**Dyslexia Chat with Abi Fowler and Sarah Sharples 23/02/2021**

Sarah: Thanks very much for having this chat, Abi. I wonder if you could start by introducing yourself and telling us about your PhD?

*Abi: I’m Abi Fowler. I'm a PhD student with Horizon Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) at Nottingham, based in the Human Factors Group in Engineering. My PhD looks at how wearable physiological measures may be able to detect mental workload. I'm applying that in the rail industry, having worked as a consultant in rail and air traffic control, before joining the PhD programme.*

S: Great thank you. As you know, as well as being responsible for leading equality, diversity and inclusion across the University, I'm also your PhD supervisor. One of the things we’ve discussed is your diagnosis of dyslexia. So I wonder if you could just tell me a little bit about how that came about and how that's impacted on your PhD study?

*A: Dyslexia is something I must have had all through my life. I was suspicious I was dyslexic from my teens onwards. I've always preferred movies or audio. I find reading books quite hard going and I can't read faster than read out loud speed. In exams I never got the grades my teachers expected, I did better in my coursework. After my Masters I vowed never to take an exam again. On joining Horizon CDT I realised, if I needed to take exams and I had this rather big thesis to write, I had better check if I was dyslexic. I attended a free group screening event that University Academic Support offered. That came back showing very clearly that I was dyslexic. I then paid for the full educational psychologist assessment. The dyslexia diagnosis really didn't come as a surprise because I already kind of knew in myself it was likely, but I found it was a really useful process. Then I was signposted to what support I could gain centrally at Nottingham through Academic Support. They've been great. The tutors make it clear they're not there to edit your work, but they can give you some pointers that are specific to your condition. I also was provided software that was speech to text and text to speech, with the cost was covered by my PhD sponsors EPSRC. I also paid for coloured lens glasses and they have been brilliant. My eyes are less tired, I don't get as many headaches and my reading speed has slightly increased. It’s more impressive when you're younger than I am, but it's still an improvement.*

*The dyslexia has not stopped my PhD. I think, in some respects, the conceptual side of thinking is easier for dyslexics. The challenge is translating that into a more linear story. That's always the tough bit. If you spoke to another dyslexic they wouldn't need you to keep in that linear form, you could jump around all over the place and they would still be able to follow your story.*

*Once you can explain to people what the challenges you face are, there's a lot of help you can gain.*

S: That sounds really interesting, the support you've had, both the software to help translate your speech into text, but also support to help your reading. How did you identify that was the right support for you? Because there are all sorts of different things that are there to support dyslexia. So just tell me a little bit about that process of identifying what tools were best for you, both in terms of the way in which dyslexia manifests itself for you, but also the fact you're a PhD student and the nature of that particular activity.

*A: After you do the full assessment, you get a very detailed report. For me, for example, one of the tests was being verbally given a series of numbers, that you read back. You then do the same test being asked to be read back in reverse order. My dyslexia was indicated by the difference in number of digits you get to before you make a mistake. It shows a working memory problem that you're not going to be able to get round. You just have to do things a different way. That led to the recommendation “this student would benefit from a dictaphone to record lectures, speech to text software and also text to speech”. Also when they went through in my interview and said, “you may have discovered that you do these things.” I could relate to all of them. I think that's where it is worth having specialists give you bespoke advice and recommendations because you're right, dyslexia can take many forms.*

S: Is there any advice you would give to people like me who are supervising and working with students who have neurodiverse conditions such as dyslexia? I think one of the things that can be a real challenge is there such a range of different conditions, and there's a big difference in the way in which each condition manifests itself in an individual. What can we do to make sure we are giving our students, and our colleagues as well, the best possible support?

*A: It’s a really good question. I think if supervisors are aware there is support there, you don't have to know the full range, but you just know where to signpost people. That's a really good thing coz you can offer that quickly so that there's no time lost. I think what's key is so many people see dyslexia as some sort of limitation. Actually, the more I think about it, because you're not aware that how you think is different to other people, I can see it as a great strength. It's just this thing of this certain aspects of study that are tough. So for a supervisor I would recommend that they always pick on something that is good about the student’s work, and make a point of explaining why it's good. And if the supervisor also notices whether that could be a reflection of the level of sophistication of thought that shows they are a student who is perfectly capable of doing the work and the thinking. It's simply then the logistics of how you get that evidence down. That's easy. You can fix that. It wouldn't have to be just the supervisor. It would be the central support team and so on. I think for students, there is always going to be that hang up that they failed so many times before (if they have not previously been diagnosed, or even if they have). The setup of academia is biased towards people who read at speed and can write for hours without their hand hurting. So it's looking for the positives really and explaining that any of the limitations “We can sort that. Let's find out what those are and, step by step, we'll get there”.*

S: I can see that's really helpful for just building students’ confidence, which is really important. I think at all stages of study and when you progress into a career as well. What advice would you give to other students or staff members who might experience the late diagnosis of dyslexia like you did?

*A: That's a tough one, because I think, because of the stigma that goes with any kind of condition, there's going to be reticence for people to want to come forward, want to seek help. If you're in a position where you do realise “I am fed up of having to deal with this” and you know that there's support out there, then just know that there's lots of people who are quite happy to see you thrive, given the right support. I'm not just saying that to promote any one person or any one way. It will be bespoke to each individual. When you do see the benefits of that support however, and you show to yourself that you're capable of what people seem to think you're capable of but you’ve just struggled with before, it's liberating. It's a joy. For me, it's worth the effort when you realise it’s the right time for you.*

Okay, that's great. Thank you. Is there anything else you wanted to share or discuss?

*If you can have a conversation with someone else who has a similar condition, that might help you realise where the specific support needs to be if it's still not quite right. It might be someone else with the same condition can relate to you better or more quickly. Finally, just good luck and best wishes.*

It's why it's so important to remove any stigma around having these conversations, isn't it? It's another aspect of diversity, but one that would probably not quite so literate in talking about and not quite so confident in talking about. But, but as you really helpfully identified, absolutely doesn't need to be seen as a negative. So yeah, that's great. Thank you.

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