

1. Introduction – Overview of the Course:

Four topics, “Enrichment,” “Skill building,” “Accommodations,” and “Hope” were addressed for each of fifteen conditions, syndromes, or differences in brain function that affect learning. Priming and review for each topic were built in to cement learning as the three days unfolded. The tables in the appendix of this paper are organized so that I will be able to easily access this material in my own work.

A basic theme of the workshop was that we must think of students as having learning differences, not disabilities. All brains can be changed – both positively and negatively. Our job as educators is to make sure that we maximize the positive influences and minimize the negative.

Genetics are the “blueprint” – not the “house.” They may or may not be expressed depending upon the environment in which the person grows up. While we may not be able to influence the genetic template, we have a great deal of influence over how we set up the conditions for learning.

HOPE: All brains can change! Given the right circumstances, we can change blood flow, gene expression, chemical activity, neural networks, coherence, new cell production and survival, cell size, connectivity, and growth factors. That is very good news! The not-so-good news is that educators must learn how to set up those “right circumstances” because they are not present in most of our schools today. The most important factor is that we convey an attitude of *hope* for all learners in all situations. Young people seem to have a sort of “radar” that easily picks up whether or not an adult truly believes in them. The only way for them to learn to believe in themselves is for us to help them learn to hope.

In general the way to change the brain is to use “multiple, sustained, positive, contrasting factors over time with safety, nutrition, hope, and support.”¹

ENRICHMENT: An enrichment activity must provide contrast from the prevailing environment, some physical movement, a challenge to make meaning from new information, learner controlled feedback, and low to moderate stress. A truly enriched environment must also include good nutrition, quality sleep, and the opportunity to make decisions and solve problems that are age appropriate and at a manageable level of challenge and complexity.

Huttenlocher at the University of Chicago is quoted in Eric Jensen’s book on enrichment as saying “Many phenomenal people didn’t have ‘enrichment.’ What they had was unscheduled time.” An important component of enrichment is rest or “downtime” when the brain can consolidate or make meaning out of the complexities of life. Maria Montessori believed in letting children wander and observe an effective kind of enrichment is to give a short lecture, then let the learners take a short walk or move to another classroom location and discuss the material before sharing their understanding with a group.

SKILL BUILDING: Good nutrition, quality sleep, optimism, and hope are important in order for new skills to be learned. The best skill training demands focused attention in practice sessions of 30-90 minutes 3 to 5 times a week. Feedback, both positive and negative, must be continuous. The learner must believe that this frequent and intense training is meaningful and connects with other areas of his or her life.

¹ Jensen, Eric. *The 3-Day Fragile Brain Learning Recovery Program*. page 19

Skill building programs can be “boxed” and used successfully with a whole class, or they can be structured individually for learners with specific needs. The job of the classroom teacher is to understand the different needs of students in his or her class and plan accordingly. Some will need to be pulled out for the sort of intense skill building necessary to change the brain. For others programs like Becky Bailey’s *Conscious Discipline*, Jane Nelson’s *Positive Discipline* or the *Responsive Classroom* will be of particular benefit.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Every learner is unique. Successful educators understand they must accommodate the needs of each child rather than to simply provide a “one-size-fits-all, “sink-or-swim” environment. Accommodations level the playing field so that learners can be taught the skills they need and help them benefit from enriched experiences and environments.

2. What was your prior knowledge? How did that knowledge help or hurt?

My introduction to BCL was in the summer of 1998 when I took the 6-Day workshop. I decided to complete my certification with Jensen Learning and have attended three Brain Expos in addition to the 5-Day presenter training with Rich Allen. I’ve attended several ASCD, AASA, and COSA (Confederation of Oregon School Administrators) Conventions and always make it a point to attend sessions on brain-based learning. I’ve had the opportunity to spend time with some of the presenters and they have been helpful as I’ve been establishing my educational consulting business. Although I have not been working in a school district since leaving the classroom in 1998, I have had a great deal of opportunity to incorporate BCL into the work I have been doing since then.

My prior knowledge definitely helped me understand the concepts presented in this course. Everything that I learned was aligned with what I already knew and I now have a framework that I will be able to use as I organize my prior knowledge as well as my future learning.

3. What concepts were reinforced that you already knew?

The main concept that was reinforced for me was the fact that regardless of the condition or “disability,” there is always hope because all brains can change. Although I have always believed this, I’m glad to have the specific resources from this workshop. After my experience as an elementary school counselor in 1989-1991, I tried during my last five years of teaching to run an “emotionally safe classroom.” It wasn’t until *after* leaving the classroom that I discovered BCL and learned what I was trying to do was “brain compatible.” I’ve always wished that I had discovered Jensen Learning while I was still teaching!

I’ve struggled with the idea of “mainstreaming” vs. “pull-out programs.” During my last few years of teaching I became very frustrated because so many of my students were being pulled out to go to a “one-size-fits-all” resource room. In many cases I believed that it would have been better for them to stay in class since my classroom was set up to meet many of their needs. However, I’ve also been frustrated with the few students who seemed to need more help than I could give them in class. I was glad to hear this issue addressed in the workshop and hope to see a better balance between mainstreaming and pull out programs in the future.

