Working with DipSW Students with Dyslexia

A Guide for Practice Teachers

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Introduction

This Guide is primarily intended for social work practice teachers, although it may also be useful for university tutors and others who are involved in the provision of practice placements for students on Diploma in Social Work programmes.

During the past five years or so we have noticed among our colleagues an increasing awareness of the need to understand and work with the problems faced by students who have dyslexia. We are conscious that this is a complex and sensitive area for all involved with students in higher education and that people have found it difficult trying to "get things right" in their efforts to help students who have this disability.

Although we have gathered some experience in this aspect of social work education over the past five years, we are not in any way setting ourselves up as experts in the field. We recognise that we are still learning about dyslexia as we go along. However we believe that what has been written in this Guide supports good practice in working with students who have dyslexia. Although there are no prescribed "right" ways of working with such students we have attempted to offer what experience we have and what learning we have achieved in promoting a flexible and supportive approach to the task.

We have been encouraged by colleagues to produce this Guide, and have been financially supported by the West of Scotland Consortium for Education and Training in Social Work. We would like to acknowledge the help, support and advice given to us by students who have dyslexia we have worked with, as without this the Guide would have been prepared without the awareness that comes from listening to the experiences of those who have spent most of their lives struggling with the written word.

We have tried to make the document as user friendly as possible, giving examples from students and colleagues with whom we have worked and who have told us of the struggles that have arisen from their dyslexia.

We hope that the content of the Guide will help to heighten awareness of the needs of students who have dyslexia and will give some suggestions, which may assist those involved in educating, and training social work students who have dyslexia.

Background to the Guide

It was not very long ago that the prevailing attitude in social work (as in other professional fields) towards students and workers with special needs was that although they may have a great deal to offer in terms of insights into the problems of people who experience similar difficulties, nevertheless if they were not able to undertake the professional task in the way in which it was conventionally packaged and structured, then they could not engage fully as professional workers and colleagues. Thus there have been relatively few qualified social workers with significant sight or hearing impairments, mobility problems or other difficulties, partly because employing organisations have not been well enough equipped to provide the support which they have needed, but perhaps more particularly because it has been very difficult for such individuals to clear the obstacles with which the training world presented them prior to entry to a professional role. This has certainly been true for those with Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia), commonly (and hereafter) referred to as dyslexia. There is little doubt that relatively few who suffer from this disability have qualified in social work up till now.

The obstacles they have faced in professional training have typically taken different forms, but there have recently been some signs of the development of a less hostile general learning environment for students with dyslexia. It is all relative of course, and there is no suggestion here that such students are operating on a level playing field with others.

Some of the main factors in this developing climate include the following:

- **Attitudes**: As social work trainers and educators have increasingly wakened up to the scale of the impact that discrimination has on the lives of people we aim to help, so there has come a corresponding realisation that discrimination does not just affect those whom we call "client", "resident" or "service user" but potentially affects a large number of people to whom these labels do not apply. Increasingly there has grown an awareness that discrimination is an issue not only for the social work process, but also for the educational process. This has caused educators and educational institutions, as well as service agencies, to begin to take a more questioning attitude towards conventional approaches to teaching and learning, and also to ways in which some aspects of the social work task might be viewed and/or undertaken. This opens up possibilities for greater access to the role for disadvantaged groups, including people with dyslexia.

- **Understanding of the nature of the problem**: Dyslexia is a disability which has been widely misunderstood and indeed was not even recognised until comparatively recently. Over the past few years however an increasing amount of research has yielded results which have produced a rather clearer understanding of the nature of the disability and its effects. This has led to

greater clarity about (among other things) the distinction between this and other forms of learning difficulty, and one consequence of this is the realisation that people with dyslexia show as broad a range of general intellectual functioning as the general population. This has been revealing both to educators and to those with the disability, causing the former to look again at how educational potential can be met, and giving the latter cause for increased confidence and higher educational expectations. Again, this is all relative, as this confidence and these expectations tended (and often still tend) to be generally low.

- **Learning technology**: Also during the past few years there has been a rapid development of the range of learning resources available to teachers and learners, and in particular we have experienced, and are still experiencing, an explosion in the field of learning technology. This has opened up for those suffering from dyslexia a potential range of tools which affords them greater opportunities to produce materials which more accurately reflect the quality of their intellectual work. Although the funding and accessing of these resources still present obstacles for students who have dyslexia to overcome, nevertheless their existence provides a possible means of releasing more of these students' potential than ever before.

All of this suggests that there are growing opportunities for students with dyslexia to participate more fully in the educational life of teaching institutions, in the professional life of social work agencies, and ultimately in making their contribution along with others to the welfare of service users of those agencies. However there is a long way to go in making these opportunities work to the full, and one of the major challenges is to educators and trainers, both in teaching institutions and in the field, in adjusting not only their approach but more fundamentally their mind-set in attempting to help and support students who have dyslexia through their educational development.

What is Dyslexia?

Within a rapidly expanding literature on dyslexia, its nature, its identification and its management, many attempts have been made to define the essence of the disability and/or to offer a description which might help to inform us about its nature. Some writers have provided helpful reviews of the range of definitions that have been proposed over the years, and in particular Reid (1993) and McLoughlin, Fitzgibbon & Young (1994) outline the debate surrounding the development of such a definition and include a number of examples of those suggested.

There is no attempt in this Guide to engage in this debate. However it may be useful to consider a few of the definitions and descriptions that are currently in circulation, in the hope that this may help to clarify, at least in broad terms, what it is that we are dealing with. It is not suggested that any one of the following examples is definitive, but they each offer something which can help us understand better.

1. Dyslexia ... "is a neurological condition, severely affecting 4% of the population; a further 6% show some dyslexic traits. Dyslexia is independent of race, social or economic background and often runs in families. Difficulties vary from individual to individual but generally include poor short-term memory and unusual ways of processing information - for this reason dyslexia can be described as a 'difference in learning'. A range of talents such as problem-solving skills and creativity has also been linked with dyslexia. With appropriate teaching and/or the use of effective coping strategies, many of the difficulties can be overcome." (Adult Dyslexia Organisation:
   http://www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/advice.html)

2. "Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty that hinders the learning of literacy skills. This problem with managing verbal codes in memory is neurologically based and tends to run in families. Other symbolic systems, such as mathematics and musical notation, can also be affected. Dyslexia can occur at any level of intellectual ability. It can accompany, but is not a result of, lack of motivation, emotional disturbance, sensory impairment or meagre opportunities. The effects of dyslexia can be alleviated by skilled specialist teaching and committed learning. Moreover many people with dyslexia have visual and spatial abilities that enable them to be successful in a wide range of careers." (The Dyslexia Institute, February 1996:
   http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk/)

3. "The word 'dyslexia' comes from Greek and means 'difficulty with words'. It is a difference in the part of the brain which processes language, and it affects skills that are needed for learning one or more of reading, writing, spelling and numeracy. This does not mean that people with dyslexia cannot become fully literate. With suitable help they can succeed, and people who have dyslexia

often have different and valuable problem-solving abilities." (British Dyslexia Association, 1996)

4. "Specific Learning Difficulties can be identified as distinctive patterns of difficulties, relating to the processing of information, within a continuum from very mild to extremely severe, which result in restrictions in literacy development and discrepancies in performances within the curriculum." (Moray House Centre for Specific Learning Difficulties, quoted in Reid, 1994)

5. "Specific learning difficulties are significant problems of:
   - synthesising (bringing together information within the brain);
   - organising (making sense and order of this information);
   - memorising (holding on to this information in order to use it at will).

   "These severe problems which restrict the individual's proficiencies in information processing produce an intractable (or hard to shift) learning problem in some or all of the skills of:
   - reading;
   - spelling;
   - written work;
   - numeracy;
   which do not respond to normal classroom teaching. If unrecognised there may be instances of secondary emotional/behavioural problems." (Smith 1996)

From these examples, and from the work of other writers, a number of features of the disability are worth noting carefully:

- dyslexia tends to run in families, and there is evidence that genetic factors may play a part in its incidence;
- dyslexia primarily concerns difficulties in the processing of symbolic information;
- these difficulties vary greatly in degree, from one individual to another;
- in some instances, the practical, social and emotional difficulties that arise from having to cope with dyslexia can give rise to other related problems;
- dyslexic difficulties are independent of race, social background and intellectual ability;
- with appropriate support and commitment, the difficulties arising from dyslexia can be overcome;
- alongside their difficulties, people with dyslexia also tend to show particular strengths when compared to others, e.g. visual and spatial abilities, problem-solving skills and creativity.

