

# Dyslexia and the Language of Disadvantage

## A personal viewpoint by Sascha Roos, Dyslexia Tutor

This article contends that we can combat the low expectations often placed on students with dyslexia by transforming the language around this learning difference.

Much research has shown that labels and language around a 'disability' are often a basis for stigma and lower societal expectations. In terms of a 'learning disability' definitions can be self-reinforcing, whereby individuals don't believe they have the ability to reach their potential. We need to address this issue of stigma and misconception, and challenge the assumptions of disadvantage and low ability around dyslexia.

In our society the conventional language around dyslexia is one of 'struggle', 'terrible disadvantage', even 'embarrassment', and those who do achieve 'despite this impairment' have done so 'against all the odds'.

The media can be particularly influential here. Although it is very encouraging to hear about successful or famous people with dyslexia, the language around their stories is often couched in very negative language. We hear tales of 'adversity' and language where celebrities 'battled' with dyslexia, and 'despite suffering' they finally 'overcame' it to then succeed in life. Unsurprisingly this negative language can reinforce the idea of dyslexia as a 'disability' that will be a constant struggle for the individual 'afflicted', and leads to that idea that we must not have too great an expectation of what a student with dyslexia can achieve.

I am not advocating a change in the term dyslexia itself, far from it, but it shouldn't be a label avoided or mentioned in hushed tones. Students are invariably relieved when dyslexia is identified as an explanation as to why they have difficulties in certain areas. However, their disappointments and frustrations often lie in others' attitudes, specifically their teachers and peers, to their 'disability'.

The following quotes are illustrations of my students' personal experiences of frustration and disappointment at the attitudes and low expectations directed at them by others:

- 'They expect me to be stupid.'
- 'I'm not expected to do well, just to pass [the exam].'
- 'But you're good in school, how can you be dyslexic?'
- 'Why are you doing Honours English if you are dyslexic?'
- 'Friends assume I can't read or write - it really annoys me.'
- 'Most people are surprised I'm dyslexic, because they think it's something

really bad.'

- 'I had my hand up with a really good point, but [the teacher] ignored me because she didn't really expect me to come up with anything amazing.'

Regularly I am met with demoralising stories from intelligent individuals who happen to be dyslexic. Those that have the confidence to declare their dyslexia can be met with incredulity or perhaps worse, a sympathetic response of how it must be a terrible struggle. It sometimes seems that the predominant view in society is that dyslexia is an insurmountable disability that affects intelligence. Society therefore has reduced expectations for the 'struggling' dyslexic's academic or career potential.

Dyslexia certainly has its challenges and students with dyslexia have to work that much harder to achieve. However, with the right intervention, support and hard work these negative terms don't equate with the reality of the dyslexic experience.

We need a positive set of beliefs and values on dyslexia, through media coverage, positive attitudes in school and society in general. We can then dispel the negative language and transform how we see dyslexia in schools and in the workplace. It is a learning difference with many challenges but it is also the reason why individuals with dyslexia have certain skills and latent abilities. My students laugh and shrug their shoulders at the notion that they have a 'disability'. Their 'disorder' in fact can seem to provide an unexpected advantage.

The right-hemispheric emphasis of people with dyslexia can help them to be creative thinkers, have good reasoning, problem solving and multiple thought processing skills, to name just a few - qualities that should be harnessed and encouraged. They don't want to 'overcome' their 'disability'; they want to work with it and use the strengths and abilities they have because of their dyslexia.

I would contend that dyslexia needs 're-branding', to highlight it as a difference rather than a disability, and further, that it is a difference to be celebrated and nurtured for all our good. Otherwise we are missing out on the potential and contribution to society of many young people.

A Junior Certificate student summarises the frustrations felt by dyslexic people very well: 'We're not slow, we're different.'

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