

Learning through listening

Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic unlocks the curriculum for learning disabled students

by Tony Gruenewald

When Christine Ranaghan was just starting out as the New Jersey Educational Outreach Director for Recording for the Blind &

Dyslexic[®] (RFB&D[®]), she wasn't surprised when some fifth grade students and their teacher, who were participating in the RFB&D's Learning Through Listening[™] program and used RFB&D's recorded textbooks in class, asked her to come to their classroom.

This wasn't an unusual request since Ranaghan frequently visits schools. But this visit resonates in her mind because it was unlike any she had experienced. It confirmed her belief in RFB&D's effectiveness for students who have difficulty reading standard print.

The teacher called some of the students to the front of the class to present Ranaghan with "a token of their appreciation." The students told Ranaghan that their experience with RFB&D's

recorded textbooks had been so positive that they wanted to help other students. They then presented her with \$30 they had raised. They wanted to purchase an RFB&D membership for someone else who needed it.

"I was shocked," says Ranaghan. "This was their idea—nothing staged, just kids, teachers, and RFB&D. It was so moving."

Since then, Ranaghan and her staff have had many other heartwarming experiences as they've spread the word about RFB&D.

Over 91,000 titles available

Founded in 1948, RFB&D, a nonprofit volunteer organization, is the nation's educational library serving people who cannot effectively read standard print because of visual impairment, dyslexia, or other physical disability. Its mission is to create opportunities for individual success by providing, and promoting the effective use of, accessible educational material.

Currently, RFB&D has over 91,000-recorded titles on analog tape and digital CD in its CV Starr Learning Through Listening[™] Library—ranging from Dr. Seuss to quantum physics and Black's Law Dictionary.

Unlike other companies and organizations that provide popular titles and periodicals, RFB&D distributes textbooks, educational, and reference materials to people with print disabilities. Another difference is the equipment. For RFB&D's Classic Cassettes[™] or analog recordings, four-track audio tapes and tape players are used instead of the standard two-track tapes most commonly used by the general public. This means that more recorded material fits onto fewer tapes. RFB&D's Audio-Plus[™] digitally recorded textbooks on CD can hold 40 hours of material and can be accessed with a special CD player or computer software. This playback equipment has a special feature that enables the student to control the rate of his learning by slowing down the reader's voice if the student needs more time to process the material. It

also speeds up the tape if the student is able to comprehend at a faster rate.

Also, RFB&D's audio books differ from commercial products because of a navigation system that makes it possible to find individual pages and chapters. This gives students independence, as they are able to read these sections without teacher intervention.

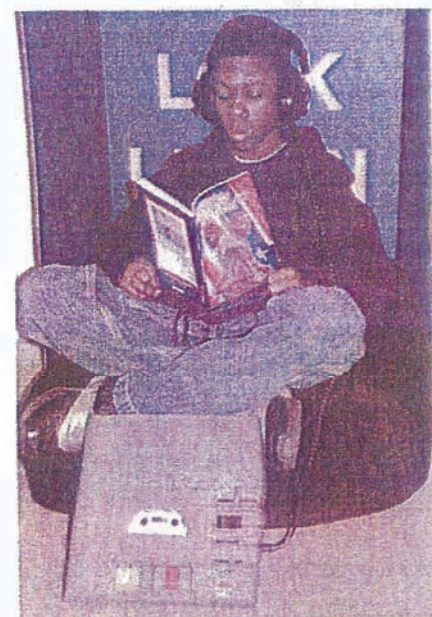
RFB&D also differs from other reading technologies because it uses experts in their respective fields to read the books. These fully accessible recorded textbooks are recorded in a natural human voice and include detailed descriptions of graphic elements. There are 32 studios across the United States that record and produce the textbooks used by RFB&D members.

The voices behind the recordings come from volunteers, with more than 5,000 nationwide and over 500 in New Jersey alone. They record everything from the most elementary of textbooks to the most technical and advanced post-graduate and professional materials. This dedicated group also provides pre- and post-production, administrative and outreach support and other duties to get the word out about RFB&D's services. NJEA member Dr. Marjorie Heyman, a Learning Consultant (LDT-C) for the East Windsor Regional School District, and also an RFB&D volunteer, says, "We have a lot of students who learn by listening and this enables them to keep up with grade-level materials and content materials."