Its Nature and Effects

The varying problems that affect people with dyslexia ultimately stem from a common cause, namely an impairment of the person's working memory. "The working memory is that part of the memory function which has to hold on to input collected from the senses (either immediate or brought back from long-term memory). This input or information has to be understood and organised (usually in some kind of sequence) before being applied and acted upon in some form and then returned to the long-term memory store. Therefore, if the working memory is weak then any process which demands its use (such as reading, spelling, numeracy, self-organisation) will be impaired." (Smith, 1996)

As with many things, dyslexia can affect people in quite different ways. However there are a number of distinguishable patterns which tend to be more common in people with dyslexia, and some of the following are among the most frequently occurring:

- a marked difference between language ability and other skills
- reading difficulties e.g. slower than most at decoding, often leading to difficulties in recalling and synthesising detail
- difficulty expressing thoughts in writing
- difficulties with spelling
- short-term memory deficit
- difficulties with concentration, especially over long periods
- difficulties with sequencing tasks e.g. alphabetical order, road directions, lists of instructions
- difficulties with organising work.

The combination of problems varies from one individual to another, and their scale ranges from mild to very severe. People cannot be "cured" of dyslexia, but there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that all of these difficulties can be overcome if:

- the disability is identified early;
- adequate support and help are available; and
- the person is well motivated to develop the strategies necessary to deal with the problems.

Individuals with dyslexia, in particular those who have now reached adulthood, frequently experience other difficulties in addition to those directly associated with the disability itself. In the past (and still now, to some extent) understanding of dyslexia, and even acceptance of its existence, has been limited. Thus, very many adults who have dyslexia have found that throughout their childhood, and in

particular during their schooling, there was no acknowledgement of the special problems they faced, and this has given rise to a number of secondary difficulties for many of them, for example:

- many, perhaps most, have not had access to the specific forms of help and support that they have needed during their schooling, and so have under-achieved educationally;
- many have found that others assumed they were unintelligent and/or lazy;
- many have taken on this perception of themselves, and have carried a negative self-image throughout their lives;
- for many, this has resulted in frustration and low self-esteem, has dulled their motivation to learn, and has lowered their aspirations and expectations of themselves.

Because of the poor understanding of dyslexia, many with these difficulties have developed over time a set of coping strategies to help them deal with the challenges of the situation in which they have found themselves. The variety of such strategies is extensive, and ranges from means by which the problems can be masked or hidden (in order to deflect the negative messages from others about e.g. a perceived lack of skill in reading and/or writing) to means by which reading and writing skills, and other skills dulled by the disability, can be constructively aided and developed. Thus people with dyslexia arrive at adulthood with a variety of perceptions of their problems and of approaches to dealing with them.

For many, their self-concept may not include the fact that they have dyslexia, since their earlier experiences may have left them believing that their problems are due to some intellectual or motivational deficit. Certainly, those who enter higher education (and it is in this educational sector that we find the great majority of social work students) do so with different levels of understanding of their difficulties. Experience in the West of Scotland Consortium DipSW suggests that students with dyslexia broadly find themselves within one of three general groupings:

- those who have been assessed as dyslexic and who over time have developed strategies that leave them (provided they have adequate help and support) well enough equipped to tackle the organisational and educational challenges of professional education and training;
- those who have been assessed as dyslexic but who for a variety of reasons have not yet been able sufficiently to develop strategies that deal with this effectively;
- those who have not been assessed for dyslexia before joining the course, but who then show sufficient indication of the disability to give rise to worry about their progress, and whose dyslexia is subsequently confirmed.

Each of these broad groupings faces different difficulties and require (from those who are responsible for supporting their educational efforts) rather different kinds of

approach. However it is important to recognise that although there are identifiable patterns in the needs that students who have dyslexia present, there is no uniform approach to helping them meet their educational needs. Much depends on how well developed their own understanding is of the disability itself, and of how its problems can be addressed.

Although understanding about dyslexia has been increasing rapidly in the past few years, there is still a tendency to concentrate on the problems and difficulties it presents. This is perhaps understandable, given that we live in a culture that places great reliance on precisely the kinds of areas which people with dyslexia find difficult, e.g. the written word, a focus on sequences of tasks, a requirement to concentrate over long periods, et cetera. It is arguable that over time our society's reliance on such patterns of operation is still growing, and this may be even more evident in a discipline such as social work which has become increasingly bureaucratised in the past 20 or 30 years. However to dwell only on the difficulties is to fail to acknowledge the other side of the coin, which is that people with dyslexia tend to show particular aptitude in other kinds of thinking processes.

Again, individual patterns vary, but many people with dyslexia show strong visual and spatial abilities, and a capacity for creativity and lateral thinking which has extensive potential applicability in many forms of activity. Such capabilities are especially valuable in a process such as social work, with its problem-solving focus, and so if a way can be found to help develop and harness such capacities then the work of social work agencies might be enhanced to the benefit of all concerned. Before this can be done however, there needs to be recognition of the particular talents that people with dyslexia may have, and of the contribution these talents can make in social work. Such talents need to be valued and encouraged if they are to develop properly, but for many with dyslexia the tendency to concentrate on the difficulties they have with certain forms of learning, and with the professional role as it is currently construed, encourages them also to undervalue their own potential contribution. It seems unwise, to say the least, to squander such special aptitude in areas that are important in the successful conduct of social work processes.

General implications for social work students

General Approaches to Teaching and Learning: On Campus

Although there are some variations, general approaches to teaching and learning in qualifying training for social work have tended to reflect some fairly strong patterns which have become more or less well established over the years. Thus campus based teaching on DipSW programmes has shown a fairly heavy reliance principally on lectures, seminars, workshop activities, small group discussions, and private study as some of the main vehicles for the educational process. All of these approaches have traditionally relied to a considerable extent on the written word through the use of e.g. handouts, overhead projector slides, black/white boards, flip-charts, note taking, written task briefings, library work (mostly books and papers) etc., etc.

Similarly the assessment of campus based learning has remained firmly rooted in pen and paper methods, as most summative assessment takes the form of a written assignment of some description. (Written examinations tend now to be something of a rarity in social work education, at least in Scotland.) This obviously disadvantages those students who have difficulty with the written word, and educational institutions have been slow to develop alternative forms of teaching and assessment which are less reliant on this form of communication. In the very recent past there has been an increasing effort to make learning technology available to students with special needs, and this has been of considerable assistance to many such students in that it can help to improve significantly the quality of their written work. Nevertheless the requirement to produce this written work in itself places on students with dyslexia a burden that is additional to those placed on other students.

General Approaches to Teaching and Learning: On Placement

Likewise, identifiable patterns have developed over the years in the ways that very many practice placements have been conducted. Typically these have centred (whatever the setting or placement context) on a workload comprising a problem situation(s) or task(s) which the student requires to address under the supervision of the practice teacher. Practice teachers vary in the methods they use, but most will build their supervision round periodic discussion sessions during which the student is encouraged and facilitated to explore and make decisions about a wide range of issues and questions pertinent to her/his workload and development. The extent to which this is dependent on use of written materials ranges from some settings (many of which are in the voluntary sector) where written records are kept to a minimum, to others (typically in the local authority sector) where written records are a fundamental communication medium throughout the organisation and are often, indeed, a statutory requirement.

Over and above agency recordings, many practice teachers require students to use other forms of writing to assist the learning process. Process recordings are perhaps not used as widely as they once were, but some practice teachers still see them, or a variation of them, as an effective basis for exploration of some aspects of the student's work that can otherwise be difficult to reach. Reflective diaries or learning logs (or, again, some variation of these) have increasingly been used in recent years as a means of locating particular levels of the student's thinking and feeling.

Whatever the general approach adopted by the practice teacher or the agency, however, assessment of practice invariably depends heavily on written material. This occurs mainly in two ways. First of all, students will be assessed on, among other things, their ability to produce written materials of a particular quality and within a given range of forms. Difficulty in doing so tends to be seen as a competence deficit. Secondly, they will require to produce a written report at the end of their placement, and this report is increasingly viewed as direct evidence on which are based judgements about a range of other competences. It is in some respects ironic that at a time when understanding of the needs and problems of students who have dyslexia is beginning to develop, the effects of CCETSW's Rules and Requirements for the DipSW (1995) in respect of the assessment of practice is to place greater, rather than less, emphasis on written material produced by the student as a basis for assessment decisions.

