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The impact of discipline and genre on writing facility: how a small group of students with and without dyslexia experience and respond to the varied writing demands of their Creative Writing degree programme.

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Summary - *Crynodeb*

This paper explores the writing experiences of a small group of female higher education humanities students, with and without diagnosed dyslexia, enrolled on degree programmes that include a variety of writing tasks including creative, reflective and critical essay writing. Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries, and thematised using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Findings indicate that the major concern of the dyslexic students was managing the organisation and structure of their essays, associated with strong expressions of anxiety, but none of the students reported significant problems structuring their creative pieces. All the students drew on multisensory imagination to some extent for creative writing, although this was more emphasised by the dyslexic students, and they all found it extremely difficult to work on creative writing and critical writing assignments concurrently. The paper concludes that discipline and genre significantly affected the writing experiences of these students suggesting that specialist writing support for dyslexic students is best provided within the disciplinary context of the writing tasks. This has implications for how literacy support is delivered within HE.

Mae'r papur hwn yn archwilio profiadau ysgrifennu grŵp bach o fyfyrwragedd AU yn y dyniaethau, rhai â diagnosis o ddyslecsia a rhai heb, sydd wedi cofrestru ar raglenni gradd sy'n cynnwys amrywiaeth eang o dasgau ysgrifennu, yn cynnwys cerddi, dramâu, rhyddiaith, adolygiadau llyfrau ac ysgrifennu traethodau beirniadol. Casglwyd data ansoddol drwy gyfweliadau lled-strwythuredig a dyddiaduron adfyfyriol, a'u dadansoddi gan ddefnyddio dadansoddiad ffenomenolegol deongliadol. Dynododd y dadansoddiad mai prif bryder y myfyrwyr dyslecsig oedd rheoli trefniant a strwythur ysgrifennu traethodau beirniadol, yn gysylltiedig â mynegiannau cryf o orbryder, ond nid adroddodd un o'r myfyrwyr broblemau arwyddocaol ynghylch strwythuro'u darnau creadigol. Roedd yr holl fyfyrwyr yn ei gweld yn anodd dros ben gweithio ar ysgrifennu creadigol ac aseiniadau ysgrifennu beirniadol ar yr un pryd. Mae'r canfyddiadau hyn yn rhoi lle amlwg i'r tensiynau rhwng tri dull allweddol o ran ysgrifennu ac addysgeg dyslecsia: y model sgiliau astudio trosglwyddadwy, y model cymdeithasoli academaidd a'r dull llythrennedd academaidd. Roedd disgyblaeth a genre yn effeithio'n sylweddol ar brofiadau ysgrifennu'r myfyrwyr hyn ond mae angen ymchwil rhyngddisgyblaethol pellach. Daw'r papur i'r casgliad y darperir cymorth ysgrifennu arbenigol ar gyfer myfyrwyr dyslecsig orau o fewn cyd-destun disgyblaethol y tasgau ysgrifennu. Mae goblygiadau yma o ran y modd o gyflwyno cymorth llythrennedd o fewn AU.

Key Words: Writing, dyslexia, academic literacies, specialist support, higher education.

Introduction

The author provides specialist literacy support to humanities students who have a range of learning differences, including dyslexia. Some of these students are Creative Writing undergraduates1 most of whom report little difficulty managing the writing demands of their creative pieces, but express a great degree of apprehension when it comes to writing essays. This observation raises a number of questions: Do all creative writing students experience the same difficulty, or is this pattern confined mostly to the dyslexic students? If the latter, is writing creatively fundamentally different from writing critical essays such that certain processing differences that are central to dyslexia are favoured in creative writing? And if creative writing is a place of confidence and achievement, could the students' skills as creative writers be used to build their essay writing skills?

The specialist support role within higher education (HE) is underpinned by the idea that reading and writing skills are transferable cognitive processes concerned mainly with lower order aspects of writing such as spelling and punctuation, detachable from epistemological concerns (Lea & Street, 1998, p.261). However, if the discipline and genre context of the writing task significantly impacts on the student's writing facility then this transferable study-skills model requires investigation.

To explore these issues, this research focused primarily around one degree programme, the Creative Writing BA (single or joint honours), to allow exploration of the impact of the varied writing requirements for that particular course on small group of students. The following research questions were formulated:

- What are the pains and pleasures of writing for this particular degree programme?
- What sorts of strategies do students draw on, and in what specific situations, for engaging with creative and critical writing tasks?
- What connections do dyslexic students make between their diagnosed learning differences and their writing for this programme?
- How do the creative and academic writing elements of the programme influence one another, if at all?

These questions are open to allow for rich, qualitative material to emerge. They place the student's writing experience in the context of a particular degree programme and no assumptions are made that dyslexia will automatically be problematic; there is room for discussion of writing strengths and achievements as well as difficulties.

Literature Review

Until recently, research regarding the writing of dyslexic students for their university degree programmes has tended to focus on lower order skills such as spelling and grammar over higher order processes such as the development of macrostructure and argument. In addition, there has been little investigation into the influence of particular subject and genre concerns on dyslexia and writing (Carter & Sellman, 2013, p.150).

Research by Sterling *et al* (1998) analysed the writing of a group of 16 dyslexic university students matched with a control group. The main focus was spelling and writing speed, based on the hypothesis that, given the well documented phonological processing difficulties experienced by those with dyslexia, these might translate into writing difficulties (Sterling *et al*, 1998, p.3). Their results show clear differences between the dyslexic and non-dyslexic groups: the former wrote significantly shorter essays, had slower writing speeds, used more one syllabic and less three syllabic words, and demonstrated significantly higher spelling error rates (of a type that indicate core phonological impairment). There were no significant differences found in sentence length or use of appropriate sentence boundaries (Sterling *et al*, 1998, p.11-13). They speculate that the slower writing speed may be due to extra effort and time demanded by spelling, and/or time spent organising thoughts into grammatically correct sentences.

