

Dyslexic difference and contextual studies writing in creative arts higher education: Three telling cases

Melanie Gale Davies, University of the Arts London: Central Saint Martins, UK

Email: m.g.davies@csm.arts.ac.uk

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Abstract Students with the specific learning difficulty of dyslexia (SpLD) are now common in UK higher educational contexts. Whether this reflects an increase in the prevalence of the condition or is a manifestation of changes in both understandings of dyslexia and diagnostic processes in the UK, is not clear. But what is clear is that the increased visibility of dyslexia reflects a wider cultural turn, which sees both the breaking down of elitist notions about who is entitled to a 'higher education', and a questioning of ableist beliefs about how learning should occur (Mallett et al., 2016). Using semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996, 2011) and an interpretive approach, this article explores the ways that three students made sense of their higher educational experiences within the context of current UK higher education (HE) dyslexia policy. The experiences of these three student case studies, understood to be 'telling' (Mitchell, 1984) rather than 'typical' cases, help to support an exploration of some of the complexities of dyslexic difference, as experienced in one creative arts higher education institution. While research indicates that dyslexia can lead to low expectations of achievement for, and by, learners, I argue that, within the creative arts context of this study, dyslexic difference led to proactive, reflexive approaches to learning that can be learned from and that this may have applications for inclusive practice in HE more broadly.

Key words Dyslexia; dyslexic difference; SpLD; creative arts; contextual studies; writing

Introduction

Students with the specific learning difficulty (SpLD) of dyslexia are now common in UK higher educational contexts. Whether this reflects an increase in the prevalence of the condition or is a manifestation of changes in both understandings of dyslexia and diagnostic processes in the UK, is not clear. But what is clear is that the increased visibility of dyslexia reflects a wider cultural turn, which sees both the breaking down of elitist notions about who is entitled to a 'higher education', and a questioning of

ableist beliefs about how learning should occur (Mallett et al., 2016).

In UK creative arts higher education institutions (HEIs) the assumptions made about the dyslexic learner are slightly different to those made in other UK HEIs, where deficit model thinking is far more common (Francis et al., 1996). This is because there is a perceived connection between dyslexia and creativity (Wolff and Lundberg, 2002; Majeed et al., 2021), and so it is often assumed that dyslexic students will automatically do well on creative arts courses. However, since the 'Coldstream Report' (Coldstream, 1970), UK undergraduate courses have been required to include some form of written assessment in their curricula, if the award of 'Bachelor of Arts with Honours' is to be granted. What is often called 'contextual studies' requires that students read complex academic literature, carry out primary research and critically reflect upon the context of their own creative practice, cultural interests or lived experience. Students learn about the histories and theories relevant to their discipline and are generally required to write traditional, academic essays. This usually culminates in the submission of an extended essay, or dissertation, in the final year of study. This 4,500- to 10,000-word thesis can make up 40 per cent of a creative arts student's final degree classification.

For many students who have had to overcome learning difficulties like dyslexia, this can be challenging. It is often the case that educators, and indeed students themselves, assume that outcomes in written assessments are reduced for all dyslexic students. However, these assumptions are not borne out by my own experiences of teaching contextual studies in UK creative arts HEIs. This article aims to interrogate some of the assumptions made about dyslexic learners, from within this educational context.

My practice as an educator and researcher is positioned in the specific location of contextual studies learning in UK creative arts HEIs. (This is the position from which I speak and the use of 'I' is a conscious attempt to acknowledge this.) I was also 'art school educated' (Llewellyn, 2015) in London, which means the blurring of the boundaries between my role, as reflective practitioner, teacher, researcher and learner, challenges the historic

convention of academic research, with its focus on objectivity as a privileged path to truth.

The development of education as an academic discipline (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018), has required robust methodological enquiries into what constitutes high-quality educational research (see Wyse et al., 2021). This includes explorations of the relations between teaching practice, 'theory', research methods and contributions to knowledge. The term 'close to practice' research has developed. This is defined by the BERA as focused on 'issues defined by practitioners as relevant to their practice [which] involve collaboration between people whose main expertise is research, practice or both' (BERA, 2018, n.p.).

The blurred boundaries between my practice and my research provide the context for a collaborative learning process, one which makes a contribution to knowledge of dyslexic learning processes in, what I would argue, is a particularly nuanced and interesting educational context. In its interpretive approach, and use of semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996, 2011), this article engages with the ways that three students made sense of their higher educational experiences, within the context of HE dyslexia policy and practice in the UK. What I have learned from these three student case studies helps to form a discursive engagement with the implications of this policy and practice. Understood to be 'telling' (Mitchell, 1984) rather than 'typical' cases, the insights shared by each student interviewee help to support an exploration of some of the complexities of dyslexic difference, as experienced in UK creative arts HEIs.

