A year in the life of
THE DYSLEXIC PROFESSOR
NIGEL LOCKETT

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Preface

This particular ‘Year in the Life’ is 2017. The year I decided to ‘come out’ as The Dyslexic Professor by posting a weekly blog. In this book (well a PDF to be precise), I have tried to recreate the since of time by faithfully reproducing each blog in order I posted them. Most are my own work but some are generous gifts of guest blogs from people I met along the way (*Ross, Rosa, Julie, Victoria, Anon, Vincent). I hope the combined works convey the move from an isolated lone dyslexic, because that is what I was, to a person connected not just to other dyslexics but also to non-dyslexics passionate about the value people with dyslexia bring to our society. We are collectively a movement of Dyslexia Activists! At the outset, I didn’t think I could do it and a times I couldn’t find the motivation to write. But, that is all history now. The task is done with 52 blogs posted and this book compiled.

Best wishes
Nigel Lockett - The Dyslexic Professor

To
An 8-year-old boy and all who follow

* My thanks to my guest bloggers: Ross Duncan (42/54), Rosa Weber (40/52), Julie Holland (35/52), Victoria Tomlinson (28/52), Anon (21/52 & 22/52) and Vincent Walsh (15/52 & 20/52).
The Dyslexic Professor (0/52)

Yes, I do mean ‘dyslexic professor’ not ‘dyslexia professor’ or ‘Professor of Dyslexia’.

By my 19th birthday, I had failed all my A-levels and couldn’t see a positive future – school had been a nightmare. Fortunately, I had two things going in my favour …

Firstly, I had passed by motorcycling test!

Secondly, after failing my English GSCE (then called O-levels) twice with Fs, an experienced out-of-school English tutor recognised I had learning difficulties and recommended I went to one of the few specialist testing centres at Aston University. After what seemed like a strange set of questions and tests (including the dreaded reading aloud), I was told I had a very high IQ and dyslexia. The former was a pleasant surprise and confirmed I wasn’t “stupid” and the latter both a new word to me and unspellable to boot!

There then followed 35 years of struggles, achievements and more struggles as I came to realise that dyslexia was not a learning difficulty but a learning difference.

This learning difference has shaped me into the person I am today … The Dyslexic Professor!

Could some of the coping strategies learnt in hostile environments actually be an advantage?

Watch 5:15 into this Ted Talk by Regina Hartley.

Why is 2017 the year I go public?

i) To highlight to anyone with dyslexia that you can quite literally achieve anything you set your mind on (regardless of what some teachers and peers say), ii) to start to compile useful links to University support for dyslexic students, iii) share ‘top tips’ gained from my own experience and iv) provide links to useful resources.

My 2017 New Year’s resolution is to write a weekly blog related to my experiences as a dyslexic academic.

A new journey for me begins with this blog …
Who would ever have thought it? (1/52)

As an undiagnosed dyslexic in school through the 70s, life was pretty tough. No one had even heard of dyslexia let alone develop effective learning strategies. For me that meant years of underachievement and ridicule from teachers (some very well meaning) and friends who were as ignorant as everyone else. I still don’t like to think of that 8-year-old me, starting at boarding school and sitting in Mrs W’s English class ...

Throughout my schooling I lived in fear of being asked to read aloud in class. I followed the trail of doom as it snaked around my classmates, getting ever nearer. Desperate attempts to read ahead to the most likely sentence to land on me, was no preparation – it just made things worse. As I stood, eyes going out of focus, words dancing on the page, the first sentence hardly uttered before the laughing started!

Even today, I can’t read out from the printed page. And yet ... I can deliver top class lectures on entrepreneurship (try spelling that without MSWord spelling or ClaroRead!). My last Advanced Entrepreneurship class scored 100% (Strongly agree/Agree) across all measures – even ‘Feedback’! ‘Teacher was enthusiastic’ getting 100% Strongly agree. I was genuinely moved by the comments in the student evaluations:

• Nigel was the absolute best lecturer, everything he taught us was interesting and relevant.
• Nigel was by far the best lecturer I’ve ever had. Every topic he chose was extremely interesting and he was able to fully engage the entire class, which is highly commendable seeing as it was a two-hour lecture starting at nine in the morning.
• Nigel is so enthusiastic and I actually listen and learn.
• Nigel made lectures fun and engaging every week, bringing in real world examples from his business network.
• Nigel was very enthusiastic and it was very refreshing being taught a module by someone with first-hand experience in the field he was teaching. This module, was by far the best module I have ever undertaken in the entirety of my time [at university].

Has this anything to do with being dyslexic?

And the journey to the top of leading business schools (University of Leeds and Lancaster University) requires a written PhD. I, and probably everyone else around me, could simply never have imagined that 8-year-old, so fearful of the written word, becoming a serial entrepreneur, community leader and professor. But that is another story ...
Dyslexia Drag Race (2/52)

You will see from my review of ClaroRead below that I rely heavily on software to help me in my everyday work – particularly for emails. Recently, I have been experimenting with dictation software for longer emails and reports.

I decided the best way to test the usefulness of dictation software was to setup a dictation drag race between two leading contestants:

Contestant One: Apple Dictation (macOS Sierra v10.12.2) built-in tool – which is free.

[You can activate the Dictation tool from the Apple icon [top left] go to ‘System Preferences’, click on the ‘Keyboard’ icon and within this click on the ‘Dictation tab’ and, finally, tick ‘Dictation’ as ‘On’. To use in any text box press ‘fn’ [bottom left] key twice [this is configurable] and then press ‘fn’ key twice to hide].

Contestant Two: Nuance Dragon (Professional Individual for Mac v6.0.4), which is probably the best-known dictation software you can buy.

So, the challenge was 400 words from a long email to a colleague. Starting with Nuance Dragon ['Contestant Drag [David], on my first whistle'], I read out from a printed page … 4 minutes and 56 seconds later 400 words have been dictated into a document with only 5 mistakes – all of which were understandable and easy to correct. I used the ClaroRead to ‘Text to Speech’ function to quickly check through the document. Not a bad achievement and probably three or four times quicker than typing with ClaroRead.

Now for Apple Dictation using exactly the same email … 4 minutes and 59 seconds later 400 words have been dictated into a document but sadly this time with over 30 mistakes. Most of these were ‘normal’ words. I used Apple ‘Text to Speech’ [again free] tool to check through the document.

[You can activate the ‘Text to Speech’ tool from the Apple icon [top left] go to ‘System Preferences’, click on the ‘Accessibility’ icon, then ‘Speech’ and tick ‘Speak selected text when the key is pressed. You can configure ‘Current key’ by clicking ‘Change Key’].

I started to correct the document and quickly realised how time consuming this was. So, even though the drag race was fairly even with Nuance Dragon crossing the line only 3 seconds ahead of Apple Dictation, the time to do the corrections made Dragon the clear winner for longer documents for me.

