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Art students, dyslexia, reading and writing: The role of the agreement

ABSTRACT

This article looks at experiences of writing in higher art education. It demonstrates how the experiences of art students with dyslexia affect their perceptions of themselves as writers. It proposes the role of the agreement in providing a negotiated space for students with dyslexia to explore difficulties and to take on responsibilities regarding their academic literacy. The need for an agreement becomes clearer when we examine the significant role writing can play in expressing ideas, concepts and theories about students’ own visual practice. This article proposes the idea of agreements that might facilitate the process of integration between writing and creative visual practice. These agreements take place at the institutional, diagnostic and educational level. The article highlights the importance of these agreements in establishing a culture of mature and democratic discourse around education; one that acknowledges both rights and responsibilities.

INTRODUCTION

This article looks at experiences of writing in higher art education. It shows how the experiences of art students with dyslexia affect their perceptions of themselves as writers. It explores the role of the agreement in providing a negotiated space for students with dyslexia to explore difficulties and to take on responsibilities regarding their academic literacy. The need for an agreement

KEYWORDS

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becomes clearer when we examine the significant role writing can play in expressing ideas, concepts and theories about students’ own visual practice, what Orr and Blythman call ‘the symmetries between the processes of design and writing’ (2005).

Orr and Blythman (2005) liken the process of design to that of writing an essay and George talks about a ‘tug of war between words and images that can be ‘productive as it brings into relief the multiple dimensions of all forms of communication’ (George 2002: 14).

The agreement takes on a new dimension when considering the difficulty many students with dyslexia experience around writing. Entering into an agreement necessitates students recognizing the value as well as the struggle of writing and accepting the challenge presented by it. Equally importantly, the other half of the agreement is the responsibility of the institution and the educator who must acknowledge the need for transparency when informing students of their expectations.

As a specialist dyslexia teacher, researcher in education and lecturer on an M.A. in Creative Practice I have used my flexible positionality to identify barriers to the successful integration of writing and visual creative practice. These are: perceptions and lived experiences of students with dyslexia, the previous educational experiences of these students, and the nature of the art institution itself.

Art academy students reported significantly more signs of dyslexia than non-art university students. Objective testing showed that art students had significantly poorer phonological skills than non-art students. Thus, according to self-reports combined with objective testing, the incidence of dyslexia was far higher among art students.

(Wolff and Lundberg 2002: 84)

This article proposes the idea of agreements or contracts that might facilitate the process of integration between writing and creative visual practice. These agreements take place at the institutional, diagnostic and educational level and may be of an abstract philosophical nature and/or have a physical print or digital manifestation. The article highlights the importance of these agreements in establishing a culture of mature and democratic agreement, of rights and responsibilities and of access to a democratic and critically aware education (Arum and Roska 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This article discusses the findings of student voices, through a range of methods including interviews and reflective writing (Ward and Edwards 2002; Coffield 2009; Hudson 2009 in Broadhead and Garland 2012). In order to research this article, 30 art and design undergraduate students were interviewed twice monthly, during term times, over a period of two academic years.

The research used narrative enquiry to follow the writing lives of its student participants through interview. Not only were responses elicited from students but also these experiences informed my own understanding of the difficulties and delights of writing and clarified for me a need for a transparent agreement that might help students with dyslexia explore the role of narrative in shaping attitudes towards writing, allowing them to freely enter into relationship with their institution, their educators and their writing. These perspectives allow for the gathering of a number of important and varied
voices, harnessing where possible the stories of art students and exploring through them the belief that ‘these are not simply stories but are narratives that have real consequences for the fate of individuals’ (Richardson 1990: 25).

All participants had been assessed as dyslexic and all were in receipt of the Disabled Student’s Allowance (DSA) entitling them to at least one hour a week of individual specialist tuition delivered by the author. The interviews took place separately from these tutorials and were not dependent on anything discussed in these tutorials. Pseudonyms were used in interviews and students were free to opt out of the process at any point. Interviews were recorded and transcripts were produced, which participants had access to. Students were then asked to reflect on these transcripts and revisit their own reported experiences. They were asked to comment on these transcripts and on the eventual findings of this study. The institution’s ethics policy was applied to these interviews and informed the nature of the discussions. The themes explored arose from the conversations themselves. My focus was on using student narratives to explore relationships with writing and from this came the notion of agreements. Relationships are, I would argue, a sort of agreement – we implicitly or explicitly take on a commitment when we enter into a relationship. The more I explored the relationship between students with dyslexia and writing the more I felt there was a potential for smoothing the path of this relationship by making clear a more explicit agreement about what was expected of the student and what might be provided by the institution and its educators.

