



One Person's Path to Literacy

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I'm 48 years old, married, live in a nice house, have a successful career as an educational consultant, and I have a learning disability, dyslexia. My life was not always so great. I was a premature breech birth, had meningitis, polio, and every childhood illness. I was tested for everything including language problems from an early age so I was labeled "dyslexic" early. I went to a special school until 6th grade where I had plenty of extra help and remediation. Still, I had to repeat 6th grade at that school. I suffered the rest of my school days in public schools where I did poorly.

When I went to college my life improved markedly because this is where I discovered art. The art world gave me a chance to express myself without words, so I took a lot of art courses. I got good at making things with clay and I learned my first important lesson about my language disability: I could be smart and articulate with clay and still have a language disability which made it hard to be smart and articulate with words.

My next big life lesson happened a few years later. I drove Volkswagens because they were the only cars I could afford. I knew little about cars and had never even changed the oil in one. One day the engine in my VW bus seized up and I didn't have the money to have it fixed. I bought the book *How to Fix Your Volkswagen for the Complete Idiot*. I started reading, slowly. I bought a few metric tools, pulled the engine, and dragged it into the backyard where I took it apart. Two weeks later when I got the engine into the car and it started I learned that when you feel good about yourself and are willing to take risks you can transfer confidence from one domain to another. I knew nothing about engines but took the confidence I'd gotten with art into a totally new domain.

My next domain was rock climbing. Hey, I don't bungi jump; I'm not crazy. I got into climbing because it was a fun thing to do with friends. We all got into it at the same time and were all chicken from the start. However, we noticed that the more we did it the easier it was to take "exposure." So we did it more. And the more I did it the better I got. It wasn't a talent thing, it was practice. After about five years of climbing I found myself in Yosemite Valley on a big wall. What had I learned? I'd learned that if you enjoy something and do it all the time you get better at it. Practice makes better.

Later I took that idea into a very scary place. I decided to see if I could actually learn how to read and write by practicing. I read and wrote every day for two years. This may seem obvious to you but it wasn't to me; I had no idea that most people read things every day. I had avoided reading things as much as possible and avoided writing completely. Nevertheless, for two years I took my prior experiences and mapped them into learning how to read and write, and at the end of two years I'd learned a lot. Most importantly, I was literate.

Then came the dawn of personal computers. Once I used one, and then bought one, my writing and then my reading improved at a rapid clip.

Here's the point: had I been given a computer as a child in school I doubt I'd have been mature enough to take full advantage of it and I doubt the school would have allowed me to use it in a way that would have been meaningful to me. I needed to go through the long, messy process that

I went through with art, cars, climbing, and reading and writing to get to a place in my life where I knew I was smart enough to dive into an area that was totally unknown, hard, but interesting.

For me growing up was particularly painful and messy. My father used to tell me the bumps would build character and I would roll my eyes. Well, he was right. And even though I wouldn't want to go through it all again I have plenty of character because of it all. And I can read and write.

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