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1 The Creative Writing degree can be a single or joint honours programme. If single honours, compulsory English Literature modules are included; if joint honours, it is combined equally with another subject such as English Literature or Philosophy.

Although no major differences were found in terms of sentence construction, they suggest that differences might occur with more conceptually difficult tasks requiring further research.

There is however a significant problem with using an approach that simply assesses the end point of writing: no insight is gained into how dyslexic and non-dyslexic students experience and manage the writing task and the writing context is viewed as a neutral vehicle by which to investigate cognitive processes and behavioural outcomes. In Sterling *et al*'s research the students were asked to write an essay about their lives as a student; this is a narrative essay genre which is less likely to tax the students' 'monitor'2, in contrast to an argumentative style essay which is more representative of academic writing for essays.

A more recent paper by Tops *et al.* (2012) explored structural aspects of writing using a large sample of 100 students with dyslexia, age-matched with 100 controls. This research was conducted in Dutch which, it should be noted, has a more transparent orthography than English. Tops *et al* observe that other research has consistently found poor spelling and reluctance to use longer words in the writing of dyslexic students but attempts to investigate the ability to structure texts has produced variable results (Tops *et al.*, 2012, p.707).

In their own research, Tops *et al* assessed the spelling, punctuation, and capitalisation errors in a précis and dictation task, along with word and syntax use in the précis. In the second part of the research, 'blind' experts were asked to judge the quality of the writing of both groups based on transcriptions free of spelling errors (Tops *et al.*, 2012, p.716). As expected, spelling, punctuation, avoidance of longer words and capitalisation errors were significantly more frequent in the dyslexic group, but sentence length and average word count were not significantly different. However, in the 'blind' assessment of the spelling and grammar corrected texts, the summaries of the dyslexic students were marked lower on the basis of poorer fluency and structure. Tops *et al* conclude that writing difficulties of dyslexic students are present at the discourse level, not just the word and sentence level, and teaching approaches to essay writing and discourse organisation need to be investigated (Tops *et al.*, 2012, p.718).

Although Tops *et al*'s research successfully pursues exploration of higher order writing skills it still denudes the writing task of any real significance. It is only with the emergence of the academic literacies approach, pioneered by Lea & Street that research considering the disciplinary, contextual and socio-cultural influences on writing has developed. Both the cognitive deficit study-skills model and the academic socialisation model have framed academic writing discussions in universities to date, but academic literacies theory, whilst not rejecting these approaches, critiques them and seeks to make explicit broader discourses concerning power relations, social identities, meaning making and authority (Lea & Street, 2006, pp. 368-370).

An early piece of research conducted by Lea & Street (1998, in Fletcher-Campbell *et al.*, 2009, pp. 260-261) entitled 'Perspectives on Academic Literacies: an institutional approach' was concerned with examining wider institutional influences on writing in response to concerns about the falling literacy standards in higher education (see for example Winch & Wells, 1995). They interviewed a range of staff and students from two universities and analysed course material, student's written work, handouts on essay writing, assignment guidelines and so on, within the academic categories of humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, using an ethnographic style methodology (Lea & Street, 1998).

Their findings indicated that staff had well defined notions of what constitutes good writing, mostly described in terms of surface features with some deeper features mentioned, most commonly 'structure' and 'argument', but there was less certainty about how to make explicit that which underpins a well-argued or well-structured piece. Lea & Street conclude that "...in practice what makes a piece of student writing appropriate has more to do with issues of epistemology than with surface features of form to which staff often have recourse when describing their students' writing." That is to say, underlying, often disciplinary, assumptions about the nature of knowledge affected the meaning given to the term, 'structure' and 'argument'. They suggest that successful academic writing is informed by particular ways of constructing the world rather than through mastery of a set of generic writing skills. Academic staff will have spent many years learning to construct their own knowledge in line with their disciplinary world

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2 The use of the term 'monitor', which might also be referred to as the central executive system, relates to Flower and Hayes' *Cognitive Process Theory of Writing* (1981). Writing processes such as planning, translating and reviewing come under the control of this cognitive organising and regulating faculty.

view but are not necessarily able to articulate what that entails to an outsider or novice (Lea & Street, 1998, in Fletcher-Campbell *et al*. 2009, pp.265-266).

The student interviews revealed that writing approaches successfully learned and applied in one course or module (or even for a specific lecturer) were often met with criticism and poor marks by another, leaving the students struggling to make sense of their assignment feedback in light of this. They also reported receiving conflicting advice about academic writing conventions such as use of the first person pronoun or what to include in an essay introduction. The students wanted 'specific course-based knowledge for a particular lecturer or field of study' but what they mostly got was general technical essay writing advice dealing with surface form and emphasising referencing and plagiarism (Lea & Street, 1998, in Fletcher-Campbell *et al*., 2009, pp.267-268).

One recent study exploring the writing of dyslexic students from an academic literacies perspective was conducted by Carter & Sellman (2013). They used a socio-cultural research methodology to understand the essay writing experiences of eleven humanities students (seven with dyslexia) using semi-structured interviews, exploring in particular how the students' own identities as writers and their understanding of their writing tasks affected how they went about an essay writing assignment (Carter & Sellman, 2013, pp.149-153).

Their findings suggest that the view of dyslexia as a cognitive deficit problem tends to obscure the contextual, discipline-specific problems faced by students; although the dyslexic students in their sample manifested all the literacy difficulties typical of dyslexia (slower reading speeds, needing to reread material, more spelling errors) these were mostly well managed, with greater concern expressed for discipline specific issues such as reading for a particular course, referencing, and uncertainty about how to integrate the voices of source material with their own writing voice. They also found that the students' ability to successfully manage their emotional reactions to writing and other studying tasks was as important as metalinguistic skills such as the ability to monitor the progress of their writing (Carter & Sellman, 2013, pp.160-161).

