

SURVIVAL READING

What possible job can you get when you are cannot even read well enough to handle a menu at Denny's? Adult education, even with its severe cutbacks has been the answer in times past.

We have become the educators of last resort for these folks. We can provide unique programs to a population that no one else can reach. We are in a unique position to provide learning where other institutions have failed. The key is to find a delivery system that works. Almost universally, students say they "hated school" and anything that remotely resembles conventional linear instruction is doomed by the student's perception that "it ain't for me."

Every few years, some new "wonder cure" for nonreaders emerges. Thousands of teachers dutifully get training in the new system, only to find that it too is "same old same old." Whether it's Lindamood-Bell, F.A.S.T, Laubach i/t/a, Why Johnny Can't Read, Hooked On Phonics or something else, it fails to serve the adult learner who has a pathological aversion to phonics, phonetics, writing, and books. If it didn't work for them *before*, why do you think it will work for them *NOW*?

As a general observation, people who dropped out of school have had horrible, terrible things happen to them. Without being sordid, let it be said that it will turn your stomach to hear the list of abuses to which they have been subjected from an early age. But that is not the real problem. All of us have had horrible things happen to us. But most of us have managed to "fix" ourselves well enough that we can make right turns on red and balance the checkbook because WE CAN READ. They can't. Often, while other kids were learning to read, these kids were having endless loop instant replays of the sordid events of the day before (or the night before) and nobody to tell it to. They got more and more broken by life, by abuse, and by the schools, w here

they were often lost in the shuffle, "referred" out (sent to Special Education), or just endured silently until they could leave. They never learned to read because they were sent out in the hall, or sent off to Title I (which has no exit-provisions), or just plain ignored. Not only are these folks more badly broken than most, they have no way to "fix" themselves because **they cannot read**. The first step in solving the problem is teaching them to read. But there's the crux.

The typical adult education learner has failed to learn to read the "regular way." They had erratic schooling in the critical early years, have missed many of the "age dependent gateways" to early reading, have suffered through a lack of meaningful materials and have been shunted away from the reading process by an irrelevant and undue emphasis on phonics.

They have been told repeatedly that they "don't listen" or they "aren't trying hard enough." They have been blamed for their own inability to read by the very system that failed them. There are dozens of commercial programs being hawked by high-paid salesmen working for high-profit companies out there and nothing has worked for them.

They have to have immediate success, with materials that have the highest level of meaning possible. The reading material has to be compelling and infinitely interesting as well as being written at a second grade level. There is NOTHING on the market that remotely fulfills these requirements. The programs that are currently in use in most adult education facilities "require" ten months to get one year reading level gain. They are of the boring variety: Dan can pat the man. Very compelling? Hardly.

This technique of reading instruction, while old fashioned and inexpensive, is filled with rich and compelling stories at the first and second grade level. Using this method, a trained instructor (not necessarily a certified teacher) can teach just about anybody how to read. It's cheap, it's easy and anybody can do it. You don't need a degree in reading remediation,

psychiatric triage or counseling.

This technique of teaching reading is student-centered, action-based, experiential, organic, with high affective response and quick results. It links writing, reading and speaking so they reinforce each other to produce resoundingly positive results. It builds from the learner's strengths, not weaknesses. It takes the learner from where he is, not where he ought to be. It uses eclectic activities to accommodate a diversity of learning styles and multiple intelligences.

It follows the student rather than leading him willy-nilly. It is content-connected to the learner, high personalized, totally individualized, and collaborative. It utilizes appropriate assessment and exploits all learning styles and modalities. It includes reading aloud by an accomplished and enthusiastic reader, modeling success not failure.

It requires no textbooks, no computers, no expensive training systems (training is one day long, and like learning to ride a bike, it lasts forever.) It generates high excitement. It emphasizes the teacher as a catalyst of learning, not a diagnostician who "repairs broken readers." It helps the reader build resilience and perspective through reading.

It generates high excitement on the part of staff who might otherwise be demoralized by slow, tedious, ineffective tools and techniques traditionally used in prisons and jails. It does not require special space for instruction, uses varied and flexible teaching, and treats learning as a partnership. It employs reading for meaning, not as a mechanical "reading machine" and honors the learner's language first. So when do you want to start? What do you need to get going?

What *do* you need? Paper, colored pencils, markers. (If I won the lottery, I'd include a laptop and a printer, but it's not vital.) A dictionary, an atlas, maybe a thesaurus and a few nice markers to write with. A table or desk is nice. A reasonably sequestered place to work is desirable but not

required.

There is only one way to teach reading effectively: one-on-one. For failed adult readers, hypersensitive about their illiteracy, results need to be quick and gratifying because the attention span is notably low and the tolerance for delayed gratification is nonexistent.