Having said that, there is one very important point that requires to be emphasised. In order to gain a professional qualification in social work, any student must demonstrate that s/he has met the requirements of the DipSW programme in terms of values, knowledge and competence. There is no suggestion in this Guide that students with dyslexia should in some way be exempt from any of these requirements nor that the standards demanded of them at the point of qualification should be any different from those that apply generally. This principle applies to written communication as much as to any other area of competence.

The difference between students who have dyslexia and others is the means by which they develop towards demonstration of that competence. This Guide is primarily about how such students can be helped, encouraged and supported to develop the skills they will need, and the task comes under two broad headings:

- the development, by the student, of strategies that s/he can employ in working towards and demonstrating the necessary competences, including those in written communication; and
- the development, by those with responsibility for supporting the student's learning, of strategies for engaging with her/his learning styles and patterns in order that the individual student's learning is maximised.

If success is achieved in these two areas, then the student should complete the professional training programme with the skills required for qualified practice.

Specific styles and patterns of learning

What then are the particular problems that face social work students who have dyslexia? If such students find it difficult to use the principal media on which formal social work education has historically been based, through what other means can they learn? These are fundamentally important questions, and to address them we need to consider the particular patterns and styles of learning that people with dyslexia tend to use more readily, more comfortably and (therefore) more effectively.

It is important to recognise that we all use a mixture of learning styles which varies from one person to another to suit the specific needs, history and orientations of the individual. They also vary for any individual according to the particular kind of task we may be tackling and perhaps also to some degree according to the circumstances we are in at any given time. Despite these variations however, we will each tend to be more comfortable with and proficient in some strategies as opposed to others, and in part our preferences will reflect our psychological make-up. Work in this field by e.g. Kolb (1984) and Honey & Mumford (1986) is widely known, and suggests a range of learning styles in the general population, varying in pattern from one individual to another.

If as we have seen there are identifiable psychological features that tend to characterise dyslexia, then clearly these will have implications for the natural learning patterns of those who are affected. People with dyslexia will draw on the same range of learning patterns and styles that are available to us all but, as with us all, they will rely more heavily on some that on others. Some of the patterns which tend to be most useful to and most effectively used by students who have dyslexia include the following:

1. ***Multisensory learning:*** that is, learning through a variety of senses simultaneously. Most of us would find it easier and more effective to learn to swim or to drive a car by being instructed while actually in the pool or the vehicle, as we could then use a range of senses - hearing, seeing (including watching others), touch, our kinaesthetic sense, etc. - to reinforce each other. For most of us, such an approach would be more effective than simply being instructed verbally by another person in a classroom or office, or trying to follow written instructions. For students who have dyslexia, the contrast between these two types of approach is especially marked, because a multisensory approach helps them by being less reliant on words alone; by bypassing the difficulties they can have in organising new material conceptually; and by using their naturally more holistic approach to learning.

2. ***Over-learning:*** "practice makes perfect". To use the same examples, proficiency in swimming or driving is greatly enhanced by constant repetition of the same procedures until they become well established in one's repertoire of skills. Students who have dyslexia are no different from others in this respect, except that (especially in verbal or sequencing tasks) they need to use this particular pattern of learning much more extensively than many of the rest of us because of their short-term memory difficulties. This is one of the reasons that learning requires much more hard work, concentration and effort from a student with dyslexia than from most others.

3. ***Structured learning:*** that is, learning where the student can locate the detail of what s/he is trying to understand within a wider picture. Because the right-brain strengths of a student with dyslexia tend to produce a more holistic approach to learning, s/he will understand new information more readily if it can be set within a clear context that highlights how different elements relate together.

4. ***Progression in learning:*** an approach to learning that builds up skills and knowledge gradually and in a progressive sequence will exploit such student's holistic approach, whereas one which does not build in this way is more likely to confuse the student because s/he will find it difficult to understand the learning as part of a sequential process.

5. ***Using shortcuts and aids to learning:*** we all try to simplify difficult tasks, e.g. by using a calculator rather than carrying out complex numerical calculations by mental arithmetic. However, students who have dyslexia may need to use different aids to learning from most of the rest of us, because of their particular learning patterns. Spelling aids are an obvious example, but others like mnemonics, diagrams, mind maps, visual patterns, colour codes, etc. may be especially valuable and more readily understandable to a dyslexic student.

6. ***Self-aware learning:*** all adults learn more effectively if they are in charge of how they learn, and this is especially true for people with dyslexia. Part of the reason for this is that their patterns of learning may be seen as unusual and therefore others may not consider these patterns to be as legitimate as the more conventional ones. Thus many people with dyslexia are pushed to learn in ways that feel alien to them, and this is not only much less effective in itself but its effectiveness also tends to be further reduced because such an approach can present a serious threat to their confidence. Given that many with dyslexia are already far from being confident learners (as a result of their earlier educational and social experience) the negative impact from this further threat on their self-esteem and educational achievement can be considerable. If however they are encouraged to learn by the means which s/he sees as potentially the most effective, s/he will benefit partly because the means thus selected is more likely to be the most appropriate, since they are much more likely to understand their own learning patterns than will someone who does not have dyslexia.

Additionally however, the increased confidence that can result from such an approach will itself enhance the effectiveness of the learning.

This issue of confidence and self-esteem is of critical significance for people with dyslexia, and its relevance for their educational development cannot be emphasised enough. Despite the fact that some of the particular strengths and capabilities that come with dyslexia are now beginning to be acknowledged, it is extremely rare to find an adult with dyslexia whose self-esteem has not been adversely affected (in some cases severely) by negative experiences stretching back to childhood. One result of this is that their confidence as learners is very much more fragile than in the general population, and so they are particularly vulnerable to setbacks or to unsympathetic or ill-judged approaches in their educational environment. For them, more than for most, explicit recognition, encouragement and support of their educational achievement relate directly to the degree of success in their efforts.

Implications for lecturers and tutors

This Guide is primarily intended for use by practice teachers who may be providing a placement for a student with dyslexia. The main purpose is therefore to help practice teachers adapt their approach to the role in ways that most effectively facilitate the student's professional learning. However it is worth saying something about how lecturers and tutors can approach their task of encouraging and supporting the learning of students with dyslexia since the approaches adopted will have some relevance for practice teachers who will then work with these students on placement. It may be that, at the very least, the methods used on campus will influence - whether positively or negatively - the expectations that students will take to placement, and so practice teachers need to know something of what this influence might be. As will be indicated later, these methods also have direct relevance to the kinds of approaches that might be used by practice teachers with students who have dyslexia.

Lecturers and tutors can attempt to engage with the more common learning styles and patterns normally associated with dyslexia in a number of ways, including the following:

1. ***Multisensory learning:*** the key task is to extend the range of educational method substantially beyond the traditional word-based means which tend to include e.g. lectures, seminars, guided reading, preparation of assignments, exams, etc. To some degree social work education began to extend beyond such means some time ago, increasingly using e.g. role-play, simulation, video-based skills workshops and a range of individual and small group activities which focus on elaboration, discussion and debate designed to enable students to help each other explore ideas and their applicability to real-life situations.

   However, among other approaches, the development of information and communication technology extends the possibilities still further, in a number of ways. For example it is possible to develop high quality multi-media packages (available on CD-ROM or through local networks) which help students individually or in groups to explore creatively and in their own way a range of dimensions of given problem situations, and to access back-up learning materials which are specifically linked to the issues in the given situation. This helps to ensure that learning is problem-based and focused, but in addition it gives the opportunity for students to use more than one of their senses in pursuing learning. For example, the use of video clips in such a presentation allows the student to see and hear roles in the situation being acted out. If the student with dyslexia is required to understand a similar series of issues by reading a written case study, the effectiveness of their learning is likely to be far more limited than is possible either with role-play or with such a technology-based package.

Generally, such interactive approaches are more effective for most students because they bring the use of different mental processes to bear simultaneously on the learning being addressed. However, they are particularly effective for students with dyslexia because they tend to place greater emphasis on "right-brain" learning processes, e.g. visual-spatial learning and a holistic approach. They allow the student to pursue learning by clarifying and addressing her/his own questions, rather than being required to follow the perhaps differently structured mental processes of others. They are also less dependent on the use of the written word.

