Dyslexia in higher education: enhancing student belonging and overcoming barriers to achievement through communities of practice

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Abstract

Feeling that they belong is a crucial part of a student's learning journey which impacts enjoyment, attainment and retention. Dyslexic students can feel isolated within their diagnosis and do not openly discuss their inherent challenges and strengths, often due to previous educational and/or social misconceptions. In the United Kingdom, with a professional diagnosis, tailored support for this Specific Learning Difference (SpLD) may be sought through government funding known as Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). However, many dyslexic students remain undiagnosed, or do not wish to disclose, and this, combined with a reduction in DSA funding in 2015, has negatively impacted the achievement and affinity of this cohort. Although as a result of this funding cut higher education institutions became legally responsible for making reasonable adjustments to their teaching practices, this broad-brush approach does not support dyslexic students in understanding the many intricacies associated with this SpLD, or how to navigate their learning in a higher education context. To bridge this gap, and help like-minded students share ideas to help others whilst also developing their own skills and confidence, I initiated a community of practice (CoP). After a year of fortnightly meetings, a group of empowered individuals, who had a much deeper understanding of what being dyslexic meant, emerged with newfound confidence, having connected and collaborated with neurologically similar people.

Keywords: dyslexia; community of practice; belonging; confidence; achievement; empowered.

Introduction

Nieminen and Pesonen (2022, p.2) assert that, 'disabilities and neurodiversity are commonly understood as deficits in one's studying, as personal tragedies that hinder one from productivity and timely graduation'; this negatively impacts students' sense of belonging and marginalises them from the academy. This is a global challenge, since 'current estimates indicate that 35 million Americans have a learning disability (LD), and dyslexia is by far the most diagnosed among all LDs' (Zablotsky et al., 2019, cited in Richardson, 2021, p.125). When referring to dyslexia in a UK higher education context, Jacobs et al.'s (2022) recent study states 'findings suggest that higher education institutions need to create an inclusive learning environment that effectively supports this underrepresented group. This will break down barriers to learning and help students succeed academically'. Although this is something that many institutions strive to do through inclusive teaching practices, a community of practice (CoP) can be an effective way of bringing like-minded students together to share ideas, learn new methods of working and connect on a level that may not be easily achievable between dyslexic and non-dyslexic individuals.

The rationale for initiating a community of practice

There is an above average number of dyslexic students studying at the creative higher education institution I work at (HESA, 2022). During six years as a Learning Development Advisor I have witnessed, predominantly during one-to-one academic skills sessions, the incredible strengths that many of these students have, not despite their dyslexia, but because of it (Eide and Eide, 2011). These strengths include increased spatial awareness, determination, big picture thinking, problem solving, creativity, visual thinking, communication - the list could go on (West, 2022). But, I have also shared tears, theirs and mine, when discussing their previous educational experiences and subsequent social and emotional barriers to learning. Jacobs et al. (2022, p.11) explain the damage these experiences and barriers have on students' sense of self as the 'data indicates that negative connotations that surround dyslexia had an impact on student's self-image and identity, indicating participants feel ostracised in their academic environments'. With sunken shoulders and heavy hearts, these amazingly talented students are frequently

lacking in confidence and isolated within their dyslexia diagnosis, something which often continues throughout their university level study and beyond. Recent research studies evidence that students' higher levels of motivation and self-confidence, together with improved academic engagement and achievement, are linked to a greater sense of belonging (Pedler, Willis and Nieuwoudt, 2021, p.398). This sense of belonging can be created through the development of a non-hierarchical CoP, which aims to empower students to foreground and communicate their individuality, and as a result of this empowerment acts as a platform to help non-dyslexics understand different ways of thinking. This is not dissimilar to Nieminen and Pesonen's views on anti-ableist pedagogies where, 'through a communal approach, every student can participate and contribute as their own personal and diverse selves, as disabledness is framed not as a deficit but as a crucial lens to examine the world that the whole community can learn from' (2022, p.6). However, without improving the understanding of dyslexia for those who are dyslexic, and subsequently improving their confidence, there is less chance that they will feel empowered enough to be a part of this dialogue.

