Is Braille Still Needed Today?

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Braille was invented by Louis Braille in 1825, but it wasn’t officially recognised in France for use in schools until 1850. It was first used in Germany in 1879 and then throughout Europe.

Much has changed since then with the emergence of electronic braille displays, recording devices and numerous other aids. The greatest new tool for us, however, is computer-based speech synthesis, which enables visually impaired and blind people to hear texts instead of reading them.

What we find normal – listening to pretty much all texts – remains rather alien to some of the older generation, who may have gone through school using braille only. Since teachers tend to be from this older generation, tensions arise time and again when they place emphasis on braille while we students simply want to hear the texts.

That reminds me of something quite interesting that happened to me in secondary school. We were studying English and the whole class was working on a book. When it was my turn to read, the teacher suspected I was either reading the text with my eyes – which would only have been possible if I had been wearing magnifying spectacles two centimetres in front of the screen – or listening to the text and repeating it, which was not really possible either, as I had both hands on the braille display most of the time. The teacher then told me to sit at a desk where I had no access to a computer. I didn’t think this was a very good idea, because it would then take me some time to load the document onto my braille display. This in itself would not have mattered, were it not for the fact that the whole class would have to wait. Luckily, I got on well with my schoolmates, otherwise I would have felt very uncomfortable. But since pretty much all of them were my friends, it was quite an amusing incident. After some toing and froing with the teacher which got me nowhere, I gave in, changed places and loaded the document onto the braille display. Somehow the incident had really irked me, so I tackled the teacher again. It all got rather heated, and when I read the text on the braille display with exactly the same fluency as the first time, I think the teacher felt rather foolish.

But back to text-to-voice technology ... The good thing about listening for me is that I’m usually much faster and my hands are free on the keyboard, so I’m very efficient. The downside, however, is that if you read a text properly, you’ll remember more details and learn the spelling. There’s no escaping this mini-conflict. Of course, this won’t be true for every student and teacher.

I’m not that fast with “normal” braille as I haven’t practised a lot. A simpler solution is what’s known as “shorthand”.

The special thing about shorthand is that it consists of abbreviations. Special signs, for example, turn a letter into an abbreviation. There are symbols, lower-case letters and endings. A word isn’t a full word, then, but a sequence of abbreviations. This makes it possible to read more quickly, and it uses less space than standard braille. That said, I still prefer listening to an audio book on my mobile phone to carrying thick braille books around with me. So technology is tending to drive braille out of my everyday life, but the question iswhether that’s bad. Braille probably won’t die out completely, as it’s still good for a great many things. Plenty of people need a braille display for the sake of orientation, for correcting things more easily, in maths, for foreign words or large numbers. The future of braille is likely to be that lots of people will still use it, but only in certain situations. I personally have no problem with that. I would be very sorry to see braille disappear: if used in a targeted manner, it is and will continue to be a great tool for efficient working.

Not only do I use shorthand braille, but also braille notation.

With musical notation, you have to learn that some of the signs have a different meaning from when they are used in a text. Once I’d learnt all the signs, I realised that it wasn’t really much use to me as I still had to read with one hand and play my instrument with the other: I’m faster and have more fun if I just play by ear.

People who aren’t faced with visual impairment in their lives are often fascinated by braille when they come to an open day or similar event: it’s a great opportunity to bring the two cultures closer and do a bit of awareness raising.

Children born with a severe visual impairment, as I was, start practising braille at an early age. I was getting to grips with reading “properly” when other children were still learning the alphabet and their first words. The simple reason is that it takes longer to read braille well than normal writing. The idea is that the children can then focus on general learning in the first class without being held back because they have to use braille.

I’d like to end by saying that the life situations of visually impaired people are just as individual as those of sighted people: people with a visual impairment have to adapt and find solutions all the time – but isn’t that so for everyone?