Nobody Wants to Read on Their Day Off

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Attention to learning differences—educationally and legally—has been historically driven by frustrated parents who intuitively sense that what has failed is not their child's intelligence but rather a system that is too cookie-cutter about how it educates to the average. I, however, am not a parent.

My "loved ones" are people like my clients, persons who have been formally diagnosed with some form or combination of dyslexia, ADHD, and non-verbal learning differences. Among these, the dyslexics are often my favorites, which on the face of it seems odd since all my life I have had a passionate obsession with the written word. I graduated with a B.A and M.A. in English Literature, taught literature, humanities, and composition at universities here and abroad, and when I was an Exhibits Director for a small historical society, initially created "books on the wall" exhibitions. But I learned my lesson.

Your most difficult students are your best teachers, if you are willing and able to listen. Dyslexics have been among my best teachers.

Teachers often say that your most difficult students are your best teachers, if you are willing and able to listen (no easy caveats, those). They are the ones who ruthlessly upend your unexamined assumptions, who expose so gracelessly your every ignorance so neatly otherwise masked, who punctuate with a firm exclamation mark the limitations of your present tool kit. They may vex you, distract you, drain you, confuse you, and drive you to your crazy-making edge—but they are also sources of innovation, of insight, of the shedding of skins in need of being lost. They are a bittersweet kiss. They are like having children.

When I say dyslexics have been among my best teachers, I speak advisedly. When I taught English language and literature to university students in Taiwan, I thought this completely non-Western, non-Indo European environment had pushed me as nothing else could to fully look at my language as a foreign thing. But I had not counted on dyslexics. For them, a native language becomes a foreign language when it changes from oral to written. They revealed to me just how new writing is as an acquired phenomenon to humans; while we are hard-wired to speak, we must labor to learn how to coordinate existing brain structures dedicated to other tasks into using orthographies. Dyslexics constantly remind me of how effortful reading is—how much focus it demands, how complex of an activity it is, how many parts it contains that must be effortlessly and instantaneously integrated to carry off the adaptive evolutionary trick.

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Sitting next to them and guiding them while they read out loud for fifteen minutes to half an hour—and watching them tire so visibly from the hard deliberate work—calls to mind some of my own ongoing struggles with books: Foreign language texts that have puzzled me even after looking up every word, or long or distracting days that have reached even past the quiet seclusion of my home to disrupt my focus on an alluring page written in English.

Dyslexics remind me how effortful reading is, how much focus it demands.

In museums, we seem to have a knack for placing written didactics in locations that—were they designed by a vindictive demon—could not have been better chosen. Let us be honest with each other—who naturally prefers to stand or bend over to read? Who prefers to have the reading placed under reflective glass or in a noisy place? Who enjoys having their field of vision constantly annoyingly blocked by the bodies of others? Who wants, case after case, to match all of the small labels to the multitude of objects? It is probably only a writing-centered profession that could have been so surprised by how audio guides, initiated as specialized accommodations for the blind, would be so avidly taken up by the general visitor population. Such audio guides have been available for years for both blind and dyslexics through the non-profit organization Recordings for the Blind and the Dyslexic. The "and" in that name speaks volumes about why the adaptation for the physical disability has been so universally embraced—dyslexics' neurological difference pops out into view the brain's structural predisposition for speaking and listening over reading and writing. In looking at the research literature on adult literacy rates in the United States and on visitor museum behavior, I have seen clearly affirmed this *human* preference for oral language.

We have a knack in museums for placing labels in difficult locations. Who really wants to stand or bend over to read?

So for the remainder of this article, I would like to feature my dyslexic students as they assume the broader role of teachers for us about how to create more effective public access educational environments *with and without reading*. In highlights excerpted below (taken from transcribed discussions that followed two separate walk-through evaluations), dyslexic teens and adults critique the exhibition "Fossil Mysteries" at the San Diego Natural History Museum. (The teen evaluators are marked by initials preceded by a lower-case *t*, the adults by a lower-case *a*. PG is the author.)

This critique will be comprised of two parts: 1) a nuts-and-bolts analysis of how neurologically accessible the presentation of the written language was, and 2) the emotional ramifications that presentation had on the dyslexics' willingness not only to learn but to remain in a museum as a perceived welcoming space.

One final comment: That the dyslexics suggested more simply formatted, legible texts and audio-video alternatives is no surprise. What is not so expected is that, by not offering such formats, museums inadvertently pushed these individuals towards free-time, leisure destinations such as Disneyland and Sea World—not out of innate preference but out of the desire to avoid the humiliation of having to read in front of their children or others in public. All the evaluators harbor good will towards our institutions and want to be our patrons—they just need to feel accepted for who they are.

Museums have inadvertently pushed non-readers towards places like Sea World, where they can avoid the shame of having to read in public.

And that is precisely why they should be *our* "loved ones" and not just *my* clients.

How Writing Can Open or Close the Gateway to Meaning

Using Oral Language to Shelter Written Language

aTH: I thought it was laid out pretty well for a person that can read. (General sounds of agreement). For a person that has a reading problem... I would spend all day in there on two or three displays trying to figure out what's going on… It's just something that...

aRG: You live with...

aTH: You live with. It's a shame but it just is the way it is.

tEP: What would help me learn would be for a guy to read it to me and I can understand it better. (General laughter and voiced agreement.) Like, if I read it myself, I would totally be like, "I don't get it," but if somebody read it to me, I'd understand it more.

tGA: [Or] I was thinking headphones... You would have the option of maybe reading it if you don't want to listen to it or just put in the scripts about what it is so that people can read along with it…

tPL: Cool narrating boxes. Like a guy in not too much of a loud voice but a cool voice, not like this doctor thing, "The Scuba Peius is like blah…" like that (General laughter). But this guy who uses actual words that people can understand...

tJB: Maybe you had the option to skip over different parts of the audio thing that doesn't interest you, kind of just skip over or whatever. And on the audio thing it has numbers, like 1 through 20 or something like that, and on the exhibit there's a number, so you could just skip to the number or whatever.