Individual learning development support can be very effective for dyslexic students, particularly good quality disabled students' allowance (DSA) study skills support, which can not only improve academic achievement, but also positively impacts how students view themselves (Johnson et al., 2019; Kelly and Erwin, 2022). However, no amount of text book reading, training course attendance, or qualifications achieved, can artificially create that real sense of belonging when amongst like-minded peers who truly understand your lived experience because it resembles theirs (Pedler, Willis and Nieuwoudt, 2021). I spent some time thinking about how this gap could be bridged. I was aware of how transformational being a member of a research CoP was to my understanding of research related intricacies and how being a part of this research community had positively impacted my confidence. So, in May 2021 I initiated a CoP at my institution to provide an informal and supportive environment within which dyslexic students could interact and share experiences connected to dyslexia and higher education. The invitation was not just for those who had a formal diagnosis, but also to students who suspected they might be dyslexic, since many students do not become aware of this until they reach a higher education level (Packer, 2020).

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The effectiveness of communities of practice for dyslexic students

In 2020-22, as the Covid-19 pandemic continued to impact the UK, teaching remained remote, so for the first five months the CoP met for one hour, fortnightly, online. Whilst my initial invitation had attracted interest from twenty-seven students, the first meeting was attended by six students spanning foundation to postgraduate level study. Although numbers were lower than anticipated, to say it was a success would be an understatement. My role was to facilitate their discussions, which was just as well because after introductions I could hardly get a word in edgeways! Students initially shared experiences; this was the first time any of them had openly discussed 'their dyslexia' and they were clearly encountering a sense of shared understanding. They touched upon lack of confidence, self-esteem and the sense of shame at being dyslexic, which was often socially constructed from educational and/or family/peer misconceptions. It boosted their morale to hear other dyslexic narratives and it was at this point I became aware of, as Wegner and Nückles (2015), cited in Tummons (2015, pp. 18-19) assert, CoPs as 'provision[s] of authentic opportunities for students to engage in practice, and to talk about that practice, as a precondition for meaningful learning'. Students were beginning to get a sense of who they really were and how, armed with this knowledge, they might navigate the challenges that a higher education environment imposes. In addition to more generalised difficulties relating to reading, writing, organisation, processing and memory, these challenges not only include, as MacCullagh, Bosanquet and Badcock (2016) assert, 'taking lecture notes…following lecture slides…auditory and visual distractions in lecture theatres and other learning spaces…[lecturers] speaking style…format of recorded lectures...assessment methods', but also a lack of knowledge about dyslexia by peers, and university staff responsible for ensuring an inclusive learning environment (Jacobs et al., 2022). Some of the strengths associated with dyslexia were unconsciously mentioned which were sometimes unique to a particular individual, and combined with discussions around co-occurring neurodivergence, this highlighted that, just as we are all different as people, so is each person's experience of dyslexia.

Prior to our first meeting I invited students to upload ideas to a virtual bulletin board called Padlet outlining what they wanted to gain from the CoP and what they thought they could give to help others, to ensure that when facilitating the conversations during meetings they were relevant to their requirements. This also helped me to think of some provocation

questions to encourage discussion around some of the particular topics they had highlighted: academic reading and writing, communication of ideas, presentations, employment, DSA support, assistive technology, life skills and the perception of others. In addition to introductions and getting to know each other, the first meeting also focused on their reading challenges and the strategies they used, or could use for students new to higher education, including suggestions from my experience of supporting dyslexic students in relation to critical academic reading. At the end of the meeting some students expressed that it would have been really useful to have had access to this type of shared community at the outset of their higher education journey. This is something that will be offered at the start of each new academic year, with existing members of the community ready and willing to embrace new members and help them navigate the unfamiliar, and often difficult, higher education landscape.

Achievements and future plans

Since the initial meeting in May 2021, we have continued to meet regularly. Students dip in and out of the meetings depending on their schedule, but they remain strongly bonded with interdisciplinary collaborations and a new student union society amongst their shared achievements. They have more exciting projects in the pipeline, and with their newfound confidence they feel empowered - embracing and enjoying their studies. The barriers may never completely be overcome, but as Learning Developers we can help build the bridges to belonging and community in higher education.

Although this paper focuses on CoPs for students with dyslexia, there is every reason to believe that similar communities would be beneficial to the achievement, integration and belonging of other marginalised groups of students facing barriers in higher education, for example, students who have English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL).

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Karen Welton is a Learning Development Adviser at Arts University Plymouth. She has a particular interest in dyslexia and is passionate about raising awareness of neurodiversity from a 360° perspective, not just the challenges which are often fixated upon within the educational and wider community. Her Masters in Education thesis explored her understanding of dyslexia, her role, and the skills she needed to successfully support dyslexic students at a higher education level.

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