

Two very recent research papers – summarized here in bullet point format, but both relating to DYSLEXIC IDENTITIES which is a core component of my research.

- **Henderson, P., 2015, Are there delays in reporting dyslexia in university learners? Experiences of university learning support staff, JOURNAL OF FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, pending publication;**
- **Thompson, C., Bacon, A.M., Auburn, T., 2015, Dyslexic identities in Online Forum postings, DISABILITY AND SOCIETY, In press;**

Two very interesting papers that are grouped in this post partly because they were read together, and secondly because their content overlaps. Although Henderson's paper is more concerned with reporting process issues in identifying dyslexia in HE students, its introduction makes some good summary points about dyslexic identity. This links well with the second paper under summary review in this post where Thompson et al conducted a highly interesting study exploring dyslexic identities by examining 'posts' on a dyslexia online discussion forum, www.beingdyslexic.co.uk.

So as to capture the gist of both papers directly after reading them, points that caught my particular interest as being highly pertinent to my research are summarized here in a very brief bullet-point format, with the intention of expanding these into a more narrative commentary later.

Firstly, the key points in Henderson's paper:

The study discusses challenges in identifying and supporting students in HE with dyslexia. It is reported that amongst other factors, recent government policies on widening participation in university education in the UK has encouraged a greater uptake of higher education from those in groups traditionally labelled as socially disadvantaged or under-represented in some other way. It is stated that students with dyslexia currently form the largest minority group of students entering higher education but points out that there remains no obligation from students in this group to either disclose their dyslexia on application or entrance, nor indeed at any stage throughout their courses. Various reasons are suggested to account for this reluctance to disclose, ranging from concerns that to do so could jeopardize future employment (for example, in nursing) to a wish to retain a non-disabled identity, to strategically deciding when to disclose in order to enhance prospects of a better degree at the end of the course.

In summary:

- Mortimore & Crozier (2006) reported that many students found disclosure of dyslexia inappropriate because they did not want the label of disability to form part of their newly-established identity as a university student;
- Morris & Turnbull (2006) found that dyslexic students wanted to be accepted by their peers as equal and not 'different';
- Several studies reported that for many students from minority groups, establishing a 'student identity' was considered by them to be more important than other aspects of their university life such as accessing learning support;
- Many other studies conclude that students are frequently reluctant to readily report dyslexia as a consequence of the medical model and subsequent interpretation of learning differences as requiring special treatment.

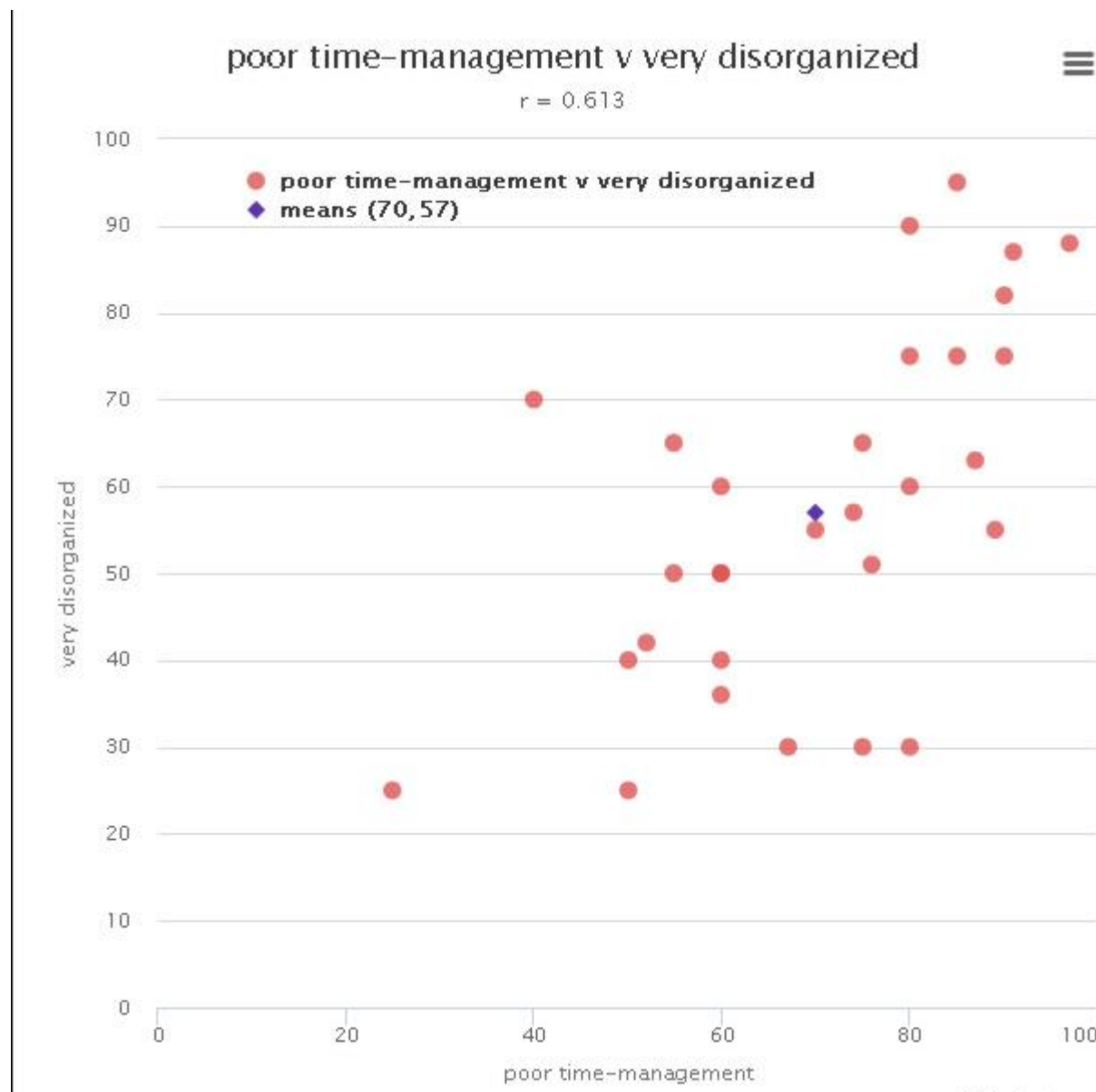
These initial key points are very pertinent to my research project as its focus is sharpening onto a study of the 'dyslexic self' and the impact that being labelled as disabled has on academic agency.

