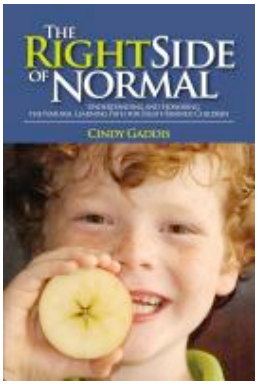
The Right Side of Normal

Understanding and Honoring
the Natural Learning Path for Right Brained Children

Cindy Gaddis



For parents and educators who want to break free from the "broken child" mentality, Gaddis offers a bold vision for learning joyfully and naturally with right-brained, creative children. There's an epidemic of diagnosing learning disabilities today. Too many children are shamed for the very traits that define who they are. Combined with a solid review of experts in the field, Gaddis provides a range of parent-proven models and concrete suggestions for frustrated parents and teachers.

The Right Side of Normal

Excitement for the release of *The Right Side of Normal:*

Please notify me when your book is finished! I was one of these kiddos and I was schooled in a left-brained environment. It has taken me great efforts to gain confidence in my natural learning style as an adult.
—Lynn

I can't wait for your book to be finished! We've been following your Yahoo groups for years and you've given us confidence in our right-brained son's method of learning. We've recommended you to many, many people with similar kids.
—Julie

I am waiting on pins and needles for the book.
—Cassidy

Hi Cindy, I live in the UK and am a member of your Yahoo group. The group has made life for me and my son so much easier. I would love to buy a copy of your book when it is finished.
—Jackie

I am extremely excited your book is done. Your words of encouragement and the advice you have so generously shared with so many has changed my view of the world and the way I can now (confidently) raise my children. I can allow them to be who they are and revel in their uniqueness. I have also been able to heal the damaged right-brained child I was so I can be a better mom for them. I can't wait to get my copy, and more to share, as I did your CDs, to open more minds about the wonders of the right-brained world. Thank you so much.
—Lauralee

When will the book be ready? I need it ASAP.
—Mary

Thank you for all of your "out-of-the-box," thoughtful, kind, practical, and beyond all else, inspiring words…can't wait for the book!
—Julia

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Understanding and Honoring the Natural Learning Path for Right-Brained Children

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ISBN 978-1-62141-766-8

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2012

First Edition

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Introduction

Strengths-Based Learning

Just as there are always two sides to every story, science and research show us there are two working sides to the brain that impact learning: the left brain specialties and the right brain specialties. Schools use a scope and sequence[1] that favors the strengths and gifts of a left-brained dominant person,[2] which works well for these learners. Here's a small sample:

- Schools instruct in a sequential manner, such as learning addition and multiplication in the younger years. This then prepares students to learn algebra and geometry when they're older (see Chapter Seven).

- ❖ Schools are product-driven. This is why they have children create physical work (products) that they can sort and classify based on right and wrong answers, completed tasks, and definable measurements. The focus is on *what* is learned (see Chapter Nine).

- ❖ Schools are word- and symbol-focused. This is why they pursue early reading acquisition, math fact drilling, and handwriting practice (see Chapter Seven).

Right-brained dominant people[2] learn in a completely opposite manner. Here's a small sample:

- ❖ Right-brained people learn best in a global, big picture manner, allowing them to experiment with the bigger ideas, such as algebra and geometry, in the younger years. This then motivates them to learn the detailed tasks, such as math facts, when they're older (see Chapter Seven).

- ❖ Right-brained people are process-driven. This is why they enjoy projects that utilize experimentation, creativity, and/or exploration. It's the act of discovery, innovation, and knowing *why* something works that drives learning (see Chapter Nine).

- ❖ Right-brained people are picture-focused. They learn best with visual, pictorial, mental work that encourages mental visualization, such as read-alouds, mental math activities, and/or an oral history documentary (see Chapter Seven).

The school environment doesn't work well for these learners. It's time to tell the other side of the learning story and introduce a scope and sequence that honors the right-brained process and the people who use it.

Right-brained children learn in a completely different manner than their left-brained peers.

