

**Backwards and wearing heels:
Conversations about dyslexia, ceramics and success**

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Introduction:

Between May and September 2000, I conducted a series of qualitative interviews with seven highly successful dyslexic ceramic artists about how their dyslexia and their passion for the ceramic arts affected their learning and their lives. The artists who spoke with me are unquestionably accomplished, by any measurement, in an intensely competitive and difficult field. I have approached this research with the attitude that dyslexics are the mining canaries of the school system. Educational circumstances that favor dyslexics are also healthier for non-dyslexics. Stronger students would also benefit from a healthier educational atmosphere. What we learn about teaching dyslexics is relevant to teaching non-dyslexics. That they are successful learners despite, *or even because of*, their learning differences presents intriguing perspectives from which to view the care and guidance of any young person struggling to learn, to communicate and to contribute.

Dyslexia is a language learning disorder in which the affected individual has difficulty learning to read. The causes of dyslexia are unknown; however it is likely a complex interaction of an intrinsic neurological condition involving an inefficiency in the brain's processing of the phonological elements of a language, in *conjunction* with weaknesses in the teaching of reading skills and the culture in which the individual lives (Frith, 1997; Hatcher, et al, 1994). It is entirely unrelated to intelligence (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Edwards, 1994; Frith, 1997). Untreated or ineffectively treated dyslexia has been linked to juvenile crime, substance abuse and a wide variety of other self-destructive behaviors (Butkowsky & Willows, 1980; Edwards, 1994; Frith, 1997;

Gilchrist, 1997; Abrahamson, et al, 1978; Smith, 1991). However at fewer than 12% of the general population (Edwards, 1994; Fink, 1995/6; Shawitz, 1989; Seligman, 1975), dyslexics also represent a disproportional population in art schools, roughly 35% according to Winner & Casey (1992). Furthermore, Fink (1995/6, 1993, 1992) identifies the foremost factor in compensation for dyslexia to be intensive reading practice, which is directed by a consuming fascination or passion for some field of study or intellectual puzzle.

I have interviewed these artists and collected stories of their life histories using varying levels of structure in the interview protocols. I utilized story-telling as a way of integrating experience, making sense of what would otherwise be a chaotic mess of disconnected facts. Thunder-McGuire (1999) writes that collecting our stories provides a direction, an integrating understanding of the meanings to be found in experience. He writes:

...The composition of stories can propose to the writer or teller questions and serve as a framework for synthesizing their knowledge.... Telling stories is the practice of unraveling the connections and direction to human action. It involves recovering meaning by putting events and experiences into a story, events that would otherwise be unrelated. The integrating function of oral history and autobiography allow the teller to bring about, beyond the grasping together of incidents, a mediation between 'what happened' and the 'meaning of what happened' (p. 10-11).

I am therefore going to tell you a story that explains my own perspective on the importance of a creative life. This is because I learned from art that we see what can be seen from where we stand, our particular perspective. Murray Edelman (1995) in *From Art to Politics*, establishes a strong link between perception and selection. To a large extent, what we notice are things that have some importance in our experience. Quite often, we see what we expect will be there. What we perceive, then, is not what is empirically there, but rather a synthesis of our previous experience, affect, and what we believe. Therefore acknowledging our perspectives is an essential step in the creation

of any theory, and especially a theory about teaching and learning.

My story:

A few weeks ago, I was reading aloud to my children from 'The Phantom Tollbooth'¹ which had been a favorite of mine as a child about a little boy who is bored until a mysterious package pops out of nowhere to teach him to use his eyes and his brain and his imagination. As I ended the chapter amidst anguished appeals for 'just one more, pleeeezze...', an old piece of paper fell out of the book. I picked it up and stared in shock at what had been my father's preferred bookmark: the paper divider from his favorite brand of cigarettes. It still smelled like tobacco.

My family had been very print-centered. All walls, except those with paintings or windows, were filled from floor to ceiling with overflowing bookcases. When my parents had guests, which was often, conversation was very important. This was not polite and clever cocktail party banter, but the passionate rattling and banging together of ideas. Although fiery, the conversation was not angry, just excited; so I knew early on that words mattered a great deal.