However, since carrying out this very unscientific test, I have found Apple Dictation particularly helpful whilst doing short emails. It is so easy to press ‘fn’ twice in the middle of typing to help me complete a long sentence or to find a difficult word [I will come back to ‘difficult words’ in another blog]. So, not quite ‘honours are even’, but pretty close.

And finally, I do find that even though my version of Dragon is up-to-date, it regularly crashes. Not great for a drag racer! But, at least for me, not a huge problem only an inconvenience as I work in Word for Mac rather than DragonPad.

Happy racing!

CLAROREAD SOFTWARE REVIEW

For me, the single most useful dyslexia software tool is ClaroRead for Mac. I literally use it everyday and for every email, letter or report I write. It has more features than I need but the two most useful features for me are:

Reading out as I type each word and then reading out highlighted text. This is a must have feature and I can’t think of any improvements to this function.

Word prediction is a heavy weight tool which offers you a drop-down list of words as you are typing. I’ve set my colour scheme (soft yellow on dark blue), for the list to be sorted by likelihood (rather than alphabetical) and to show ignored words and next word [Go to ‘Settings’ > ‘Predict’ > ‘Window’].

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I prefer to use the ClaroRead training feature rather than automatically adding correctly spelt words. The latter slows the application down to the point it interferes with my typing. Yes, I’m now really that fast! To be honest I’m still pretty slow but my correspondence are of a better quality. This means fewer spelling mistakes, homophones and bigger words (like correspondence!). The package comes with additional features I don’t use: ruler, capture and colour screen overlays.

The one improvement for me would be the option to have the prediction window track with the cursor (just to the right would be perfect). I’m sure I’ve seen this feature on Window-based software like Penfriend and Read&Write – I see there is now a Mac version.

I have just bought an iPad Pro and downloaded the ClaroSpeak App. Give me a couple of months and I will write a review.

PS How could I not mention the power of MSWord (or other word processors) and built-in spelling and grammar checks. My adult life spans the Sinclair ZX Spectrum to the MacBook Pro – probably the real revolution at your fingertips for dyslexics.

My ClaroRead’s word reduction window:
Time to see Dyslexia as a Superpower? (3/52)

Happy New Year! By posting this third blog on dyslexia, I already feel 2017 is getting off to a good start ...

We are all familiar with the Marvel Comic superheroes (Dr Strange, Captain Marvel, Black Widow and Spiderman, to name but a few) – each with their own superpower. I wonder if it’s time to rethink our view of dyslexia and focus less on what dyslexic people can’t do and more on what they can do. Yes, I am actually suggesting that we consider dyslexia as a superpower!

In a future blog [probably entitled the ’Dyslexic Safari’], I will consider whether dyslexia is why the human species has prospered. Anyway, back to mere superpowers. In my experience, I have noticed dyslexics appear to be able to deal with complexity. In fact, not just complexity but dynamic complexity – where a myriad of events move with abnormal pace.

This ability seems to comprise three capabilities particularly prevalent in dyslexics: i) seeing patterns, ii) seeing objects and iii) seeing shapes. Combining these capabilities with calmness [I will come back to that in the future] and you have, in my view, a dyslexic superpower!

I have noticed these capabilities in myself and other dyslexics. The easiest way to explain these is through examples:

1. Patterns. This is all about being able to see the wood for the trees or the big picture. Nowhere is this more true than with complex business information systems. I once received an early Sunday morning call from a friend whose multimillion pound distribution company had switched to a new computer system and despite the best efforts of the project team could not get customers’ orders picked and dispatched. After just 4 days the situation had reached crisis point – no orders dispatched equals no company! “Would I mind looking into the problem?” In fairness, I wasn’t going in cold – I had implemented several stock handling information systems in my time. I spent 30 minutes walking around the office and warehouse talking to members of the project team, warehouse staff and the system provider. Using the wood for the trees analogy, there appeared to be two trees that needed felling to get orders moving through the system … i) electronically transferring all stock from deep storage to the picking faces and ii) changing a parameter which allowed for negative allocated stock. This did the trick and 100s of orders appeared on the handheld devices … we were back in business!

2. Objects. In an increasingly complex digital world where the amount of information we have to deal with is growing exponentially, we gladly turn to objects or things which help us navigate. Two examples readily spring to mind – firstly, Google Web Search (launched internationally in 2000) and secondly, the Apple iPod Classic (launched in 2001). They both provided a simple interface to information – the former through a webpage and the latter a wheel. With the iPod, Steve Job designed a physical object which set a course which brought us the iPhone and iPad. Impressed? Have you ever seen a 3-year-old child pick up an iPad and within seconds starting to access their favourite apps? Steve Jobs was dyslexic.

3. Shapes. Imagine walking in the mountains, and on returning home, being able to recall and describe the terrain of your whole journey. This ability to see in 3D is exceptional and provides opportunities for a host of applications. Many people can use a map and compass to navigate on a walk but can’t simply look at an OS map and convert it into 3D shapes in their mind. Can you imagine how useful this ability would be for an architect or builder? Richard Rodgers, brought us the Pompidou Centre, Millennium Dome and European Court of Human Rights building, is dyslexic.

Which organisations wouldn’t want to recruit staff with these superpowers?

The age of the dyslexic is here!
Dyslexic Glass Ceiling? (4/52)
Many of us will be aware of the Glass Ceiling or the artificial barriers to the advancement of minority men and women into management and decision-making positions. But could it also apply to dyslexics?

Not so much a glass ceiling as a word ceiling.

Of course, I can only refer to my own experience as a manager, entrepreneur, community leader and academic [The Dyslexic Professor no less!]. But, in each role there came a moment when my dyslexia did indeed become a barrier. I’m not looking to blame anyone or any organisation and recognise I have constructed some artificial barriers of my own. However, I am looking to highlight the real challenges faced by dyslexics in everyday life – more particularly, everyday living in environments full of words!

I will illustrate this point with two examples. The first being more painful to recall than the second.

Firstly, I have been involved in many community projects from fundraising garden parties to chairing a medium sized charity through a change in Chief Executive [Foundation] and from helping set-up an organic food social enterprise [Growing with Grace] to chairing the governing body of a primary school and even President of my professional body [Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship]. Of course, I am constantly scanning my environment for threats that might expose me as a dyslexic but occasionally even I have dropped my guard.

It is good practice to involve parents and carers, in appropriate ways, to support young children’s learning in primary schools. This can range from after school clubs to individual support. What could be more natural for a teacher to ask the Chair of Governors to join the rota of one-to-one reading support for Year 1 and 2 children (5 to 7 year olds). Of course, I had a BSc, MSc and even a PhD – so, without thinking, I accepted.

