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## Editorial

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This edition of the Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and Higher Education brings together a range of articles from our annual conference, from academics and researchers and from practitioners in the field. I would like to thank everyone who submitted an article for publication and encourage readers to have a go at writing something from their own area of practice.

This edition is published during a time of great uncertainty but also of hope in the area of inclusive practice. In higher education in England recent announcements (Willettts, 2014; DfES 2017) from the previous and current Government mean that there have been significant changes made to the way support is funded for individual disabled students. A number of strands of support will no longer be funded, most noticeably support in the classroom such as note takers and for additional equipment such as printers and consumables. However, the Government has also announced that it expects higher education institutions to take responsibility for mitigating the reduction in funding through ensuring that they fulfill their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 and that they promote inclusive practice.

There have been several key initiatives down the years in higher education which have brought us to this point such as the Quality Assurance Agencies section on disabled students in its quality code of practice (QAA, 1999, 2010) and HEFCE's baseline review of support in 1999. The funding councils in the UK have provided HEIs with mainstream funding to support disabled students for a number of years as well funding as a series of projects to develop catalyst activities. Momentum seems to wax and wain though as the spotlight on inclusive practice is shone then moved away again depending on the political priorities at the time.

Perhaps the current policy focus heralds a tipping point (Gladwell, 2002) for the sector which will see HEIs fundamentally consider how they approach disability support. HEIs can learn much from the schools and further education sectors who have seem to have been moving towards inclusive practice at a much faster pace. Perhaps, HEIs will reconsider how they organise disability support with more emphasis being placed on the role of teaching staff. The role of SENCOs (Tissot, 2013; Cole, 2005) in schools may be a model of support which we could learn a lot from as these staff span the divide between the teaching profession and specialisms provided by learning support personnel.

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## **Body size and higher education: the experiences of an academic with dwarfism.**

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### **Introduction**

I have Achondroplasia, more commonly known as dwarfism. I am four feet tall and have a disproportionate body size. A secondary impairment associated with dwarfism is spinal stenosis, which I have in several parts of my spine. This causes mobility difficulties, but as of yet I do not use a wheelchair. I have studied at several universities, between 2005 and 2014, eventually gaining a PhD. Since 2008 I have worked at several universities, in the UK either teaching or in research. The support I have received has always differed in each institution. Due to my height I encountered numerous barriers. Whereas I should have been provided with accommodations to accommodate for my short stature, I was instead provided with accommodations suitable for other impairments. It was as if there was only a limited selection of support items available, created for a narrow perception of disability in mind.

In this paper I discuss the challenges of receiving the appropriate accommodations and support as someone with dwarfism. I then suggest that implementing Universal Design would be a more suitable design approach in order to accommodate for a range of body sizes within higher education. Universal Design fits in with the notion that spaces and facilities should be designed to cater for a more diverse population, including different body sizes and shapes. Using the social model of disability, body sizes that exceed the norm are argued to be disabled within a one size fits all built environment.

### **Body size and the built environment**

Researchers are now beginning to question body size, in particular fatness, as a disability (Brandon and Pritchard, 2011; Chan and Gillick, 2009; Cooper, 1997; Herndon, 2002; Kirkland, 2008; Longhurst, 1997, 2010). Cooper (1997) draws upon the social model of disability in order to suggest that a built environment that does not cater for fat bodies causes their disablement in the same way the built environment causes disablement for someone in a wheelchair. It is the notion of who is disabled and who is not which Cooper (1997) suggests affects the implementation of suitable spaces and facilities for particular people. Cooper (1997), Chan and Gillick (2009), and Kirkland (2008) point out that a lack of understanding of the social model of disability by other members of the public affects their perception of what disability can be. Chan and Gillick (2009) argue that there is a lack of understanding of disability, as it is commonly thought of as comprising solely of physical limitations and which therefore ignores body size as a disability and the disabling consequences of public spaces.

As perceptions of disability evolve and shift disability may come to be seen as a product of the society where accommodations or adjustments are required. Furthermore, when considering how the built environment is designed and constructed for a narrow range of bodies, it can be argued

that body sizes that exceed the norm are disabled by a built environment constructed for the average sized person.

Although considered by many to be a disability, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (Kruse, 2010), dwarfism is not always considered to be a disability by other members of the public (Shakespeare et al., 2010; Thompson et al., 2010). In their report, Shakespeare et al. (2010) argue that the disabling affects of dwarfism, including medical and social aspects, are not always apparent and that the negative aspects of dwarfism are often played down by organisations that represent them. I am often told that, “...(I) am not disabled”, and that, “(I) should not be so hard on myself”. As if stating that I am disabled is somehow being cruel to myself. I am often made to feel like a hypochondriac despite the disabling effects of the built environment. If body size were not a contributor to disablement then there would be little or no need for ergonomics. The purpose of ergonomics is to make spaces and facilities user friendly and suitable for the averaged sized person.

There is growing literature that focuses on how ‘fat bodies’ negotiate the built environment (Colls, 2004; Hettrick and Attig, 2009; Huff, 2009; Longhurst, 1997, 2005, 2007, 2010). Freund (2001: 692) suggests, ‘being ‘very’ tall or short can be disabling in a ‘one size fits all’ socio-material environment’. This is due to spaces and facilities being constructed for the average sized person. As Imrie (2004: 281) states:

*There is a tendency for architects to design and construct spaces to specific technical standards and dimensions, which revolve around the conception of the ‘normal’ body<sup>1</sup>, creating physical barriers for anyone who does not fit the conception of the normal body.*

These dimensions, it could be argued can include the average stature and weight of a person, impacting upon anyone who is too big or too small needing to access different spaces, resulting in their disablement. Longhurst (2010) suggests that the materiality of spaces can be disabling for people whose body size does not adhere to average standards. Trying to squeeze into a chair, or climb onto a chair can be disabling for people who are fat or small. Huff (2009) explores how the body is seen as capable of adapting itself to spaces which are constructed to fit specific standards set out by corporations as opposed to these spaces being adapted to suit a range of individuals. Whilst those with fat bodies may be expected to lose weight in order to fit in, people with dwarfism cannot be expected to conform to these expectations. Nor is it reasonable to expect people whose body size does not adhere to these expectations to lose weight or to maintain what is considered an acceptable body weight throughout the life course.

Focusing on students’ bodies within the classroom environment, Hettrick and Attig (2009) examine how classroom desks that are not size suitable for fat students cause physical pain and social distress. They argue that these desks are only made to suit a specific standard of body size

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘normal body’ Imrie (1996) bases upon Le Corbusier’s ‘Modular’ a conception of the normal body which is a person approximately six feet in height, taunt, strong and showing no signs of physical or mental impairments. Modular became a device to enable architects to create spaces and buildings based on the scale of a human being.

and thus the classroom becomes a place that not only works to shape a student's mind but also their body. Hettrick and Attig (2009) argue that classroom desks unconsciously attempt to change a student in order to fit in and therefore become a conforming body. In order to use a classroom desk without discomfort or social distress the student is required to change their body size. This shows that different spaces can have a disabling affect on someone when their body size, in these cases being too big, is not accommodated for within the built environment. It also resonates with a medical model view of disability whereby the person is expected to change in order to fit in.

There is limited, but growing research concerning how people with dwarfism<sup>2</sup> negotiate a built environment constructed for those taller than them (kruse 2002, 2003, 2010; Pritchard 2013, 2014; Shakespeare et al., 2010). Kruse (2002, 2003, 2010) examines the socio-spatial experiences of dwarfs within the built environment. Using the term 'statuarized' Kruse (2002, 2010) points out that dwarfs live in spaces that are physically constructed for people of average height, affecting a their use of spaces. He points out how facilities such as cash machines are literally out of reach for dwarfs, affecting how they interact with the built environment. Pritchard (2013, 2014) examines how spaces and facilities for other users, including disabled people and children, have unintended consequences for dwarfs. Due to the majority of facilities for disabled people being designed for wheelchair users, they are not necessarily accessible for dwarfs. Also, due to society's perception of disabled people, Pritchard (2014) points out that dwarfs are often refused access to disabled facilities, such as low counters, as they are deemed for wheelchair users only. Thus it is important to consider the effectiveness of facilities for disabled people, taking into account a range of impairments. Using the example of disabled toilets, Kitchin and Law (2001) argue that they are unsuitable for a range of disabled people. This is because they are built with a narrow view of how they will be used and by whom.

## **The experiences of university as a dwarf**

In the UK Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) are provided to students who are categorised as disabled under the Equality Act (2010). DSA is intended to fund reasonable adjustments for disabled students, as well as provide study related assistance if required. As a disabled student I was entitled to DSA. Whilst I appreciate the fact that DSA is available for disabled students, although it is being 'modernised' (cut) under the current government, I do not consider it to be the most appropriate solution in accommodating for a range of disabled students. Instead I would propose that Universal Design is a more suitable solution.

When I started university, half of the adjustments that were discussed with my disability adviser were not in place when I arrived. For example, I had to wait several weeks before a keypad was lowered in order to gain access into one of the main buildings. Most of the issues I raised with my disability advisers, in various universities, were never rectified despite the numerous meetings

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<sup>2</sup> The term used to refer to someone with dwarfism is often contested. Terms include: person with dwarfism, dwarf, person of short stature and person with restricted growth. I have chosen to use the terms person with dwarfism or dwarf, as both indicate a condition that incorporates more than being just being small, such as having a disproportionate body size and some of the secondary conditions associated with dwarfism, such as spinal stenosis.

we had. These meetings were often very time consuming and not all of the proposed adjustments were ever implemented. Disabled students have reported (Seymour and Hunter, 1998) being 'time-disadvantaged' through obstacles presented in arranging accommodation with service providers and getting the actual accommodations implemented. I had to go to numerous meetings to discuss adjustments that were never put in place. This time could have been better spent on my studies. Universal Design aims to create spaces and facilities that accommodate for a wide range of people without the need of specialised design (Steinfeld and Maisel, 2012). Therefore implementing Universal Design within higher education establishments would help to avoid the problem of having to accommodate for different users whilst they are at university.

Whilst some of the accommodations I received were useful, the majority did not take into account my dwarfism. That is not to seem ungrateful as, of course, a lot of this equipment was very costly and some of the disability advisers that I worked with have tried to be accommodating. It felt to me that most of the accommodations I was provided with were meant for somebody with a different impairment. Whilst I was often asked what difficulties I encountered, due to my dwarfism, I was never asked what I thought the most appropriate solutions would be. Instead I was told what would be most suitable for me. Quite often it was not. It was more about providing me with assistive technologies, whether they were suitable or not, as opposed to creating spaces that would accommodate for my dwarfism, such as lowering facilities.

One of the main barriers I encountered was suitable seating in lectures. I require seating that is ergonomically suitable for my short stature, but I was not provided with this. Lecture theatres often contain fixed seating and desks that are constructed for the average sized person. I was unable to move my chair closer to the desk and thus due to my short arms could not reach the desk. I was also unable to rest my feet on the floor, making sitting uncomfortable and writing very difficult. Instead of being given appropriate seating, which would have required changing some of the lecture theatre, I was given a digital voice recorder and a laptop. This is an example of being given specialist equipment, as opposed to adapting the built environment. I was provided with a laptop to make notes on. Whilst both could be considered useful items for any student, they were not suitable for accommodating my dwarfism. A laptop was not going to solve the problem of not being able to rest my feet on the floor or to be able to reach the desk in front of me. Not only could I not reach the laptop once I had placed it on the fixed desk in front of me, but I also had difficulty carrying it to lectures. I was also given a dictaphone in order to record lectures. However, this did not solve the problem of having to sit uncomfortably for at least an hour on benches unsuitable for my body size. Various sized seating, a footstool and or seating that is not fixed would have been a more appropriate design solution that would have benefited a wider range of students. To achieve this would have meant altering facilities. This seemed like a less desirable solution to providing me with equipment that would not affect the layout of various spaces, such as the seating in the lecture theatres.

Whilst some spaces in the built environment have been altered to accommodate for disabled people, such as the addition of ramps and accessible toilets, further changes are needed to

benefit a wider range of users. Pritchard (2014) argues that disabled spaces and facilities have unintended consequences for dwarfs as they are constructed mainly for wheelchair users who often have different needs. In some cases people with dwarfism will find facilities that have been lowered for wheelchair users are also accessible for them. Despite this not all facilities will be accessible. Another homogenous facility that was deemed accessible, but unsuitable for myself, was one of the self-service scanners in the library. Whilst it was slightly lower than the other self-service scanners, I was still unable to reach the screen due to my short arm length. I was told the following by one of the disability advisers:

*It [self service scanner in the Library] complies with the Disability Discrimination Act, as it is accessible for wheelchair users .*

Without an accessible self-service scanner I was unable to take out any books after 5pm as by that time the library staff had left. This meant I did not have the same opportunities as other students, including wheelchair users, who were deemed able to use the self-service scanners. Imrie (1996) argues that disability access is usually only provided for a narrow range of disabled people, such as wheelchair users. Whilst it is important to provide access for wheelchair users, they account for less than 8% of the disabled population (Papworth Trust, 2013). Thus to be deemed accessible it seemed that the library scanner only had to be suitable for less than 8% of the disabled population. Only providing for a narrow range of disabled people is inadequate in providing access for all and continues to leave other disabled people without access and equality. Instead of purchasing a self-service scanner that I could use I was instead offered an assistant whom I would have to book in advance and arrange a suitable time with. This meant I could not just pick and chose when I could go to the library. I also found it unsuitable to arrange for an assistant when the book(s) I would need may have been taken out by the time an appointment was arranged. Again this resulted in me being time disadvantaged in terms of having to rely on either an assistant or only being able to take about books during staff hours. A more suitable solution would have been to either provide another low level scanner, suitable for both wheelchair users and users with shorter arm lengths, or for the facility to be height adjustable.