Whilst in most UK HEIs dyslexic students are in the minority, this was not the case for some courses at the university where my research took place. On some of the contextual studies units I led, students with a formal diagnosis of dyslexia made up over 50 per cent of the students enrolled. There were also students without a formal diagnosis of dyslexia, who had indicated that they thought they might be dyslexic. Perhaps more importantly, there was no attainment deficit for dyslexic students who had a formal diagnosis of dyslexia. This was even though the assessment method for the contextual studies units was formal, written, academic essay.

As part of an introspective turn (Hatton, 2013) on my own teaching of dyslexic learners, I sought to understand this situation more clearly, partly to improve my own teaching practice but also because I suspected that the educational context of the research, which seemed to refute widely held assumptions about dyslexic student achievement, might have wider implications for inclusive practice in wider contexts. Historically, much of the research into dyslexia has arisen in English-speaking countries. However, as Maunsell (2020, p. 98) points out, 'dyslexia is a cross-cultural problem [existing] across languages, alphabets and scripts'. It has been identified in all languages that have been studied, and of the 35 million Americans estimated to have learning disabilitiesⁱ, dyslexia is by far the most commonly diagnosed (Zablotsky et al., cited in Richardson, 2021). Although research into dyslexia in China is relatively scarce, of the 8,000 Beijing children surveyed by Wengang and Butterworth, 1.5 per cent were deemed to be dyslexic (cited in Butterworth and Tang, 2004). Dyslexia is a global phenomenon and insights into specific educational contexts where dyslexic students do well, in written assignments, is clearly useful.

The introduction of more integrated models of writing into primarily studio-based art and design HE contexts was researched by the Writing Purposefully in Art and Design group (Lockheart et al., 2004). Integral to this was a questioning of the 'theory/practice divide' (Orr and Shreeves, 2017) and an acknowledgement of the different ways of writing that occur in art and design HE contexts. Tobias-Green (2020, p. 12) explores these as 'lived writing experiences'. She argues that, while normative expectations about writing can disable dyslexic creative arts students, they frequently do well in written assessments and 'defy the medical model of dyslexia' (2020, p. 12). She explores the role of 'the agreement' in the development of dyslexic creative arts student writers (Tobias-Green, 2014). These ideas align with this research, which aims to address the following questions: What kinds of pedagogic strategies, situations and interventions (intended or otherwise) have dyslexic students, on creative arts courses, found useful in relation to their contextual studies written work? How are positive dyslexic 'pedagogised identities' (Atkinson, 2001, 2003) formed? What could a greater understanding of this mean for inclusive practice in HE?

Using semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996, 2011) and an interpretive approach to the experiences of three creative arts student 'case studies', the research explores the way these students made sense of their learning journeys. As Welton (2023, p. 1) observes, dyslexic students' feelings of belonging can be problematised due to previous educational experiences. This supports my own observations that the development of positive dyslexic 'pedagogised identities' (Atkinson, 2001, 2003) can be a complex process – a process which requires an engagement with terms such as 'dys-lexic', 'dis-abled' and 'specific learning difficulty' that are inherently about difficulty and what a student is unable to do. While research suggests that this can often lead to low expectations of achievement for and by dyslexic learners, I argue that, within the creative arts context of this study, dyslexic difference led to proactive, reflexive approaches to learning. I suggest that this supports a view that research that delivers a greater understanding of dyslexic creative arts students' experiences is useful, and that more research into the learning strategies they employ could have implications for inclusive practice in HE, beyond a UK creative arts HEI context.

Dyslexia defined

There is still no consensus about dyslexia in the UK, or one universally agreed upon definition: the British Dyslexia Association (BDA) prefaces its definition by stating that: 'there are a number of different definitions and descriptions of dyslexia, which may be appropriate for certain contexts or purposes' (BDA, 2016). In addition, as Reid (2009) identifies, there is no single test for dyslexia and a formal dyslexia assessment involves a range of tests which are interpreted and assessed by an individual assessor. In the UK, this is most commonly an educational psychologist, working as a private practitioner.

In contrast to the interpretive basis of a dyslexia 'diagnosis', there is a 'common-sense' understanding of dyslexic difference. This assumes, on the one hand, a clear cut, scientifically identifiable dyslexic minority, and on the other, a non-dyslexic normative majority. What adds to this contradictory situation is that a decision to undergo formal dyslexia assessment nearly always follows the identification of unexpected difficulties in the development of required literacy skills. For Deacon et al. (2012),

what this means is that it is necessary to view those with a 'diagnosis' of dyslexia as a sub-section of a larger body of dyslexic learners. This includes 'high-functioning' or 'fully compensated' learners, as well as those learners who have not been formally assessed but who would meet the dyslexia criteria. All researchers into dyslexia must take these contradictions into consideration.

