

Students with Dyslexia

and other Specific Learning Difficulties

INTRODUCTION

The term "learning difficulties" is used to cover a group of neurological disorders. A student described as having a learning difficulty may have a problem in communicating their thoughts and ideas. This can manifest itself in written communication and/or verbal communication. Students' learning therefore depends on teaching which acknowledges these difficulties, and provides opportunities to overcome these potential barriers to learning.

Although the term "specific learning difficulties" can cover dyspraxia, dyscalculia and AD(H)D, the most commonly disclosed specific learning difficulty is dyslexia.

The word dyslexia literally means 'difficulty with reading' but dyslexia is much more complex than that. It is a difference in the way the brain works – people with dyslexia are often innovative thinkers and have strengths in holistic thought and visualisation, they tend to be very creative and, as they can often see the 'big picture', are excellent at problem solving.

Although dyslexia can vary in degree from person to person, there are a number of underlying characteristics that dyslexic people may have in common. These include: reading hesitantly, inefficient working or short term memory, misreading, difficulty with sequencing, poor organisation and time management, difficulties with motor skills and visual processing, erratic spelling and difficulties organising thoughts clearly.

There is no correlation between dyslexia and general intelligence.

Dyslexic people can learn effectively but often need to take a different

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approach to their work. The Dyslexia Institute sets out the following Principle of Teaching:

"Our guiding philosophy: if a pupil can't learn the way we teach, then we must teach in a way that s/he can learn and extend her/his abilities. Teaching provision must be multisensory, structured, thorough, active and relevant."

Case Study One

I am a study support tutor employed by the university to work on a one-to-one basis with students with specific learning difficulties. I see each student on a regular basis, usually for an hour a week. Students are referred by the faculty Disability Coordinator and come with an educational psychologist's report and Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) assessment.

I have recently started working with a student who is in the first year of his course and is struggling with writing his essay. He tells me that he knows what he wants to say, and indeed he talks about the project at length, but when he comes to write it down, he freezes. His previous attempts at starting to write the essay have proved frustrating and he is worried about not meeting the deadline. He has also told me that he has no notes from his Critical and Contextual Studies lectures and has not been able to find a copy of the lecture notes on the Virtual Learning Environment. He complained that when he had managed to write some notes, he was unable to read them back to himself. He finds it difficult to concentrate during the lecture and cannot listen and take notes at the same time. In fact, at the beginning of term he found it difficult to find the lecture room in spite of being told where to go and was always late in arriving. He tells me that he finds it hard if someone tells him to turn right as he has difficulty in telling his left and right hands apart.

Further discussions with the student revealed that he had strong visual mapping skills which were identified in his educational psychologist's report. He was awarded an assistive technology software package based on this strength which would assist with his essay planning skills. I suggested to him that this would be a good starting point for organising his ideas for planning his essay. I also suggested to him that we work backwards from the hand-in date in order to plot the available time and required tasks to be completed. In order to access the missing lecture notes, we navigated through the pathway to the relevant area where the lecture notes had been put up. These were then printed off so that the student had a hard copy to annotate

independently. The student told me that he had problems keeping track of assignment briefs and was worried that he would lose the notes we had just printed off. At home his desk was covered in papers and he had no files in which to put them. I advised that he visit his local supermarket and buy several files with dividers to help him to organise his notes.

I also encouraged him to ask the lecturer if the notes could be made available beforehand. This would enable him to familiarise himself with the content and vocabulary prior to the lecture which would improve his concentration. I noticed in the DSA report that the student had been allocated a mini-disc recorder which I asked if he used in lectures. The answer was 'no' as he would feel self-conscious about asking the lecturer for permission. We discussed the benefits to him of making use of the recorder so that he would not need to rely on any hand-written notes. This would also be useful in a tutorial to have an accurate record of the feed-back.

The student is doing well in his studio practice as he has had positive feedback from the lecturers about the creative content of his work. However, it takes him longer than other students to complete projects as he sometimes experiences difficulty in using the tools. This led us on to a discussion about time management and I advised him to speak to the lecturer about possible extensions to project deadlines.

Case Study Two

I started with a six-year printing apprenticeship and went to art college on day release, then spent three years at art school. I've worked as an art director in publishing, and ran my own company until I sold the business and went freelance. That's when I was asked if I'd give some talks about printing and graphic design at a local college. I really enjoyed it and started doing more teaching. Now I'm a 0.5 lecturer in graphic design and also do guest lecturing, plus running my own commercial practice and doing research into helping dyslexic children.

I'm dyslexic myself, so I don't see it as a problem: I've made my living from it! In any art and design group there will be some dyslexic students – I've had up to 25% in a group.

I start by finding out from the disabilities officer who is dyslexic and what their special needs are. Every institution will have someone in charge of dyslexia – they will know who the students are and will help you with what you need to know. I don't make a big deal of it – I plan in advance but they don't need to know what I'm doing; it's important not to be patronising. If I look at the problems and I solve the problem then it's no longer a barrier.

