

The LAS adviser's role in supporting dyslexic students

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Abstract: *While Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers play an important role in the support our institutions offer to dyslexic students, there is considerable variation in our understanding of the condition and its implications for studying at university; in our arrangements for collaborating with other relevant staff; and in our opportunities to use what we learn from working with dyslexic students to influence inclusive teaching in our universities. Rather than being trained to help dyslexic students with academic work, we are likely to be chasing information and strategies as the need arises. This paper argues that LAS advisers need to know more about dyslexia, both to inform our work with individual students and to improve our institutions' capacities to anticipate and meet the needs of a diverse student population.*

Key words: *dyslexia, academic support, social construction of disability, inclusive teaching*

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to explore some concerns that arise out of our work with dyslexic students.¹ The Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992) (DDA) requires universities to make 'reasonable accommodation' for students with a disability, to ensure that they have equal opportunity to engage in and benefit from a course of study. The primary responsibility for implementing this requirement lies with the institution's Disabilities Office, which tries to provide each student with whatever they need to compensate for the limitations imposed by their impairment. If they need support with academic skills, however, they are referred to us, like any other student.

In many ways, dyslexic students are like any other student: they are encountering the unfamiliar cultures of a range of disciplines, whose purposes, forms, and language

1. In Australia, 'Learning Disability (LD)' is the preferred term, rather than 'dyslexia'. However, I have chosen to retain 'dyslexia' here because LD includes other conditions such as dyscalculia, dyspraxia, attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder, and sometimes Asperger's Syndrome, which are not discussed in this paper.

they need to understand in order to succeed. In other ways, however, they are not the same, for they are hampered in their literate performances by physiological differences whose nature is unclear even to experts in the field of learning disabilities. Language and Academic Skills (LAS) advisers may feel ill-equipped to help these students, for we are not normally trained in this (or any other) disability. Earlier this year, I conducted a brief survey of colleagues on the Unilearn discussion list, asking whether they had ever had training related to dyslexia. Of the sixty-one LAS advisers who responded, only thirteen had had any training: for most, no more than a seminar, sought out by the LAS advisers rather than offered by their institutions. Forty-eight said they had had no training at all. These numbers should not, however, be taken to indicate that LAS advisers are satisfied with their ability to meet the needs of dyslexic students: in addition to the 13 who had already taken steps to learn about dyslexia, 17 respondents said they would like to know more about this area.

It is not unreasonable of our institutions, in fact, to hope that we can manage without this sort of training. We see students with a wide range of disabilities each year, but not many students with any one kind of disability. Perhaps the numbers do not, as yet, justify the expense of training us in all of these, and it seems invidious to pick out one for special attention. Nonetheless, I would like to argue that, because of the challenge dyslexia poses to academic habits of thought and performance, LAS advisers need a fuller understanding of it – both to inform the ways we work with individuals, and to improve our institutions' capacity to anticipate and meet the needs of a diverse student population.

The meanings of disability

Dyslexia is a condition that uniquely challenges basic assumptions about what an educated person should be like. All disabilities are socially constructed, both in the sense that other people construct an interpretation of what one's physical difference means about oneself, and in the sense that particular social expectations about normal performance are, to a greater or lesser extent, responsible for the disabling effects of the difference. Dyslexia is disabling in both these ways. Our society equates literacy with intelligence, so that limitations to literacy are understood to signify limited intelligence. Dyslexic students do not fit with our construction of an educated person because, while they are as intelligent as other students and can learn quite effectively in other ways (Reid & Kirk, 2001, pp. 154-172), reading and writing are very hard for them (Herrington, 1995; Singleton, 1999, pp. 2, 17-18, & 29; Farmer, Riddick, & Sterling, 2002, p. 224). Difficulties with written language are disabling in an educational environment whose currency is writing, for most disciplines do not readily offer students other ways of showing what they have learned (Morgan & Klein, 2000, pp. 198-199).

