

Book Reviews and Ideational Extracts: Learning from Existing Literature



Beyond Labels: Recognising the Hidden 'Gift of Dyslexia'

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The Gift of Dyslexia (Why some of the smartest people can't read... and how they can learn)

**By Ronald D Davis (with Eldon M Braun)
[Penguin Publishers, ISBN 978-0-399-53566-6
, 257 pages, first published in 1994]**

Teachers often experience students with different ability levels in the classroom. There is not a single class wherein each and every student has the same skill, aptitude, and interest as all his/her peers. Within the context of such a heterogeneous teaching environment, it becomes doubly difficult to recognize and address students with genuine learning difficulties properly. The term Dyslexia today has come to encompass a wide range of behavioral manifestations which include, but are not limited to, symptoms like an inability to pay attention, spelling errors, difficulty in reading, poor handwriting, and an over-all tendency to learn slower than the rest of the class.

As Ron Davis points out in his excellent book on the subject, dyslexic students are not actually slower in learning; they are simply learning in a way that is very different from the normal – and by “normal” I only mean more prevalent – human experience of learning. It is this difference that, when inadequately addressed, makes the process excruciatingly painful for the student and frustrating for the teacher.

Students with dyslexia have a drastically different worldview than other students. Davis claims to have found in his years of research that most dyslexics think in pictures, rather than in words. This isn't just a small difference, the kind where some people are said to learn better through diagrams and others through paragraphs. No, this

difference goes all the way down to how the brain perceives the world around itself, what Davis refers to as the “Mind's eye”.

In the book, Davis suggests that dyslexics have no internal monologue, they aren't hearing themselves think, they only have images of concepts and words. This makes it very difficult to think with words that can't be represented through images. For example, a dyslexic who reads the word “horse” should have no difficulty with it since his mind's eye can visualize a horse. However, the same student would have immense difficulty with words such as 'I', 'the', 'it' etc. When confronted with such words, known as trigger words, a dyslexic's mind is unable to form a mental image and therefore goes blank. It is this state of blankness that is the root cause of the difficulties faced by students with dyslexia. This may lead the reader to give up in frustration, or double their efforts in concentration. Either scenario, according to Davis, is counterproductive. Giving up is of course not a good idea, but even concentrating too hard is not useful. Davis argues that concentrating twice as hard on a blank image is still going to turn up a blank image. This sounds like an impasse but it doesn't have to be.

Throughout his book, Davis insists that dyslexia is correctable given the right environment and cues. He gives examples of students who have undergone training under the Davis Dyslexia Correction program. As a reviewer, I have my reservations about the claims made in the book about how effective these measures are for all those who are treated. Davis claims to have successfully re-oriented tens of thousands of dyslexics through the Davis Dyslexia Correction



program. While this is an impressive claim, the validity of such a claim can only be verified through independent studies carried out by other researchers. Having said that, Davis does give some very interesting suggestions on how to engage with students with dyslexia in the classroom and outside, and as an educator I'm more than willing to try his methods if it means that I might gain some success with even one of my students. Reading this book has made me more empathetic to some of my students in whom I recognize the symptoms described. Even this empathy has gone a long way in improving the teacher-student dynamic between us.

The title of the book makes it clear that Davis does not consider Dyslexia to be a curse, but instead a gift. The list of famous dyslexics he cites includes eminent personalities from various fields including science, art and sports. He goes on to make the point that these people are not masters of their fields *despite* dyslexia, but in fact *due* to dyslexia. He says that the same defects that hinder dyslexics from formal reading and writing tasks, make it easy for them to do difficult, abstract thinking much faster than others. Thinking in pictures, he claims, is anywhere between 2000 to 4000 times faster than thinking in words. It is this ability to think fast, when harnessed properly, that can lead to what Davis refers to as the "gift of mastery" over a subject or a field. He cites many examples both from his own research as well as from history of such mastery.

While the first half of the book serves to inform and educate the reader as to the various aspects of dyslexia, how to think about them, and how to change one's own perspective in order to help dyslexics, the second half of the book is dedicated

to giving specific practical exercises that can be done with students with dyslexia to improve their learning experience.

Over the course of almost a hundred and fifty pages, Davis provides the interested reader with a complete toolkit to engage with students with learning disabilities. He starts out with an exercise to help orient the student and ensure that their perception is correct. From here he leads the students through various exercises designed to help them with reading, speaking, writing, listening, and mathematics. All of the instructions given are simple to follow and there is no special qualification required to use them as part of your teaching methodology. The only things that Davis says are important, are the willingness of the teacher to help and the consent of the student to be helped. Once these two things are in place, the program can begin.

In summation, this book is an ideal read for teachers. The strength of the book lies not in the actual practical advice, although that is very good, but in its ability to force the reader to be more empathetic of the dyslexic condition. The book emphasizes the difference in worldview that dyslexics experience and how it is important to teach them in the way that they learn, not in the way that teachers think they *should* learn. I recommend this book as essential reading for both novice teachers who are just starting out in the field of education and will soon meet their first "difficult" child, as well as to experienced teachers for whom I predict this book will confirm a lot of their personal observations and will provide a theoretical framework in which to place the nuggets of wisdom they have gathered through their careers.

