

The Extraordinary Characteristics of Dyslexia

Dyslexia comes in many forms, but for us who have it, we share a common thread; that of growing up in a society where we've been judged as retarded in our abilities to read or to do math. Each of us can narrate an early life of failure in schools, and 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, and it is not uncommon that we "dyslexics" go on to succeed at the highest of levels.

Not caring much for the word dyslexia, I generally think of "us" as spatial thinkers, whereas non-dyslexics, in my mind, are linear thinkers, or people who could be most often described as being "dys-spatios." For us 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 up-most 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 and 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's unfortunate for us that we are the minority and have to deal with the linear-thinkers' exams in order to enter the market place to find jobs. But, even though we often fail or do miserably on these linear-thinker tests, we often end up in life having achieved exceptional accomplishments. We accomplish because from the perspective of the linear thinkers, we spatial thinkers seem to "think out of the box." And we do this because we have never been in a box. Our minds are not clogged up by a bunch of preconceived ideas acquired through excessive reading, and 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, on an annual schedule, brought together the highest achievers in America with the brightest American high-school students. The Achievers included US presidents, Nobel laureates, movie stars, sports figures, and other famous people, while the high school students were winners of the best scholarships like the Rhoades, 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 end up as an Achiever 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 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 which things, such as reading and math, that I need help with, but I've also learned from my accomplishments, the things at which 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 deficiencies, but I would never think of trading my spatial way of thinking for their linear way of thinking, regardless of how many books they told me I could read. I think dyslexia is an extraordinary characteristic, and certainly not something that needs to be fixed, or cured, or suppressed! Maybe its 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!

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