

Study explores why students with learning disabilities excel in opera

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UBC researchers have launched a study to explore why learning-disabled students shine in the University's demanding opera program. The study, called "Libretti of Learning," will be presented at Congress, a national gathering of 7,000 researchers that begins June 1 in Victoria.

Preliminary findings of the study, which is led by education professor Marion Porath and opera chair Nancy Hermiston, suggest that students respond well to the multi-tasking required for opera, particularly when they bring their own passion to it.

"In opera you have to act, sing, dance, watch the conductor, respond to the audience, and work in a [foreign language](#), all at the same time," says Hermiston. "It means training the brain to think in a different way."

Hermiston and Porath, in collaboration with Laurel Parsons of Quest University, are working with a small group of students in UBC's award-winning opera program who have a range of learning disabilities.

Porath explains that students with learning challenges often benefit from complex learning that requires full [concentration](#). In a program requiring intense [discipline](#), they need to be immensely committed.

By identifying the key elements of opera education that are helping learning-disabled students thrive, the researchers hope to find ways of improving education for learning-disabled students in any field.

"It is possible to have a [learning disability](#) and be immensely gifted," says Porath, who will present the project on June 5. "Our early findings suggest that students' passion carries them through many of the challenges they face and gives them the drive and determination to succeed. But they also need to be understood and supported in areas where they're challenged."

"At universities, we need to remember that we might be overlooking the next [genius](#) somewhere because they learn in a different way," adds Hermiston. "We can't be so set in our ways that we won't try to find a way to reach that student. It's always possible."

UBC and Congress

The opera study is one of hundreds of UBC research projects being presented at Canada's largest annual social science and humanities conference. Organized by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Congress will occur June 1-8 at the University of Victoria.

Study background

In her 18 years teaching opera at UBC, Hermiston wondered if there's something special about opera for learning-disabled students.

"I had one student who came to the program and took months to learn just one excerpt," Hermiston says. "By the time they graduated, they could learn a whole opera in just two weeks. That's what made me say, OK, there's got to be something going on here. The more they're on that opera stage, the less that disability seems to affect them."

In addition to multi-tasking onstage and [passion](#) for their craft, the

researchers say positive reinforcement could also be a key factor. Some students who grow up with learning disabilities lack self-confidence, so being praised for excelling on the [opera](#) stage can be the boost they need to unlock their full potential.

Another factor seems to be the coping strategies [learning-disabled students](#) develop from struggling through the regular school system, where they grew accustomed to thinking differently.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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