Carter & Sellman suggest that cognitive models of dyslexia alone do not explain all the difficulties those students experience; an understanding of writing as a social practice alongside a view of dyslexia as socially constructed may be more helpful in appreciating the writing concerns of those students. They acknowledge the tensions this produces between specialist and inclusive approaches, expressing concern that the curriculum for writing development is 'distorted' when funding issues prioritise specialist approaches. They advocate for a more inclusive approach to writing support (Carter & Sellman, 2013, pp.161-162).

Carter & Sellman's paper is of particular interest as it touches on many of the same concerns as this research, but their call to view dyslexia as a socially constructed phenomenon is controversial; many will feel this undermines the progress made to have dyslexia recognised as a learning disability.

Research Methodology

Of central importance to this research is the idea of writing as an embodied, contextualised activity, not just a set of abstract cognitive skills that are applied in the same way regardless of the writing situation. A research methodology was required that could capture and convey a lived experience of writing and reveal the extent to which the writing experiences of students both with and without dyslexia might be qualitatively different or similar. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was considered to be the most suitable methodology by which to meet these requirements.

IPA allows for production and analysis of rich, subjective material and is an ideal springboard for developing further research. In IPA, sample sizes are small, the aim being to draw out detailed material and to examine similarities and differences within a homogenous group, hence only female students were selected to participate in this study (Smith, 2008, p.56).

Five female students took part in the research; four were mature students. Only students who had undertaken a full diagnostic assessment with a qualified assessor indicating dyslexia were included in the

dyslexia3 category of students; two of the dyslexic students were also diagnosed with dyspraxia (also known as developmental co-ordination disorder)4.

Semi structured interviews were undertaken with both students and staff from the relevant department with the staff interviews conducted first as a way of gaining an overview of the writing requirements of the specific course programme. Additionally, the student participants were asked to write between two to four diary reflections triggered by a set of questions immediately after undertaking a 'writing event'5 for a creative or academic course related task, and asked to submit both to the researcher. Creative writing students are familiar with the reflective diary convention, and this method allows a more immediate writing experience to be captured. One participant did not submit any writing event reflections or extracts but was interviewed. The other four students all submitted reflections and work extracts. When they had completed their writing event diaries they were then interviewed. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts and writing reflections were initially analysed for each individual student and themes noted. The data was then merged and analysed in two group, the dyslexic and non-dyslexic students, to explore themes of commonality and difference to both groups.

The staff interviews were loosely analysed and the full discussion can be found in Appendix 1. The staff themes feed into the 'Findings' and 'Changes to Practice' sections.

Findings

The findings are set out in two sections. Section one discusses differences between the dyslexic and non-dyslexic students. Section two discusses themes of commonality between both groups.

The dyslexic students include Sandra, Hannah and Elle. The non-dyslexic group includes May and Andrea. These are, of course, pseudonyms.

Differences between dyslexic and non-dyslexic students

Managing structure and organisation of essay writing

A central concern for the dyslexic students was forgetting if they had already written about something in an essay or inability to locate an argument or section in their document often resulting in time-consuming strategies such as starting the piece again, opening new documents to write new sections, or repeatedly going back to the beginning to work all the way through the text. Hannah describes this process as 'backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards.' She keeps everything she has deleted from the main text in case she loses something and often starts new sections of writing in another document, but then has to keep track of all these other documents: it is 'chaotic'. Hannah also talks about her need to have all her writing around her in the form of written notes and hard copies of electronic documents, and the constant stress of managing her electronic files. 'I like to sit with all the bits of paper around me so that I can see everything. I just…I'm finding working with the computer really, really difficult because you can't see everything at the same time, you can't touch it.'

Sandra reports feeling particularly overwhelmed beyond a certain word-count: '…it just seems to be that if I go over 1,500 it starts to get really difficult for me. So writing to length is really difficult…I just get lost…', and as she needs to restructure 'it starts to become more of a mess…I'm trying to say everything all at once.' She identifies 'organising ideas' as the main difficulty but also says 'I'm sort of coming to realise that I like to do things fast…I don't feel comfortable in unpacking things bit by bit.' It was not clear to what

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[3] Dyslexia is widely understood to be a developmental condition affecting reading, writing and spelling. Core cognitive processes implicated include phonological processing, memory, processing speeds, co-ordination and automaticity of tasks. Discrepancies in areas of achievement are often noted (Reid, 2009, p.4-5).

[4] One definition of dyspraxia is 'an impairment in the organisation of movement which leads to associated problems with language, perception and thought.' (Dyspraxia Trust, 2001, in Reid, 2009, p.293).
It is increasingly understood that dyslexia is found in conjunction with many other processing, attention, memory and organisational issues. The presence of dyspraxia in these students therefore does not invalidate the research. Indeed, it would be hard to find a group of dyslexic students with no other associated learning differences.

[5] This term is a play on the phrase 'literacy event' coined by Shirley Brice Heath (1982) which refers to discrete episodes of reading or writing which make up 'literary practices'.

extent this unease with taking time to develop a point was due to stylistic preference, a lack of technical knowledge around how to build arguments more slowly and thoroughly, an effect of dyslexia or a lack of confidence in taking up writing space.

