Natural Learning and Learning Disabilities: What I've Learned As the Parent of a 2 Year Old

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Abstract

Many students with learning disabilities continue to struggle in the classrooms of our traditional school systems, where curriculum objectives usually take precedence over the natural processes of learning. In this article, I review and summarize what I have learned about learning through the observation and parenting of my 2 year old son. I reflect on the question: What do these lessons about natural learning teach me about instructing students with learning disabilities? While I conclude that students still need compensatory strategies, they also need the space to allow learning to move at its own pace, the freedom to make good and bad choices, honesty from educators, and they need to learn independence within structure.

The past 30 years has given rise to an explosion of research, literature, and information about learning disabilities and their impact on students (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs & Barnes, 2007; Swanson, Harris & Graham, 2003; Waber, 2010). As we learned more about the nature and origins of learning disabilities, the emphasis began to shift away from identifying and labeling

ISSN:1916-8128

the student as the problem. Educators have tried to find new ways of instructing students with learning disabilities within the traditional classroom (see differentiated instruction or Universal Instructional Design for more information on teaching in mainstreamed classrooms). The emphasis thus shifted from the student as the problem to the teaching as the problem. However, many students with learning disabilities still struggle even in a modified environment and find themselves in an alternative school, and often perform better in a different school structure (Atkins, Hohnstein, & Roche, 2008; Bevan, 2003). The sometimes unstated truth is that for many students with learning disabilities, the structure of school and the curriculum is the problem, not the students or the teaching.

In my position as a teacher of study strategies to university students with learning disabilities, I see the results of unsuccessful schooling far too often. Many students tell me of their negative experiences in the classroom, their failure regardless of how much time and effort they invest, and, most interestingly, their lack of instruction on how to learn. My role for the last 10 years has been to fill this gap—to teach these students *how* to learn according to their individual cognitive styles.

I never quite realized how ironic this phrase was until I had a child. As I've watched him grow over the last 2 years, I came to the realization that I am not teaching him to learn anything: I provide a nurturing and caring environment in which to learn. *He's* the one that is doing the learning, using the cognitive processes that are most natural and developmentally appropriate. I can direct him to what I want him to learn, such as how to put on shoes or hold a spoon, and my words and actions can make his learning easier or harder. However, I'm not teaching him how to use his visual processing capacities, which he is using to watch me put on his shoes. I can model to him how something is done and offer verbal instructions, but he processes and 'learns'

the task on his own. This is my understanding of the concept of natural learning: as humans, we do not need to be taught how to learn because learning is natural to our development.

I began to take note of what I was learning about learning from my observations of my young son. I have no prior experience with infants and toddlers, so this experience has been wondrous, educative, and awe-inspiring. As I've learned about learning, I applied this new information to my other job as a teacher to students with learning disabilities. While there is specific instruction that I need to provide, gaining a deeper understanding of learning has taught me much about how I can support students with learning disabilities and has provided me insight into their lack of instruction on how to learn. In this article, I take the perspective that our role as educators is not to teach students *how* to learn, but rather to nurture the vast diversity of students' natural learning abilities. I begin by reviewing the definition of a learning disability and how it impacts a person's *ability* to learn and process information. Next I will discuss some of the major milestones of my son's development and the struggles I faced in watching him learn at his own pace. Finally, I will provide an overview of the major lessons I have learned about learning thus far through observing the natural learning and development of a child.

Learning Disabilities

In my experience, there is still a great deal of misunderstanding about what constitutes a learning disability. I frequently hear the question, "What are they doing at university?" This question implies that persons with learning disabilities do not have the intelligence to master academic material, or that persons with learning disabilities are not able to learn. On the other end of the spectrum, some of my colleagues in the field of learning disabilities are sceptical of my integration of natural learning into my practice since it is not based on the cognitive sciences.

To understand how learning disabilities and natural learning are not mutually exclusive, we must first have a clear definition and understanding of learning disabilities.

There are three key components that define a learning disability. According to the Learning Disability Association of Ontario (LDAO, 2011), the term learning disability

> refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organisation or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information. These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning …, in combination with otherwise average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning.