In popular culture there are also opposing views: on the one hand, an idea of dyslexia as 'a meaningless label used by middle-class parents who fear their children are being branded stupid' (*Daily Mail*, 2014); and on the other, the essentialist notion that the dyslexic brain is 'wired' differently (Marshall, 2012). Both these extremes are paralleled by diametrically opposed research bases, which are, nevertheless, well-respected within their fields. For example, Julian Elliott (Elliott, 2016, p. 135) argues that dyslexia is a 'nebulous construction' and therefore 'not a helpful diagnostic term' (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014). In contrast, Shaywitz and Shaywitz (2004) maintain that there is a neurobiological cause for dyslexia. Their research informs the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) definition of dyslexia, adopted in 2002, and is therefore particularly important. This is because the IDA definition informs educational funding policy in many states in the US.

In the UK, educational policy and practice has negotiated an uneasy relationship with the two positions outlined above. For many years, there was no formal recognition of dyslexia in mainstream state schools. This was finally addressed in 2008 when the UK government commissioned a report to clarify the situation. This report, 'Identifying and teaching children and young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties' (Rose, 2009), explicitly rejects the idea of dyslexia as a 'nebulous construction' (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014; Elliott, 2016), but also sidesteps the causal certainties that inform the IDA definition. The report is underpinned by Margaret Snowling's interrogation of accepted wisdom within the field of dyslexia research (Snowling, 2019, 2020; Kirby and Snowling, 2022). The careful wording of the report allows for productive dialogue and debate across what are frequently bitter disciplinary and/or methodological divides.

As Rose's report defines:

- Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling.
- Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.
- Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities.
- Dyslexia is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.
- Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor coordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation, but these are not, by themselves, markers of dyslexia.
- A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds, or has responded, to well-founded intervention (Rose, 2009, p. 10).

Rose's report provides a definition of dyslexia now widely accepted in the UK by mainstream stakeholders. It is also acceptable to many of the dyslexia researchers and policy makers who are committed to a neurobiological cause for dyslexia. Although the lack of consensus about dyslexia remains, Rose's report provided a clear direction for UK dyslexia policy. It also informed the 2010 Equality Act, in relation to SpLDs like dyslexia.

Dyslexia in HE

The 2010 Equality Act has had significant implications for all UK educational institutions including HEIs. As the '2010 Equality Act: technical guidance on further and higher education' states, the act 'makes it unlawful for a Higher Education institution to fail to comply with a duty to make "reasonable adjustments" for disabled students including those disabled by dyslexia' (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014). The guidance also stresses that disabled students should be able to 'enjoy' and 'fully participate in' their educations and that students, staff and organisations representing equality groups should be consulted. The act requires that students are not subjected to 'any other detriment' and that institutions 'proactively anticipate their needs'

(Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014). This duty of care extends to all students who can be understood to be disabled by dyslexia, and not just those with a formal diagnosis.

In line with the requirements of the 2010 Equality Act, students at the university where the research took place, with a formal diagnosis of dyslexia, are entitled to 'reasonable adjustments'. These are changes in institutional practice that aim to ensure, as much as possible, that disabled students are not disadvantaged by their impairment (Equality and Human Rights Commission, n.d.). Although the rationale behind the implementation of reasonable adjustments is that these are tailored to each individual, in nearly all cases, at the university, they include: a two-week extension for written work; the provision of a laptop and specialist software if needed; additional study support from a specialist dyslexia tutor. These adjustments are funded by a central government fund: the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). Academic staff are also asked to provide teaching material prior to taught sessions and to overlook minor grammatical and spelling errors, if these do not affect the ability of the writing to communicate its meanings.

Despite the widespread availability of this additional support, Office for Students data indicates that dyslexic students are more likely to withdraw from their courses, in the first year of study, and a Higher Education Funding Council for England report identifies a significant reduction in dyslexic student satisfaction (Dobson Waters & Torgerson, 2021). Although attainment for dyslexic students on the contextual studies units I was leading wasn't lower, dyslexic student experience did seem to bear out these findings. However, this was not restricted to those students with a formal dyslexia diagnosis.

There seemed to be another group of students who thought they might be dyslexic, were being encouraged to have formal dyslexia screening by their tutors, but who had not, at the time the research took place, agreed to this. This was despite a university commitment to paying for full dyslexia assessment. There were also students who identified as dyslexic but were not claiming the DSA and therefore had no reasonable adjustments in place. The generic response to dyslexic difference, as outlined above, did not seem to be engaging with the complexity of its

manifestations, in the students I was teaching. So, part of the preliminary research for this article involved a questioning of this straightforward approach.

Within the field of disability studies there have been radical and far-reaching changes. For example, researchers at the University of Sheffield advocate for a 'critical disability studies' perspective that 'interrogates how and why certain impairments are deemed more amenable to education than others' (Goodley, 2007, p. 6). Because the disablement of dyslexic students is inextricably tied up with normative expectations about reading, writing and education, these new perspectives are particularly resonant. And as Goodley et al. (2019, p. 973), argue: 'To contemplate disability is to scrutinise inequality'. My aim in this research process was to engage discursively with dyslexic students, about their own writing experiences, in order to contemplate a particular manifestation of disability, in the particular context of UK creative arts HE. But what was also important was to aim to inflect this contemplation with a consideration of what any new insights could suggest about accepted learning processes in other HE contexts.

