across the page. The items of this sub-test are more readily processed by left-to-right thinkers than those with a left-handed orientation, meaning that the testing is stacked against the potential 'dyslexic'.

And this is not the only disadvantage of such tests. Internal verbal monologue – or its absence – can become an issue. In processing the pictorial puzzles on the page in front of them, language thinkers tend to use a running internal verbal monologue as a vehicle to process, sequence, note, remember and accumulatively learn the skills to decipher, master and thus perform. What is so often unrecognized here, is that our 'pictorial thinkers' do not have this internal verbal monologue capacity, and therefore have a reduced 'tool-kit' with which to decipher the puzzle. As a result they tend to under-perform on such IQ tests, and may be labeled as 'low-ability' children, rather than children with a different thinking style (pictorial) which, in the context of our current schooling system, creates an identifiable learning difficulty.

In summary;

Under the age of 12 years boys tend to be 'pictorial' thinkers.

An element of left-sidedness in the family gene-pool may throw the child into his 'pictorial' brain.

The sheer intellectual capacity of the individual may mask (or not) a lack of verbal style.

The degree of early exposure to language in the home will effect his development of a language tool-kit – or not.

Social/emotional attitudes in the home will support or undermine the child.

The presence or absence of adult males, as opposed to the predominance of adult females in his early home and schooling life may have an immeasurable effect.

Commonly used assessment tools may give a totally misleading read-out of what the child's real abilities (and therefore real difficulties) are.

As a final point, it is worth noting that in a purely practical world the dyslexic person may actually be at an advantage. They are more likely (than the language thinker) to be able to rapidly visually assess and respond to demanding life-situations – and therefore more likely to survive in situations of duress. On this basis it is easy therefore to postulate that right down through history the 'dyslexic' was possibly a preferred operator in any social group, a person who could be depended upon to make things work.

Social developments over the last two hundred years however have brought a change in style, a change in values – and a change in education. 'Educational opportunity for all' may be a fair and valid ideal, but in practice this notion may well have blinded us to the realities of individual learning style – and our ideal may be the very factor that has created the 'dyslexic' phenomenon.

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Procrastination

- A Useful Tactic With A Bad Reputation?

- the art of putting off 'til tomorrow that which I should be doing today. In general day-to-day life it is seen as a basic avoidance technique – avoiding things that may be unpleasant or difficult, and leaving them to another occasion. If left long enough with any luck they may go away altogether - they are not on the priority list "because I don't feel up to it."

To author and psychologist Laughton King there is a common social tendency to write off natural human behaviour as being negative, maladaptive and otherwise unwanted.

We fail to see running away and 'avoidance' as being basic self-preservation, but label it as inappropriate and maladaptive. Similarly we write-off "denial" as being something to be avoided in the quest for an integrated and healthy being – completely forgetting that denial is one of nature's blessings and is a natural way for us to handle the stuff that is too hard to handle. Too often, he says, we go against the flow of our nature, rather than valuing nature and working with it. His book "With, Not Against" incorporates this as a parenting philosophy, but he cites many other situations where the same style is evident.

What really goes on when we are 'procrastinating'? Laughton King is an observer of human process. By his own statement, he is not a researcher and does not seek for 'irrefutable proof'. "Rather", he says, "I look for patterns, then I look for purpose. I look to see what people do repeatedly, then look to see what the possible benefits might be. I then test this with further observation of the behaviour, and of the outcome."

How common is it that parents, teachers, and indeed the students themselves, berate a tardy student who puts his assignment off until the very last minute. And is it these same students who will often rationalize the behaviour by explaining, "I work best under pressure – it seems to work for me, to do it at the last moment". However this same student will be running a king-sized guilt complex in the meantime, categorizing their own behaviour as irresponsible and un-useful. The criticisms of other authority persons will further erode the self-concept.

King is keen to get these people off the hook, and certainly keen to get other well-meaning critics off their back.

