

Functional illiteracy
by
Michael J Holme

© 2025, Michael J Holme

Introduction

Functional illiteracy is a term, and in keeping with the nature of this book, I am not going to give you a stock, academic definition of it, because I have not researched it: tried to read books about it; but rather, I will speak from experience, and say what I think it means; more to the point, what I assert it means. So as far as this book continues, it is what you might call, something an individual “has”, when they find difficulties with basic reading and writing, to the degree that occupationally and personally, in terms of their emotional and intellectual growth, they are or have been notably disadvantaged by it in broad aspects of life.

It doesn't just affect their ability to read and write; so, for example, a daily newspaper would be an unlikely part of their routine, but comprehension in its wider sense is affected.

A brief search of the Amazon books database using the term “functional illiteracy”, reveals few books on the subject, and amongst them are studies regarding various educational systems or structures, rather than covering the subject per se.

My broader work highlights the positive side of realising that your parents, schools, and perhaps to some degree your peers, may have let you down, when as an adult, you realised your

reading and writing skills were woefully behind those of others, and both aspects had and were still holding you back.

Personally, I always tried to adapt, but in a natural rather than a calculated, reactive fashion. Therefore, I studied subjects involving numbers, equations, symbols, and mnemonics, such as mathematics, chemistry, classical piano and computing, both in and out of that order. But at a relatively late age in life, the broader literary subjects, such as in the humanities, began to really interest me, for example, religion and psychology, and perhaps sociology. However, being almost totally unable to read relevant books, my knowledge was limited to my own life experiences. Then, I discovered the blessing that an unread ignorance offered. Apart from science and technical books, the only books I have read fully, are -

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory - Roald Dahl

Kes - Barry Hines

The Gamekeeper - Barry Hines

Of Mice and Men - John Steinbeck

Mere Christianity - C.S. Lewis

The Pigeon - Patrick Suskind

Post Office - Charles Bukcowski

(I read two thirds of D.H. Lawrence's Sons and lovers.)

Bipolar disorder

I have a bipolar diagnosis. Much of my prose was read during times of bipolar elevation, or hypomania. Bipolar is a mood disorder characterised by periods of high and low activity. A lot of my writing was achieved during manic, or high, periods. However, the inward-looking depressive periods were often more likely to yield deeply insightful thoughts to write about, if again, being exaggerations of a more level (mythically) normal state of living.

Writing course

After writing a few hundred poems on a distance learning poetry course, and as such, iteratively gaining skills in English language, I turned to writing prose more often than verse, and focused on sharing my conclusions, experiences, or wisdom, if you will? That way, I felt I was bolstering the existing shared knowledge, to do my part in leading bodies of thought to a greater, stronger state of common sense, through any agreements arrived or implied in my own isolation, and not just repeating what I'd read academically.

What if many others did a similar thing: how useful. That's my premise for people to read on, regardless of how little they've formally studied. In fact, even if they've studied and/or read

much, humility may be profited by the acceptance of the difference that exists between knowledge and wisdom: books and practise.

Risking patronizing you, my description of wisdom is more practically calling upon life experiences to make serious and/or vital decisions confidently, on account of having had related occurrences and outcomes. Whilst knowledge is wisdom distilled, because it originated as experience and was written down, not to be reexperienced with the original emotions, but to be read and intellectualised, and less confidently employed by the said, unsure unbacked-up intellect.

Writing and the role of memory

My memory abilities are poor, but I've found since 1997 that threads emerged from my writing, and I have been able to hone and tighten my ideas by continuing to write more thoughts down.

Making sense of my mental processes helped me to make sense of me, and to have greater self-confidence, meaning better everyday understanding and general choice making. But writing is valuable even if you have a good memory, because it is easier to share your ideas by writing them down, so people can try to take them in at their own speed, rather than listening

to the spoken word, at a set rate. And whether, as Herman Hesse said, “wisdom cannot be imparted”, it might be validated one day if a seed has been planted.

Early life

I have no memory of being read to when I was little. In comparison, my second wife has recounted stories of her own mother reading copious words to her, and Michelle reads and writes very well as an adult.

In school “reading” lessons, I remember the better readers were given the job of doing so, out loud, and near to the time of our exams, we were shown films of the books we’d covered; presumably to compensate for classroom inattention.