Accommodating dyslexic students

Let us look, then, at how universities respond to the needs of dyslexic students. In compliance with the DDA, accommodations are devised to meet the needs of each individual student with a disability, depending upon the ways their disability is likely to disadvantage them in their studies. Dyslexia is a syndrome, rather than a clearly delineated condition, and neither its underlying cause(s) nor the full range of effects has,

as yet, been pinned down with any certainty (Rice & Brooks, 2004, pp. 13-16). While most investigators agree that a physiological difference is responsible for the syndrome, there are several different views on where exactly that difference (or differences) may lie (Reid, 2003, pp. 6-7; *A Framework for Understanding Dyslexia*, 2004). There is, however, widespread agreement that dyslexia involves a difficulty in distinguishing the phonemes of language (Snowling, 2000) – for example, being able to separate ‘met’ into ‘m’, ‘e’, ‘t’ – which may affect accuracy in comprehending speech and/or in pronunciation, and which usually proves an obstacle to reading and writing because the alphabetic principle depends on being able to match phonemes to symbols. In many cases, problems with written language are exacerbated by visual disturbances in which print appears to move, fade, or even disappear (Singleton, 1999, pp. 27-28; Mailey, 2001).

These difficulties in dealing with letters have suggested a ‘medical’ model of dyslexia, in which it is viewed as a deficiency in some facult(ies) for processing language. However, dyslexic people are often very articulate, which complicates this understanding, and at the same time, more than language seems to be involved (Farmer et al., 2002, ch. 7). Sometimes dyslexic people have poor physical coordination, and many have limited short-term memory (Singleton, 1999, p. 27). Dyslexic students commonly experience difficulties with following, and with producing, the linear structure of ideas conventional in discursive academic writing (e.g., Morgan & Klein, 2000, pp. 200-201; Herrington, 2001, pp. 188-189). This does not necessarily mean that dyslexic students will achieve less than others, however, for many are able to take advantage of a strong spatial sense, and a tendency to think holistically rather than sequentially, which serves them well in fields like art, architecture, and engineering (Singleton, 1999, p. 30). Whether these talents are merely unaffected by dyslexia, or are actually more common in people with dyslexia, is a matter of debate. The variety and complexity of the talents and limitations associated with dyslexia has led many who work with dyslexic students to view the syndrome as a difference rather than a deficiency in their physiological makeup (Herrington, 2004, pp. 12-13). However, within the rights discourse established by the DDA, a medical diagnosis of deficiency is needed to trigger accommodations, which vary with individual needs.

Every person with dyslexic characteristics experiences a different cluster of difficulties, and experiences them with a different degree of severity (Monash University, 1993; Reid & Kirk, 2001, p. 3; Mortimore, 2003, p. 61), so the likely effects on their studies will vary widely. However, the effects generally include stress and fatigue, because the reading and writing assigned in their courses require much more time and effort of them than of non-dyslexic students (Preston, Hayes, & Randall, 1996; Singleton, 1999, p. 29; Fawcett, 2004, pp. 179-180); anxiety about their ability to cope with study and, in the longer term, with work; inaccurately written and often unconventionally organised assignments; and frustration at their limited ability to demonstrate their learning in the ways that their courses require.

Some of these effects can be addressed by the Disabilities Liaison Officers (DLOs) who have primary responsibility for supporting dyslexic students at university. Depending on the types and severity of an individual student’s difficulties with literacy, accommodations may include

- discussion with the DLO about the nature of dyslexia and the accommodations available;

- employment of a notetaker and/or a library assistant;
- pre-recording of core readings and recording of lectures;
- provision of assistive technology such as mind-mapping software to help with planning of assignments; voice-recognition software, so that students can compose orally and dictate to their computer; and/or screen-reading software which can read, in a synthetic voice, materials scanned into the computer, materials available on the internet, and the student's own writing (this helps with proofreading);
- advocacy and negotiation of extended deadlines and/or extra time in exams; and
- referral to a counsellor or LAS adviser. (Payne & Irons, 2003, p. 17)

