

# Designing effective curriculum for dyslexic students within Art and Design in Higher Education

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In the first instance, it is worthwhile examining the context for curriculum changes in 2005. The Higher Education Statistics Agency in 2004 recorded the number of dyslexic undergraduates in the U.K. as 11,865, clearly illustrating the growth rate from the total dyslexic undergraduate population in 1994 of 1,679 students (HESA, 2004).

Art led Higher Education institutions should also be aware that the Creative Arts and Design subject areas attracted the highest percentage of dyslexic students at 5.59%. Even if the new Disabilities Discrimination Act 2005 did not require a mandatory focus on changes to the curriculum, the reality of a changing audience would force the issue onto the agenda. In seeking accommodation for dyslexic students it would seem beneficial to examine the whole curriculum as perhaps in redressing the balance, the Art curriculum designers will find a mode of delivery and assessment which benefits an increasingly diverse student population.

Dyslexia is seen as part of 'widening participation' (DfES, 2003), like inclusivity, it is an issue of democracy for policies and practices designed to encourage those with disabilities entering Higher Education. The 'disadvantaged' learner is noted in the Schwartz report (<http://www.admissions-review.org.uk/>) in its recommendations for 'adjusting' entry criteria for admissions. It offers new guidance on University

expectations of applicants to Higher Education, advocating considerations in relation to adverse circumstances which effect student's grades. In addition the Higher Education Funding Council is funding projects, which further encourage dyslexic applicants to Higher Education (Pumfrey, P.BDA: 04)

*'Reasonable adjustments'* to existing curriculum are documented in most University guidelines, for example University of the Arts Academic Affairs. (intranet.arts.ac.uk). Practitioners are now reflecting on existing practice within a new paradigm; Who are my students? What learning style suits them best? What is it that needs adjusting? What are our expectations of students from entry to exit? Are they still appropriate? What needs changing?

### **Who are my students?**

Dyslexics who will have learning styles stemming from their disability.

*'Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that is neurological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.'*(IDA Nov 2002).

Sue Treseman adds that *'for those with dyslexia, difficulties may occur with a range of other processing skills including organisation, sequencing and retrieval of information, short-term memory, spelling, writing and number.'* (BDA Sept 05)

The students are likely to be dyslexics who may have taken routes to Art Higher Education involving as little written language as possible or, who may have under achieved in traditional examinations. It is worth noting that only 0.88% of dyslexics opted for Languages, illustrating a weakness or resistance to this area of the general curriculum offer in Higher Education (dyslexic.com: 8.09.05) The strength of art education is that admission has always centred on the portfolio. In this respect tutors often have a familiarity with their student audience in advance of the start of programme.

A change to curriculum design, delivery and assessment is then shaped by inclusivity and Art education. Discourse on the body of knowledge or content imparted in creative practice will reflect the professional world of art. What it would appear needs altering is the process by which it is delivered to students.

Stenhouse's basic position holds true that the most effective methods of delivery and assessment require tinkering with the original recipe according to taste.

### **How do I know what suits them?**

Before embarking on a new curriculum design, it is worthwhile consulting those with direct or indirect experience of dyslexia. Your local University Dyslexia Co-ordinator, web sites such as the Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education, PATOSS, and the British Dyslexia Association. Students and colleagues self disclosed as dyslexic are great human resources and although there is no idealised 'one size fits all' model in pedagogy, there is a level of shared experience within a specific learning difference that it is useful to employ. Importantly adjustments can be minimised by understanding the disability and restructuring schedules.

In the case study undertaken by Herrington (2002) student researchers shadowed students with dyslexia to try and understand their needs on a daily basis for them to

be better met by institutions. This social action research could also have included the monitoring of Needs Assessments, which all students in receipt of Disabled Student Allowance have and which course directors will receive. Although profiles will remain individual, the Needs Assessments, which are theoretically matched to the course demands, will present a picture of needs, which can be factored into planning.

Pedagogic practice for examining delivery includes multisensory education (Fiske, E: 1999) whereby learning channels for example auditory or, visual are adopted to improve concentration and retention. Uniform design for learning, rather than instruction, is also a possible avenue of exploration (Rose, D:2005), examining flexibility of assessment and providing multiple means of representation and expression. Choosing holistic and formative assessment with different modes of expression will benefit all students as no one assessment vehicle suits all students. Classroom or lecture practice may include dyslexia friendly techniques advocated by specialists in the field; Gilroy and Miles, Cottrell, West, McLoughlin et al. Attempts at meeting needs, rather like the attempts to speak a language in a foreign country, are generally met with a positive response from students. It is not easy to alter teaching styles. New delivery methods, for example, tapping the board or lectern when emphasizing important points, enabling students to locate the exact space on their audio recording, is hard to remember to include in the teaching toolkit, whereas, it is common practice to underscore on the board or to write up a key concept.

In creative practice the use of auditory, visual and kinaesthetic learning is more easily practised and evidenced in the studio than in text led disciplines in classrooms. Demonstrating a skill kinaesthetically, asking for repetition of the haptic movements, combined with visual reinforcement and quality and concise instruction will force concepts from short to long term memory.

Employing Messick style formative assessment strategies at the end of a taught session, requesting students to recall just two things from every delivery (Messick, S.J. :95) is a litmus test for tutors but can be useful for dyslexic students to ensure key concepts.

### **What needs adjusting ?**

Adjustments are ultimately led by the specific needs of the student's specific learning difficulties, again, attempting to put certain universally beneficial initiatives into curriculum design will minimise the need for adjustments. Staff may decide that coloured paper is useful for all students, as it is easier on the eye, this may enable those with scotopic deficiencies, which can include dyslexics. Choices of assessment allowing oral, audio, audio-visual or text led submissions improves flexibility. Comparability of assessment is a professional judgement that only requires the agreement of colleagues and external examiners, the law endorses decisions opportunities to display learning outcomes through alternative vehicles.

Text led assignments probe the root of the disability and an adjustment will often be requested where the speed of information processing, decoding or encoding is more demanding for the dyslexic student. In short, an extension to the deadline. Tutors who have planned a curriculum from a critical-theoretic stance (Habermas, J : 1971) will make the least adjustments. Planning will reflect appropriate evaluation of the learning outcomes for the student group and will consider how knowledge is constructed by the student. Their position may already be informed by examining case studies featuring students with difficulties who need additional frameworks of support. An interest in achievability (Hewlett, K: 2005) sets the agenda that then minimises adjustments. There is no one formula for enhancing curriculum offers within art and design but exploring possibilities and the enthusiasm to undertake

minor modifications to add value to programmes and attempt to meet new legislation is vital.

A shopping list of practical 'adjustments' is provided on University or dyslexia associations web sites which can be consulted (adshe.org). These typically reflect the use of Blackboard, lecture notes or route maps to content, oral logs as reflective diaries or indeed any listening or production enhancement.

Finally, our expectations of the students will be determined by our own monitoring of and research into students' performance. Consider the percentage of students with dyslexia on your programme, their assessment profile, their grades of practical work in relation to text led assessment and ultimately the retention percentage of such students .

In 2005 Higher Education has a changing postmodernist student body, cohorts with diverse identities and with different skills to offer. Meeting fresh student needs, requires reviewing and preparation but ultimately there is an opportunity to produce a vibrant art curriculum that has risen to the challenge.

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