Case study – coping with dyslexia

Introduction

This case study provides an insight into the PhD process from the perspective of a dyslexic student, Tom, and his supervisor, Chris. In addition, Tom’s internal and external examiners, and his Dyslexia Support Tutor (DST) contributed to the case study based on their reflections of the examination and the support package, respectively.

Identifying dyslexia

After finishing his undergraduate degree, Tom worked in industry before starting his PhD. At this stage, his dyslexia had not been identified.

My undergraduate had been maths based, which is perhaps why it wasn’t picked up at that stage. However, the PhD involved more written work, especially as I had to write a report every 6 months for my industrial sponsor, so my issues became more apparent.

During the first year of his PhD, Tom’s housemate, who had previously worked as a Teacher, was reading through some of his work and suggested that he should consider being screened for dyslexia. This was reinforced by Tom’s supervisor, Chris, who had noticed that he had been struggling with the written element of his work.

There’s an initial stage where you might not notice a student’s specific learning disability because they’re all new to writing reports and to the subject. There’s a learning curve, whereby their written work improves and the time it takes to produce the work decreases, so I wasn’t alerted to a potential problem until I realised that the student wasn’t following this pattern.

Chris realised that Tom wasn’t on trajectory in his first year but initially didn’t consider that a specific learning disability might be the reason for this.

You assume that disabilities such as dyslexia will be picked up at undergraduate level so I wasn’t looking out for it. He’d obviously developed coping strategies as it hadn’t been flagged up before and he’d passed his undergraduate with a first class honours degree and had progressed onto PhD level.

It was a year into Tom’s research degree that his dyslexia was identified when Tom was screened through Academic Support. Following the screening, a formal assessment appointment was arranged with an Educational Psychologist. The report came back stating that Tom had dyslexia (for further details of the dyslexia screening process and typical timescales, see Appendix 1).
Accessing support

With the report in hand, Tom and his DST had a one-to-one chat.

Each person is affected in a different way by a specific learning disability. We try to help them understand the nature of their disability, particularly how it affects them.

Academic Support then helped Tom apply for Disabled Students’ Allowances through his Local Authority, which covered specialised support, including a computer and software, books, and extra lending time at the library. Tom found that his support package took several months to organise and filter through.

I would advise students to prepare for this delay – try and develop coping strategies to assist you whilst you’re waiting for the specialised equipment to arrive.

In the interim period, Tom had fortnightly meetings with his DST.

At Academic Support, we offer one-to-one support in the interim period and throughout the student’s time at Nottingham. With the student’s permission, we can also notify their school or department and Disability Liaison Officer (DLO).

Tom recounts:

In addition to the support offered by Academic Support, I could also ask my school DLO for advice or materials as both were aware of my situation. Over time, we worked out where my weak areas were and how I could best deal with this in my work, for example with exercises or extra materials. My DST also tested me with different coloured filters as black text on white background was difficult for me to read – the text would ‘vibrate’. We discovered that I responded best to a purple filter, which I then used when reading papers and when on the computer (by changing the background colour).

Chris remembers that Tom’s case represented fairly new territory for all concerned and recounts the parties involved in securing the necessary support.

The student, supervisor, DLO, DST, Graduate School and Registry were all involved, though obviously none of them had a full picture of what was going on so I found that as the supervisor it was my job to glue together the different parts of the administrative machine. It took a long time to join the pieces of the process together and often to create processes where they didn’t already exist.

Chris was keen to ensure that Tom’s PhD programme ran as smoothly as possible under the circumstances and realised that he played a pivotal role in achieving this.

In a supervisory relationship, once you know where their learning difficulty is, you get alongside them and you help.

Academic Support explain that supervisors must often adapt existing resources to suit the student’s requirements:

There are lots of useful resources for taught students but most doctorates are not taught, so these resources must be adapted.
A dyslexic support network is provided by the University, though Tom preferred to consult peers in his school.

*There were two dyslexic people in my building so I chatted to them and we provided support for each other.*

Tom recommends the publication *The Gift of Dyslexia* by Ronald D. Davis, which helped him to better understand dyslexia and how it affected him.

