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**Why are we doing this? thoughts on teaching adults braille**

Hello everyone,

My name is Ágústa, and I have worked as an educator at Sjónstöð Íslands for many years. My primary focus has been teaching braille to adults, while I have also consulted on and taught computer usage.

I have years of experience teaching adults who have lost their sight in their adulthood. People exhibit different enthusiasm; some are quick learners and are soon reading with ease, while others quickly give up, even before they have learned all the letters.

Why should one learn to read braille and take advantage of it?

To answer the question, I will be using myself as an example of a typical braille user.

I began learning braille when I was six years old and have since, for fifty years, used it every day.

I cannot imagine life without braille.

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When I was in grade school there were no computers or smartphones and the technology to create books in braille was rather primitive. All schoolbooks I read in braille and occasionally some children’s books, but they were in short supply. I did all my projects and hand-ins in braille using a Perkins Brailler. However, when I reached upper secondary school, I had to type my hand-ins using a regular typewriter, reason being that none of the teachers knew how to read braille. It felt miserable! I, for sure, made numerous typing errors and struggled to fix them when I realized I had made one.

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Then, new technology began to emerge. I first got a large heavy machine named Versabraille, which was a major revolution for me. This lump of a machine stayed with me for few years, and I loved it. It was the first digital technology that improved the access to educational materials and books for entertainment. The machine utilized regular cassette tape to store digital content. I received books on cassettes, but the machine could also be used for writing projects, save them to tape and it even connected to a dot matrix printer for printing. I lugged this lump around through upper secondary school or until I got my first PC, my Victor, with DOS operating system, Word Perfect, Papenmeier braille display and a very primitive Icelandic speech synthesizer. Now things started rolling.

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Early on, I began labelling all kinds of objects around me, such as playing cards and games.

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When I was fourteen, I got my first record player. I quickly discovered that if I wanted to own records, I would have to find a way to label them. Otherwise, I could spend all day searching for that Abba record. With time my record collection became quite extensive, with every single one of them labeled using Dymo tape and the Perkins Brailler.

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I began living on my own when I was eighteen. To be independent and able to run a household, I needed to label all kinds of objects.

I labeled the spice jars, canned goods, and a lot of other things I used daily. I also wrote partial instructions for both the washing machine and the dryer.

Who can learn the function of all the buttons on the remote, all at once? Not me, so I wrote down a list of them all to keep at hand, at least to begin with.

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It is quite impractical to open and sniff every spice jar just to find that one you need. Cooking would simply take too long. It is much easier if one can just open the cabinet and quickly find what one needs.

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All cans are basically identical, and it is impossible to always ask someone else what they contain. It is, therefore, quite convenient to keep a stock of labels with rubber bands, which can easily be put around the cans once one comes home from the store.

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The instructions for the washing machine I fasten inside a cabinet door in the laundry room. Now if I want to run some special program on the machine, all I have to do is open the cabinet door and read the instructions.

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Had I not marked all the games I have, both card and board games, I would have lost out on so many quality hours with friends and family playing them.

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I have marked so many things through the years, but behind it is always the thought, “how can I be as independent as possible.” In my kitchen there are four light switches, one for the light above the table, one for under the cabinet, etc. I mark each one of them with a single letter, so I can choose which lights are on. My home also has a lot of photos of family and friends. Each one has a label on the back so that I know what each one is. Quite convenient if a visitor asks:

“Who is that on the picture?”

How am I to answer if I don’t know it myself?

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I love knitting and am an avid knitter. I knit all kinds of things; sweaters, shawls, socks and just about anything I can imagine.

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I have for example knitted multiple identical shawls where the only difference is color. How can I know which one is which if I haven’t marked them somehow?

Now someone is thinking, how about just using a color identifier?

Well, color identifiers are fine for some things, I however have never found one that meets my expectations. Most of the once I have owned are total junk. But yes, I do own and use a color identifier, and it comes in especially handy in the launder room to stop me from mixing white with strong colors.

