

A Wandering path

BY PATRICIA PORTER, PhD

My journey through my teaching career has not been a straight path. For that I am both grateful and anxious.

I started teaching in the United Kingdom in the late 60's. Jobs were hard to find, and I ended up working with children who were thought to be slow learners, "Special Education students", as they were known then. After a couple of rocky years—nothing like experience to teach you what you don't know—I realized that I liked working with these kids.

I took a position in a school for students whose IQ measured below average. What a joke! Yes, these kids had learning problems, and some had behavioral and medical issues, but many of them showed levels of intelligence that surprised me. One boy could calculate betting odds instantly, another child did amazing embroidery, one could draw intricate images—I have one of his drawings near my desk as I write this. So, what was going on? Why were some kids struggling to learn, while some kids learned more easily? These questions bugged me for years. I had a lot to learn so I managed to enroll in courses that eventually led to a Master's degree.

But I still didn't have my answer.

When we emigrated to Canada in the dying days of 1989, I wasn't going to teach; I needed a change. Then I found out not only that I would be earning double what I had earned in the UK, but that there was this position called "Learning Assistance Teacher". Back to the classroom I went, first as a substitute teacher—we all have to pay our dues—and eventually as one of two learning assistance teachers in a large East Side elementary school in Vancouver.

Most days, I loved my job, but I still needed answers to those questions of mine. I was very fortunate; experts from the Feuerstein Institute in Israel were putting on a training course in children's learning for the Vancouver School Board. The course changed my whole approach by teaching me that children need to learn how to learn. There are 12 foundational learning skills all children need to reach their full potential, in three broad categories: physical skills - sight, hearing, energy, movement; emotional skills - good attitudes about themselves, others, their work, the future; and cognitive skills - attention, understanding, processing, production. Simple, eh? The reason some children struggled to learn was because they were lacking one or more of these basic skills. It made sense; even a bright child who lacked skills would struggle to learn.



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A lack of self-confidence (“good attitude about themselves”) is one of the main factors I came across in kids who struggle to learn. Once they knew WHY they were struggling to learn, their confidence grew, and they became good learners. A few kids knew the subject but couldn’t show others they knew it, they stumbled at “production”. I was able to help my niece learn how to complete university exams; she was getting low marks, not because she didn’t know the work, but because she didn’t understand how to answer the questions correctly.

I had found my answer. The reason some children learn more easily than others is because they have and use all the foundational skills that lead to learning. Now all I had to do was assess which skills students were missing and help them develop them. Problem solved!

Well not quite. I had a full teaching load so finding time to assess a child’s level of skills was very difficult. Further, as a Learning Assistance Centre teacher, I often came into contact parents who wanted to know what they could do to help their child learn. I knew all the regular answers, talk to your child, read with your child, pay for tutoring, buy this book etc. but now I knew that parents also needed to make sure their young children developed the skills necessary to learning.

What to do? What to do?

I talked myself into a part-time job with the Vancouver School Board as a Home/School Consultant and worked with schools to let parents to know about this new way of supporting their child’s education. I started presenting at various Parent Advisory Council meetings and local libraries. At the end of nearly every presentation, parents would come up ask for help with a child. It became clear that the school system, no matter how good it was, should be seeing parents as collaborators and, whenever possible, trying to work with them. So, I used my skills to work one-on-one with parents and students and soon realized that I had a system that could be of use to many parents.

All the above was the fun part of my career for which I am very grateful. Now I come to why I am anxious. At the ripe old age of 76 I am having to learn how to create online courses for parents who want to help their children become better learners, how to use social media to let parents know that I exist, how to network with other organizations that work with parents, and how to design a website. I like learning but sometimes it all gets a bit too much.

Tech students in India are helping me with social media. I read all I can about marketing (and not liking it much) and trying to come up with a feasible marketing plan. I’m learning to write better blogs and get them up on my site. I can even handle YouTube and send out weekly tips.

It is exhausting but every time I think of quitting, some parent contacts me and asks for help. Oh, I know that parents might want to secure the services of an educational psychologist, either through the school or privately, but this option is not open to many parents. My system fills the gap between a full Educational Psychological Report and no report at all. For not a lot of money, parents can access information that helps them help kids succeed in school. So many parents have written to express that learning how their child learns, and helping them to develop these basic skills, has not just helped their children to learn, but has reduced distress and frustration for everyone involved.

How long will I continue to do this work? Possibly as long as parents keep asking for help. What have I learned from this journey? My main takeaway is that I understand how children learn and why some struggle to learn.

I have also learned that while I may be a good teacher, I am not good at setting up and running a business. In fact, as much as I like helping children learn, I really

dislike all that comes with trying to set up a business. That is where my anxiety comes from. This service is needed but I am not sure I can get it to the people who would benefit from it. The anxiety comes from not being able to help the kids who need help, and from worrying that this work I've built over the years may not survive once I am no longer involved.

What comes next? I am not sure. Once a teacher always a teacher. For now, I am hanging in there. My passion to work with parents is still strong. Maybe my anxiety will go away. Who knows?

Meanwhile I am grateful for the joy that my teaching career has given me, the fun I have had working with kids of all ages, the support from the many learning specialists who have taught me, my PhD supervisor, and the calming influence of my overweight cat.

Learning is forever. I may take a cartooning course this summer—why not? •

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See www.leadingtolearning.com.

