

Additional help, additional problem

– Issues for supported dyslexic students

Linda Robson

Faculty of Maths, Computing and Technology
The Open University
Milton Keynes
Linda.robson@open.ac.uk

Abstract

Dyslexia affects many students who are studying in the Higher Education sector. Since the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, institutions are legally bound to offer support to students with declared disabilities. Disabled Student Allowances are used to provide technological support and specialist tuition to individuals.

This discussion highlights the problem that additional support, whilst very valuable, often leads to additional difficulties, particularly around time management.

Keywords: Dyslexia, additional requirements, additional support

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that dyslexia affects an individual's ability to read and write. Specifically, the key manifestation of dyslexia is difficulty dealing quickly with symbolic information. Applied to study, this means that individuals with dyslexia take longer than their non-dyslexic counterparts, to complete reading and writing tasks (Miles, 2006).

Less well known, and consequently often overlooked, are the other problems which manifest in the dyslexic individual. A limited short-term memory causes challenges in information processing, be that taking notes in a lecture, or structuring an essay. Dyslexics are also likely to struggle with time management issues. They find it difficult to plan tasks in order to hit deadlines, and to keep track of elapsed time causing them to frequently be late for appointments (Kirby *et al.*, 2008).

Since the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, educational establishments have been required to offer support to dyslexic students, in order to alleviate the difficulties they face. Disabled Student Allowances have been used to provide a range of assistive technologies and specialist study support. It is believed that better support for dyslexic students has significantly increased the proportion who choose to disclose their known dyslexia or undergo assessment (Richardson, 2010).

Encouraging progress has been made in making courses more accessible and improving attainment rates for dyslexic students. However, individuals still face the challenge of embedding their support into the mainstream study pattern, and often struggle to keep up with the pace of their course. Students whose dyslexia was identified at an early age, may have developed ways of working which suit their

needs. They have experience using assistive technology and additional support, so have developed strategies for utilising it. Whilst adult identification of dyslexia can come as a great relief to individuals who are finally able to understand their differences, it also comes at a price of needing to invest time into developing new approaches to reading, writing and other everyday tasks.

Ensuring tutors have an understanding of the additional support these students are receiving, will help them to assist the students in planning their studies, hitting deadlines and achieving to the best of their ability.

Being a spectrum disorder, there is clearly no *one size fits all* solution to supporting dyslexic students. Even the definition of dyslexia is a contentious issue. The World Federation of Neurologists (1968, cited in British Dyslexia Association, 2013) first defined it as "a disorder manifested by difficulty in learning to read, despite conventional instruction, adequate intelligence and sociocultural opportunity". More recent definitions have widened the scope to include difficulties with writing, spelling, phonological awareness, verbal memory, organisation and time management (Du Pre *et al.*, 2008).

The specific combination and severity of effects varies between individuals. For some dyslexics, the condition is a minor annoyance whilst others, with severe effects, find it impacts extensively on their daily life. Those who choose to undertake university level study, have to find ways to overcome their difficulties, in order to be successful on their chosen course.

Richardson and Wydell (2003) found the proportion of dyslexic students varied by subject, with lower representation in veterinary science, languages, law, education and medicine. However, it was not clear if this represented preferences of the students, or discrimination in accessing courses.

Regardless of the discipline students choose to study, it is a fundamental facet of *graduateness* that individuals are able to read, write and communicate effectively. Beyond this requirement, there are characteristics and issues, which potentially make some subjects particularly challenging. For example, computer programming requires accuracy in inputting code in order for programs to run correctly. The identification of errors in large blocks of computer coding is both difficult and time consuming. Most science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects require the use of diagrams and graphs, where the use of shading and multi-directional text can be challenging.

2. Typical support for dyslexic students

Dyslexic students are often allowed extra time to complete activities. In the case of exams, nearly all UK HE institutions allow extra time (Singleton, 1997) to mitigate for slower reading and writing speeds. Some institutions use special stickers to identify scripts belonging to dyslexic students, along with guidelines to examiners on allowances that should be made for spelling errors (Ingram *et al.*, 2007). An amanuensis or voice recognition software may also be available.

Regarding course work activities, tutors are often asked to allow some flexibility around assignment deadlines, to allow the individual extra time where needed. Many

dyslexic students benefit from technological assistance, including software such as voice recognition, readout and note taking facilities, and hardware such as voice recorders, smart pens and e-readers.

