

Opening the Door to Learning

Today, people who are deaf and blind can receive a standard education. Schools and organizations help them make the necessary adaptations. However, this was not always the case. At one time, educators had few ideas about how to teach children who were both deaf and blind.

Laura Dewey Bridgman may have been the first deaf and blind person to learn how to read and write. She was born in New Hampshire on December 21, 1829. Scarlet fever destroyed both her hearing and her sight at age two. The illness also damaged her senses of smell and taste. Only her sense of touch was not affected.

Young Laura learned to perform tasks such as sewing by following her mother's hands, yet she had few ways of expressing her thoughts or interacting with other people. Then a local handyman, Asa Tenny, taught her to communicate using a system of signs. A professor at nearby Dartmouth College heard about this and wrote a newspaper article about Laura.

The article attracted the attention of Dr. Samuel Howe, head of the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston. Most educational experts believed it was impossible to teach a deaf and blind student reading, writing, or arithmetic. Dr. Howe wanted to tackle a new challenge—teaching Laura.

At age 8, Laura began living at the Perkins School. Dr. Howe needed to develop new methods of teaching because of Laura's deafness. He had Laura feel an item, such as a spoon, and then run her fingers over a label that had the word *spoon* spelled in raised letters. Initially Laura struggled to understand the relationship between the item and the word. Finally, after several weeks, her face "lighted up with human expression . . . [as] this truth dawned upon her mind," according to Dr. Howe.

Laura learned to read words, and then she worked backward to learn the alphabet and numbers. Eventually she was able to keep a journal of her thoughts and experiences. Previously, people had little knowledge of what went on in the mind of a deaf and blind person. Laura showed that she was as intelligent and capable as anyone.

Laura and the school became famous. She returned home at age 20 but struggled to adjust to life in rural New Hampshire. After three years, she returned to Perkins, where she lived for the rest of her life. She taught sewing to other sightless students, exchanged letters with many people, and made crafts to sell to tourists who visited her.

Laura Bridgman is not as famous as Helen Keller, who also suffered a childhood illness that left her blind, deaf, and mute. Helen's mother read about Laura Bridgman's successful education, which inspired her to seek help for Helen. This led to Anne Sullivan, a recent graduate of Perkins, tutoring Helen. Helen went on to college, graduating in 1904, and became a successful educator and journalist.

These two women helped show the world how intelligent and successful a deaf and blind person could be.

Questions

1. Why is Laura Bridgman an important person in history?
2. Why did Dr. Howe have to come up with a new way of teaching for Laura?
3. Why did Laura live out her life at the Perkins School rather than at her home?
4. How did Laura Bridgman's success help Helen Keller?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. destroyed
2. affected
3. tasks
4. interacting
5. tackle
6. initially
7. capable
8. adjust
9. inspired
10. tutoring

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) "Scarlet fever **destroyed** both her hearing and her sight"

- a. made better, increased b. wrecked, ruined c. avoided d. completed

2) "Only her sense of touch was not **affected**."

- a. changed, altered b. good, excellent c. allowed d. sweet and loving

3) "Young Laura learned to perform **tasks** such as sewing"

- a. tricks b. tests, experiments c. adventures, exciting actions d. jobs, chores

4) "yet she had few ways of expressing her thoughts or **interacting** with other people"

- a. being away from b. associating, being involved c. reading long books d. eating

5) "Dr. Howe wanted to **tackle** a new challenge"

- a. fish for b. escape, run away from c. undertake, attempt d. write about

6) "**Initially**, Laura struggled to understand the relationship between the item and the word."

- a. always b. letter by letter c. curiously d. at the start, in the beginning

7) "she was as intelligent and **capable** as anyone"

- a. beautiful b. tall or large c. able, having fitness to do d. generous, giving

8) "but struggled to **adjust** to life in rural New Hampshire"

- a. adapt to something new, become used to b. travel c. enjoy or relax d. escape

9) "which **inspired** her to seek help for Helen"

- a. instructed b. breathed c. encouraged, caused to take action d. dismayed, saddened

10) "This led to Anne Sullivan, a recent graduate of Perkins, **tutoring** Helen"

- a. becoming friends with b. hiring for work c. scolding or correcting d. teaching