

# My unexpected journey

In the pre-COVID days, when I did face-to-face training, I would usually ask folks if they remembered learning to read. 99.99% of them reported no recollection of this and could not describe how it happened, or indeed how they now do it so efficiently. I think I must buck the trend on this because I actually do remember my journey to being a reader and it is not quite what you might imagine.

There are a few things you need to know about me before you read this.

Firstly, I am 59 (that places me as being in an English school as a pupil, rather than a teacher, in the late 1960s to early 1980s) and being exposed to the ‘look-say’ ‘whole word’ approach to initial instruction in reading within the context of a ‘whole language’ approach. Secondly, I was born into a lovely family but one in which no one read books or magazines. Needless to say, I wasn’t surrounded by a walled library as a child. I had two books: *365 Bedtime Stories* and a *Teddy Edward Annual*. I don’t recall my parents having any books of their own at all.

So now I’ve set the scene, let’s get to the first event in my reading story. I am sitting on the floor in my first infant class (age five) and my teacher, Miss Day, is holding up words on cards in the shape of fish. She shows us the word, says it and we say it back – next card! ‘Rinse and repeat’ is, I believe, the trendy phrase people use at the moment and it fits right in here. My mother told me I was the first in my class to be able to read all the words on the fish on my own and so I was the first one to be allowed to bring home a reading book. My older sister had ‘difficulties’ with reading, so they were flabbergasted when I sat down with the book and read it from cover to cover. They were thrilled ... Phew, job done!

My next reading memory is of being sent to Mrs Green, the headmistress, to read to her (I guess I am 5 or 6). This was presumably a big deal at the time as I remember it very vividly. There were four of us readers in the room, one at each corner of the enormous desk. We all opened our books and set off reading our completely different stories in glorious cacophony. Mine was about an elephant, in case you’re interested, but I can’t recall any more details. Mrs Green was absolutely delighted. I was absolutely horrified. The massive knot of fear in my stomach was there for two reasons. Firstly, because I was extremely shy and didn’t want to draw any attention to myself in any way; this was my own personal version of torture. Secondly, I knew that I was saying all the right words, but in order to achieve that, I wasn’t following the meaning at all – and I most certainly wasn’t reading with any expression. From then on, I lived on the edge of my nerves, constantly worrying if I would be randomly asked questions about what I was reading and would be caught out, unable to answer. I started to dislike this reading thing.

Around this time, I looked around and realised that my fellow classmates were also getting through the fish, had their own books and some were actually



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reading ‘better than me’. I became aware that the words were getting longer and there were more of them on the page. When I saw words I’d never seen before I had nothing in the toolkit and just couldn’t read them. I began to dislike reading even more – it was hard work and I didn’t think I was very good at it. I avoided it if I could.

At some point around this time (I guess about 7, maybe 8), I took a long hard look at things and realised that I needed to do something about this situation. So I took a conscious decision to try to work it out. I was lucky to have a logical brain (to this day I love a good puzzle and, despite the evidence, cling to the idea that a daily sudoku will keep me mentally alert into my 90s) and so I unlocked the code. Well, let’s clarify that ... I very, very slowly partially unlocked the code enough to be able to use it successfully. I realised that there was a connection between these ‘letter things’ and the sounds in spoken words. Then, I began to unpick the alphabetic correspondences, realising that some letters ‘work together’ in this business. I also worked out that I had to push the sounds together to make meaningful words. I worked out that longer words

can be split up into chunks to make them easier to read, chunk by chunk, and from this I was able to read more complex words. I then found I could read longer texts and, more importantly, I could understand what I was reading. I still didn’t like it though, reading that is, and I now actively avoided it. My first choice of entertainment was not to dive into a good book.

But I did love stories. My next memory is of Mr West (Year 5 – Junior 3 back in the day) who had a tennis shoe he called Hermes which he launched at those who weren’t listening. I digress, sorry, happy days. Mr West read Alan Garner’s book *The Owl Service* out to the class, enticingly serialised at the end of each day. I was enthralled. It triggered my ongoing love of the fantasy genre and I wish, dear reader, I could tell you that it also triggered an appetite for reading heaps of books, but it didn’t. I still avoided it, if I could.