Room for improvement

All these things can be helpful, but we cannot be satisfied that they will 'level the playing field' for dyslexic students, as intended. Some of the shortcomings often found in such an approach were raised, in Britain, in the Report of the National Working Party on Dyslexia in Higher Education (Singleton, 1999). One significant problem is that almost half of dyslexic students in universities are not identified as dyslexic until they are partway through their course (Singleton, 1999, p. 83). In Australia, Payne and Irons (2003, p. 14) found this to be true for a third of dyslexic Australian students, but for 50 percent in Queensland. This problem occurs because dyslexic students have found ways of learning, during their earlier schooling, which compensated to some degree for their difficulties with the normal acquisition of skills in reading and writing, and it is not until they encounter the heavier and different demands of university study that these compensating strategies prove inadequate. This means that many dyslexic students do not receive support for some time, and others never receive it because they do not know that they might be dyslexic and so do not consult the DLO. Many of us will have the experience of being the first person to suspect that a student may be dyslexic, and being faced with the uncomfortable challenge of raising this – often very upsetting – possibility with the student. A related problem is that an undiagnosed student may be expected to pay up to \$500 for an assessment with an educational psychologist, which is necessary to authorise support by the DLO (Payne & Irons, p. 15); some forego this option and never find out whether they are dyslexic or receive accommodations. Those who are assessed often find the experience distressing (Farmer et al., 2002, pp. 77-86) and the subsequent report incomprehensible, so that its benefit to them is very limited (Singleton, 1999, p. 109). It is of some concern, as well, that even experts have grave doubts about the science and the thinking underpinning such assessments, which rely upon IQ testing with all its shortcomings (e.g., Stanovich, 1999; see also Franklin, 1987; for problems with some of the commonly-used tests, see Farmer et al., pp. 18-21, 202-203).

Once students are diagnosed, there are problems with implementing the support available. Some students provided with assistive technology make little use of it, because they are not trained in it sufficiently to appreciate the ways in which it could help them (Singleton, 1999, p. 124; Payne & Irons, 2003, p. 28). Extra time on assignments or exams, meanwhile, is helpful but not sufficient to make up for problems with memory, retrieving information, understanding what the questions are asking, and producing answers the marker can understand (Morgan & Klein, 2000, pp. 139-140). Indeed, the chief problem identified

by the Singleton Report and other studies is the lack of awareness of dyslexia among staff in universities, and teaching staff in particular, as lecturers need to understand the syndrome if they are to be receptive to alternative ways of students demonstrating their learning (Singleton, 1999, pp. 47 & 50; Payne & Irons, 2003, p. 39). The recommendations of the Singleton Report which are equally relevant in our region included funding for psychological assessments to identify dyslexic students; training in the use of technology; development of appropriate methods of assessment in academic subjects; efforts to raise awareness of dyslexia among teaching staff; and employment of knowledgeable staff in counselling, careers, and academic skills (Singleton, 1999, passim).

‘Need to know’

Indeed, one of the most important lessons of the Singleton Report, and one which institutions in both the UK and Australia are a long way from acting upon, is the need for a whole-of-institution approach to accommodating dyslexia (see also Krupska & Klein, 1995, p. 69). If we ask ourselves who, in the university community, needs to understand the physiological experience of dyslexia and the ways in which it may interact with the demands of a course of study, we can identify the following personnel, at least:

STAFF: IN ORDER TO:

DLOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • screen students to discover whether they are likely to be dyslexic • refer them for assessment by an educational psychologist • interpret the reports that result from these assessments • provide helpers and technology to compensate for their diagnosed impairments • negotiate accommodations such as extra time or alternative assessments
IT and audiovisual staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • train students in the use of assistive technology (AT) • keep up with developments in AT
College staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • offer appropriate kinds and levels of help with management of time and study
Administrative staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • help students with forms and procedures
Counselling staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognise the role that dyslexia plays in the experiences that impel students to consult them • help with stress and the emotional consequences of living with dyslexia • refer students to other specialist staff as appropriate
Careers staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourage (realistic) aspirations of students • research and advise on the demands of different sorts of jobs • help with resume preparation so that students can market themselves in terms of their strengths • help with job applications and interview preparation