*After reading the book I felt more comfortable with my dyslexia – I’ve recommended it to others, including my DST, who’s also dyslexic.*

**Managing expectations between student and supervisor**

Although Chris had experience of supervising students whose first language was not English and also those who had experienced problems during the PhD process, it was the first time he’d supervised a student with a known specific learning disability.

*I didn’t have a baseline to compare him with...*

Tom’s industrial sponsor required a quarterly report, which caused issues in the initial stages of his project.

*I remember once staying up all night to get the report completed on time. I felt I needed to work harder to meet deadlines.*

Chris remembers this period:

*Sometimes it felt like he’d just finished writing one report and we’d have to start work on the next – he wasn’t spending enough time on the actual research.*

Tom and Chris identified methods to help with report-writing, e.g. using ‘mind maps’, putting Tom’s ideas onto a dictaphone and setting up a template/structure for the report itself.

Tom recounts:

*The hardest part was translating my ideas into words and structuring this appropriately.*

Tom would work on the report as much as he could, then he would present it to his supervisor and DST.

*We developed a system whereby I would first approach my DST who would read through the document, then my supervisor would concentrate on the technical content.*

In order to support him through the writing process, Tom’s DST recounts that she had to develop a working knowledge of his subject area:

*In order to assist Tom with his writing skills, I needed to have a basic understanding of the technical side of his project.*
Chris was conscious of setting clear expectations regarding corrections.

I noted errors but didn’t tread on the DST’s territory in terms of working through the errors with him and the learning process associated with that. And this agreement liberated me to be able to assist him more fully with the technical side of the project.

During the writing-up period, one of Tom’s fellow PhD students offered to proof-read his work as well, correcting his work electronically and changing words into different colours, suggesting alternatives and including comments to explain his suggestions.

I found this much easier than looking at corrections on paper, especially because handwritten comments can be hard to decipher and this would take me even longer to process than electronic text. For this reason, it really helped that my supervisor talked me through his comments.

Reasonable adjustments

Due to the severity of Tom’s dyslexia, his registration period was extended by 6 months. Tom’s DST explains:

If a student’s registration period requires an extension due to a specific learning disability, Academic Support work with the Postgraduate Registry on the student’s behalf.

Tom’s supervisor was conscious that an extension might have implications.

The University prefer research students to submit within four years so I was worried that the student would be logged outside of that period and would affect University and HEFCE statistics.

An added consideration was the industrial sponsor, who received regular updates on the progress of the project. Chris recounts:

I notified Tom’s industrial sponsor of the extension and assured them that he had legitimate personal reasons for it. I felt it was not my place to inform them of Tom’s dyslexia, as it was his choice whether or not to divulge that information.

Tom was conscious that if his dyslexia had been identified before starting a PhD and he had therefore received the full range of support from the beginning, he may not have required an extension.

I think if you’re supported day-by-day, a specific learning disability needn’t affect your work significantly.

After submission, when Tom’s examiners had been approached by the University, they were alerted to his dyslexia and how it affected him. They were also encouraged to adjust their questioning styles and rephrase questions if Tom didn’t understand, and due to the information processing aspect of the viva, to allow breaks if he became tired.

Before the viva, my supervisor made sure that the examiners were aware of my situation, which really helped me because I worried that the piece of paper in the examiners’ packs giving details of my specific learning disability might’ve been overlooked and if so, would’ve disadvantaged me.
Chris comments:

I’m aware that dyslexia is still a controversial specific learning disability in many circles so I felt the need to explain the student’s case to the examiners to ensure they were well-informed. Some people might question why the viva should be any different but if factors such as disability aren’t taken into account, the student could be disadvantaged.

The writing-up process

Throughout the writing-up process, Tom struggled to arrange his thoughts into appropriate structures and edit his thesis to the required standard.

It was torture! A very tiring process submitting version after version of each chapter for my supervisor to read – by the end you become desensitized to the material.

Tom explains why writing is a much longer process for him than for most people:

When I write something I have to slow it right down and double check that what is written in front of me is actually what I meant to write.