CONTEXT

The research has a strong institutional focus. Current evidence confirms that ‘people with disabilities are probably under-represented in most institutions and across higher education as a whole’ (educol 1997). A mere 6.9% of UK first year students in 2011–2012 were disabled (Equality Challenge Unit 2012). However, in art and design institutions and institutions teaching creative disciplines the figures are very different. A higher proportion of students studying creative arts and design were disabled than any other subject (14.7%) (Equality Challenge Unit 2012). Dyslexia accounts for a large percentage of declared disability within these institutions, for instance the Conservatoire for Dance and Drama – which includes LAMDA, RADA, Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and the National Centre for Circus Arts – reports 22% of its eligible students receive support through the DSA, with most of those having a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia (Merrifield 2014). This research is situated in an independent art college in the North of England where it is estimated that around 40% of its undergraduates identify as having dyslexia-related issues, 15% alone in the first year of their degrees.

Cogent, well-researched and well-argued academic writing is achievable for students with dyslexia. Research suggests dyslexic students may be more likely to achieve first-class degrees than their peers. The researchers suggest that motivation to try to solve the complex problems presented by dyslexia in HE might be one of the reasons for this (Hill 2004) but the process of producing this may well take longer and require more detailed analysis at word and sentence level in order to convey the structure of an argument or idea. Similarly, in evaluative, often first-person writing, there may be an emphasis on language etymology, clarifying meaning, separating description from review and reflection.

Writing at degree level in a specialist art institution takes many forms and provides opportunities for creative uses of language to enhance and develop
and explore the visual. Undergraduates in my institution are expected to produce the following types of writing – academic essays, annotations, evaluations, reflective writing, positioning statements, artists’ statements, case studies, presentations, academic posters, job applications and CVs, personal and artistic statements.

This may not always be part of the explicit contract negotiated between student and institution when an undergraduate ‘signs up’ for an art degree. Our students may consider themselves ‘fine art students’ or ‘fashion undergrads’. They may be less likely to identify themselves in terms of their writing and may not make explicit connections between writing, theory and practical work. Therefore, when presented with written tasks and tasks that involve the synthesis of written, read and spoken elements, they may feel wrong footed.

THE ARGUMENT

For many students the process of connecting writing to visual practice can be difficult, fractured, a source of anxiety.

‘Students’ written texts continue to constitute the main form of assessment and as such writing is a ‘high stakes’ activity in university education. If there are ‘problems’ with writing then the student is likely to fail. (Lillis and Scott 2008: 9)

This may be because writing is seen as separate from visual practice and assessment of the former may appear to exclude acknowledgement of the latter (Nyffenegger 2009).

As long as students (and teachers) focus on the differences between writing and design, as long as they perceive the former as an impersonal, formal exercise lacking practical relevance and the latter as a creative, satisfactory personal journey, they will not be able to establish helpful connections. Instead of emphasizing (or even celebrating) an opposition of visual and verbal literacy, design knowledge should be used to develop student writing. (Nyffenegger 2009)

However this article asserts that textual language can and often does enhance the process of making visual art, and artists and art students with dyslexia do not necessarily feel excluded from the creative and intellectual possibilities that this offers. Writing is an art and a craft – the process of imagining constructing and realizing writing is very similar to that of the visual arts and involves both synthesis and praxis. Writing, reading, speaking are all part of the process of knowledge transfer, communication and understanding. Sharples uses analogies that ‘help us see the process [of writing] as paralleling the visual or active making of things’ (Sharples in Francis 2009: 27).

George expresses the idea of reconciling and mediating

In place of a resolution, then, I am after a clearer understanding of what can happen when the visual is very consciously brought into the composition classroom as a form of communication worth both examining and producing. (George 2002: 14)
A way of resolving, to use George’s term, might be to promote the notion of agreements that acknowledge the benefits and the difficulties of reading and writing as part of the visual communication process.

