

# **Towards Learning Creatively: Supporting Innovative Assessments for Students with Dyslexia**

## *Authors:*

*Hazel McCafferty, Project Manager, Southampton Solent University*

*Jenny Anderson, Project Director, Southampton Solent University*

*Lyn Bibbings, Partner, Oxford Brookes University*

*Liam Higgins, Partner, Southampton Solent University*

*Caroline Jackson, Partner, Bournemouth University*

Towards Learning Creatively is a unique learning and teaching project that will support the work of lecturers in developing innovative assessment. This article introduces the project and summarises some of its findings, focusing particularly on initial feedback from students with dyslexia.

## **Giving students a little TLC...**

The main aim of the project is to encourage and support lecturers to develop an increasingly diverse range of assessments in non-written or partly written formats. These might include presentations, creating videos or running events and exhibitions, all of which develop skills, which can be put to practical use in the workplace. A website is being created ([www.creativeassessment.org.uk](http://www.creativeassessment.org.uk)) which will include practical advice and exemplar briefs developed during the project.

The project grew from the recognition that the student population is becoming increasingly diverse. About 4% of all students in higher education have dyslexia and their numbers are set to rise in the future. Many of these students have strong visual-spatial 'right hemisphere' strengths, are good at holistic perception, lateral thinking, being creative, practical problem solving and have excellent interpersonal and intuitive skills (CADISE 2000). Students may be able to use these skills during their courses, but for many the required assessment evidence is written. So however creative the student has been in their thinking or approach, the evidence they have to provide means they are working to address their weaknesses and not to develop their strengths.

A variety of research methods are being used in the development of the project materials. These include focus groups with staff and students and audits of current assessment practices at both institutional and course level. To date, focus groups have been undertaken with staff and students from three institutions. This article concentrates specifically on the feedback of those students with dyslexia.

## **Students with dyslexia - their perspectives on current assessment**

The students were asked to describe their positive and negative experiences of assessment and to consider how these experiences might be enhanced.

The students praised some forms of assessment, speaking in depth about 'practical' forms of assessment; examples of these included coaching skills, event management

and video production. These forms of assessment were seen as positive for a number of reasons including:

- Opportunities to put learning into practice
- Perceived relevance to future employment
- Development of skills
- Opportunities to fully express themselves, which they felt written forms of work did not always encourage
- Industry recognised qualifications
- Finished products that they could take pride in
- Receiving immediate feedback.

They particularly liked those subjects where the lecturers had introduced an element of choice, as they felt this tended to increase their motivation and encourage independent thinking.

Presentations were also praised. The students valued opportunities to personalise these and enjoyed learning about the new perspectives which other students were able to introduce to a specific subject. One student summarised the important role presentations have in enhancing confidence and developing skills that students believe to be vital to the workplace, by saying:

‘I feel you get more of a chance to shine because when you go out, once you finish your degree, you’re going to have to talk to people, you’re going to have to give presentations – that’s part of the big wide world.’

Whilst the students praised some forms of assessment, others were less popular. Examinations were on the whole seen as a negative and undermining experience. The students with dyslexia spoke in detail about the strategies they use to avoid taking subjects with examinations, even when they like the subject area or had previously excelled in it.

For most, examinations had proven to be an unhappy experience, where they were unable to do themselves ‘justice’. They were concerned at the emphasis placed on examinations, as one student said:

‘You could have gone the whole year and you’ve done really well and then you’re judged on your performance in a 3-hour slot.’

Their primary concern was the struggle to structure their answers within the time constraints set by an examination. One student described his personal experiences when sat in an examination:

‘I don’t think I have read through anything in an exam, because I am there trying to structure it all. I can’t structure it anyway. I don’t think I’ve ever actually had time to go back and read through it.’

Its common practice for students who have been formally assessed as having dyslexia to be allocated extra time in their examinations. The students felt that this extra time brings challenges. They spoke about finding it difficult to concentrate for the additional time, being disturbed as other students leave the room, being interrupted by lecturers asking why they had not finished and being stigmatised by having to remain in the room as other students leave.

'When most people leave the room, I'm thinking I want to leave as well, go as well, want to go. It sounds odd that you feel different from everyone else that gets to go.'

The students recommended that they be allocated separate rooms wherever possible.

Despite their concerns, some of the students could not perceive a degree where examinations did not feature. They felt that examinations showed they had 'earned' something and that employers would expect them to be able to cope with examinations. They suggested a compromise – 'in-class tests', which they believed encouraged a more structured and gradual approach to their learning.

Students spoke about the important role lecturers take in either enhancing or undermining their learning experience. They commented positively on the efforts of those lecturers who had set clear criteria, took the time to explain the requirements of the assessment and also specified how it might be initially approached. This seemed particularly important to the students with dyslexia, who felt that knowing where to direct their efforts was their biggest challenge. They spoke of times when they had felt supported, for example when a lecturer had made a point of quietly approaching those students with dyslexia in the seminar group and offering them help via e-mail. They contrasted this experience with the lecturer who had asked students for a show of hands to indicate that they had dyslexia, which had left them feeling embarrassed and not wanting to ask for help.

Lecturers were also criticised for the quality of their feedback. In some instances, the emphasis was on the spelling, rather than the content of the thinking behind the assessment, which resulted in the students feeling 'stupid'.

'The trouble is that a lot of teachers don't understand about dyslexia and probably just think oh they can't spell properly. That's the way it goes. So when I get a piece of work back, I get all the spelling done for me, but that's it. They won't tell me what I have done wrong in the essay, this is spelt wrong, this is spelt wrong, and underline each little one of them.'

Another area for strong criticism was *random* in-class assessment. Although the students recognised that lecturers were trying to increase attendance by randomly picking them for assessment tasks in their seminars, they found this approach particularly stressful and felt that it often led to surface learning. The students spoke about the struggle to read and assimilate new information given to them each week especially in subjects, which they felt to be complex with a range of new terminology to learn. Poorly photocopied materials, with small font sizes and no introductory paragraphs to put information into context, added to their problems.

### **What next?**

There is more work to be undertaken in analysing the results of the student focus groups and placing them in the context of the staff focus groups, audits, existing literature and related projects. However, initial feedback from students is worth consideration now. In the words of one of the students:

'I think they should listen to us more, because we're the ones doing the assessments, but they don't listen to our points of view, so they don't listen to how we have found things, so each year they're setting the same

assessment. It might be that the same problem is coming up, because they haven't listened to what we have to say.'

*Southampton Solent University in partnership with Oxford Brookes and Bournemouth Universities has been awarded funding for three years, under FDTL5 (Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning).*

*Please contact Hazel McCafferty TLC Project Manager for more information about the project, which continues until October 2007.*

E-mail: [hazel.mccafferty@solent.ac.uk](mailto:hazel.mccafferty@solent.ac.uk)

Telephone: 023 8031 9609

Web: [www.creativeassessment.org.uk](http://www.creativeassessment.org.uk)