I would be permitted to listen to the conversation, if I sat in full view and kept silent. If I interrupted, even once, I was sent out of the room. However if I timed it right, I could question my parents after the guests had departed and they would explain what I had heard. So I would sit with a doll or some paper and crayons, and listen, memorizing the words and gestures. I can still remember the taste and texture of the words they strung together, words that rose like the smoke from their cigarettes weaving together overhead like a blue-grey canopy.

Considering the great importance that books played in our lives, it went unnoticed far longer than then would be expected that I could not read. If a passage had been read to me before, I could repeat it word for word, using the pictures as

¹Juster, N. (1961). *The Phantom Tollbooth*. Clinton, MA: Colonial Press.

prompts. I memorized passages readily and guessed with fair accuracy. Initially if I watched and listened carefully, picked out the few words I could recognize, I could usually comprehend enough to throw my parents and teachers off the scent. Knowing that only the very stupid could not read, I put a great deal of effort into disguising my illiteracy, and succeeded remarkably well. For me the written word was a mysterious package that, if only I could open it, would change my life.

It was later discovered that I was dyslexic. Eventually, I did win access to print, but that particular journey is not the one I will talk about today. Suffice it to say that it involved the slow and steady progress of years of patient, hard work, mine and my teachers.

Briefly, the story I *would* tell you now is about how my passion for learning was not extinguished, despite years of grinding frustration and sadness. I do not recall a time when I was not engaged in aesthetic contemplation. In a snapshot memory I carry like a fetish,

I am looking through the vertical bars of my crib. It is nap time, which I hate, so I am entertaining myself by squinting my eyes, playing with the patterns of light. I turn my head sideways. Peering through those vertical slats of my crib at the horizontal stripes made by the afternoon sun slanting through my Venetian blinds, I see that dust hangs in strips of yellow light. Across the floor I notice distinctly blue shadows from the blinds. I tilt my head from side to side, enjoying the echoing linear patterns and how they jump when I move my head.

Elementary school was very difficult to say the least. I think that I got through it by pretending that I wasn't there. Sometimes, I would pretend that I was the hero in a different world populated by the people and plots of my invention. It is not that I would lie or that I could not distinguish between reality and fiction, but fiction was a better reality for me. Since school was an illegible book to me, I removed my bookmark from that particular story, focusing instead on my art. When I was drawing or modeling in clay, I felt real, solid and fully three dimensional because pretending '*what if*' was the

law of this country and I wore the shiny star badge. My concentration was so complete that it did not matter what else was happening around me. I was utterly consumed and focused, excited about learning. It was a bonus that others liked what I did, but hardly the point.

Now and then, I would drop in, figuratively speaking, on school to see if anything had changed. I was always physically there, but an intuitive instinct for self-preservation restrained me from investing too much effort into a losing proposition. When I dropped back into school and found that effort was unexpectedly paying off, I believe that my unadulterated joy in discovery and ability to concentrate, first witnessed in my parents, but later practiced and perfected in the studio, allowed me to be successful academically. Experiences of success in the studio made it possible for me to dream of something better. It preserved a child-like sense of wonder and awe about the world that is too frequently extinguished by repeated failure.

My research framework:

Having told you this story which explains much about my research, I would also tell you that the micro-aspects of this kind of story-telling is tempered by a framework applied to others' stories which broadens the particular considerably. Because few of the interviewed artists had received formal diagnostic evaluations, I first looked for strong evidence of typical patterns of difficulties in early education, and their multi-faceted consequences, such as difficulty after age eight in learning how to read and tell time, persistent right/left confusion, difficulty saying long words, difficulty recalling and correctly sequencing digits, adding and subtracting, and longer confusion with letters like b and d, etc. (Miles, 1995; Butkowsky and Willows, 1980; Gilchrist, 1997; Edwards, 1994; Fink, 1992, 1993, 1995/6, 1998; Frith, 1997; Gilchrist, 1997; Osmond & Morrison, 1992; Riddick, 1996; and Sullivan et al, 1996). I was also alert for indications, both past and present, of the psychological scarring, or 'learned helplessness' (Seligman & Maier, 1967, Weisz & Cameron, 1985), often associated

with dyslexia. The principle is that when there is no response possible that results in control over the situation, human beings will respond with lower levels of persistence, poorer performance quality and willingness to attempt new and different task.