Henderson describes the methodology of the research which, briefly, focused on the experiences of four learning support tutors at one university in the UK, collecting together their thoughts about student disclosure of dyslexia, what leads to this disclosure or might not and the reasons students provide for coming forward to disclose when they do.

The analysis and discussion also draws out some interesting points:

- A consistent issue that emerges ... is that dyslexia may be more likely to be identified or reported at times other than in the early stages of a student's academic journey at university – notably in Year 2 or 3 of their studies. This is also consistent with my own experiences working with students with dyslexia at Southampton where I regularly met students for the first time at later stages in their courses;
- Nichols (2012) found that some students only consider reporting their dyslexia or agreeing to a screening test when their academic performance feedback deteriorates or when they begin to find it much harder to keep up with their peers. [*adjust/amend my research QNR to find out about this*];
- Jacklin et al (2007) had earlier suggested that dyslexic students begin to experience challenges in keeping pace with the demands of self-directed learning that frequently characterizes later work at degree level because this demands greater competencies in organization and time-management. This point is consistent with the prevalence of these

characteristics of dyslexia identified by respondents to my small-scale enquiry to professional colleagues where firstly, colleagues reported that each dimension is encountered in nearly 60% and nearly 70% of student interactions respectively, with my association analysis of these dimensions revealing a 0.613 correlation between them, increasing to 0.693 when the significant outliers were removed from the dataset.



- Henderson’s paper is in line with Lahteenoja & Pirttila-Backman (2005) as one of many research teams which consistently conclude that during the first year of study in HE, establishing their student identity through a sense of belongingness to a social group is more important to students than the learning process at university.
- Henderson reports another theme that emerged in his research relating to time-factors where some dyslexic students reported that juggling day-to-day demands of their learning did not leave sufficient time to attend specialist learning appointments or other learning support initiatives. I found this to be similarly reported in the pilot study (MSc project) to my research where finding the time to do ‘extra’ was a recurring factor amongst dyslexic

students who already experience challenges in getting enough done to keep up with their courses in the time available.

- ‘Going for help with studies takes up more of my time when i’m already struggling with too much work and not enough time, and it rarely helps as i can’t explain why i’m struggling otherwise would have just done it in the first place’ (student #20, Dykes, 2008, p99);
- Evidence is increasingly emerging that many of the competing demands faced by dyslexic students are equally faced by some other contemporary learners. Fraser (2012) suggested that it might be argued that in the context of widening participation, many NON-dyslexic students from non-traditional educational or socio-economic backgrounds do not receive the level of support they need to guide them through complex social issues which may even be aside from their LEARNING needs but which nevertheless, impact on their engagement with their learning at university.

Two, key recommendations emerge from Henderson’s research: First of all, and as broadly indicated in the summarized point above, we must not assume that all students with dyslexia will report or disclose this at an early stage of their university journey, or even at any point during their time studying. This is consistent with my research conjecture that there are many students at university either with known but undisclosed dyslexia and more significantly, with unknown dyslexia. Henderson suggests that finding ways to ensure that late-reporting dyslexic students don’t become discouraged or lose confidence in their abilities to study at university is an important issue to address.