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But doesn’t now a days technology solve all these problems? Can’t we just turn on our smart phone, open an app like “Seeing Assistant Home” and use it to read packaging and identify objects? Get it to read the washing machine and the board games?

It is quite possible that someone could do just that. It will, however, take a lot of time. Imagine how long it would take me to cook if I had to use my smart phone to read all the spice jars and cans. The app wouldn’t be able to help me with the pictures on the wall and I am quite sure no one would have the patience to play games with me if I had to ready all my cards using the phone.

It would take me forever to find the right CD, the right book or select the right program on the washing machine.

But I, of course, use this app, especially when I return from the store with cans and other identical things. I identify them, label them with the correct label, and put them away, all to be able to quickly find them when I need. The app is also very useful when mail arrives. Another situation is when the computer acts out and Jaws doesn’t work, then it can be quite handy to use the app to read the screen.

There is no question that all these apps are a great addition to boosting people’s independence. I, however, have a tough time accepting that they can in all cases replace braille.

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How would I, for example, be able to give this presentation without braille?

A speech synthesizer could be used to read it to me, and I then repeat everything it says. I know of people who do exactly that, but it is quite challenging to split your attention between simultaneously listening and speaking. It requires a lot of practice, but it is possible.

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I listen to a lot of audiobooks, and I deeply enjoy having access to a large and varied collection of books. I admit that today I do not read a lot of books in braille, both because I really enjoy listening to a good narrator while knitting or taking a walk, and because I find it quite a waste to print out a book on quality paper just to be read once. The only exception is poetry. I want to be able to read poems in braille, I want to read them slowly and I want to read them over and over again.

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Few things delight me as much as sitting on the sofa with my cats and a good book of poetry. Not long ago, a senior poetry lover was learning braille from me. She had read a lot of poetry while she had her vision and therefore put a lot of effort into learning braille with the main goal of being able to read more poetry. She had quickly seen a purpose and this purpose acted as a driving force in her studies. This is the key in my opinion. If a student recognizes the value of learning something, they will learn. But not everyone likes poetry, people’s tastes are different. It is therefore very important to work with the student to find a reason them to learn braille, to make them realize the benefits of their efforts.

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It is quite natural to put focus on teaching people to use technology, it can for sure help and make some tasks easier, but teaching braille should not suffer due to focus on technology. New technology solutions come out all the time, solutions that can be useful for us all, especially people who cannot read, neither with their eyes or fingers. This is of course great, but I fear that it lessens people’s willingness and interest in learning braille. They don’t see the reason to learn and would rather just wait until the right technology comes along which solves the problems.

I would like to mention one more thing which I find very important. The European union’s regulation which mandates that all member states must enforce braille labeling of all medications. This is a big step forwards, both for safety reasons and because it makes braille more visible to the public. I personally feel much better being able to identify medications without problems, it is great freedom.

It is also great freedom when going to places where for example elevator buttons are marked in braille or labels next to interview rooms are in braille.

Unfortunately, braille is not very visible in the Icelandic community and there is little interest in putting in the effort to fix the situation, as readers are few and there is not much pressure for improvements.

As I have said before, students vary. Some are full of interest and quick learners, while others need more time and practice. If students give braille a chance it usually works out well. Students are usually quick to learn the letters, that is, the braille structure. It can, however, be more challenging to develop the necessary sense of touch and motor skills for reading. Unfortunately, way too many decide that they cannot learn braille, even before they start. It can take quite some effort to convince people to even give it a try and if that succeeds, it is very important to be encouraging, assign manageable tasks and try to make the learning experience interesting.

We should focus on teaching adults braille, as being able to read braille makes people more independent. If people can read braille and can label everyday items, they gain independence and a more positive self-image. Our primary objective is therefore to make braille an attractive option and assist people in seeing the benefits in learning to use braille in everyday life.

And speaking of technology, next up is Helena María Agnarsdóttir. She will be talking about an innovation that impressed us all; a small device that could spark the interest of people to write braille and even eventually read it.

Thank you.