Because most of us were schooled in a left-brained manner, we learned to value left-brained traits, too. If we have right-brained children, though, we'll soon notice they do things differently. For instance:

- Do you hear your child say "this is stupid," or constantly question why they are asked to do something?
- Do math facts not come easily to your child, or is your child a "late reader?"
- Does your child provide answers on his homework, but can't explain how he got them, or does your child have trouble "showing his work?"
- Does your child occupy himself with something like building with LEGO®, drawing, or playing while you read aloud to him?
- Does your child watch TV or listen to music while doing his homework, or does your child doodle on his homework?
- Does your child have trouble completing tasks or keeping track of homework, or do people say your child daydreams instead of concentrating?
- Does your child struggle with spelling, have difficulty putting together a legible sentence, resist handwriting or have difficulty with it?

Listening to music helps a right-brained child better concentrate.

Or, alternatively:

- Does your child have a knack for current technology?

- Does your child go on and on telling stories, or does your child enjoy dressing up in interesting costumes or creating complicated play scenarios?

- Does your child spend hours doing one of the following: computers/video games, cooking/gardening, music/dance, building/electronics, art/photography, fashion/sewing, puzzles/mazes, math/numbers, or theater/showmanship?

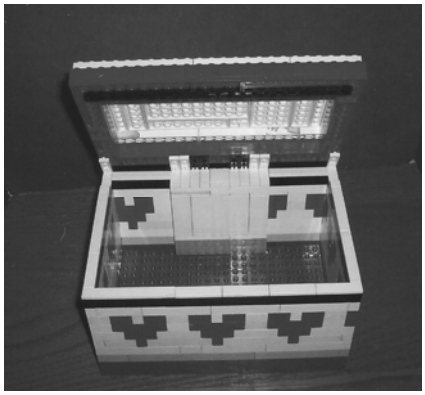
- Does your child craft, draw, or build something in intricate detail?

- Does your child ask profound questions or know interesting facts that leave you wondering where he learned them?

- Does your child show compassion for the cares of the world and want to make a difference, or does your child act as an emotional gauge in the home?

- Did your child have an interest in ancient history, mythology (such as dragons or unicorns), other cultures, the sciences (including dinosaurs), or nature and animals at a young age?

- Does your child remember directions to places she's only been to once, or have a keen visual memory for stories or movies he heard or saw only once?



Right-brained children can build with detailed precision and creativity.

If you recognize your child possesses many of these attributes, you may have a right-brained learner. These are intelligent, creative, and inquisitive children who often seem to flounder in school. The reality is *creative children love to learn, but hate to be taught*. They resist or perform poorly because we are not teaching in the way they learn. We use left-brained teaching methods on a right-brained child. The good news and hope within this book is that there exists a valid and strengths-based educational approach best suited for right-brained learners and, with it, they flourish and thrive.

Consciously or subconsciously, our society believes that the scope and sequence created for our schools that favors left-brained thinkers is "the norm." It's held up as the measure of intelligence. For example, a current benchmark declares that reading can and should be accomplished through phonics by the age of 6 to 7 years. Around this, parents hold their breath, waiting to discover where their children will be classified. If a child reads before the benchmark, she's "smart as a whip" or "gifted." If he reads at the expected time, he's "average." Look out if she reads after that time frame! At best, she's either "lazy," "not living up to potential," or "stupid." At worst, the child is disordered. Broken. Learning disabled. The truth is that it's *normal* for right-brained children to learn to read at a later age. Left-

brained benchmarks shouldn't be the only "normal" that children are held to in a scope and sequence.

The solution is to allow right-brained children to learn on a different time frame that honors their gifts and strengths. This doesn't mean we should follow the current left-brained scope and sequence, and then just wait a little longer. It means right-brained learners' success requires a totally different scope *and* sequence.

- ✓ The right-brained child needs different resources for learning than those currently found in school.
- ✓ The right-brained child needs a different skill development focus than found in school.
- ✓ The right-brained child needs a different time frame for learning than the one expected in school.