In total, it took Tom around a year to write his thesis. Tom’s DST comments:

Writing-up can be a longer process for dyslexic students; supervisors should be aware of this.

A year before submission, Tom’s industrial sponsor required a final report, which kick-started the writing process for him.

It encouraged me to write and I began to structure my research findings ahead of writing the thesis. At the time I was still conducting various parts of my research, some of which were taken longer to perfect, so it made me feel better knowing that I was getting some of it down on paper.

Throughout this period, Tom’s DST and supervisor supported him and offered feedback.

With their help, I developed strategies and techniques to improve my written work, using bullet points to cut down my waffle and mind maps to help me structure my writing.

If Tom discovered a recurrent error in his written work, he would report this to his DST and discuss methods that would allow him to pick these errors up before submitting work:

At the beginning of my third year, we had a full session identifying common mistakes to help me when writing my thesis.

Chris comments:

Some students rely on their supervisor as a safety net, which means they’re less meticulous in their written work so the supervisor should encourage the student to be proactive. Dyslexic students aren’t exempt from this and still need to employ appropriate processes to assist them in producing ever more accurate written work rather than relying on the supervisor. However, the balance is important so the student doesn’t feel stressed throughout the writing stage.
Tom’s DST comments:

*Supervisors should be aware of how the student is feeling and reassure them, where necessary. The student needs to know that if they’re struggling, it’s ok to ask for help.*

Although the PhD process had been challenging for Tom, he recounts times when he felt particularly positive about his written work:

*Every time I wrote a report, I would get comments from my supervisor and from my DST that I was improving, which motivated me because I felt that I was actually achieving something. Then there was the feeling I got when my examiners told me I had passed my viva – indescribable – I had survived. There were times when I doubted my ability to get through it – during my writing up year I very nearly gave up but my supervisor kept me motivated.*

Chris also remembers the positive moments throughout Tom’s PhD programme:

*He was very creative, which may or may not be due to his dyslexia. Also, when he produced coherent strings of writing, it gave him confidence which was a rewarding experience for both of us.*

The viva

Tom’s examiners received a one-page document with details of his specific learning disability and recommendations with regards to reading the thesis and conducting the viva.

Tom’s external examiner comments:

*I just needed to be alerted to a potential issue so I could deal with it accordingly and effectively read the thesis through the student’s eyes.*

At the beginning of the examination, Tom talked to his examiners about his specific learning disability.

*The student was open and relaxed about discussing his disability – he initiated this at the beginning of the viva which lightened the atmosphere for everyone concerned.*

Tom’s internal examiner recounts:

*We were warned that he might misinterpret questions and we should therefore qualify questions where necessary so that the student was aware of exactly what was being asked of him.*

On the adjustments put in place for the viva, the external examiner comments:

*This was not dissimilar to the style I adopt anyway – the viva examination is a nerve-wracking experience for any student, regardless of a specific learning disability.*

The examiners agreed that because dyslexia is a well-known specific learning disability, the guidelines they received were sufficient and as a result, the examination went smoothly:

*I don’t think anything else was required. To be honest, the viva went as if there was no problem at all.*

- Internal Examiner
The student started out extremely nervous and conscious of his disability but by the end of the viva he was writing out equations on the board! So it was fine – it just took me longer to get to that stage than it usually would. - External Examiner

Looking back

Both parties agreed that if they had been aware of the specific learning disability from the beginning, support structures could have been put into place much earlier. Chris comments:

If I’d known about his disability I could’ve supported him more in the early stages with useful techniques.

Although Chris and Tom’s DST communicated over email at various stages of the PhD process, it was agreed that all parties would have found it useful for Tom’s DST and supervisor to meet at key points along the way.

I had very little to do with Tom’s DST until we were preparing the examiners’ guidelines ready for the examination, though in hindsight it would’ve been useful for me to meet with the DST (with or without Tom) occasionally to discuss common issues, divide up responsibilities and aid his progression. It would also have been useful for me to have had access to the guidance given to the examiners from the outset of the project rather than learning through experience – it would’ve modified how I dealt with the student during supervision.