4. What was relatively new to you?

I have been interested in the idea of Learned Helplessness since reading about it almost 20 years ago. When I was teaching, I could see varying degrees of it in so many students. During the workshop, however, was the first time, however, that I've ever heard of the concept of "community learned helplessness." I live in a small, rural coastal community that until recently has relied on fishing and lumber to support the economy. As those industries have changed, the whole community seems to have become discouraged. Compounding the problem is the fact that tourists and retirees have brought a great deal of money to town and the polarization between the "haves" and "have nots" has become more evident. In the past people tended to raise their families here and many of their children stayed and worked in fishing, lumber, or local business. That has all changed now, and the attitude at the high school – and perhaps throughout the community – is one of learned helplessness.

5. What concepts are worth using?

I like being able to have a concise model to share with parents and teachers when they are frustrated with learners. I have organized the course content and my unedited notes into two tables that will help me as I work with students, parents, and teachers. The first table deals with "What's Going On" and lists "Symptoms" and "What's Going On in the Brain" for each section of The Fragile Brain course. The second one is called "What Can Be Done" and gives thoughts on *hope*, and ideas for *enrichment, skill building, and accommodations* for each kind of learner. The concept I want to be able to convey to others is that there is always hope. I'm glad to have so many specific ideas that can I can pass on to frustrated parents, teachers – and students!

6. How do you plan to implement?

My life is in transition right now so I'm not sure how I will implement this material. Since I am semi-retired and plan to travel and write, I want to be careful about taking on commitments at this time. However, within a week of returning from Portland I was offered a job as the county coordinator of the drug and alcohol prevention program. This would be part-time work and is exciting because I could use what I know about the brain as I develop curriculum and train staff. I was offered the job because of the work I've been doing with the MIP (Minors in Possession) classes and a fifth grade class I taught as a community volunteer. My segment of those classes was to talk about alcohol and the brain. The director liked the way I presented the information about the brain in and wants me to incorporate it into the whole program K-12 in the three school districts in Curry County.

Another of my projects is called "Learning to Write / Writing to Learn: A Standards-Based Curriculum in a Brain Friendly classroom. I have given this workshop several times, but will revisit it and include some ideas from The Fragile Brain when I get a chance to give it again.

7. Likely obstacles in implementation?

I have no obstacles right now – but my opportunities for implementation are also limited. I probably will accept the job and begin working with the South Coast Community Resource Center. My main concern, however – even before taking the position – is to find out how open they will be to change. My impression of the program has been that it is highly

traditional and has not proven to be very effective. If I feel that there will be very much resistance to change, I would rather put my energy into my own work.

I also plan to market myself as an educational consultant and work with families who are frustrated and don't know what to do. A mother came to me this summer and wanted me to work with her family in this way and it was wonderful. There are no obstacles in my way in terms of doing this and I just need to move ahead, make contacts, and find clients.

8. Concerns you have about the material?

The only concern I have about the material is the sheer volume! It seemed overwhelming until I took the time to go back through the notebook and all of my notes and pull out those ideas that I can put to use right away. It now seems manageable and, while I have a lot more to learn, I feel like I have an organizational framework that makes sense to me.

9. Possible solutions for overcoming obstacles?

Since my only main obstacles are the lack of opportunities to implement this material, the obvious solution would be to overcome my fear of committing to the county job and simply make sure I am clear about why I'm accepting it. Since I'm being hired because of my knowledge about the brain, I would have a chance to bring some awareness to every teacher in the county.

10. Timeline for upcoming implementation.

- Before August 17, 2006 I will organize the information from the workshop and my notes into a form that will be easy for me to use in my continuing work.
- August 2006
 - Make a final decision about the Drug and Alcohol Prevention job and discuss with Bob Bare when he returns from Drug Free Communities conference.
 - Meet with Emmalie Lee, the new high school principal, who is very interested in BCL and wants to know about the Fragile Brain workshop. Be open to her ideas for doing something at the high school.
 - Contact Raleigh Philp about ABC video on cocaine. Get copy for Angela in Medford.
 - Find out when the next MIP class is and begin to reorganize the lesson plan around new material.
- September 2006
 - Close toy store and go on vacation for 3 weeks!
 - Review K-12 drug and alcohol prevention curriculum and make plans for 2006-07 school year.
- October 2006 – June 2007
 - Implement prevention program
 - Work with Heidi Connolly on marketing plan for Leadership 2020
 - Write
 - Travel
 - Watch for opportunities to present or work with like minded educators!

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11. Next Step(s)?

- I will find out what I need to do to keep my Oregon Teaching and Counseling licenses current and set up a timeline for doing that. I had planned to sign up to substitute next year, but if I take the county job, I won't do that.
- I will have lunch with Emmalie Lee next week and talk about possibilities for the high school next year.
- I'll continue to organize the materials I've been collecting over the past few years so it will be readily available when opportunities to use it come my way!