After that, I probed for the value of their arts education and the roots of their intense fascination for ceramics. At the introductory level in ceramics, as with most of the visual arts, sports and drama, impressive results can be achieved by beginners without penalizing poor reading, spelling or mathematical skills. At this level, these activities offer beginners a variety of benefits, including release of tension and frustration, self-expression, opportunities to explore concepts (and relationships among concepts) non-verbally, pride of accomplishment and self-esteem (Edwards, 1994; Duffy & Geschwind, 1985).

According to Silver (1989), areas of specific dyslexic difficulty, such as sequencing, short term memory, spatial concepts and general organizational concepts may be exercised by drawing and modeling in clay. Similarly in a survey conducted at a Quebec junior college (or C.E.G.E.P.) to determine the value of a ceramic arts education, students (Eden, 1996) responded that beyond the obvious technical and design skills, they learned good study habits such as time management, organizational skills, the value of patience, practice and hard work. Many students expressed an increased respect and appreciation of all the visual arts and for the work and effort necessary to produce such objects. Students also believed that they gained greater respect for their classmates, their classmates' work and property. About half of the students claimed that they synthesized knowledge gained from other courses and other areas of their lives in order successfully to complete ceramics projects. Finally and most significantly, students believed that their self-esteem improved because they successfully worked through problems from beginning to end, learning important lessons about themselves and their ability to be creative.

In the last category of my interview protocols, I invited the artists to speculate

about any connections between their current career success in the ceramic arts and any aspect of their dyslexia. Because I think that success for anyone is more an act of will than an extraordinary and inherent talent, I looked for evidence from the artists that, at least in part, their success stemmed from what they had learned about coping with dyslexia, rather than that their achievement is linked *directly* to the brain organization that caused both a disability and a gift (West, 1991; Shawatz, 1989). Gardner (1983, 1989, 1993) did not find a specific Intelligence for art, but rather that all the Intelligences could, if desired, be used towards aesthetic ends. If it were true that their artistic 'talent' was a developed interest utilizing areas of cognitive strength, channeled towards aesthetic ends, the role of the educational environment would be enormous. The opposite of this statement is that 'talent will out' regardless, and the role of education is not to interfere with the inevitable.

I offer you as an example Alan Bennett, one of the artists who agreed to share his story with me. Alan earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics from Arizona State University, Tempe. He and his wife are self-supporting artists-entrepreneurs working out of their own studio in Bath, NY producing a wide range of pottery and sculpture which sell in museums, galleries and at juried craft fairs throughout the northeast United States.

Alan Bennett was born in 1954, one of five children in a rural area in New Jersey where he loved to fish, ride horses and make art. Two of his siblings also likely have some kind of learning disability. From the first grade, Alan encountered problems in school. He reversed numbers and letters, and had particular difficulty learning how to tell time. He was painfully aware that all the other children could complete these tasks that he found unfathomable. This story was told as an example of how very early in his life he learned to doubt himself and his assumptions. Very quickly, he understood the necessity of double-checking anything having to do with symbols, e.g. numbers or letters.

Because Alan Bennett did not yet understand that it was the symbol itself, rather than the underlying concept that was difficult for him, he spent large amounts of time unnecessarily double-checking his reasoning processes. It was only much later that he understood that the need for double-checking had to do with sequencing and reading symbols correctly, rather than comprehending and applying concepts. Before this realization, the double-checking actually compounded his problems. When he double and triple-checked, he was slowed down so much that he only sank further and further behind the other children.

Private tutors and summer school are the primary memories of his youth. He said:

They didn't know what to think. ...I can actually remember my mom crying. They couldn't figure out why I wasn't... being able to achieve simple goals....

Alan summed up his early childhood by saying that he was only successful four times a year in elementary school because there were only four times a year when the children had art activities. His teachers thought that he was either a dim or lazy child.

The gradual deterioration of his confidence and self-esteem made it difficult for Alan Bennett in social situations. He described himself as shy and a loner until about the age of 13:

Well, I didn't have a lot of friends when I was younger. I was into art at a very early age and I spent a lot of time doing it on my own. ...It was a high; it was great! I guess it was an escape in some ways.... It didn't matter to me what anybody thought of it. I didn't do it for anybody else but myself....