The complexities outlined above, Rose's definition of dyslexia and the clarifications provided by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014) informed the preliminary research for this article. The research process had to engage with the problematic nature of a straightforward, binary understanding of dyslexic difference. For as Slater (2012, p. 1) emphasises, 'making binary distinctions of disabled/non-disabled can unhelpfully cast the two groups in opposition to one-another, leaving underlying disabling notions unaddressed'. The inherent difficulties of differentiating between a dyslexic and a non-dyslexic student, and the problematic nature of a binary distinction between the two, is implicitly addressed in the selection of the student case studies, and the methodological decision making, as outlined below.

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996, 2011) were conducted with three undergraduate creative arts student case studies about their experience of their contextual studies written

assessments. Some questions were asked, but in the main, the conversations that emerged were informal and undirected.

All data was anonymised. Written, informed consent was obtained, and students were reassured that they were entitled to withdraw this consent at any time during, or following, the research. The selection of the 'case studies' recognised that dyslexic students might not have had a formal dyslexia assessment and that if they had, they might not have chosen to access the additional support provided for them by the DSA. Only students who had initiated an informal conversation about dyslexia, during contextual studies discussions, were approached as potential interviewees. At all times a tactful approach was taken, in recognition of the sensitivity of the subject and the inevitable power dynamic that exists, both between teacher and student, and between researcher and researched (Kvale, 1996, 2011).

All participants had English as their first language and had grown up in the UK. No explicit consideration of race, class or gender was made, in relation to the selection of the case studies, although a consideration of the ethical implications of this did form a significant part of the reflective process. This drove the methodological considerations.ⁱⁱ

Implicit in these considerations was an understanding that, in the context of my research process, a division between learner and teacher/researcher and researched was being blurred: I wanted to learn something from the students I was teaching. These considerations required sustained reflection on both my own position as teacher and the kinds of research methods that are commonly utilised for educational research. The point of the research was to attempt to contribute to understandings of dyslexic student experience, but as part of a contribution to greater understandings of some processes of disablement and of inclusive practice more generally. The BERA's (2018) guidance suggests that educational research that features co-production, or close collaboration, between learners, teachers and researchers is relevant to these aims. The following section articulates this reflection and explains the process by which collaboration was designed into the research process.

The invitation to take part in the research was considered carefully. Attempts were made to equalise the status of interviewer and interviewee, and to address the interviewees as 'experts in the field' of dyslexia research rather than 'objects of study'. In the formulation of the limited interview questions, in the preliminary approaches to potential interviewees and during the interviews themselves, I attempted to interpellate (Althusser, 2001) the students as experts on dyslexia pedagogy rather than position myself as the expert.

For Althusser, the term 'interpellation' describes the 'hailing of the subject' (Althusser, 2001, pp. 27–31). His use of it reflects an understanding of the ideological work inscribed within the assumptions made by the 'hailer' and the power that these have in relation to the identity formation of the 'hailed'. This concept provides a useful 'thinking tool' in relation to understandings of how the unconscious assumptions we, as educators, make about student potential are part of the way student identities are constructed. Atkinson describes these as 'pedagogised identities' (2001, 2003).

There was also an acknowledged attempt to draw out students' positive responses rather than a focus on identifying and quantifying the negative effects of dyslexic difference, as the interviewees understood this: in considering how dyslexic students are addressed – how they are interpellated as subjects – and, in particular, how I would address my student interviewees, I was attempting to respond proactively to the negative effects of deficit model thinking (Francis et al., 1996) and to understand the successful learning strategies utilised by particular students, in a particular educational situation. I was also hoping that the interview conversations would be an educationally productive process of positive reflection for the students (Moon, 2002; Bolton, 2005). But as Sikes and Piper (2013, p. 80) argue, 'It is simply not possible, in advance, to predict how participants might engage with a research project (if at all) or how the messy terrain of educational research might be encountered'. Although the three interviewees did provide important insights into what they understood to be their own successful learning strategies, inevitably, perhaps, it was the difficulties they had experienced that sometimes came to the fore.

A semi-structured interview is defined by Kvale (1996, pp. 5–6) as ‘an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee, with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena’. For Lea and Street (1998), the justification for the use of case studies comes from Mitchell, who argues that a valuable case study is one that can be understood to be a ‘telling case’ (in Lea and Street, 1998, p. 163). What is significant about the idea of a ‘telling case’ is that it differs from the way interview data is often used in educational research, and in a social science context, where what is sought is a ‘typical case’ (Mitchell, 1984). Typical cases, it is assumed, provide information from which it is possible to draw findings about a numerically calculated, wider group, of which the sample is typical. This distinction between a ‘typical’ and a ‘telling’ case is epistemologically significant.

