

Definitions of dyslexia

In my experience of working with students at university with dyslexia where as many appeared to be at ease with the challenges of their studies as those who struggled, I have generally felt that the defining features of the syndrome appear as indistinct as they are multifarious.

This causes problems for researchers when the focus of their studies will need to rely on a common understanding of what dyslexia MEANS because without this, it might be argued that the research outcomes of their projects are floating on a meaning of choice, that is, one that may be 'convenient' for the purpose of their studies rather than something more broadly agreed. If so, then this surely serves only to confuse rather than advance knowledge.

In previously asking 'dyslexia specialists' in universities to explain what dyslexia is, the response most commonly received has tended to be preceded by a thoughtful pause (which in itself says much) followed by a somewhat equivocal response often along the lines of 'a broad spectrum of weaknesses in lexical competencies and phonological processing often balanced by strengths in other (academic) areas frequently relating to innovative and creative thinking, but where these strengths and weaknesses also impact on time management and organization, in working memory function and in systematic sequencing of processes and tasks' - or any combination or absence of any or some of these factors.

So the second of the literature review maps that will be guiding the more formal written-up literature review takes 'Definitions of Dyslexia' as its focus.

GoogleScholar is an invaluable tool in delving into archived research and by using its 'date range' filters interesting results are being revealed on the evolution of definitions of dyslexia as most, if not all research studies that aim to explore dyslexia and how it impacts on learning tend to report on how their research agenda is founded on a definition of the syndrome.

From search results revealed, it has been of interest to note that from the very emergence of the term 'word-blindness' in the late nineteenth century as a descriptor to explain specific reading difficulties that on the one hand, did not appear to be as a consequence of any particularly apparent intellectual disability or impairment or other cognitive disfunction, nor on the other as a consequence of visual impairment or lack of acuity, writers such as Schmitt, Hinshelwood and Morgan report not only issues related to reading difficulty, but also to 'impairments' or 'deficits' in other areas of functioning that were unrelated to reading. This was particularly the case in Hinshelwood's report of his encounter with a middle-aged adult male who, in addition to difficulties with reading the printed word, was reported to have difficulties with sequencing tasks and organizing his work processes in ways that suggested some difficulty with short-term memory processes.

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This is interesting because almost all early reports of dyslexia aka 'word-blindness' relate to children struggling to learn to read so there is little early evidence about issues encountered in non-reading related cognitive functioning, so Hinshelwood's account of not only *other* difficulties that we now know are well-reported as part of the dyslexic syndrome but also about the PERSISTENCE of difficulties into adulthood make that report worthy of comment.

The Literature Review Map on Definitions of Dyslexia currently under construction will provide a more comprehensive commentary on the evolution of definitions but even at this stage from the research identified so far, it seems that throughout the first half of the twentieth century, professionals involved with and/or interested in dyslexia fell into two distinct camps. These commentators were either medical practitioners or physicians and as such regarded the syndrome as a medical condition that required 'treatment', or otherwise were educators or psychologists who more usually viewed dyslexia as a learning disability. In either case, the syndrome was quite obviously viewed using a 'medical' rather than 'social' model of disability which, in my view, persists to this day as in my experience at least, it is rare to find a dyslexia specialist who DOESN'T refer to an individual being 'DIAGNOSED' as opposed to the much less loaded term 'IDENTIFIED' which seems clearly preferable in my view.

So it has been of great interest that whilst researching literature from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first, it appears to have been only in the last 50 years that studies have become more enlightened and open-minded about the nature of dyslexia in an educational context. Studies in the late 1960s about how dyslexia impacts on learning in early-aged schoolchildren in the USA pioneered some of the earlier 'more modern' definitions of the syndrome although most are focused on dyslexia as a learning DISABILITY rather than a learning difference. Lerner (1969) offers an interesting summary of the history of definitions of dyslexia to that date and this paper will be the subject of a subsequent post in this StudyBlog.

This literature cluster review so far has prompted me to reflect on how the outcome of any research study is surely skewed according to the researcher's definition of dyslexia and upon which the legitimacy of the study is based. Without a generally agreed starting point that describes what dyslexia IS, it is difficult to understand how the body of research on dyslexia more generally can move forward cohesively. Indeed, this lack of consensus about the nature of dyslexia has clearly troubled most researchers ahead of me.

With this in mind, I have decided to try to explore the current drift on the definition of dyslexia amongst researchers and professional educators who are interested in how dyslexia impacts on learning. If I can gain a reasonably consistent understanding about what everyone else thinks dyslexia IS, then this should surely be the basis upon which this research project is based.

To conduct this exploration, I have collected 10 definitions of dyslexia from a variety of sources and built them into a short e-Questionnaire, accessible on the project's webpages [here](#), which I plan to distribute across the various

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forums and discussion lists to try to elicit enough responses to enable a conclusion to be drawn on a definition of dyslexia in the contemporary context.