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An interview with Don M. Winn: Coping with a Sense of Loss of Control

*Jul 14, 2020 by
Michael F. Shaughnessy EducationViews Senior
Columnist*

Michael F. Shaughnessy –

1) Don, most people know you as a fantastic writer and scholar—but now you are venturing into the realm of “coping with a sense of loss of control.” And I can really relate. What brought this about?

Hi, Michael, thank you for your kind words and for inviting me to the beautiful world that is New Mexico again.

For me, 2020 began innocuously enough; I had several school events and keynote speaking engagements on the schedule, and was working daily on my writing, research, and social media. It was business as usual. Until it wasn't.

In February, there were rumblings on the news about China and a new bug that was flexing its muscles on the mainland. Before I knew it, cases were spreading around the world and life as we knew it was, if not gone, at least on a long pause.

Suddenly, everything was changing, replete with unknowns and open-ended scenarios. Not exactly my definition of a comfort zone. In fact, it felt to me as if the whole planet was collectively holding its breath. I don't recall a single time in my own life where I have felt like I knew so little about a topic or concern, or a time when so many conflicting opinions were flying at me like a blizzard in headlights on a dark night. It's been disorienting, to say the least.

I've had to make a project of getting comfortable with discomfort, with not knowing, and with uncertainty, and I wanted to reach out to my readers and see how they were managing this unprecedented situation (and its attendant emotions) as well. So that's what prompted my blog, [Coping with a Sense of Loss of Control](#).

2) You are in touch with parents and teachers and kids. How are they coping in general?

Families vary widely; for most parents, homeschooling is a task they never imagined undertaking, especially while concurrently learning to work remotely if they were able to maintain their employment. Others are struggling financially, adding another layer of “unknown” to an already overwhelming situation.

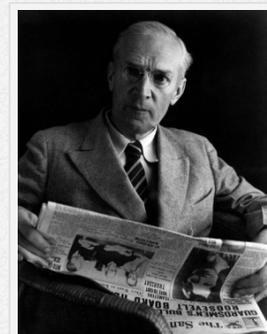
Students seem to be struggling not only with the change in their learning environment but also with the loss of their main source of structure, public school. And those who have reached out to me seem to be chafing the most at the loss of their social freedoms. Several have said that they haven't spent this much time at home since they were in elementary school, and they don't like being “cooped up” without their friends. Many are compensating by spending more time on social media.



Don M. Winn

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Many parents have mentioned that far too many students—especially those with different needs—are experiencing considerable academic “slide,” or loss of traction academically.

Additionally, some adults and children are feeling so isolated that they refuse to shelter in place or abide by the WHO guidelines, thereby putting themselves and their families at risk.

I wouldn't want to trade places with our dear teachers, either. Talk about unknowns! The decision of each ISD looks to be right down to the wire regarding how to proceed for this school year, mere weeks away (here in Texas, at least). Additionally, many states are not requiring children younger than a certain age to wear masks, and ensuring social distancing between students will be a challenge, to say the least.

If it turns out that distance learning is the model followed this fall, I would imagine that many teachers will be frustrated with the shortfalls in interaction and the commensurate challenges to comprehension in their students.

3) Some parents have had to both provide parenting and instruction—how much stress did this bring about?

I would say it produced massive amounts of stress. Parents have lost their structure as well, the workplace is off-limits for many, and working conditions at home may be far from ideal. Distractions can really impact an adult's productivity, and to have to oversee their child's schooling as well is overwhelming.

Some parents remark that they are being asked to explain topics that they didn't understand well themselves and may not have thought about for years. Tensions are running high in many homes.

4) Don, I return to teach around August 15—maybe in person, maybe online, but there is this feeling of anxiety and apprehension. Your thoughts?

Rightly so! I can't imagine what you must be going through. If you teach remotely, you'll have to deal with the changes in interaction that ZOOM and other platforms create, and if you're back in the classroom, safety issues will be largely out of your control due to how the students choose to respond to health guidelines.

The world keeps spinning, as the expression goes, and education, like other facets of our infrastructure, will find its way, but the challenges of finding a balance between safety and meeting the needs of all concerned will not be quickly achieved, I fear.

5) You know what I have been doing during this COVID-19 thing? Reading! Do you have any suggestions for elementary, middle school and even high school kids? And parents too?

Fantastic! Reading is the perfect escape. We can be transported to a different time, different worlds, different realities. All welcome changes of scenery!

And reading introduces us to characters who are finding their own way through challenges and who ultimately grow as a result—a paradigm that is comforting in its very reliability.

This is a perfect time for parents to make a goal of reading together as a family. Classics like *The Wind in the Willows*, *Winnie the Pooh*, and *Swallows and Amazons* are beloved for good reason. More contemporary offerings like the My Teacher is an Alien series, the Sir Kaye the Boy Knight series, or the book *Fish in a Tree* are excellent, relatable choices that anyone can enjoy.

It's so beneficial for kids to see their parents reading for enjoyment. In our instant-gratification world, reading can seem like a slow-moving, pale substitute for movies and video games, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

Reading great books is actually more satisfying than playing a digital game, watching a movie, or other pursuits where someone else (or a team of someones) has done all the work of imagining things for you. When we read, the story becomes ours alone in a way no one can replicate. We fill in the details, scenery, and events from the richness of our imagination and experience, a much better thing by far. Beloved books become a part of us in a way digital media can never be, and that makes all the difference.

What if someone struggles to read? Audiobooks are a gift from above! My wife and I love to listen together while we work on jigsaw puzzles. Audiobooks are a great option for families, adults, and kids alike.

6) What have I forgotten to ask?

I'd love to tell you about my current project. It's going to be another one to two years in the works, I'm estimating, but I hope to make it well worth the wait.

As you know, dyslexia is one of my favorite topics, especially with regard to early detection and support. My reference book, *Raising a Child With Dyslexia: What Every Parent Needs to Know*, has been very well received in that arena.

But the more I meet parents at my speaking events, the more I have become aware of another greatly underserved demographic: adults who are likely dyslexic but who have never had the benefit of diagnosis or support.

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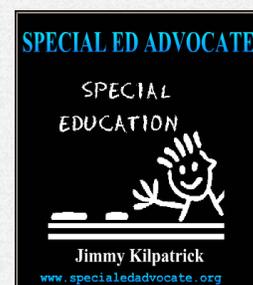
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I recently did a very vulnerable interview about my own struggles with fellow author and educational advocate Lois Letchford, and republished it on my blog, [Learning to Read is Not Enough for Dyslexics](#). Adults are coming out of the woodwork, so to speak, with their own stories after having read mine.

The feedback from that interview capped all the personal input I've had previously from undiagnosed parents and made this project a must-do for me. There is a huge need not only for relatable information about all aspects of dyslexia, but even more, for a framework of acceptance and self-compassion for all these folks who have been suffering in silence for decades.

I look forward to sharing it with you! Once again, thank you so much for the opportunity to have a "virtual" trip to New Mexico!

7) Where can you learn more about your books and how to purchase them?

My website/blog is <https://donwinn.com/>, and you'll find lots of information about my books and resources for teachers and parents there. Here is my Amazon author page too: <https://www.amazon.com/Don-M-Winn/e/B003DQIJME/>

All of my chapter books are available in softcover, hardcover, eBook, and audio.

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