If *all* of these differences are honored, right-brained children will learn various subjects as joyfully and painlessly as their left-brained counterparts.

Right-brained children learn subjects at different times with different resources.

What's our current solution? We attempt to "fix" right-brained learners. We remediate when they don't meet left-brained expectations (i.e., dyslexia programs). We medicate their behaviors (i.e., Ritalin). We even "jump-start" natural biological occurrences through exercises (i.e., vision tracking). There are consequences to these common "solutions." Some children decide they are "stupid" and take that notion into adulthood. Some children develop anxiety, depression, or grow angry as they are made to feel worthless. Some children decide they "just don't care" and "do the minimal," as if oppositional, because they want to feel some control over the

fact that they can't live up to the left-brained expectation. Some children self-medicate through alcohol or drugs in their teen years to ease the pain of not feeling "good enough." And some children get a learning disability label and live *down* to that expectation believing they are deficient in some way.

Right-brained learners are the most labeled children in our schools. There are so many labels they often overlap[3] as professionals scramble to justify the discrepancy between the obvious intelligence and creativity displayed by these children and their inability to perform to the expectations of the school setting. Why is it that behind practically every learning disability label (ADD/ADHD, dyslexia, learning disabled, dysgraphia, twice exceptional, dyscalculia, etc.) is a right-brained learner? Where are the left-brained learning disabled children? They're difficult to find because left-brained children are flourishing in the left-brained learning environment! The good news is that when right-brained children are placed in a right-brained learning environment, they will also flourish and learning disability labels will all but disappear.

Maria Montessori said, "Free the child's potential, and you will transform him into the world." One important way to do this is by **understanding and honoring the natural learning path for right-brained children** that inherently develops their strengths and gifts. This book exhorts *shifting perspective* about learning disabilities by showcasing the *natural learning path* of the right-brained learner. This book further shares how we as parents, educators, and mentors can help facilitate *strengths-based learning* that celebrates **the right side of normal** allowing the right-brained learner to thrive.

References and Notes

[1] A scope and sequence is a term used in school to delineate a list of skills to be taught (scope), and the order in which the skills are taught (sequence).

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[2] See Chapter One for an explanation of the left-brained and right-brained labels.

[3] Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., was the first who helped me recognize the overlapping of criteria in learning disabilities in her book: Silverman, Linda Kreger. *Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner.* Denver: DeLeon Publishing, Inc., 2002. See Chapter Three in this book for more details.

Chapter One

Reclaiming Our Creative Children

Shift Begins with Me

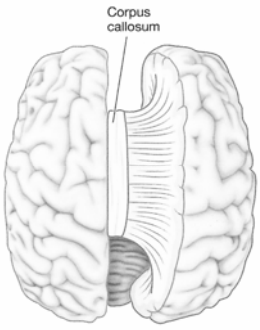
"You will all write in a journal every day at the beginning of class based on a word I put on the board," explained my psychology instructor at the business college I attended as a young single person. He explained that he wanted us to share our own definition of the word. The words would be big picture ideas with no right or wrong answer. Some of the words were love, fear, faith, and integrity. This class coincided with a time in my life I was feeling particularly confident and competent as I was carving out my new adult identity. When the first word was introduced, I felt a surge of knowledge course through my mind as I was sure my definition would be the highlight of all others. Much to my surprise, as the instructor called on others to share their definitions, I

> *was humbled by the depth of expression found in these young lives. It took a few more days of the same initial thought pattern and subsequent humbling for me to accept that there are as many meaningful and valid definitions as there are people experiencing the word in question.*

It's tricky to try to define something as complex and global as how a brain works. Nobody really knows the real deal, yet it's a topic that has inspired research, studies, and speculation for years. As I have helped support families of right-brained children, common questions crop up as each tries to understand why the right-brained information is relevant to the healthy learning of their children. The answers to these frequently asked questions give us the good news about how right-brained children can flourish in their learning lives with the application of this better information.

How Does the Brain Work?