For Kvale (1996, 2011), the rise in the use of qualitative interviews as a valued research method aligns with the decline in positivist modes of thought. Positivism sees science, and scientific knowledge formation, as objective truth which often arises from the application of statistically correlated quantitative data. The aim is to make universal generalisations from research which has been designed to avoid bias and threats to validity. The rise in the valuation of more interpretive research methods, like the semi-structured interview, reflects a move towards a more pluralistic view of the world and its inhabitants. This sees the world as being open to multiple interpretations and meanings (Kvale, 1996, p. 11). The view is predicated upon a belief that bias is inevitable and that a claim to objectivity is usually a product of a privileged subjectivity. Whilst it is important to recognise the limitations of qualitative research methods like interviews, as Kvale asserts interview conversations can help ‘to picture a manifold and controversial human world’ (Kvale, 2011, p. 7). My interpretation of the narrative accounts of these three telling cases makes no claim to objectivity. While this necessarily limits the recommendations to tentative suggestions or perhaps calls for consideration, I would argue that the addition of qualitative pedagogic research, which acknowledges the specificity of its cultural, historical and educational context, can provide useful insights.

Three telling cases

For the three second-year students interviewed, passing the first-year contextual studies written assessment was a requirement for progression into their second year. The contextual studies learning of their second year would also, often, inform their third-year dissertation research. This in turn contributed to their final degree classification. Writing, then, was fundamental to their success as creative arts graduates. Each student interviewee, I would argue, had managed to negotiate a positive pedagogised identity. However, this had involved some complex decision making in relation to their understanding of dyslexic difference.

Of the three interviewees, only two had undergone a formal dyslexia assessment and received a formal diagnosis of dyslexia. The third (F) had been encouraged by one of her core-course tutors to consider formal testing (partly because she was experiencing significant difficulties with her written work), but she had resisted this encouragement. F had, however, indicated that she thought she could be dyslexic. In addition, of the three interviewees, only one (J) had, at the time of the interviews, accessed the support provided by the DSA. The second (H) had not applied for additional support via the DSA, despite being entitled to it. F, of course, was not entitled to apply for the DSA, because she had not been formally assessed as being dyslexic.

All three interviewees offered some practical suggestions based on their experiences and the learning processes they had developed. One interesting aspect of the responses was that none of the interviewees referred to the role that specialist assistive technology played in their learning, or to the role of the specialist study support provided. For the two interviewees who had not applied for the DSA, this can be explained by their lack of entitlement to it. But J's use of assistive technology seemed to be as automatic as her use of any other software package and so it was not something that she raised in our discussions. It was, in the most part, the human interactions that were discussed: the way that the interviewees felt about their experiences seemed to be the most important aspect of the strategies for success they considered valuable.

J's story

As a dyslexic student who was not experiencing literacy difficulties, and who was receiving consistently very high grades for both her contextual studies written work and the practical element of her course, J's learning strategies were clearly working. I wanted to know more about how she achieved her consistently very high grades: what strategies she used; what situations were beneficial to her; and what future interventions she would recommend. One would have thought that because J's learning strategies were working, her sense of herself, as a successful student, was secure. In many respects this was true. J was confident in her own working processes, able to work to her strengths and skilled at planning and organising her workload. She was able to understand the wider contexts of her assessment briefs and comfortable asking for clarification when necessary. She could work independently and was consistently producing work that exceeded the expectations of her tutors. I saw J as an expert on her own learning processes and her own academic literacy development. However, J's sense of herself as a successful student was less secure than might have been expected. She felt that her working practices were unsustainable and that they were having an impact on her well-being. This was partly to do with the reasonable adjustments that were in place for her.

One of the key aspects of the reasonable adjustments made for most dyslexic learners at the university is an automatic two-week extension on deadlines for written assessments. J was entitled to this. I had had some reservations about the wisdom of this adjustment because it meant that many dyslexic learners started their research later than other students and so were working out of synch with their cohorts. It also meant that, in many cases, they were writing their essays once term had finished and thus had less access to tutorial support. J didn't always use the two-week extension she was entitled to, and before the interview she had made an off-the-cuff remark about the downside of it: she explained that it significantly reduced her holiday time. J therefore avoided using it if she could. J was clear that, despite the downsides, the extended deadlines were useful because they enabled her to manage her workload more effectively, but she

was becoming increasingly aware of the long-term implications of her strategies for her overall health and well-being.

J's comments about the impact of taking up the two-week extension were troubling: 'Yes, I might be entitled to a two-week extension, but what that means is I don't get any holiday'. In one way J's needs, as a dyslexic student, were being met by the reasonable adjustments in place for her but I would argue that the repercussions do need to be considered, in relation to the rights of dyslexic students to 'enjoy' and 'fully participate' in their education (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014). If we further consider J's comments about the coping strategies she has developed in response to her specific learning difficulties, 'I got very high grades but I spent every hour of every day working', in relation to the findings of Carroll and Iles (2006), who identify increased incidence of depression and anxiety in dyslexic learners, it is perhaps necessary to think about the impact of a succession of two-week extensions, over three years, on students' overall well-being.