It is in this notion of ‘reconciling and mediating’ that the agreement is located. The notion of the agreement or contract is not new (Stephenson and Laycock 1993) but this research has discovered a perhaps more abstract and philosophical view of the contract, taken from the like mindedness, rapport, consensus and concord. Students may not be aware when they enter higher education that art and design carries with it the same requirement for textually expressed critical thinking and literary exploration as does any other university validated undergraduate degree. Students with dyslexia may feel they have ‘avoided the dreaded dissertation’ until all becomes clear in their first semester. The agreement is put forward as a way of smoothing the path and shedding light on the obligations of both institution and student.

The British dyslexia association (BDA) states that dyslexia is not only about literacy…. Dyslexia affects the way information is processed, stored and retrieved, with problems of memory, speed of processing, time perception, organisation and sequencing. (B.D.A., 2012: 1)

This outlines the additional difficulties facing students with dyslexia and perhaps foregrounds further the need for an explicit agreement to support and facilitate their relationship with the written word that encompasses so much more than simply allowing extra time for reading or encouraging the use of a spell checker.

However, in the same way that a democratic and inclusive art education would not exclude students with dyslexia from challenging creative practices in their visual work it follows that this same art education would not want to exclude them from challenging practices in the craft of writing. In the pursuit of a democratic education it is necessary to embrace rather than limit our educational possibilities. And, to be pragmatic, students who are paying tuition fee up to £9000 a year, expect to be worked rather hard.

THE INTERVIEWS

The following quote is from a student who is now in his third year of a B.A. (Hons) degree in Interdisciplinary Art and Design: ‘Writing and reading is laborious, detailed, painstaking; it takes time, needs concentration, the material needs to be reasonably stimulating. I need silence. Words work against you – white background, small print etc.’

Another student identifies their difficulties in the following way: ‘My sentence structure is all wrong; I know my written work is hard to understand I have always struggled with just knowing exactly what I am meant to do. I needed to discuss every aspect step by step to get the overall picture’.

Both students use the word ‘need’ in a way that might suggest these needs are not being met or realized, and there is a tension in the use of the word that suggest both a sense of inadequacy on the student’s part and a frustration at the barriers and complexities of writing. Writing is presented here as something both difficult – ‘laborious, detailed, painstaking’ – and something that requires an intervention of some sort – ‘I needed to discuss every aspect step by step to get the overall picture’.
The need for discussion and clarity emerges in these extracts – a transparency that is possible through dialogue and that recognizes the conflict between the wish to express and the difficulties in doing so. It seems there is an implicit recognition here of a need for concord or agreement.

Interestingly there is physical, almost visceral response being described here. The author’s research goes on to reveal further accounts of the teacher who ridicule the child for their spellings; the insistence in class that someone reads out in front of their peers to satisfy an arcane educational tradition (‘reading out in class was traumatizing’). Examples of excellent teaching emerge of course, but a strong narrative thread is provided by the dislocation between intent (the student wishes to engage) and outcome (engagement is partial, unhappy or attained at a cost).

Into this narrative of past experiences and present fears comes the idea of a fracturing of intent between visual and textual language – a discord that might be mediated by an agreement that student and educator will search for a commonality between the two, as Nyfenegger suggests, rather than pursue the existing negative narrative thread.

Students speak of fears that ‘they did not have the same level of grammar and words as everybody else’; they spoke of structured sessions delivered at school which ‘told them what to do’ but did not address the issues they really wanted to address. One student, when asked the question what were your experiences of writing at school replied:

I used to hate reading until I finished doing English but now I enjoy the library because it’s all about art books. Primary school, experiences were difficult – my problems were identified but weren’t dealt with. There was a discrepancy between intellect and processing.

Here we can see the basis for an agreement or concord – a student recognizes the value and relevance of art and design-related knowledge and can now, in Higher Education, see the ‘pay off’ in pursuing the often difficult processing of text as it yields rewards and possibilities that may benefit them.

Another account of reading perceptions from a third year fine art student highlights the sociability of shared reading experiences and the effect that university work and real life experiences have on the processing speed of students with dyslexia:

I don’t have anyone I read a book with. Unless it’s a really short book I’m not going to read it. My concentration span’s getting worse. I used to be able to read a book no problem, get to the end and stuff but now it’s – I’m reading it and I’ve got to go back to read it again to understand it and get the point.