In other English lessons we were tested for comprehension. A short passage had to be read, then questions were answered. The first couple were always literal “low hanging fruit” ones: “how old was Mary?”, “was Mary happy to become a mother?” Then it got harder. You needed to have increasingly absorbed the spirit of the passage. I was always hopeless at that point, as there were no easy pickings. I’m not much better now, hence I consider myself functionally illiterate.

It is not just a problem with the written word. Comprehension of the spoken word also figures in parallel, not least in the lecturing model of teaching widely used in universities.

Spoken words

As a young man, meeting new people via work or otherwise, I often found myself losing the thread in groups of diverse new people. That generated anxiety for me which made concentration even harder. And some people spoke too fast, others unclearly, others just had the wrong, distracting aura. Once a fragment was lost, I got derailed from the rest of the discourse. Having sufficient comprehension skills to compensate for my anxiety hold-ups, was vital at that socially and occupationally crucial period of my life, but I didn't.

Occupation

Admittedly, a possible autistic element was at play in my case, but I think the two aspects: autism and functional illiteracy, overlap. That would explain the way I'd obsessively read data as a child, such as statistics about pistols and rifles, their calibres, muzzle velocities, barrel lengths, magazine capacities, weights, etc. I could take it in and remember it easily.

I studied chemistry then computing at university, both subjects in which essays very nearly need not be written or read. Midway, I learned how to read classical music at sight; again, avoiding English comprehension.

Pigeonholing myself mentally, I began to work in computing, somewhat avoiding people. Had I gone to a private school rather than a comprehensive one, I imagine my misbalances would have had a better chance of being addressed.

Poetry

Poetry was something I didn't want to read, despite that being suggested to me on many occasions. With plain English being hard for me at times, other people's verse could be extra tricky, in its tight, often metaphorical and obscure nature. But for some reason, I felt an inner compulsion to want to write.

As I've said, I joined a distance learning course. I began tentatively, apart from one poem which I wrote over a week and about thirty or even forty hours-time. It's called "Panic attack", describing an experience I had with magic mushrooms that I thought was seminal to my life.

I submitted that work to my tutor early in the course. It was the year 2000, and I sent it along with more trivial pieces, but tsoon

found myself not writing for another six years. There was no time limit to the course, just a total lines and submissions count.

I ultimately subtitled my collection of poems, “My beautiful diary”, because each piece was dated, and many described my life either currently or retrospectively. Rather than just describing events, my poetry took a turn and began to describe thoughts or ideas. For example, I had a short phase which could be described as my pantheistic period. I didn’t know there was a word for what I was writing, but my ideas that God was nature, etc., was labelled with that former term by a friend. Of course, I wasn’t reading books, so I was “reinventing the wheel”, and as much as I liked, totally unashamedly and validly.

After writing my “Joe’s second-hand testament”, my writing was generally more psychological and often linked to mental health topics, particularly my own bipolar and psychotic experiences.

Spreading the word

I hope this book illustrates my personal advancement in writing ability, even if my reading remains poor. And I think it is our duty to strengthen those original discoveries, by

making mistakes, avoiding the advice already laid down, and telling others about it in any written and/or spoken manner. How else was common-sense arrived at?

The path

It turned out that my personal path of functional illiteracy became a strength. I won't lie. It didn't yield true fruit until I reached my early to mid-forties. However, those familiar with Carl Jung may have heard his suggestion that life begins at forty, and prior to that we are just collecting data.

However, I eventually sensed that most people around me had not been forced by their mistakes into a state of consciousness, and rather, they were somewhat adrift in the system with its trinkets for popular successes: cars, property, holidays in the sun and "healthy" offspring, and so it would cycle through families; until perhaps a random setback or tragedy occurred.

Whereas, the person who is cursed with multiple common and often avoidable mistakes, is forced into introspection. Or at least, it is hoped they can do so. Whilst that path of wisdom is not "paved with much gold", isn't it the goal of life to become you and not some sort of capitalistic clone.

Of course, there are other paths to wisdom other than illiteracy or functional illiteracy. However, by definition, knowledge is not so much the path of individuality, as so much a path of bolting on parts from other people, and individuality, therefore, often comes with some form of cost or hardship.

They say -

“The help I didn’t get was all the help I needed”, and -

“Good judgement comes from experience, and experience? Well, that comes from poor judgement.”