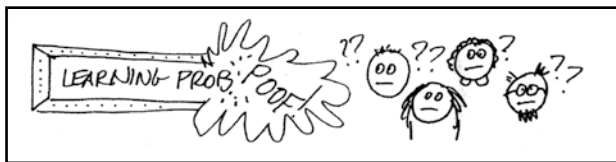




Increasingly, I drove home from school visits acutely aware of how different my life had been since I escaped from school. It had taken a long time, but in the real world, I'd learned I wasn't stupid or slow. Now that I was writing, many new doors were open to me. I was frustrated it had taken me so long to start. And I wanted to know where my learning problems had suddenly gone.

About that time I chanced on two magazine articles about well-known authors. They were worlds apart—one a big-time TV writer, the other a serious novelist—but both told school failure stories that were strikingly familiar. Both talked about how surprising it was to find that they could write and that they were not stupid or slow, except in school. Those articles

prompted me to start asking other adults about their school experiences. It turns out there is a big cohort of us out there—school survivors—who discover how easily we can learn after we leave school.

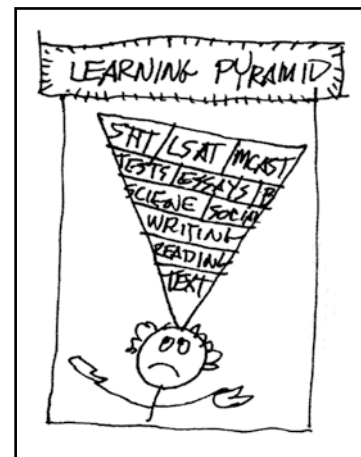


UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT BIND

As soon as I considered the possibility that many learning problems could be a by-product of how we teach, identifying the most common source of school failure seemed easy: *Text was too hard for many students.*

School is built on an expanding pyramid of skills. We start with "the basics"—reading and writing—and we progress to diverse content introduced and reinforced with text. From a child's point of view, this weighty learning pyramid rests on one narrow point—text, and that means if you are text-smart, you will look smart in school and be rewarded daily. But, if you are text-slow, everybody in school will know you are slow at everything that really counts—and you'd just better grit your teeth and try to survive.

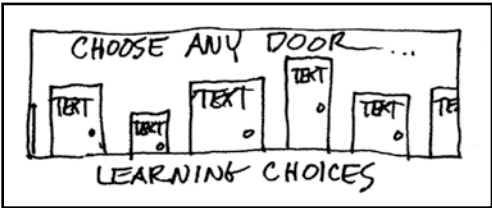
Looking at school from this back-row point of view may seem negative. To suggest our practice leaves kids behind can seem critical of teachers, but please stay with me; there is a silver lining. Paradoxically, considering that students' learning may be stalled by *text itself* can offer us an exciting window onto a new learning landscape. If a lot of school failure is caused by text itself, that might mean an alternative path to text could enable us to address much of this failure at its source.





It can be hard for those comfortable with text to see how text might create a serious education problem—and that’s the rub. From kindergarten on, all of us were steeped in the idea that text is central to good learning. By the time they took away the blocks and crayons, it was clear all the “smart” kids were learning to read and write well. These early lessons go deep, and by the time we leave school, we’ve all seen text competence connected with successful learning for so long that we unconsciously view them as the same thing. To get respectable scores on the SATs, you must have good text skills, and those who do well are rewarded with entrance to the best colleges and the best jobs.

To seriously consider the proposition that many competent learners are stalled by text in school, we need to crack that good learner = good-at-text nut. From the back row, it’s not hard to see that reading and writing text are what we teach and how we deliver content, and that text skills are how we measure achievement. That means competence with text skills becomes the narrow gateway to all learning, from introducing content to class discussion to showing what you know on the test or the essay.



In classrooms with older students, where content is often introduced and reinforced through independent reading, poor comprehension clearly hampers both learners and teachers. The limiting effects of text are directly acknowledged in tracking, where lowered expectations become the norm for kids with poor text skills. Parents are often told, “Your child will be more comfortable in the lower track because the regular classes do a lot more reading and writing.”

An outside observer might ask, “Why do you lower learning expectations for those students—why not address their poor comprehension issues head-on?” If we try to answer that question, we bang directly into text as a learning problem. The uncomfortable truth is that educators know reading problems (and associated poor writing skills) are tough to address. We know because we’ve tried again and again, with labor-intensive early-intervention strategies and expensive remedial reading programs. Despite those interventions and Special Ed accommodations, reading and writing problems seem more pervasive than ever.

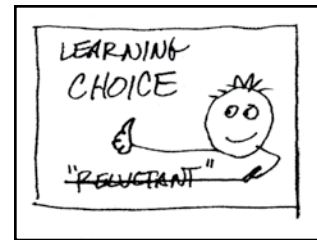
As things stand, we might fairly restate the education “facts of life” this way: We know reading comprehension and writing are hard for a significant number of students, and since text is our central tool in school, then lots of school failure seems unfortunate but unavoidable. And so do the myriad costly problems, educational and social, that flow from school failure.



HEEDING THE MESSAGE OF RELUCTANT READERS AND WRITERS

In trying to explain why students are disengaged from reading and writing, adults often cite competition with TV or digital media as the problem. Yet there was plenty of evidence of text as a learning problem in the one-room schoolhouse, where it was commonly accepted that some folks were good at “book learning” and others just weren’t. In a world that needed lots of farmers, and then factory workers, text problems sorted themselves out: The text-smart stayed in school; the text-slow went to work. As a popular eighth-grade teacher nearing retirement told me, “Teaching used to be easier. When the boot factory was open, we all expected half the class to get good jobs right here in town, so nobody worried too much about college.” It is only in a world where we expect all students to be text-proficient that the difficulty posed by text for a significant number of learners becomes a serious, costly education problem.

But what if the explanation for many reluctant readers and writers starts in our own classrooms? What if kids’ disengagement with learning is a straightforward message to adults about how hard learning through text is? I received the following e-mail from an experienced high school Language Arts teacher who had seen an introductory storyboard workshop and decided to try it in her classroom: “It’s SO cool to see students who have done next to nothing in my class all year create their storyboards!!!”



Those exclamation points only hint at how exciting it is to witness sudden engagement from students we thought we couldn’t reach. Her stalled students demonstrated, in practical hands-on terms, that they were ready to engage with text when they saw a way in. Students who had done “next to nothing” were able to use storyboards to write because they provided a way to get ideas on paper, to brainstorm, organize, and revise—without requiring students to write exacting, difficult text from the start.

A Practical How-To

The good news from the back row is that your text-stalled students are ready to show you how to break the text-only learning trap that snares both students and teachers. Examining students’ breakthroughs can help us recognize the two critical parts of the message students are sending:

- What makes text too hard for many learners?
- How do visual/verbal tools create a clear, effective bridge to text skills?