The impact of J's specific learning difficulties, and the impact of the coping strategies she had developed to overcome these, might not be immediately apparent. They would not have appeared in the quantitative data used to monitor and assess student success, because this generally correlates success with achievement of an upper-second or first-class degree classification. Although J can be seen to be a student who has developed a successful dyslexic pedagogised identity, there are repercussions to the reasonable adjustments in place for her, in relation to her right to enjoy and fully participate in her education. J's experiences point both to the limitations of an automatic correlation between student success and grades achieved, and to the need for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of dyslexic difference on student experience.

F's story

For F, a place on her creative arts course at the university was the culmination of a childhood dream. Her much-admired cousin (who was, at the time of the interview, working as a fashion designer) had attended previously. F had experienced significant difficulties with both the writing and the research required for her

first-year contextual studies written assessment. Though she passed the assessment on resubmission, she found the process very difficult. Giving up on the course was, however, never an option for her and she was determined to overcome the difficulties she was experiencing. F also seemed to have an astute recognition of the value of her tenacious attitude and of her own resilience. For these reasons, I understood F to be someone whose knowledge and understanding were valuable: someone who had developed a successful pedagogised identity, despite a challenging year.

Many students at the university take non-traditional routes into HE. For F, this had been a British and Technology Education Council (BTEC) diploma. For students like F, who have not completed academic A levels, the contextual studies written assessments do often present challenges. As F commented, 'It's taken me to the second year to really understand what I'm supposed to be doing'. Her experience of her BTEC diploma in fashion was that it was the practical fashion design and realisation element that was most important. Her perception was that the written assessments were less significant. As she commented, 'I forgot about maths and English and I just did a BTEC in fashion for two years'. The admissions process for her undergraduate course was based on the presentation of a portfolio of her practical work, so this perception was, in many ways, entirely reasonable.

To some extent F's need to improve her research and writing skills was addressed by the extensive study support, provided both within the taught content of the contextual studies units, and by the academic support team at the university. This support is available to all students. But it can be demoralising for students like F to be assessed at tasks for which they are unprepared. As F pointed out, 'I struggled a lot – I kept failing – it put me down a lot. I felt a bit stupid – I know that's not a good word to use – I've always struggled with academic stuff. It took me so long to finally understand and to know what I'm doing.' Though F had clearly found things challenging, she had demonstrated great tenacity in response to her initial failing grade and had overcome these challenges. It seemed she was able to avoid being defeated by grades and feedback which might perhaps have led less emotionally secure students to give up.

For F, the most effective strategy she used was to seek out the people who she saw as committed and able to help her. But she also had a strong sense that she did not want to be favoured over other students. It is possible to speculate that what motivated this is that she had internalised some of the negative, stereotypical attitudes to dyslexia. She didn't want to be defined as being dyslexic and deciding not to have a formal dyslexia assessment was part of this. I have a great deal of respect for the progress F made in her written work and the strategies she had employed to achieve this. I would argue that it is important to resist making assumptions about the wisdom of F's decision and to learn from the strategies she felt were useful to her.

F was proactive in making connections with the people she felt were supportive of her and also in avoiding interactions that in her words 'put her down'. F had used the range of additional support available to all students at the university. She worked diligently with her tutors and explored a range of different strategies until she found the ones that worked for her. In this way, she took ownership of her own learning processes. An important aspect of this seemed to be the decision not to be formally assessed for dyslexia. I would argue that what F's decision-making points to is the need to question an automatic assumption that all students who are experiencing difficulties should have dyslexia assessments. It points to a need to recognise the complex narratives that make up a student's understanding of dyslexia and what it means to be dyslexic.

Whereas for F a formal assessment for dyslexia was something to be avoided, J's experience of the process was essentially productive. As she explained, 'I found it really interesting actually, because there's a link between anxiety and dyslexia ... and, I think as well [it] enabled me to be a little bit less hard on myself.' Unlike F, J was able to integrate a new subject position – that of dyslexic learner – in positive and productive ways. She used this to negotiate the additional support she needed but did not allow stereotypical understandings of dyslexia to reduce her expectations of what she could achieve. For F, who perhaps had internalised some of the negative, stereotypical ideas about dyslexia, this integration may not have been possible. I would argue that F's decision to avoid formal dyslexia assessment needs to be respected and learned from. It arose, I would argue, from a

position of self-knowledge and an understanding of the strategies she needed to employ in order to overcome the barriers to learning that she was experiencing. This is particularly significant if we consider F's decision in relation to H's experience of her formal dyslexia assessment. This is outlined below.

H's story

H had been selected as the third 'telling case' on the assumption that she was, like J, a student who was not experiencing difficulties with her written work. To some extent this was true: she was receiving consistently high grades for her written assessments. However, H's verbal contributions in workshop discussions showed a level of understanding and astute criticality that was not reflected in these assessed essays. H had not yet, it seemed, developed the writing skills necessary to demonstrate her very sophisticated application of the complex cultural theory she was learning about. Her essays were, however, elegantly written and beautifully presented in a way that refutes a stereotypical understanding of what a dyslexic student is capable of. What these essays also perhaps suggest is that H had managed to overcome prior learning difficulties, in relation to the development of writing skills. She could be seen to be one of the 'high-functioning' or 'fully compensated' dyslexics that Deacon et al. (2012) discuss. H's attitude to what she understood to be the relationship between her creativity and her dyslexia could account for the confidence she had in speaking critically about complex ideas and perhaps her prior learning successes.