Difficulty with word count was not expressed at all by the non-dyslexic group; in fact May talks about how she usually over researches and writes too much. Some aspects of essay writing and structuring were problematised by the non-dyslexic group but not to the same extent. May refers to 'getting lost' sometimes, and Andrea talks about finding 'linear', 'methodical' ways of writing difficult, but they have both developed strategies to help with these issues and did not express difficulty with the logistics of managing documents or losing track of where particular items are in their work. Rewriting whole pieces or sections was a strategy that only the dyslexic students referred to, yet this strategy is ultimately more time consuming and demanding on writing processes. Revising rather than rewriting text is less demanding but requires greater diagnostic skills (Horning & Becker, 2006, p.30).

This experience is in line with Tops *et al*'s findings (2013) that structuring writing is problematic for students with dyslexia, and Sterling *et al*'s findings (1998) that dyslexic students have difficulty meeting longer word counts. The increasing preoccupation with keeping track of what is written and where it is located in the text as the piece expands, at the cost of the development and coherent linkage of ideas and arguments, suggests that the ability to revise global writing goals is affected. Adept global revision is a characteristic of experienced, successful writers, whereas novice writers tend to focus on local, surface revisions such as grammar and spelling (Horning & Becker, 2006, p.30).

How might this structuring difference between the dyslexic and non-dyslexic students be accounted for? There are at least four relevant factors here. Firstly, from a cognitive perspective, complex writing tasks place huge demands on working memory capacity (Horning & Becker 2006, p.31) and dyslexic students are likely to enter this situation with already compromised phonological short term memory (Hatcher & Snowling, 2002, in Reid, 2009 p. 99). Writing revision, particularly global revision, is the most demanding process of all in terms of working memory capacity and central executive functioning (Horning & Becker, 2006, pp.32 and 39).

Secondly, the knowledge base and amount of practice of writing for a particular genre or discipline also strongly affects working memory load. Experienced, successful writers are able to draw on long term memory templates that reduce working memory overload and free up short term memory space for taxing revision activities (Horning & Becker, 2006, p. 32), thus prior learning experience becomes highly significant. It is noteworthy that two of the dyslexic students in this research entered their current degree programmes from non-traditional routes with no prior foundation course preparation. One of these, Hannah, says: 'If I knew in my first year what I know about writing an essay now, I'd be able to concentrate on the dam subjects better...all of it's mind-bendingly frustrating...It feels as though I am running to catch up all the time...'

In contrast May (not dyslexic), who also entered from a non-traditional route, did undertake a foundation degree which was extremely helpful to her in developing a basic essay writing template: 'That's what was great about doing the foundation because it gave you a basic formula. So, OK, I've changed that formula and got into my own way of writing it but I needed that formula, you know, and it explained why I'd had so much trouble the first time I went [to college] because I never learned how to be an academic student...'

This highlights the double or even triple whammy that dyslexic students may face on entering HE: negative prior learning experiences, little or no essay writing practice and a cognitive difference that may make some writing and organisational processes particularly difficult.

The third point relates to how the Creative Writing and English Literature course is structured. The interviewees struggled to understand the value of the English Literature modules in their first year and there is a deliberate strategy of exposing students to difficult critical writings in their first year (Appendix 1). For some students this combination of new vocabulary and concepts, copious reading expectations, poor knowledge base, new writing genre to master and confusion as to why they are being required to do English Literature modules in the first place, may prove overwhelming. If students do not have access to foundation degrees then some other sort of supplementary discipline-based writing practice is required in which smaller writing tasks focusing on fewer concerns allow mastery of one aspect of writing at a time until knowledge base and some structuring automaticity have developed.

Finally, as the research of Lea & Street (1998) and Carter & Sellman (2013) suggests, of central importance in supporting students in their essay writing is guidance in relation to the particular disciplinary and epistemological concerns of a writing task. This idea was neatly conveyed by one member of academic staff who noted: 'The person offering the support has to have a deep understanding of what they are supporting towards...' But typically dyslexic students receive learning support from staff who mostly have no relevant academic disciplinary background; indeed the support model is predicated on detaching the study support from subject knowledge.

Zoning out and stress

The dyslexic students described more intense feelings of stress, anxiety, and effort related to organising and keeping control of essay structure than the non-dyslexic group. This was conveyed vividly by Hannah: 'I put myself through Hell to get my marks!' Essay writing is 'frustrating', she feels 'tearful', 'stressed' 'snappy' 'already in a panic' 'confused', 'I am in a total tiz about this essay', 'now I feel sick.' Similarly, Sandra is 'panicky' and 'anxious' whilst trying to sort out an outline for a presentation. When a piece she is working on starts to get out of control she 'zones out'. Elle describes something like 'writer's block' during essay writing: 'as you're writing your mind goes blank...and it's like negativity reaching you.' Hannah describes 'spacing out', and being 'disconnected' from the work when she feels overwhelmed.

In contrast, the accounts of the non-dyslexic students' are more contained. Andrea describes it as 'very difficult stuff...' and May reports 'I can get pretty nervous with the academic writing', but if she gets 'shaky' in a writing task it is usually life events 'stressing' her out, not the writing process itself.

This links to Carter & Sellman's (2013) findings that meta-affective factors in managing written work are as important as meta-linguistic aspects. Research on the impact of emotional arousal on learning shows that there is an 'optimal work zone'; high levels of adrenaline and stress are a significant impediment to learning and performance on academic tasks (Apter, 1989, in Boud & Molloy, 2013, p.53). Furthermore, 'zoning out' and disassociating can be a result of working memory overload which has been extensively researched in children with learning differences. Frequent zoning out can have a devastating impact on learning and motivation; tasks must be broken down to avoid overload of working memory (Gathercole, 2008, p. 383).

Furthermore, the extra effort dyslexic students must put into some reading and writing tasks can be hidden by the specialist support system; the module lecturer may only see the end result. As one academic lecturer interviewee commented: 'In a sense you never really know quite what it is that has gone together up to the point of submitting.' A higher level of collaboration is required therefore in supporting student's writing to alert lecturers to student struggles much earlier allowing for timely diagnostic and scaffolded feedback[6] in addition to providing the discipline and genre specific context for the writing support. The need for greater communication, and shared and complementary pedagogies between support and academic staff was raised by all the academic staff interviewed.