Again, the student begins by addressing the difficulties of reading; yet, later she goes on to discuss how the reward is much more tangible at degree level – now she is studying a subject she is committed to and feels ownership of (art); she can find something agreeable in the language- and text-based knowledge banks that support and enhance her understanding of this subject.

As a child, she goes on to say, she was told what to read, but as an undergraduate she selected from a reading list and became absorbed and involved in what seemed to her to be relevant text. Although this activity was slow and laborious due to her processing speed it was ultimately useful and productive.
She learned from her reading and was able to apply this learning at a high level. Whilst not classing this activity as reading for pleasure, she did describe it as pleasurable and satisfying and a responsibility she felt willing to take on. It was this discovery particularly, which led me to investigate the possibility and role of the agreement in negotiating a space for students to explore writing and reading.

Further examples, summarized, include: ‘Research makes you better at your subject; I needed to be pushed to do that level of reading; writing teaches you so much; I’ve never read so many books; It gives you a contextual understanding, a platform, a foundation to build your work on; it improves so many skills as far as understanding and articulating your ideas goes, being able to communicate them, being able to understand them yourself. Again here the student is able to negotiate a way of looking at research that agrees with their desire to become better at articulating their ideas, better at understanding their work in relation to the work of others.

In contrast this response in particular points to the influence of the narrative voice, highlighting perhaps the existence of a dual narrative: ‘I don’t feel positive when I think of my writing in general … I felt sick in my stomach. I don’t know why, I didn’t fail in English, I did really well. It helps that the writing [I do now] is connected to a subject you have chosen and enjoy’.

However when respondents were asked about their perceptions of writing in general, their past experiences of writing and their sense of themselves in terms of personal self-esteem and writing responses tended to be markedly different and words and phrases including ‘embarrassment, exclusion, lack of control, shame, confusion, feeling misunderstood’ emerged. This sense of the unreconciled, of writing and reading and the gathering of what might be termed academic capital, being in conflict with the expectations, wishes and skill set of the art student with dyslexia comes across in these responses.

**RESULTS: THE EMERGING ROLE OF THE AGREEMENT**

So how can these differing narratives become reconciled? It is clear from this study that reading and writing are arenas for transition, movement and discourse for art undergrads with dyslexia. What emerges from this study also is the sense of responsibility and ownership students feel around their reading and writing and although there may be doubts and anxieties (Nyffenegger 2009) there is also a recognition of the value, benefit and purpose of reading and writing on an art and design degree course and a sense that through the process of engaging with these areas art students are able to gain control and develop strategies for accessing a wide range of knowledge and information to support their visual practice and enhance their critical thinking skills.

What is noteworthy, this article would suggest, are however is the profound and long-lasting effects of these experiences and the associated physical and psychological effects they often engender. Such responses appear to have consequences that are far reaching and may follow the student through their educational life. Even after achieving the necessary results to gain a place at the coveted art institution of their choice, students are likely to have vestigial anxieties around reading and writing.

The nature of the art institution itself plays its part in both establishing a relationship between writing and visual practice and encapsulating some of the tensions of this relationship. Nyffenegger refers to this conflict between
academic rigour and the ‘place’ of writing in art institutions in this quote and points out its origins in the attitudes of many art teachers.

Often, students as well as a senior generation of art and design teachers, themselves being formed by practice rather than by academia, are unaware of the educational potential inherent in academic writing. Besides, they see writing as a part of theory and theory as opposed to practice. Moreover, they identify with visual rather than with verbal literacy. (Nyffenegger 2009: 2)

However, widening participation and the decentralizing of support services have arguably helped to develop models of writing in practice that view writing as a component rather than as additionality (Lillis 2006). This could be and to an extent is being done, in an art education that is moving towards inclusivity, by making explicit a series of agreements, some of which exist as actual documents, some of which are part of an ongoing discourse.

One example of these agreements is the Institutional: where research and development of inclusive pedagogy is built in to funding strategies the institution is making concrete its obligation to the student. By interviewing with sensitivity and by being transparent about the nature of the courses they are offering and the demands of these courses the institutions makes clear both its expectations of and commitment to the student. In return students agree to acknowledge and work towards the expectations placed on them, to use the mechanisms in place for doing this, to engage in learning. This takes the idea of the agreement beyond the sphere of the individual – a dialogue between tutor and student, between support worker and student or between needs assessor and student. Instead it extends the notion of agreement to include a transparent commitment on the part of the institution to place the valuable components of reading writing and research at the heart of artistic practice, making explicit to students the need to engage with these methods of critical thinking and critical analysis in order to further their art practice.

