

Dyslexia – Difficulty or Difference? Welsh Dyslexia Project Winter Newsletter December 05

The accepted view of Dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty may have been a major cause of under achievement among students and low expectations among teachers for the past two or three decades. A learning difficulty implies that something is “wrong” with the learner, leading to a focus on identifying weaknesses rather than celebrating strengths. This, in turn, can result in an emphasis on remediation by specialists rather than resolution by aware class and subject teachers. One inevitable consequence of this has been to focus on a school’s special needs provision, placing responsibility for remediation on the SENCO and diverting attention away from the mainstream classroom which is, after all, the place where dyslexic students spend most of their time. Acknowledging SpLD as a Specific Learning Difference, however, places the focus firmly on the way all lessons are planned, resourced and taught and on the way teachers are supported through school policy, practice and ethos. Now real opportunities are available for an emphasis on inclusive mainstream strategies designed to empower all learners to be the best they can be, especially if we reject those wordy, cumbersome definitions of Dyslexia and, instead, accept it as

“A specific learning difference which may cause unexpected difficulties in the acquisition of certain skills”

Defining Dyslexia as a specific learning difference rather than a difficulty conveys a realistic balance of opportunities and costs, strengths and weaknesses for the child, as do all the other learning styles and preferences. The “straight line thinking” typical of many mathematical logical students is vulnerable when creativity is required, while the eclectic style of linguistic students may not yield results when step by step processing is required. So the notion of Dyslexia as a specific learning difficulty is arguably unhelpful and wrong, certainly within the inclusive ethos of a Dyslexia friendly classroom. While there are undoubted areas of vulnerability, this is true of all students and of all learning preferences. The skill of the teacher lies in achieving a balance between empowerment and challenge within clearly understood patterns of strength and weakness. Therefore viewing Dyslexia as a difficulty may be to fundamentally misunderstand the situation. Dyslexia is, in fact, a specific learning difference which becomes a difficulty when ignored, dismissed or badly addressed.

How does this difference manifest? Dyslexic students are often imaginative and creative lateral thinkers who develop original solutions to problems. They may be skilful in design and construction, IT etc, often seeming to “know” how things work without reading instructions, manuals etc. Creating a big picture from apparently disparate bits is often strength, as is the ability to form the “whole” when some of the elements are missing or not quite appropriate.

Despite opportunities there are inevitable costs associated with thinking in a dyslexic way, just as there are with all the other learning styles and preferences. The nature of the specific learning difference may cause unexpected problems with the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills, requiring dyslexic children to be taught in the way they learn in order to minimize problems and maximize potential. A particular priority is to recognize and compensate for possible problems with working memory, information processing and hearing the sounds and syllables in words. Dyslexic students are particularly vulnerable when a classroom-based preoccupation with reading and spelling accuracy is allowed to detract from information processing and organizing thoughts on paper. When this happens the specific difference becomes a specific difficulty and a learning preference becoming a learning problem

Linking the preferences – a whole class strategy

Consider the following task:

As part of a Geography lesson the student is asked to explain how a volcano erupts. This sort of tasks places demands on working memory (auditory and visual sequential memories) and information processing, precisely the areas in which dyslexic students are vulnerable. Yet during the oral part of the lessons it may be quite clear that the dyslexic students have an ability appropriate understanding of what happens and, given an appropriate learning medium, are perfectly capable of showing what that know. However, being non-traditional students along with a majority of the class, they are unlikely to be the best they can be during a traditional pen and paper exercise. The challenge facing the teacher is how to provide evidence of learning in a way which will support all students.

One simple response is to base most information processing around kinaesthetic preferences because the nature of activities invariably engages the student in a wide variety of tasks. It can work like this:

- Prepare a list of all relevant (and some not so relevant) information
- Cut into strips,
- Place in envelopes
- Share envelopes between tables or pairs or whatever.

The initial task is to sort the information in terms of process, order and relevance and consideration may also be given to “piles for paragraphs” at this time. “Piles for paragraphs” simply means a loose clustering of information according to some vague initial criteria – perhaps things happening “above/below ground” as a starting point.

A casual audit of learning styles may reveal the potential for the following preferences to be harnessed by all group members at any given time:

Kinaesthetic – physically sorting the information into sequence and/or piles

Auditory/ – discussing/justifying sequence and choice of pile

Linguistic

Visual - colour coding the information – e.g. brown for below ground, red for above and/or illustrating certain points with quick drawings

Mathematical/ - achieving an appropriate order of events to fulfil the task

Logical

Intrapersonal - working on delegated tasks within the group

Intrapersonal - making individual decisions, perhaps based on research and then reporting back

Musical - creating the “volcano rap” as an aide memoir

Similar opportunities derive from information generated by the group during brainstorming. Most teachers use brainstorming as a class activity to generate information, with the teacher recording on the board. It is even more effective as a small group activity in which the group members accept responsibility for the generation and recording of information to resolve a given issue. It can work like this:

- Each group nominates a scribe to record ideas
- The teacher sets a problem to be addressed by each small group
- Group members whisper their ideas to the scribe, who writes them down as fast as s/he can

Dyslexia Friendly Evidence of Learning

If the lesson aim is to produce and process information on a given topic or aspect, the evidence of learning is on the table in the form of a colour coded and/or numbered list or perhaps a flow chart or mind map using strips of paper. The evidence can be recorded on digital camera or web cam etc and the lesson can move on. However it is likely that the teacher will require evidence in exercise books in order to generate individual marks and it is at this point that the “Dyslexia friendliness of the lesson will stand or fall.

The least Dyslexia friendly option is to ask for some form of write up, in sentences and paragraphs. Even though the aim of the lesson makes no mention of the need for “flowing prose” it may be difficult for teachers to break free of this traditional response to producing evidence of learning. Yet individual evidence of learning within the tasks above could also embrace:

- mind maps
- storyboards
- flow charts
- bullet points
- scribed work
- web cam/video oral presentation
- “Explain how a volcano erupts”

I would argue very strongly that any of these are acceptable evidence of the effective generation, selection and processing of information. Furthermore, they are within the reach of dyslexic students whose specific learning differences empower them to operate effectively in some or all of the tasks above. While writing in paragraphs may be a step too far for some students, insisting that the ideas can only be presented as, say, a story board will intimidate and even alienate others. The Dyslexia friendly and learning friendly approach is offer the opportunity to produce evidence in a variety of forms, allowing students to select the one best suited to their pattern of preferences and the demands of the task. It could be that paragraphs are the most effective way to present the information and a dyslexic student may choose to work in a less comfortable zone in

order to meet certain criteria. However the key word is “choose.” Working outside of comfort zones is always less uncomfortable when it is the student’s choice to do so.

Sometimes it is impossible or inappropriate to offer choice, perhaps when preparing model exam answers etc. The priority here is to ensure that students have had the opportunity to process and handle information within their comfort zones before being expected to present in paragraphs.

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