

Has art and design education become more accessible for dyslexic students? A retrospective look.

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50 years ago, I began my foundation course at what is now called Kingston University and six years ago my daughter began her Foundation course at the same university. Later, in 1981 I did my MA at London's prestigious, solely, post graduate Royal College of Art and in 2002 I became the first dyslexia co-ordinator there, where I still work. In 2008 I started Creative Mentors Foundation¹ which is a charity which encourages and helps (mostly main stream neurodiverse,) primary and secondary school children, access the art and design curriculum within the classroom, these are my credentials for writing about the changes in art and design education over the last 50 years and the effect of these changes on dyslexic students.

Back in 1970 I was working hard for my art A level. My observational drawing was full of what I call 'hedge your bets' lines, similar to my hand-writing, but this didn't hold me back because the curriculum was extremely open to interpretation. I actually made a piece of sculpture for my exam. From what I remember the only writing involved was to describe the materials and techniques I had used. I did not have to show development drawings or write about the various stages I had explored before arriving at the final piece. Practical work was 90% of the exam. Fast forward to 2013 and during a teacher/parent meeting at my youngest daughter's school to discuss her choice of GCSE, I was told in no uncertain terms that art GCSE was out of the question for her, because her observational drawing was not good enough. Luckily for her the school did offer photography at A level which she was allowed to take. There was a fair amount of writing to do with research and explaining how the idea had developed, in addition to post rationalising the final piece. 50% of the exam was practical and the other half involved writing about it.

¹ <https://creativementors.org>

Back in the 70's in order to apply for a Foundation course one had to submit a portfolio and attend an interview, mine took place in January 1971. I was accepted unconditionally, which of course meant I hardly ever left the art room and failed my other A levels. The Foundation course was blissful. I was introduced to so many new techniques and materials and there was hardly any writing to do. I then stayed at Kingston for my BA, the studio work was interesting and enormously satisfying, however the dissertation was a different matter and boy did I struggle. There was no dyslexia support of any sort.

In 2015 my daughter also got a place at Kingston. She enjoyed her Foundation year and learnt lots of new skills and there was also hardly any writing to do. She decided not to continue down the art school path and went to Sussex university to do a BA in history of art. She did struggle but got the DSA (Disabled Student's Allowance)² and through that, weekly one to one sessions. She also got the accommodations which I believe all universities now have to offer their neurodiverse students.

Some years after my graduation I began my MA at the Royal College of Art, (RCA) where once more my dyslexia came back to bite me, when I started to write my dissertation. The drafts came back to me with sp in red written all over the text, (this was long before computers). On at least one occasion during a tutorial I was told, "I'm not prepared to read this script because there are so many spelling mistakes." The only help available was the welfare officer who was a wonderful man called Mike Starling I remember sitting in his office sobbing my heart out. He was very sympathetic and had heard about dyslexia but couldn't offer me strategies or any accommodations. Then in 2002 I became the first dyslexia co-ordinator at the RCA and was able to provide that all essential one to one help with the dissertation for those students who are not eligible for DSA funding. I also raise awareness amongst staff so that they understand what students might find particularly difficult and how to help them. One result is our library which now has a book finding service for students who get overwhelmed by the number of books and particularly the Dewey

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/disabled-students-allowances-dsas-whats-available-how-to-apply>

classification system. The library also subscribes to Bob³ and Zotero⁴ both of which are essential for any dyslexic student. I have also convinced academics of the importance amongst other things of accommodations such as feed-back on written work in clear unambiguous language, avoiding metaphors, and including concrete examples where possible, (and definitely not a red 'sp' in sight), extra time for written assignments, and the option to pre-record verbal presentations for viva voce examinations. Of course, having your own laptop with text to voice, dictation, spell check, and the myriad of new softwares particularly mind mapping is also a huge improvement on what was going on fifty years ago. Technology and government legislation DDA (Disability Discrimination Act)⁵ and (DSA (Disabled Students' Allowance) have really improved accessibility to Higher education for our neurodiverse students, including those with dyslexia.

It is interesting that 3 years after graduation according to 'Creative Graduates Creative Futures'⁶ graduates with dyslexia are just as likely to be employed within the creative sector as graduates without dyslexia. This is great news when you consider that it is estimated that dyslexic people are four times more likely to be unemployed than people in the general population. So, I think we can agree that the Creative Industries can provide great professional opportunities for our dyslexic community and that this dyslexic strength is now being acknowledged by a much wider community, in fact diversity of thought in the media and technology fields is becoming increasingly valued and interestingly some architectural and design businesses look specifically to recruit people with dyslexia. Interestingly Microsoft and Goldman sachs recently started initiatives specifically recruiting neurodiverse individuals by altering the interview process making it much more inclusive. This awareness of and willingness to accommodate the brilliance of the creative dyslexic brain is very reassuring to young dyslexic graduates applying for positions in the creative sector.

³ <https://libguides.lsbu.ac.uk/bob/mybob>

⁴ <http://Zotero.org>

⁵ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/disability-discrimination#:~:text=Disability%20discrimination%20is%20when%20you%20are%20treated%20less,of%20the%20situations%20covered%20by%20the%20Equality%20Act.>

⁶ Higher Education Partnership and the Institute for Employment Studies.

So, to answer the question posited at the beginning of this chapter, I would say that art and design tertiary level education, has definitely become more accessible for dyslexic students and professional practice has also become less discriminatory, all though there is still a long way to go, (particularly, strangely enough, for dyslexic academics teaching in this area). My concern is those students who cannot navigate their way onto a GCSE or A level exam course, for them things have not improved yet. Covid has been dreadful in so many ways but it may yet bring positive changes to our exam system, but this will need encouragement and I'm hopeful that the education committee at the BDA will put pressure on art and design exam boards to revisit their curriculums. In the meantime, if you know any dyslexic individuals who really want to pursue studies in art and design, please encourage them like mad. Images are everywhere, talk to them about what they like and don't like visually. Take them to galleries and ask them questions, get them to consider photography, textiles, DT, visual communication as an A level option and If drawing from observation is still a stumbling block then there is an excellent book which you can buy them called, 'Observational Drawing for Students with Dyslexia Strategies, Tips and Inspiration. In the book you will find SEN teaching strategies have been adapted for the drawing studio, you will also find inspiration and encouragement from some of the alumni from the Royal College of Art. Incidentally one of the 2 authors are also the author of this piece.