Reading to learn

In 2000, the New Brunswick school system pioneered a pilot project of RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program in New Jersey. The program was comprised of three key elements: accessible educational materials, playback equipment, and program support. The New Jersey Unit of RFB&D continues to replicate this model program in strategic school districts throughout the state. Ranaghan and her staff are working to spread the word about RFB&D.

RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program is an accommodation that enables students with print disabilities to keep up. It is a simple adaptation of curriculum which, in concert with RFB&D's instructional practices,



Students who have historically fallen behind can "read to learn" and keep up with classroom assignments.



Students have been so grateful for RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program that they have raised money so other schools could share the experience. Here, New Brunswick elementary school students meet with New Jersey Unit Outreach Director Christine Ranaghan, Assemblyman Joseph Doria, RFB&D Marketing Vice President Peter Smith, New Brunswick Schools Superintendent Ronald Larkin and RFB&D President and CEO Richard O. Scribner (l-r) after presenting a book they wrote about their Learning Through Listening experience.

allows students to complete grade-level work.

Ranaghan notes, "Reading problems can be addressed in two ways: either through remediation or accommodation. Some students, no matter how much remediation they receive, may only acquire functional reading skills. The majority of these students receives basic skills instruction but may never have adequate reading skills to keep up with curricular demand."

She believes RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program can provide an accessible and appropriate adaptation of curriculum for these students. Many audio books in RFB&D's extensive library are included in the New Jersey Frameworks to assist teachers with instruction of the state's Core Curriculum Content Standards. Students with reading disabilities are therefore able to complete the same work as their peers. RFB&D helps students read to learn rather than only learning to read, and permits them to acquire content knowledge and foster self-reliance. In short, RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program promotes lifelong learning and independence.

Lorraine Vega, a teacher at New Brunswick's A.C. Redshaw Elementary School comments, "RFB&D provides a comprehensive program designed to remediate the deficits of special needs students. Its purpose is to build self-esteem in reading and promote proficient learners. Students learn with all their modalities rather than compensating on one. Their auditory, visual, and tactile abilities are enhanced as students learn through listening. Comprehension

is heightened, vocabulary skills are strengthened and expanded. It was a pleasure to witness the excitement as my students found success when initiating the program."

A quantified success


Most recently, Ranaghan received welcome news from a research project conducted by Rutgers, The State University. In 2001, Rutgers, the New Jersey Unit of RFB&D, and the New Brunswick School District collaborated on a research project to collect responses to a series of targeted questions examining the effectiveness of RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program. The impetus for the study was the need to identify a "best practice" model. The project consisted of 21 students, each with an Individualized Educational Program (IEP), from two schools. Each student was classified as having a specific learning disability that made reading difficult. They received instruction on how to use RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program as an accommodation.

The New Jersey unit's project team leaders trained the teachers and students on the analog and digital playback equipment specially designed to play RFB&D's audio books. Each teacher received hands-on training and students were assisted with equipment use until they were able to operate the playback devices independently. Teachers were also given suggestions on how to integrate RFB&D's audio textbooks into their existing curriculum.

Overall, the findings indicated that students' pre- and post-test scores on the

Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) improved after a period of 15 weeks using RFB&D's audio books in the classroom and suggest that in certain contextual and instructional situations, they help students improve their reading skills. Students who used the audio books in structured classroom exercises improved their reading skills more than students who used it primarily as optional free-time activity. Based on pre- and post-SRI scores, RFB&D audio book use appears to have had a positive effect on student reading skills and improved student achievement. Evidence also suggested that teacher implementation of the program affects student efficacy with the audio books and improved student achievement. Teachers who integrate RFB&D's Learning Through Listening program into regular and ongoing activities are most likely to see improvement in student achievement.

The study also looked at students with attendance problems and found, "Teacher feedback indicated that students with poor attendance began to attend class much more regularly after they began using audio books," due to improved levels of reading confidence.

RFB&D's New Jersey Unit Educational Outreach Center is a professional development provider. Its teacher training conforms to the state's mandated 100-hour requirement. RFB&D's audio books complement, supplement, and enhance direct instruction because students can learn specific reading skills while also building listening comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. Perhaps the most important benefit is that they provide access to general curriculum. This levels the playing field and empowers students with print disabilities to complete the same work as their peers. 

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Learn more about RFB&D

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