The main problem with using commercially available materials is that they do not utilize the reader's intrinsic organic innate language. The failed reader has ZERO interest in reading somebody else's words now or ever. Commercial programs all rely on "other people's words." This technique relies on the learner's own words. There is a pile of research out there that buttresses the contention that this the most critical factor in successful reading instruction in a high-risk population is using compelling reading material. Where do you find compelling reading at the first or second grade level? In this technique it comes like a veritable tidal wave.

How does it work? This technique rests on a few rock-hard premises (all documented):

- First words must be words of power: kiss, monster, love.
- Red is better than black. It's a longer wavelength. This is why fire engines are red.
- Big print is better than small print. We have made the print too small too early.
- Words are the best toys on the planet.
- You never outgrow the need to be read to.
- We all can learn to read.

What the teacher does is very simple--elicit stories and write them down, word for word, either by hand or by computer. In big print. In red. Then ask the reader to choose some words out of this story, put them on cards, and

burn them into the brain using multi-sensory input techniques (modeled in the training sessions) that rest on the simple premise that if one learning mode is good, three is better. *I see and I forget, I hear and I remember, I do and I understand.* Learners see, hear, touch, shape, smell and eat those words.

This program is designed to help the reader love words. They do this by eagerly using the dictionary, atlas, thesaurus, symbol dictionary or other reference tool (even in a foreign language). It builds from strength, and each increment rests on the learner's own experiences.

This program uses phonics (derived from organic vocabulary) as well as configurational clues, all the decoding skills, contextual skills and also uniquely uses handwriting as a way to organize the brain.

Best of all, it produces results fast. At the end of the first session, which usually lasts thirty minutes, the reader has a finished story that can be read and reread. As repeated experiences build the learner's story base, the teacher often makes a handmade book (again, being careful not to introduce any elements of danger or potential weaponry) consisting of the learner's own stories.

At the end of the thirty hours, there is a substantial amount of reading that has been generated, all of it directly from the learner's own experience, in the learner's own vocabulary. Each session ends with the teacher reading aloud to the learner for about twenty minutes from something gritty and wonderful like *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen, or *Wringer* by Jerry Spinelli or any number of other commercially available (nontextbook) titles with high interest and low reading level.

This technique works well because everybody has a story and everybody's story matters. Everybody's life is like a series of stories. Often, adult learners are eager to tell their story; just ask and they'll each tell you the terrible things that have happened to them. They each have a story to tell, and lack the skills to write it or tell it. That's why this program works.

Stories, like real life, have logical endings. Cause and effect, logic, even justice, prevail in good stories. Often the stories "told" by adult education learners are filled with wild fancy, crazy lying, and fabricated reality. It all makes for compelling reading, which is the whole point.

The first step is getting your "life story" on paper, and how are you supposed to *do* that if you can't read and you can't write? That's the teacher's task. As learners see their lives become manifest on paper, there is a great deal of connection to the larger story of their life which connects up the brain centers where conscience and judgment reside to the centers where action and reaction reside. Many of these learners, as children, learned to insulate themselves from further pain by shielding their higher limbic functioning areas by a "disconnect" technique of one kind or another. Often, their "limbic disconnect" has taken place many years before as a result of severe childhood trauma. This simple system moves them toward healing and wholeness with no drugs, no counseling, nothing more than words.

Many adult education experts bemoan the fact that a large percentage of their "clients" exhibit all the classic signs of psychopathology: lack of remorse, total self-centeredness, crazy lying, (there are 20 major signs Hervey Cleckley used to classify behaviors into this category, also see *Unmasking the Psychopath*). Most clinicians agree that trauma "freezes" the personality at whatever age it was when the event took place. Until the real event is remembered and dealt with, the behavior that covers the trauma keeps getting repeated.

Everybody has a story and everybody's story matters; everybody wants their lives to mean something. Nobody wants to have lived a life as a victim, not intentionally. When the adult learner's story is finally put on paper, whether it's true or not doesn't matter. What does matter is that it is given concrete reality. This has a curious effect in the mercurial personality: it centers them.

What *does* happen is that the adult education client sees himself as what Joseph Campbell called the Archetypal Hero, questing into the dangerous "extraordinary world" and returning with the needed stuff to keep the village going. Their story often reveals and disempowers the compulsive quality of their trauma. During the course of teaching them to read, all this stuff comes out, like a boil that has been lanced. If you cannot tolerate any Brain pus, then stick to the boring and ineffective textbooks. This technique reaches further back, back to myth and story, back to primal forms.

Everybody has a story. Everybody's story matters and everybody's story is like a myth or a legend or a fairy tale...if you only knew which one, you would know how it ends. Chances are, if you can't read at all, you're not likely to find the story that defines your life.