As a lecturer I have been lucky enough, in my current place of work, to be provided with a very suitable office. One of the main barriers I have encountered as an academic though is when giving lectures. This is often because the lecture podium is built for someone a lot taller than me and therefore I have to use a stool or chair to be able to give lectures. Goldstein (2015) suggests that height adjustable podiums accommodate for different body sizes. I have yet to see this kind of podium available in any of the institutions that I have worked in or visited.

Colls (2004) suggests that spaces that are not accommodating for women with fat bodies can have an effect on their emotional wellbeing. If there was a facility that I was unable to use or if I struggled to use it or had to use it differently due to my size, I often felt exposed and embarrassed among other people. Universal Design suggests that the design of places and products should occur in ways that do not draw attention to bodily difference, such as body size (Imrie, 1996) and can help to reduce the stigma that people with different body sizes encounter.

Availability of facilities, overall campus design and welcoming and barrier free classrooms can positively influence how well students interact and learn (Goldstein, 2015: 227). When students have accessible spaces and facilities suitable for their body size, they are able to properly focus on their learning. Sitting on uncomfortable seating was often distracting and prevented me from focusing on my learning. My feeling was that the barriers I encountered, such as an inaccessible 'accessible' library scanner and classroom seating did not give me the same opportunities to learn and interact as my fellow students.

## Conclusion

The accommodation of different body sizes within education institutions has largely been ignored. The contention regarding what is considered to be a disability means that those who are have difficulty accessing and using spaces and facilities within higher education, due to their body size, are unlikely to be accommodated for. I encountered numerous disabling situations whilst at university that were the result of either not being accommodated for or because the provision was already viewed as suitable for disabled people.

The solutions I was provided (or not as the case may be) often left me time disadvantaged which was problematic in relation to the importance of managing my time effectively at university. Students are expected to meet deadlines and ensure that they spend their free time studying. Universal Design would help to minimise time disadvantages, such as attending meetings to look at possible accommodations.

Higher education institutions need to take into account the different body sizes that exist and accommodate for them in order to provide better access for a more diverse student population. More research is needed to explore how Universal Design can be used to create more inclusive spaces within higher education for a range of different body sizes.

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## **Improving the support for disabled research degree students**

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### **Rationale**

Feedback from within Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) was that the Disabled Student Support (DSS) service could improve support available to research degree students, particularly PhD students.

DSS team members at SHU create individual 'learning contracts' for disabled students. These learning contracts outline reasonable adjustments for the learning, teaching and assessment for individual disabled students on their courses and are disseminated to appropriate staff within the University.

Learning contracts have been created, and developed, with taught undergraduate students in mind. Prior to this project, they contained no standard reasonable adjustments for supervision, research or a viva. The head of DSS therefore tasked me, as a disability adviser, to investigate this area and produce some proposals for reasonable adjustments for these areas.

### **My relevant skills and knowledge for the project**

As a student, I completed a research based Philosophy Master's but chose not to move onto a PhD for various reasons, some of which were disability related. This has given me personal insight into the potential difficulties faced by disabled research students and fuelled my interest in this project.

I have been employed as a disability adviser at SHU since 2009. A large part of my role is meeting students on a one to one basis to discuss which reasonable adjustments they require, and negotiating some of these with academic and professional support staff. Through this work I have gained a comprehensive understanding of what is reasonable in the higher education context, alongside an appreciation of the varying attitudes and work pressures of the staff groups that would be implementing these new reasonable adjustments.

### **The project**

My main source for the initial research I undertook was online, in particular a website called Vitae Realising the Potential of Researchers (*the Premia Project, 2007*). The project's aims, were stated on the website as, '...to improve provision for disabled researchers', to, 'increase the number of disabled researchers at UK institutions' and 'improve the quality of their experience'.

I also asked friends who have completed PhDs in various subject areas to email me with their reflections on what PhD study was like for them, explaining that the purpose of their reflections was to inform my thinking on improving the support for disabled research students at SHU.

Papers that informed this work included Martin (2011) *Promoting Inclusive Practice for PhD Students Near Completion*, which proposes an inclusive approach to supporting students in the viva, based on participatory research with students with Asperger Syndrome, and Chown et al (2015) *'Examining intellectual ability, not social prowess: removing barriers from the doctoral viva for autistic candidates.'* Further, I familiarised myself with SHU's Regulations for the Awards of the University's Degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Philosophy (2014).

Based on information from these sources, using knowledge gained from engaging with disabled students over many years, and reflecting on my own personal experience of research as a disabled student, I compiled a list of potential areas that disabled research students may find problematic, without adjustments in place. I cross referenced this list with SHU's existing suggestions for reasonable adjustments and was able to identify gaps in our existing support. I was then able to begin working on suggestions for reasonable adjustments to address these gaps, incorporating ideas and suggestions from the sources outlined above.

I consulted with disability specialists within DSS on my proposals for the new reasonable adjustments, and presented them to the university's Research Degree Sub Committee which represents supervisory staff across the University and is able to make decisions about matters concerning research degrees. Also represented on the committee are staff involved in the administration of research degrees and the decision making about research degree policy and procedure. Feedback was very positive about the suggestions. At this stage I had the approval of disability specialists and key academic and support staff within the University. This was key in order to turn the proposed reasonable adjustments into accepted, and defended, practice across the university.

Once I had incorporated the feedback from disability specialists and staff on the Committee into the proposals I created the DSS new research degree learning contract template. The template contains possible reasonable adjustments for all impairments. It is rather long!

All research degree students are now referred into a two hour appointment with a disability adviser to discuss what reasonable adjustments they require. Advisers have been briefed on how to use the template and it is emphasised in the accompanying guidelines that there are likely to be bespoke adjustments for individual students, depending on the student and the nature of their research.

The reasonable adjustments in SHU's learning contracts are presented in a format highlighting the separate areas of responsibility. Breaking them down in this way is something that DSS have been doing for approximately 10 years. Outlining the reasonable adjustments in this format was the result of a recommendation from a project carried out by myself and Dr Manny Madriaga in 2006 which aimed to improve SHU's existing learning contracts. The project found that previously there was much confusion about where responsibilities lay in terms of implementing the reasonable adjustments contained within the contracts, and recommended that the adjustments be broken down into areas of institutional responsibility to ensure more clarity. This format has been maintained for the new research degree learning contract templates. Below are

some potential areas of responsibilities for research support staff and viva examiners on the subject of the viva:

### **The faculty is responsible for**

- collating a list of questions from the examiners and presenting them to xxx under exam conditions. A room and an invigilator should be booked. Xxx should have one hour/two hours to prepare responses under exam conditions.
- booking two rooms for the viva. Xxx's viva will be conducted via email/using a digital recorder/Blackboard Collaborate. An invigilator should also be booked.
- ensuring that all written communication is relayed in a format that should be discussed and agreed with xxx.
- arranging xxx's viva to be in the morning/afternoon.
- arranging xxx's viva and waiting area to be in quiet venues.
- arranging xxx's viva and waiting area to be in a venue that is familiar to xxx.
- booking the viva venue for double the amount of time that a viva venue would normally be booked for.
- contacting xxx to ask if they would like to visit the viva venue in advance of the viva and arranging a time for yyy to do so.
- arranging xxx's viva to be in a venue that is accessible to xxx's wheelchair.
- arranging xxx's viva to be in a venue that is accessible to xxx's large electric wheelchair/mobility scooter.
- arranging xxx's viva to be in a venue that has level access or lift access.
- arranging xxx's viva to be in a room that has sufficient space to accommodate a guide dog/support dog.
- liaising with Disabled Student Support to arrange for xxx to have an orthopaedic/office chair for zzz viva.
- sending clear instructions on the venue's location to xxx well in advance of the viva.

### **The examiners are responsible for**

- reading the reasonable adjustments sent to them by the faculty. The reasonable adjustments should have been emailed to them before the viva and there should also be copies of the relevant sections of xxx's learning contract in their briefing packs.
- reassuring xxx at the start of the viva that ppp can ask the examiners to repeat questions/clarify what they mean.
- reassuring xxx at the start of the viva that ppp can type/write zzz answers if verbal communication is not understood/if ppp becomes too fatigued to speak.
- reassuring xxx at the start of the viva that ppp can take a break when needed, and being aware that xxx's need for breaks may be unpredictable.
- providing xxx's British Sign Language interpreter with preparatory material.
- referring to the guidelines for working with deaf students on the staff intranet:  
<https://staff.shu.ac.uk/sls/qess/ss/ds/deaf/deafguidelines.asp>

- collating any questions that they want to ask that can be pre-written and emailing them to the faculty. Xxx has been advised the following: 'you will be given questions to prepare answers to in a separate room before your viva. You will have one/two hours to do this. The degree to which questions can be pre-written is subject dependent. The nature of the viva is conversational so it is not possible or appropriate for the panel to write down all questions they intend to ask you. Please note: An invigilator will be present.'
- agreeing verbal signs with xxx at the start of the viva to demonstrate that ppp has completed zzz answer and that they wish to begin the next question.
- being aware of xxx's epilepsy diagnosis and reading the epilepsy guidelines available here: <https://staff.shu.ac.uk/sls/qess/ss/ds/epilepsy.asp>
- ensuring that all written communication is relayed in a format that should be discussed and agreed with xxx.
- being aware that xxx will carry out the start of zzz viva under exam conditions. Xxx will have one hour/two hours to prepare responses to questions collated from the examiners under exam conditions.
- being aware that the viva will take place in two rooms. Xxx will be in one room and the examiners will be in another. Xxx will be responding to the examiners' questions using zzz preferred method of communication- email/writing/using a digital recorder/via Blackboard Collaborate.
- being aware that xxx will be responding to the examiners' questions using zzz preferred method - typing/writing.
- spending the first 15/30 minutes of the viva talking informally with xxx so that they can get accustomed to how ppp communicates.
- arranging the room so that light falls on the examiners' faces and so that they are not sitting in front of windows. This is to facilitate lip reading.
- being aware that xxx may need to use the loop system. The examiners will need to use either xxx's personal microphone equipment or the in-built lecture microphones where loop systems are installed.
- being directive in their questions to xxx e.g. 'That's not the answer I am looking for. Please can you talk about x.' This is because Xxx may misinterpret the question and answer what ppp believes the question to be.
- being aware that xxx's guide dog/support will be present.
- being aware that xxx might refer to zzz assistive technology to demonstrate responses to some questions/parts of questions.
- asking questions in Plain English wherever possible.
- being aware that a technical personal assistant will be present to convey answers when the examiners are unable to understand xxx's speech.
- being aware that xxx's mentor may be present and should not be asked to contribute. This is not xxx's academic mentor. The mentor who may be present has a disability specific remit and will be there to support yyy with managing zzz mental health/aspects of zzz Asperger syndrome.

- being open and honest if it has not been understood what xxx has said.
- helping xxx to stay on topic during the viva as ppp may experience some difficulties communicating zzz ideas verbally.
- being aware that xxx can take some time to process verbal information and that this may slow down the communication process.
- if possible, arranging a meeting with xxx before the viva to help towards building familiarity and therefore reducing anxiety.
- indicating clearly when xxx has answered a question to the required extent.
- being aware that xxx may not make eye contact during the viva.
- being aware that xxx may need considerable time to process questions and will therefore take longer than non-disabled students to respond.
- being aware that xxx's viva may take considerably longer than a non-disabled student's viva due to .....
- explaining clearly to xxx at the start of the viva what exactly what will take place.
- agreeing structured break times with xxx at the start of the viva.
- using phrases that will guide xxx's communication such as 'I'm going to stop you there and now I'm going to ask you a different question on the same subject'. Open ended and ambiguous questions should be avoided.

In addition, within the learning contract template there are sections for supervision, research, and presentations, broken down into different areas of responsibility.

Disability advisers have been using these templates in their appointments with research degree students since the start of the academic year 2015/16. Informal feedback from advisers and students has been positive. SHU's approach to research degree students is now much more considered and structured, and students are therefore more likely to get support that is appropriate to their level and type of study.

### **Future work - feedback and improvement**

In appointments with research degree students I emphasise that the learning contracts are new documents and that any suggestions or amendments are very welcome. I am very keen to hear how students are finding these new learning contracts, and receive any suggestions they have for improvements. I also make it clear to teaching and professional support colleagues that any feedback from staff is very welcome. I am in contact with support staff from the Research Degree Sub Committee, who I consult with on any significant changes that I would like to make to the template.

Some new reasonable adjustments have already been incorporated into the templates based on meetings with students, and their informal suggestions. I will be seeking more structured feedback and suggestions for improvement in summer 2016 by sending out a formal questionnaire to all research degree students that have learning contracts.

I have also created a training document, 'Supporting Supervisors', which has been used for some new supervisory staff. I plan to disseminate this document more widely across the university. The document is broken down into sections which include The Equality Act, Disclosure, The Project, Useful Web Links, and what I consider to be a key piece of advice for staff supporting disabled research degree students:

'...disabled postgraduate researchers are not one homogeneous group, nor is their identity defined by their disability. The impact of a student's impairment, learning difference and/or long term health condition on their research is not quantifiable; there are no definitive answers and what constitutes a reasonable adjustment will vary.' (Premia Project, 2007)

## **Final thoughts**

I believe that this work will significantly enhance the experience of disabled research degree students at SHU, and should give them a better chance of excelling in their research. It has given advisers in DSS confidence that was previously lacking in advising these students, and should enable supervisors and viva examiners across the University to more effectively support these students.