H spoke eloquently about her creative practice and had used the theoretical perspectives introduced in contextual studies lectures and workshops to reflect upon this. She took a similar, reflective approach to her own dyslexia. She saw it as an integral part of her creativity and something that was 'part of who she was'. H was able to 'declare' her dyslexia in what seemed to be an unselfconscious way. Like F she had an ability to 'self-advocate'. This is a key aspect of what 'high-functioning' or 'fully compensated dyslexics' are understood to do (Deacon et al., 2012). In relation to my understanding of H as someone who had developed a positive dyslexic pedagogised identity, it seemed to be particularly significant. However, during the course of the

interview conversation, it became apparent that H's achievements involved the overcoming of some significant barriers and difficulties, not the least of which was her experience of the formal dyslexia assessment process. As H explained:

'At school I was used to getting things right, but all those tests are designed for you to fail and it felt like he [the educational psychologist] was fixated on trying to catch me out. ... such a horrible experience. ... I was crying half-way through. Well I was upset for a bit but then I thought at least I've done it now. ... He was just a bit cold really ... at the end he said ... well what haven't you got and then just read off a list of all the things I couldn't do. At the beginning he had said I should expect it to be upsetting, he said obviously, if you're trying to force this, or you're just trying to get a laptop we are going to be able to tell from the results.'

Dyslexia assessments must focus on deficits in order to justify the allocation of additional support for students disabled by dyslexia. This is a requirement of UK funding policy for disabled students. But these comments are inflected by an understanding of a diagnostic process as being about 'catching out' students rather than providing the university with a service in order for it to fulfil its obligations, as explained by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2014). H also described how she had felt ridiculed by the assessor when she explained that she sometimes read aloud to herself when the information just 'wasn't going in'. This again was a deeply problematic response to what can be seen to have been an effective learning strategy, given H's prior educational successes.

H's experience was different to J's, and little can be extrapolated from it in relation to the frequency of this kind of approach. However, it does suggest that we need to know more about the testing procedures used by educational psychologists, working as private practitioners, before we encourage students to use their services. The assessments take place in private, to exclude threats to validity, and are understood to be an objective, scientific, diagnostic process. But as H articulated, 'you are laying out your flaws to someone'. Clearly in this case what was understood to be an objective assessment of H's learning difficulties came with some problematic preconceived notions about dyslexic students and the role of formal dyslexia assessment. H's suggestion was that all formal dyslexia assessments take place on a university site, close to the disability

support team. She felt that this would allow for more monitoring of the process and would mean that support was close by if this be needed. H's experience of the process meant that she did not apply for the DSA, which would have paid for the additional support to which she was entitled. It perhaps also sheds some light on why some students may resist an encouragement to have formal dyslexia assessment.

The perspectives of what I have interpreted as telling, but not necessarily typical, cases provide examples of very different engagements with the dyslexia label, as well as different narratives of achievement. Each interviewee made different decisions in relation to the support available for dyslexic learners and to the difficulties they were facing or had faced. Although they are not typical cases from which it is possible to draw conclusions about a wider body of students, they do, I would suggest, provide insights into specific instances of the development of successful pedagogised identities which were constructed in negotiation with the dyslexia descriptor. They also provide some insights into the complex ways that dyslexia can have an effect on student experience.

Conclusion

An understanding of dyslexia as potentially disabling is now inscribed into educational policy in the UK and within anti-discrimination legislation (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014). What this article has drawn attention to is the need for HE educators and policy makers to develop more nuanced, more far-reaching responses to dyslexic difference so that all students can 'fully participate in' and 'enjoy' their educations (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014). It has foregrounded some central complexities that inform all aspects of dyslexia research, policy and inclusive practice and factored these into both the methodological considerations and the conclusions and recommendations outlined below.

No overarching, definitive answers have arisen, following this research, to the questions posed at the beginning of this article: What kinds of strategies, situations and interventions (intended or otherwise) have dyslexic students, on creative arts courses, found useful in relation to their contextual studies written work? How

are positive dyslexic 'pedagogised identities' (Atkinson, 2001, 2003) formed? What could a greater understanding of this mean for inclusive practice in HE? This reflects the interpretive, blurred, 'messy' (Sikes and Piper, 2013) nature of the research and necessarily limits the application of the findings. These are offered as tentative suggestions or perhaps calls for consideration. But, I would argue, the research draws attention to the problematic nature of the uncritical application of statistically correlated, quantitative data to diverse and complex HE educational contexts. This produces, I would argue, certainties about dyslexic learners that simply do not exist.