Tom’s DST comments:

With the student’s permission, we are happy to meet with the supervisor (with or without the student) It often helps to set boundaries for supporting the student.

Tom appreciated the support offered by both his supervisor and DST.

My supervisor and DST were great – if I had any issues, I could always go and see one or other of them and they would give up their time to help me, which I really appreciated, especially in the interim period when I was waiting for the dyslexia support to come through.

Chris recounts that Tom’s openness with regards to his specific learning disability aided the process:

It’s really essential that a student with a disability gives their supervisor permission to discuss their disability with relevant colleagues across the University. He was very open in this respect and allowed me to do so, which made life easier.
Advice to others in a similar situation

Tom’s advice to other dyslexic students:

- Find out what support is available and use everything that you find useful.
- As a student with dyslexia, you may be conscious of other people’s perceptions of dyslexia but once you understand more about it and start talking to people, you should feel more comfortable.
- If you have any questions or issues, approach your supervisor, your school/department Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) or your Dyslexia Support Tutor in Academic Support.
- Keep going – you’ll get there in the end.

Chris’s advice to supervisors:

- Be aware of disabilities, especially those that are hidden.
- Don’t underestimate the impact a specific learning disability can have on a project – it’s vital that the disability is managed appropriately.
- Establish a relationship between you and the support contacts across the University, in order to create a cohesive process for the student. Don’t leave it all to the student to manage, unless they insist on it. That said, leave the student to manage the areas they’re capable of managing.
- Always ensure that your own frustrations are under control – it’s important to keep communication channels between the supervisor and student open and discuss the management of the specific learning disability where appropriate. This ensures that the relationship remains positive and amicable throughout the project.
- You need to have patience and to be prepared to schedule more time for supervisions.
- When the examiners’ pack is sent out, an additional sheet is included which gives details of the student’s specific learning disability. It’s feasible that an examiner could miss the sheet, so it’s good practice to check that the examiners are aware of the student’s disability before the viva day.

As the number of PhD students increases, so does the number of students with a specific learning disability. Try to be aware of disabilities and their different manifestations. - Academic Support
Useful resources

➢ Websites:
  o Thinking about dyslexia: a staff resource for developing practice | www.nottingham.ac.uk/dyslexia
  o Premia: making research education accessible | www.premia.ac.uk
  o The British Dyslexia Association | www.bdadyslexia.org.uk
  o BRAIN.HE | www.brainhe.com

➢ Publications:
  o The Gift of Dyslexia - Ronald D. Davis (Perigee Trade)

Useful contacts

Emma Rowlett | Disability Advisor for Postgraduate Students
Graduate School
Trent Building
Telephone: +44 (0)115 8468849
Email: emma.rowlett@nottingham.ac.uk

Academic Support
Student Services Centre
Portland Building
Telephone: +44 (0)115 951 3710
Email: SSC@nottingham.ac.uk
Website: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studentservices/supportforyourstudies/academicsupport

List of school/department Disability Liaison Officers:
http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/StudentServices/Supportforyourstudies/DisabilitySupport/DisabilityLiaisonOfficerLookUp
Appendix 1

So you think you’re dyslexic...

See tutor at Academic Support

Use one of the dyslexia drop-in sessions
Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 12.30pm-2.30pm
Come to the Student Services Centre reception B Floor, Portland Building, University Park

20 minutes initial conversation with tutor

Up to 4 weeks later

Screening appointment 1

Exploration of learning experiences prior to H.E.
A further explanation can be found at:
http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicsupport/screening/index.html

1 hour discussion session with tutor

Up to 2 weeks later

Screening appointment 2

What’s happening now?
Reading; writing; spelling; time management; short-term memory etc.

1 hour discussion session with tutor including tasks

Up to 3 weeks later

Screening feedback with tutor

What does this show?
Are indicators of dyslexia present?
Identification of existing & possible new strategies to help you move on.

Up to 1 hour discussion with tutor

What’s next?

Nothing

Study Support – building/developing strategies

Contact department

Formal assessment (Educational Psychologist)