

Hidden talents

Photocopy and use

Lynne Smith describes a method for helping dyslexic students to read and learn more effectively and turn their disability into a gift



I started my teaching career as a remedial teacher in a secondary school in Bedfordshire and later got involved in adult literacy. As time went on I became more and more frustrated, realising that the children I was trying, unsuccessfully, to teach in a class of 30-plus would become the adults joining the adult literacy schemes.

At this time, during the 1970s, the term dyslexia was not used. Local education authorities denied that the term existed and would only, when they had to, use the term specific learning difficulties. It was increasingly frustrating to see the talents and unfulfilled potential of the children and adults with whom I was working, yet not be able to provide them with the appropriate support they needed. I found out about a new course that had been developed by the London Language and Literacy Unit – the Certificate in Adult Dyslexia Support. At last dyslexia was talked about! The course taught how to diagnose dyslexia and recognise auditory, visual and motor processing difficulties. It outlined how to plan and implement a spelling programme using the ‘look, cover, write and check’ method.

I found that for dyslexics, the assessment process was enormously important. It allowed people to make sense of failures in school, to try to get rid of the labels of ‘lazy’, ‘stupid’,

‘careless’ and to have a name for why they felt different. Having an assessment helped them understand themselves and their individual learning style. It helped them come to terms with their past failures, move on from these experiences and start feeling more confident in their abilities.

The Davis Method

I then read a book called *The Gift of Dyslexia* by Ron Davis which had a substantial effect on me. It took a completely different approach in that it showed people how to control their dyslexia, turning their disability into a gift by using simple orientation techniques. Following this they worked on basic concepts while staying focused or orientated, thus learning how to recognise ‘triggers’ to their disorientations. They also learned how to start controlling disorientations when they occurred.

I started the training to become a Davis Dyslexia Facilitator using the skills I was developing in a further education college. I had the ‘Eureka’ moment when I’d been working for a while using these techniques with a 17-year-old boy who had been studying and failing his GCSEs and A-levels. He came in grinning from ear to ear one Monday morning saying, ‘It works!’ He explained that he had sat in his bedroom trying to put off studying by screwing up pieces of paper and throwing them into his wastepaper bin, but kept missing. He tried the orientation methods I had shown him and every time he used the techniques, the paper landed in the bin! This boy went on to achieve respectable grades and to gain a place at university.

I now work on 30-hour Davis Dyslexia

Correction programmes with people aged 8 to 80 in Brighton in various educational settings. How do these methods work? The first step is the orientation procedures that teach the dyslexic person how to recognise and control the mental state that leads to distorted and confused perceptions of letters, words and numerals. Once they have learned to turn off the thought processes that lead to disorientation their mind should be in a relaxed mood suitable for reading. A release procedure and visualising a dial to control internal energy levels are also part of the programme.

Symbol mastery is then introduced – students use clay to model letters of the alphabet and punctuation marks and then individual words, linking how a word looks to



its sound and meaning. This is particularly important with ‘trigger’ words, such as ‘because’, ‘and’ or ‘but’, where dyslexic picture-thinkers cannot form a mental picture to go with them.

Following orientation and symbol mastery, ‘Spell-Reading’ and ‘Sweep, Sweep Spell’ Special

In the classroom



Special strategies are introduced which train the student in left-to-right eye movement in reading and help them to recognise letter groups as words.

For the Spell-Reading procedure, a piece of paper is used to cover everything below the line the person is reading, and a second piece of paper is used to cover the right section of the line being read. The paper should be moved along revealing one letter at a time with the person saying the name of each of the letters until the end of the word is reached. The reader says the word if they

know it, or you say the word and they repeat it. Once they can identify all the words after spelling them out, you move on to Sweep-Sweep-Spell. This involves revealing one word at a time and encourages the person to sweep their eyes over the word from left to right and then say the word.

Once these methods have been introduced the 'Picture at Punctuation' process to reading can be used. This builds on the visualisation strengths the dyslexic reader already possesses. The person needs to read up to the first punctuation mark and then say

what they can see and feel. You need to make sure that the pictures are accurate and no other detail is added. I remember someone reading and becoming disorientated on the sentence 'the sea was as smooth as glass'. It was important she recognised exactly what had disorientated her so that she could then re-orientate herself before continuing to read. The problem was that her mental image of the sea was not 'smooth as glass' but had large waves! Her image was so strong that she found it difficult to change the image, getting very angry and refusing to accept the author's description!

I find these methods invaluable, working with everyone from beginner readers who have phonological problems to university students with their long weekly reading lists!

Clay can be used to model a whole range of concepts that dyslexic people struggle with. These can include the concepts of self, change, responsibility, consequence, time and order and disorder. I have a large box of clay by my side and as soon as a student looks puzzled or 'has a block' we model it with the clay.

What I find exciting about Davis's methods is the way people can start to control their dyslexia, changing it from a disability to a gift. For the first time they become independent learners using their dyslexic talents when appropriate and switching them off when they need to be focused or orientated. They start to recognise the triggers that make them move from being orientated to being disorientated. Along with this they develop the confidence that control brings. I have also noticed that dyslexic people are then able to explore more deeply their creative side as they have discovered a way to come back to being orientated.

There are still children and adults going through life missing out because they are trying to learn in a disorientated state. They see and hear things that they want to hear and see rather than what is actually said or what is actually written. They 'blank' through confusion, panic and day-dreaming to alleviate boredom. In other words, these people have a disability which could be recognised as a gift. 

*Lynne Smith is a Dyslexia Consultant and Davis Dyslexia Correction Facilitator working in Brighton. For more information on the Davis techniques visit www.dyslexia.com or read *The Gift of Dyslexia* or *The Gift of Learning* by Ron Davis.*