2. *Over-learning:* approaches such as those indicated above allow the student to come at specific learning from a range of different angles, and in addition to the advantages already outlined these approaches allow the student more than one, and perhaps numerous, attempts at the learning in question. Generally the main point about over-learning is that repetition is helpful, and the implications of this for campus-based teaching include the following:
   - instructions should be given more that once;
   - presentations (e.g. lectures) should be begun with an explanation of the ground to be covered, and concluded with a summary of the main points;
   - main points should be displayed on a chalk-board, white-board or OHP;
   - summary notes should be made available;
   - areas and points of learning should be revisited at intervals to reinforce and consolidate the learning achieved.

3. *Structured learning:* a student with dyslexia will make more sense of an argument that is presented to her/him if the way in which the argument is built up is clear and explicit. Lecturers can be guilty of leading a class through a complex line of reasoning by means of a fairly circuitous route, and whereas some students may be able to discern the thread for themselves and build up the whole picture without too much trouble, a student with dyslexia is likely to find this more difficult. Lecturers can incorporate a number of approaches into their work that may help to provide invaluable assistance for such students, e.g:
   - ensure that the points to be covered in a lecture are ordered into a logical sequence, and clarify at the start of the lecture both the structure of the presentation and the progression of the argument;
   - as each point is made it should be related explicitly to the last;
   - relate the developing argument to practice - this helps to clarify its relevance, which is important for learners in general but for students who have dyslexia in particular;
   - summarise the main points at the end of a presentation, both verbally and on a chalk-board, white-board or OHP slide;
   - ensure that any potentially unfamiliar terminology is clarified, both verbally and in writing (e.g. on the board or in a hand-out);
   - in more general work with students who have dyslexia, be prepared to give additional help in the planning and structuring of their work.

4. ***Progression in learning:*** lecturers and tutors can help the dyslexic student by engaging with her/him in the planning of learning so that it becomes a clearly and explicitly staged process. Thus the lecturer or tutor can help the student to work towards the integration of values, skills and knowledge as an end point that can be reached by a series of steps which follow in a planned sequence, each building on the previous one. To achieve this, the lecturer can:

    - clarify progression in the learning to be achieved by breaking down the processes into a series of identifiable steps; and
    - help the student to focus on taking each step at a time, and to try to avoid tackling too much at once.

    This approach, as well as assisting the student to develop a "map" for her/his own development, is also more likely to provide an experience of understanding and success which can serve as a basis for confidence-building and further learning. The confidence that this can provide is of particular importance for such students since (as has already been noted) there is a strong likelihood that such confidence will have been damaged by previous experiences. Building self-assurance in this way contributes towards the development of increasing self-direction in learning, and this is a key factor in any student's development as a learner.

5. ***Using shortcuts and aids to learning:*** in this regard, an important form of support that academic staff can give to students with dyslexia is to actively encourage them to identify and use shortcuts and aids that work for them. A number of examples (including mnemonics and mind-maps) were suggested earlier, but the ways in which these and other such devices are used will inevitably be individual to the student and therefore they cannot easily be "provided" by a lecturer. What a lecturer or tutor can do, however, is to acknowledge the validity (indeed the importance) of such tools for learning, and to value them as a means of achieving the results that are sought. The message to the students must be "if it works for you, use it", rather than for the lecturer to succumb to any temptation to cling to more "traditional" learning methods, either because they have somehow come to be regarded as academically more respectable, or simply because they have worked for others, perhaps including the lecturer her/himself.

    Such encouragement and recognition of individualised tools is very important, but there are also more direct forms of help which lecturers/tutors can provide or at least facilitate. These could include the following:

    - opportunities to see the work (including the written work) of others, as a means of helping the student develop a clear sense of possible methods of approach to a given task. Care needs to be taken to avoid any inappropriate suggestion that an identified task can only be tackled in one way, and that

this one way can be demonstrated by the provision of a single example of someone else's attempt at the same or a similar task. Rather, a number of examples should be offered, as a means of helping the student achieve a clear sense of the "whole-ness" of the completed task, as a basis for developing her/his own approach. This is clearly different from simply giving the student a model to copy which, far from advancing her/his learning, might in fact inhibit it.

- provision of materials in diagrammatic or pictorial forms, rather than in text. The value of diagrams in social work and in education has long been acknowledged, but there is still a tendency for much handout material in social work education to consist of text rather than other forms of representation. Greater use of a range of diagrammatic forms such as flow-charts, mind-maps, tree diagrams, tables, etc. would be of considerable benefit to students with dyslexia. In addition however, many find it helpful to devise their own pictorial representations of situations and concepts, or to use for example a colour code to organise ideas in their minds. For the lecturer, the most important thing is to acknowledge and engage with what works for the student.

- more generally, handouts need to be clear, well structured, well presented and easily readable, whether they are in text or some other form.

6. ***Self-aware learning:*** the most successful learners are those who can actively harness their own self-knowledge, and their knowledge of available learning resources and how they work, to pursue their educational objectives in a purposeful and largely self-directed way. Therefore, the success of educators can be measured by how far they are able to help learners to develop their capacity to exercise responsibility for their own learning effectively. For students who have dyslexia, no less than for others, this means enabling them progressively to take on this responsibility and to exercise it with awareness. One of the main differences however is that the student with dyslexia is much more likely to have been undermined by earlier educational experiences, and so their readiness to operate in this way may have been inhibited by negative feedback and the effect on their developing self-concept and self-esteem. There are a number of ways in which social work educators can facilitate the development of the effectiveness of students with dyslexia as self-aware and self-directed learners, and these include the following:

- encourage, facilitate and support the student's efforts to engage in aware and purposeful self-assessment;
- encourage, facilitate and support the student's efforts to plan the approach/process to be used in relation to her/his own learning, both at a general level and in relation to specific educational tasks;
- encourage the student to make connections that are meaningful for her/him, and be prepared to engage with these connections in discussion;
- be open and explicit about the rationale for undertaking particular educational tasks, and for tackling these in any given way;

- offer different approaches to teaching/learning, from which the student can determine the one(s) which s/he finds most effective, and which the student can use to reinforce learning (for instance by working from specific examples to general concepts, as well as in the reverse direction).

Implications for practice teachers

One of the greatest difficulties facing people with dyslexia is the extent to which as a culture we are dependent on the written word in everyday life. Most people with dyslexia require to go to great lengths to find ways to cope with this, and many develop over the course of their lives very sophisticated strategies, some of which may be designed to hide rather than manage the problem. This is perhaps inevitable, given the value placed on writing throughout our education system at all levels, and given the common misconception that those who cannot read and write well are lacking in intelligence. As already suggested, people with dyslexia often feel subject to the very negative perceptions of others concerning their educational and intellectual worth, and this leaves many with a legacy of poor self esteem which can frustrate further educational effort.

It is now generally accepted that dyslexia spans the full range of intellectual ability, and therefore that assumptions to the contrary that have been made in the past are quite false. If, then, people with dyslexia have the same range of overall potential as the general population except in respect of use of the written word, do some not therefore have a contribution to make in social work? As a practice teacher operating within the culture of the written word, it may be tempting to start from a position that says that if a social work student cannot deal with the written word in the way required by the agency, then s/he cannot demonstrate the full range of competences and so cannot operate as a fully functioning social worker. However such a position denies all the other qualities and skills that such students may bring, and anyway which of us, with or without dyslexia, is a fully rounded social worker in all respects? We all have areas of our practice that we have to (or should) grapple with. Is it just that an ability to use the written word is more visible than some others that may be equally or more important?

As soon as we accept that people with dyslexia have as valid a contribution to make in social work as have the rest of us, the questions then become:

- How can we work to maximise that contribution?
- How can we provide a good learning environment for students who have dyslexia?
- How can we support them in their learning and enable them to become good practitioners?

Early Planning:
Whatever initial thoughts a practice teacher may have in beginning to plan for a student's arrival on placement, s/he will be concerned to ensure that all the questions that are particularly relevant for a student with dyslexia have been considered. Practice teachers generally try hard to get things right, but in order to support the student they require to listen carefully and to approach their planning

with a mind that is open to different ways of working. Usually the first step is to try to gain an initial sense of how the student learns. Pre-placement information from the teaching institution and/or the student, and discussion at a pre-placement meeting, can contribute a great deal to this developing understanding.