The three interviewees did give some clear indications of the kinds of successful strategies they had used as well as insights into the development of their own dyslexic 'pedagogised identities' (Atkinson, 2001, 2003). These provide, I would argue, relevant suggestions to be considered by HE educators beyond the UK creative arts location of this study.

In the main the strategies the interviewees found useful were not centred upon the reasonable adjustments available to dyslexic students at the university but were about how they felt as learners and how they negotiated with the HE educators and support practitioners who they wanted/needed to learn from. The exception to this was J's use of the two-week extension to negotiate her deadlines and work to her strengths. This did, however, produce working practices understood to be unsustainable by J.

For H an insensitive response by an educational psychologist during her dyslexia assessment meant that she chose not to apply for the DSA. Her recommendation was that all testing take place within university premises so that support could be accessed, if needed. H had also found that reading out loud to herself had been useful. This strategy is not advocated for dyslexic learners generally but given H's astute understanding of the complex theoretical sources she was being asked to read, I would argue that her suggestions warrant further investigation and could be something that HE educators consider suggesting to their students.

The main strategy that F understood to be useful to her was a seeking out of those who she felt didn't 'put her down'. Her strengths as a learner included tenacity in response to initial failure and an astute awareness of her own need to carefully seek out people who, she perceived, would help her in the ways that she needed. Part of this was avoiding formal dyslexia assessment but it was also, I would argue, about a sophisticated, critical engagement with the assumptions made by those who were teaching her and perhaps about their commitment to inclusive practice.

Of course, the lack of reference to reasonable adjustments reflects the methodological decisions made: in relation to the selection of the case studies, two out of three of the interviewees had not applied for the DSA and were therefore not entitled to these reasonable adjustments. Further research is required, but HEIs' duty of care extends to all students who can be understood to be disabled by dyslexia and not just those with a formal diagnosis. Institutions must 'proactively anticipate' the needs of all disabled students (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2014). I would argue, in relation to dyslexia, that this cannot be achieved without a rethinking of the role of formal dyslexia diagnosis, in both the formation of dyslexic student identity, and in the allocation of additional support.

This study can be understood to be an attempted intervention into both deficit model thinking and the way students presenting with what can be understood to be dyslexic differences are disabled in HE contexts. This can be considered in relation to the Office for Students data that identifies retention issues for disabled students in their first year but also needs to be considered beyond this. For it is not only researchers and educators who 'scrutinise inequality' (Goodley et al., 2019) but also the students we teach.

Whether students have the capacity and strategies to overcome the barriers to learning they experience and the challenges they face depends upon a whole range of intersecting contexts and experiences. In the case of those negotiating 'specific learning difficulties' that may or may not be dyslexia, the certainties produced from assessment practices, and widely accepted scientific research methods, may or may not be productive. They

may or may not contribute to the formation of successful 'pedagogised identities' (Atkinson, 2001, 2003) in specific instances, and we, as educators, may or may not know if this will be the case. HE educators must factor in this lack of certainty and engage productively, in dialogue, with the decisions students are making about their own learning processes. Ableist beliefs about how learning should occur must be challenged (Mallett et al., 2016).

Knowledge that is produced from the uncritical application of statistically correlated, quantitative data, in the construction of universal generalisations which have arisen from research and assessment practices that have, of course, been designed to avoid bias and threats to validity, has implications. I would argue that the uses we, as researchers, educators and learners, make of descriptors like dyslexia, and the policies that arise from this, reveal something important about these implications.

While I would argue, contrary to Elliott (2016) and (Elliott and Grigorenko, 2014), that dyslexia *is* currently a helpful diagnostic term and that Rose's (2009) definition of it, as a continuum of difference, has helped to ensure this, I would also suggest that it is important to critically reflect upon the certainties that are currently in play in relation to dyslexia. Although UK HE inclusive practice is positively affected because of the availability of the term 'dyslexia' as a naming device for a particular range of 'specific learning difficulties', current UK education funding policy has implications. Given these, it is important, currently, to provide opportunities for all students to have free, formal dyslexia assessment if that is what they want. But what is also important is that UK HEI educators and policy makers work towards establishing more pluralistic responses to dyslexia difference and to disability more generally.

The disablement of dyslexic students is inextricably tied up with normative expectations about learning and writing. But as Tobias-Green (2014) suggests, students frequently refute our assumptions about how learning should occur. Opening up productive dialogue about students' own learning strategies is one of the fundamental approaches advocated by this article. HE educators must challenge their own ableist beliefs about how learning should occur (Mallett et al., 2016). Avoiding this kind of

deficit model thinking (Francis et al., 1996) can mean that students are encouraged to value their own educational decision making and to seek out their own strategies for success.

ⁱ 'Learning Disability' is the US term that best correlates with the UK term of 'specific learning difficulties' (SpLD).

ⁱⁱ These ethical implications point to the need for more research into the way diagnosis of SpLDs like dyslexia intersect (Crenshaw 1993) with wider exclusionary practices, particularly in relation to race and class, international students and non-native English speakers in UK educational contexts.

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