The final component of this definition states that students require at least average intellectual functioning. This is what separates a learning disability from an intellectual disability, which stems from low intellectual functioning (LDAO, 2011). A learning disability is an "impairment in one or more psychological processes related to learning" (LDAO, 2011). The LDAO states that the list of psychological processes is an evolving one, but research has focused on phonological processing, memory and attention, processing speed, language processing, perceptual-motor processing, visual-spatial processing, and executive functions (e.g., planning, monitoring, and metacognitive abilities). The definition also states that these impaired psychological processes may affect a person's ability to acquire and use oral language, to read, to write, and to understand mathematics, plus they may affect a person's organizational skills, social perceptions, and social interactions. The key to this point is that the impairments "may affect" these skills, but the degree to which this takes place varies in each person.

The LDAO also explains that the impairment in psychological processes is a specific, not a global impairment. It is a lifelong impairment that is not due to "factors such as cultural or language differences, *inadequate or inappropriate instruction*, socio-economic status or lack of

motivation, although *any one of these and other factors may compound the impact of learning disabilities* [italics added]" (LDAO, 2011). While the LDAO stress that inadequate instruction cannot cause a learning disability, they do state that inadequate instruction may "compound the impact of learning disabilities." In my experience, I have found that many students with learning disabilities have often learned strategies and methods that are contradictory to their strengths and prey upon their disabilities. These inappropriate strategies were quite often learned in school.

Due to these specific impairments, compensatory instruction is key to the success of students with learning disabilities. For example, a student with an impairment in phonological processing will likely require instruction in reading strategies that do not rely on phonics. There are many well-trained and enthusiastic teachers that offer the instruction that these students need to compensate for their psychological impairment. These teachers require knowledge based in research and they need to rely on a wide variety of possible strategies (e.g. focused free-writing and mind-mapping). This is what I try to accomplish in my position. I help students use their strengths in completing their academic work rather than falling back on their weaknesses. For example, a student with a learning disability in written expression may have very strong oral communication skills. I would encourage students to capitalize on this strength and have them write while imagining that they are speaking to someone. With this strategy, the student is less likely to edit him/herself while he/she writes; thus they are relying on their oral communication skills rather than their written expression skills. My goal is to teach students how to complete a task in a different way, using different strategies, or using different cognitive modalities.

Parenting a 2 Year Old

For the past 10 years, the focus of my professional work has been to help students master new methods of learning, ones that are more suited to their abilities and strengths than what they

have learned in the past. None of the strategies I've collected have so far been helpful in being a mother to my son, Darwin. While it's been contrary to my daily work, I've learned quickly that I need to sit back and allow my son to come to his learning on his own. This seems obvious with certain abilities, such as standing and walking. In those regards, I had nothing to worry about. Darwin started crawling at 4 months, climbed the stairs at 6 months, and started walking at 10 months. He only needed to hold my hands for 2 weeks while he was learning to walk. After that, he walked well and didn't need me or want my help.

Not all abilities have come as early for Darwin, and any 'delay' is bound to cause a new parent to worry. In contrast to his quick motor skill development is his average or late average verbal abilities and reading skills. Literacy is of course a skill where we as educators place a great deal of emphasis. Much of the advice given to parents of young children emphasize the importance of reading to infants and toddlers to get them used to the way reading sounds when spoken aloud and the way books work (starting at the front, turning one page at a time). As a baby, Darwin was not that interested in hearing a book or looking at it. He would not sit still in my lap for more than a page, and rather than looking at a book, he preferred to tear it apart. Even with many people asking me if I read to him, I had to admit that I did not. He was not ready yet and he did not want to read.

I kept the books within his reach and allowed him to play with them. Every once in a while I would pick one up and try again to read it to him. I'm not sure exactly when it happened, but slowly Darwin became more interested. His new routine is to choose one or two of his favourite books from his bookshelf and bring them to me. He will climb on my lap and I'll read to him. As I read a page, Darwin will spend a fair amount of time looking at the pictures, pointing and asking, "Wa zat?" ("What's that?"). He's even started pointing to some letters and

numbers and asking, "Wa zat?" When he's ready, he turns the page. I'll read the same book to him two or three times before he's ready for the next book or he finds something else to play with.