The day duly came and I chose a suitable book from my own children’s collection and read it through several times to myself. Just as I was leaving to walk to the school, my wife kindly offered to hear me read the book aloud. Even I was surprised by the reality. As soon as I started to read out I made a simple error which I heard as a whisper in my head and then a roar as it was gently pointed out. In an instant, I was teleported to standing in a classroom with ‘eyes going out of focus, words dancing on the page!’ [Definitely my dyslexic Achilles’ heel] I completely lost my confidence and accepted the offer to be substituted at very short notice.

Secondly, now in my fourth career, as an academic (previously and concurrently as manager, entrepreneur and community leader), I am now enjoying being a Professor of Entrepreneurship and an Associate Dean at a leading business school. I was recently asked by a University Vice-Chancellor [I hasten to add, not my own] – What are your career ambitions? In an instant, I knew the answer was not, the very top of academia or even nearly the very top! I decided to disclose my dyslexia and listed the things I couldn’t do and that would make it difficult to carry out the full range of duties expected of a leader in modern academia.

Reflecting honestly on this conversation, I think there were in fact three specific things – two related to my dyslexia and one completely different.

Names – Peoples names are difficult for me and new names in particular. This might seem very strange but working in a leading national and global university constantly brings me into contact with new people and more challengingly, new names. It just takes me longer to associate a familiar name to a new face and an embarrassingly long time to associate a new name to a new face and even longer to pronounce it with confidence. And there is one important event that takes place at least twice a year … graduation. The role of the Head of School (or Faculty) is to call (read out loud) the names of the graduates. Many times, I have sat on the stage smiling as my students graduate and every time thought, I just couldn’t do that.

Speeches – I have become more comfortable speaking in public. Helped by years of leadership roles which necessitated it and hours of classroom teaching. But I still remain fearful of making speeches. Of course, I’m referring to written speeches that senior leaders need to deliver as a normal part of their job. For very senior leaders these will have been drafted by someone else. I am always moved when I watch The King’s Speech, even through it is not directly related to dyslexia Again, I have watch many people deliver good speeches and every time thought, I just couldn’t do that.

Admiration – Now, this might be the main reason! I have been fortunate to work universities with strong and committed leadership teams. I see the long hours and the sacrifices made by these high performing individuals. Of course, I do appreciate for readers not familiar with the environment of a modern university this might seem strange. But, believe me when I say, we are fortunate to have some the world’s best universities in the UK and you simply don’t become the best through poor leadership. Universities contribute many things to our society.
So, there might be a Dyslexia Ceiling but, at least for me, there might just be a few other factors involved. Interestingly, Catherine Brennan, a distinguished Professor of Biology and Chemistry at MIT, doesn’t agree, ‘There is no a dyslexia ceiling, doesn’t exist, unless you create it in your own mind’. Watch 17:01 into her Dyslexia Advantage talk.
The Dyslexic Brain: Words, words, everywhere (5/52)
I can’t stop smiling as I start this blog on the Dyslexic Brain. I will return to this important subject in a moment – I’m smiling because I have just remembered a former business bank manager [Brian] saying, in all earnest, ‘Nigel, I do appreciate getting your monthly financial updates but please would you stop writing to me as, Dear Brain!’

Words, words, everywhere but not a sentence to read! [Apologies to Samuel Coleridge’s The Rime of the Ancient Mariner – ‘Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink’!]. I merely use it to highlight the challenge that dyslexics face in our word-rich world. Of course, this blog is just a drop in the ocean in the sea of research on dyslexia.

Recent research on how the brain’s cortex, more especially the structure of minicolumns (dense versus loose) and axons (short versus long), impacts on connections, suggests that dyslexia is not a dysfunction but a difference. Of course, I rather like this idea and recognise this might just be because it supports my worldview, expressed in my first blog (0/52), that dyslexia is a learning difference.

In this blog, I am drawing mainly on The Dyslexic Advantage (book) by Eide and Eide, 2012 and Dyslexia and the Brain (video) by Eden, 2016.

So, why would cortex structure (short-dense and long-loose) effect connections and why is this relevant to dyslexia?

One of the key differences (or in Eide and Eide’s words advantages or in my words superpowers) for dyslexics is the ability to see patterns or the wood for the trees or the big picture (Watch 7:30 Eden video). This big picture thinking is function of a cortex structure – more precisely long axons and loose minicolumns (long-loose) which slows down processing. The opposite is short axons and dense minicolumns and (short-dense) which speeds up processing and supports fine detail thinking. This produces a fascinating spectrum from slow (big picture thinking) to fast (fine detail thinking), which maps onto dyslexia (big picture thinking) and autism (fine detail thinking).

Importantly, learning to read (a function of phonological processing and procedural processing in the left brain) is enhanced by fine detail thinking. This might also go some way to explain the challenge words cause dyslexics.

The implications for dyslexics are firstly, dyslexia is a difference not a dysfunction and secondly, as I know from my own experience, adult dyslexics can improve their word processing power [I will come back to how in a future blog but in the meantime watch 7:58 Eden video] to a mostly adequate level without losing their big picture thinking!
Vacancy: Dyslexics need only apply (6/52)

Of course, I’m not suggesting there are jobs that only dyslexics can do. But, just imagine if employers valued the enhanced abilities that dyslexia can provide – or the ‘dyslexia superpowers’ (See 3/5).

I have applied for a few senior positions in my time and have been faced with completing the anonymous ‘Equal Opportunities Form’. Each time, I think, Do I have a disability?, Should I declare it?, What would be the consequences?, Is it really confidential? ...

It’s hard to pick up a newspaper [or read your favourite title on the proprietary app] and not read about the latest big challenge faced by a big organisation. See below a few examples from this week’s press coverage:

• NHS ... Fifty-two NHS hospitals sent patients elsewhere in busiest week yet
• TATA ... Chandra’s challenge: Old problems await a new boss at Tata
• VW ... VW’s scandal: The cost of cheating
• NHS again ... One in five new drugs could be rationed on the NHS

Clearly, these are big complex problems with multiple stakeholders and both political and financial implications. Oh, and probably full of big data.

So, if you run one of these organisations, Who you gonna call?

No, not Ghostbusters!

But, perhaps a group of people with specially honed big picture thinking [yes, you know where I’m going!] (See 5/52). But, you recruit your top talent from top graduates from top universities; who have in turn recruited top students with top A-levels; most likely achieved by students with an enhanced ability for fine detail thinking. Really you need both big picture thinking and fine detail thinking to crack these really big problems.

Perhaps this is at the heart of the matter. We have designed an educational system that rewards fine detail thinking and labels the very people with enhanced big picture thinking as dysfunctional.

As a society, we often look to government and politicians for solutions. But, how many successful applicants to Fast Stream or MPs are dyslexic?