It also makes clear the responsibility of the institution to provide structures through which students can negotiate their journey. Examples from my own institution include: introductions to blogging as part of first year inductions, seminars on the role of text in art and design, art installations and art ‘happenings’ located in the college libraries, the rolling out of workshops that encourage hands on, activities to incorporate the role of writing into creative practice and the display around the building itself of text and imagery working hand in hand.

Diagnostic agreements include access adequate screening and diagnosis for dyslexia, dyspraxia and associated neuro-diverseities; the provision of specialist support (alongside the embedding of pedagogic best practice arising from this support into the general teaching and learning ethos) and in general a commitment to the provision of reasonable adjustments as recommended in the student’s Needs Assessment report.

Educational agreements are those established at teaching and learning level and do indeed exist in many art institutions already. These include the learning contract; the provision of holistic and supportive tutorials; a recognition of the external demands and conflicts placed upon students; an awareness of alternative and viable ways of inputting and outputting learning and what might be called the scaffolding up of knowledge (where students are met by learning at a level they can access and provided with mechanisms to continued access to more complex levels of critical engagement). In return students
agree to access these opportunities to prioritize their personal development; to
engage with integrity in the demands of art school education acknowledging
the challenges as well as the rewards and pleasures this entails.

At their most effective these agreements form a personal contract between
student and tutor. In a necessarily imperfect world much that is radical begins
at a local level. What this article referred to earlier as the individual agreement
is set out here. In the author’s own art institution, her work with students with
dyslexia takes place in weekly one to one tutorials for the duration of their
degree studies. During these tutorials students are able to look at their writing
in detail, exploring at word, sentence and paragraph level the points at which
language and meaning collide. The humble apostrophe is shown to be a trans-
mitter of possession and as such carries huge semantic weight (artists, artist’s,
artists’). The choice between to and for is hotly debated; the comma alters
the connection between one part of a sentence and another and therefore the
connection between one potential meaning and another.

Students speak of how sessions become ‘a place where I can re-establish
myself from week to week’, where writing is ‘broken down into little bricks
which build a bigger picture’. A student about to embark on dissertation writing
says ‘words can affect you emotionally; they are precise and can direct you
in your emotional response’ another recognizes the importance of nuance and
perhaps most significantly another talks of how ‘Words and pictures go together,
asserting you need both to really speak. Art is for a reason and therefore needs
to be rationalised, discussed, read about and written about’.

As in the creation of ‘a work of art’ (Bauman 2000: 82), words are chipped
away at and built, moved about, dissected and substituted. In some cases their
etymology is established through an analysis of their spelling, making spell-
ing relevant and part of meaning. And during these tutorials a dialogue takes
place between tutor and student where an agreement is made to explore and
acknowledge the presence and power of narratives around writing during
duration sessions. Narrative can set us free but it can bind us too. Dyslexia is not a self-
defeating scenario – statistics show dyslexic students can and do achieve in
the realm of writing and critical thinking. In a 2010 study,

Shaywitz documented that while IQ level and reading ability are linked
in typical readers, they are not linked in people with dyslexia. Many
high-achieving dyslexics have compensating strengths that enable them
to rise to the top in various fields.

(Shaywitz 2010 in Landau 2011)

And in the author’s own institution, success rates for students identified with
dyslexia are high, the majority achieving at least an upper second-class honours
degree, requiring completion of a dissertation of 6000–9000 words in length.

CONCLUSION

Van Rensburg argues that it is not necessary or desirable for students to
become ‘fixed in their academic identities’. Writing, he argues, is one of the
most important ways in which students “assume” alternative and perhaps
“real” academic identities in the University’ (2006). In moving towards these
agreement we see textual and visual language, writing and creative practice are
potentially powerful tools in the hands of art students with dyslexia, designed
to develop questioning and critical learners with a clear understanding
and acknowledgement of their rights and responsibilities as part of a responsive and viable education system. It is possible to see these pedagogic tools – recognition of barriers, acknowledgement of the narrative voice and the establishment of agreements – as a further step towards an inclusive, democratic and critically rigorous education.

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