Darwin's ability to say words, not just recognize them, is also part of his verbal development. He has been verbalizing for over a year, but has not been using any recognizable words. One of the websites I visit says that children start saying words at 10 months, and most can use mommy and daddy correctly by 14 months (babycenter.ca). By these standards, Darwin is well off the mark. He uses 'Daia' quite often to refer to his daddy, but rarely says Mama, much to my dismay. So far he has used about 10 words on a fairly regular basis, but he obviously recognizes more words than that. He does not say book, but if I ask him, "Go get the book," he knows exactly what to bring me.

While I can provide the support and experiences Darwin needs to walk, talk, and read, I cannot force him to learn how to do these things before he's ready. The lesson for me was one of patience. Natural learning needs the experiences and opportunities to be in place, but it also needs time. When Darwin is developmentally ready and motivated, he will learn all of these things. So I wondered to myself — are my students with learning disabilities any different?

If I accept my assertion at the beginning of this article, that as humans we don't need to be taught *how* to learn because this is natural to our development, then what does this mean to students with learning disabilities? They have difficulty learning and they face many challenges in school and in the workplace, and I am not about to turn back the clock on their struggle for identification and understanding as students with disabilities. It is clear that their difficulties in processing information impacts their daily lives and they need to be shown alternative methods

of reading, memorizing, doing math problems, and so on (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs & Barnes, 2007; LDAO, 2011; Waber, 2010).

But if they need to be taught *alternative* methods, then there exists a disconnect with the other methods they have learned. In traditional classrooms, we often present very compartmentalized methods of learning, which may or may not differ according to the newest fashion in education (for example, phonics or whole language learning). These isolated programs of learning may or may not rely on the natural cognitive strengths of the students, and when they do not, the student is often confused, frustrated and often blames him/herself for their lack of understanding.

Although I do believe that at times students with learning disabilities will need compensatory instruction, I have also come to believe that students with learning disabilities are not given enough freedom to use their own natural processes and natural abilities to learn. From an early age, they are taught to learn according to mandated school curriculums, early literacy programs, etc. They do not come to learning academic material when they are ready, but when the curriculum dictates they must learn it.

Lessons I Have Learned

As I reconceptualised learning by observing the process of natural learning, I began to reflect on how I have used or could use this knowledge to support the students I work with. I was already using some of these techniques with students, but I do not think I fully understand why they were working. I outline these lessons below, and I will try to explain what I have learned and then connect it to my students with learning disabilities.

Learning can be slow and it follows its own path: We have become accustomed to 'learning' just by hearing or reading a fact and believing that now we know this fact and can

have an opinion. Learning is a process that is always taking place. Even after being in my position for 10 years, I still learn new things about my students, about learning disabilities, and about how to support my students. My learning has not stopped. And what I do now is much better than when I first started in my position. Students find it hard to accept when I tell them that they should try the new strategy with one course only. When they feel that they are comfortable with it, when they have adapted it to their own style of learning, then they should apply it to their other courses. I do not have a magic solution for these students, which many of them know because they have been struggling in school most of their lives. However, some think that I can solve their problems just by giving them a handout outlining a study strategy. Learning to become a better student and succeed at university takes time.

The importance of choice: When I began working as a Learning Strategist, the position was new to universities and colleges in Ontario. I am the first and still the only Learning Strategist my university has hired. The original vision for my position involved the facilitation of learning plans for each student, which would include the recommendations of the psychologist and an analysis of their psycho-educational assessment. I did not follow this format beyond the first year of my work, simply because it did not work. Students came to our appointments with other issues and other priorities. The plans were often left in the file and what the students and I did bore little resemblance to the plan. The students need to decide for themselves what areas they are struggling with and which areas they want to find new ways of doing.