Look at it again he urges, and look at it differently;

A task is allocated. Typically a teacher or lecturer will deliberately structure the task to be a challenging stretch of the academic mind for the students involved - and certainly the task would have less value if it was not.

The student hears, reads, and tentatively considers the task. Predictably the initial response is one of a minor degree of anxiety, and the student quickly switches to some other thought that is less challenging at that moment.

At a surface level this is the end of the matter and other things distract the conscious mind for the present time.

King believes that at this point an unrecognised, natural, and very productive process takes place: The brain which heard, read and then considered the task has taken it on board at both a conscious and an unconscious level. Like a duck that feeds on the bottom of the pond the unconscious brain then starts a process that few observe. King postulates that the brain first works to make sense of the task, and in doing so may examine it academically (via language) then practically (in picture form) then historically (from personal experience), then comparatively (things similar and things different). Simultaneously the brain will open new ports via the senses for any new information – heard, seen, observed – that may expand the information-base around the task in hand.

The next task of the brain, he suggests, is to take all the information that can be accumulated thus, examine it for pattern and sense, then (unconsciously but progressively) seek out explanations, additional aspects, or extensions to help create a base of understanding around the ‘challenging task’. All this at an unconscious level.

At this point he says, the duck resurfaces, and the individual may think about the task at a conscious level for a brief period, before effectively, but unwittingly, allocating it back to the ‘unconscious brain’ for the next round of processing. These ‘below the surface’ feeding and processing bouts may occur a number of times before the student finally takes over the process at a conscious level, sits down to the task, and finds an ability to draw the information together in a useful way. Essay done, just in time!

King even goes as far as to suggest that the longer the time-frame available, the longer this process will take, and conversely, the shorter the time-frame available, the faster the process will be effected.

In his lectures to both students, and to Learning Support teachers at a tertiary level, King emphasizes that the brain does this naturally. Whilst we are giving ourselves a hard time about procrastinating, our unconscious brain is, in fact quietly getting on with the job – and we are we are reaping the benefit.

He goes further however, and claims that he has been personally using this process to positive effect for many years. Writing Court Reports, chapters for his books, and preparing seminars and speeches for public delivery would once have left him an emotional wreck. Once we understand this natural process, he says, we can specifically harness and utilize it with confidence. The more we get used to using it, the more we can enhance our use of the process, and by enhancing it, hugely increase our application, and our benefit.

Laughton King is currently touring New Zealand running seminars for parents and teachers about the impact of DYSLEXIA on both learning and behaviour. He can be contacted;

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Exam Technique

As much as students hate sitting exams, teachers and lecturers hate watching students fall to pieces with exam distress, and under-perform as a result.

The objective of the exam is simply to measure the student's ability level, and to thus indicate whether or not they are ready to graduate to the next level of work or study. If other factors (such as emotional apprehension) are masking the student's actual ability, strategies to overcome these would be appropriate.

Following on from Article No. 9 looking at procrastination, below are two strategies that have been shown to be invaluable with many students.

1. Pre-programming the brain to perform.

It has been said that we only use a small fraction of our brain's capacity, and that we could do so much more if we knew how to tap into the remainder capacity. This approach does exactly that.

- Consider our whole brain to be like a mainframe computer – enormous, complex, multi-faceted, and almost too technical for most users to understand.
- Consider our conscious, academic brain to be like a lap-top computer – small, portable, task-specific and user-friendly.
- Consider that the two are intrinsically linked, and that the lap-top can be used independently (and as such is sufficient for moment-to-moment tasks), or that the lap-top can equally be used as a programming tool to tap into the enormous resource, range and style of the main-frame.
- Now consider the difficulties and constraints encountered if complex tasks that the mainframe is designed and suited for, are repeatedly attempted on the lap-top -
 - the simple wiring may overheat.
 - too many simultaneous tasks may cause the lap-top to freeze.
 - unwanted and unrelated information may appear on the screen.
 - information entered may be lost as the memory-card is over-taxed.