I also hope that through this work that negative attitudes towards disability can be challenged. I want the message to be that disabled research students should be judged on the content of their work, not on how long it might take them to do it, or how ill or exhausted they might get while doing it, or on the way that they might communicate their findings at the end. I want this work to contribute towards the ethos that we are 'examining intellectual ability, not social prowess' (Chown et al, 2015). I want the message to spread that we should not be examining stamina, strength or speed, as if a PhD is some kind of awful endurance test, but creating an environment where all research degree students can thrive.

If you would like to have a copy of our research degree learning contract template to inform your practice at your own institution, please contact me at [lucy.davies@shu.ac.uk](mailto:lucy.davies@shu.ac.uk).

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# **A narrative of the role of the learning support assistant (LSA): the impact on identity of working as an LSA in a creative arts university**

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on the lived experiences of learning support assistants (LSAs) working in a higher education institution (HEI) in the south of England. This study draws on personal narratives over the course of interviews with LSAs to capture the complexities and challenges of the LSA role, in the form of a social-constructivism-based narrative inquiry. In a climate of rapid changes in HEIs and reduction in governmental financial support for disabled students in the years 2015-2016, the future of the provision of non-medical support is uncertain. Through narrative accounts, I sought to bring issues around the role of the LSA to the fore, highlighting implications the role may have on both professional identity and professional development.

## **Context for the Study**

Universities in the United Kingdom have seen a vast increase in student numbers in the past years as a consequence of different initiatives promoting diversity and inclusivity: in particular the impact of the initiative of widening participation (WP) requiring that HEIs consider tailoring their support to accommodate all students' needs (Shreeve, 2007; Veck, 2009; Peck et al., 2010).

Relatedly, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of LSAs working in mainstream, specialist schools and colleges (Murray & Flannery, 2008; Edmond & Price, 2009) as the number of students identified as having learning difficulties is also increasing. The improvement in learning support at compulsory educational level is perhaps also reflected in a massive expansion in learning support in universities (Jelfs & Richardson, 2010; Allan & Clarke, 2007; Lyman & Shaw, 1999). Policy initiatives associated with inclusivity and legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), and the provision of DSA, have made the transition to further and higher education institutions possible for neurologically diverse students (Lacey, 2001; Griffin & Pollak, 2009; Murray & Flannery, 2008). HEIs have since been working on becoming more accessible to all, by making adjustments and providing learning support assistance to all students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD).

The study is concerned with the personal conversations of these LSAs working specifically in a creative arts and design HEI, and examines their subjectivity about their role, their ethos and the values they bring to their job, professional backgrounds, aspirations, and ultimately the way they shape their professional identities.

## **Literature Review**

The literature on the LSA's role in higher education (HE) seems sparse, and although I have not exhausted my research in this area, I have not found evidence of a rigorous exploration of their

experiences. The White Paper 'Widening Participation in Higher Education Policy' (DfES, 2003c) outlines the "challenges universities need to meet in the fulfilling of [...] the desire to include everyone" (Peck et al., 2010:137). Despite the significant role that LSAs could play in facilitating inclusion, there seems to be very little interest in exploring the ways in which learning support staff are meeting and contributing to those challenges.

A large project report commissioned by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service in 2010, explores the training needs of LSAs. The study was conducted in the lifelong sector, predominantly further education (FE) and specialist colleges. The report acknowledges that the topic "has been hugely under researched." (Simpson, 2010: 5). The study suggests that the role and functions of the LSAs are not always understood by other members of staff; it also highlights the lack of training and notes that career path "training and development was not available for LSAs because they were not teaching staff" (Simpson, 2010: 16).

McLachlan & Davis (2013) describe the LSA's role as complex, with aspects of education and pastoral care mixed into their work. They argue that the problem lies with the employment of untrained LSAs with no previous teaching experience and a lack of knowledge about the area of disability in an academic setting (Lacey, 2001; Farrell et al., 1999; Veck, 2009).

Veck (2009) argues, in his study of the role of the LSA at Fordham Sixth Form College in the south of England, that for LSAs to contribute to the idea of inclusivity, the role of the LSA needs to be clearly defined as there are many 'grey areas' in the role. He notes that the role of the LSA is limited by the curriculum, it separates not only the student from his peers but the LSA from being a part of a whole, a part of a community, a 'disharmony between the identified needs of the learners and their educational provision' (Veck, 2009:44).

Peck et. al (2010) acknowledge that the field of learning support is complex, and whilst there has been a conscious and steady effort from HEIs in promoting inclusion by incorporating learning support in the learning experience of the student with SpLDs, there is a dilemma expressed in a lack of staff [LSAs] development opportunities, academic perceptions of their role and "...the enduring culture of academics resisting the changing needs of the student" (Peck et al., 2010:136).

## **Conceptual framework**

Foucault's *Technologies of the Self* (1998) explores the importance of the care of the self where the concern is in looking inward, thinking from the inside out and recognising truths that might impact on the way we see ourselves in relation to the social context [HEIs] we participate in. Foucault's critical theory of the Self is essential in this study as a critical framework to analyse how participants (LSAs) relate to themselves and others, as his emphasis is on the importance of taking care of one's self through practices such as self-writing and reflection, allowing the individual to gain control and power over one's self and others (Batters, 2011).

Giddens (1991) points out that self-awareness becomes an essential part of getting to know oneself and in exchange this awareness induces potential changes. These changes take one on a

journey of self-reflection to conceive a sense of identity (Giddens, 1991:76). This perspective has drawn my attention to exploring how participants see themselves, how they have constructed their identities and how they negotiate their sense of self in an academic environment, for example why becoming an LSA as opposed to being an artist/teacher?

In the essay *The Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor (1992) explores the notion of identity as being partly shaped by the recognition of others and that misrecognition or non-recognition of a person or group of people by others can have distorted consequences to '...someone and reduce mode of being' (Taylor,1992:25). In other words, it can be argued that having no recognition is being made to feel invisible or a stranger, an ambiguous person who it is hard to identify (Clarke, 2008).

It is therefore clear that being recognized in a social context, being acknowledged by others, is paramount to the construction of a positive identity. Considering these theories about the formation or deformation of identity in relation to social relations and the need for recognition, will help clarify and provide a deeper understanding about how LSAs experience their role.

## **Methodological framework**

In choosing narrative inquiry as the process to obtain data I was able to reflect on those shared accounts. Personal stories are subjective: in re-counting lived experiences we bring back memories of the past; by doing so, we might bring new understandings and meanings to those events, mutating, shaping our understanding of the way we see ourselves and the way we relate to others (Andrews, et al. 2008; Savvidou, 2011).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) first recognized the significance of this approach to educational research in critically reflecting on the lived experiences of academic staff. The research project took place at one of the campuses of an HEI in the south of England where I presently work. Careful consideration led to a decision to invite only participants I was not familiar with, to assure the validity of and lack of bias in the data collected. The sample consisted of nine participants, six having been LSAs for less than five years, and the other three participants having quite a substantial length of experience as LSAs in this HEI.

The process started with an informed consent letter and a participant information sheet inviting them to take part and introducing them to the project. This was followed by an arranged face to face semi-structured interview with each participant on different days depending on availability. Anonymity and confidentiality was reassured to the participants from the start and throughout the length of the study.

In considering the implications of researching and exploring departmental culture, I chose to exclude parts of the narratives in the transcripts to keep the participants' privacy. These were jointly discussed and made decisions between researcher and participant. In other situations, precise details have been changed as to protect the participant from being identified, for example, exact numbers of years in the post (Norton, 2009). Names have also been changed.

## Analysis of personal narratives

This study focused on the interpretations participants give to their own stories, that is the meanings attributed to an experience lived (Riessman, 2002). Consequently, the purpose of this analysis was to explore LSAs' interpretations of their experiences of supporting students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and the impact on their professional identity.

In order to analyse the data, I chose to use a thematic analysis method (Norton, 2009) to identify data that related to key concepts in the aims of the study, literature review and conceptual framework (Riessman, 2002; Vandeyar, 2010). I read the two transcribed interviews and listened to the recorded ones multiple times in order to note down any general themes (i.e. academic, boundaries, disabilities, invisibility).

For each interview I generated as many categories as possible, so for all nine participants' data I noted 48 categories. Then I looked for repeated examples for each category or any that overlapped with other ones; the purpose of this process was to reduce categories and to regroup and label as themes. Verbatim quotations from transcribed interviews were used to reflect the richness of the LSAs' experiences under each theme.

## Findings

### From art student to learning support assistant

Thornton (2012) argues that a person's sense of self is greatly affected by those identifications applied to them, in the form of job titles or professional roles. It is not surprising to find that all nine LSAs participating in this study are ex-graduates of the same art and design university they are now employed by. Their identification has been encouraged through knowledge acquisition via established educational structures. In this narrative account, the participant describe how he "fell into" the job of an LSA after finalising his BA course:

*how I started out ...umm I kinda fell into it, I, so I was doing my degree here...[name of degree] and when I finished my degree, [...] I was artist in residence so [...], I was always been asked for help, and I realized I quite like the helping side of things you know the sort of seeing people get through a tough time or sorting a problem or something like tha [...] there was a win-win situation for me type thing, but mainly it was good for me because I wanted to do...the idea was to... mainly be a full time tutor to support my sessional work to then supplement my practical practice. (Participant 1).*

For this participant, it was a normal progression and an obvious way to develop a professional identity. As a graduate art student he sought opportunities to enhance his practice, and also to deepen a significant sense of identity in relation to being an artist as well as a growing interest in supporting other students. Like him, other participants sought opportunities to enhance this artist-tutor identity after graduating:

*After I finished my MA I was looking for an opportunity within design and teaching. A fellow student, who was receiving support, suggested to look into LSAing as it's related to my studies. I thought getting into teaching and working with disabled students will benefit gaining a better understanding of various learning difficulties and would give me a better foundation for a possible future career into teaching. (Participant 8).*

It is very common for individuals who are artists to become teachers, to take on the dual role of the individual who wants to make art but also teach: 'artist-teacher' Thornton (2012). Although these particular LSAs have been recruited on the basis of having a creative background and practical knowledge as art students and artist in residence, the new role as an LSA involves supporting the learning of neurodiverse students with a wide range of needs depending on their neurological differences. Shreeve (2011) argues that working in the same environment where you have been employed for your artistic expertise to teach [support] students, can be difficult.

## **Becoming an LSA**

In this context, since as an LSA you are not expected to teach to students, this certainly can feel like being in two separate worlds, where your practice-based knowledge and the supporting activities don't seem to match. Participants reported a sense of diminished identity in realising that the role itself would determine what LSAs could contribute:

*I was very conscious of not passing on any experience I had [as an artist] to the student, so I wanted to remain neutral and work at the student level, um, [name] mentioned that he had complaints from academics that 1 or 2 LSAs had been kind of applying their background to their supporting role, so that got me, quite scared that, in thinking...no...I don't want to be accused of that, so I'm not going to (pause), yeah, I'm a bit cautious of that. (Participant 2).*

These LSAs sought to enhance their professional identity through access to the educational space where they were once nurtured as students. The dilemma, however, was in the conflicting scenarios they were facing. As art graduates applying to become LSAs, they have their professional expertise and the enthusiasm to support students with SpLDs. But they are now inhabiting an unrecognisable space, they are no longer art students nor are they teachers of art. These reflective accounts provide evidence of the lack of understanding about the description and expectations of the role. No one participant seemed to know what they were contracted to do at the start:

*On reflection when I started I did far too much for the student. Again, no clear guidelines/ support or boundaries were in place. At that stage I felt I was failing the student if I didn't provide support in all areas.(Participant 3).*

*At the beginning I felt I hadn't fully understood what my role was and how I would assist the student. I feel I took the word 'assistant' in the wrong way, to the point where I would help the student with carrying equipment to her house,*

*proof reading full essays and sometimes running errands amongst other things.  
(Participant 8).*

In all the narrative accounts the participants claimed to not have had a proper induction, shadowing or training to prepare them to work with students with SpLDs. The lack of knowledge based on aspects of how students with SpLDs learn, what might trigger certain behaviour and the student's health and safety needs makes it almost impossible for LSAs to be effective in some aspects of their roles. All LSAs expressed frustration about the lack of appropriate and relevant training offered to them:

*I did not receive training or shadowing from the university except for the one day training we all receive in the summer and the occasional workshop covering various areas, for example, Asperger's. (Participant 6).*

*I would say that my training at [name] has been limited on specific learning difficulties and I have on-going frustrations that most training is at a basic level. (Participant 3).*

## **Relationship with students and academics**

With the lack of training and an unclear understanding of the role, LSAs can walk blindly into very stressful and unpleasant situations. LSAs recognised the importance of boundaries between themselves and the students but they reported that maintaining a professional working relationship with a student can be very challenging when they work together on a one-to-one basis for long periods of time.