But no significant difficulties structuring creative writing

However, none of the dyslexic students expressed particular difficulties with the structuring and organisation of their creative writing and this could not be explained solely by shorter length of writing tasks. Hannah describes how she is able to write novella length stories: 'It unfolds...' If she gets to a place that requires more work, she leaves a blank page and writes a few words on it that 'make the picture' so that she can go back and flesh it out later. Hannah recognises that with creative writing she has greater control: 'I'm putting my own constraints on it....I give myself the rules and when I write I'm not worried about the grammar or spelling, just the content, just what is there. Everything like that can be sorted out later.' Her calm and confident approach to structuring stories is in stark contrast to her essay writing experience.

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[6] Dialogic feedback and feedforward conversations between staff and students on students' written work have the most impact on their marks out of all other teaching and learning interventions. For a thorough discussion of this refer to Boud and Molloy (2013).

This difference may be explained by the familiarity of creative writing as a genre. The first writing children do at school, and continue to do well into secondary school, is story writing, whereas many university applicants have never written anything that resembles the type of essay that is required of them at university. For this reasons, narrative writing forms place less pressure on working memory and other writing processes (Horning & Becker, 2006, p.48). But this difference may also be connected to varying subject writing cultures with greater emphasis placed within Creative Writing pedagogies on peer review, in-class writing exercises, and the development of a supportive writing community (see Appendix 1 pp. 21-22 for a discussion of the writing culture of the Creative Writing programme).

Themes that emerge for all the students

Creative and essay writing require a different mind-set. All the creative writing students expressed great difficulty working on creative and essay writing assignments at the same time, regardless of dyslexia diagnosis: 'I found doing the two together really difficult at times as, whilst they have really positive effects on one another...they are two different mind-sets. And flicking from one to the other has been quite stressful at times.' (Andrea)

Similarly May: 'Well, I just can't [do it], you know. I found that extremely difficult 'cos you've got a completely different mind-set...' When she tries to work on both together she finds it 'doesn't work' and the creative writing 'gets a bit stilted.' Both May and Andrea talked about how they avoid working on creative and critical writing alongside each other at all costs, but this cannot always be avoided due to deadlines. Elle sacrificed her creative writing in the first year to get to grips with essay writing: '...I focused more of my energies on English 'cos it's harder erm...I haven't focused so much on creative writing so that's been pushed back.' This can be demotivating for students who have come to university specifically to develop their Creative Writing.

All the students described creative and essay writing as requiring them to use a different part of their brain, adopt a completely different mind-set. Creative writing was described as having an emotional and immersive character. For Hannah it is her 'dream space' where she can 'blank it all out. I'm in the zone. I'm there in my mind imagining all the pictures, all the emotions....I'm sort of immersed in it'. Similarly May says 'It's almost like I'm using a different side of my brain, you know...it's a very different space emotionally... It's what I call legend tuning'; it is often 'healing'. Sandra also uses the term 'immersion' and describes it as 'otherworldly...things are sort of filtering down. I'm just trying to grab it while it's flowing.'

Creative writing can create a buzz, an emotional high even. Andrea describes 'the eureka moment when you finally get something...' May uses words like 'buzzing', 'adrenaline going', 'I like the "Yes!" high feeling I get when creative writing goes right.' Elle's description is a little more muted but still positive: 'enjoyable...relaxing'.

In contrast essay writing is, for Andrea, 'like going to work... I'll have my diary... I do it sat at my desk... you are trying to solve a problem, trying to construct an argument... I'll sit and drink an inordinate amount of coffee....' This aspect also comes out in May's description: 'The academic is a task...quite often I don't really know what I'm doing.' It is 'linear' and you can't bring in emotion ''cos it wants an argument.' For Hannah it is 'formal.' Her experience of English Literature is that it 'is outside...it's almost like I'm engaging with it across a bridge, if you like...English feels backwards. None of the rules make sense...' Essay writing also has strong physical effects. Andrea says: '...everything about writing an essay feels taxing at the time, everything is physically exhausting. I eat a lot...it's like I've run a marathon'. Hannah also 'eat[s] loads' and her 'shoulders and... back burn!'

Multisensory imagination

All the students described or demonstrated some form of multisensory imagination, particularly visual, but this was more marked in the dyslexic group. Both Hannah and Elle described strong visual and multisensory imagination feeding into their creative writing, rather like a film or image unfolding. Hannah said 'I've got quite a good imagination...I imagine things in colour in 3D with all the sounds and smells, 90% of the time they have all the smells there as well.' Elle also reported being able to imagine 'how someone might look, how someone might speak...' in her creative pieces. Sandra uses her own photographic images in one of her writing events (planning a presentation) as the starting point for her

planning, bringing in words towards the end. She also successfully used a mind-map to clarify her confused thoughts about the line of argument for her presentation. In a third reflection Sandra used a very strong visual metaphor to structure a rather vexing abstract task. The non-dyslexic students also discussed multisensory approaches; Andrea sometimes uses visual images in relation to planning her writing, commenting: 'and I use lots of colours, sometimes I'll even use pictures to sort of draw my attention to things or remind me of things.' She uses mind-mapping software to achieve a strong global overview of her ideas for essay planning. May included a mind-map featuring the image of a tree with writing around it in one of her diary entries, the inspiration for the piece coming from a radio programme, and she also described finding an English Literature module that included lots of other media really helpful. May repeatedly described needing to find the rhythm in a piece of writing.