We go back to story, always, as the firm foundation. In the beginning was the word. Once upon a time. In a faraway kingdom, a long time ago. These classic forms have held the human psyche together through untold centuries of horror, of trauma and of hope. Old is better. The oblique lessons of myth and fairy tale are what were given by the elders, long ago and far away.

To this day, in Navajoland, when a kid is really bad, some old medicine man will sit him down and say, "Let me tell you a story about a long time ago, when animals could still talk and people could still understand." And then the kid has to sit there for six hours and listen to a story. It's never about HIM, it's about Coyote and the Blackbirds, or Spiderwoman and the Big Rock. But it really IS about him, and it changes him. Story has a way of doing that. It's why Jesus used parables. We are the only animals who tell stories. Storytelling is a vital element of what the reader does. As teachers in this system, we need to tell stories, write stories, know lots of stories. We must honor stories, no matter how rudimentary because they all come from the same place. The universe, it seems, is made of stories, not atoms.

When your life is a series of bad things that have happened to you, and

you suddenly find out that there is a three thousand year old story that is exactly like your life, there is a *frisson*, a chill that goes down your back. All of a sudden, there is an element of the mystical and miraculous to your life which you previously only thought was squalid and meaningless, certainly not heroic.

This is the power of myth about which Joseph Campbell always spoke. It is the archetypal form of the hero journey that we all know so well from the lessons we learned in front of the big screen: *Trust your instincts*, *Luke Skywalker* and *ET-Call Home* and *Good going*, *Harry Potter*. Each of us has a story, each of us has a story that matters. If you can't read and you can't write and you don't know how to tell the story because you've been turned into a deaf-mute by television and drugs, well then, how do you tell your story? That's what this effective, humane, flat-footed system does. Makes the deaf hear, the mute speak and the silent tell stories.

Not only do we do "fun" stuff like storytelling, we do "hard" stuff like writing. There is a mounting body of evidence that graphology entrains the brain. The disordered personality can be re-ordered through graphotherapy. Unlike school-learned handwriting, this system uses music and stylistic movement to reteach handwriting, and as a value-added benefit, seemingly reorders the personality. It often also cuts down on the compulsion to self-medicate that you see in a high percentage of this population. Not all, but some.

And what about math? Well, it's been my observation as an old geezer who has been teaching since the days when the dinosaurs were still alive, that reading isn't the most important thing: it's the **ONLY** thing. Teaching math is much easier once the reading floodgates have been opened. Math is not that hard (in spite of what Barbie™ says when you pull her string), if you already know how to read. Once you have reading and math, you can conquer almost any field, given a persistence and opportunity.

The technique acknowledges that the learner needs an interactive, high-interest, integrative sensory approach. The learner needs to become self-motivated, self-correcting and independent in not just reading, but in life tasks. The ability of process language and words is THE prerequisite to all other learning tasks. Without it, everything else is a sham.

The ability to effectively process written language, to utilize oral language effectively, to spell, to write legibly are all integral elements of literacy and this program. It successfully develops higher-cortical symbol imagery and directly applies that sensory-cognitive function to sight word development, contextual fluency, spelling accuracy, pattern recognition, and increases the speed and stability of phonemic awareness. Developing symbol imagery directly stimulates the integration of imagery and language, activating latent language abilities. This unique program is best utilized to teach the total nonreader or the adult reader with tested levels below third grade literacy. Most people want to learn but hate to be tested. Therefore, we use the WRAT as the testing instrument. It takes about five minutes to establish an accurate reading and math grade level equivalent. Adult learners, for the most part, are accomplished users of oral language. This system utilizes and maximizes that strength.

While the organic reading technique is effective for increasing literacy levels in higher-functioning individuals, it is most spectacularly effective at those who are virtually unreachable by any other system. Getting the non-reading adult from zero to third grade level usually takes about twenty hours at the most. There is nothing else that works this well, this quickly and this inexpensively.

Outcomes you can expect, beyond literacy at the third grade level include

- more positive attitude toward reading and books
- increased desire for reading

- increased motivation to read
- engagement with content in the reading act
- authentic purposeful reading and writing
- high involvement with reading process
- expanded student confidence as a reader
- meaningful learning
- personal connection to reading and writing
- student driven learning with high success rate
- individualized instruction
- using literacy to advocate for self-interest
- integrative connection to the affective domain
- empowered readers
- increased use of metaphorical thinking
- increased articulation and interest in words
- forward and backward temporal relevance of reading
- increased long-term recall
- increased motivation to write, to learn to spell, to learn to read better and better
- extended attention span
- increased willingness to take responsibility for their own learning

Montezuma County is at the bottom of the heap in the state of Colorado, bringing up the rear in per capita income, reading levels, median income, but leading the pack in unemployment, drunk driving, drug abuse, domestic violence and probation violation.