Why not take matters into your own hands?
Who will be the first large organisation to include, ‘Evidence of overcoming the challenges of dyslexia’ under desirable selection criteria?
Dyslexic War of Words (7/52)

Relax, I don’t mean the Boris Brexit Bus or the Trump inauguration ‘alternative facts’ war of words. I mean the internal dialogue dyslexics hear – the challenge of all those words to process. Of course, I have chosen a profession [academia] which is actually located in a temple of words [university]!

To give you some idea of what this means in practice, I thought the last couple of weeks might give you a sense of my personal dyslexia challenge. Here goes:

• In 2009, I was fortunate to be invited by Dr Richard Blundel, at the Open University, to co-author an exciting new textbook ‘Exploring Entrepreneurship’. Published in 2011, it was well received by peers and adopted for many entrepreneurship modules. Of course, I would say this, it is a thoughtful contribution to the subject – a book of two integrated halves (practice and perspectives) with some innovative pedagogical features such as critical incident teaching cases and leading researcher profiles. My contribution was mainly the practice first half. It literally took 6 months of weekends to complete. Don’t ever ask my family about the book! The last couple of weeks have been dominated by finishing the copy for the second edition due to be launched by Sage Publications at the ISBE conference in Belfast this November. The second edition will include a third author – Professor Catherine Wang at Brunel University and video cases of entrepreneurs who describe a real business challenge and then reveal what actually happened. My copy was submitted for typesetting last week.

• Since 2014, I have been leading a collaborative three country investigation involving universities in Spain, Sweden and the UK, which is exploring the role of universities in supporting entrepreneurial students and graduates. The first publication has just been accepted by the Industry and Higher Education journal. Proofing the article, ‘Lost in space’: The role of social networking in university-based entrepreneurial learning, was completed on Monday.

• Last Monday saw the publication of the HM Government Building our Industrial Strategy Green Paper. This could represent a significant opportunity for universities to help address the productivity dilemma, which has seen UK productivity remain stagnant after the financial crisis in direct contrast to previous recessions and other developed economies. As Associate Dean for Engagement, I needed to read, digest, debate and respond with appropriate recommendations.

Of course, the above is added to the usual wordy [written] duties of responding to emails, reading documents, preparing presentations, moderating assignments and back-to-back meetings.

I am certainly not complaining as this is how you get things done in a modern university. However, it might give you an insight to my personal challenge of the war of words or at times what feels more like a wall of words!

Luckily for me, I don’t have to face this alone. As I explained in the Dyslexia Drag Race (2/52), the single most useful dyslexia software tool for me is ClaroRead for Mac. I simply could not handle this huge volume of words without it.

I do appreciate that a non-dyslexic academic might point out that this is simply normal and begs the question, why is this such a challenge?

The simplest reply is … time!

It just takes me more mental time and energy to process words. Imagine if at aged sixteen you knew what the word doubt meant and could use it readily in conversation. However, if asked to spell the word doubt, either to recite it or write it, you could not ‘see’ or imagine the word beyond the d. Now concentrating hard, you get to d…ow, then dow…t – But life isn’t that easy for a dyslexic – you aren’t certain of your ability and have your own doubts! Dow look’s like bow, is this bow to an audience or bow and arrow? In addition, as soon as you realise the environment is hostile, your reply is expected instantly, other people are watching … How could an increasingly doubting dyslexic get anywhere near ou or even bt?
Of course, doubt is just one word!

Some words are just simply more difficult for dyslexics than others. No doubt, each of us will have our own set of desperately difficult words. Difficult words are challenging in two ways. Firstly, hearing and spelling and secondly, reading and pronunciation. Two sides of the same coin.
Developing Your [Dyslexic] Superpower Institute (8/52)

Since my ‘Vacancy: Dyslexics need only apply’ blog (6/52), I was feeling rather frustrated. Why?

It’s all very well me suggesting that employers should recruit staff who have dyslexic superpowers and can show ‘evidence of overcoming the challenges of dyslexia’, but that’s only half the solution. Surely the key to success is developing programmes that support the learning differences experienced by dyslexics and to enable the further development of big picture thinking. In the context of the higher education sector, let’s look at each in turn.

• Supporting: Universities recognise that some of their students could have learning difficulties, often called Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs). Indeed, many have invested time and resources in supporting these students. Typically, through their Disability Service – just follow the links from my list of university support for dyslexic students to see how dyslexia is positioned as a disability and dysfunction. So, step one to enlightenment must be to focus on dyslexia as a learning difference and reposition support as continue professional development (CPD) for the enhancement of existing abilities. Remember, the goal is to develop superpowers in academic and professional staff!

• Enabling: Having repositioned support as CPD and, hopefully, engaged with dyslexic academic and professional staff [I will deal with this challenge in a future blog], it’s time to think about developing the superpower of big picture thinking. I’m sure that once dyslexics have switched from thinking about their dyslexia as a disability to a difference, they will already becoming aware of their enhanced abilities to see patterns, objects and shapes and ready to rethink their own educational and work experiences. The challenge of this repositioning shouldn’t be underestimated. Remember, many dyslexics will have felt labelled and excluded by an educational system that rewards fine detail thinking.

Perhaps we [the higher education sector] need to establish a Developing Your Superpower Institute (DYS Institute), which delivers this outcome. Of course, it would quickly become known as the disinstitute – which, at least for me, has a certain comic irony!

Dyslexic Advantage, formed in 2012 after the publication of Brock and Fernette Eide’s The Dyslexic Advantage book, is the nearest organisation I can find to the idea of the DYS Institute.

Of course, Dyslexia Advantage is focused on all dyslexics not just those in the higher education sector. Time for some big picture thinking ...
My Dyslexia Valentine (9/52)

Of course, I couldn’t let the 14th February pass without reflecting on my ‘love hate’ relationship with my dyslexia. Well, I say, ‘love hate’ but what I increasingly feel is a love relationship with my Dyslexia Valentine!

Many will know the footprints in the sand poem in which the traveller experiences hardship and on looking back sees particularly hard periods in their life when there is only one pair of footprints in the sand; turns to their ‘companion’ and says, ‘Why did you abandon me during my most difficult times?’; The gentle reply comes, ‘Those were the times I carried you’

And so, it is with my dyslexia. I can now look back and freely acknowledge that what I first saw as a disability, I became aware of as a difference and now increasingly see as an advantage (or superpower!).