At around this time, he made many friends who had similar interests in art and fishing. Only as a senior in high school just prior to University did Alan discover that he had vision problems which may have been related to his dyslexia since his 'eyes were not working together.' No treatment was offered for the dyslexia, but this was the first small step towards understanding his reading problem.

For much of his youth, Alan Bennett encountered teachers who were actively

destructive. A grade school teacher had a nervous breakdown during the time Alan was in her class and could not cope at all with Alan's problems. This is not an unusual story. Many of the artists I interviewed suffered similar fates and disproportional consequences. In high school, an art teacher told both Alan and his parents that he had no talent for art and that he was wasting his time working so hard on his artwork because he had no future in the visual arts. Fortunately by this time, art-making was so important to him that he would not be discouraged:

I felt so much conviction with what I was doing with the art; it didn't matter. She could not, she couldn't do me any harm. She could've helped, but she couldn't hurt.

Later as a painting major in art school, Alan Bennett luckily chose a ceramics class that captured his interest completely. The vastness of the ceramics field and the spontaneity possible in handling the material fit Alan Bennett's personality and thirst for challenges. Alan said that it is absolutely essential for him to have more to learn, surprises, things he could not anticipate.

I'd like to be making some kind of political or social statement, but I'm not. It's simply, I'm just doing work. It's got movement and color, and peace and excitement, the work itself and that's what it's always been about. Movement and color, and the spirit of the moment. Once it's been captured, it's done and I forget it and move on. It's hard to explain. Did you ever play "Play Station" games? Well those games...they have them so you solve them, you go from one level to the next.... Once you've done all the levels, what's the point in playing the game anymore? Same thing with my art, once I've gotten to a certain level with something, I stay on that level for awhile. But then I get excited to see what's beyond that next hill. The same thing excites me about fishing and water, when I don't know what's in the water. Seeing what you might get out of there.

Essentially problem *finding* and then problem *solving* (Getzels & Csikszentmihaly, 1976) is what intrigues Alan Bennett, and all of the other artists interviewed, most about art-making using clay. Furthermore, Alan was not at all 'disabled' in ceramics and, in fact, learned incredibly quickly. The first day of his first ceramics class, he was the only

student able to throw a large cylinder. Furthermore, he could continue to explore the interests that attracted him to painting: color, texture and movement. In fact in ceramics, color has an additional attribute difficult to explore in painting: the depth of the glazes.

Alan Bennett also had an exciting ceramics teacher who had many similar attributes as Alan: "He's

always interested in stuff. It's hard to explain, he gets intensely fascinated by things."

This teacher loved to experiment in exciting ways and the relationships between theory and practice were tested with an immediacy that suited Alan very well.

This theme of good teaching and bad teaching ran through all the interviews. Good teachers were not merely experts in their field, but intensely interested in continuing their own discovery through the field. Their enthusiasm for the subject translated as *caring* for the learner. It mattered to these teachers whether students learned or not, and everything they did was directed towards facilitating a joy in discovery. As Herbert Kohl wrote about his teaching experiences in a Harlem elementary school:

...The children learned to explore and invent, to become obsessed by things that interested them and follow them through libraries and books back into life; they learned to believe in their own curiosity and value the intellectual and literary,...the quest...(1967, p. 52).

Alan Bennett's teacher, Randy Schmidt whom I also interviewed as a dyslexic

accomplished ceramist, defines good teaching as 'belief':

As a teacher, ...I've noticed that people who want to do something, if they want to do it badly enough, they usually can do it. I think it's that desire, wanting to make something happen.... I had someone believe in me.... I guess believing in somebody is just kind of like allowing people to find their own way, not the way that I think it should be done, but to help them find their own tracks.

By contrast, a bad teacher was ignorant of the discipline, emotionally unbalanced, unkind, un-empathetic, controlling, or disorganized. Therefore, good

teaching of art and good teaching for dyslexics is discipline knowledge presented in ways that excite students' curiosity and interest. This correlates with the aforementioned (Fink 1998, 1995/6, 1993) insistence that passionate interest in some field or intellectual puzzle was the determinate factor in dyslexic compensation.

Another important theme that ran through our discussion concerns the importance of communication for Alan and others I interviewed, a concern that overlaps both the art-making and compensation for dyslexia. One of Alan's greatest fears is to be misunderstood, having his talents overlooked because of his dyslexia. Alan describes his artwork in terms of communicating his thoughts and feelings using a medium in which he excels. In addition, he believes the single most important factor in his reading as an adult had to do with his desire to have contact with other people.