In a 1993 study, New, et. Al. listed the elements of successful adult literacy programs:

Learner centered

Recognize different learning styles and cultural background
Utilize multiple intelligences
Participatory
Do not take a "deficit" perspective
Use learner strengths
Meaningful contexts that address learner needs
Literature written by learner
Well organized
Structured instruction with teachers as follow-up facilitators
Incentives for attendance
Community tutors who also act as transitional mentors into the new world of learning.

Assessment rubrics can be developed to include

Attendance

Test Scores

Duration

Objectives achieved

Decrease in distractibility and disruption

Better relations with staff

Increased employment rates

Length of time arrest/drug free

Improved social skills

The preferred testing instrument, pre and post, is the WRAT because it is quick and accurate.

SELECTED SOURCES

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Downing, John, *the Initial Teaching Alphabet*,

Durkin, Dolores, *Teaching Them To Read*, Allyn and Bacon 1974

Farmer, Jeanette. *Retrain the Brain the Write Way*, Self Published, Denver, 1990.

Fox, Mem. *Reading Magic*, Harvest, 2001

Gattegno, Caleb, *Commonsense Teaching: Reading & Writing, Educational Solutions*, 1985

Glazer, Susan Mandel, *Getting Ready to Read*, Prentice Hall, 1980

Goodman, Ken and Yetta, *The Whole Language Evaluation Book*, Heineman, 1989

Graves, Donald, *Testing is Not Teaching: What Should Count in Education*, Heineman, 2002

Haigler, K.O.; Harlow, C.; O'Connor, P; and Campbell, A.; *Literacy Behind Prison Walls*, National Center for Education Statistics, Washington DC, 1994

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Smith, Frank, *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read*, Holt Rinehart, 1970, rev. ed. 1994

Reading Without Nonsense, Teachers College Press, 1997

Van Allen, Roach, *Language Experiences in Communication*, Houghton Mifflin, 1976

Butler, Dorothy, *Cushla and Her Books*, Horn book, 1980

Calkins, Lucy, *The Art of Teaching Reading*, Longman, 2000

Recommended learner titles

Cole, Brock. *The Goats*, FS&G, 1990
Coman, Carolyn. *What Jamie Saw*, Puffin, 1997
Cushman, Karen. *The Midwife's Apprentice*, HarperTrophy, 1996
Estes, Clarissa Pinkola, "La Llorona" in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Ballantine, 1997
Garidner, John, *Stone Fox*, Harper Trophy 1988
Hesse, Karen, *Music of Dolphins*, Scholastic, 1998
Hesse, Karen, *Out of the Dust*, Scholastic, 1999
Hesse, Karen, *Witness*, Scholastic, 2001
Lowry, Lois, *The Giver*, Laurel Leaf, 2002
Paulsen, Gary, *Nightjohn*, Laurel Leaf, 1995
Paulsen, Gary. *Hatchet*, Pocket, 1999 (this has three sequels, too)
Rowling, J.K, *Harry Potter series*, Scholastic, 2000
Sachar, Louis. *Holes*, Yearling, 2000
Schwartz, Alvin, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, HarperTrophy, 1977
Spinelli, Jerry. *Wringer*. Harpertrophy, 1998

Picture Books to Use with Adults

Alexander and the Terrible Horrible No Good Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst
Animalia by Graeme Base
Asterix by Goscinny & Uderzo
Catkin by Antonio Barber and PJ Lynch
CDB! By William Steig
Dawn by Molly Bang
Dogzilla and Kat Kong by Dav Pilkey
The Faithful Elephants by Tsuchiya
Fly Away Home by Eve Bunting
Fox by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks

The Girl Who Loved Wild Horses by Paul Goble
Hello, Red Fox by Bill Martin, Jr.
John Brown Rose and the Midnight Cat by Ron Brooks and Jenny Wagner
Leo the Late Bloomer by Robert Kraus
Love You Forever by Robert Munsch
The Math Curse by John Scieszka
The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg
Rose Blanche by Roberto Innocenti
Sir Gawain and the Loathly Lady by Selina Hastings
The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Stupid Fairy Tales (John Scieszka)
Sylvester and the Magic Pebble by William Steig
The True story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf (John Scieszka)
Village of Round and Square Houses by Ann Grifalconi
White Wave by Diane Wolkstein
Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge by Mem Fox
The Wretched Stone by Chris Van Allsburg
Yellow and Pink by William Steig
ZAK the One-of-a-Kind-Dog by Jane Lidz
Zoom by Istvan Banyai

©2005 Gwynne Spencer, PO Box 121, Mancos CO 81328
gwynnespencer@aol.com