Working in the higher education sector in the UK is particularly challenging at the moment with academic and professional staff being expected to deliver simultaneously across multiple areas: engagement, research and teaching. My Valentine’s week serves as a good example of this diversity:

- **Monday:** Early start with a morning of back-to-back meetings spanning engagement, research and teaching. No lunch break as straight into leading a four-hour entrepreneurship workshop with our excellent MBA students until 6pm. Late home.
- **Tuesday:** Off-site strategy session considering our response to the Apprenticeship Levy. This has the potential to transform undergraduate and postgraduate education in the UK. I’m particularly interested in Level 7 (masters) provision for middle managers and entrepreneurs. We have a lot to offer but packaging this will be a challenge. Late afternoon an internal mock panel interview for a major research bid we have been shortlisted for interview. Very exciting but a big challenge. By the end of the day, my head is full of opportunities and threats!
- **Wednesday:** Another full day away from the university. This time with Lancashire Leaders: firstly, at a small panel event which will provide the material for a magazine feature and then the annual dinner and networking event – including a chance to talk with a key stakeholder. A long day and evening. Home at midnight. Only Wednesday and I’m probably well passed the European Working Time Directive already!
- **Thursday:** At the university early for a full day of back-to-back meetings spanning engagement, research and teaching. End the day with my head spinning with opportunities and threats.
- **Friday:** TGIF! A full day without any meetings. Just my laptop and ClaroRead to help me to plough through the rather full inbox. Why does every email seem to require a considered reply? By the end of the day, there are still emails to answer but I’ve peaked and agreed with myself that Sunday afternoon looks clear for this.
- **Saturday:** Happy Days

- **Sunday:** Morning starts with the train to London to meet colleagues in the evening to prepare for Monday’s “major research bid” panel interview. More to follow on this but only if we are successful! Used train journey down to reply to emails but not until I had upgraded, at my own expense, to 1st class to get a table, wifi and some quiet.

My working week ends mid-evening and I can’t be bothered to add up all the hours! Looking back, I can see the ‘footprints in the sand’ where my dyslexia has carried me through the challenges of my working week.

Yes, my Dyslexia Valentine is definitely a superpower for me!
Support for Dyslexic University Students (10/52)

In terms of the undergraduate recruitment cycle, we are now in between 2017 entry (UCAS closed on 15th January for most courses) and 2018 entry with open day season starting from June. At least for now, the focus will be on making offers and converting offer holders into first choice or ‘Firm acceptance’ applicants.

But what about students with Dyslexia? It is bewildering enough choosing a university, a course and city – and getting those all-important grades if you don’t have an unconditional offer!

However, it could be time well invested if you are concerned about support for dyslexic students. Just to see what support was on offer, I typed, in Google, “[University name] support for dyslexic students”. I have produced a table of results, hyperlinking to the most appropriate page and used # to indicate universities with a specialist dyslexia page and ** with multiple dyslexia pages. Below I have listed the more impressive offers:

1. University of the Arts London
2. Bangor University
3. University of Hull
4. Liverpool Hope University
5. London School of Economics and Political Science
6. London South Bank University
7. Loughborough University
8. University of Leicester
9. Nottingham Trent University
10. University of Newcastle
11. University of Nottingham
12. Oxford Brookes University
13. University of Southampton
14. University of St Andrews
15. University of Strathclyde
16. University of the West of England
17. University of York

The one I like best is the University of the Arts London – including sections on: What to Expect, Advice Before Applying, Funding; Assistive Technology. However, it does use the expression ‘Disability & Dyslexia’, personal stories are limited and the contact email is generic with no staff profiles.

For me, the best website should address me personally, as a student with dyslexia and how their support could help me engage fully in my studies and, of course, enhance my Dyslexia superpower! I want to read about successful current students – better still watch a video – to inspire me to give the university my ‘Firm Acceptance’!

Cardiff University students video:

PS See Dyslexia Action and Which? have a useful webpage by the British Dyslexia Association
Stimulating Big Picture Thinking (11/52)

Can you really teach big picture thinking? As a dyslexic academic, I use my big picture thinking (or ‘dyslexia superpower’) every day. Throughout my lecturing career I have tried to develop pedagogical techniques that can support my students’ learning by stimulating their big picture thinking. In the context of my discipline, entrepreneurship, I understandably call this ‘entrepreneurial thinking’ but it’s really the same thing – seeing patterns in complexity. In fact, my department (Department of Entrepreneurship, Strategy and Innovation) has developed quite a reputation for doing just this at undergraduate, postgraduate and executive levels. So, perhaps it’s not surprising I was asked to develop and deliver a workshop to stimulate entrepreneurial thinking in environmental doctoral students – hosted in a NERC-funded Doctoral Training Centre called ENVISION.

Myself and two colleagues (Dr Joanne Larty and Dr Ricardo Zozimo) set about doing just this and last week delivered a 3-day ‘Stimulating Entrepreneurial Thinking in Scientists’ (SETS) workshop at Lancaster University.

Before revealing what happened, I will explain what we designed and why. Our learning objective was to provide an opportunity for environmental doctoral students to learn by doing or experiencing entrepreneurial thinking in practice.

- **Day One**: was all about suspending their disbelief and giving them permission to be creative (idea generation), select good ideas (opportunity recognition), understand what might be needed to deliver (exploitation) and explain this to others using business models. In mixed groups, they gradually became more confident and all teams pitched their best idea to each other – we filmed these.

- **Day Two**: started by watching the previous days winning pitch and discussing why it won, then the focus moved to responding to four business challenges (energy, food, waste and water), using problem trees and finished with teams pitching their solutions to a panel of experts. Interestingly, the groups were deliberately different from Day One and centred around the students’ own research expertise – we even provided printed coloured (organic – of course!) t-shirts: RED energy, GREEN food, BLACK waste and BLUE water.

- And finally, **Day Three**: again, started by watching the previous days winning pitch and discussing why it won, then shifted to addressing a global challenge (around water in West Africa) in interdisciplinary teams pulling together expertise from each of the teams formed in Day Two. Each team also included a member with direct experience of West Africa. The task was simply to submitted a two-page ‘expression of interest’ by 2pm and attend an interview with an expert panel. The winner was an impressive team focusing on sustainable rice production linked to water management and entrepreneurial community building using advances in drought resistant rice species and optimum fertiliser usage.

Academic readers will already have recognised the link to the Global Challenges Research Fund call – £1.5 billion fund announced by the UK Government to support cutting-edge research that addresses the challenges faced by developing countries through: challenge-led disciplinary and interdisciplinary research; strengthening capacity for research and innovation within both the UK and developing countries; providing an agile response to emergencies where there is an urgent research need.

This 2-minute video (played just before the panel interviews) captures the energetic team working and fun of the three days!

Stimulating Entrepreneurial Thinking in Scientists Video

It was fascinating to work with future scientists and see the power of structured big picture learning through role play, team working and responding to staged challenges. Developing the ability to articulate the value or impact of environmental sciences to terms of addressing global challenges has never been more important.

The full video of Stimulating Entrepreneurial Thinking in Scientists programme
Stimulating Entrepreneurial Thinking in Scientists (SET...
Reads, spells and guesses: The Dyslexic “Eats, shoots and leaves”? (12/52)
Before addressing the title of this blog, I wanted to update last week’s blog on ‘Stimulating Big Picture Thinking’ (11/52), setting out the approach to designing and delivering the workshop to stimulate entrepreneurial thinking in environmental doctoral students. So, after all the hype, what was the students’ feedback?