Secondly, Henderson reports findings that suggest that some students with dyslexia were more likely to come forward if their student peers had already reported similar learning issues or challenges. He therefore advocates recruiting student champions with learning differences such as dyslexia to be involved in pre-admission and open days so that dyslexia might be de-stigmatized and a more inclusive message reaches prospective students to a university which might encourage them to be more candid about their dyslexia at the outset of their studies.

Next, summarizing the significant findings in the 2015 research by Thompson et.al.:

This very interesting paper reported an enquiry to explore how people with dyslexia aligned themselves against three identity descriptors:

- as learning disabled
- as differently enabled
- as socially disabled

The process examined threads on an online forum hosted in the UK and used by a wide variety of people with dyslexia or with an interest in dyslexia: www.beingdyslexic.co.uk. Since I am building into my research QNR a self-identity question in the opening section which asks a few brief questions about the respondent, such as their student status, their gender. I have included an option to self-report what I have described as ‘specific learning challenges’ where I am hoping that students who know they are dyslexic will self-identify. When they do, I have asked these to complete a statement sentence which tells me how they were told of their dyslexia and in what way was the syndrome described to them:

- ‘My dyslexia was to me as a learning ,

I am hoping that data gathered from the variations in the options for completing the sentence may enable me to detect tensions related to stigma about being labelled as disabled which is highly pertinent to my research, and link this to the broader discourse about the dilemma of difference as written about by Norwich (eg: 2010). Although his context is in the areas of special education and special educational needs, terms in themselves that are quite contentious due to their associations with deficit and disability, there is an increasing discourse about stigma in not only education but across society more widely that is taking a more analytic approach to the impact that stigmatization has on individuals, how they construct their identities and their realities, and in particular on how it impacts on their relationships to learning. (eg: Ainlay, et al, 2013). In keeping with the positivist direction in which this research project is pointing, it is of note that development in the ‘capabilities approach’ as a counter to deficit-laden disability labelling is making some headway in the educational context. (eg: Norwich, 2013, Hornby, 2015). This is an interesting discussion and will be the subject of a later post to this StudyBlog.

So, some of the key points:

- A thematic analysis of forum contributions showed that although identities were to an extent malleable, those individuals who constructed themselves as differently-enabled CELEBRATED their dyslexia-related abilities;
- Some researchers have proposed that those with visible disabilities are more likely to self-identify as disabled than those with hidden disabilities...
- ... and that students with hidden disabilities such as dyslexia practise ‘perception management’ strategies which permit them to use the relevant learning support mechanisms whilst at the same time minimizing negative stereotypes about disability (p3);

- Dyslexic identities are traditionally shaped within a discourse of intrapersonal impairments resulting in learning disability (p4) ...
- ... whereas the SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST approach indicates that individual are disabled by society and the personal characteristics that society values (p4);
- which continues with further references to work from Chanock (2007) and Riddick (2001) about the social constructivist perspective by commenting on the ways in which learning institutions (aka education systems) transmit knowledge and evaluate learning through literacy-focused models of delivery and assessment, which disables learners with dyslexia;
- ... by conceptualizing students with dyslexia as having ‘special learning requirements’ this reinforces the model of those with dyslexia as needy and disabled (p5);
- Zeleke (2004) amongst many researchers points out again, that in an educational system that emphasizes literacy skills, students with dyslexia can become discouraged at repeated failure and develop lower self-esteem and academic self-worth than their non-dyslexic peers (p5);
- The discussion that follows draws attention to the Equality Act (2010) which although stipulates the requirement of so-named ‘reasonable adjustments’ in workplaces, places of learning etc, by drawing on a human rights agenda to redress social injustice and discrimination, it still relies on an understanding of ‘difference’ that is limited to medically defined ‘impairments’ that are ‘diagnosed’. Our attention is drawn that for some, ‘diagnosis’ at least provides an explanation that can bring relief from emotions related to being previously labelled as lazy or stupid, these emotions are resilient to change and can be pervasive in learning contexts throughout adult learning histories. ‘Diagnosis’ can compound the sense of ‘something being wrong’ (p6)

The next section discusses the concept of ‘differently-enabled’ as a more positive viewpoint on individuals with dyslexia:

- Several research studies are commented on and although attention is drawn to some reporting anecdotal rather than empirical evidence to support them, dyslexia being associated with enhanced visio-spatial abilities is well-recorded and that ‘visual thinking’ does seem to be a widely reported characteristic of dyslexia, linking this to reports that employment and career fields where this is valued as a creative ability tend to have a high representation of individuals in them with dyslexia because these individuals’ skills in seeing the world from novel perspectives is recognized as being desirable;
- Notable references are made to Chanock’s (2007) paper about the disconnections between the members of the various knowledge and learning communities when it comes

to knowing about dyslexia. Aspects of the paper that particularly mentioned refer to Chanock's viewpoint about dyslexic students being 'differently good' at academic work rather than 'not so good' when comparing with their non-dyslexic peers. In my earlier research project that forms the pilot for this research, this is echoed by the reflections of one QNR respondent who wrote: "EXTRA SUPPORT IS NOT GIVEN IN THE RIGHT WAY. HOW DOES EXTRA TIME HELP? IT DOESN'T REFLECT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IN THE REAL WORLD. ***More focused tuition concentrating on different skill areas (such as practical, visual and aural) would be of a lot more benefit, or changing the assessment techniques***" (Dykes, 2008, p81);

The results and discussion section of the paper is divided into three sections, each corresponding to the three identity categories outlined in the introduction: 1. 'LEARNING DISABLED', 2. 'DIFFERENTLY-ENABLED' and 3. 'SOCIALY DISABLED'. The major part of each section uses examples of forum-posts to populate the analysis and examples of these are reproduced here

1. 'LEARNING-DISABLED':

- "I NEVER THOUGHT I WAS STUPID OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT, BUT I DID FEEL THAT MY SMARTS WERE TRAPPED INSIDE MY HEAD, UNABLE TO BE PROPERLY EXPLORED" (p12);
- "THE FAULT OFTEN COMES FROM OTHERS WHO ARE NOT FULLY INFORMED ABOUT DYSLEXIA AND THINK ILLITERACY IS SEEN AS A RESULT OF LOW INTELLIGENCE" (p13);
- "FOR ME, REALIZING I WAS DYSLEXIC GAVE ME THE CLUES TO START TO WORK OUT WHY I FELT SO OUT OF STEP WITH THE WORLD" (p16);

2. 'DIFFERENTLY-ENABLED':

- "I JUST THINK AND DELIVER MY KNOWLEDGE IN A DIFFERENT WAY TO OTHER PEOPLE" (p17);
- "THE TRUTH IS, THERE ARE MANY ADVANTAGES TO BEING DYSLEXIC. THE TRICK IS FINDING OUT WHAT THESE ADVANTAGES ARE AND HOW TO USE THEM" (p19);
- Thompson comments that many posts analysed in this section where individuals considered themselves to be 'differently-enabled' poured scorn on the traditional focus of non-dyslexics on dyslexia-associated deficits rather than strengths. However, this is consistent with the viewpoint that whilst education systems remain fixated on literacy-based assessment processes, it will be the deficits in this single area that continue to disadvantage those with dyslexia.

- “IT IS EASIER TO FOCUS ON PEOPLES’ WEAKNESSES ... BECAUSE THEY HAVE ALREADY DECIDED THAT BECAUSE OF ‘WEAKNESSES’, THAT PERSON HAS GOT TO BE THICK” (p19);

3. ‘SOCIALY-DISABLED’:

- on reflecting about peers at university: “THERE WERE NO GENIUSES – NONE THAT I COULD SPOT ANYWAY. BUT THEY [student peers] DID HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON: THEY WERE GOOD AT READING, WRITING, EXAMS AND PLANNING ASSIGNMENTS – THE VERY STUFF I WAS SO BAD AT” (p21);
- “I FIND THE WORLD IS NOT ARRANGED IN A WAY THAT USES MY ABILITIES. RATHER IT IS ARRANGED IN A WAY THAT EMPHASIZES MY PROBLEMS” (p21);

In the final section of Thompson’s paper, some of the conclusions of the research are telling:

- Blame for the construction of a learning-disabled identity was often ascribed to non-dyslexics; with a recurrent concern of forum-posters was that dyslexia is too often associated with a lack of intelligence or laziness;
- A more constructive view was presented in the ‘differently-enabled’ identities although even amongst these contributors, many reflected on the positive markers of difference being frequently over-shadowed by the difficulties of living in a non-dyslexic world where it was clearly alluded that this is principally with regard to education and learning where different learning styles were imposed due to a lack of accommodation of different learning styles;
- There needs to be a continued review of those educational practices which serve to underscore dyslexia as a disability (p25);
- Chanock (2007) is referred to again, and collected with Graham & Grieshaber (2008) to further strongly emphasize the need for education systems to acknowledge and appreciate diversity of learning style and different expressions of intelligence (p25);

My research project unashamedly takes a positivist standpoint and I strongly echo current and prior researchers and thinkers who advocate a re-evaluation of the VALUE of dyslexia in learning communities where all creative talents and competencies should be equally celebrated and more so, accommodated in learning and knowledge-acquisition processes. Thompson’s paper concluded with a recommendation that whilst the status-quo prevails, at least by converting those with an identity stuck at ‘learning-disabled’ to one more aligned with ‘differently-enabled’ is likely to influence the development of positive self-worth (esteem).

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