Many students who have dyslexia will come to the placement with a clear awareness of their needs and with well developed strategies that have worked for them in previous learning situations. Clearly such students will have lived with and coped with their difficulties since childhood, and will have worked constructively to deal with the problems they have always required to face. In such instances a little extra support and encouragement, often concerning practical issues, may be all that is necessary from the practice teacher. Bearing in mind that the practice teacher's overall aim is to facilitate self-directedness in the student, then such self-directedness should not be interfered with where it already exists - "if it ain't broke - don't fix it". Certainly any approach that does not have the nurturing of such self-directedness at its heart will not help to develop the student's competence as a learner, and is therefore likely to undermine rather than support the student's development.

As in all good learning and teaching processes, practice teachers and tutors in higher education require to check out some important matters prior to beginning to work with the student. The following is a suggested check list for practice teachers prior to embarking on work with students who may have dyslexia or who have been assessed as dyslexic. Of course each student will have individual learning needs and patterns and so the following is a guide rather than a blueprint for action.

What do practice teachers need to think about before the placement starts?

1. Has the student been assessed as having dyslexia, and if so when (e.g. in childhood, on return to higher education or perhaps never) and by whom?

2. How does s/he learn in general?

3. Does s/he have or require information technology support or other special equipment and if so what form does/should this take?

4. Has s/he or do you require to make contact with the Special Needs Advisor or Learning Support Unit at the educational establishment?

5. Does the student require to make (or has s/he already made) application for funding through CCETSW, the British Dyslexia Association or from another agency to obtain financial assistance for non medical help e.g. a scribe?

6. As a practice teacher in an agency, what discussions do you require to have with your manager, colleagues or training team e.g. concerning special requirements, the loan of equipment, or extra time to be made available to process written work for the student?

7. Does the student have or require contact with other students who have dyslexia or colleagues?

8. What tools have been helpful for others in the past e.g. use of maps, colour codes, hieroglyphics, role play, audio visual interactive videos or CD ROMs?

9. How will you record supervision notes, and give extra space, time and encouragement to the student?

Exploration of these questions, and action where necessary, will begin to help the student settle into the placement and will increase her/his confidence in you as the practice teacher. This is not to suggest that such students will expect you to have all the solutions to their difficulties, but more importantly they will gain confidence from a reassurance that you are "tuned into" the important issues for them. Clearly, it is important that such plans are reflected in the working agreement for the placement, since this helps to ensure that they are correctly understood and are implemented as agreed.

1. Structured Learning

Students who have dyslexia generally need to work harder than others to organise and structure their work. For the practice teacher, awareness of this need is often highlighted when the student is preparing the Interim or Final Report, or the Integrative Practice Study. Such tasks make many demands on the short-term memory span, especially when recalling or reflecting on specific information which is to be used for assessment purposes.

To help reduce the anxiety and stress which can be associated with such complex and comprehensive pieces of work, the student should be encouraged and helped to develop a structured approach, which not only involves organising systems, but also might include observing and assessing (and timing) how they work on an assignment or an assessable task. For example one practice teacher noticed that her student, who found it helpful to use a colour code instead of written headings to classify and categorise salient information, highlighted feedback from direct observations of practice by using thick bright felt markers, which immediately allowed him to link all the pink, yellow or blue areas in a sequence. Although this made little sense for the practice teacher, the student was clear that certain colours signified specific areas of reflection or learning

and as a result used these areas again effectively when writing the Integrated Practice Study.

Another student used a form of mapping and graphs which allowed her to easily record a groupwork process used to support children in looking with them at unacceptable behaviours.

Although the examples above represent good practice in that they allow the student the freedom to be creative and in control of their own learning patterns, there can be occasions when the student can try to tackle too much at once and therefore become confused and anxious about recording or writing accounts of situations. In such circumstances, helping the student to maintain a clear focus on the essence of the task is of critical importance.

Although many students with dyslexia are computer literate (often more so than their practice teachers), using a laptop or Dictaphone during an interview situation may still prove inhibiting, both for the service user and for the student. Issues of confidentiality need to be borne in mind and sometimes the resulting complexity can become confusing for the student. Thinking and planning together about such matters in advance is necessary to reduce the risk to both the student and the service user.

2. Over-learning

As indicated earlier (see pp 11 and 15) over-learning is a strategy which offers a constructive and highly effective means of enhancing the learning of a student with dyslexia. However problems can arise if the student has difficulty in focusing on what has been useful in this learning.

These problems can occur if the student tries too hard to get things correct, perhaps spending hours reading, re-learning, and recapping on the available information, serving only to cause "word muddle". As a result s/he may misunderstand a situation or get it out of proportion, ultimately becoming confused about which parts of the assessment or situation are important or relevant for the purpose or task.

On such occasions it is important that the practice teacher, during supervision, provides a safe, secure and helpful environment for the student. The practice teacher must help reduce anxieties by empathising, listening and restoring confidence in the student. Sometimes it is important to spend less time looking at the specific issues than one might with some other students, and more time supporting the student's morale and empowering her/him to take control of her/his own learning.

In some instances the involvement of the university's Special Needs Advisor in supervision sessions can be invaluable, and this may be a continuing support to the student in her/his academic learning, as well as in the practice placement. The Special Needs Adviser's role in supporting the student requires, like the practice teacher's, clear boundaries in terms of role and function. Sometimes Advisers obtain confidential materials which they are at liberty to share only with the student, e.g. psychological assessments on reading and writing abilities and on the student's ability to cope with academic work. It is not always necessary or even desirable for this information to be shared with the practice teacher, as it is often the case that discussion in supervision will need to be focused around resource materials which may assist the learning process, rather than on raw information about the student's chronological reading and writing age. Such information may indeed be more of a hindrance than a help, and if disclosed, must be treated in a highly sensitive and confidential way.

3. *Progression in Learning*

Self aware learning and a general progression in learning tend to go hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other.

Firstly, the progression may be small e.g. the student becoming more able to write accurately about the needs of a service user, or setting out some factual information in the correct chronological order within a panel report for a Children's Hearing. The student may be able to present this verbally in a comprehensive way, but perhaps only if, to begin with, there is some structure to her/his recall of the situation. Role play may be useful in facilitating the student's recall, for example of a home visit where various family members have contributed to the provision of information relevant for the report. With the practice teacher taking the role of the student and the student that of the service user or family member, barriers can be broken down by encouraging the student to re-enact the interview and thus allow a glimpse inside the situation from the student's perspective.

This procedure can trigger the retrieval of unspoken exchanges or non-verbal communication between the student and the service user as, during a direct observation session, students sometimes have excellent powers of recall. On one occasion, a student explained that when people talk she sometimes tries to spell the words in her head, to allow her to access the meaning. From time to time this would lead her to forget what had been said, but she was nevertheless able to observe a number of aspects of the non-verbal communication and interactions between others in the household. During the subsequent role play, which was regarded as an important stage in the progression of her learning, she was able to feed back the essence of the situation which she observed, and most surprisingly managed then to recall the verbal contributions, which she seemed to re-hear in her head.

As students who have dyslexia progress they may gain an awareness of themselves at a distance and may seem quickly to make links between one situation and another. During one home visit, for example, a student linked certain personalities in the household with themes which ran through their discussions, and as a result her/his verbal contribution (in the form of both open and closed questions) could be safely explored in supervision by the student.

The use of the reflective diary, graphs, mapping of words and themes and verbal recordings by use of a Dictaphone, all provide good forms of support in revising or recalling past events.

4. Using short-cuts and aids to learning

As mentioned in other parts of this Guide, students who have dyslexia often benefit from tools to help them find suitable short-cuts. For example many students with dyslexia use information technology, and some can make excellent use of speech synthesisers and other equipment obtained or suggested by the British Dyslexia Association or the university's Special Needs Advisor.

Placement agencies may require to obtain software which is compatible with those used by students who have dyslexia and potential workers. CCETSW can give funding for non-medical help e.g. a scribe or reader of materials for the student. Practice teachers do not always have easy access to information about such resources, but it is likely that the university tutor and/or Special Needs Adviser can offer some guidance.

Other aids which help may include maps, colour codes, hieroglyphics (e.g. Dingbat software packages), Dictaphones and recording machines which automatically erase after the student has played back and written down the information. Special Needs Advisors are invaluable and should be consulted, as should practice teachers who have some experience in working with students with dyslexia.

As already indicated on page 10, it must be emphasised that the aim of all these measures to help the student to become equipped with a range of resources and strategies which will enable her/him to produce written material compatible with her/his current stage of education and training.

