

Braille or Tactile

Is It Braille Literacy Or Is It Tactile Literacy?

by Danielle Burton (age: 21)

It was the first day of my Freshman year of college when I walked into my Earth and Space Science course for teachers. I had already been to one class that morning, and I was once again filled with nervous energy as I sat down in the classroom and waited for the beginning of class. Many questions were going through my mind at top speed, with no intention of ceasing. What would this course be like? Would I be able to understand the material? How would I handle visual information? These questions were running through my mind in an endless cycle, along with all the what if this happens or what if that happens.

As soon as class started, I was handed a copy of the syllabus in braille. This was the only class that I had received a syllabus in braille instead of as an electronic file. The syllabus was nearly the size of a single braille volume, which did nothing to settle my nerves. However, along with this syllabus, I was also handed three or four tactile diagrams that I would be needing for the class that day. It was these few diagrams that made me begin to ask myself what I was even doing in a college-level science class as a Deaf-Blind student.

I have always been a braille reader and have done nearly all of my schoolwork using braille. However, my experience with tactile diagrams with braille labels was inadequate throughout high school. I found them to be overwhelming and difficult to understand. In high school, it was common for me to avoid using tactile diagrams at all costs. If I could get by with managing to understand material without using a tactile diagram, I did it. By avoiding tactile diagrams throughout high school, I found myself in a situation where my avoidance of tactile diagrams was a problem.

Although I cannot recall what these tactile diagrams were today, I can remember the amount of time it took me to get past being overwhelmed by a simple raised-line drawing enough to where I could begin to gain any usable information from it. The diagrams had a combination of raised lines and braille labels which made them

extremely easy to read if only I could get past my ingrained notions that tactile diagrams were hard to understand.

Having this experience has caused me to think about what it really means to be braille literate. I gain a great deal of knowledge through reading and writing braille. However, I believe focusing only on braille literacy means we are limiting ourselves in more ways than we realize.

Sighted people do not just learn how to read print and nothing else. They learn how to read print along with charts, graphs, pictures and diagrams. They must be comfortable with both words and drawings and illustrations in order to gain the maximum amount of information they can.

However, it is often assumed that if you can read braille fluently, you can also read tactile diagrams without any farther instruction or experience. Sighted children are taught how to interpret diagrams and pictures from the time they are in Kindergarten, but blind students are often left to either not use the tactile diagrams or to figure it out for themselves.

Being able to gain knowledge through a combination of braille and tactile diagrams is as liberating to me as simply being able to read braille is to many individuals. It has allowed me to do many things in my college career that I would not be able to do if I just used braille alone. There are some concepts that are visual in nature and often require a tactile diagram in order to truly convey the concept in a meaningful way.

Going back to my predicament with the tactile diagrams on the very first day of my college career, I did eventually figure out what those few diagrams were about on that first day. I left that first class in complete turmoil as to what to do. Now the questions that I had prior to class had been replaced by new questions. What am I getting myself into? Why did I avoid tactile diagrams in high school? Will I ever be able to overcome my attitude toward them in order to get through this course? Will I understand these diagrams enough to even pass the course with a decent grade?

After thinking about all these questions, I realized I was left with only two choices, which were to either drop out of the course right then or accept the challenge to overcome my inability to use tactile diagrams and complete the course. I chose to learn how to interpret and use tactile diagrams along with braille in order to gain access to the content and material that was taught in this course. There were many occasions throughout the course of the semester when I wondered if I had made the

wrong choice. Those simple diagrams from the first days became more and more complex as the course progressed. It was not an easy first semester.

I finished the course that December with a solid B. Not only did I pass the course with a satisfying grade, but by the time the final exam came around, I was no longer intimidated by a tactile diagram. I had actually begun to look forward to them.

I am now a Junior in college studying Elementary and Special Education. I have used a combination of braille and tactile diagrams in several courses in order to learn the material. I could not have gotten through many of the courses without both braille and tactile diagrams. I will continue to use both of these together in the future and in my career as a teacher in order to be as successful as I can be.