



While screen reading technology has improved life for many people who are blind and partially-sighted, Braille is still the gold standard for people with visual disabilities.

“It’s a myth that Braille is obsolete,” said Elizabeth Lalonde, Executive Director of the Pacific Training Centre for the Blind, a division of the Canadian Organization of the Blind and Deafblind. “I always say that Braille is the equivalent of print.”

Elizabeth, who is legally blind but does have some vision, said that when she was younger, she was encouraged to read traditional print and didn’t learn Braille until she was older. As a result, she’s not as advanced at reading Braille as some others who learned it at a younger age. She said learning Braille is a definite advantage.

Elizabeth said because she learned to read print when she was young and didn’t learn Braille until she was older, learning Braille has improved her spelling ability, because she can now recognize letters.

Elizabeth said while she considers Braille as the building block of communication for those who are blind, she said it is one tool in an entire box of tools for communication. She said it depends on what each person was exposed to whether they are comfortable with screen reading programs or Braille or a combination of both.

Elizabeth noted that Braille is included in some manuals for appliances. It also appears on the bills of Canadian currency.

“It’s a great tool ... and can be used a little or a lot,” she said.

Elizabeth said learning Braille isn’t as difficult as sighted people might think, but, like anything, practice improves proficiency.

Elizabeth said technology has improved to the point that many Refreshable Braille Display programs now exist, allowing text on a computer to be turned into the raised dots that make up Braille.

Meanwhile, there also exists many screen reading programs, some of which are up to \$1,000, while others are free.

“There’s lots (of technology) out there. It’s always improving and quite exciting,” Elizabeth said.

The Pacific Training Centre for the Blind tries to do the best it can for clients to match them to the technology that suits each individual the best.

“We do whatever we can to get them whatever they need. There’s no one program that works for everybody,” Elizabeth said.



The modern system of Braille was perfected by Louis Braille while he was a young student at the Royal Institute For Blind Youths in Paris in the early 19th century. Braille used a system of raised dots on a page created by Charles Babier. Braille added punctuation marks to Babier's system to form the modern version of Braille in use today. By 1856, one year following Braille's death, Braille was adopted as the official way for people who are blind in France to communicate.

Braille was adapted for use in English in 1902 and became the official communication tool for English speaking people who are blind in 1918.

According to the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey conducted in 2006 by Statistics Canada, there were 87,830 people over the age of 15 with a diagnosis of legal blindness. Fully 2.1 of adults over the age of 75 were legally blind, the highest proportion by age.

Although no figures exist for the exact number of working-age blind Canadians, a 2013 estimate put the figure at 30,000.