The brain is divided by a grooved fissure into near-symmetrical halves, the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere. A thick band of nerves called the corpus callosum connects the hemispheres. Roger Sperry, a neurobiologist, conducted split-brain experiments in the 1960s on behalf of epileptic patients in which he completely severed this communication system between the hemispheres.



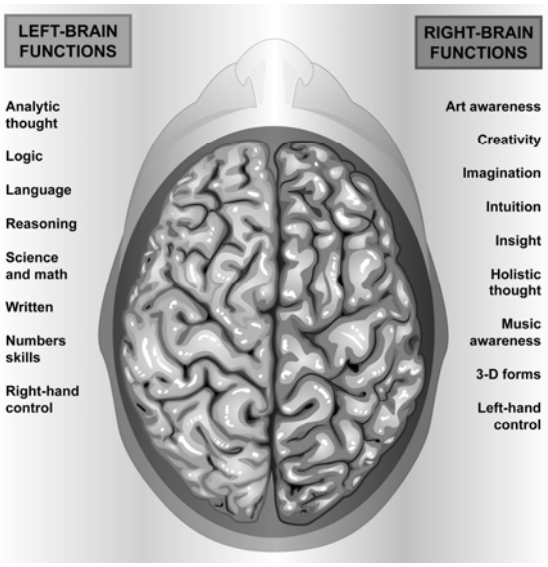
The corpus callosum provides for communication between the two sides of a normal brain. (Image[1])

He discovered that each side of the brain specializes in high-level cognitive functions equal in complexity. Still, the

corpus callosum provides for communication between the two sides of a normal brain at a rate of several billion bits per second. Therefore, there's significant cross-over between hemispheres.

The Right-Brained/Left-Brained Label

We call a person right-brained dominant (or right-brained) if he favors using the specialization traits of the right side of the brain. Likewise, a left-brained dominant (or left-brained) person favors using the specialization traits of the left side of the brain. There are some people (referred to as whole-brained dominant) who use the specialization traits equally between the hemispheres. The first image below represents one of the current lists outlining left-brained specialization traits and right-brained specialization traits. It's depicted in a sequential (left-brained) manner. The second image represents the same in a visual (right-brained) fashion.



A left-brained version of brain functioning specialties.

A right-brained version of brain functioning specialties.

The Right-Brained/Left-Brained Trait Differences

Although controversy continues regarding the labeling of people as left-brained or right-brained, I have noticed, as have many experts (see Chapter Two), an easily recognizable pattern of learning and temperament traits that frequently go together. For instance, when I describe these traits (see Section Two) at conferences, I see whole audiences nodding in recognition. Inevitably, various individuals approach me and say, "You described my child to a tee" or "Have you been looking in our window?" This can't be coincidence. Whether proven by current studies or not, there's ample anecdotal evidence that supports there are time frame, temperament, and gift/strength differences based on brain processing preferences.

The Right-Brained/Left-Brained Communication

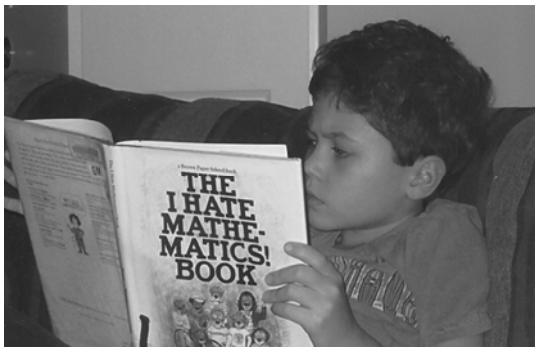
Being left- or right-brained dominant doesn't mean we only use half our brain. Billions of bits of information per second can travel along the nerves that connect the two hemispheres, so naturally there's communication between the hemispheres. I'm simply talking about the brain processing *preferences* that each of us is biologically born to *favor*. With those preferences come the traits that stem from the specialization found in the left or right side of the brain.

Why Does the Brain Dominance Information Matter?