Some Examples:

The following are examples which can help us appreciate the numerous problems which face social work students with dyslexia who are on practice placements, and hopefully give the reader some ideas and potentially helpful working tools for both the practice teacher and the student.

As already indicated, many people with dyslexia are talented individuals who may excel in art, music or other creative activities which allow them to express themselves and their feelings without having to rely solely on the written word. Although in social work practice the student is required to demonstrate the integration of values as well as skills in verbal and written communications, students with dyslexia might require some more practical help in order for them to feel comfortable and achieve these requirements.

In working with a particularly gifted student who demonstrated great verbal skill in role play and an ability to use symbols as a short hand for written communication, one practice teacher was able to discuss the preparation of an assessment by using role play as a report-back of the student's observations. As the student's short term memory span seemed to be limited as a result of dyslexia, it was especially useful to have shorter supervision sessions on a more frequent basis than tends to be the norm, and to schedule these as soon as possible following the interview or home visit. On role playing the scenario with the practice teacher and using a tape recording of the session, the student was better able to devise useful headings to enable him to complete the written assessment. An appropriate computer software which featured a series of pictorial symbols was of great benefit in this instance, and agreed symbols were used during supervision to decode process recordings or reports. For example:

symbol   🏠   meant "home visit"

symbol   👤👤   meant "family".

The more artistic student can use a colour code in the same way - so that for example the colour red could trigger off statements relating to "crisis" or blue for "tasks" to be undertaken.

Students who find this form of communication shorthand helpful should be encouraged to use it, as it utilises their talents and helps them focus more positively within their learning, rather than having to concentrate on the difficulties they experience in some differently structured form of learning.

These may seem unusual examples and for practice teachers the sense of risk may seem high, especially where the student does not appear to have a clear framework to guide her/him with the dyslexia. However we should not see the such students as having insurmountable difficulties, but rather we should gain as much knowledge as possible about the student, about dyslexia and about what s/he finds helpful in the learning process.

We frequently encourage social work students to use mapping and diagrams to relate theory to practice. Symbols such as those referred to above are also a form of mapping and one which is often used by students with dyslexia.

The notion that such ideas are too unusual or non-traditional for the proper teaching of practice needs to be resisted. Indeed practice teachers should be encouraged to be creative and innovative in the methods they adopt for the facilitation and assessment of development and competence in students with dyslexia. The sharing of information among practice teachers is an essential component in helping them to maximise their own learning about dyslexia, and in helping them to counter the effects of misunderstanding and a widespread lack of awareness of the effects of the disability.

The Role of the Second Practice Teacher

Where during the course of a practice placement a second practice teacher is appointed to the original training team, there is a tendency for the student (and sometimes others) to carry an associated feeling of failure. As a result the role of the second practice teacher is a complex one and has many more dimensions than are often recognised.

Within the West of Scotland DipSW the appointment of a second practice teacher is considered only in certain circumstances. The person appointed to this role is normally an experienced, CCETSW accredited practice teacher. The role is usually clearly defined for the specific instance by a Practice Assessment Panel, and for the second practice teacher who is to work with a student who has dyslexia the areas to work on are usually particularly complex and specific to the student.

For the student the identification of another practice teacher raises an increased anxiety which can result in the student regressing, perhaps feeling that s/he will be unable to achieve what is asked. Another new relationship requires to be established, with the student having to explain again how they learn and how they have struggled with the learning process in the existing supervisory relationship.

The second practice teacher will require to seek out a great deal of information about the student, including perhaps the software which is useful for them and how they operate the equipment. Information about such resources should be sought from the Special Needs Advisor or Learning Support Unit within the teaching establishment. As the second practice teacher has only a short time to become familiar with resources such as these it becomes crucial (so that the student is not disadvantaged) that appropriate information is made clear and available as soon as contact is made with the student and tutor. The student and possibly the original practice teacher will be able to detail the difficulties as well as the areas of competence which have become apparent during the supervisory process. Communication between the tutor, practice teacher, student and second practice teacher is critical. Very clear, specific areas require to be identified for the student and the second practice teacher to work on together, as any lack of clarity (with the associated risk of mixed messages and multiple tasks) may serve only to confuse the student to the point of failing comprehension and increased word or thought muddle.

Second practice teachers, especially those with students who have been recently assessed as having dyslexia, may need to ensure that the student has some respite or time out. For example in working with one such student it was critical that the second practice teacher was able to assess how much the student's learning and ability to practice was related to the dyslexia and how much was due to an inability

to comprehend the analytical processes of the social work task. In that instance it became necessary for the student to withdraw temporarily from the social work course to enable her not only to come to terms with her dyslexia, but also to address personal issues which had been highlighted as a result of being assessed as dyslexic. Having received appropriate support and help, the student was able to rejoin the social work course at a later date.

The Role of the Practice Assessor

Within the West of Scotland Consortium's Practice Teaching Programme, practice assessors now have a more clearly defined role in supporting new practice teachers, in particular in providing a comprehensive report of their observations of the practice teacher's practice in supervision, and in supporting and giving advice on how they have taught social work practice and theory.

Where the student concerned has dyslexia, it is important that the practice assessor meets with the practice teacher and the student early in the placement. Although the practice assessor is not required to assess the student, there are some aspects of the role which can seem unclear. It is important that the practice assessor gains some understanding of the nature of dyslexia and how it affects the student in question. Unfortunately however, a student with dyslexia may find yet another practice teacher within the process confusing and as a result may have increased anxiety about the placement.

Where a student is assessed as dyslexic after the placement has begun, the practice assessor should try to give the practice teacher clear and concise guidance on how to progress the learning process for the student, and should certainly avoid giving the practice teacher a message that the student's difficulties may somehow reflect a weakness or failure in the practice teacher. In such instances the practice teacher requires time to read, reflect and discuss the issues with the practice assessor, just as the student requires to do with the practice teacher.

Practice teachers should be encouraged to make contact with other practice teachers or local support networks which are offered by agencies, to allow them access to wider discussions with others who have worked with students who have dyslexia.

So what support is required from the practice assessor by the first time practice teacher working with a student who has dyslexia? Below are some useful areas for consideration.

Some questions for the practice assessor working with a first time practice teacher:

1. What is the practice teacher's understanding of the specific needs of the student with dyslexia?

2. What materials can you, as the practice assessor, obtain from other colleagues who have worked with students who have dyslexia?

3. What ideas might you consider in helping the practice teacher consider her/his own learning?

As already indicated, these areas of exploration are not intended to be prescriptive, but rather as suggestions for both the practice teacher and practice assessor to consider.

In view of the apparent increase in the number of people with dyslexia who successfully complete DipSW courses, it must now be recognised that dyslexia may not be an issue only for students, but increasingly for colleagues who are qualified workers. Thus practice assessors may find themselves working with a practice teacher who also has dyslexia and who therefore may need specific help or materials to be made user-friendly, to enable her/him to cope with the new role. Some such workers may already have developed competent ways of writing, perhaps agreed by their agency after negotiations with managers. However it is important to remember that first time practice teachers who have dyslexia may require help from colleagues with some experience in working within this field. Some practice teaching programmes now have link people with this expertise, who could if necessary assume a mentoring role for the practice teacher. However like all roles involved in supporting those who have dyslexia, the boundaries, remit and clarity of function require to be agreed with the practice teacher, and learning methods which s/he finds helpful should be considered to help facilitate the task.

Assessment of the Student's Competence

Whether you are the main practice teacher or the second practice teacher (if one requires to be appointed), it is important to be clear about what methods you will use to assess a student with dyslexia, given that the written word may not be the only means you will adopt. In either role it may be important to consider the checklist for practice teachers given on the next page and perhaps include answers to the given questions within the working agreement.

If you must reduce your reliance on the written word as a suitable assessment tool what else can you use? Of course, there are no fixed answers to this question but it may be worth considering the following list of possible methods which have been used in the past and have been helpful in assessing the student's competence.

Some Useful Ideas:

1. Use diagrams, maps or symbols rather than relying on process recordings or copious case notes.
2. Use a symbolic dictionary e.g. = home visit. It may take longer for the practice teacher to decode the symbols into the written word, but as a short-cut the student can gain confidence from being aware of your understanding of the symbols and their potential for conversion into words.

3. Direct observation of practice requires to be formally structured with clearly defined areas of competence to be addressed. Feedback in verbal form, initially on a tape recorder, is helpful. Among other things, taping the feedback in this way usually means it can be returned more promptly, thereby reducing anxiety as well as the stress associated with reading the written material.