*I have been supporting him [student] for four years yeah yeah, I was doing four days and um, [...] was draining me completely so I thought I can't do this [...] he has got a lot of problems going on [...] he just dumped all the emotional stuff on me. (Participant 1).*

This pressure on the support staff and the one-to-one working relationship supporting learners identified as having SpLDs can have a negative impact on some individuals, not just the support staff but also on the student being supported. As Veck (2009) points out in his study, the LSA role can actually be exclusionary:

*Um I felt excluded as well as the student, so at times we both felt excluded, cause I think there's a social disability that comes with quite a lot of disability in general where you are kind of inhibited socially and I think people, other students and academics might feel apprehensive about approaching someone who is with a member of staff [LSA] so a major part of the job is to be invisible yeah!... it does lower your self-esteem a little bit. (Participant 2).*

The ambiguity of the role of the LSA can make it harder for academics to relate to the support staff. The lack of communication between support and academic staff could potentially be

reinforcing this feeling of exclusion. LSAs' frustrations do not originate from having to support students with SpLDs, but because of the lack of support and recognition from other members of staff in terms of being part of the same community and their capability to contribute in supporting learning for all.

Some participants expressed that they did not have a professional identity. They perhaps find it challenging to identify with the role as it conflicts with a positive sense of self.

*I am not sure I have a professional identity. (Participant 6).*

*Great lack of professional identity...doesn't seem to be any way of climbing the ladder as it were. (Participant 3).*

All nine participants, however, expressed a sense of commitment to the role, expressing the fulfilment and rewarding experiences that also come with the role. They wanted to be known as facilitators of learning as well as art practitioners, stating that the art practice is very much a part of who they are as individuals:

*I consider myself a designer-maker as well as someone who is very interested in education. (Participant 4).*

*I would like to be known as a facilitator of learning and a maker, you know, I make stuff, my own practice. I'm an artist, it's difficult to get into your practice when you are trying to survive the trenches of LSAing where it is so emotionally draining. (Participant 2).*

## **Conclusion**

In using narrative as an approach to opening reflective spaces, LSAs had the opportunity to become aware of their emotions and how this can have a powerful impact on the rational aspects of being a LSA. Sharing narrative or lived stories with others has demonstrated the experience of the role, what it is like to be an LSA in practice in HE. The future of LSAs might feel uncertain at the moment with the DSA proposals threatening to cut some non-medical support for students with SpLDs, however LSAs in this study remained optimistic that things will not change dramatically and that there will still be a need for caring and supportive staff in specialist support roles.

Analysing the consonances and contrasts between the LSAs' experiences and the current literature accentuates the problematic nature of the LSA role. There is a high level of consistency in the participants' narratives, particularly with regards to the tensions and frustrations of the role which appears to be related to working in isolation. This tension seems to stem from a lack of appropriate training and understanding around the right strategies to support students. LSAs need to be clear about the nature of the job right from the start. Having a degree in a creative subject might be beneficial but as the findings suggest, LSAs are still at loss about the skills necessary to support students with SpLDs.

Students with SpLDs should be encouraged to provide feedback on the support they are receiving from their LSAs. Monitoring work practice could contribute to empowering LSAs through recognising and valuing their efforts as well as underpinning opportunities for professional development.

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# **Busting the barriers to inclusive learning environments**

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## **Abstract**

Building on research carried out by the authors in 2015 (Newman & Conway, 2016) this workshop represents a snapshot of successes in, and challenges to, attempts to create an inclusive learning environment (ILE) as experienced by the workshop participants at the NADP's summer conference. The workshop proposed that creating an ILE requires a multi-level effort over a number of years. Key success strategies outlined included: gaining top-level management's buy-in, course validations to include an assessment of inclusivity and working cooperatively with cross-departmental allies. Challenges exhibited by academic staff included an absence of recognition of learning difference, major worries about placing audio/video recordings online and patchy compliance. There were also difficulties with making older buildings accessible. Hearteningly, workshop participants were upbeat about their successes and their ability, over time, to meet the challenges.

## **Background**

Research involving over 60 specialist SpLD study skills tutors and others in associated roles was undertaken in 2015. The tutees of the research participants were studying at more than 50 UK higher education institutions (HEIs). The research showed that to achieve an inclusive learning environment (ILE) action was required within the following nine categories:

- Philosophy or mission
- Management
- Technology
- Course specific materials design
- Non-course specific materials design
- Academic staff awareness, attitude, training
- Wellbeing support availability
- Built environment

This research also identified that eight barriers existed to implementing an ILE. These were placed in the following order:

1. Need for and extent of academic staff training
2. Academic staff attitude
3. Financial resources
4. Time availability
5. Need for cross-functional working
6. Need for leadership

7. Challenge of creating inclusive materials
8. Facilities constraints

The workshop opened with a short presentation of these findings after which participants were invited to identify successes and challenges in implementing ILEs at their HEIs.

### **Successful ILE Initiatives**

The following section identifies the successes reported by participants in moving forward with their inclusivity goals. Each HEI presents its own unique environment and the examples provided reflect that diversity.

Importantly, participants identified that, although they were dissatisfied with the manner of the Government's introduction of changes to Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA), the clarifying statement that reminded HEIs that they had an anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments (BIS, 2015) & (BIS, 2016), had been helpful. The changes had focused attention within HEIs that action was required by them that could neither be ignored nor avoided.

#### **Philosophy/Mission**

Two examples of a successful philosophy/mission were given. In one HEI the academic standards committee includes inclusive practice in all policies. In another, all course validations and reviews require that inclusive practice be considered as standard practice.

One participant reported their HEI's successful 'two-pronged' approach to implementing inclusive practice which involved i) policy changes and ii) followed by their provision of support to academics in implementing the policy changes. The policy changes were based on the recognition that within this particular HEI, academics changed behaviours only when obliged to by institutional policy. This led to an assessment of courses' inclusivity being included, as a matter of policy, in validation procedures. However, the next phase of supporting academics in the achievement of inclusivity was crucial in gaining compliance and a successful outcome.

#### **Leadership**

Several participants reported success in this component. One vice-chancellor directly supports inclusive practice whilst at another HEI the academic review of competence standards includes a focus on inclusive practice. Two HEIs have progressed their approach to assessments. In one, for those with exam accommodations there is automatic renewal of their exam arrangements, saving considerable management time. In the other, policy agreement about alternative assessments was gained to ensure clarity and uniformity for both staff and students. This success was achieved cross-departmentally with the disability team providing input into the policy writing.

#### **Management**

Improving staff awareness about diversity was one HEI's objective in their appointment of a disability & equality trainer. Initially, this involved only the executive board prior to wider roll-

out in both bespoke and generic form. Similarly, another HEI, which had previously managed its response to disabled students through its registry and admission teams appointed a disability coordinator. A third participant reported progress by academics in managing the early availability of their lecture material via the HEI's virtual learning environment (VLE). Participants talked about their success when working with colleagues in other departments, potentially sharing budgets to fund initiatives.

#### **Course Materials Design, Including Assessment**

The most frequently mentioned success was in HEIs making the uploading of course materials, especially lectures, in their respective VLEs, a matter of policy and in lecturers' compliance, typically 24-hours beforehand. Success appears to be more certain when the pace of implementation is slower and lecturers are supported. One participant reported that his/her HEI used an 'Inclusive Checklist' to help lecturers prepare for validation/revalidation.

Lecture capture was identified as a technology still in its infancy and which some lecturers embrace whilst others remain very wary. One participant reported a successful implementation. However, the availability of subtitles with audio-visual materials was also cited as a success. A further success was the provision of individualised timetables to enable students to see clearly which sessions they should attend, their location and time/duration.

At one business school, online exams are conducted over a 72-hour period (weekend) for all open book assessments. Hence, students take as long as they need to work on the exam but it must be submitted via 'Turnitin' before the deadline.

Although now widely used, one participant recalled that early success at putting lecture materials online via a VLE came through identifying the costs of printing hundreds of copies of lecture notes and the difficulty of carrying them to lectures. Hence, making a business case for specific elements of inclusive practice was identified as a useful approach. However, some participants noted that developing a business case to cut costs or achieve other efficiencies was not a skill of which they had much experience. However, making the business case was not sufficient in itself in achieving compliance. The ability to persuade was also a necessary skill.

#### **Non-Course Specific Materials Design**

At one HEI, students and staff benefitted from automatic library renewals which removes the need to request extensions or appeal against fines on behalf of disabled students. This policy demonstrated a proactive and responsive learning resource centre which delivered both inclusive and good practice.

#### **Academic Staff Awareness, Attitude, Training**

One participant described a disability awareness month which involved academics and students, who had disclosed their disability, and the remainder of the university population. The initiative led to increased development of lecture capture and accessibility adjustments to one degree course's components.

At another HEI, academics were asked the question “How inclusive are your courses?” as the theme for academic ‘health reviews’, that is, annual course review and reports. Hence all module leaders had to consider their modules and the possibilities for change.

Success was reported in achieving an understanding within the academic staff body that, in addition to written assignments posing challenges, practical assessments also posed challenges and that extra time should be considered and granted where justified.

### **Other, and the Built Environment**

One HEI was reported as having achieved the installation of assistive software on all its PCs and MACs whilst another had ‘got ahead’ of the start of year pressure by ensuring adjustments were added for applicants prior to course start date. This action reduced numbers of students missing out on support at the start of their course, a smoother transition into study and less need for interaction with the disability service at the ‘peak period’.

An accessibility programme was successfully delivered at one HEI which made all its properties personal emergency evacuation plan (PEEP) regulated, resulting in access for all, including access to old buildings and to meeting venues.

### **Challenged ILE Initiatives**

This section identifies the challenges that participants had actually experienced. These challenges should not be seen as universal across all HEIs, indeed, they might apply to only a single or a few HEIs. However, they reflect the concerns of the academics and others at a range of HEIs and the way those concerns have impeded progress to an ILE.

#### **Philosophy/Mission**

Some participants reported frustration that their colleagues still made a distinction between ‘disabled groups’ and other students. Additionally, inclusive teaching had not been recognised in teaching and learning plans but, rather, the HEI’s focus had been on international students and research. At some HEIs it was reported by participants that academics worried about the time and effort required to address a seemingly small (proportionally) group of students, not recognising the idea that inclusive practice was good for all students. A number of participants mentioned that they felt addressing the needs of disabled students was now in the shadow of [the Government’s] widening participation initiatives.

#### **Leadership**

The need for formalising numerous good practices was identified as important, but could be absent from senior managements’ leadership agenda. Indeed examples of inclusive practice were reportedly often achieved without senior management support. At one HEI a senior management group was awaiting appointment.

#### **Management**

A number of examples were given where ineffective cross-departmental working was highlighted as frustrating more inclusive practice. For example, the absence of estate/facilities planning to

include installation of lecture capture facilities into the refurbishment of lecture theatres. In some cases, it was suggested that such an omission might be caused by senior management's worry about reduced lecture attendance if recordings were available online. In another similar example, senior management sought sector wide evidence that lecture capture yielded positive outcomes. Similarly, where lecture capture was installed some academics refused to use the system unless there was evidence of its utility. In the absence of being able to provide such evidence, in this instance progress was blocked.

Some senior management's views appeared to be that assistive technology/software could only benefit disabled students which was reported as frustrating inclusivity initiatives including the availability of assistive technology/software across a campus as opposed to just on PC designated for disabled users.

### **Course materials design including assessments**

Placing lecture and other course materials online was seen as a key element of inclusive teaching, however participants identified a number of impediments to this goal. Some reported that lecturers believed that they owned the intellectual property (IP) rights to their materials and as such were not willing to place them online, even within the controlled environment of an HEI's VLE. However, other participants reported that lecturers felt that recording lectures constrained them, for example from making jokes.

One HEI met resistance to all 1<sup>st</sup> year lectures being recorded. In response the HEI provided help, delivered cross-functionally, to academics by making the recording process automatic and by helping with the editing of recorded materials. A participant reported academics refusing to allow individual student's digital voice recorders [which were probably funded the Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA)] in their lectures despite their HEIs' policies.

Participants reported that a number of academics worried about students skipping lectures if notes were available beforehand, whilst others reported that some academics regarded lecture materials in advance as lowering academic standards by 'dumbing-down'. Lack of time was also reported as being given as a reason not to place notes online, a point also reflected in material on the VLE becoming out of date.

It was reported that visiting lecturers could also present a problem in two ways, first that their materials would need to be placed within their host HEI's VLE and secondly that such visitors might only know at the last minute what they would be lecturing upon.

Participants reported that lecturers fear that videos of their lectures 'might appear on YouTube' and the possibility of litigation was also reported as frustrating efforts to implement lecture capture.

Participants also reported that reluctance to embrace elements of inclusivity, could be addressed by engaging with their academics to answer their concerns and potentially to ask them how they would meet individual student's needs if they were not willing to, for example, record their lectures or put lecture notes online beforehand. Indeed, one participant described academics at

their HEI who 'balked' when told they had to implement an HEI-wide lecture recording strategy yet were receptive to understanding the needs of disabled students and were amenable to making adjustments for them.

### **Built environment**

Older buildings, especially listed ones, may present problems of physical accessibility, with some rooms not accessible. Indeed, one participant mentioned that not all courses at his/her HEI were accessible. A lack of voice in the planning of refurbishments was also reported as responsible for hindering progress towards inclusivity. A consequence of some rooms not being accessible could also create an issue when room changes happened, an event scheduled in an accessible room could be moved to an inaccessible one. Not all estates departments accepted that their HEIs lacked accessibility.

### **Conclusion – key 'take-aways'**

Other than persistence, no single 'silver bullet' strategy was identified as the way to make progress towards an ILE. Senior level 'buy-in' and support were seen as important together with consequent insertion of inclusivity issues into policies. Major cost items, for example, by an estates department in creating accessible premises, or installing technology to enable lecture capture, may require justification by way of a business case. However, as the implementation of an ILE depends on many individuals, especially academics, delivering their own small piece, much effort is required to engage with those individuals to discuss and meet their doubts or worries. These individuals may benefit from support so that they can master the technologies in order to minimise additional calls on their time. Cooperative working with colleagues in other parts of an HEI and sharing of ideas and potentially budgets was also considered to be a useful approach, especially given the current widening participation initiatives.