The traits that stem from the specialization found in the left and right sides of the brain impact everything we do. They impact education: how we learn, what we learn, when we learn, and even why we learn. They impact our work: which career we choose, how we work best, and why we work. They impact our relationships: how we interact, how we view others, and how we communicate. In this book, we'll mainly discuss the impact on education, which naturally impacts our future working lives.

Education

Schools teach in a left-brained fashion. They use such formats as sequential scope and sequence resources, short-term memorization, part-to-whole "show me" steps, and verbally based written work (defined in the Introduction). The problem is right-brained people learn best with global interest-based resources, long-term association, whole-to-part conceptual formats, and visual pictorial mental work (defined in the Introduction).



Interest-based, visual, big picture, associative resources work best for right-brained children. (Image[2])

Ever since our population has been schooled, our society tends to value left-brained traits. We've been subconsciously conditioned to believe the left-brained scope and sequence is the norm, but for people who are right-brained dominant, there's a different scope and sequence—a different norm. Thus, in order to expand on what is viewed and accepted as normal, we must first recognize how our system of learning favors left-brained processes. We can then add in and value those processes of the right side of normal.

Education should help an individual discover her passion and purpose in life. Instead, right-brained, creative learners have been misunderstood, overlabeled, unappreciated, and undervalued. This is the result of making these children fit into an environment that is geared toward their weak areas. There's a place for each style of learner in our society, but we can no longer undermine these creative children with outdated schooling practices. Right-brained people have gifts and strengths that should be nurtured as part of a good education.

Work

Education is meant to prepare a person for his life's work. John Taylor Gatto, former New York State Teacher of the Year, in his book *The Underground History of American Education,* espoused that the primary reason for the initial inception of school was to create an obedient workforce similar to what was designed for the German soldiers of the Nazi regime.[3]

However, I believe that we as a nation have matured and deepened our motives since that time. The 21st century needs big picture, creative, innovative thinkers. In an article for *WIRED*® magazine entitled "Revenge of the Right Brain," Daniel Pink encapsulates the changes in our workforce:

> *As the forces of Asia, automation, and abundance strengthen and accelerate, the curtain is rising on a new era, the Conceptual Age. If the Industrial Age was built on people's backs, and the Information Age on people's left hemispheres, the Conceptual Age is being built on people's right hemispheres. We've progressed from a society of farmers to a society of factory workers to a society of knowledge workers. And now we're progressing yet again to a society of creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers.*[4]

Jeffrey Freed in his book, *Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World,* has said, "The software being developed today reflects the right-brained, spatial characteristics of its designers. These are aggressive, forward-thinking individuals who either work for themselves or for innovative companies, and they are living proof that the workforce of the future will require almost none of the skills being focused on in today's classrooms."[5] This book was written over fifteen years ago. The workforce referenced in that quote is that of today, yet our schools continue to languish in old habits.

How Do I Determine Brain Dominance?

Throughout this book you'll find information to help you understand and recognize right-brained learning traits. Just remember, this information is not meant to polarize brain processing preferences. It's meant to be viewed holistically, globally, and intuitively; which, by the way, are all gifts of the right-brained person.

Right-Brained Adult—Right-Brained Child

This information will help those of you who are right-brained embrace and validate your natural process and path to learning. It will definitively prove that you're not broken, and it will showcase valid right-brained strengths and gifts.

As a right-brained adult, you'll need to resist the urge to push right-brained children sooner and harder thinking it will protect them from the hurt you may have experienced as a misunderstood right-brained child. Beware of the "mirror effect" as well. The mirror effect is when we subconsciously dislike something about ourselves and criticize those with that same trait, especially our loved ones.

The mirror effect is when we're critical of someone who reminds us of our own traits we dislike.

In this situation, it's important to remember that the strengths and gifts of right-brained children have been historically undervalued and misrepresented. You can provide a well-matched, strengths-based learning environment for your right-brained child that celebrates his particular gifts. You'll receive the opportunity to redefine and heal your own self-image and emotional reaction to these same gifts and strengths. This book shifts the perspective about right-brained traits and specialties that our school-think has promoted as deficient and reveals that these right-brained traits and specialties actually bless the world we live in today with ingenuity, creativity, and innovation.

