

Handout to support tutors Working with Dyslexic Students

This set of information focuses on finding ways to help students in the academic learning environment. Dyslexic students are not disabled they are not lazy and they are not trying to be difficult. Dyslexia is a different way of thinking about, interacting and paying attention to the world and this impacts on the ways that they learn. The numbers of people who are dyslexic vary from 1 in 7 to 1 in 5 people so by the law of averages you will have dyslexic students in your classes. This handout draws on multiple sources including my own research undertaken in NZ and the UK with input from a group of dyslexic former University and Tech students.

As lecturers and tutors, it can be difficult to understand which students are dyslexic; and even when you begin the semester by asking students to let you know if they need any support they will not come forward. There are still a lot of stigmas associated with dyslexia which results in people feeling that they have to keep quiet because dyslexia is viewed as failure.

As dyslexia is both an experience and an expression of different ways of interacting with the world, it does not just affect writing. For example, dyslexic students often won't look you in the eye because there is 'a lot of information in a face' (Elise, research participant) and this information can be a distraction from what the person is saying. Asking a dyslexic student to look at you means that you're asking them to ignore what you are saying. Some of my older research participants had adapted societies' need to look at people by focusing on the person's forehead or nose but for those who were younger, they would look away to concentrate.

Sensory overload was something discussed by most of the people involved in my research and this is not something we can manage as tutors. Sensory overload means that the individual just can't cope anymore and their work will stop. One senior academic (dyslexic) described the experience as a complete shutdown 'must stop must stop now!' and worried about dyslexic students who haven't learnt to manage the experience. The only thing we can do is continue to support our students and encourage them to be aware of the stress that they are putting themselves under, especially during exam and test conditions.

The main thing to know is that all people with dyslexia are different and what may work for one may not for another, as with other students. The following ideas are ones which I have found help dyslexic students but many of them could be helpful for other students as well.

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The Dyslexic collective is a group of 4 adults (with dyslexia) and an anthropologist who create material supporting dyslexic ways of Being.

Tutorials/ lectures

The Space: arriving in a tutorial space creates particular work for dyslexics. Due to sensory overload there is a need to readjust to the space and to the people. This can mean that they may seem less engaged or may turn up late to miss that initial interaction. You can give the student time to adjust by letting them take the time they need. Something different is to play music, for the first couple of minutes, that is relevant to the topic being covered that day. I've found it helps all of the students to refocus after their previous class and set the tone for the rest of the session.

Questions: asking questions is part of the tutorial space, however, for dyslexic students, this can be problematic. This is not because they may not know the answers but they get overwhelmed by possible answers. One academic described being asked what she thought saying 'for a moment, a small tidal wave just disorganised anything I have to offer.' (Granger 2010:14-15), she couldn't answer the question because she was overwhelmed by possible answers. This can be addressed in different ways. One is to write the question on the board and work it through a mind map which will give the dyslexic student time to work through what they are dealing with by using the other ideas to narrow down their's making it possible for them to contribute. Another way is to ask a more detailed question so that the student can narrow down the possible answers. There can also be an issue with not answering the full question due to getting caught on the possibilities. Highlighting each part of the question by underlining it or making each part a different colour can help to ensure that it is clear what is needed.

Too much information?: The opposite of this can happen when your student becomes comfortable and they start explaining their ideas. Sometimes it can appear that they are randomly jumping from one idea to another - covering everything from what they saw last night on TV to a philosophical discussion - and what seems to be relevant out of everything they have said is the last sentence. The people I worked with called this the dyslexic short version. The reason for this information is because it is background information that helped them to come to their conclusion. They want their listener to know what led to the conclusion so that they are fully informed. Trying to hurry this along won't work but speaking privately with the student and helping them to understand that other students just want the punch line can sometimes help. Suggest that they mind map the idea quickly first to help them to focus their comment can help.

Note Taking: Some students will use note takers but many won't as they find it awkward. In a handout I have developed, with The Dyslexic Collective, for students there are sites for them to check but if you have time giving a tutorial on note taking can be in-valuable.

Doodling as note taking may seem like an unusual thing to suggest but it has been found to help all students and for dyslexic students who have someone note taking or if they have chosen to not have a note taker this type of engagement helps with thinking and memorisation as well. Not all notes need to be written.

<https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/24/skills-and-strategies-doodling-sketching-and-mind-mapping-as-learning-tools/?mcubz=0>

How to explain the development of an assignment

The possibilities in an assignment question can be overwhelming. What is seen as a straightforward question can become very complex in the hands of a dyslexic. Being incredibly creative thinkers they can see links with seemingly disparate material that we may have missed. Unfortunately, these complex ideas are not always explained and we are left not knowing how they arrive at their conclusions. This is in part because in many situations they are not sure of how they got there themselves. The **Possibilities Planner** can help with this as it encourages that initial linking of ideas and puts it in a concrete format to show their working. This should be the first step before doing any planning or mind mapping strategies. When marking if you're not sure about their conclusions it can help to advise them of this and give them ways to track and write about their thinking.