However, it became clear that it was more difficult to use this multisensory imagination for essay writing. Hannah notes:

 I can't do that with an essay: it's black and white. I can't make the pictures... they're like different pictures, like a cartoon, like a comic book rather than a film. It's all separate pictures that I have to join together with little comic book boxes of words, whereas the story, I'm just there, it's an experience.

This raises the issue of when a student should move from a non-linguistic representation to a linguistic one in the course of planning and writing their work. It may be that the sooner this occurs the better so as to allow the development of further writing goals that can only emerge as text (as opposed to other representations) develops. More research is needed on this.

All the students described a qualitative difference between working on creative compositions in contrast to critical essay writing. They all described drawing quite heavily on visual and other sensory imagination for creative writing but some of them noted how they are unable to access this facility in the essay writing. Despite the staff interviews indicating a desire within the department to convey a sense of the interconnection between different writing disciplines and genres (Appendix 1 p. 20). When it comes to working on creative and critical essay writing assignments the students' are vocal and unanimous in their assertion that creative writing and critical essay writing are two quite different beasts, each requiring their singular attention.

In conclusion, two key findings emerge in this section: the particular difficulties experienced by dyslexic students in managing the structure and organisation of essays, and the contrasting life-worlds of creative and essay writing experienced similarly by all the students. These findings have been discussed from both a cognitive psychology and academic literacies perspective showing how within-person processing differences and academic disciplinary cultures and practices interact. The findings indicate that writing discipline and genre profoundly affect the ease of writing for all the students but particularly the dyslexic students; this suggests that specialist writing support needs to be sensitive to the disciplinary and writing genre context. Finally, the IPA methodology has allowed the affective aspects of writing to emerge; this would not be the case if methodology were employed that only considered the end writing product.

Changes to Practice

This small scale qualitative study suggests that writing andragogy is best situated within the context of the subject discipline and genre requirements of the writing task. At the same time, however, all staff involved in teaching and supporting students with dyslexia and other learning differences need at least some minimal understanding of how dyslexia impacts on writing processes. More research is required in the area of writing and learning difference at HE level, but two key recommendations can be made:

Firstly, all students can benefit form from small-scale, low stakes, scaffolded, non-assessed writing practice that is situated within their academic discipline and allows for immediate peer and tutor dialogic feedback. Such a writing support model already exists in the form of Writing in the Disciplines (WiD), an approach that is rapidly gaining ground in UK HEIs in response to recognition that many students who enter HE are not prepared for academic writing for a variety of reasons (Bright & Crabb 2008, p.5).

WiD is a 'doing writing and evaluating it' approach rather than a 'talking about how to write' approach. It is: "... [embedded] within the design and delivery of course/module content in order to help students learn both disciplinary knowledge and the writing practices of that discipline. It sees writing as more than a means of assessment; it considers writing to be part of a process that can facilitate students'

understanding of a subject and improve their reasoning and critical thinking skills." (Bright & Crabb, 2008, p.4).

WiD also provides a platform for collaboration (and research) between academic staff, specialist support staff and learning technologists, thus facilitating development of shared goals and practices (Deane & O'Neill, 2011). WiD is not a substitute for specialist support but can provide discipline-specific writing exercises with explicitly stated goals, allowing opportunities for further discussion and reinforcement in one to one support sessions.

Peer learning, a central feature of WiD, builds students' confidence and helps them evaluate their own writing. Horner & Becker (2006, pp.39-44) emphasise, and provide much evidence to support, the importance of peer feedback (based on evaluative frameworks that reflect the discipline and genre goals of the writing task) for improving student writers' abilities to accurately critique and more effectively revise their own writing.

In the staff interviews, lecturers expressed concern about being drawn into teaching writing; however, WiD type writing activities are often already happening - they simply require developing and formalising within an explicit WiD model. The Creative Writing workshop culture for example has a writing ethos that is already highly compatible with WiD. (See pages 25-26)

The second recommendation is for good practice in inclusive teaching and learning to be identified and agreed across the institution and for training to be made available to all academic staff. Inclusive approaches benefit all students and reduce the sense of stigma that specialist approaches can sometimes engender (Tinklin, 2004, p.649). Action on this recommendation is particularly pressing in light of recent changes to DSA which have resulted in less funding for individual support of students with dyslexia and other specific learning differences. Increasing numbers of such students will no longer receive specialist support and will therefore be wholly reliant on the good teaching and learning practices of their institution.

Conclusion

At a deeper level, this research has attempted to bring together two world views: on one hand that of cognitive psychology, the dominant paradigm informing specialist support approaches, concerned largely with individual learning differences, and on the other, the academic literacies perspective that examines how socio-cultural and academic disciplinary discourses impact on learning and students' writing. If students with dyslexia and other learning differences are to reach their full potential at university it is clear that the parallel worlds of student support and academia need to meet somewhere. Collaborative research projects and pedagogical models such as WiD, can provide a bridge. The alternative is that we continue to inhabit our own sealed-off Universes (Barkas, 2011) while bewildered students are left to make whatever sense they can of conflicting and opaque discourses.

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Appendix 1:   Staff Interview Discussion

Four members of staff from the Creative Writing and English Literature department were interviewed. Themes to emerge from these interviews are discussed below.

The relationship between creative and critical writing

Both the Creative Writing single honours and joint honours degree programmes have compulsory modules that include critical essay writing assignments. Encouraging the Creative Writing students to understand the relationships between different writing forms was touched on to a greater or lesser extent in all the interviews, alongside a desire to justify the inclusion of English Literature modules: '[there's] sometimes a failure to comprehend why they should be doing English in order to do creative writing.' There was general agreement that the two disciplines of writing (creative and critical) were complementary and that essay writing was an important skill for the Creative Writing students, not only for enhancing their creative writing but also for the world of work. One member of staff felt strongly that a Creative Writing degree should prepare the student for 'surviving as a creative writer...A degree course...that does not teach the other kind of writing as well is letting those students down.' This is because 'writing in broader terms is essential for a job. Very few students can make a living only by creative writing.'