Left-Brained Adult—Right-Brained Child

We left-brained people will need to resist the temptation to categorize, compartmentalize, or quantify the information about right-brained learning. Because we fit into the left-brained school model so easily, we might believe the fallacy that we are "the smart ones." Yet, logic demands that we acknowledge that our inquisitive, creative right-brained children are smart, too. When we left-brained people discover the information about right-brained, strengths-based learning, we tend to want to forge full steam ahead, applying the "formula" to our right-brained children. In my situation, resisting the temptation to categorize allowed me greater enlightenment about the diversity of learning.

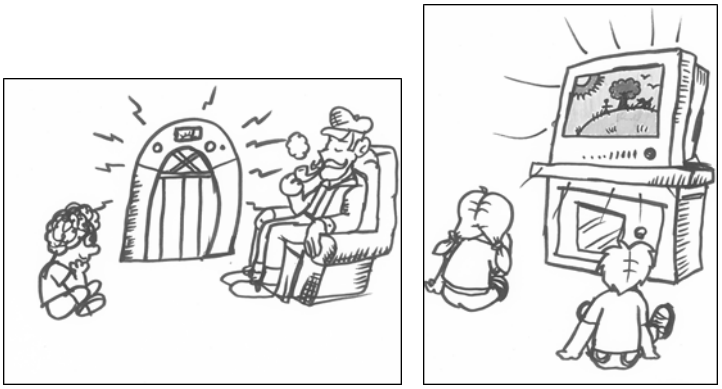
The secret, I discovered, is the timing when I applied the new right-brained information to my child. As I gathered and researched information about how children learn, I filed it away in my efficient left-brained memory system for instant recall as needed. As I observed my children at work or play and I wondered about something, I would search my database of knowledge to see if something I had learned could be used or applied in that instance. This way, what I knew about different learning styles, approaches, or time frames was useful because it emerged from my child's immediate needs. I was not trying to apply it arbitrarily simply from my desire to make something happen based on my limited understanding of a new concept. In other words, as a left-brained person, I needed to release my need to categorize my children and instead connect to my own right side to view them holistically. Since that doesn't come naturally, I had to trust what each child showed he needed in each moment.

How Many Right-Brained Learners Are There?

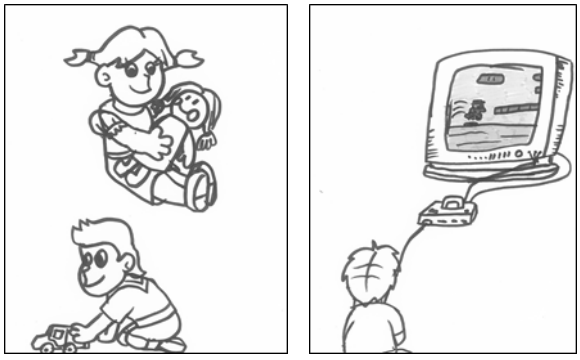
In an article titled, "Why All Students Need Visual-Spatial Methods," Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., states at her website that, currently, about one-third of the students in our

schools are *strong* right-brained learners, and 30% more *moderately* favor the right-brained processing preference.[6] This is the majority of our student population!

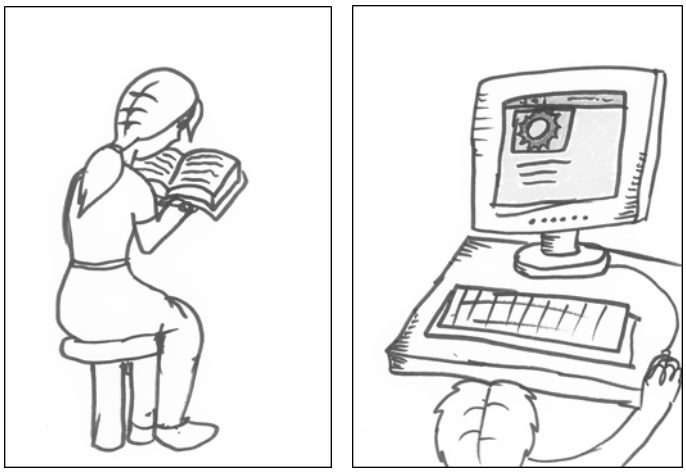
I sat down with my artist son and asked him to illustrate some distinctions in our world today compared to yesteryear that might account for this majority. Not only are natural, gene-based creative people entering our world, but our culture-based influences also encourage visual and spatial connections in the brain to be strengthened from a young age.