Government policy as regards changes to DSA, whilst potentially causing short term difficulties, was seen as helpful in focusing HEIs' attention on the need to pursue greater inclusivity in their learning environments.

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## **Peer-to-peer success... celebrating diversity!**

Alice Speller, Jamie Crabb & Adam Hyland  
*Diversity and Ability*

### **Diversity and Ability**

Diversity and Ability (DnA) is a social enterprise designed and led by neurodiverse adults, who are end users working with the sole purpose of providing support, strategies, assistive technology training and shared wellbeing.

At the NADP summer conference 2016, DnA presented a concept of how understanding one's diversity in a positive frame, sharing lived experience and accompanied with the right strategies, can have a huge impact on a person's journey to become a confident lifelong, independent learner. This concept has come out of a community of diverse learners who became facilitators of enabling change to many disabled students in receipt of DSA over the last five years.

How we view ourselves and the value we give to our different attributes, that make up our diversity, has a huge impact on how we experience different elements of life and how successful we are. Historically (and still to this day), learning differences, along with many other strands of diversity, have been met with discrimination and negative stigma by society. This has a detrimental effect on how learners feel about their 'diagnosis' and how it impacts on their day-to-day lives.

### **A new and exciting viewpoint**

DnA's celebratory model of diversity is an exciting and enabling viewpoint of how society should view diversity. Compared to other models where disabled people have been seen as having less ability or experiencing negative effects, DnA's model recognises that every individual has their own way of thinking, learning, working and doing different tasks. Whilst it is important to recognise the fact that the medical model of disability is still used in terms of needing a diagnosis to get support, the celebratory model then leaves the negative diagnosis and focuses on learning from the individual in terms of the way that they learn. Whilst the celebratory model is predominantly similar to the social model of disability, the celebratory model goes further in viewing everyone as unique individuals who have their own brilliant skill set.

As with the social model, the celebratory model also believes that society puts barriers in the way of disabled people. However, the celebratory model develops this notion, arguing that we as a society need to look at everyone's strengths and be proud and celebrate everyone's diversity. Whilst an individual's diversity may need strategies built around them to fully achieve their potential, it is crucial that our society makes this support available to everyone. The celebratory model is convinced that when an individual's learning and working styles is understood and recognised every individual has the ability to reach their maximum capability.

Whilst the social model talks about removing barriers, in reality this does not go far enough. Just because the obvious barriers are removed does not mean that each individual is fully supported in terms of their diversity. The celebratory model suggests that if energy and time is put into building strategies around every individual the whole of society benefits. This could be in education, the workplace and beyond. The ability to understand one's own way of processing and working unlocks many doors to success. Once this notion is recognised the ability to succeed becomes infinite.

In order to support the adoption of the celebratory model of diversity, society needs to move to a more open and encompassing language when it comes to this strand of diversity. There also must be recognition that diversity is not about one diagnosis and in order to reach potential, the consideration of diversity co-occurrence must take place when implementing strategies.

The celebratory model supports the idea that people experience the world differently based on the ways that their brains and environments interact. DNA embraces this movement, which does not see neurological differences as 'disabilities', but rather as a diverse balance of unique and equally valid skills and experiences that benefit society and deserve celebration.

### **Reframing in the positive**

In order for a learner's journey to start on a positive foot, it is crucial that the understanding of one's diversity is reframed into a positive one. In order for this to be achieved, an understanding of one's metacognition is key. An understanding of individual strengths is part of metacognitive thinking. In their analysis, McLoughlin and Leather (2013, p.46) argue that metacognition can, "improve performance in learning and working situations".

Having an understanding of how one's self thinks then enables the individual to make an informed choice in terms of strategies used. When an individual has both an understanding of how they think and the strategies available to them, one can start to unlock a positive way of thinking about one's diversity and their ability to succeed. As Borkowski & Krause (1985) observe "general knowledge about the efficacy of strategies has been hypothesized to have motivational properties."

DnA believes that the single most common barrier to the learners they have supported is self-esteem. Positive use of metacognition and the ability to celebrate an individual's diversity can have a huge impact on self-esteem. Jones & Idol (2013) recognise how:

General strategy knowledge, and its associated motivational factors, are bidirectionally related, each contributing to the development of the other component. High self-esteem, and internal locus of control, and the tendency to attribute success to effort are the consequences of a history of consistent, successful, strategy-based habits of responding to learning and memory tasks. Good performance following strategy use strengthens general strategic knowledge, which promotes positive self-esteem and attributions of success.....

Another crucial step in the positive reframing process and exploration into one's metacognition is the recognition of the individuals existing strategies. For many learners, 'diagnosis' has often been in the latter years of an individual's educational journey, often occurring once they have entered higher education. Getting to higher education is a success in itself and this should be recognised, along with the strategies that have enabled that individual to get there.

### **The peer-to-peer factor**

DnA are convinced that peer-to-peer empathy, respect and support delivered by people who share a lived experience can also have a positive impact on a learner's journey to becoming a lifelong, confident independent learner. For many learners, there is often a feeling of isolation and believing that they are pretty much alone in the way they think and learn. However, when one is supported by someone who can relate through lived experience and have succeeded in their learning journey by understanding and celebrating their diversity, it creates an environment for the learner to feel safe and more confident with their own diversity.

The ability to relate is a powerful tool when working on one's metacognition. This process can often be an emotional journey and the need for people around the learner to understand and show empathy is crucial. This is why peer support can greatly aid the learner's journey in understanding and celebrating their diversity.

There is no universally accepted definition of peer support but the term generally refers to mutual support provided by people with similar life experiences as they move through difficult situations. At its most basic, the peer support 'approach' assumes that people who have similar experiences can better relate and can consequently offer more authentic empathy and validation, (Mead & Macneil, 2004).

### **The Diversity and Ability approach**

Diversity and Ability have been developing the celebratory model for the last five years. Diversity and Ability has supported over 8,000 individuals and the average confidence change is an increase of 127.8%. Diversity and Ability has discovered a direct correlation between the confidence of learners using strategies and this approach. Learners have used feedback to demonstrate their confidence before receiving support and their confidence in their own learning strategies after receiving the support. This feedback has clearly shown that by using this celebratory, metacognitive, peer approach can be game changing for individuals becoming lifelong, confident independent learners.

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## Using the student voice to question the practice of inclusivity

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### Abstract

Literature around inclusivity suggests that inclusive practice should be strongly underpinned by the principles of the social model of disability where there is a move away from making small, piecemeal changes to more radical, widespread changes. What is also clear within the literature is that creating fully inclusive HEIs will take time to emerge and develop. This paper presents the findings from a research project about the impact of inclusive practice for students with specific learning differences (SpLDs) in one higher education institution. It explores students' views utilising qualitative interviews. Three different yet overlapping aspects of inclusive practice are explored: accessible learning environments, feedback, and focussed control. This paper will argue that inclusive practice requires a paradigm shift in our institutional and cultural approach in order to ensure that all students are treated equally and are included in the university classroom.

### Inclusion and inclusive practice in higher education (HE)

In the 1990s, inclusive policies and practices were at the heart of governmental agendas with the development of relevant legislation such as the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA) (Home Office, 1995), the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act* (SENDA) (DfES, 2001), the *Disability Equality Duty* (DED) (Disability Rights Commission, 2006) and the *Equality Act* (2010). The focus on inclusion has continued into the 2000s. For instance, the DED (2006), which extends the DDA (1995), calls for public bodies (schools, colleges, universities) to respond in advance to the needs of disabled students and to actively involve disabled staff and students in the planning and implementation of the duty so that positive attitudes towards disability could be promoted. The scope of this legislation is to put further pressure on HE institutions to celebrate cultural diversity and to be more proactive in developing policies and strategies that enable such students to access the same teaching and learning environments as their non-disabled peers.

However, Vickerman & Blundell (2010) note that legislation alone cannot ensure the needs of disabled students are met and eradicate deeply embedded practices. Rather they argue for a radical change in institutional policies and cultures across HE institutions. Similarly, Madriaga (2007) uses the term 'disablism' to suggest that the educational sector reinforces practices that are a result of the medical model of disability, negative mindsets and assumptions about disability and the prevalence of dominant discourses which are unchallenged and considered as the 'norm'. Drawing on the work of authors such as Oliver (1996, cited in Madriaga 2007, p.400), Madriaga links 'disablism' to wider societal attitudes and structures through which, he argues, society seems to continue 'oppressing' those with disabilities promoting thus further exclusion and disability. As a result, Madriaga associates the term 'disablism' with 'institutional racism' (p. 400). Indeed, several authors agree and note that much more is needed if HE institutions want to

be seen as offering truly inclusive environments (Fuller, Bradley & Healey, 2004a; Moriña et al., 2014; Gibson, 2012; Riddick, 2001).

## **Learning experiences of disabled students**

A number of national and international studies have explored the experiences of disabled students in HE (Moriña et al., 2014; Collinson & Penketh, 2010; Madriaga, 2007; Goode, 2007; Griffin & Pollak, 2009). These studies have reported narratives of success and the challenges faced by these students in their academic endeavours. For example, a recent study by Moriña and colleagues (2014) asked 44 students with various disabilities to identify aspects of the curriculum that influenced their inclusion in the university classroom. They found that group work, active participation and access to real life case studies can be empowering. Likewise, there is research that has shown a clear link between staff attitudes and the performance of disabled students (Moriña et al., 2015; Cameron & Nunkoosing, 2012; Riddell & Weedon, 2006; Mortimore & Crozier, 2006; Fuller et al., 2004b; Holloway, 2001; Riddick, 2001). These studies showcase examples where staff and faculty members have made adjustments to their teaching methodologies and assessments to accommodate for disabled students. They also report cases where staff are resistant in adapting their curricula citing factors such as lack of training, time and knowledge on the range of disabilities they encounter.

Other studies have argued that despite significant developments in legislation and an increase in the number of disabled students entering university, the reality for such students is one of exclusion and barriers to learning and teaching processes (Moriña, Lopez & Molina, 2015; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010; Madriaga, 2007; Goode, 2007). Fuller, Bradley & Healey (2004a, see also Borland & James, 1999; Holloway, 2001) discuss how the university environment, the curriculum and staff attitudes can further disable these students. In a larger study, Fuller et al., (2004b) showed how the student's disability dictated all aspects of the university experience from the type of institution, course, module and assessment and the barriers they faced when accommodations were not made for the student's disability. As a result, the literature puts the onus on HE institutions to make significant and proactive changes to their inclusive practices in order to ensure that disabled students can make the most of their university education.

## **Research design**

This was a small scale study carried out in one university in the south of England. The project adhered to the university's ethical guidelines (UoW Code of Practice for Research, 2013). A Research and Knowledge Exchange (RKE) ethics pro forma was submitted and approved prior to the start of the research project.

Participants were identified as those who have been taught by academics seen as 'champions' of dyslexia who had made changes to their teaching and learning practices. The academics, who participated in an earlier project, provided the title of their courses (Karousou, 2015). All students who I knew to have disclosed their disability were emailed from all four faculties namely, the Faculty of Business, Law and Sport (BLS), the Arts, the Faculty of Humanities and

Social Sciences (HSS) and the Faculty of Education, Health and Social Care (EHSC). In the end 13 participants agreed to take part in this project. It is important to note that the researcher works as a dyslexia adviser at the university. Thus, it was important to ensure that she had not worked with any of the participants prior to the study in order to avoid any bias in favour of the participants.

This research project was a mixed methods project involving semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. However, in this paper only data from the qualitative interviews will be analysed. The semi-structured interviews were used to gather data about the students' diagnosis, the difficulties they experience, the initiatives they noticed in their learning, assessment and feedback, and any changes they would like to see implemented. At the start of the interview all participants were informed verbally and in writing through the information sheet about the aims and objectives of the project. They all signed a consent form prior to being interviewed and had the opportunity to ask questions at the start and in the end of the interview. All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and were transcribed by the researcher.

## Findings

Data was coded and analysed thematically by two independent researchers to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. The themes were then grouped into three main categories:

- Accessible learning environments
- Feedback
- Focussed control

### Accessible learning environments

Accessible learning environments refer to the initiatives that academics made to their teaching practice through changes to their teaching style and methods, pace and delivery to ensure that learning was accessible to students with SpLDs. Within this theme participants talked about how a varied teaching style along with the use of multi-sensory methods, the design and layout of the power point slides and the pace of teaching had a significant impact to their learning.

*And the way his power points are always quite bright...and he is quite slow...so that helps in the sense of, he's always like 'has everyone got that, is that ok?'* (Student 10, EHSC).

*Yes because he [lecturer] rounds up what we have meant to have learnt in that and then I can compare to what I have missed and what I need to go back over.*  
(Student 8, EHSC).

With regard to the layout of the power point slides, student 10 identified the importance of having lecture slides that are clear, use appropriate font and background colours; which are much easier to read and understand. She spoke enthusiastically about the significance of the teaching pace especially when learning about new and complex concepts. Both students found that including pauses, asking questions, and providing summaries as helpful strategies, enabling

them to learn better. Ensuring not only that the content is right but also that the way that information presented is accessible to everyone, can have a significant impact on students' learning.

Conversely, when participants were asked to reflect on their learning experiences as a whole, they talked negatively about those lecturers who include too many slides, slides containing lengthy texts and used black font on white background in their slides.