Frequently, dyslexic students are offered support from a specialist tutor. Dyslexia support tutors fulfil two functions; they support the student in developing effective study skills, and give more focused assistance with individual assignments. The study skills support would typically develop note taking, essay planning, time management and approaches to improving spelling and grammar. Working on individual assignments, the support tutor is likely to assist with essay structure and referencing, in addition to providing a proof reading service. The type of proof reading carried-out by a dyslexia support tutor will consider structure, spelling and grammar issues only, leaving the content as the student has provided. This is an important distinction from academic proof reading, which may include comment on the content, and would give the student an academic advantage.

3. Issues in embedding support

From the student perspective, receiving support for dyslexia, significantly improves the study experience. However, it also requires additional time and effort to embed the specialist support into the study programme. By definition, the dyslexic student already needs more time than their peers to complete many study tasks, and the utilisation of additional support puts further pressure on both time and time management.

Tops *et al.* (2012) identified that students, who had managed to implement compensation strategies at secondary school level, frequently struggle in higher education settings, when presented with a higher study load. This study load step change may also account for the number of students whose dyslexia is only identified after they enter higher education. These students have employed compensating strategies, without having formal specialist support throughout their school years, and their dyslexia has only manifested as an identifiable problem once study intensity goes beyond a certain level.

Since personal computers have become relatively inexpensive, most students have benefitted from their use. Particularly relevant to this discussion is the ability to spell check written text. Modern word processing software reliably identifies misspellings, but it is of limited use for the dyslexic student. They may be presented with a list of possible alternative spellings, and be unable to select the correct one. In some cases, the attempted spelling is so far from correct, that the spell-checker is not able to offer any useful suggestions (Osborne, 1999). Frequently the dyslexic individual will resort to using a different word, which may not be as appropriate. Spell-checkers are unable to identify words which are correctly spelt, but inappropriately placed, or used.

Where students find inputting text difficult, they may find voice recognition software useful. The ability to dictate can help a student to get their ideas into words in a faster and more organised manner. However, the dictation software will attempt to decode every sound. The user must speak very clearly and carefully, or go back and

edit out every *umm* and *arh*! Voice recognition software also needs to be trained to the specific user, and taught many of the discipline specific specialist or technical words.

Similar issues arise with the use of amanuensis. Collins (2003) found that use of an amanuensis puts additional stress on candidates, as it removes visual feedback from the writing process, and consequently puts heavy demands on the student's working memory. To be useful, the student and their amanuensis need regular practice sessions, to develop an effective partnership. In some subjects, bespoke systems need to be developed, in order to dictate specific formatting, for example the writing of equations in science and mathematics, or programming code in computing.

A student who receives support from a specialist dyslexia tutor will usually spend some of that time working with them on specific assignments. Frequently assignments are set at the end of a study period or set of lectures, with the expectation of students demonstrating understanding of that block of instruction within the assessment. A common pattern would be for assignments to be due for submission a couple of weeks after the final teaching session. This poses a particular problem for the dyslexic student wanting to take advantage of their dyslexia support tutor. The dyslexic student will need a draft of their assignment completed far enough in advance of the submission date, to allow time for the dyslexia support tutor to read, and then discuss it with them. Consequently, the student may need to have completed their draft prior to the end of the teaching period. In this case, the student will be unable to incorporate the final session of teaching, or benefit from any summarising and summing-up. This puts students at a disadvantage, especially as synthesising course material is a common difficulty for students with dyslexia. One potential solution to this issue would be to allow the dyslexic students additional time between relevant teaching and submission of assignments. However, where study programmes have a final assessment, there is a danger that offering flexibility of submission dates on early assignments leaves the student with very little time to prepare for exams, or complete end of module assignments. This is particularly problematic, as exams or final projects are often more important than earlier assessments, in terms of how much it contributes to their overall grades.

Regarding the performance of dyslexic students in exams, there is complexity caused by reading and writing difficulty, and the requirement to keep track of time. The dyslexic student is likely to misread exam questions because they are aware of their slow reading speed and feel pressured. Once coached to take more time to read the questions carefully, making good use of their additional time allowance, they still need to overcome their difficulties in keeping track of time. Dyslexic students will often benefit from advice on how long to spend on each section of an exam paper. If allowed to sit their exam in a private room, they may even consider using an alarm clock to go off at regular intervals to remind them to move on.

Increasingly, institutions are providing course materials for all students in electronic formats. This is useful to dyslexic students, as it allows them to be accessed in a variety of ways.

Some individuals find it useful to access texts using readout software. However, readout is slow. For example, the author was able to listen to this article using Texthelp Read & Write, at a speed of 165 words per minute. This is a reduction of 17%, compared to the speed of an average reader, who covers 200 words per minute.