4. Write important materials in bold colours e.g. red, purple and green. You can be adventurous and even write supervision notes in fluorescent pink if this is helpful!

5. Experiment with different means of assessment feedback - be creative and innovative!

Most of the following points are consistent with those made earlier in that they represent good practice currently in use. It should be noted that many of these ideas have been adapted slightly to take into account the particular needs of the student. Sometimes they require to be tried and tested, and as practice teachers

we do not always get it right. Do not despair! There will be other ideas with which the student and the practice teacher will be comfortable, and those which have helped the student learn in the past are likely to be worth revisiting. Whatever the outcome, we require to ensure the student is given the learning opportunities to help meet the competences s/he requires as a potential social worker.

Checklist of Assessment Methods:

1. As in all good learning processes, start where the student is at. Communicate with the student, tutor and the previous practice teacher (where applicable).

2. Check out what methods have been used in the past to help the student learn.

3. How does s/he hear/receive and understand feedback from others?

4. How does s/he analyse factual information and what does s/he observe from others? Are these worth exploring further?

5. As a practice teacher, what methods of assessment might be useful, e.g. direct observation, using a tape recorder or personal computer/ information technology software packages?

6. How will you use these to ensure that the student can meet the DipSW requirements and how will you collate evidence of appropriate values, knowledge and skills, to ensure that s/he is able to practise?

This last question is a crucial area for practice teachers and one which requires examination of different assessment methods. The struggle for practice teachers is not necessarily that, for example, the student's ability to engage is limited, nor that her/his value base is questionable, but rather it concerns how s/he is able to convey all of these thoughts and skills into writing in a comprehensible way. Practice teachers sometimes struggle with uncertainties about their grading recommendation where they do not have appropriate evidence concerning the student's written work, and students with dyslexia sometimes find themselves at a Practice Assessment Panel where their overall competence in relating theory to practice, analysing situations and writing about them is in question. Many students are able to speak well about their practice, but a few find it difficult to bridge the gap between acceptable analytical assessments and just trying to work out situations in their head without some awareness of how the issues might be conveyed in writing.

So what other assessment tools can be considered by the practice teacher, other than those suggested above? Here are some further ideas:

1. Regular feedback to the student is important, perhaps beginning with short term tasks to test their ability to retain information and write about factual details before going on to analyse.

2. Asking others to observe practice informally so that the student feels under less pressure than within a formal observation session. This may mean allocating pieces of practice which involve other workers.

3. Separating out and being clear about specific areas on which they are working e.g. by identifying and working to headings in their reports and records.

4. Mapping out plans with the student in a logical way, for example by using a flipchart and asking the student to talk through each issue or area of concern within the piece of practice.

5. In writing the Interim and Final Reports, giving the student ample time to collate all the materials, in order to help her/him transfer available evidence into the written word.

6. At the beginning of the placement, focusing in the first instance on the important areas for personal development by discussing learning opportunities which (as far as can be anticipated) will give sufficient time to achieve the required development. The student is thereby more likely to see some positive outcomes rather than struggle initially with highly complex situations, since such a struggle may diminish the student's confidence and result in confusion. Confusion of this kind can lead to word muddle, and the practice teacher may therefore have difficulty in making sense of what the student is doing with the practice and what her/his aims are.

Case Studies

The following are some examples which may help to highlight a few of the difficulties students who have dyslexia face, as well as suggesting some possible ways in which the practice teacher might facilitate the learning process.

These examples are not intended to suggest that the associated difficulties can be overcome by instant solutions or by the application of a tick list. Rather they are intended to provide a picture of real people working towards becoming competent social workers, with developing skills and a real sense of commitment to service users.

Case A:

A is a mature student who, prior to undertaking his social work training, had a degree in philosophy and arts. He had a variety of experiences in social care settings and was a gifted student who had been assessed as having dyslexia by the British Dyslexia Association during his teenage years. Like many other students who have dyslexia he had struggled with written work as a child but had high powers of recall and excellent verbal skills which he had used very ably from childhood, for example by "talking his way out of having to write".

He harboured considerable negative feeling about education, and developed an involvement in local communities using photography as his profession. A had few difficulties within the placement because of his verbal, reflective and analytical skills. His assessments were sound but he required a vast amount of time to write any assignment, report or social work duty/intake referral notes. His spelling was poor, and he lacked confidence in his abilities. Organisation proved difficult and therefore the prioritisation of his work suffered, only to cause further anxiety and word muddle.

So what did the practice teacher need to bear in mind and what was learned in working with this student? In many ways it was relatively straightforward for the practice teacher to begin work with this student, as he had been assessed as dyslexic many years prior to his entry to higher education. However it was not clear how the student learned or what resources could be identified to help him with his writing skills.

As this was the first time the practice teacher had worked with a student who had been formally assessed as having dyslexia, there appeared to be a clear open agenda for supervision, as an approach to learning could be identified and planned to fit the student's difficulties.

However the practice teacher began by focusing on correcting the student's written English, albeit in a sensitive way, but this only served to undermine the student's confidence as each attempt to write formal assessments or case notes bore no resemblance to what was appropriate for the task. The practice teacher quickly recognised that to empower the student there had to be an agreed agenda in supervision about time scales and perhaps reducing the emphasis on written assessment by allowing the student to tape record reports, process recordings and the reflective diary, so that the practice teacher could listen to the content and reference the salient issues for supervision. The practice teacher required to be responsive to the student's needs by changing her normal way of working. She also ensured, in collaboration with the tutor, that the student received additional support from the Special Needs Adviser at the academic institution. This adviser offered equipment and short-cutting methods to help the student with his written work e.g. an efficient word processor which was compatible with that of the placement agency. The practice teacher also obtained further funding from CCETSW to allow the student non-medical help, namely a scribe, to complete the resources offered to support him with his written work.

Case B:

B had a variety of social work experiences prior to being accepted for the Diploma in Social Work Course. She undertook her first placement in a large psychiatric hospital and worked with a practice teacher who had not previously supervised a student on placement, but who had other experience in teaching social work students. Since her early childhood B had experienced difficulties with spelling and sentence construction but had received little help in her secondary education as she was regarded as a "slow learner". She was aware from others within her family that she might have dyslexia, as one of her siblings presented with similar difficulties.

The student, tutor and university were very open with the practice teacher in acknowledging the possible difficulties and a psychological assessment was undertaken through the Special Needs Adviser at the university. Although this confirmed that the student could possibly have dyslexia, she also received information on her reading and writing age of ability. The student found it impossible to share this information with the practice teacher and, whether as a result of this or not, the supervision process was less useful than it might otherwise have been. B already had a scribe, a family member who would transcribe all her written work. The practice teacher was unhappy about this arrangement as he felt unable to ascertain how much of the final written product was the student's own work and therefore felt unable properly to assess her writing skills.

The working relationship between the student and practice teacher deteriorated with the result that each time the practice teacher requested written work the

student was unable to produce it, and as a result her anxieties increased. Eventually the skills which she had previously developed in her pre-course work began to diminish. As a result doubt came to be cast on her overall level of achievement in the placement.

So what might the practice teacher have done differently, and what were the areas of learning for the practice teacher and others?

1. Practice teachers need to be responsive in their approach to students, and it is unrealistic to work from the premise that each student will learn in the same way. This student seemed to require some support in coming to terms with her dyslexia, and perhaps some focus on this area along with greater external support from the Special Needs Adviser and the tutor would have been helpful.

2. The practice teacher might have been more open to alternative assessment and teaching methods and perhaps some of the issues mentioned under the heading "Assessment" would have been worth exploring e.g. less concentration on written work and more on verbal skills, reflecting on practice and then using information technology to enable the written work to be produced.

3. The practice teacher felt that he had failed in practice teaching for the first time. The practice assessor required to support him and to help him consider alternative strategies that might be developed in a situation such as this.

4. Wider issues arise for placement coordinators within agencies, for example whether students who have dyslexia should perhaps be placed with more experienced practice teachers.

5. It has been suggested that Practice Teaching Programmes might place more emphasis on an anti-discriminatory perspective, training candidates to be creative and innovative in their approach to the task.

6. This instance highlights the importance of the practice teacher's attitude to the task, as it may be that focusing on the "dyslexia" label from the outset served to narrow rather than broaden the perspective of both the student and the practice teacher.

7. Perhaps the practice teacher would have benefited from more advice and support from others within the agency to help him explore alternative methods of working.

