

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to attend this conference.

I was absolutely delighted to be asked to represent the Royal College of Art here today, and I am especially delighted to have an opportunity to take part in raising awareness of access issues for SpLD learners to Higher Education.

As the only wholly postgraduate university of Art and Design in the world, the Royal College of Art represents the very pinnacle of 'AchieveAbility' within the world of Art and Design. To use our Rector, Professor Sir Christopher Frayling's words: 'it is the most concentrated community of artists, designers and communicators to be found anywhere. At its heart is a strong belief in project-based education, face-to-face teaching and learning and professional orientation - a belief that these are the ways in which postgraduates can best be encouraged to 'find their own voice'.' I am tempted to add.... 'at last'.

Dyslexia and dyspraxia are recognised to be widely prevalent within Art and Design education. And indeed this is the case at the Royal College of Art – at any one time, out of approximately 850 students, over 200 of them have been assessed as being dyslexic, dyspraxic or both, (that is, at least a quarter that we know about), the vast majority of them being assessed for the very first time at the RCA. Very few of our students seem to have dyscalculia and for this reason I will not be mentioning it a great deal today, but do remember its impact is as important in other fields as dyslexia/dyspraxia is in ours.

I have been extremely privileged in the last six years to be a key figure in moving forward awareness and learning provision for disadvantaged students at the Royal College of Art. I have witnessed enormous changes in Institutional attitude and provision.

Realising that the College needed to make a giant leap in order to underpin our commitment to creating a positive and inclusive learning environment, we set about commissioning Reports from external consultants on English for Academic Purposes, and Dyslexia, in 2001 and 2002. The results of these were that the College created 2 new half-time posts, one for an English for Academic Purposes Co-ordinator and one for a Dyslexia Co-

ordinator, Qona Rankin, who has done excellent work in raising awareness within the College. Both of these posts have now been upgraded to 3 days a week. We also have a three year HEFCE funded Project which began two years ago entitled 'Improving Provision for Disabled Students – Dyslexia and Disability Co-ordination, for which I am responsible.

I quote from the Dyslexia Report written by Katherine Kindersley of the Dyslexia Teaching Centre in London: 'People with dyslexia often show particular and special talents in the visual and creative fields and are drawn to the art and design areas of the curriculum. It is the nature of the Royal College of Art, with its post-graduate study based in studio practice, which attracts many of the most talented students, and I suggest that a proportion of these students are gifted because of their dyslexia, their alternative form of cognition and different way of looking at the world.'

Yes – you heard the word the word 'gifted'. Yes, that difficult and unruly sixteen-year old student of yours who seems to be underachieving at most things is could be gifted. Why? Perhaps, just perhaps, he is dyslexic or dyspraxic.

Take a moment to consider this film made by one of the RCA's graduates from Animation. Her statement accompanying the film is this: 'My aim was to produce a film that conveys the feeling and emotions experienced by a girl whose reality is haunted and saddened by her disability with words'.

Film: 'Gifted'.

Why is Emily, who is clearly gifted, 'haunted and saddened by her 'disability' with words?' What kind of experience must she have had as a child to feel like this, to use the word 'disability'?

Clearly we all need to find a way to enable our students to 'find their own voice', their own way. Within the last three years the RCA has come from no formal learning or other support for students with learning differences to the enviable one of 'providing the best support for students at this level I have ever seen', as an eminent external examiner (who happens to be dyslexic) recently commented.

I appreciate that there is a lot of good work already being done, especially in schools. But we can all aim higher, there is always room for innovation. As I understand it, the 'AchieveAbility' project is essentially about promoting those two 'A's: Awareness and Access. You and I can start that promotion right here, right now. We can begin to make those small, easily attainable changes at school or FE level which could make huge differences to students who may have dyslexia, dyspraxia or dyscalculia. It is up to us ladies and gentlemen.

It does not matter how much legislation there is like SENDA and the Race Relations Amendment Act. If we do not begin to change our own Attitudes and those around us we will never achieve lasting and embedded change. The process in education starts with you and ends with me. To do this we must change hearts and minds – ours and others. Let us lead by Action and Example, the 'A & E' approach if you like.

Between two of us in my office every week, we see approximately 70 to 100 students. Many of them are dyslexic or dyspraxic. That means that for a start, over the last five years I have personally read fully the detailed diagnostic reports of over 600 students and assisted them with the Disabled Student Allowance process.

