Twitter Thread by NortherlyRose ■ ■



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Why I love learning.
Personal reflections from an #ActuallyAutistic perspective.
#ActuallyAutistic
#AllAutistics
#education
#edutwitter
#teaching
#studying
#autistic
#autism
1/

I realised I loved learning at nursery school. I pressed my painted palms onto sugar paper and slid smooth wooden beads on an abacus. I sat on a vintage tractor in the grounds and marvelled at its mechanics. To learn was to wonder.
#earlyyears
#education
#nursery
#autism
2/

I loved the fabric of the building. A small human sized door set in a large wooden gate. My coat peg with its sunflower motif. The canvas and metal camp beds we slept on after lunch. Collaborating with my cousin David, who helped do up my buttons, while I tied his shoe laces.
3/

My memories of primary school are even more vivid. Immersing objects in water, seeing what would float. Making kites out of sticks and paper. Translating shapes on paper into meaning and sound. Planting seeds then scraping back the earth to find red radish globes. Watching.
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One day we made a sorting machine out of index cards with holes in different places threaded onto knitting needles. It would answer questions for us. It was a rudimentary computer. I learned that I could answer questions myself by reading books, or sometimes just by thinking.
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Without any conscious effort on my part I became very good at reading and spelling. These were things I performed well in, naturally and effortlessly. For a child who struggled with handwriting, and never learned her times tables, this unexpected excellence was utterly joyful.
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I was on uncertain ground in many respects, but spelling and language were things I was confident about getting right. It's only recently that I've been able to leave up tweets with typos in them. Precision was a form of self reassurance now I've learned to live with mistakes.
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Many aspects of school were challenging but I always loved learning. Not every lesson of course, double maths filled me with dread. The sheer unexpectedness of what might be discovered in biology, or chemistry or English filled me with excitement. Knowledge seemed limitless.
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One day Edward de Bono talked to us about lateral thinking. Thinking about the way we think was a new concept to me. I thought a lot about the human mind and behaviour through studying literature. What made people act in certain ways? What was right and wrong? How do we know?
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Learning can't happen without making mistakes and that was incredibly hard for me. In art I would draw in pencil and keep rubbing it out until all I had was a hole in the paper. My lovely art teacher gave me an ink pen and explained how to incorporate 'mistakes' into artwork.
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I had no idea what I wanted to do after school except that I wanted to carry on learning. English and Art were my strongest subjects but the pull of literature was strongest. I still have some of my undergraduate essays and it's interesting to see how I went from B- to A.
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My small friendship group wasn't subject based so I was on my own when it came to lectures and seminars. I loved listening but simultaneous note taking was tricky. Luckily I got to know another student who helped me by lending me notes so I could revisit what had been said.
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My later essays have more original thought. I'm not sure to what extent this was due to me being autistic and seeing things differently, it was definitely influenced by reading outlier rather than mainstream commentators. It required confidence to adopt a different position.
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What I learned at university was how to state and justify my own unique perspective on things. And literature helped me to untangle mysterious aspects of human existence like love, betrayal, retribution and forgiveness, while I was living them. It was an immersive experience.
14/

Learning helped me to master and control aspects of my life. Theoretical concepts could be applied to practical things like cooking and driving a car. Immersion in research induced a trance-like state of flow. And learning gave me a common language to talk to other people.
15/

I might have gone on to research, but no one explained how to do it, and I was too shy to ask. Instead I took on a social care job. In many ways it was a terrible experience but I learned a lot about myself. I wouldn't collude with abuse. I was more courageous than I thought.
16/

Having derailed my career by resigning, I spent a while taking stock. It occurred to me that I should focus on what I was good at, so I applied to do a PhD. I wanted to study the poetry of Bob Dylan, which got a disdainful response. I couldn't be persuaded onto Paul Scott.
17/

Learning has always been a refuge for me. It's my comfort zone. I eventually found my way back to academia in my 30s, when I had two young children. I was working for the Probation Service, and the Home Office sponsored me to do a Masters Degree and Diploma in Social Work.
18/

I had a lot of angst about what was involved. The commute was a 90 minute drive each way. At the enrolment session I got into a real muddle with some of the paperwork. But in spite of many trials and tribulations over the next two years my love of learning saved the day.
19/

It was a challenge switching to social sciences after studying literature. They were connected by human experience, but the way I wrote essays had to change. Just as with my first degree it took me a while to understand exactly what was required, but once I did I flourished.
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I flourished to such an extent that I enrolled for a PhD, alongside a social work practitioner role. I then got offered a part time lectureship, teaching on the programme I'd only just graduated from. It was an extraordinary time in my life. Enormous pressure and opportunity.
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As a lecturer I discovered the joy of teaching, helping students access new knowledge, shift perspectives, and realise their potential. I also realised how ill-equipped I was to deal with departmental politics, and a Lothario masquerading as my mentor. Eventually I escaped.
22/

Most of my career has been dedicated to learning and development. I discovered that what was looked down on in one institution was lauded by others. My use of visual imagery disturbed traditional academics, but in the emerging field of blended online learning it was revered.
23/

Love of learning may be my main special interest. Unsurprisingly one of my interests is autodidacticism. I wouldn't be surprised to discover many autodidacts are autistic like me. I started researching this topic for an Un-PhD some time ago, perhaps I'll return to it one day.
24/

Many challenges involved in learning were about people and places. When I learned in my own way, in an environment and at a pace that suited me, it was a wonderful experience. I became completely immersed in topics and stuck with them without getting bored.
#autistic
#autism
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