

Switched-On Lifelong Learner

A Testimonial by Charlotte Palmer



When the year 2000 arrived, I was 58, the mother of two college-aged children, wife of a retired geologist/educator, and a veteran teacher of 35 years experience. The last 30 of those years had been spent with students with "learning disabilities".

I had mentored dozens of USF students earning their special education degrees. For this service the university gave me tuition waivers for continuing education courses. During the 1990s I took the 5 courses needed to add the "English for Speakers of Other Languages endorsement to my Florida teaching certificate. (With the changing school population projected to escalate in the 21st century, this seemed like a good thing to do.)

Shift was in the works in public education. The FCAT assessment program had begun. No Child Left Behind was the impetus to change the criteria for placing challenged students in self-contained classes like the ones I had taught at Pinellas Park Elementary for the past 12 years. I applied for a teacher/facilitator position with a grant that funded a 3-year school wide reading reform program called Success for All. At the end of 3 years I was asked to split my time between being a reading coach and the staffing team coordinator. That was 4 years of swimming upstream pushing the limits of my learning curve ever steeper. The continual challenge was both invigorating and extremely stressful. "There's got to be a better way to keep up with all these new requirements", I thought. "I need a better brain! I need retraining big time!"

A long time ago I learned from an Asian guru, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears", and so it was. In my case the "teachers" were presenters at a national symposium on the brain sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in Washington, D.C., in May of 2001. The school paid my way to learn about different applications of brain-based learning to education.

What a banquet of ideas and teaching techniques! Among the books I brought back was a British illustrated children's paperback called ***The Learning Gym: Fun-to-Do Activities for Success at School*** by Erich Ballinger published by Brain Gym® Edu-Kinesthetics, Inc. This showed children doing different dance steps and holding or rubbing points on their bodies in a variety of postures. Each stance had a name, a description, and its own physical and mental benefits. These benefits included increased attention, calm, centered emotions, and improved whole-brain comprehension. There was a recurring encouragement to drink more water to improve response time.

This seemed like information I could quickly share with interested staff so I did a "show, tell and try" session to a small group of teachers when I returned to school. One creative National Board Certified educator invited me to share it with her kindergarten class. They liked it, and she has used it with good results ever since. Many teachers were undecided, but let me occasionally work with their students. I reminded some of Jack and the Beanstalk coming home from the fair minus a cow with only a handful of "magic" beans in exchange.

The following year I was asked to be the interim guidance counselor. This



was a great platform from which to share the learning gym activities with K-5 students. Many liked them. They noticed that they had more energy when they did them. Some shared them with their parents, and others wrote me stories about them. It was definitely time to get some formal training in these skills.

The book's author said that these were Brain Gym® exercises that he had learned as a member of the Educational Kinesiology Foundation based in Ventura, CA, and founded by Dr. Paul Dennison who had developed this exercise program in his group of reading clinics in the 1980s. I knew that the Pinellas Physical Education Department Supervisor endorsed the program. He spoke enthusiastically about the ways it had helped his own daughter improve her coordination and reading abilities. When I checked with him about the availability of training locally, he mentioned that a young woman had visited his office the previous week saying that she had just become Brain Gym® certified. She planned to offer an introductory session in Largo within two weeks. I made the connection, attended the session, and signed up for the 24-hour Brain Gym 101 entry level course.

I found that through the five learning principles central to the Edu-k work:

- Drawing Out: Intelligence is inborn.
- Focus: Attention follows intention.
- Notice: We learn what we actively experience.
- Move to Learn: Growth is a search for balance; imbalance is a search for growth.
- Interconnect: Each of us is affected by every other.

I could combine any of the many exercises to achieve my stated self-improvement goal. "What a bonanza for all our stressed out, attention deficit students," I thought. What a self-help tool for me!

That fall I got my opportunity to move into my new area of certification. I was asked to be the interim ESOL teacher while that teacher took a year's sabbatical leave. At the back-to-school teacher training session, the ESOL teachers were encouraged to apply for a free 2-year Master of Arts in Education in Multicultural Multilingual Studies program offered through No Child Left Behind at University of Florida.

A free second Master's degree? Yes, I would definitely apply even though I was now in my 60s. Although I had a Masters degree with a 4.0 GPA, I would still have to take the Graduate Record Exam on-line. No pressure! I had made the entry requirements in my 20s. Could I do it again in my 60s? It was worth a shot. Now I had Brain Gym® to focus my attention, calm my self doubt, and integrate my whole brain comprehension.

I took my 61st birthday off from school to take the GRE. I did my Brain Gym® exercises as I prepared for the GRE, right before the GRE, and again during the break. Relaxed, focused concentration followed. Afterwards I felt I had done the best I could. When the results came back, they weren't just "OK", they were admirable. Yes, I was accepted into the program. One professor remarked that I had scored in the range of PhD candidates. That victory set the tone for the 37 hours of coursework I plowed through during the next 24 months. Evening and Saturday courses, one summer month of 3 days a week on campus, 4 days home to prepare for the next 3 days on campus... it was a rugged schedule, but doable.

The 30 of us from a 5 county area bonded to help each other along. The resulting degree made us the mentor candidates in our field giving each of us a greater sense of personal respect and self-worth. Could I have done it without Brain Gym®? Maybe. Would I have felt as empowered in that learning process without Brain Gym®? Definitely not. It showed me then and continues to reveal to me the extent of my capabilities and capacities.

I have been fully certified as a Brain Gym® trainer/therapist since 2005. That spring I presented a 90 minute workshop on Brain Gym® for ESOL teachers at the Florida Sunshine State TESOL conference in Orlando. I've presented to my school faculty and to a foster parent organization. I use it in summer day camp programs I co-direct at Boyd Hill Environmental Studies Center, Pinellas Park Elementary, and with various families in the Tampa Bay area.

Since March 2008, I have been additionally certified to teach Double Doodle Play, an art awareness integration program for aspiring artists of all ages and abilities. Brain Gym® personally gives me a method for keeping alert, articulate, and active, negating the effect of "senior moments" and envisioning another two decades or more of integrated learning, teaching and living.

You can learn more about Brain Gym® at: <http://www.braingym.com/>

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