I tell the students at the beginning that I'm dyslexic and we talk about it, so they see it as just another way of thinking rather than a problem. I give them some role models like DaVinci and Einstein and explain why dyslexic people think differently. It's important not to make them feel different or weird – don't make out that they have a disability or it'll be self-fulfilling!

You need to know how dyslexic people perceive the world; we think in pictures, not words, so it's easy for people to get annoyed if they don't understand. Because dyslexic people think visually you may need to re-arrange the way you present things.

Handouts with heavy text elements are very off-putting – wadges of notes make your heart sink. Breaking the text up visually with the odd visual or picture dropped in makes it much more approachable. When we're working on projects I show them the finished thing first so they see the whole picture

before they start working on the sections. If appropriate I'll do a demonstration; the other students love it too so no-one loses out. I also do simple visual notes which I go through with them to start with, until they're confident enough to carry on by themselves. I don't put too much on a page so it gives them a feeling of progressing quickly.

They do sketchbooks so their work is based on pictures with a small annotation at the side to minimise writing. Many dyslexics have an excellent vocabulary but don't use it because they can't spell it.

Short-term memory can be very poor, so I follow important points up with an e-mail. When I'm giving notes I divide them into sections and make links. If I ask the students to take notes I give them short bits then discuss something else, then another short bit so they can keep up. It works well for all the students.

Don't take them by surprise; it's physically impossible to take dictation if you're dyslexic, and don't ask them to read things out! If you put them under pressure it'll get worse. If you make it just part of life they relax and get better.

I don't think it's about coping; it's a factor of life that you take into account within the structure of what you're doing. That's reality so take it on board. The students are all people; a disability doesn't make them different. The disability, whatever it is, isn't the personality, so I just relate to each student as an individual and treat them as normal.

REFLECTION/CONTEXTUALISING

Having read these two personal accounts, how do they relate to your own experience – or your expectations if you are about to start teaching a student with Dyslexia? What are the key things that need to be considered?

Dyslexia	Learning/Teaching			Assessment	Social Interaction/ group work
	Preparation	During session	Follow-up		
Issues					
Strategies					
Benefits					
What other support or information might you need?					
Where or who can you get this from?					

Points and Strategies

- At the beginning of the year, emphasise to all the students that in disclosing any learning difficulties they will get help, and that it is in their interests to do so
- Each student is different, and it is important to understand the nature of their learning difficulty and what kind of help and support they want
- If a student has made the decision to go to university they will have coping strategies already in place – our role is to support these and to help them develop new strategies
- It is important to give positive feedback and, without being unrealistic, find ways to increase students' confidence rather than criticise
- Support the students to manage on their own; if help is given make sure the end result is their work and not yours!

WRITTEN WORK AND ESSAYS

- Present assignments early with unambiguous titles and clear due dates
- Give plenty of time for research, drafting and proof reading
- Provide reading lists early and prioritise them
- Provide clear guidelines for specific formats

Points and Strategies

- Avoid using a red pen to mark
- When marking distinguish content from grammar and spelling as far as possible
- Where possible give feedback verbally and type-written

PRESENTATIONS

- Provide encouragement and support and establish an atmosphere of trust and safety to reduce stress
- Encourage students to develop visual aids to support presentations, eg overhead projector and PowerPoint

LECTURES AND TUTORIALS

- Ensure that the lecture/seminar/classroom has the appropriate equipment installed eg overhead projector, flipcharts
- Hand out lecture notes before the teaching session or right at the beginning so students can annotate
- Try to ensure that the teaching session is structured and easy to follow. Give an overview before going into detail
- Provide a glossary of key terms early in the module
- When producing handouts ensure that they are clearly photocopied, have enhanced line spacing and are at least in a sans serif font 12

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Points and Strategies

- Some students would benefit from receiving the notes on coloured paper, generally pastels, to stop the words from 'jumping' around the page
- Make the presentations clear and not too wordy or complicated
- Provide information visually e.g. diagrams, charts
- Use coloured pens for board work but avoid the colour red
- Allow students to record lectures/ seminars
- Write any information on changes in lecture time/venue on the board

PRACTICAL WORK

- Useful strategies include non-judgemental acceptance of difficulties
- Give clear logical spoken instructions, repeated in different words and then reinforced by written directions
- Practical demonstrations are very helpful

And finally... remember that everyone has different learning styles, so whether or not you are aware of any students with specific learning difficulties it is a good idea to use a variety of teaching methods

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information, contact:

BRITISH DYSLEXIA ASSOCIATION
www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk

DYSLEXIA INSTITUTE
www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk

DYSPRAXIA FOUNDATION
www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)
AND ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER (ADD)
www.addiss.co.uk

THE NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY
www.nas.org.uk

SKILL – NATIONAL BUREAU FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
www.skill.org.uk

HEFCE FUNDED PROJECT ON
'IMPROVING PROVISION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES'
<http://jarmin.com/demos>

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Miles, T.R. and Gilroy, D.E. (1995).
Dyslexia at College, 2nd edn. London: Routledge.

Cottrell, S. (2003).
The Study Skills Handbook, 2nd edn. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.