Ways in which creative writing might enhance critical writing were less spontaneously offered. When asked about this directly, the responses were generally positive but limited. For example Creative Writing students may: '...write with a kind of fluency which may not always be achievable by a student who doesn't

do creative writing because they feel reticent about expressing themselves in that way, and when they write an academic essay it might be very precise...'

Use of figurative language, metaphor and analogy were seen as very appropriate to critical writing, but one staff member felt that structuring devices were not so generalisable: 'plot-structure less [transferable]...'

The academic literacy culture of English Literature

Echoing Lea and Street's research (1998) ability to develop a strong line of argument and clarity of expression were emphasised as key aspects of good writing for English Literature: '[students should] be able to construct arguments, to be able to structure them well, to be able to express themselves clearly and fluently.' These skills were also viewed as mostly transferable across the Humanities in general apart from the approaches to textual analysis studied on the programme which are more specific to English literature.

A deliberate strategy of introducing students to specialist vocabulary and dense theoretical writings quite early on in the programme was described by one lecturer who also commented that the both first year literary and theoretical texts can be very challenging:

Some of the literary texts can be quite hard as well [as the theoretical texts]... some of the early... texts can offer distinct kinds of problems... very different world views... the use of terms which are now obsolete and the changes of meanings of words...

Frontloading the first year English modules with new vocabulary and difficult conceptual material could create particular problems for students with dyslexia who need more time to embed new vocabulary and read dense texts. Time and effort taken to get to grips with new vocabulary can reduce comprehension of material (McLoughlin and Leather 2013, p. 168).

The academic literacy culture of Creative Writing

A sense of Creative Writing degree programmes still finding their academic identity emerged in the interviews. One member of staff commented: 'Creative Writing is relatively new... But the hostility there's been. I remember when we started here from the academic side of things 'cos they couldn't get out of the idea that it was a dawdle, that people were, you know, just sitting around... not taking things seriously.' This uncertainty also surfaces in discussion on assessment practices for Creative Writing discussed later on.

The writing workshop and the community of writing was strongly emphasised in Creative Writing in contrast to English Literature where group writing activities and the critiquing of each other's writing were not mentioned: 'When you're a [creative] writer you have a workshop inside your head and... that is how you learn to edit... because you become different people in that workshop looking at your work, being able to objectify that work... And I don't know if, when you're writing academically, you can get to that point.

Emphasis is placed on writing in class, encouraging a daily writing habit and writing as a process rather than as a means to an end: 'I think in creative writing the outcome and process are very much entwined so the actual process of writing becomes part of what's there at the end...' Encouraging writing confidence in students is presented as an explicit teaching goal, along with developing a sense of responsibility and establishing trust; creative writing is viewed as more personally exposing: '...it needs to be a trusting kind of environment... People are putting their souls on the line really, writing, and you can't treat that with anything other than the greatest care and respect and that gives them the confidence to tackle the other [academic writing]... Students need to share in gaining authority.'

Creative writing was also discussed as an equalising medium. A student need not have lots of advantages to be successful (the inference being that for other academic courses socio-economic status might be significant): '... creative writing... it equalises things. It gives every student the opportunity to be as good as every other student...' It is a culture where mistakes might be seen as positive: '... in creative writing you need to make a mistake in order to go further and get it right...' It was also commented that the academic side can be too 'pedantic'.

Writing support provided by the department

Three main ways in which students are, or could be, supported in their writing emerged in the interviews. Firstly, there is the embedded compulsory study skills module in the first year described by one lecturer in the following way: '…we've tried to make it not about the mechanical thing; we've tried to make it about the process.' Students go through a series of writing exercises each building on the last, starting with a very short personal essay.

The second approach is the personal tutor system for students to discuss feedback and work through any particular difficulties. 'In theory, every single student who gets a piece of feedback comes to talk to the module lecturer about what that means. In practice, we probably see less than 20%.' This lecturer also notes that students who are struggling may be even less likely to approach their personal tutor for feedback. There is ample evidence that students who might benefit most from feedback dialogue are more likely to avoid feedback discussions and waiting for those students to approach lecturers is indeed a doomed strategy (see Boud and Molloy 2013).

Lastly, in-class approaches to discussing writing for particular assignments/modules were described. For example: 'There are ways in which I as a lecturer will try to engage the students in a discussion of how they will do certain things when writing their essays'. This lecturer goes on to give an example of getting them to think in class about how they will construct an argument about a particular topic, what sort of evidence they might use to argue a particular point and to build their argument. Another lecturer listed a number of concrete methods such as introducing students to templates for taking notes; use of signposting language; providing essay exemplars; discussing the shape of the essay; providing feedback on drafts: and advising on how to weight secondary source referencing at the beginning of the piece so the student can establish their 'authority' early on in the piece.

Many of these approaches consist in talking about, rather than doing, writing. There was ambivalence about introducing writing activities within the English Literature module: 'I think we've got enough to do in the session covering the content. Also poor attendance impacts on the usefulness of going through certain types of exercises.' This lecturer added: 'I'm all for writing outside class for in class presentations that all students can comment on and it always works well.' Another staff member expressed concern that writing exercises within classes will feel like 'detention' and suggested that there was already a good level of writing exercises going on but then added 'perhaps we could do more.'

