

Audio Textbooks Give Students with Reading Problems Access to Curriculum

For students of all ages with documented reading disabilities, Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic (RFB&D), a private, nonprofit organization, offers an accessible, inexpensive approach for assistance with assigned reading in science, social studies, math, and other school subjects. RFB&D currently provides recorded audio books on CD to more than 150,000 people, 70% of whom have reading disabilities. The organization's ambitious goal is to increase its membership to 1 million people by the end of 2009.

SchwabLearning.org recently interviewed RFB&D's President and CEO, John Kelly, to find out about the organization's latest offerings, and its future plans for helping people with "print disabilities" succeed in school. Mr. Kelly, who has held several positions at RFB&D over the past 20 years, is especially excited about the organization's aggressive push to reach more students with reading disabilities, as well as their parents and teachers.

Could you describe what's unique about the selection of recorded books you offer students with vision impairment or dyslexia?

Our library of recorded textbooks at every grade level is unique in the world. We're not a recreational reading library; we focus on books that kids need for their classroom studies. We require the volunteers who narrate books for us to have good voices, but we recruit them primarily for their subject matter skills. If you are reading something aloud and you aren't knowledgeable about the topic, that's going to come across to the listener. If you're trying to read a book on deep-space, interstellar telecommunications, for example, you'd better be an astronomer or a physicist, or it's not going to come off as a fluent, natural presentation.

But, beyond the narration, textbooks are so highly graphical that the person reading the book aloud must be able to describe to the listener, for example, a bar chart. The narrator needs to be able to describe in precise detail what an illustration represents — for example, an illustration of a quasar — and in order to do that, of course, a narrator would have to be a subject matter specialist.

In what ways can recorded books address the needs of students with reading disabilities?

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the increasing awareness in general education — and in the American psyche — about kids with learning disabilities, came a growing awareness of the role of audio materials in the educational success of these kids. Recorded books are an accommodation: a way for a student to access educational material in a format that promotes content acquisition and retention, without requiring the student to have the kind of decoding and reading skills that science proves he or she is not neurologically "well wired" to do. We are a tool in the toolbox, not the toolbox itself.

One of the barriers we had to break down, however, was people saying, "Wait this isn't really reading. You're not helping students build reading skills; these kids are cheating." We had decades of anecdotal evidence from parents, teachers, and students saying this is a "walk-in-the-room-and-turn-the-lights-on" experience. "My child, or my student, used to hate going to school and now he did his homework last night so he could take part in the classroom discussion tomorrow"; "My daughter used to hate reading and now she loves reading."

We had all these people telling us anecdotally that it really made sense. Then we went back to the experts and asked, "What do you make of this?" We went to the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and together we asked ourselves, "What bridge do we need to build between the reading remediation and reading accommodation communities?" Because, clearly, books in an audio format can be a benefit for students who struggle with reading. I give credit to Nancy Hennessy, an outstanding woman who was at that time the president of IDA, who said, "You know what? I get your point, and many of our teachers get it. So let's as an organization — IDA — say we get it."

We call the bridge the "remediation-accommodation continuum." From the remediation side, educators

say, "Give us a literacy curriculum based in structured language, give us specially trained teachers, give us sufficient classroom hours, and we will remediate kids; we'll teach them how to read print." But at the same time — and here's the "bridge" language — we also say, "Bring in the accommodation of recorded books to enable subject content acquisition at school." So, while we're trying to teach somebody to read, we should also provide the student an audio version of his health book, his social studies book, and his math book, so he can keep up with peers in subject content acquisition.

After grade five typically, in American public education, nobody teaches anybody to read anymore. If you haven't gotten it by grade five and you have a reading disability, you're at sea. At this point, the accommodation is essential to keep you up-to-speed in acquiring content knowledge about school subjects.

Our dialogue with the IDA community was so wonderful and rewarding to us because they looked at the whole picture of the student with learning disabilities and they said, we have to teach them how to read but we also have to look at the overall education of the child.

There's even some scientific evidence emerging that says, in fact, multisensory learning, such as following along in the text while you're hearing it read aloud, may benefit the reading process itself, not just subject content acquisition. If you expose kids to auditory learning, for example, you help them acquire expressive language. If they hear a description of what an oak tree looks like, they are exposed to that language and information, which can be retained and used in future reading tasks.

RFB&D is involved with some exciting research on recorded books as an accommodation for students with dyslexia. Could you tell us about that?

Well, first I'd like to say that we have been really following and, in fact, benefiting in a collateral way from the dyslexia research of Sally Shaywitz and her husband, Bennett, at Yale University. They are imaging the brains of living kids with learning disabilities and proving that, in fact, dyslexia is a neurological disability — a physically based disability. These kids are not dumb. They're of average or above-average intelligence. They're not lazy. They're really well motivated. In fact, they're often working two or three times as hard as their non-disabled peers, just to keep up.

