

A tale of two woes

OR, how schools fail dyslexic students

Frank Johnston

Let me introduce the *Democracy Rules Golf Club*.

They're sticklers for majority opinions guiding club directions and their latest regulation stipulates right-handed play only is allowed on all parts of the course.

All members were given a fair vote and the right-handers won with a clear majority of about 85%.

Left-handers are given plenty of support, after hours tuition even, plenty of intensive assistance in managing right-hand techniques, correct club grip, smooth swing and so on. A few left-handers obtain passable skills, others are left to flounder.

They are called the dysgolfs.

Generally the dysgolfs are laughed about, ignored, told they won't win competitions, they don't focus enough and are usually overlooked for pennant teams.

They are told they don't try hard enough even though they have to put in much greater efforts than their right-handed club mates. Most of the club's high handicappers are dysgolfs.

They suffer a sense of low self esteem but right-handed golf is the only option available.

Outside help is available in the form of the Dysgolfia Slice Foundation, who analyse the left-handers' abilities to prove they are left-handers (at great cost, and there is a long waiting list for testing) then provide expensive tutors who give very intensive, evidence-based lessons on right-handed golfing techniques. Again, some improve but many experience frustration and depression.



Crazy scenario?

Scarily enough, similar situations actually do exist in the real world.

Mainstream education is a prime example.

Public schools, and most private institutions, provide majority rules one-size-fits-all traditional teaching methods which favour the 80 or 90% of students who are word thinkers.

They can manage phonics, sequential learning, direct instruction, rote learning, and they succeed in class and are rewarded accordingly by the school system.

Reports, Naplan tests, league tables all reflect these set goals.

However, the 10 to 15% of students who think in a different way, are visual-spatial learners, 3D thinkers or picture thinkers and are often left frustrated and depressed by a school system which does not cater for the clever and very intelligent way in which they view the world.

Families often seek outside help, spend large amounts of money for their students' intensive training in the same word-based thinking approach as in school, then are left disappointed when little or no progress is made.

Most teachers, and the academics who devise the curriculum and how it is to be taught, are themselves word thinkers and imagine success can be duplicated by similar strategies in the classroom.

The visual-spatial approach to learning, understood within a few days, becomes the visual-spatial learner's key to learning for life



Enabling word thinking teachers to understand and apply visual-spatial techniques in the classroom is a slow process which takes time and requires the readiness to see an alternative way to learning from the well worn and traditional.

The answer lies in a more diverse and comprehensive training of teachers, both initially and during service, which includes a range of visual-spatial strategies which will enable visual-spatial learners to succeed and progress along with their word-thinking fellow students.

Once the visual-spatial or 3D thinkers are provided with the strategies and tools to use their talents for learning in literacy or maths or in whichever area they have

difficulty, they simply take off and power their way to success.

With the right strategies it is nothing for a student to improve 2 to 3 grade years in reading in only a few days.

3D thinkers, once released from the school system, often 'take off'.

Think Richard Branson, Albert Einstein, Vincent Fantauzzo, Dav Pilkey (Captain Underpants), John

Lennon, Carly Simon, Roald Dahl, not to mention the thousands of lesser known significant talents in the community.

They're a bit like left-handed golfers.

Given permission to use their natural strengths, they win a fair share of major tournaments around the world.



Dyslexia indicates unusual visual-spatial talent; Blake is a great example

There are many stories of ordinary kids who can do extraordinary things because of their dyslexia.

This story comes from Albany and was written by **Shannon Smith of the Albany Advertiser.**

It also shows how dyslexics CAN learn all school subjects given the right learning experiences which suit their learning style.

A Mt Barker boy who was told he could not take part in the mainstream education system has become an entrepreneur.

At 14 years old, severely dyslexic Blake McFarlane has turned his love for his feathered friends into Blake's Chooks and Eggs.

With the help of his mother Joanne, father Shane and sisters Jacinta and Cara, he is running a free-range egg-producing farm in Forest Hill and supplying eggs to several local stores.

Mrs McFarlane said Blake was learning so much.

"It is helping us with Blake as he is learning maths, science, English and even geography, as not all breeds are started in Australia," she said. "He does public speaking, talking about all things chooks, he is involved in every aspect of



Blake McFarlane runs Blake's Chooks and Eggs. Credit: Laurie Benson/Picture: Laurie Benson, Laurie Benson Albany Advertiser

the business and tells us what he wants and we figure out if we can afford it."

His mother clearly remembers the day the family was told even with tutoring, their boy would not be able to learn in mainstream education.

"Lucky for us, a teacher within our school totally understood," Mrs McFarlane said. "She was dyslexic herself. With this teacher and a group of amazing parents, Dyslexia Assist within the school was started.

"This helped for a while, but we were unfortunately met with some misunderstanding

from some teachers who don't understand dyslexia. He acted out because he didn't understand.

"If he is told to read what he is supposed to do, the words jumble up and all mash into each other.

"When your child comes home from school in tears saying he is dumb, you just know you have to step in and do something.

"I don't care that he is getting a D or an E for the other subjects — he's happy and he's learning in other ways."

Blake got into pure-bred breeding at the age of 10.

Mrs McFarlane said he started researching various breeds, going to chook shows and auctions.

The family began trading on July 1 and are now selling about 175 dozen eggs a week.

Motel Le Grande, The Grocery Store in Mt Barker, Solomon Merchants, and Teede and Co. all use the eggs in their cooking.

You can find Blake's Chooks and Eggs on social media.



Jamie Oliver considers his dyslexia to be his secret to success in business. He was identified as a 'special needs' student at school, but he overcame that label and went on to be a celebrity chef and restaurateur. He is the second best-selling British author, despite the fact that he did not read a novel until he was 38 years of age.



Patrick Dempsey, better known as Dr Derek Shepherd on the hit television show, *Grey's Anatomy*, was diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of 12. Prior to that time he was placed in a special class for slow and retarded children. As an activist, actor and philanthropist, he frequently speaks of his troubles with dyslexia. Although he still struggles to read scripts he relies on his

memorisation to master his character's lines. Dempsey has starred in many films and television shows outside *Grey's Anatomy* including *Sweet Home Alabama*, *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* and *Valentine's Day*.

Tommy Hilfiger was motivated to start his own fashion designing business at the age of seventeen, because he was afraid that his inability to read well would prevent him from succeeding in academia. Today his company's products, including premium clothing, apparel, footwear, accessories, fragrances and home furnishings are sold in department stores in ninety countries.

Mollie King spent her childhood feeling stupid before being diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of 10. Reading aloud in class was so uncomfortable for her that she would make up an excuse to leave the room when it was her turn to speak. Even as a successful radio personality for the BBC she still has to focus really hard to make sure she reads the words correctly from left to right. As part of the girl group, *The Saturdays*, she has written 13 top-ten and 8 top-five singles, including the UK's number 1 hit, *What About Us*.

