

# The Lost Art and Neuroscience of Visual Learning

Enabling neurodivergent children and adults to excel



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**M**y mission is to enable neurodivergent children and adults to find it easy to fully contribute to the world's challenges. They have the skills business wants and the world needs!

When I started my NLP training, I could freely admit that picturing anything in my mind's eye, including words, was impossible. Then I discovered that people who are good at literacy see images of words in their mind's eye, an invaluable skill for fluent reading and spelling in the English language. But nobody had told me that at school, and my spelling was pretty terrible. In fact, at 16 years old, my school report said, "It would be helpful if Olive could learn to spell." I had been in the same school for 12 years, and whatever they tried had clearly failed.

Two days later, I had the opportunity to teach kids in my local special needs school and, to my amazement, I could get them to visualise words in their mind's eye really quickly, in just a few minutes, and much better than I could. Doing just one 15-minute session a week with them, they could spell and read much more quickly. A few had been traumatised when young and lost their pictures, but they soon returned.

Neurodivergent skills are extraordinary, removing the common misconception that having so-called learning differences or difficulties is bad. Whilst the symptoms of learning difficulties present challenges, the rest is sheer genius. According to NASA's Dr George Land and Dr Beth Jarman, 98% of 4-to-5-year-olds are creative geniuses. Any parent will probably notice their child's creativity at this age when they are looking for it. This drops to only 2% of the population as they progress into adulthood. According to Temple Grandin, young children are visual-spatial or object thinkers. Her book *Visual Thinking* has collected together extensive research that confirms our experiences with students. Finally, the late, great Sir Ken Robinson spent decades

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campaigning for and developing creativity in schools. His *RSA Animate* video on YouTube has 17 million views (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>).

So, I must ask, "Why are we losing all this creativity in schools?" Worse than this, it's not just creativity; the following strengths of divergent thinkers are also being lost, whilst these are the very skills that are wanted in business today:

- **Creativity, imagining**, visualising
- Spatial awareness, pattern recognition
- Creative and critical thinking
- **Problem solving**, learning from failures, collaboration, empathy, compassion
- High sensitivity, intuition
- Communication, questioning skills
- Originality, innovative mindset, curiosity, exploring
- **Big picture thinking**, entrepreneurship, leadership, teamwork
- Resilience, seeing different perspectives
- Hyperfocus, confidence in capabilities, fine detail, long-term memory, drive and energy
- Finding your passion (*Finding Your Element*, by the late Sir Ken Robinson)
- System breakers (not accepting things the way they are)

## Diverse thinkers

We are heralding in a generation of 21st-century diverse thinkers with exceptional visual thinking skills. Some get identified as gifted and talented. Some even call these 'evolutionary superpowers'. When working with neurodivergent students, I have discovered that most have more than 25 of these skills, but value them infrequently.

However, the education system is an auditory sequential system of primarily rote learning, designed after the Industrial Revolution, when everyone in work was expected to carry out the same tasks in factories, coal mines, transport etc. Few workers were encouraged to show creativity! There is a huge challenge for teachers who were themselves not taught visually. Although every school would agree with multi-sensory teaching and learning, we are delighted to see Ireland's first teacher training college including visual literacy and numeracy in their electives. In the UK, this is, as yet, not included. Empowering Learning programmes can quickly teach these missing skills, which may even be natural for neurodivergent teachers.

Now, especially with the arrival of AI, we need to educate our teachers and parents on how to teach visual thinkers and learners. It isn't difficult, especially for visual teachers who may themselves be neurodivergent. The number of so-called neurodivergent students grows yearly, especially with late diagnoses. How long will it be before more than 50% of children are known to be visual thinkers, and they become the norm? These children may have much better visual skills than their parents or teachers, who have lost their skills over time.

Whenever I work with neurodivergent students, I ask them about their strengths. Some have mislaid them; others have managed to remain focused on what their strengths are. The next question is: "How do you do what you do so well?" It doesn't matter if it is a PlayStation game, a sport, painting or drawing. The answer is always about how they use their mental imagery. Here are a few examples:

- The chess champion clearly saw the chess pieces in his mind's eye and could go forward several moves to see how he and his opponent would move.
- An interior designer described in great detail a house she was working on and the planned contents of every room.
- A shop window designer visualised every window in great detail before drafting the design for others to review.
- An actor from one of the popular soaps recalled the set he was currently working on in minute detail, including the places he needed to stand. It was an extraordinary description to listen to. He then went on to say that he could remember every set he had ever worked on.

### Dyslexia isn't a superpower, but...

My work with people with dyslexia over 24 years has confirmed that 100% of these students are visual learners. But nobody has taught them how to visualise words in school, for spelling, reading and dealing with the homophones and silent letters of the English language. When this happens, the results are magic.

Find out more on YouTube: *Dyslexia is Not a Superpower* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YHCrzELyB4>) and *Literacy from the Inside Out* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8eVJDjRVPg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8eVJDjRVPg))

In 2023, we also produced materials for parents and teachers of young children, in the early years, to incorporate visual learning into the EYFS curriculum. As a precursor to phonics, learning visually will speed up any phonics programme and dramatically improve spelling.

Those who struggle with numbers have not learnt how to visualise numbers, an essential skill for numeracy. Children who are good at mental arithmetic will have picked this up naturally, but those who struggle with maths and may even become very anxious need to learn this simple skill. It takes minutes.

Those with ADHD symptoms have no idea that simple grounding, breathing and sleeping techniques can dramatically reduce the chaos in the head and free up space for focused thought. Most of the chaos is having out-of-control mental images, but it can also be joined with continuous chatter or even music playing, all out of control. Being without medication has a significant advantage in letting the brain spin off into creativity, innovation, problem-solving, and all those valuable 21st-century diverse thinking skills when needed. When you want to concentrate, you can flick your own internal grounding switch to create focus in seconds. High sensitivity often goes with ADHD, and you can learn simple, energetic NLP skills so you don't take on other people's energy, clog your energy channels and even start

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behaving like another person, picking up and running with their energy.

Having a brain in overdrive, of course, creates massive confusion and anxiety, switching off the executive function in the frontal cortex of your brain, which means logical thought is not possible. We have also realised through Steve Poges' work on the vagus nerve that people sitting in permanent anxiety will also show symptoms of ADHD. This is quite common, especially since Covid, trying to return to school, looming exams, and being deluged with social media. ADHD pictures are actually a joy, with a logical progression from one to another, a skill that is invaluable in later life in the workplace but can be a nightmare in school.

Then I must consider ASD. Although the description of ADHD above does have many similarities to ASD, there is more to add from other modalities, such as nutrition and emotional freedom techniques. However, where they do overlap is mental imagery. The difference is that ASD students often have so many pictures cascading around in their heads that it hurts. They are literally drowning in images, with no structure at all. To reduce the chaos, grounding, breathing, sleep and conscious control of imagery enables you to make friends with your mental images.

### Empowering learning

Empowering Learning has an international network of coaches trained in Empowering Learning Techniques to follow the route mapped out above and help students further develop their visual talents into adulthood. There is a new Neurodivergent Toolkit ([www.neurodivergenttoolkit.co.uk](http://www.neurodivergenttoolkit.co.uk)) that covers all our practical experience gained over 24 years. The toolkit is suitable for parents, teachers, learning support and educationalists, giving them enough knowledge to pass on these invaluable skills to others. NLP professionals make excellent practitioners because of their existing knowledge of NLP, which underpins the toolkit and enables practitioners to add in their other skills. ■