Library staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make searching easier • allow longer loans • help students with using electronic equipment
Examinations staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implement accommodations for individual students
Teaching staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make their teaching and assessment methods more inclusive • recognise students who may be dyslexic and refer them to the DLO and/or LAS
LAS advisers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognise students who may be dyslexic and refer them to the DLO • understand the meaning of reports from educational psychologists • talk with students about their experiences of learning • help them to develop strategies • help them negotiate with teaching staff • help them to develop self-advocacy

Table 1: Staff who should have some awareness of dyslexia

At present, out of all these people, only DLOs are likely to have received any training relating to dyslexia.

The situation in the UK is quite different in at least one respect: dyslexic students receive one-to-one tutoring by specialist dyslexia-trained tutors. Our efforts to help students with dyslexia seem likely to be unsatisfactory by comparison. However, in discussions with dyslexia specialists in British universities, I found that they considered expertise in dyslexia less important than familiarity with the demands of academic study at this level. What is essential, in their view, is frequent one-to-one consultation about the work that students are doing for their subjects, informed by an understanding of the purposes of their assignments and the cultures of their disciplines (see also Herrington, 2001, p. 191), and focussing on whatever the individual student most needed to work on, in ways best suited to that student's learning style (for an excellent source on dyslexia and learning style, with practical strategies for students to use in acquiring, storing, and expressing ideas and information, see Mortimore, 2003). This is the way we try to work with any individual, and it may be that extensive training in specific techniques for teaching dyslexic students would not add a great deal, as these were commonly considered less relevant, and less likely to be effective, for working with adults than with children.

Nonetheless, it is important for us to inform ourselves about dyslexia, for a number of reasons. If we are the first to tell a student that s/he may be dyslexic, we need to do it sensitively, and to explain their options knowledgeably. If a student has had an assessment for dyslexia, we need to be able to make sense of their report (see, e.g., Farmer et al., 2001, pp. 198, 210-211). While each student will be different, we need to know enough to set aside unhelpful assumptions about what strategies are likely to work best for our dyslexic students. Where we might work on helping a non-dyslexic student to see the structures of written language and academic discourse, and to reproduce these for assessment, it may be more effective to help a dyslexic student to *listen* for these, to store ideas in diagrammatic form, and to offer an oral commentary on a visual presentation. Some

dyslexic students will need us to help them find alternatives to course requirements that disable them; others may prefer to use their time with us, and/or assistive technology, to improve their literacy -- for, although dyslexic people's problems with literacy are attributed to lack of phonic awareness, there is also evidence that phonic awareness can be a consequence of becoming literate (Castro-Caldas & Reis, 2003; Rice & Brooks, 2004, p. 28). We also need to appreciate the effects dyslexia may have beyond the obvious literacy difficulties, in terms of personal organisation and emotional responses to setbacks in the course of an individual's studies.

Resources for professional development

Fortunately, the resources we need are already available, and key sources are accessible online. The large and interesting literature on dyslexia can be a mixed blessing, for it can be difficult to identify where to begin when we have so little time to give to DIY professional development. I would like, therefore, to point to just a few resources where the information we need has been very competently condensed and helpfully presented, and where references to more specialised sources can be found. One of these is the revised *Opening All Options II*, funded by DEST and available at <http://services.admin.utas.edu.au/options/index.htm>. This is addressed to a diverse audience including students, teaching staff, and LAS advisers, and deals with most aspects of learning at university with dyslexia, and of teaching and supporting such learners. It does not really deal with the range of theories about the physiological causes of dyslexia, however. Indeed, it is difficult to tackle these in a confined space, and perhaps also risky in that the more we know about these, the less inclined we may be to regard the syndrome as scientifically well-defined. However, I do not think it is helpful to distance the practice of dealing with dyslexia from the science of explaining it: such a separation simply replaces confusion with vagueness. Fortunately, there is an online publication that presents these theories briefly, and discusses areas of agreement and disagreement among them: *A Framework for Understanding Dyslexia*, which can be found at the U.K. government website, www.dfes.gov.uk/readwriteplus/understandingdyslexia. A more contentious account can be found in *Developmental dyslexia in adults: a research review*, available at http://www.nrdc.org.uk/uploads/documents/doc_166.pdf, which surveys 1800 articles on dyslexia since 1987.

