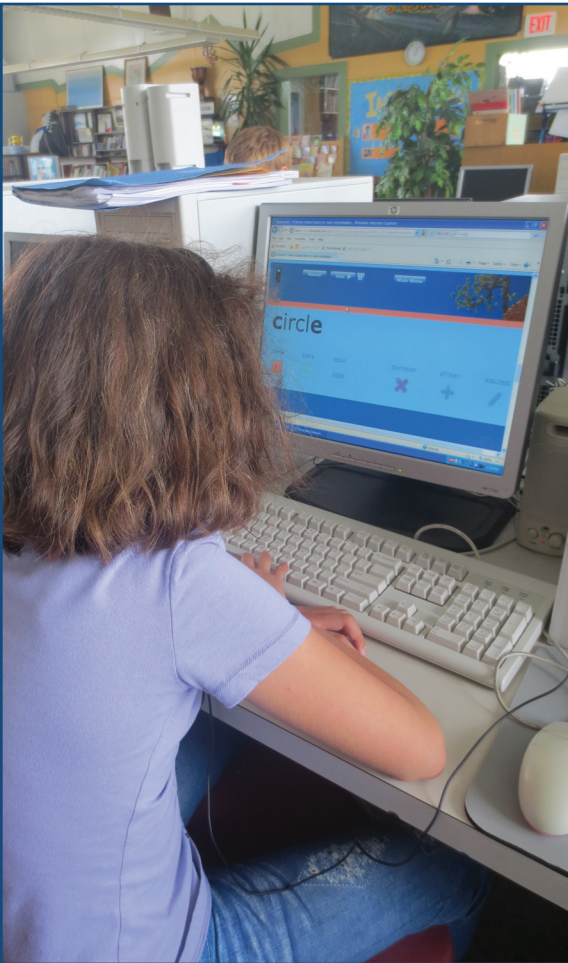


A dynamic approach to dyslexia

When reading materials are tailored to personal interests, some students begin to understand what is being said. These steady improvements lead to improved comprehension and better prospects.

by Leslie Dyson



Dynaread, a dyslexia treatment program developed in BC, is being used by a growing number of schools in the province and beyond. For Hans Dekkers, founder of the program, it started with the question “Why?”

Six years ago, Dekkers was coaching a kids’ softball game in Cranbrook where he met Arlene Schroh and her eight-year-old son J.T.

“I encountered this one child who I know now was a classic representative of this predicament. He had a marginally functional phonological decoding system and had already had four years of struggle.

“I wanted to know why he couldn’t read. I’m obsessed with ‘why’ questions. I felt this call to get involved.” Dekkers, his wife and five children are avid readers. They bring home a laundry basket of books from the library every week. “I couldn’t imagine a life without reading,” he said.

Even without formal training in teaching and education, his expertise with diagnostics, analytics, linguistics and academic research were called into play. Even his 10-years of experience as a combat fighter and weapons instructor in the Netherlands during the Cold War played a role. “It requires one of the highest levels of profes-

sionalism,” he explained. “You develop a habit of wanting the facts, not assumptions, because they can cost lives.”

His initial research led him to James Royer, PhD, and a University of Massachusetts psychology professor specializing in reading and listening comprehension. Dekkers said, “I had a fascination with the whole field. He sensed a passion and gave me a tool to have J.T. run through a very structured diagnostics routine.”

Arlene Schroh said her son was not able to make a connection between a word he saw and how it was pronounced. Dekkers told her that he was working on this issue because he’d met another child with the same problem.

“We were frustrated,” Schroh said. “J.T.’s a good kid [but] he was shutting down on us. If we didn’t find something, we could have lost him to the dark side. J.T. could have said, ‘I’m not learning anything. I don’t need this stuff.’ He was in this grey world. The school wasn’t sure what to do with him.”

J.T. said, “I didn’t comprehend the stuff I was reading. I couldn’t understand what I was supposed to do, but I didn’t really tell anybody

For more information visit www.dynaread.com or call 1-800-449-1588 and ask for a free school demo account.

because I didn't want to be the odd-ball. It went on for three years. I wasn't getting the best of grades."

Dekkers created reading materials tailored to the boy's interests and worked with him for a further three years. "He helped me understand what words were being said and put it into stuff I liked, like hunting, fishing and animals," said J.T.

His mother said she saw improvements almost immediately and steadily. "His comprehension is bang-on now," she said. "J.T. will always have challenges with the English language. But how he reads is 10 times better and that's what Hans did for us."

J.T. is proud that he was on the honour role twice in grade 7 and is now attending Mt. Baker Secondary School. His long-range plan is to go to college or university so that he can become a conservation or police officer.

Dekkers' initial research work quickly led him to the debate about the term dyslexia. "There's a whole basket of erroneous definitions," he said.

"We speak of dyslexia when a child demonstrates difficulty in learning to read, despite adequate instruction, motivation and intelligence," he said.

Scientific research shows that four out of five people with dyslexia have a phonological decoding deficit (<http://goo.gl/L40u2>). They can't sound out words. "It's just a neurological issue, a wiring issue." Approximately 10% of any age group struggles with reading. Many adults and children, embarrassed by this condition, "have developed brilliant camouflage techniques," Dekkers added.

Another challenge for educators and parents is the cost and the time it takes to get a diagnosis. A formal assessment can cost between

\$500 and \$3000. In the meantime, the usual strategy is to give these students more attention and more time. But continued lack of success leads to greater frustration and, in psychological terms, learned helplessness. Struggling readers convince themselves that they will never learn how to read. However, illiteracy leads to financial and emotional problems. Reading is fundamental to academic and career success.