Another option for using electronic materials is to reformat them. Different people will have different preferred fonts, and may change background colours, text size or spacing. The more control readers have over the aesthetics of their texts, the easier it will be for them to engage with it. Schneps *et al.* (2013) found some dyslexic students' reading comprehension improved significantly when using electronic display with short line length. Reducing the number of words per line helps the reader keep track of where they are in the text. For these students, the use of a kindle, iPad or similar e-reader may be beneficial, but their use is limited. Frequently formatting, and/or diagrams, are lost when using eReaders, leaving the student having to switch between the original and the reformatted version, in order to access all the information.

Lecturers do not need to know what their students' preferred formatting preferences are, provided materials can be manipulated to the individuals chosen settings. Large or preferred fonts (O'Brien *et al.*, 2005) and coloured paper (Singleton and Henderson, 2006), are simple alterations, which students can easily make themselves. In addition to allowing reformatting, providing handouts and course texts electronically in advance, also offers the opportunity to read items in preparation. Sometimes lecturers are reluctant to provide handouts in advance, as the teaching session may be built around incremental resources. In this situation, lecturers need to consult with their students on the best approach to take.

Taking notes is challenging for dyslexic students, as the level of concentration needed to write the notes, results in them missing the next few sentences of the lecture. Using a voice recorder allows the student to concentrate fully on a lecture, with the confidence that they can recap later using the recording. However, the recording will need some form of cataloguing after the lecture. For each lecture recorded the student will then need to spend as much time, if not more, listening back to the lecture, to highlight the important points, and produce a useful revision aid.

4. Summary

Dyslexic students utilise a range of different support mechanisms to compensate for the challenges they face. Each individual will have their own preferences regarding how to study. Whatever mechanisms are chosen, students are challenged to organise their study to be able to fit this additional support around the standard study pattern. Organisation and time management are two factors, which dyslexic students frequently struggle with, alongside their difficulties with reading and writing.

Awareness of these issues and the impact of the support that dyslexic students receive should help lecturers understand the challenges, and raise awareness that the

additional support does not fix all the problems. Commonly, additional support, whilst very valuable, leads to additional problems, particularly around time management.

5. References

- British Dyslexia Association (2013) BDA definition of dyslexia Available from: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk (Accessed 25 November 2013).
- Collins, E. (2003) 'It's really hard, this dictation business'; observations on the use of an amanuensis in examinations. *Support for Learning* 18 (2), pp.66-70. ISSN 0268-2141
- Du Pre, L., Gilroy, D. and Miles, T. (2008) *Dyslexia at College*. 3rd ed. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ingram, A., Pianu, E. and Welsh, R. (2007) Supporting dyslexic Scottish University hospitality students, positive actions for the future? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 19 (7), pp.606-11 DOI: 10.1108/09596110710818347
- Kirby, J.R., Silvestri, R., Allingham, B.H., Parrila, R. and La Fave, C.B. (2008) Learning strategies and study approaches of postsecondary students with dyslexia. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 41 (1), pp.85-96 DOI: 10.1177/0022219407311040
- Miles, T.R. (2006) *Fifty years in Dyslexia Research*. Chichester: Wiley and Sons.
- O'Brien, B., Mansfield, J. and Legge, G. (2005) The effect of print size on reading speed in dyslexia. *Journal of Research in Reading* 28 (3), pp.332-49
- Osborne, P. (1999) Pilot study to investigate the performance of dyslexic students in written assessments. *Innovations in Education and Training International* 36 (2), pp.155-60.
- Richardson, J.T.E. and Wydell, T.N. (2003) The representation and attainment of students with dyslexia in UK higher education. *Reading and Writing* 16, pp.475-503 ISSN 0922-4777
- Richardson, J.T.E. (2010) Course completion and attainment in disabled students taking courses with the Open University UK. *Open Learning* 25 (2), pp.81-94 DOI: 10.1080/02680511003787263
- Schneps, M.H., Thomson, J.M., Chen, C., Sonnert, G. and Pomplum, M. (2013) E-Readers are more effective than paper for some with dyslexia. *PLOS ONE* 8 (9), pp.1-9
- Singleton, C. and Henderson, L. (2006) Visual factors in reading. *London Review of Education* 4 (1), pp.89-98.
- Singleton, C. (1997) Dyslexia in higher education: policy, provision and practice. In: British Dyslexia Association International Conference. York: British Dyslexia Association.
- Tops, W., Callens, M., Lammertyn, J., Van Hees, V. and Brysbaert, M. (2012) Identifying students with dyslexia in higher education. *Annals of Dyslexia* 62, pp.186-203.