Underpinning this discussion is an assumption about how prepared students are, or should be, for their university course. Two staff members described literacy standards as declining and were of the opinion that schools should better prepare students for university; one of these lecturers includes grammar points in the creative writing sessions:

I used to start every session with an English grammar and usage point…it takes away some of the fear of grammar… have a bit of fun with it…not smacking people on the head with it…making it part of the session…

However, other staff members expressed concern about getting caught up in this level of teaching '…you do not want to have to teach them grammar, teach them punctuation whatever, you know. They need to be beyond that so they can freely express themselves.' This lecturer also commented that grammar is taught in relation to proofreading, but added that that 'the problem is that they don't come knowing it', suggesting additional grammar drop-in clinics as a way forward. Three of the students interviewed in this research corroborated this need for more structured support around grammar, especially in their first year, and stated how this support might have improved their confidence.

Assessment

Discussions about written assessment veered between the desire to be flexible and the need to ensure assessment reflects some sort of 'real world' reality and ticks the right boxes. One lecturer talked about the departments move away from unseen exams but at the same time stressed the need to maintain rigour: 'exposing them to the reality so that whatever they do with the rest of their lives they understand that there are conventions and norms of presenting material…if they want to have a professional or personal life where they write almost anything including blogs, including Facebook posts, and understanding that there are conventions that apply…'

This desire to cater for individual needs but still meet general standards was also expressed specifically in relation to students with learning differences: '… at the moment we are paying lip service to the complexity [of the students' learning differences] which is a problem… and if you get to individual kinds of learning agreements it perhaps even should be that not only is there a kind of adjustment but that the assessment itself is fundamentally different for the student.' But again, this view was later moderated with a comment about the need to comply with standardised assessment criteria making such an individual approach difficult.

As mentioned earlier there was some ambivalence about what constitutes appropriate assessment for Creative Writing degrees: 'Now where perhaps creative writing is unusual is that culturally in the UK we are still on a journey working out what we think the underlying principles of the discipline are.' In terms of assessment: '…there might be a conversation to be had where we never require a single honours Creative Writing student to produce something that looks like a formal essay, which doesn't mean that we don't require of them all sorts of rigour and reflection; we just never ask them to do that particular task.' This lecturer noted that there are other Creative Writing programmes in the UK 'that do no formal academic writing whatsoever.'

The impact of the assessment culture on English Literature assessment was also discussed: '…our assessment cultures have caused all students to think that writing is something that happens at the end…at ten minutes to midnight, whereas if writing were something that happened continuously, the essay would still be a struggle and a stress, we all do that thing of missing deadlines whatever and underestimating time, but if you were constantly writing the essay would be a natural end point.'

The conclusion of many large-scale reviews of assessment practices in HEIs is that assessment policies and procedures for disabled students should be embedded within the general assessment procedures of the university (see for example Tinklin, 2004, p.649), rather than provided in the form of individual 'accommodations' which some disabled students find stigmatising. However, the intrinsic literary nature of the Creative Writing degree programme would seem to place limits on the scope for alternative assessment. It is nearly always writing that is being assessed, even oral presentations require an accompanying written script, in contrast to other disciplines that can include more visual and purely oral assessment.

Views on the role of learning support

A key aspect of the discussion regarding appropriate student support was the need for the support person to understand the disciplinary culture. They must be able to help the student:

> '…grow towards the expectation of the discipline…The person offering the support has to have a deep understanding of what they are supporting towards….and what we've done inadvertently is to create parallel ways of trying to cope and the pressure on us actually is to put…more and more of the sort of "this is how to do it" rather than "let's do it and work it out"…well I don't know what it means to have a class on critical thinking skills…We need to be critically thinking about something and applying thinking skills in a way that is relevant to the discipline.'

These views are very much in line with an academic socialisation model, one which values acculturation of a fairly 'stable' academic discourse (Lea and Street 2006 p. 369). The current specialist support approach might be described as a deficit model in which a specialist bolt-on service provides general study skills support in isolation from the teaching of the academic discipline to students viewed as having within-person cognitive learning difficulties, (Lea and Street 2006 p.368). The notion of a more dynamic and critical approach towards the disciplinary discourse itself (i.e. an academic literacies approach) was not so evidently expressed by the staff although one lecturer acknowledged that HEIs are slow to change, particularly in getting to grips with more 'radical student-centred learning approaches', the suggestion being that some of these approaches might facilitate a more critical engagement with the academic culture itself.

Three of the staff indicated that greater communication is required between support and academic staff. Concern about conflicting messages was a particular theme: 'We need to share information about

how we do study skills...If we are giving fundamentally contradictory advice to somebody who is struggling to understand the advice they're being given in the first place, that's also a problem.'

A sense of not really knowing what goes on between the student and the support worker and how this might impact on their writing was conveyed: '[students] will avail themselves of the support that's on offer to different degrees... In a sense you never really know quite what it is that has gone together up to the point of submitting.'

There was also a view that student support is reactive and that what is required is '…a team of people with the student in the centre of that working on this from day one...'

The problems of defining the boundaries between student support and academic teaching were expressed very clearly by one lecturer: 'I suppose one thing that remains in my mind...is the ongoing question of "Where does the student support offered generically across the Faculty end and where is that kind of training picked up within the modules by academic lecturers?"... and I can see where some of the things I do in seminars… there is a direct connection there, a continuity there... obviously coming from a different angle, but nevertheless there's a continuity...and some of the benefits of that activity.'

As these staff comments suggest, much remains to be clarified in respect to the relationship between academic and support staff. For example, what sort of shape might closer working together take? Should support staff be required to have a background in the discipline within which they support, or academic staff take on more specialist knowledge, or is it a case of meeting somewhere in the middle? Alternatively, should the focus (and expenditure) be concentrated on inclusive teaching and learning practices at the level of curriculum planning, VLE design, embedded assistive technologies and a radical rethink of assessment approaches and policies? We need to consider how students with learning differences entering HE can be empowered to fully engage with their studies and become agents of change themselves, rather than pawns in (and in some cases casualties of) a tick box culture.