The nature of my job means that I am often involved in these students' ordinary day to day negotiations and circumnavigations – enabling them to extract meaning from housing contracts, to manage debt, relationships and their washing machines! I see and understand dyslexia and dyspraxia does not just affect someone's educational life, it affects every nook and cranny of his/her life.

Neither of us in the office is dyslexic or dyspraxic (as far as we know, although we are beginning to think dyspraxia may be catching) but we have noticed that slowly and subtly our office practice is evolving to reflect our students' needs.

We write down all our advice; anything photocopied or printed is done on cream or coloured paper; we repeat everything at least twice; we have interesting 'toys' on our desks because we found nothing was safe on our desks, students pick up and fiddle with everything – it is part of their creativity and also helps them concentrate. We are striving to change our minds, to understand how it is to 'be' dyslexic or dyspraxic.

One of the ways the RCA as a whole is striving to change minds is expanding our activities and relationships with schools. Although we are postgraduate we feel we have an important role in providing opportunities for young people to see what is happening at the highest level in art and design education.

Our Pro-Rector, Professor Alan Cummings, is passionate about learning differences and is leading us in this area. He is particularly interested in reaching out to gifted and talented young people who experience difficulties in other subjects because of dyslexia, dyspraxia or other disadvantages, and those who may not naturally consider art and design as a viable career path.

We are leading by 'Action and Example'. In January 2005, 16 students from two London Comprehensives visited us. They were all in year 9, (13/14 years olds) and had been identified by their teachers as having particular potential in art, design and technology. The project, called 'Cable Tied' was organised by one of our current students in the Communication Art and Design department.

There is a web-site,(www.cabletied.co.uk) and hopefully we can view some of the images that came from it. I think the excitement and sense of achievement experienced by everyone involved in the Project is tangible. Some of these students are failing elsewhere in the curriculum – but just look at their 'AchieveAbility' given some encouragement and praise! Perhaps you are already reaching out and collaborating with another college/school in a similar way?

I am now going to give you some real examples of the educational path and experiences that some of our students have had to beat to get to our doors. Many of our most talented students get 'A's for Art at 'A'level, but because they often fail to achieve high grades in other subjects they do not follow the traditional route directly into high ranking universities, and therefore use the FE/HE route.

Profiles:

Francis, Sunil: dyslexic

Jane, Andreas, Mary: dyspraxic

Derek, Anita: dyspraxic/dyslexic

Let me give you a flavour of what it is like to be one of these students. Let's listen to their 'own voices'

Video Clips, Kate and Alastair. (copyrighted)

Kate, dyslexic – work bought by Charles Saatchi. 25,000 chicken bones.

Alistair is dyspraxic.

I want to say something particularly about dyspraxia, as it is less recognised and we really see the aftermath, and I mean aftermath, of this at the RCA.

If you remember some of the profiles I mentioned earlier had mental health issues. No doubt Mary Colley will mention this in her workshop later, but I highlight it, as mental health issues seem to crop up increasingly at the RCA in connection with dyspraxia. As a result I am convinced that if more young people were spotted sooner and coping strategies were put in place earlier on in life, then many of them would be spared the appalling experiences of severe/clinical depression, breakdowns or even attempted suicide that many of my students have related to me.

Quote: magazine article, comments about shoelaces etc.

Why should anyone have to go through the feelings so well expressed in the next short film made by another RCA Animation graduate? His statement is summarised thus: 'This is a film about dyslexia, based on my experience expressing the difficulty of understanding information that is affecting oneself emotionally....I use a tunnel and image of myself to replicate a personal, intense and claustrophobic experience....abstract sound is used to express the internal atmosphere of my mind.'

'Long Distance Thinking'

The answer is: there is no excuse for any child/young person to live Gary's experience anymore. You and I know what the issues are: we have to work together to empower young people today to achieve their full potential. We can all go for straight 'A's: we can

all **Aim** to change **Attitudes** and take **Action** to **Achieve Access** for all **Abilities**.

We need to be open to fostering and nurturing our students' gifts, whatever those may be. After all, they have learning differences, not disabilities. They are left handed in a right handed world, so to speak. If we approach (another 'A') the learning experiences we are giving them just a little differently, if we make small adjustments, like giving them left handed scissors, they can cut anything.

The Royal College of Art is working hard to Action Access. In the main we are successful in supporting the students who have largely found their own way to us. Now we want to reach out to the students who for reasons of Accessibility have not been able to find their way to us so far. We celebrate differences.

My question to you today is:

Do you?

Thank you.