In this example our conscious brain is like the lap-top, and we can use it as a simple programming tool to tell our unconscious brain what we want from it – what we want it to do, how, when, and in exactly what application – and even with what desired outcome.

This particular article that you are reading at this minute was pre-planned from the comfort of the writer's midnight bed. Using internal language-thoughts the writer addressed his mainframe brain -

"Big brain, tomorrow I want to put together a simple, straightforward written outline of how to use words to programme and harness the resources of the unconscious brain.

"I need the language to be simple, and the concepts straightforward. I need it to flow step by step, and I need some analogy, some clear example, to demonstrate the system, something simple, so that the reader can go, 'Yeah, I understand that'.

"I need the right words to come, in the right sequence, to start when I sit down at my key-board – and to keep flowing until the task is full and complete.

"In the meantime I want you to do all the research and preparation required to do this for me – while I have a good night's sleep. Check out all the thoughts I have ever had on this topic in the past, select and marshal them, select user-friendly language, and have it all ready for me when I get to my key-board tomorrow."

"Take this as your given task for the night, and as a supplementary task ensure that I sleep well and am well rested for the challenges of tomorrow. Thanks, goodnight".

Exactly this system can be used by students, to compliment their reading and their revision, and to enhance their assignment and exam marks, by allowing them to fairly present what they know. Prior to exams, or to writing assignments, pre-programme the unconscious brain by addressing it in words. Outline the task, the steps of the task, and the considerations that you want involved.

If the preparation is for a speech, (or perhaps for a live radio interview, or for a practical Trade Cert examination) you might programme in selection of the right tonal inflections, the right pauses, and the right vocal emphases for the particular audience. If you predict questions from the floor during or after the speech, even go as far as to ask the brain to predict all possible questions, and prepare all necessary answers – with the appropriate element of humour. It can do this, and it will do this if you give it the right prompts in a direct, positive, unambiguous manner. This applies equally to written, spoken and practical tasks.

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2. Targeting a Particular Exam Mark.

If, as the student enters the exam room, we secretly creep into their mind-space, what are we likely to see there? Tension, apprehension, even fear, as they move into a predictable task, with unpredictable dynamics. At this moment we have to ask what is their motivation, what is their intention? For most, if they heard our question they would give some sort of nebulous answer alluding to surviving the next three hours and coming out with "A pass, I suppose".

How many students actually enter an exam-room with a specifically thought-through numeric target. The results of the exam typically come in numbers, (e.g. 64%) or alphabetic grading, (e.g. C+), yet "A pass", or "As well as I can", or "My best" is the typical nebulous stated objective. Such goals may sound good, but in fact are, in themselves meaningless as they cannot be quantified, and therefore are of little value as a target.

Following is an example of one version of a parent/student conversation that can greatly assist the student to target, and achieve, a certain outcome.

P; What is your first exam honey?

S; English – on Tuesday.

P; What sort of mark are you going to get in that paper?

S; Gee, I don't know – a pass I hope.

P; A pass – so you'd be happy with 51%, huh?

S; No way, I want to do better than that!

P; So what sort of mark would you be happy with?

S; I don't know, haven't really thought about it like that.

P; So if you did have to pick a number, a mark, that you would be really happy with, what might it be?

S; Maybe somewhere around 60, maybe 70%.

P; So when you go into that exam room you will be writing for a target of, 70%?

S; Mmmmmm, 72.

P; You'll target 72% for English?

S; Yeah, 72%.

P; Good one.

This sort of process not only moves the student from a generalized, fear-based stance, into a specific, self-targeted goal, but it also acts in a self-hypnotic manner (as in the process outlined above) involving the unconscious brain.

Take note that simply directing the student to select a goal, is not going to achieve the same outcome; the two-person, processed interaction as set out above will cause the mental processing necessary to affect the desired outcome.

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