Opening All Options II also does not fully deal with the important issue of whether dyslexia should be understood as deficiency or diversity. A good online source on this, at <http://jarmin.com/demos/index.html>, is the DEMOS project: follow the links to 'Disability awareness' and 'Dyslexia'. Still more relevant to LAS advisers, but not available online, is Herrington's (2004) book incorporating the views of experienced dyslexia-trained skills tutors in British universities.

Improving institutional response

In addition to informing ourselves about dyslexia, we can try to work more closely with other relevant staff to ensure that students get the kinds of support they need as expeditiously as possible. University structures usually assign responsibility for disabilities, for counselling, for learning skills, and for information technology to different units, but a student's needs

may well encompass all of these functions. If we have no formal structures or procedures for communicating and collaborating amongst our different units, we should consider establishing these; or, if that is not feasible, setting up informal networks to share ideas and information, so each of us can learn what people in the other units can do to help a student with dyslexia.

Most important to students is that their tutors understand dyslexia, and LAS advisers are well placed to raise awareness of dyslexia among teaching staff. Our LAS expertise should help us to understand how our dyslexic student's constellations of strengths and weaknesses articulate with the demands of their subjects, and we can discuss this with their tutors in specific, rather than generic or simply legalistic terms. Farmer et al. (2001, pp. 49-50) touch on this, and their investigation suggests that many tutors would welcome information on dyslexia (pp. 174-175). Some of the measures we suggest may be specific to a particular student's dyslexic profile, but others may have wider benefits. The largest challenge posed by dyslexia is that of changing teaching methods to be more inclusive – not only for dyslexic students but for all students, who bring a great variety of learning styles, strengths and weaknesses to their academic studies, and who would benefit from most of the adjustments that would help dyslexic students. To prepare subject materials and make them available, online, well in advance of teaching; to be explicit about the purpose of work assigned, and the important points in reading, lectures, and discussions; to anticipate and avoid confusion in the wording of assignments; to present ideas and information in a variety of modes; to accept a range of ways of demonstrating learning for assessment: all of these methods, which are recommended for teaching dyslexic students, would be helpful to others as well (see, e.g., Noble & Mullins, n.d.). LAS advisers can play a role in identifying what would be helpful, and how it could be done without adding unreasonably to lecturers' workloads, and then in talking with them about methods that have worked for others and might work well for them. Some of these methods, in case studies, can be found online, for example, Herrington and Simpson (2002) and Zakaria and Osborne (1997); and looking ahead, eight British universities have begun a 'SPACE' Project (Staff-Student Partnership for Assessment Change and Evaluation) which will also collect relevant examples at <http://www.space.ac.uk>, and University College, Worcester is developing a website of Strategies for Creating Inclusive Programmes of Study ('SCIPS') at <http://www.scips.worc.ac.uk/Plone>.

Conclusion

Payne and Irons (2003, p. 30) remark that 'A wide range of support services and accommodations are being provided' but that this is being done 'in a reactive way. A better approach', they suggest, 'may be to focus on teaching practice so that it is inclusive of the needs of all students, and supported by systemic provisions for the particular needs of those with [learning disabilities]'. In this paper, I have discussed the role that LAS advisers could play in such an approach, and a range of resources to inform our efforts.

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