*Our lecturers, there are so much information on the slides. In one lecture there were 100 slides. ... That's too much information to absorb. (Student 1, BLS).*

*Quite often at lectures we were given stuff to read and we were given a short period of time to then formulate an opinion on what could be a journal... that time pressure is quite a lot for me because I think I am more than capable of getting my opinion but in the end, having restricted time to read, I just thought I won't say anything. (Student 7, EHSC).*

*I think any lecturers across the board who don't use white background for their presentation is so much better cause I struggle with visual stress. (Student 6, HSS).*

These students articulate the multiple difficulties that students with SpLDs experience when trying to make sense of wordy slides or read long texts within the time provided. Student 1 commented how long it took her to read through the lecture slides, process and understand them. Similarly, student 7 focused on reading long texts especially under pressured conditions. Interestingly, she noted that this was not about ability or competence but about the process of reading long and complex academic texts. At other times the label was used as a means of subscribing to the academic discourse despite experiencing difficulties with literacy and perceptions of oneself as not worthy. The issue of how the label is used in different contexts is reported in the literature (Cameron & Billington, 2015; Cunnah, 2015; Riddick, 2001). Student 6 paid attention to the background of the slides and how it could impact the speed of her reading. These students suggested that reducing the number of slides, including just the relevant text and forewarning them about reading texts would make their learning more accessible.

Another initiative that was noted by the participants was the use of multi-sensory methods combined with a varied teaching style. Traditionally, in the institution researched, a teaching session includes an hour or more of teaching along with other activities such as group work and discussion. However, a number of the students noted that having the session broken down into much smaller intervals where for example the lecturer teaches for 20 minutes but builds into the session some time for students to discuss what was said as much more beneficial because it gives students with SpLDs time to process and absorb the information.

*...we will have conversations or group discussions and debates which mean you are rehearsing it to remember it easier. (Student 12, HSS).*

*I found it [making a video] useful because we didn't just go over the stuff in class, I was able to look it up myself and then converse with the group and get a better understanding. (Student 2, Arts).*

Student 2 identified a number of initiatives that this lecturer took that made the learning environment more accessible to her. The first initiative was the combination of two or more teaching styles: verbal and visual. Making a video allowed her to actively engage with the learning process which seemed to better reinforce the information provided verbally by the lecturer earlier. Asking students to make a video as a teaching aid also meant that this student was able to access this in her time in the class. This student also noted that being able to talk to other students also enhanced her understanding of the material which was also highlighted by student 12. Sometimes students with SpLDs may misunderstand what they have read because they have misread the information. Having the opportunity to talk to others in the group enabled this student to clarify what she had read as well as engage in discussion with her fellow classmates which extended and challenged that understanding further and encouraged deep learning.

## **Feedback**

Another area that was identified by the participants as important was feedback particularly formative feedback, 1:1 feedback and attitudes to feedback. What came across strongly in the interviews was the opportunity to engage in a discussion and ask questions so that any concerns or misunderstandings were clarified.

*...I like 1:1 feedback like talking through it would be much more helpful because it would be really understandable and you could talk and you could ask questions like 'I thought I did that' and he would say 'oh no you did it in the wrong way or something'. (Student 9, BLS).*

*Face to face feedback is always more effective than written feedback especially because of the two-way dialogue in terms of what you have and haven't done. (Student 11, HSS).*

*...she [lecturer] would reference that part of the essay so I always know where I went wrong and what part of the essay, she might quote saying 'this, that and the other'. (Student 5, BLS).*

Students 9 and 11 both emphasised that having a conversation with the lecturer allowed them to ask questions and engage in a constructive discussion. Moreover, student 5 added that contextualising comments within his essay proved a better way of understanding what was being said. Through selecting particular examples to show the student what could be done differently or how a point could be expanded, ensured that the comments were relevant and any misunderstandings were demystified.

The emotional effect that feedback can have on students was highlighted by student 10 who argued that receiving 'bad' feedback can act as a barrier in wanting to engage in an academic dialogue with the lecturer. Therefore she emphasised that having a conversation with the lecturer earlier to avoid feeling frustrated was vital for her.

*...it could be an option as before you get your feedback or when you pick this feedback up, we sit down and go through it together rather than get your paper and you read it and you are 'I am just going to ignore it and forget about it or I don't agree with what you said, it's upset me, I am going to forget about it.*  
(Student 10, EHSC).

Understanding and engaging with feedback is not an easy process. It requires that the learner can successfully listen, process the information and make sense of the intended message. It is also known that these are the areas where most students with SpLDs might have difficulties (Mortimore, 2008; Du Pre, Gilroy & Miles, 2008; Fuller et al., 2004a). As such, if the learner is not able to decipher and understand the comments, this might lead him/her to respond negatively by choosing to ignore it as student 10 has suggested. This can reinforce the learner's negative perceptions of their competencies and make them feel anxious and upset. Therefore, although the nature of the feedback can be helpful for the learning process, it is also interlinked with other aspects such as perceptions, emotions and attitudes towards it.

Besides the benefits of engaging with the feedback in a 1:1 session, participants also talked about the importance of receiving formative feedback.

*I mean she read through my bit and she was like 'some bits are a bit wordy, can you read through it and take out some words' and I just went through it.* (Student 3, EHSC).

*She can give me new ways of thinking about that aspect or what I think might be wrong. ... It's useful to me in terms of again making sure I am on the right lines, that I haven't misconstrued the question, if you will.* (Student 5, BLS).

The nature of the feedback these students received was different. For example, for student 3 the feedback was more instantaneous in terms of providing her with specific advice on what she needed to change in order to improve their work. However, for student 5 the feedback was more generic in guiding him when making revisions later on. Getting feedback is important for all students but for students with SpLDs it is particularly important as they can often misread the question, go off on a tangent or miss an entire section of the assignment. This was especially so for student 5 as he seemed anxious about misconstruing the question which he said he had done in the past. Regardless of the type of feedback students receive, it is clear from the data that receiving comments half way through the process of composition is an important part of the learning process. This is particularly so for students with SpLDs who may become cognitively

overwhelmed, are anxious about their performance, and may have adopted inaccurate strategies which may lead them to misinterpret the question.

## **Focussed control**

This finding is very much in accordance with the social model of disability where it is argued that it is the environment that disables these students. Thus the data shows how small changes made by the academics can empower students considerably more than expected. Initiatives such as uploading the lecture slides and other key material in advance, providing key readings and other important information on virtual learning environments (VLEs), and providing them with specific information in advance can significantly alter these students' learning experiences.

*I like having it [power point slides] in front of me normally on a PC... I like to take my notes from the slides. (Student 7, EHSC).*

*He [lecturer] is quite good at telling you exactly which bit is going to be the most useful like 'read this chapter, it's useful or these pages are useful'. Again it's very focussed. (Student 10, EHSC).*

A great number of the participants talked about how having access to information in advance allowed them to take control of their learning. For students 7 and 10 this simply meant going through the slides on the train on the way to university or reading the text the night before. Implicit in their narratives was a sense of ownership they did not have before. Students with SpLDs have often have difficulties with their working memory (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006) and the organisation of information (Fuller et al., 2004a) which makes it more difficult to access, read and process information at the same speed as everyone else. Student 7 talked about how in the past she would write down everything the lecturer said which was counterproductive to her learning as she did not pay attention to what was being said in the class. For student 10 being able to select key information from a reading list left her feeling anxious and overwhelmed. Having to focus on specific pages meant that she was able to manage her time more effectively which in turn made her feel in control of her learning. Therefore, having access to information in advance allows such students to go through the material at their own pace and speed which then makes it easier for them to process and make the material their own.

The tensions between wanting to keep knowledge of their disability to themselves and the advantages of disclosing as means of helping their learning was an issue for a number of students.

*I don't like to discuss it [dyslexia] in front of them [lecturers] when other students are around. It's not something I particularly like to draw attention to in the presence of other people. (Student 4, BLS).*

*I think a lot of the time people with learning differences are embarrassed I think to need the degree of clarification that we do to be as clear as other people who think in a sort of more linear way. (Student 11, HSS).*

*I've had so many things coming back about spelling saying 'if you proofread this you could check up on spelling'. Actually I did proofread it, but I am dyslexic so I didn't notice. (Student 6, HSS).*

Reading these comments is quite disheartening as it shows that despite the introduction of relevant policies and legislations, institutions do have some way to go in their inclusive endeavours. What is also interesting in these comments is how students perceive their disability and how they think it is perceived by others which is reported by a number of other studies (Madriaga, 2007; Goode, 2007; Mortimore & Crozier, 2006; Pollak, 2005; Fuller et al., 2004b). In this study, it is clear that the first two participants perceive themselves quite differently from student 6. This, in turn influences the degree of disclosure. Students 4 and 11 did not want to talk openly about their disability in front of others in the classroom. In fact, student 4 would go to extreme measures to ensure that no one else other than the lecturer knew about her disability. Student 11 described feeling 'embarrassed' about being different and thinking differently compared to her fellow students. Although student 6 has a big sticker attached to her essay telling everyone that there is a problem, there is still the same degree of frustration about the stigma attached to having a learning difference. Such comments bring us back to the medical model of disability where the student and others see the dyslexia as a deficit, a problem, something to be embarrassed of and talked about in privacy where possible.

## **Discussion**

This paper has reported the findings from a research project that asked students with SpLDs to voice their expectations and perceptions of their learning experiences at one HE institution. By providing feedback and further suggestions on what works, what they would like to see changed, and how their teaching and learning experience can be improved, they are placed at the centre of the learning culture and have the opportunity to engage and reshape it. In so doing, this study has questioned the practice of inclusivity from the perspective of students with SpLDs.

## **Accessible learning environments**

This finding concurs with current literature that showcases how changes to teaching methodologies, group discussions, and the design of the learning material can make the learning environment more accessible to students with SpLDs (Moriña et al., 2014; Collinson & Penketh, 2010; Fuller, Healey, Bradley & Hall, 2004b). What is interesting in the present study is that the participants' comments depict a learning climate that is conducive to students' needs; it's student-centred and the teaching has been adapted in response to an awareness of the needs of students with SpLDs. In addition, all the participants in this study commented on the foresight of the academics seen as 'champions' of dyslexia in making the learning environment more accessible. Cameron & Nunkoosing (2012, see also Riddell & Weedon, 2006; Mortimore & Crozier, 2006; Holloway, 2001) highlight a link between staff attitudes and the learning experiences of disabled students. They argue that staff who hold positive attitudes towards dyslexia are more willing to make the necessary adaptations and provisions for such students

compared to staff who do not hold such attitudes. This study takes a slightly different view in that it shows that staff simply need an awareness of disabilities in order to make helpful changes to their teaching.

## **Feedback**

This study showed the importance of both formative feedback and giving feedback through discussion. Having a conversation around feedback can be seen as part of the process of embedding students in the culture of the academic discipline. This is very much in accordance with what Lea & Street (1998, 2000, see also Collinson & Penketh, 2010) advocate as good practice when learning in higher education by putting forward three interlinked models to learning: study skills, academic socialisation, and academic practices. They argue that we need to move away from a model of learning that emphasises the mastery of literacy skills, an approach that reinforces the medical model of disability, to seeing it as a social practice or indeed a series of practices embedded in the culture of the academic discipline, the individuals and the pedagogy. The skills model simply reinforces the medical model of disability whereas the academic practice model recognises the need for students to learn the practices of their discipline. The students in this study suggest that discussion, particularly 1:1 discussion is a helpful way of achieving this for students with SpLDs.

## **Focussed control**

The participants in this study identified two different areas of inclusive practice. On the one hand, they valued the positive attitudes of staff and the adjustments made to the teaching and learning environment through initiatives such as the provision of material in advance. Such changes were perceived to empower and provide these students with a sense of control and ownership. This finding concurs with other studies (Moriña et al., 2014; Mortimore & Crozier, 2006; Riddell & Weedon, 2006; Fuller et al., 2004b). Regarding the second area, participants were uncertain as to whether they should disclose their disability or not. Some felt that disclosure would disadvantage them in terms of how they were perceived by staff and their peers or that they would be judged unfairly. A reading of the literature suggests that many dyslexic individuals perceive themselves as being 'different' from their peers from a young age (Burden, 2005; Pollak, 2009). Fear of disclosure and how it will be perceived meant that a lot of the students in this study were not aware of anyone else in their class or academic community who had a learning difference. No wonder then there is a big degree of ambivalence for students in disclosing their disability as in their perception, disclosure seems to be seen as the last resort often only necessitated by perceived or actual failure.

Despite the positive responses reported in this article by students with SpLDs of individual academics who have taken steps to make the learning experience more inclusive, there are still comments from students in this study and others (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010; Goode, 2007; Fuller et al., 2004b) who find HE institutions and practices challenging, inaccessible and exclusive. In addition, Madriaga (2007) emphasises that inclusivity does not solely demand a handful of individuals to change their practice and way of thinking but rather it is a much wider endeavour

requiring a complete reconceptualization and re-evaluation of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment practices. In the words of Burke (2012) 'moving towards a transformative discourse requires less attention to individual attitudes and much greater attention to the cultures, practices and histories that have benefitted highly privileged groups over others' (p. 194, cited in Gibson, 2015, p.7). This study has identified some excellent individual practices, but references by students to other less helpful experiences shows that this is not, as yet, the experience across the institution.

Gibson (2015) notes that from a socio-cultural perspective inclusivity needs to engage with different cultures, identities, attitudes, values and lived experiences. She suggests that failing to do so will result in a misunderstood and misrepresented form of 'inclusion' that is practised in education.