When working in Mexico, he had his first experience of pleasurable reading:

Put yourself in an environment where you don't speak the language. Nobody will speak to you in the language you understand. Everything on the radio is in a language you don't understand, and you're inundated with that day-in and day-out for months. And then all of a sudden, you discover that there's a newspaper in English and you go nuts! I mean, I used to read that thing, everything from cover to cover....

Initially when working in Mexico, he could not understand Spanish and felt terribly isolated. However this drive to communicate overcame his, in his words, "mental blocks" in both reading and learning a foreign language. He is now fluently bilingual.

Alan Bennett attributes his current success as an artist to the resourcefulness and hard work necessary for coping with his dyslexia:

I think I'm used to working hard. You have to work hard to be successful in this field. If you're really doing this, you gotta' work very, very hard. There's no way around it. I learned to work hard; I think that dyslexia, to be successful, I had to work hard regardless of what anybody else was doing around me. It's no good saying it's not fair. I just say, 'I want this to work', and I just work hard.

Throughout our conversations, the words that Alan Bennett used to describe

himself are paradoxes (Rothenberg, 1979): careful and precise, careless and spontaneous. He constantly double-checks, works extremely hard, watches the clocks, but his work is about capturing the moment. He has too many projects and becomes disproportionately annoyed with himself when small details trip him up. He loves the surprise of a kiln opening, fishing in a strange lake and sailing. Yet he is a perfectionist, who takes copious and painstaking notes and has held onto his highly treasured and well-worn glaze notebooks for over twenty years. He is playful, smart and very funny; intensely focused, highly self-critical and patient with difficult people. And his artwork, about capturing the moment, about the process of making art, about color and movement, humor and paranoia clearly reflects all of this. As he says:

I'm so excited about what I'm working on now....In fact I'm in, like, 20 different directions at once right now, and it's very confusing, and it's very exciting and I can't wait to get at it! Even tonight, I'm just about to go down and work some more.

Besides the themes already mentioned, problem finding (Getzels & Csikszentmihaly, 1976) and good teaching, there was also the intrinsic importance of the ceramics discipline itself. For Alan Bennett and many others I interviewed, I believe that clay was the glue, the serendipitous solution, through which the artists felt whole and undamaged. As successful adults the problems of dyslexia-- organization, slow reading speed, difficulty with numbers-- have not disappeared. Yet the field of ceramics supported learning in a dyslexic-friendly way. Not everything is easy, but because what matters is results, the route can be individualized. For those who still feel the pain from the negative consequences of their dyslexia, the ease with which feelings and ideas can be expressed is important. Finally, each artist described his artwork as a response to events in his life. Since Alan and many other described their artwork in terms of narratives that attempt to make sense of their experiences, clay functioned as the vehicle by which each could tell his own story until it made sense.

Conclusion:

I am convinced that the foremost factor in dyslexic accomplishment is not a string of typical dyslexic strengths (West, 1991; Swaywitz, 1989) that are like a consolation prize for the extra effort required, but rather an interest that becomes a passion. Our conversations, and what the artists wanted to discuss, pivoted around three themes: the dyslexic friendly quality of the ceramics field, problem-finding and good teaching. Special interests can become a life's work and a passionate interest boils down to motivation. When learning is its own reward, motivation is self-sustaining. Important for any child, intrinsic motivation is especially important for a child who struggles with dyslexia. Yet this intrinsic motivation requires effective leadership and guidance from empathetic, knowledgeable parents and teachers who care enough to get to know the child well. This is not news, but it is also rarer than it should be.

There is a story attributed to Ginger Rogers, commenting on the relative attention paid to her famous dance partner in which she quips, "I did everything he did, only backwards and wearing heels." For people with learning differences, success is achieved by traveling a different route over very un-level ground. Alan Bennett says what he learned from being dyslexic is that

If you work hard, you have less chance of failure. ...I had to work harder than the other kids just to do equal to what they did. In my younger years, I remember that. And even now, there's a – I have to work really hard to make this work. I enjoy work. It is really hard to make a business work; this may be a crazy way to do it. ...You look around and you see fish all over the walls. How can you possibly make a living making these fish? Who could possibly want all these things?

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