8. Perhaps the biggest issue and area of learning for the practice teacher was the need to acquire knowledge and share ideas with others who have experience in working with students who have dyslexia.

9. Some recognition is required concerning the power imbalance that exists between students and practice teachers.

However it is often difficult to undertake these issues as a practice teacher if resources are few and information scarce.

Case C:

C had been assessed as dyslexic on entry into higher education. He had successfully undertaken his academic work, which resulted in his admission to the DipSW course. He was a gifted student in respect of his engagement with young people, and very personable. His vitality in early childhood had equipped him for entry into the Armed Forces - he spent most of his primary schooling perfecting his skills in sport as he was unable to understand the written word in books or on the board within the classroom setting.

He was also regarded as "rather slow", and discovered on entering the services that he was unable to progress further because although he was intelligent and physically able, his writing skills were poor, making him unsuitable for promotion. Undertaking exams filled him with fear. However, having had a variety of good experiences with social work agencies, he decided to consider social work as a career.

He began his first placement with great apprehension about his ability to cope with the demands of working in an area team. He felt unable to think about anything other than how he would cope with the volume of written work required of him. Part of the discussion at the pre-placement meeting between the student, practice teacher and tutor concentrated on the positives within the placement and the skills and methods of learning which the student had previously found useful.

The practice teacher was experienced in working with students who have dyslexia and had a knowledge base that helped reduce the concerns of the student. Setting the scene and being clear about roles and responsibilities, and acknowledging difficulties initially, is very important as it can reduce the student's concerns.

If word muddle exists, whether the student is under stress or not, it is crucial that other areas are clarified. In this instance the practice teacher was creative and somewhat adventurous, taking risks in testing out different methods in helping the student with the written word. These proved to be significant factors in making the placement workable for the student.

Symbols, maps and software compatible with the student's and agency's information technology systems seemed to empower the student in his learning. For example, rather than recording the occurrence of a home visit, the student used software to transcribe the diagram of a house into the written phrase, signifying a

home visit. Shorter more concentrated discussion helped the student focus on learning and gave time to transfer some ideas into the written word with the practice teacher. The learning for the practice teacher in this instance was vast, not only in looking at different ways of supervising the student, but also learning about the styles of supervision which can also be used with all students. Although many of the skills used provided shortcuts to learning, the student did not lose out on being offered qualitative supervision nor being fully assessed by the practice teacher.

Practical Help

Many students who have been identified as dyslexic are well aware of their practical needs and the resources that might be available to meet these needs. Such resources include not only a variety of tools to enable them to undertake their academic work, but also financial support through grants or loans from agencies such as:

1. Student Awards Agency for Scotland
2. CCETSW (for non medical help, e.g. a scribe)
3. Benefits Agency
4. Loans - e.g. Student Loans Company

However, if a student is in the process of being tested and assessed for dyslexia, they may not be aware of such supports, and in such instances it is vital that the student's tutor and or practice teacher encourages the student to make contact with the Special Needs Advisor or Learning Support Unit within the academic institution. If the student is having difficulty in accessing a comprehensive assessment, then the British Dyslexia Association can offer this service, although payment is required. Some academic institutions can offer a general assessment to students who suspect they may have dyslexia, sometimes via their Psychology Department. This path is worth exploring as some educational institutions offer such a service free of charge.

Whatever avenue the student chooses or is made available to her/him, much depends on the form of support that is required and what is offered via the Special Needs Adviser/Learning Support Unit. On placement, students can find useful tools to help them with written work or in processing materials. Some social work agencies can help by providing spare equipment which may be made available to the student while on placement. The following is a list of equipment and practical ideas which may be useful for a student who has dyslexia, depending on the nature of their particular learning styles and patterns:

1. Dictaphone, or other recording equipment
2. Computer, word processor or laptop - with e.g. spell-checker, scanner, speech synthesiser, CD ROM and/or fonts that may include useful symbols
3. Voice mail
4. Coloured acetates - as colour filters can help some people with dyslexia to read and write more quickly
5. Bibliography of relevant materials
6. Support through discussion with other students who have dyslexia or staff members.

In discussing with students who have dyslexia their personal experiences of support offered on placements, some have stated that to share their difficulties and fears with fellow people who have dyslexia is particularly helpful and supportive. As the number of students and workers with dyslexia appears to have grown in recent years, so the potential for such informal support also appears to have increased.

Support Agencies

Below is listed contact information for some of the principal agencies which can provide assessment, guidance and/or practical assistance for those who have dyslexia, or who are supporting someone who has dyslexia.

UK Organisations:

The Adult Dyslexia Organisation
336 Brixton Road
London
SW9 7AA   tel: 0171-924-9559

Web site: *http://www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/index.html*

The British Dyslexia Association
98 London Road
Reading
RG9 5AU   tel: 0118-966-2677

Web site: *http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk/*

BDA Helpline   tel: 0118-966-8271

The Dyslexia Institute
133 Gresham Road
Staines
Middlesex
TW18 2AJ   tel: 01784-463851

Web site: *http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk/*

In Scotland:

The Scottish Dyslexia Association
Stirling Business Centre
Wellgreen
Stirling
FK8 2DZ   tel: 01786-446650

The Dyslexia Institute (Scotland)
74 Victoria Crescent Road
Dowanhill
Glasgow
G11 9JN   tel: 0141-334-4549

Scottish Council for Educational Technology
74 Victoria Crescent Road
Dowanhill
Glasgow
G11 9JN   tel: 0141-337-5000

Web site: http://www.scet.org.uk/

Dyslexia Scotwest
74 Victoria Crescent Road
Dowanhill
Glasgow
G11 9JN   tel: 0141-334-0066

Articles, Books and Leaflets

British Dyslexia Association (1996)	*Dyslexia: Your First Questions Answered*	British Dyslexia Association
Buzan T (1989)	*Use Your Head*	BBC Books
Gilroy D (1993)	*Dyslexia and Higher Education*	Dyslexia Unit, UCNW, Bangor
Hales G (ed) (1994)	*Dyslexic Matters*	Whurr
Herrington M et al (1995)	Theme Issue: Dyslexia **in** *RaPAL Bulletin; no 27, pp1-36, Summer 1995*	
Honey P & Mumford A (1986)	*Using Your Learning Styles*	Printique
Hulme C & Snowling M (1994)	*Reading Development and Dyslexia*	Whurr
Joller C (1995)	Professional Development Defeats Dyslexia **in** *Momentum; vol 26 no 2, pp50-52, Apr/May 1995*	
Kolb D (1984)	*Experiential Learning*	Prentice Hall
McLoughlin D, Fitzgibb G & Young V (1994)	*Adult Dyslexia: Assessment, Counselling and Training*	Whurr
Miles T (1993)	*Dyslexia: The Pattern of Difficulties (2nd ed)*	Whurr
Miles T & Gilroy D (199	*Dyslexia at College (revised edition)*	Dyslexia Unit, UCNW, Bangor
Miles T & Varma V (1995)	*Dyslexia and Stress*	Whurr
Nistler R & McMurry H (1993)	Insights into Dyslexia: Lessons from a Personal Struggle to Overcome Reading Disabilities **in** *Language Arts; vol 70 no 7, pp559-566, Nov 1993*	
Osmond J (1993)	*The Reality of Dyslexia*	Cassell/Channel 4
Preston M et al (1996)	*Four Times Harder: Six Case Studies of Students with Dyslexia in Higher Education*	Questions Publishing Company
Reid G (1994)	*Specific Learning Difficulties (Dyslexia): A Handbook for Study and Practice*	Moray House Publications

Reid G (ed) (1996)	*Dimensions of Dyslexia: Assessment, Teaching and the Curriculum*	Moray House Publications
Singleton C (ed) (1991)	*Computer and Literacy Skills*	British Dyslexia Association
Smith D (1996)	*Spotlight on Special Educational Needs: Specific Learning Difficulties*	NASEN
West T (1991)	*In the Mind's Eye*	Prometheus Books

Some Useful Web Sites

http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk/index.html
http://www.dyslexia.com/
http://www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/advice.html
http://www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/read-lst.html
http://www.greenwoodinstitute.org/resources/resindex.html
http://www.hensa.ac.uk/dyslexia.html
http://www.scet.org.uk/
http://www.shefc.ac.uk:80/shefc/publicat/others/access/access.htm
http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Psychology/WDNF/sites.html