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Dyslexia and The Problem with pride*

December 9th 2019

Guest post by [Danny Dorling](#), Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography in the school of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. Danny has published with many colleagues more than a dozen books on issues related to social inequalities in Britain and several hundred journal papers. His post raises the question of why being bad at maths is socially acceptable, when illiteracy is frowned upon.



Dyslexia, for me, is a problem of pride, mine and others'. I work in academia. Many academics are understandably proud of the fact that they can write well, construct sentences carefully, and that they have mastered the rules of grammar. It is a part of their job that gives them quiet satisfaction, I think. I often receive emails which have been well crafted and display the authority with words that the sender has, and I am not complaining about that. But I know that even if I take a great of time over what I send, it will not have quite the same effect (or is it affect)?

I often hear people make remarks about the standard of student essays. Or about a paper they are reviewing written by someone for whom English is not their first language, or at least does not appear to be their first language. Being able to write well and read quickly is often taken as a necessary but not sufficient basis to be a part of the humanities or social sciences at university. At the same time often the same people are very happy to put up some numbers at a departmental meeting and say that because they are not numerate they really do not understand them, as if only some 'geeks' can count. Self-deprecation is allowed with numeracy but not with literacy.

When I was five I was just alive, wrote A. A. Milne in 1927. When I was five I first went to school, in 1973. I had a teacher who was very caring. She was so caring that she cut badges out of balsa wood for all her pupils. It must have taken her hours with the jigsaw. She painted each badge brightly using enamel paint that shined when it reflected the light. My badge was a red elephant and I sat on the table with the other children with elephant badges; all pinned to our shirts or jumpers. We were slow and plodding. I used to wonder what it took to where (sorry 'wear') a blue busy beaver badge and be on the table for the *fastest* six children. I can't remember all the animals and colours in between; but I still know several of the children on those two tables at that one small school – the slowest and the quickest.

It was when my younger brother overtook me in reading, and then my next younger brother, Ben, overtook me as well, that I began to realize I was a little bit *slow*. Ben was unusually quick with words. He later won prizes for poetry. I won prizes for maths. That got me through, along with a mother who, when I was eight, made me read a page of a children's book a day for every day of the summer holidays. By the end I was no longer the only child who could not read in the class. I was also lucky that I went to normal schools with a wide range of children in them. You don't stand out as much in a normal school.

I went into the wrong business really. But I like ideas, and I now like to write. The problem is that what I write is not actually what I think it is. It takes a long time and the help of quite a few others to turn it into something you can understand (it always makes sense to me). Between me writing this, and you reading it, more than one person is likely to

have helpfully intervened (I have learnt to ask for a great deal of help). It also becomes easier with years and years of practice. My parents didn't tell me that they thought I had a problem with writing until after I had submitted my PhD, in 1991. They had corrected seven drafts of it, which I now realize is not usual. When I first published this short story, in 2012 in a very obscure website my PhD thesis was published as a book: "The visualization of spatial social structure", all about how we see things and can draw pictures of things we cannot see. It is a book of many pictures and no so many words that were mine (there are a great deal of quotations in that book)!

In my family some children find words very hard. Some find them ever so easy. I watch a family member struggle and I get it. I know exactly why it makes absolutely no sense that we spell things like we do. I watch another, a young child I am related to read, and it is like watching magic at work. The child asks if I can check his spelling and I cannot because already he can spell some words better than I can. He is aged six – I am in my fifties. Spell checkers help, but you write toady instead of today and quite instead of quiet and you worry that people might think that you are being lazy and don't really care when you send them messages that are full of errors, the spell checkers do not help that much at all.

Some people can be too proud of being able to write well and other people can worry too much about their pride in admitting that they find writing and reading very hard and extremely tiring. Being able to think in clear and imaginative ways is very different from being able to write in a clear and entertaining style. I wanted to tell that six-year-old child how proud I was that he was so good at words, but I am just as proud of the other older one, struggling through his homework, avoiding being where I was; not being labelled as the slowest. Not made to stand on a chair by a teacher in an English class at age ten because I was "not trying hard enough". A lot has changed; I suspect that English teacher had no idea why some children found reading and writing harder in the late 1970s in Oxford. But that is all I remember about that one teacher. Other teachers were much kinder.

Above all else, I think I should not have to be proud at all. I should know that the next generation will be safe, whether they find using words as easy as a tight-rope walker finds walking on a rope, or whether they fall

off the minute they try to construct a sentence in this strange garbled language of English where there is no reason why piece is spelt peace or board is not bored. Even if you have the letters the right way around (or round or rownd) you can still easily have the wrong word. And then they tell you every sentence needs a verb...

We should be proud of what we do when we do something useful and what we have to say when that thing is worthwhile and what we have done when it helps, not about the way we have learnt to say it. Being proud of writing well is not dissimilar to being proud of having a cut-glass accent or of thinking that you look ever so good as you are talking. It is the content that matters over the style. The style can make the reading easier on the eye, but it is a surface thing, it is not substance.

If you can devour a novel in an evening and if for you words tip off the end of your fingers effortlessly then it is hard to understand why some people find it so hard to read and write. Don't be proud of it, just count yourself lucky, and ask others not to look down on you for what you find harder – as we all have weaknesses – everyone does.

* First published, quite quietly, as [Dorling, D. \(2012\) 'The Problem with Pride', RASP, October 8th](#), a year after which Danny was appointed to his current post at the University of Oxford. Danny has lived all his life in England. Before a career in academia Danny was employed as a play-worker in children's play-schemes and in pre-school education where the underlying rationale was that playing is learning for living. He tries not to forget this. He continues to write books—with a huge amount of help from many people, whose names appear in the acknowledgements, but those few people reading his unedited words realize that without that help he would still not be able to publish any of what he writes about. People are also very kind.