Based on a simple Likert-type scale: 1 excellent, 2 average, 3 poor, the facilitators (myself and two colleagues) received a flawless score and only dropped one point for ‘How satisfied are you with the outcomes of the programme?’ (Meaning: increased confidence, bringing together science and entrepreneurship and meeting like-minded people) – that’s a relief!

Qualitative feedback included: ‘Excellent! It has really got me thinking about the skills I have and how I could use these in my career going forwards.’ ‘Interesting, challenging and fun.’ ‘A tiring, but stimulating few days, that was led by some really helpful and enthusiastic individuals.’ ‘Overall it was an enjoyable course, really varied and applied to a variety of challenges. Made it easier to see how scientific knowledge could be applied to a business …’ ‘It was worthwhile and enlightening.’ ‘Enjoyable, inclusive, and well delivered.’ ‘Intense and stressful, but highly rewarding. Don’t change any of the organisers, they each brought something different to the challenges they set.’

Now back to the, Reads, spells and guesses: The Dyslexic ‘Eats, shoots and leaves’.

I was recently asked about the practicalities of learning grammar as a dyslexic and was immediately struck by my lack of grammatical knowledge. At school, I was so far behind my reading age (I remember when I was tested for dyslexia aged 19, my reading age was in single digits – an assessment I have conveniently buried for 35 years!), I couldn’t possibly engage in learning grammar. Compulsory French classes until I was 14 years old, served only to compound my grammatical confusion. As an adult learner, I have even had Spanish lessons, in both the UK and Spain, with limited success – plenty of scope for a future blog there!

On reflection, I realised I needed to go back to grammar school (no, not Grammar School!) to start all over again. A timely meeting with one of my children (an English Teacher at a Secondary School in London), resulted in a trip to a big Waterstones and the purchase of ‘Grammar Rules: Writing with Military Precision’ by Craig Shrives. We had so many books, in the ‘English Language’ and ‘Learning English’ sections, to choose from but decided on Shrives (2011) because it was accessible, at least to me, and it had a sense of humour whilst still taking the subject very seriously. Craig also maintains a very helpful web site: http://www.grammar-monster.com/. You will no doubt have spotted the extensive use of: apostrophes, brackets, colons, commas, dashes, hyphens, semicolons and speech marks; or to be more precise – Section 1!

Given more self-study time, I think I will be able to learn grammar rules as a dyslexic academic. At the very least this new competence might be useful for my blogs.

Next week could see the first guest blog – from a fellow dyslexic academic. Perhaps this will be more than appropriate, given I will be a quarter of the way towards achieving my goal of posting 52 blogs this year. I continue to be pleasantly surprised by contact from dyslexics in academia, which have resulted from my decision to disclose my dyslexia. Should I consider establishing an invitation-only LinkedIn group or inviting guest blogs from dyslexic academics?
A Dyslexia Reflection (13/52 or 25%)
A week’s holiday and a break from blogging was a chance to reflect on the ‘quarter way’ point in my plan to post a weekly blog, 52 in 2017, on being an academic with dyslexia or to be more precise – The Dyslexic Professor.

Looking back on the last three months of blogs, three equally weighted themes have emerged (it’s almost like I planned it this way!). Firstly, the dyslexic learning difference (12/52; 10/52; 5/52; 2/52). Secondly, how this learning difference gives rise to the dyslexic superpower (11/52; 8/52; 6/52; 3/52). And finally, overcoming the challenge of dyslexia by recognising the learning difference in order to build the superpower (9/52; 7/52; 4/52; 1/52).

1. **Dyslexic Learning Difference:**
   - Reads, spells and guesses: The Dyslexic “Eats, shoots and leaves”?(12/52)
   - Support for Dyslexic University Students (10/52)
   - The Dyslexic Brain: Words, words, everywhere (5/52)
   - Dyslexia Drag Race (2/52)

2. **Dyslexic Superpower:**
   - Stimulating Big Picture Thinking (11/52)
   - Developing Your [Dyslexic] Superpower Institute (8/52)
   - Vacancy: Dyslexics need only apply (6/52)
   - Time to see Dyslexia as a Superpower? (3/52)

3. **Dyslexia Challenge:**
   - My Dyslexia Valentine (9/52)
   - Dyslexic War of Words (7/52)
   - Dyslexic Glass Ceiling? (4/52)
   - Who would ever have thought it? (1/52)

Interestingly, my initial article on LinkedIn, ‘The Dyslexic Professor’, received 3,783 views with the subsequent 10 blogs clocking up 1,477 views in total.

But perhaps more importantly for me, this opportunity to reflect has highlighted the cathartic value of blogging and the overwhelming support and encouragement I have received. In both cases, this was contrary to my expectations.

I have actually enjoyed sharing my experiences (releasing the pent-up frustrations and wounds of five decades of learning) and the unexpected support and encouragement has kept me going. So, what next?

Firstly, having recognised the difference, I want to learn more about my learning. Hence the willingness to continue to reflect through blogging, self-teaching (the purchase of ‘Grammar Rules: Writing with Military Precision’) and supported learning. To help with the latter, I have enrolled on a MOOC in Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching (coincidently by Lancaster University). It’s not really for dyslexics but for gaining practical tools and theoretical insights to help dyslexic students learn second languages. Anyway, it starts on the 24th April and I’m going to have ago!

Secondly, I’m looking for help. More specifically, a few guest bloggers willing to share their experience as a dyslexic or working with dyslexics. I’ve approached a couple of friends but please volunteer or just put the word out ...

Thirdly, I need a goal. Not that I am at all competitive [!] but having something to aim for might just spur me on. I’ve just found out there is a Dyslexia Awareness Week (2nd to 8th October 2017) and even a World Dyslexia Awareness Day on Thursday 5th October 2017!

I’m thinking about how best to mark 5th October 2017. Perhaps I could accelerate my blogging and hit the target of 52 blogs 3 months early. Hmm, perhaps I’m going to need more help than I thought!
Not quite the Dyslexia Superpower (3/52) but getting closer … In fact, Dr Gail Saltz makes a compelling case for linking ‘disorder’ (including dyslexia) with ‘genius’ in her recent book – The Power of Different (2017).

In a recent TV interview, Dr Saltz talks about the need to highlight the positive as well as the negative aspects of learning ‘disorders’.

The first chapter (pages 17 to 46) focuses specifically on dyslexia and, through examples drawn from “brilliantly” successful dyslexics, highlights four categories which together with “grit and resilience” could account for this “Power”. Firstly, experiencing significant trauma in school. Secondly, developing “work-arounds”. Thirdly, creativity and insight linking to brain differences and finally, “tremendous” drive and determination.

Looking at each in more detail, we can begin to see how dyslexia can indeed be an advantage or superpower. However, the challenge of recognising the positive aspects of dyslexia appears to start in school and probably continues into college and university.