I got into grammar school at 11, ironically, mostly on the strength of being able to read, understand and discuss (on paper) what I had read in a range of subjects. In the rarefied atmosphere of a 1970s all-girls grammar school, I was introduced to Latin and

with this the final piece of the reading puzzle, etymology, was slotted into place ... prosody came scurrying up behind it all. By now I could read and understand practically anything. We read Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Golding and Keats. I achieved an A grade in my English Language and English Literature O levels\* and can still dredge up quotes to answer obscure questions on University Challenge on Julius Caesar. Surely, surely this transformed me into a lifelong reader? Nope. I still didn’t enjoy reading and I did not choose to read for pleasure or entertainment. I told myself I had a leaning towards the sciences (I did a Zoology degree at university) and just preferred to read technical works – still true to this day. Interestingly, I still love stories though.

I went into primary teaching and confidently expected to learn how to teach children to read during my PGCE year in 1988. After all, this is one of the most important aspects of the job, surely? In induction week, we were given a timetable of lessons which we attended when we weren’t on school placement. One of them was ‘reading’. At the start of

\* ancient qualifications circa. the Middle Ages

our first lesson an absolutely lovely but rather clueless chap stood up and said, “No one really knows how children learn to read so when you get into a school have a look at what everyone else is doing and copy that.” We then spent the remainder of the year working on *The Iron Man*. You name it, we did it. We read it, practised voices, acted it out, made puppets, did junk modelling, only just curbing our activities short of recreating it in the medium of interpretive dance. At the end of the year, I was none the wiser about how children learn to read but I did consider myself somewhat of an expert on the Ted Hughes classic and pasta art.

Fast forward 10 years and in 1998 I discovered the work of Diane McGuinness and trained in linguistic phonics in early 2000. For the very first time I could see how to teach a child to read (and spell incidentally) and also I could see how I had taught myself to read. In fact, I was so struck by this that I rather sheepishly privately shared my story with one of the trainers on the course. Even in that context disclosing that I ever had difficulties with reading was gut-wrenching and shameful – as is, in fact, typing these words to share with the world! But, the lightbulb was switched on and McGuinness has been my guiding light ever since.

So, years later, I can see what was going on for my younger self. I have a good visual memory and that accounts for my initial success; I remembered the first words ‘as a visual whole’ relatively easily. But when the words got more complicated and there were more of them, my reading stalled – suddenly and terrifyingly. I just couldn’t stuff any more whole words in. I am extremely fortunate. I also I have the inherent capacity to see patterns and relationships and a desire to get better. I worked it out, just as many other children have had to do and possibly still do if the instruction isn’t right. Mercifully, I wasn’t a reading casualty in the sense that I am, and have been for many years, a confident and competent reader, although there but for the grace etc.

The final question is, after all my experiences, do I now read for pleasure? Did my experience of ‘whole word’/‘whole language’ teaching result

in a lifelong passion for literature? Sadly, this story doesn’t have a happy ending. The answer is no. My experience of living on the edge of failure for my formative years and the anxiety associated with it put me off choosing literature as my default entertainment or solace. In this sense I am a reading casualty.

I believe that if I had been taught from the get-go how written words work in a structured way (phonics) then the ending of my story would’ve been different. For the majority of children, the time needed to unpick the code (i.e., be explicitly taught it) is relatively short and in a child’s perception ‘over in a flash’. Some people say that phonics is dry and dull. Well, anything taught badly can be boring and off-putting. The onus is on the school to use a good quality, well-resourced systematic, synthetic phonics program (I would also suggest linguistic phonics too) and on the teacher to make this exciting and engaging with a good range of interesting materials and activities. In the 21st century there are ways to present things to young children that Miss Day could never have imagined back in 1967. For those who say phonics ‘destroys’ the love of reading, I say it is much, much less painful than years of anxiety whilst working it out for yourself... or not, of course.

Please note: Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

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*This article originally appeared on the author’s blog, [Phonics for Pupils with Special Educational Needs](#).*

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