*'Inclusion' becomes about attempts to induct that which is 'different' into already established forms and dominant institutional cultures. The impact can be seen in the stories of disabled students who have struggled to engage successfully with mainstream education: the pre-determined box or curriculum is square whilst the student is round (Gibson, 2015, p.4).*

Gibson argues that inclusivity has failed when institutions fail to make the necessary changes to their practices to respond successfully to disabled students. Instead she argues, we witness a continuation of disabling practices and cultures that demand learners to fit into that which is already established. This in turn has great implications for student retention and success.

## **Conclusion**

There has been great progress made as a result of equal opportunities, reasonable adjustments and the work that individual academics have done. In the light of the findings from this study and others, it is vital to build on, reward and review current practice as well as maintain reciprocal dialogue with all individuals be they academics, students, and professional bodies. However, it is also clear from this study that there is a lot more that we need to do to ensure that students with SpLDs are included in the university classroom.

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# **The value of Dyslexic Culture within our society**

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*AchieveAbility*

## **Abstract**

This paper will give an overview of recent PhD level research which revealed a 'Dyslexic Culture' within the visual arts. The initial research set out to investigate the thinking approaches of dyslexic visual artists in their creative production, thus the research investigated dyslexic culture and the arts. The purpose was to find out if there are any thinking differences between dyslexic and non-dyslexic artists; to further discuss if dyslexic visual thinking is of value to modern mainstream society. The fieldwork included a purposive sampling of 44 artists with the data collected and interpreted through mixed methods using a range of tools. The research was positioned within cognitive and social constructivist perspectives, recognising that independent thinking is an integrated cognitive process of conceptualising inner, outer environments and of complex social interactions. Thus the research methodology was both ethnographic and phenomenological.

Dyslexic visual thinking within a socio-cultural context was explored to give context to the concept of creativity, visual language and the value of arts education as a process of thinking and conceptual development. The research focus emerged during the first stage of the fieldwork, namely to consider if visual creative practice is produced through the skill of thinking within a multi-dimensional context, thus to further consider how dyslexic thinking might be of benefit to mainstream systems: education and the workplace.

The research revealed that there is a 'Dyslexic Cognitive Culture' positioned within the dynamic of the 'outsider'. Triangulation of methods was used within the data collection and the analysis. The key finding is the dyslexic ability to think as flowed movement within a multi-dimensional conceptual framework. It was found that this ability is so inherent that the dyslexic artists did not question or consider this ability to be different or of any greater value. The research drew conclusions on this finding by emphasising and further discussing the value of this thinking to a technological and an increasingly entrepreneurial society where divergent thinking contributes to creative production. The research positioned visual dyslexic thinking within a positive paradigm and questioned the dynamics of mainstream systems that should recognise more the value of these differences within a 'Dyslexic Culture and the Arts'.

## **Introduction**

The terms 'outsider' and 'others' emerged during the research fieldwork and is one of the key findings. The life experiences of the dyslexic artists are part of the shaping of their way of thinking, creativity and approach to relationships. These dyslexic artists

talked about themselves as the 'outsiders' and other non-dyslexic artists were the 'others'. They experienced a sense of isolation from the mainstream of society, being on the edges or boundaries. Within this context the artists tended to be keen observers, to watch, to be sure of the state of things within their immediate environment before engaging with the mainstream. The findings show that there is a fundamental difference in thinking; hence an engagement with the 'other terrain' of life. The findings show a difference in thinking from dyslexic artist cognitive processes manifested as 'spiral thinking'. The process of spiral thinking is flowed and continuous and therefore non-linear, chronological or sequential and therefore does not fit within categorised systems made by others.

This paper will discuss the mainstream terrain of education and the workplace in the context of the position of the dyslexic person. Mainstream is defined as being what society thinks you should be, and look like. This paper will further discuss how mainstream provision has sought to recognise the 'outsiders', the results of this inclusive practice and the value of this dyslexic culture to our technologically global society.

For context this paper discusses educational provision, which needs to be more inclusive of different thinking and thus ways of learning. Critical analysis and self- reflection have been the cornerstones of cognitive theoretical thinking and are some of the underpinning practices in teaching and learning, particularly within technology and arts education. In arts education, critical analysis has been the cornerstone and underpinning element of this system. Interestingly many dyslexics have tended to enter these areas of study, not because they are particularly talented but because this type of learning enables flowed creative thinking. Central to this debate is the value of dyslexic thinking to society and the value of arts education to enable this.

## **Visual Arts Education**

As a high percentage of dyslexic people congregate within visual arts education this research has set out to investigate the cognitive processes of these dyslexic people as a product of arts education. In the academic year 2006 to 2007, 24,820 UK higher education first year students were identified by HESA as dyslexic (Symonds, H. 2008) compared to 4,364 in 1996 to 1997. Approximately 12% - 14% of higher education students studying art and design are recorded as being dyslexic (Cole, 2008, p.2)

The arts have become an environment of choice for many dyslexics. From 2000 to 2010 there were some initiatives to include those who were different in their thinking and learning. The following narrative highlights the inclusion agenda up to 2010 to include key voices and government initiatives leading up to the change of government in 2010 and to a more fragmented secondary educational provision and an increasingly prescribed National Curriculum. Included is comment on the position of young people in an era of austerity where it is now more likely that a young dyslexic person will be NEET. The Give Every Child a Chance Trust (2009) produced data on the costs of literacy to the economy. Outcomes for

permanently excluded pupils are poor with 63% having criminal convictions by the age of 24 years old. These excluded pupils have high rates of Special Educational Needs (SEN). There are practical learning implications of this loss of cultural and intellectual capital and this is part of the discourse on the relevance of visual language in our increasing technological societies .

Visual Arts education in further and higher education has historically provided a much more flexible entry system with a curriculum that reflects the innate creative talent generally prized by the educational sector over and above more formal academic credentials. Further Education was set up to meet the needs of their community providing a range of provision for a range of learning albeit still prescribed to meet the requirements of Higher Education (Kennedy,1997). Since the Coldstream Reports (1960 and 1970), Arts Education has been required, first by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) and then by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), to comply with a more sequential and academic provision. While this is helpful in preparing students to navigate the processes and systems of society (which tend to be sequential and chronological) this has moved away from a more interdisciplinary and flexible approach to curriculum.

However visual arts education still offers a different way of providing an educational experience, based on critical enquiry, analysis and the promotion of conceptual thinking. Educational rules are formed by the practitioner in their search for creative knowledge and production; this means the rules of learning are developed in the here and now. Thus as students develop their understanding of their own practice they set their own outcomes; this is within the prerogative of the creative individual.

### **The Mainstream: the position of the dyslexic person**

Whilst dyslexic people have tended to congregate within the arts they have also tended to congregate in marginalised groups if they do not find an outlet for their ways of thinking. It is startling to realize that up to 60% of people in prisons have reading ages comparable to being dyslexic (BDA 2012). This is further substantiated by the report 'Dyslexia Behind Bars' (2012) which found that overall, 53% of (2,029) prisoners at Chelmsford Prison during the project were diagnosed as having dyslexia, compared to 10% of the UK population.

The exact percentage of dyslexic people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) is not known, however it is known that the possibility of being NEET is heightened by certain socio-economic characteristics such as: disability, being in care, disadvantaged background and lack of education. The report 'The EHRC Triennial Review Developing the Employment Evidence Base' (Policy Studies, 2010) states that having a disability doubles the incidence of NEET status compared with those without a disability: 15% compared with 8 % of those who are not disabled (Policy Studies Institute 2010). In 2013 the percentage of young people who were NEET was 14.9% (Office for National Statistics, 2013). In addition the terrain of education is increasingly complex with a raft of qualifications and different forms of delivery. Granted the age of compulsory educational participation has been raised to 18 years

old in 2015, but if the delivery is not appropriate to learning then the high percentage of NEET could remain.

Up to 2010 teaching and learning in secondary, post-16 education and HE had a drive towards more inclusive practice with the emphasis on widening participation, greater access to different assessment for different learning and a range of curricula designed for lifelong learners, vocational learning and flexible study. However testing has increased with more emphasis on fact-based exams and standard assessment tests (SATs). Now there is even more emphasis on exam-based testing and with this increased linear learning.

### **Mainstream education: seeking to recognise the outsider**

In 1997 Helena Kennedy QC wrote *Learning Works* on behalf of the then Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) Widening Participation Committee, set up to widen access to further education. Professor John Tomlinson, a former Chief Inspector of Schools at Ofsted, was in position as Chair of the Committee for Learning Difficulties and produced the report on 'Inclusive Learning into the post school education of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, in England' (1996). This report urged educational sectors to recognise different learning as of equal value and pressed the government to fund resources for adults with dyslexia in mainstream education. This report was a major step forward in placing responsibility on educators to provide the appropriate learning for the learner, thus placing the dyslexic learner within a positive and not a deficit position within society. In *Learning Works*, (1997) Helena Kennedy talked about inclusive education and the importance of this for society-economically, socially and culturally.

These reports and the existence of these committees demonstrated the importance of widening participation to the then Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). They wished to place growth at the heart of their funding methodology. In 1999 the QAA, working with a number of stakeholders from across the HE sector, published a code of practice for students with disabilities. By 2000 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) had in place policies to widen, not just increase, participation. Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) has further supported dyslexic students once they achieved entry. Widening participation and the new legal duties of public sector organisations opened the doors to educational opportunity for dyslexic students. However, Higher Education (HE) continues to value academic qualifications over and above vocational qualifications and employers are increasingly looking to a selective and elite grouping of universities. Helena Kennedy discusses her vision for inclusive education in *Learning Works* at a time when this was the vision of a government from 2000- 2010.

One inclusive educational goal was almost achieved when the Rose Report (2009) was presented to Ed Balls the then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families. The evidence of this independent report showed that teachers needed to be trained to implement high quality interventions in the classroom for children with literacy and dyslexic differences.

In the main the report 'Identifying and Teaching Children and Young People with Dyslexia and Literacy Difficulties' (Rose, 2009) was considered ground-breaking and called for effective personalised learning to meet individual needs, teacher training that included pedagogy in inclusive learning for dyslexic students, and specialist teachers in the classroom to identify those students who might be severely dyslexic. The report sought to ensure provision for dyslexic learners from primary school and secondary school (2009, pp. 9-28). For a long time dyslexic experts and organisations had noted that dyslexic learners were not being supported in pre-university education. By the time the student had reached HE they had developed coping strategies and had succeeded overcoming many of the barriers to learning. In addition, they were able to access Disabled Students' Allowances. (DSA), which is an allowance not available across other educational sectors.

Underpinning the Rose recommendations was a strategy to ensure quality of provision and teaching with audits of school provision, assessment of learner progress, identification of any learning difficulties and teaching differentiated to learner ability. Many in the world of dyslexia - the British Dyslexic Association, Dyslexia Action, educational psychologists, specialist teachers and educationalists - welcomed the report as enlightening and enabling an inclusive education in the classroom. There were those who considered that the report was based on a deficit model of disability with no input from dyslexic expert representatives themselves, therefore continuing the negative label placed on dyslexia, defined by Rose as issues around literacy (Cooper, 2010, pp. 49-53). The point being, if this is about inclusive education why were the dyslexic experts not included to provide a different perspective.

With the change in government in 2010, this report and these recommendations were not taken forward. To address the gap in provision, in 2012 the Children and Families Bill laid the foundations for those with a specific learning difficulty/difference (SpLD) to be in charge of their own budget for support. This meant that a person needed to understand the systems in place first before they could even start to secure the services that might support them. For example, many young people who have a SpLD and are NEET might not be aware or know how to access this provision. The provision is available for 0- 25 years old, with young people now able to ask for an assessment of their SpLD. However if they, or an advocate, does not ask, the assessment will not happen, thereby potentially affecting their transition and progression in education or training. Local offer of services are delivered by the Local Authorities (LAs), yet to-date LAs do not have the resources nor the knowledge to broker these care plans.

### **Mainstream workplace: recognising the outsider**

In 2007 Alan Johnson the Secretary of State for the Department of Education and Skills wrote a foreword to the Green Paper 'Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16' (2007) where he stated that it was unacceptable that a young person's background was still a key factor in whether they progressed into post-16 education. Alan Johnson himself had not attended university and had progressed from working in the Post Office to senior positions in the Trade Union to senior positions in the Labour Government. Earlier the Leitch Report

(2006) had been very influential in making it clear that the UK was lagging behind our global competitor countries. The report identified the skills-mix required for the UK to maximise economic growth, productivity and social justice .

In the paper 'Raising Expectations' the government wished to offer a fuller range of learning opportunities that would address the skills-needs for the workforce. Differences in learning styles were recognized as being of relevance to the context in which people could effectively develop their skills. There was now to be an emphasis on choice of opportunity underpinned by the theory that everyone has an 'individual learning style'. The issue was that there had been no rigorous testing of the appropriateness of this model to identify a learning style or styles. Back in 2005 the 14-19 White Paper had identified the need for an increased development of skills relevant to the workplace. Following this the Leitch Report (2006) had identified the skills-mix required for the UK to maximize economic growth. Both government papers recognized that there was a danger of young people becoming NEET.