Another important choice that students have to make is to decide not only what is important to them, but what habits they are willing to change. Much of studying and ways of doing schoolwork is a habit by the time students attend university. A student might be struggling with studying for exams, but they are not at a point that they are actually able to implement these

changes in their behaviour. I recall one student who was very enthusiastic about meeting with me and learning new techniques. He came to our appointments with pen and paper ready, and a long list of questions. He wanted to hear everything I knew about studying. What I discovered after a few appointments is that this is where it ended. He never went back to his notes and tried to implement any of the ideas we discussed. But he still came with another list of questions for me. I finally shared my observations with him and told him that he should not make another appointment with me until he was ready to follow through with the suggestions and change his behaviour. A year has passed, and I have not seen this student again.

The importance of bad choices: I come to my position with many years experience as a student, a teacher, and as a university instructor. I have much to share with my students, and I can see the potential pitfalls of some of their decisions. The most I can do is share my concerns with them because many times students need to make mistakes and try things that simply do not work. This is also a form of learning, even if it is painful for the student and painful for me to watch. As Darwin learns to walk and run, he falls, hits a table, or runs into a wall. His legs are covered in bruises and his toenails often are cracked. But I know that this is part of learning. He can only learn to judge speed and distance through practice (which includes both failure and success).

Another activity of Darwin's that I see him making mistakes with is a sorting toy. There are different shapes and colours—blue circles, orange stars, green squares, red triangles, and purple Xs—that only fit through the corresponding slot. Darwin generally does well with the first shape—usually the square or circle—but almost always gives up on the rest. He prefers to lift the lid and throw the piece into the bucket rather than figure out which is the right slot. This is true even though one of the very first times Darwin played with the toy he put every shape in

the right slot. This is something I have not seen him repeat since. Sometimes I will point out the correct slot to him, but usually he just ignores me and does what he likes. I know that bypassing the slots defeats the purpose of the game—to understand shapes—but Darwin has to play with the toy in his own way. He *is* learning, after all. It is just a different lesson than the makers of the toy had intended. He has learned that the pieces go in the bucket, and at that he has been very successful.

Honesty is indispensable: As a teacher and an instructor, I understand the effort it takes to choose the right reading material for a course, and I understand the importance of that reading for understanding the course material. Having said that, I also understand that it is usually the *ideas* in the readings that are often most important for students, not the reading itself (this of course, depends on the subject being taught). I have a quote on my filing cabinet for students to look at. I took this quote years ago from www.canberra.edu.au: "Academic material is not meant to be read. It is meant to be ransacked and pillaged for essential content." I am quite honest with my students when I review reading strategies with them. I state that it really does not matter if they do the entire reading or not. What is important is that they are able to identify the major points and the major arguments of that reading. Most reading strategies instruct students to read the thesis statement, topic sentences of paragraphs (to identify important paragraphs) and read the conclusion. I tell them quite honestly that they can skim or skip other parts of a reading depending on what they need to take from it.

Students learn independence with guidance: By watching natural learning take place, I've learned that it doesn't mean that learning only happens in unstructured situations. Structure is good and necessary, but it needs to be in the right balance to independence. Darwin thrives on the structure of his day. The routine gives him stability and comfort. He knows that food comes

on a regular basis. He knows that there will be a nap during the day and that bedtime comes after a bath. These routines provide him with a sense of safety and security. Within this structure, however, he has the freedom to play and experience. I give my students the same advice. A predictable routine and structure allows them the freedom to learn at their own pace and in their own style. My students find it very difficult to focus on their studies and on new ways of studying when there is chaos and unpredictability in their lives.

Unfortunately for so many children, the traditional school system does not respect or even acknowledge the importance of these natural processes of learning. Even though the field of learning disabilities has evolved, many attitudes and beliefs still function to blame either the student or the teaching when students struggle in school. Curriculum objectives created under the framework that students must learn material based on their age rather than on their individual development will continue to be a barrier for many students, not just those with disabilities. Rethinking the structure of schools, the timing of curriculum expectations, and the lack of choice provided to students is the next challenge for improving the learning of students with learning disabilities. Then perhaps students will be given the space and freedom for their own natural learning to thrive.

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