Find your Universities essay structure and if it is not in a graphic format ask that it be put into one as it can be helpful in a graphic format for planning. In the past I have described essay writing as being like an obstacle course and you are leading someone who is blindfolded safely along the course. I explain that just like you have to tell them when to duck or when there is a step you have to do the same thing in an essay. You are leading the reader through your ideas and telling them what to watch for. Planning here is everything so help you can offer in how to structure the work will be helpful.

Assignment timing can be a problem as the way that dyslexics remember tends to not be by remembering them as connected with dates because dates are abstract. I've been told it is about the events and the people not the dates and times. One way to address this I call the **Go Stop System**. At the end of class, the last slide is the next assignment and 1 month before it is due the background of the slide is green. I do this for 2 weeks and then change it to amber and then the final week I change it to red. This helps to move it away from an abstract date into a sensory experience of timing. Sometimes though the assignment will be late because of the extra work many dyslexic students have to put in but many students I have worked with are ashamed of the lateness and won't submit or will pull out. Having an open door policy for students can help them tell you if they are struggling.

Break down bigger projects and offer students the opportunity to do a rough outline for you to check. Many tutors and lecturers already do this but for dyslexics helping them to do this is important as their ideas can be expansive. There are a variety of techniques to help with this but many don't allow for this expansive thinking to take place. The **Possibilities Planner** can be a place for students to do this before narrowing down their focus.

Episodic memory and marking. Dyslexics have very strong episodic memory so any marking of assignments which uses storytelling or metaphor will help to ensure your comments are taken on board. For example talking about correcting structure won't be as helpful as explaining that writing is like building a house; the foundation you lay is the introduction, the body is the building of the house and you can't put on the gib before you have framed the walls. Another metaphor which can help is that of weaving by talking about the initial choice of material, the laying out of the threads and finally bringing them together.

Managing text

Fonts: There are a multitude of different *fonts available to help students* which have issues with text movement on a page. This is not something that all dyslexics have but a font called dyslexie has been helpful for some. <https://www.dyslexiefont.com/en/dyslexie-font/> Allowing students to write and submit in this font can be helpful. Using this font or Arial for handouts and slides can help to access the written text. *Printing on colour* can also be helpful.

Accessing Text and Course Readings: Text to speech software. There are a variety of different software programmes available both free and with a fee. This software can be useful for students when writing and reviewing their work and for reading required texts. *Some of the software programmes will create mp3 and mp4 so that they can be loaded onto an iPod, iPad, phone or mp3 player.* The software can be a little clunky in reading journal articles as it will read all of the text, including the download code, but it means that students keep up with the material. If you are using a textbook which has no audio or digital version the students have to scan all of the pages, convert them from images to text, make any corrections needed and then convert the file to an mp3. The student handout also has possible software for students to look at but if we ensure that digital versions are available for readings this will make a difference.

When setting a book reading assignment check to *make sure that a text-to-speech enabled book is one of those available in the list* or that there is an audio book available. One way to do this is to check to see if there is a digital version and if it has been text-to-speech enabled. Not all academic books have been enabled due to issues about copyright and the future of audio books.

Helping students find their writing voice: The opposite direction of text-to-speech is speech to text which you can recommend to students. There are a *variety of different programmes available* but all of them have a cost associated with them. They include Dragon Naturally speaking, Speextexter and gotranscribe; there are more constantly coming onto the market. The software enables the computer to convert what they say in to text.

The hardest part of managing text is that of researching for literature. Time or rather loss of time is a common experience because accessing the text can be difficult for a multitude of different reasons. For some it can be that they get lost in the material they are reading and forget to take notes and have to read something multiple times, for others reading text is physically uncomfortable so they either fight through it or have to spend time converting the material to speech before they know if it is relevant and for others it can be slow because their reading is slower. *Teaching students to use the search engine for articles and getting them to focus on the abstracts can help to cut down getting lost in the text or not accessing it easily.* Printing on coloured paper can also help some as it makes the words more accessible.

PowerPoints can also be an issue as the glare from a screen can cause difficulties. This is an easy fix as if you make *sure that your slides do not have a white background* it makes them more easy to read for students. If you can *include a mind map* slide in your teaching I have been told by dyslexics who have studied at Uni that this becomes the most important slide and the one that is easier to access.