1. Living with learning differences: Many dyslexics, myself included, can recall the trauma of school. Dr Beryl Benacerraf (renowned Radiologist at Harvard Medical School) compensated for her dyslexia, ‘she would count the number of students in front of her and find the paragraph she would be asked to read, and then practice that paragraph over and over until it was her turn’ – sounds familiar! Prof Carol Greider (Nobel Prize winning Microbiologist) ‘had a lot of trouble in school and was put into remedial classes. I thought that I was stupid.’

2. Developing work-arounds: To overcome these challenges dyslexics use their learning difference to create work-arounds. Reading can no only take longer it consumes more mental processing power, these work-arounds are vital to progressing. These can include the simple technique of avoiding problematic words (doubt), more sophisticated learning tools and, of course, big picture thinking!

3. Seeing dyslexia as a gift: If we assume that human evolution accentuates the positive, eliminates the negative, dyslexia could be an important feature of the survival of the human species. What has been, and continues to be, the role of big picture thinking that is characterised by seeing patterns, objects and shapes? The challenges of focusing on the written word, might actually be the advantage of not focusing on one thing in the centre of our vision but rather registering multiple incidents in our peripheral vision. Prof John Stein puts it rather well …

4. Flourishing as a dyslexic: So, having experienced the trauma of school, developed the work-arounds and having a host of life enhancing gifts, dyslexics can flourish in later life. But, what about taking a totally different approach to schooling? An approach which recognises the value of creativity and big picture thinking as well as spelling and grammar. I’m back to my emerging hobby-horse – Developing Your Superpower Institute (DYS Institute)!

And finally, Dr Gail Saltz (2017: 37) highlights that whilst dyslexics have many differences, they seem to have a propensity to develop empathy. Perhaps born from the very knocks life has delivered to them.
Guest Blog by Dr Vincent Walsh: “Batman, Clowns, Dark Days and Dyslexia 1” (15/52)

The first of two guest blogs by Dr Vincent Walsh focuses on his early years and formal education. Vincent also provided me a copy of his psychological dyslexia assessment.

Two things struck me: Firstly, the similarities in our experience of becoming the “class clown” – something I have heard from many dyslexics. Secondly, leaving compulsory education feeling ‘undermined and broken’. This resonates with Prof Carol Greider’s (Nobel Prize winning Microbiologist) experience of, ‘I had a lot of trouble in school and was put into remedial classes. I thought that I was stupid’ – mentioned in last week’s ‘[Dyslexia] Power of Different’ (14/52) blog.

Dr Vincent Walsh (Ecological Innovation Fellow, Academic & Practitioner) Part 1:

Batman, was my first word, at the age of 3 years old. I was a late developer with speech and reading, child care professionals said I was a slow starter. Although, I was fine feeding myself and getting dressed, but at this early age, it was clear, I could not concentrate for long or sit down for long periods, but what under five-year-old child wants to do that anyway?

Contemporary research now strongly suggests that developing late verbal communication, if not identified and treated, can have serious consequences across preschool, high school and adult life. I received speech therapy between the ages of three and five, although I have no recollection of what my speech problems were since I was so young at the time. Even though I cannot remember much of my childhood, I do remember from the age of 3 to being 24 years old always feeling inadequate and somehow different – silently troubled.

My mother recalls that in primary school, teachers thought I was not academically gifted and they were quite happy to not bother trying to teach me, it was easier for them to let me concentrate on sports. My mother arranged private tuition for 12 months, aged 10, before I went to secondary school, and it was suggested I got up to a reasonable level in Maths and English. High school confirmed my frustration, I came to understand, I was different, for all the wrong reasons. I remember having a deep lack of the fundamental principles of verbal and written communication, maths and languages. My peers, knew I was “thick” and to the teachers, I was “disruptive” concluding, that I did not want to learn, and therefore I continually disrupt the class, because, I did not want anyone to learn, if I could not. I remember feeling deeply upset not just for days or months, but years, because I did not understand why, I was, the way I was.

I quickly developed an identity, a role for myself as the “Clown of the Class”. This was my alter ego that suppressed the pain and inadequacy of Vincent Walsh by pursuing laughter, by highlighting how ‘thick’ I was. I acted very well in my expected behaviour. Psychologists, understand that typically the class clown is not disrupting class for the sake of disrupting class, class clowns usually act out when they’re bored or confused, they would rather stick to something they’re good at, like making people laugh.

I now understand my frustration and anxiety was fuelled and enhanced by a lack of knowledge of my specific learning difficulties and I would suggest that this also frustrated of my teachers and school. Understanding, having knowledge of my difficulties (epistemology) would have supported my understanding and rehabilitation as an early age, but it was never explained to me in the 15 years of child education, why I had difficulty, and if it was it was never done with the rigour and clarification that I needed as a young adult.

At the age of sixteen, I left school feeling that I learnt nothing, with no education, undermined, and broken. The years of poor education, lack of creative teachers, directed me on a path of destruction. In 2002, I was diagnosed with moderate to severe Dyslexia and moderate Irlen Syndrome.

Vincent’s story certainly supports the first of Dr Gail Saltz’s four common categories of dyslexics, ‘the trauma of school’ – articulated in her book ‘The Power of Different’ (2017). I am looking forward to Vincent’s second blog focusing on how he has overcome the challenge of dyslexia and how it has helped shaped into the ecological innovator!
Nuts, bolts and hurdles of Dyslexia (16/52)

It’s back to school after the Easter break for many pupils and students this week, and so it is for me – well, online school in the form of a MOOC entitled ‘Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching’ to be precise. This 4-week course is designed to support teachers of additional languages but is already proving useful to me both as an educator with dyslexic students in my university lectures and as a student of what often seems like a foreign language to me – English!

Dr Judit Kormos (the module leader) provides an insightful metaphor for dyslexic students learning a language: a hurdles race – only the hurdles are invisible! Or, as Dr Kormos expresses it [00:50]: ‘Learning to read for dyslexics is like running a race where only the dyslexic students have invisible hurdles on the track. The others complete the race easily and quickly while the dyslexic students fall when they first hit the hurdles.’

Dr Kormos goes on to explain the two main hurdles of dyslexia which impact on language learning are: i) shorter working memory span and ii) reduced phonemic awareness or, in other words, hearing the difference in words and sound-letter association. She calls on educators to recognise these hurdles exist and help students to see them coming and develop ways to overcome them.

Interestingly, Dr Kormos also urges us to look at dyslexia as a learning difference [05:50]: ‘Dyslexia should not be seen as a disability that hinders people in their daily life, but as a difference in acquiring new knowledge and skills. These students can learn successfully. And to return to our metaphor of the hurdle race, they can reach the finish line, but they do it differently from others. Hence, they will need adjustments in the teaching process and the environment, and assistance in developing efficient strategies.’