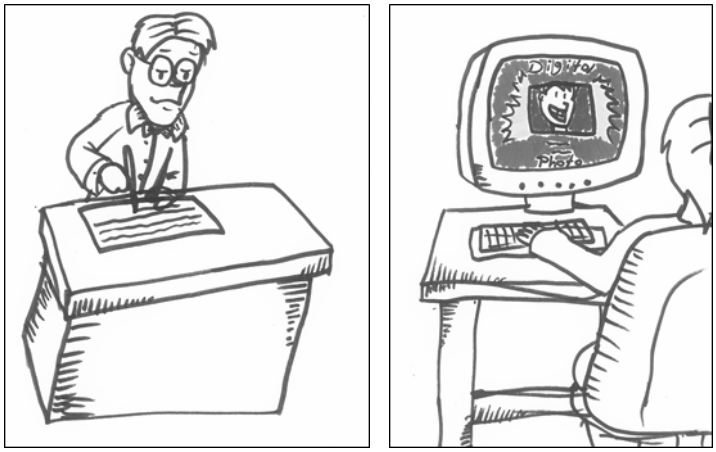
From oral storytelling—to visual storytelling.



From physical play—to visual play.



From print paper—to visual screen.



From handwriting with print—to keyboarding with visuals.

One is not better than the other; they are simply different ways to process information. Yet we still value print over visual, even when the amount of visual interactions in our culture has exploded. Again, both should be valued versus

displacing one narrowly defined value system for another. We are all born with a genetic bent toward a dominant processing preference. Developing a new educational value system begins by understanding what each dominant processing system contributes to our world. It's time to update our educational practices to support both styles of learning in our schools. A right-brained dominant child deserves a scope and sequence that favors her learning path just like the one her left-brained peers enjoy. All learners should have the opportunity to experience joy through well-matched resources and teaching strategies at the same time their different time frames are honored. Our 21st century jobs demand more thinkers who are creative and innovative, the natural strengths of a right-brained dominant person. We need to recognize the traits of right-brained learners in order to give them value in our schools, our society, and our world. We must take a stand to reclaim our creative children and this book shows the way!

References and Notes

[1] Corpus callosum image is taken from: Michael Gazzaniga, Todd Heatherton, Diane Halpern. "Figure 3.28 The Lobes and Hemispheres of the Cerebral Cortex." *Psychological Science, 3rd Edition*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2009.

[2] The resource seen in the image is: Burns, Marilyn. *The I Hate Mathematics! Book*. Little, Brown and Company, 1975.

[3] Gatto, John Taylor. *The Underground History of American Education: A School Teacher's Intimate Investigation into the Problem of Modern Schooling.* Odysseus Group, 2000.

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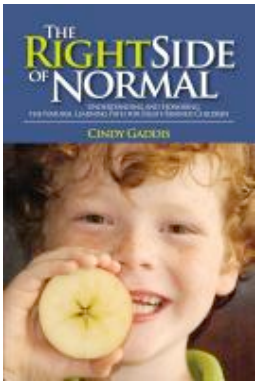
[5] Freed, Jeffrey and Laurie Parsons. *Right-Brained Children in a Left-Brained World: Unlocking the Potential of your ADD Child.* New York: Fireside, 1998.

[6] Silverman, Linda Kreger. "Why All Students Need Visual-Spatial Methods." *Visual Spatial Resource.* n.d. http://www.visual spatial.org/files/allstudnt.pdf (accessed February, 2012).



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