Avoiding Short-Term Memory Overload

aVF: If I see too many words (snaps fingers) right off the bat that I know I'm not... I'll just walk away because it's just too much.

aRG: And that's what I find myself doing. Before I read it, I scan it real quick. Because if I see too many words that I don't know, and I try to break one down and it didn't work for me, I just look at the bones and the picture and leave it like that because I couldn't do it.

tJB: I'd redo all the paragraph stuff and make it like really short and straight to the point. I just want it to be a couple of sentences instead of having to read two paragraphs. Put it in words I can understand, not like big words… [Everyone starts cutting in with faux science words]

tGA: They should give us the key words we need to know. It would be like the word you can't get is all over… the page that's talking about it, and you're sitting there…

tQW: Maybe have the main points underlined…

tEP: Maybe more colorfulness.

tDS: More legible font.

aRG: And then we had a problem with lighting. You have to stand in a certain way for the light to shine on what you're reading on, you have to kinda move to the side, you know, because that light is shining on the words and makes it hard…

aVF: And I think another thing is if you're standing there and you're reading and all of a sudden you're hearing somebody behind you, you totally lose where you were because you're focusing so much on trying to read that. I found that in the beginning of going through the exhibits I really got it, but then when I got more and more people, the noises… much more… I started to lose concentration of what I was really looking at. But I think with an audio, you can block that out.

aPB: If it's not cost prohibitive, earphones. For me, that would be the ideal thing for dyslexics… uh, second-language people…

aRG: Everybody.

aPB: I mean everybody.

aRG: Everybody. Because I think it would be too much to change all the words because like I said this one word was in a lot of them and after I saw that word—all three of us (RG/VF/PB, PB laughs)—we kind of walked away, you know. But if we had something there to tell us the word it could be interesting because it wasn't that we didn't like it. You know, we loved the pieces. It's that we didn't know what we were looking at!

Nobody wants to read on their day off.

tPL: Nobody wants to read on their day off. If they come here, like for a field trip or just to do something cool, no one wants to read that hard. That's for the 9-to-5, right? [Your] job?

The Emotional Dimension of Feeling Forced to Read

aVF: I think for us, all of us having a learning disability and not being able to read, write, however. We've learned to adapt not to get ourselves in a situation where as long as no one around knew that you didn't read—"Oh, nobody knows that I can't read so I'm okay." But if somebody started to ask you a question, your first instinct is to "Well, gee, I don't know. Ask somebody else." You found a way to get out of it.

aTH: Also, it's hard for us because we can't sound out words in our heads a lot of the time. We have to do it vocally, and we are not going to stand up there in front of the adults and kids and try to sound out a word to ourselves (laughter from others) and they're going to be standing there looking [at us]... "What are you, an idiot or something?" "Who's this?" ... and you've got a ten-year-old kid telling me what the word is and we have no idea what it is, so we're not going to embarrass ourselves more than we already do.

aVF: My kids are grown now but when they were little, that was always my struggle was when I would take them out because they wanted me, "Oh, Mom, read that!" "Uhmmm… well, let's see, let's see"… because I knew I couldn't read it. So it is frustrating for me. So I avoided places like that, especially with my kids. And it is sad that you want to do that because you know it's going to happen. Your kids are going to ask questions. They're going to want to know. And if you can't read it or get the gist of it, then you kind of want to not get yourself in an environment where you feel like you're going to have to [read] something.

aRG: I have five children. Like she said, I didn't bring my kids to the museum. I took my kids, like, to the zoo, to Sea World, to Disneyland. Places, you know, where they could get with it and wouldn't say, "Well, mama, what did that say?" "Honey, I don't

know." I took them places where you didn't have to read. Just pay the money and go in there and have fun. And that was a big problem, because I remember when I was going to school, at that time, the schools brought you to the museums and they would explain it to me. They talked to us about it and I understood it then and I liked it. But when I got grown, I wanted to bring my kids and I came to check once myself and it was, like, too much for me. It was too overwhelming for me to come here. I have five children, they're smart, they ask really good questions—questions that I couldn't answer. So like she said, I would never put myself in that position.

I took my kids places where you didn't have to read. You just pay the money and go in there and have fun.

aCC: I would like [audio guides] because then I wouldn't feel so intimidated to come with my child. Because I've never brought her here, and if I did, she would ask, "What's this? What's that?"

PG: "Mama, read me that."

aCC: Right, no way, I'd rather go to the zoo and you can see the animals. But I would like to bring her here, but I wouldn't know what to tell her about the subject, whatever it is. I liked that little video. That way next time if we want to come we wouldn't have to do all the reading. We could just look and play and do…

A version of this article was originally published in the Winter 2007 issue of *WestMuse* and is used with permission. Paul Gabriel has a private educational therapy practice in San Francisco, working with children and teens who have a variety of learning and processing differences, such as dyslexia, ADHD, and Non-Verbal learning challenges. Over the past several years, he has developed a consulting practice to museums around raising awareness of this population and how it provides insight into neurological universal access for all visitors regarding museum educational practice and exhibition design. He can be reached at paulglhs@yahoo.com or 415-310-6640.