RFB&D has anecdotal and testimonial evidence that audio books benefit learners with print disabilities, and now finally we're reaching for "the brass ring." We're looking for scientifically sound, quantitative evidence of that benefit. We went to Johns Hopkins University, an institution whose reputation for sound, unbiased research nobody could question. When we asked them to undertake this research, they did a literature search and found that, in fact, nobody was studying the possible benefit of audio processing in education of kids with learning disabilities, and they said, "You betcha we'll investigate it!"

The Johns Hopkins research, which started in 2002, shows a 38 percent increase in subject content acquisition among high school students who use our audio books. This statistic is based on measurable student performance in comprehension, recall, and retention of content presented in an audio format. We have a second study underway with Rutgers University, and we're contemplating a third study with another top-notch institution. We want to make sure that there's not something quirky that results in audio books working for social studies, but not for math; or working for elementary kids, but not for high school kids. We want to get a research-based answer to the question about their effectiveness.

Could you share with our readers some of RFB&D's current and future offerings?

Our goal is to reach a million members, and we're not going to achieve it by sending books — even on CD — out the back door and through the mail. It will require multiple new products, services, and technologies, but also new channels, in order to reach, not just students, but also teachers and parents. The partnership opportunity with Schwab Learning — which promotes RFB&D's products to a parent audience — is extremely exciting because our channel has typically been to students and teachers and we need to bring in the parallel channel to parents. So we are beginning to put staff and volunteers in classrooms with parents, with teachers, and with students, so that we can extend our reach.

We have also begun a partnership with the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST). Our two organizations fit together really well because CAST is a research and development nonprofit doing really cool stuff with technology in education for kids with learning disabilities. We need that. Our students need that. We need that for the development of better products and services. Our partnership with CAST will help us develop inventive, universally designed ways to make "learning through listening" a

reality in today's classrooms. We'll also be building a teacher-training website to support educators in applying Universal Design for Learning and new multimedia to instruction. With RFB&D's ability to reach the broader education community and CAST's longstanding reputation as a leading educational innovator, we expect to make a real difference for students with all kinds of abilities.

A third avenue we're using to expand our reach is the Internet, since it allows us to develop web-based teacher training, web-based student support, web-based parent awareness. We are perched on the edge of online chat rooms, peer mentoring, Ask the Expert, Q & As, and, no doubt, online education conferences.

What can parents do to explore RFB&D products and services, either individually or through their schools?

For one thing, don't wait for your school to take the first steps. Sign your child up now and we'll serve that student with what we call an Individual Membership so you can get your books right away. Then, go to the school principal, go to the education administrator, go to the superintendent, and go to the school board to raise their awareness about the products and services we offer. One of these professionals will also know whether the school is already a member of RFB&D. A school membership in RFB&D service starts at around \$350 a year, which is very affordable.

If your child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), and the IEP team can say, let's try audio accommodations, or why don't we try books in audio form, you can ask them write that into the IEP. That's often the sign that makes it okay for a school to include recorded textbooks as an accommodation.

As part of our transition to an all-digital service, we now provide books that play on specially adapted CD players. The players have been adapted to play RFB&D books, but they are still CD players with features that offer major functional enhancements for our members, who can now navigate audio books by chapter, by page, and even by section. And, we will very soon move into MP3 players and iPods.

Can you tell us a favorite anecdote about a student who benefited from using RFB&D's products and services?

I remember one young man who was originally diagnosed as mildly mentally retarded. He was pushed along in school by his well-meaning parents and well-meaning teachers. He graduated from high school and went to community college, where he bombed out miserably. The content was just overwhelming, and he left. Fortunately, he had a good family support network and was re-diagnosed. His parents knew that there was something they weren't getting. They knew they had a really smart kid who just wasn't reading. Anyway, he was re-diagnosed not as mentally retarded at all, but as severely dyslexic. This young man cannot read two or three words strung together. He is profoundly dyslexic. He signed up for RFB&D services, went back to school, this time to an exceptional four-year college, and got an undergraduate degree in aerospace engineering!

Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic

QUICK FACTS

Product:

Nation's largest collection of recorded textbooks

More than 25,000 of the nation's most highly circulating educational titles available on CD

For vision-impaired or dyslexic students, kindergarten through college;

5,000 new titles per year.

Sample of services:

Catalogued, annotated, online library of titles

Librarian assistance

Outreach to schools

Distribution of special CD and cassette players

Members: 150,000 children and adults; 70% with LD/dyslexia

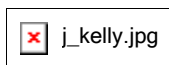
Volunteer readers: 6,000-plus

Local recording facilities: 21 across the country

Organization: Private, not-for-profit; funded largely by private philanthropy

History: Created in 1948 to serve blind WW II veterans attending college

© 2006 Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation Created: 01/27/2006



About the Contributors

John Kelly is President and CEO of Recording for the Blind & Dyslexic®. During 20 years with the organization, he has raised its profile with educators and policy-makers, and, since 1989, has headed initiatives that have increased membership by 600 percent. Mr. Kelly is a member of the American Library Association and the Special Library Association.

Other Resources

Websites

Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic website
www.rfbid.org

Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) Website
www.cast.org/