The 2007 government paper 'Raising Expectations' had taken this further with a new requirement for 17 year olds to stay on in education and training with increased employer input. The aspiration was for 90% participation in education and training among 17 year olds by 2015. This report emphasized apprenticeships and the newly introduced diplomas as routes of vocational learning to employment and education; thus another way of assessing learning. According to the Department for Education, Children and Young People (June 2013) 92% of 16 and 17 year olds received an offer of a place in education in 2012. Against a background of austerity and unemployment this data is presented as positive. However the Office for National Statistics (ONS) records have shown that for young people over 17 years old the percentage of young people who are NEET is 14.9% (Mirza Davies, 2014). Within this percentage it is not known what percentage of dyslexic people might be NEET.

In 2011 the Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) published the paper 'Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A Strategy for Social Mobility'. This paper showed participation age was to be raised to 18 years providing over 60,000 extra learning places with funding to create more than 360,000 new apprenticeships at all ages by 2012. Reforms to higher education funding were to put new obligations on universities to improve access. In particular, those universities charging over £6,000 in student fees per annum would have to attract more students from less affluent backgrounds, in 2015 this fee increased to £9,000 per annum. The summary of labour market statistics published on 12 June 2013 by the Office of National Statistics shows that from February to April 2013, compared with November 2012 to January 2013:

- There was a rise in the number of economically inactive people aged from 16 to 64.
- The 16 to 24 age group had the lowest employment rate at 50.9 per cent (42% of all people in this age group were in full-time education)

The fact that 42% of 16-24 year olds are in full time education suggests that these people are staying on in education and training for as long as possible due to the lack of available work and in order to have a greater chance of gaining work following their course of study.

This data suggests that young people are increasingly staying on in education and training, yet education has become more assessment led for both educational providers and students. Assessment is all-important to gain recognized qualifications: the outcomes of learning. Assessment can be based on the ability to condense a huge quota of information within a short space of time, to then be tested within an environment that is not conducive to thinking for the dyslexic person.

A recent John Cass Business School report (2012) suggests that the divergent thinker often does not fit easily within this type of assessment practice. The world is now more complex, where thinking is required at multiple levels, thus testing and assessment should reflect this. This global environment is constantly changing at an increasing speed therefore the economic benefit might be for changes to be made to testing and assessment to embrace the divergent thinker.

Researchers from the Sir John Cass School have produced new evidence that shows entrepreneurs with dyslexia hold the key to economic growth. They create more jobs and firms than non-dyslexics, yet a lack of expert support in mainstream education for dyslexic learners is costing the UK economy £1 billion per year. The report Halfpenny & Halfpenny (2012) calls for investment to harness the talents of dyslexics for the growth of the UK.

Halfpenny & Halfpenny (2012) cited one in five entrepreneurs as dyslexic an estimate that is of national significance. The report called for more government investment in specialist support for entrepreneurs to understand their strengths. This should include mentoring and training as well as investment to create awareness and understanding of dyslexia amongst business networks to enable them to assess systems of communication and make adjustments to their way of thinking. Yet our global communications and global businesses thrive and even require divergent thinking, as discussed in the following section.

## **Technology and global communications**

What value is conceptual divergent thinking in our society? Internet cultural capital sources describe conceptual thinking as the ability to understand a situation or problem by identifying patterns or connections, addressing key underlying issues and thus with divergent abilities; in different directions.

Manifestations of conceptual thinking can be the use of common sense and past experiences to identify problems or situations, the recognition of differences between the now and then and the ability to apply and modify complex learned concepts or methods to identify links amongst complex data from unrelated areas.

One of the main findings of this research has been the recognition that technology is part of the day-to-day lives of dyslexic creative practitioners. Technology also enables multi-faceted conceptual thinking to be shared and developed and to challenge conceptual thinking in an integrated way that has not been possible before.

From the 1990s the emergence of the internet and allied technology has grown apace to become the prevalent form of communication and by doing so we have increased the variety of visual images that surround us. Visual technologies are now a part of our lives and central to the cultural construction of social life in global societies. The artists, in the research, utilised visual communications as an inherent language of exploration. This language can connect people to the world in visual terms and enable interpretation of how we think we see. This is a world that all people might navigate, in a considered way, through the ownership of their own visual language. Visual language has become important to our global communications.

Since 2000 technology has become more advanced and an integral part of learning, academic study and creative production. Technology has thereby added a dimension to learning that has given access to different ways of operating, conceptualising, thinking and seeing. This lends itself to multi-dimensional thinking as outlined in this paper.

### **The outsider and spiral thinking: dyslexic value?**

The concept of the mass media was discussed in 1936 by Walter Benjamin in *'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'* (2008). Here he discussed the new role of technology as a means to alter the relationship of mass production to art. Benjamin was quick to understand the value of film as a way to perceive from many different angles.

*'Film has resulted in a similar deepening of a perception across the whole optical (and now acoustic) segment of the sensory world'* (Benjamin, 2008, p. 28)

Film, photography, television, billboards, print were the tools of distribution for the plethora of visual images and communications that surround us. Advances in technology, the emergence of the Internet, social media, mobile devices, 3D visuals have all added extra dimensions to communications. These ways of thinking and seeing tend to be embraced by the creative dyslexic. This is a terrain that some of the high-flying blue-chip companies are recognising as of real value to their businesses, such as Virgin, Apple, Netflix. Coffield cites Desmedt et al in the 2004 research into the validity of learning styles models *Should we be using learning styles?* Here he notes that the 'world of work is crying out for creative, rule bending and original graduates who can think for themselves' (Desmedt et al cited in Coffield, 2004, p. 59).

Creative thinking can be articulated, shared and innovated through technology. Through technological innovation we view knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge (Gardner 2006). Howard West calls for universities, corporations and organisations to adapt to some of the most gifted who have uneven abilities, particularly given 'new smart technology which

enable gifted visual-spatial thinkers to work in a visual spatial language on fast powerful graphic- orientated computers, developing and effectively communicating their ideas in novel ways' (West, 1991, p.43).

The research reported on in the current study suggested that dyslexic visual artists could have the ability to 'spiral think'. The technological revolution has meant that spiral thinking can be harnessed into the multi-connections that technology needs to be constantly developmental. The margins in which dyslexic people congregate still exist, e.g. prisons and the NEET group, however, global technology embraces visual thinking and entrepreneurship goes hand in hand with these emergent technologies.

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**Book Review: *Study Skills for Students with Dyslexia: Support for Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs)*. Edited by Sandra Hargreaves and Jamie Crabb. Third Edition. London: Sage. 2016**

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Given the recent cuts to DSA<sup>3</sup>-funded support for students with dyslexia, or what has been referred to by David Willets (Minister for Universities and Science) as the “measures to modernise”<sup>4</sup> DSA, the recalibrated third edition of *Study Skills for Students with Dyslexia: Support for Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs)*, edited by Sandra Hargreaves and Jamie Crabb, would appear an expedient intervention. Filled with practical study techniques and learner exercises, this book is designed to empower and enable students to develop the self-knowledge needed to understand the impact that their SpLD will have on their study, and the strategic means through which they can develop the study skills to make the most of out of their learning. Each chapter offers a set of developmental objectives designed to encourage and enable students to become reflective, autonomous, and proactive learners. Throughout the Study Skills guide, mindfulness strategies (such as meditation exercises and yoga practice suggestions) go hand-in-hand with study skills development, bringing the self-determining ideology of “self-help” to bear on the learner experience.

So, how does the third edition differ from its predecessor? Structurally speaking, the new edition follows a narrative logic that constructively maps out the student life cycle – operating as part educational bildungsroman, part study development survival guide – to offer students with SpLDs the building blocks towards academic success. Almost every learning stepping stone is covered: starting from the opening chapters “Managing Your Study” and “Understanding How You Think and Learn”; with new additional chapters on “How to Make the Most of your Lectures” and “Critical Thinking,” offering students a foothold into their transition to HE; culminating to that all-important endpoint, “The Dissertation.” Structured in such a way, students and practitioners can more easily dip in and out of the relevant sections as well as follow the guide as a timeline of developing skills required to advance at university.

Whilst *Study Skills for Students with Dyslexia* offers ample opportunity for students to develop their academic literacies in social sciences specialisms, including a complete chapter on “Improving Your Mathematics Skills and Using Statistics,” it is a tad lighter on content for arts and humanities subjects. Given that a disproportionate amount of students with dyslexia opt for

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<sup>3</sup> Disabled Students’ Allowances

<sup>4</sup> Department of Business, Innovation & Skills, and the Rt Hon David Willetts, *Higher Education: Student Support: Changes to Disabled Students’ Allowance. Written Statement to Parliament*. Delivered on April 7, 2014 (available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/higher-education-student-support-changes-to-disabled-students-allowances-dsa0> [accessed on 14/12/2016]).

a practice-led arts degree programme,<sup>5</sup> such an omission would appear a crucial oversight (one that arguably reflects a wider gap within study skills literature, whereby arts and humanities literacies remain something of a mystery, despite being essential for students to develop, given that the arts and humanities have specific writing style requirements and interpretive practices that differ from other disciplines). Similarly, although there is some coverage of reflective writing, this is limited to journaling; the volume is not fully up to date with the concept of this critical writing practice, which is quickly gaining popularity in HEIs as a form of assessment across all disciplines.

Moreover, in attempting to be all things to all people (practitioners and students alike), *Study Skills for Students with Dyslexia* occasionally runs the risk of being overly complex for students to understand, while at other times tending towards oversimplification. For example, whilst on the one hand “metacognitive skills” are explained by way of enabling students to grasp their own learning, on the other hand students are encouraged to build their criticality (i.e. their capacity for analysing information and developing an argument) by endeavouring to apply the steps to critical thinking to what to have for lunch (see chapter on “Critical Thinking,” 121). Likewise, although the chapter on “Understanding How You Think and Learn” is an enabling resource, there are obfuscating references to learning theories (for example, the Rayner model) using terminology such as ‘(W)holistic’ (a phonetic and visual pun that would potentially confuse a student with dyslexia). References are also made to long de-bunked learning styles (for example: visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic). Nevertheless, in light of the recent changes to DSA (the government’s decision to no longer fund note-takers for incoming students with dyslexia), Kay McEachran’s chapter on “Note-taking and Note-making” is a particularly invaluable teaching resource for practitioners and specialist support tutors working with students with dyslexia.

Whereas the second edition was “designed to be used independently,” the third makes the addendum “or with a study support tutor” – which is suggestive of the difficulty students could face attempting to navigate the guide alone, as it is a pedagogical reminder that fostering autonomous learning in students with SpLDs necessitates a modicum of support at an institutional level. In the third edition reboot, the CD-ROM is replaced by a companion website, which includes a download link to individual chapters that can be adapted to suit each reader’s formatting and colour scheme preferences, alongside templates for each of the learner exercises contained within (with a view to making its contents more accessible to students with dyslexia). However, despite the technological advantage of increasing learner accessibility, the companion website is clunky for students, given that they have to navigate a cumbersome subscription in order to access the companion site.

For practitioners and students alike, the sheer amount of invaluable content makes *Study Skills for Students with Dyslexia* the definitive study bible. However, that the resources are at biblical

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<sup>5</sup> According to statistics collected by the Royal College of Art, 29 per cent of the student cohort have dyslexia compared to 5–10 per cent of the overall student population (Available at: <https://www.rca.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/rebalancing-dyslexia-and-creativity-rca/> [accessed on: 13/12/16]).

proportions is both a blessing and a curse. Throughout the volume students are consistently and helpfully signposted to websites and other useful resources (such as, DnA Matters, and various online mind-mapping tools). However, most students could easily get lost without the go-between support of a specialist tutor. Even on paper, although the formatting has been improved, the third edition leaves little space: pages are chock-a-block with examples, exercises, hints and tips, and web links for downloading, but this invariably means that it could be a difficult read for students with dyslexia. Arguably, many students would struggle to negotiate between the mass of information contained both in the book and the online resources.

Comparatively, Palgrave's pocket guide, *Studying with Dyslexia*,<sup>6</sup> might offer a more manageable middle ground. Nonetheless, *Study Skills for Students with Dyslexia* makes a valuable contribution to the field of learner support literature. Any difficulty in traversing the scale of the content in this volume could be understood as reflecting the wider challenges that students with SpLDs currently face in an ever-changing knowledge economy, and as a testament to the ongoing need for additional support to overcome barriers to learning (despite cuts to DSA funding). I would highly recommend *Study Skills for Students with Dyslexia: Support for Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs)* for new practitioners working in HE, and to academic staff who are committed to making their teaching practice more inclusive.

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<sup>6</sup> Janet Godwin, *Studying with Dyslexia: Pocket Study Skills* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

**Journal of Inclusive Practice in Further and  
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- JIPFHE is the open access refereed journal of the National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP). All JIPFHE academic papers are peer reviewed and share the common aim of furthering best practice to promote disability equality in post-compulsory education.
- Papers which focus on any part of the student journey from pre-entry to post-exit are in keeping with this over-arching theme, as are those which consider issues relevant to staff in Further and Higher Education.
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- Based on the principle of ‘nothing about us without us’, contributions directly from disabled students and staff are encouraged.
- A conference proceedings’ edition and a general or themed edition will be published each year.
- Sufficiently robust research papers, as defined in these guidelines, may be submitted for the general or themed editions. Narrative pieces reflecting the personal experiences of disabled people will also be considered for publication. Work submitted for NADP Accreditation can be considered for the journal, including short articles.
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- Two referees will be nominated by the edition editor, who will be a member of the editorial board.
- An abstract, maximum 300 words, is required for academic articles.
- Harvard referencing is compulsory and authors need to ensure references are as up to date as possible.

- Contributions should reflect ethical participatory/emancipator research, which involves disabled/neurodiverse participants and results in interventions which improve services for disabled/neurodiverse people in the education and training sector.
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