Dekkers becomes emotional thinking about the consequences for a child or adult who has given up. "Sometimes tears well up when I see the assessment that a child is illiterate. I know precisely where this child is heading."

Dyslexia has been linked to: depression; criminal activity (up to 60% of inmates are functionally illiterate or have low literacy skills; suicide (some 89% of adolescent suicide victims demonstrated significant deficits in spelling and handwriting that were similar to those of adolescents with dyslexia; and failure to reach their potential.

Dekkers continued researching and connecting with experts like Linda Siegel, professor of special education at UBC, who is a leading researcher in the field. He found many others as well who are as committed and concerned as he is. "The science appealed to them," he said. They also bought into his dream of "doing something revolutionary. We're going to obliterate illiteracy," he declared. "The challenge is how do you find solutions when funds, expertise and staffing are so limited?"

Dynaread is helping educators and experts extend their reach.

"When you design something, first of all, it has to work or you're just a snake-oil salesman," said Dekkers. "That's a given." However, he is

just as concerned that the program doesn't waste children's time. "I wanted to create something that, after just a few weeks, a child would have an 'I can learn to read' experience. These children are vulnerable so if they have a negative experience in their first lessons or if they don't perceive any benefit, it will reinforce their belief that they can't read."

Anyone can go onto the Dynaread site and try the free dyslexia test, but it is intended for children ages seven and up. It assesses the participant's phonological decoding route (the slow route or grapheme to phoneme route) and the lexical route (the fast route or dictionary route).

"Kids don't like being tested, but we need to measure the effectiveness of the core components of their reading systems." Students do a 15-minute, child-friendly online assessment, similar to the card game Memory. The test administrator receives the results immediately. Each test is also reviewed by the Dynaread assessment team and followed up with a personal report and recommendation to the teacher.

"Kids see that it's actually kind of fun and we are earning the right to interact with that child." The content features meaningful non-fiction text written for children seven to eleven years of age.

"The vast majority will be helped by what we have," Dekkers said. Those who aren't may have more than one barrier to overcome (problems with auditory processing, an attention deficit, poor motor co-ordination, etc.). Even so, some flexibility has been incorporated into the design. For example, the program can be customized to slow down or speed up depending on the skill of the reader.

Two principles drive the work of the Dynaread team, Dekkers said:

“That everything is science-based and that the focus is on the individual child. These [factors] influence every decision we make.”

Rod Giles, principal of Adam Robertson Elementary in Creston, an hour’s drive from Cranbrook, said the school is using Lexia Reading as well as Dynaread. “Some fit Dynaread, but not Lexia. But between them both, we’re picking up a lot of kids,” he said.

After students do the no-charge assessment, the results are reviewed by one of the Dynaread’s resident dyslexia academics. Findings and recommendations are emailed back. There is also a statement about whether the child would benefit from Dynaread or not. “That’s what I like about the program,” said Giles. “You don’t know until you use it if a child fits the profile or not” and Dynaread is upfront about it.

Giles said he’s also impressed with Dekkers’ approach and level of service. “He’s insistent that everything is research-based and follows scientific principles. He’s motivated to help kids. He doesn’t want to hand over his work to a big company that would market it and drive costs up. In the second round [after piloting it], we got a full licence and he told us to put as many kids on as we want. And on the bottom of all correspondence there’s a note that says, ‘If the cost is too high, please call and we’ll negotiate.’”

For Giles, the biggest selling feature is that Dynaread allows so many more children to receive help.

According to the website literature, “Dynaread can be self-administered to a great extent. Self-efficacy raises intrinsic motivation. Self-efficacy also helps your school’s bottom line: You will be able to offer effective remediation at a reduced ‘staff hour/remediation effort’ ratio.”

Tina Harms, the Learning Assistance Centre teacher at Robertson Elementary, said, “It’s changed my teaching approach. My traditional way was to work with four kids in a pullout situation. Now I’ve moved into the school’s computer lab and I have 30 students working at a time. It’s not the same one-to-one, but it does allow me to serve a much larger numbers of students before problems develop. They are confident that they are moving ahead and making progress. She has her students working with three technology based programs: Dynaread, Lexia Reading and Mathletics.

“I don’t think any program is everything for everyone,” Harms said, “but I think Dynaread is a really good program to help learning assistance teachers reach more children.”

Every program still requires some one-to-one assistance, she said. “You still need to have human support to listen and assess to see if the students really do pronounce the words correctly and know their meaning.” As with any program, she cautioned educators, “don’t be afraid to adapt it to make it work for your students. I still check sight words and vocabulary with flashcards.”

Dekkers maintains a close working relationship with the schools that have signed on and pays close attention to the suggestions from teachers and students. That respect and attention is appreciated.

“Hans has been fantastic,” Harms said. A couple of her students sug-


gested that during the two-minute breaks a timer could be added showing the countdown. “Hans was able to implement it so the students had a more vested interest in the program.”

During the pilot, Harms also alerted Dekkers to a small loophole. “We have very creative students who found ways to cheat the system so that the program thought they knew things that they didn’t.”

Dekkers also pays attention to the results and sends notes to the teachers asking if they’ve noticed that particular students don’t seem to be pushing themselves. “He’s making it really relevant,” Harms said. The Dynaread team also employs web technology that provides nearly face-to-face support.

Dekkers said, “When you talk to parents, when you see the pain in the child and the pain in the parent, you see that this is so completely necessary. We’re getting consistently positive feedback and so we’re encouraged to move to the next challenge.”

As the company grows and with more funding, Dekkers said the Dynaread team would like to address the problem of adult illiteracy. There are different challenges for adults because there are so many competing interests for time and a new curriculum would have to be written, he said.

“We’re all set to go for this year,” said Giles. “We are discerning and we think it is cost effective. I think the program will grow.” 

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