I wonder if we will get to dyslexia as a superpower by week 4?! Professor Kate Cain explains how [the nuts and bolts] people learn language and why this presents particular challenges for dyslexics. Her research concluded that there are three steps to understanding: i) words, ii) sentences and iii) meanings. Dyslexic readers can pick out key words, deconstruct sentences but often struggle to integrate these coherently and recall them accurately with their shorter working memory span playing a part in this. Add an increasing crisis of confidence as other racers [learners] start to pull away and you are on a collision path. No wonder so many dyslexics leave education with low self-esteem – you will no doubt recall Vincent’s guest blog last week (15/52).

I’ve three more weeks to go on the course. But, there is still time for you to sign up … ‘Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching’
Building the dyslexic classroom (17/52)

Last week’s Nuts, bolts and hurdles of Dyslexia’ blog (16/52), saw me going back to [online] school by enrolling on a MOOC entitled ‘Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching’. I’ve just completed Week 2, which focused more on the adult students’ experiences of learning before considering what useful accommodations educators could make. Or, in other words, starting to build a learning environment which supports dyslexics – the Dyslexic Classroom.

Four themes emerged from the experiences of dyslexic language students – i) learning language is harder, ii) it takes longer to memorise, iii) there are differences in the specific challenges faced (finding meaning, learning new vocabulary and writing and spelling) and, on a positive note, iv) somethings are easier (seeing patterns, understanding abstract concepts and appreciating similarities between languages). Perhaps not surprisingly, there was an underlying sentiment of unhappiness and lack of enjoyment. Learning didn’t seem like much fun.

Dr Anne Margaret Smith identified four main accommodations, which could usefully assist dyslexics – i) classroom environment, ii) communication and interactions, iii) content and iv) supporting independent study. In addition, she usefully explained the concept of differentiation [07:00].

"Differentiation can be thought about in four dimensions along two axes”
- Task (same or different; core and additional) to Materials (shorter and complex)
- Support (teacher time or peer work; dictionary or electronic) to Expectations (individual and appropriate)

So, the dyslexic classroom is as much about the learning approach as it is the physical environment, communications between educators and students and the course content.

Having struggled to learn English at school, the issue for me is having the confidence to engage with educators and peers in a classroom setting. It is just so difficult for non-dyslexics to appreciate the challenges. Maybe that is why, as an adult, I have looked much more towards independent study with the support of technology. Perhaps, with the explosion of devices and software we are entering a new dawn for dyslexics.
Dyslexia is in the air (18/52)
Not only is spring in the air this week, but so to is dyslexia. It seems that several things are coming together which make me feel more optimistic about recasting dyslexia not just as a difference, as opposed to a difficulty, but as an advantage.

Firstly, I now have four guest bloggers crafting their pieces. Hopefully, part 2 of Vincent’s ‘Batman, Clowns, Dark Days and Dyslexia’ (20/52) blog will be published later this week. The others will be from a senior dyslexic academic, a dyslexic Head of Department at an FE college and a PR professional who has mentored dyslexic senior executives. Watch this space …

Secondly, I’ve just signed off the copy of an article for a national Higher Education sector publication and had my photograph taken today! Less of a smiling portrait and more of a concerned academic look! Again, watch this space …

And finally, and this is the big one, a new charity was launched this week by Kate Griggs called Made By Dyslexia whose goals are:

- That dyslexia is properly understood as a different way of thinking.
- Work with governments, charities, schools and parents to ensure all dyslexic children are identified early and given the support they need. [Of course, I would add work with universities to ensure student and staff are supported.]

The launch, supported by Sir Richard Branson, coincided with the publication of ‘Connecting the Dots’ a highly informative report. It includes and an explanation of dyslexia thinking skills and the advantages it can bring (or Dyslexic Superpower):

- **Visualising:** Moving, Making & Inventing
- **Imagining:** Creating & Interpreting
- **Communicating:** Explaining & Storytelling
- **Reasoning:** Simplifying, Analysing, Deciding, & Visioning
- **Connecting:** Understanding-self, Understanding-Others, Influencing & Empathising
- **Exploring:** Learning, Digging, Energising & Doing.

Also, I can’t help admiring their sense of humour … the Dyslexic Sperm Bank
Multi-sensory learning: Not all in the dyslexic mind (19/52)

Given a busier than normal schedule over the next couple of weeks, I decided to tackle weeks 3 and 4 of ‘Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching’ MOOC in one go. To be honest, the course is also getting more specifically for teachers and harder for me to engage with – a criticism of me not the course!

The two weeks focused on learning spelling, grammar and reading with the common theme of using multi-sensory teaching techniques. In a moment, I will explore this in a little more detail but before doing so I wanted to share my feelings on getting to the end of the course. I was overwhelmed by the application of research in practice and how little must have been known by teachers when I started learning English some 50 years ago! So, perhaps I need to learn to forgive Mrs W and all that followed her. I do hope that teacher training and CPD fully utilises the good work that has been done on supporting dyslexic learners.

In week 4, Professor Joanna Nijakowska discussed how phonological and orthographic awareness learning can be multi-sensory. But, interestingly for me, she also explains why English is a difficult language for dyslexics to learn (5:27).

Multi-sensory teaching provides opportunities for learners to hear, see, say and write and includes structured small steps, practice and revision. Ultimately, learners need to develop techniques they can use in different environments to help extract meaning. These techniques can include discussing meaning (active construction), asking questions (reciprocal teaching) and visualising meaning (mental images).

Interviews with adult dyslexic learners and English language teachers highlighted several specific supporting techniques, including: i) informal interactive sessions, ii) small group learning, iii) flash cards (in CAPITALS), iv) reading introduction and conclusions before skimming the middle of articles, v) using diagrams and images, vi) knowing the lesson plan, vii) avoiding rote learning and viii) using mind maps.

I will come back to using mind maps in a future blog (more specifically, the use of rich picture) but the session usefully provided links to software packages to support mind mapping:

- MindMaple
- Edraw
- Bubbl.US
- iMindMap
- MindMeister

In summary, the last three weekends engaging with the “Dyslexia and Foreign Language Teaching” course have been very informative. I've gone from Dr Judit Kormos' insightful metaphor of a hurdles race with invisible hurdles (Nuts, bolts and hurdles of Dyslexia) through Building the dyslexic classroom to appreciating that multi-sensory teaching (and other techniques) can support dyslexics in learning languages.

A heartfelt thank you to Dr Kormos and colleagues. There are now simply no excuses for not supporting dyslexic learners in moving through understanding the difficulties, differences and then advantages of dyslexia.
Guest Blog by Dr Vincent Walsh: “Batman, Clowns, Dark Days and Dyslexia 2” (20/52)

The second and final part of Dr Vincent Walsh’s guest blog needs little introduction from me. It charts the traumatic and painful journey to the seemingly unthinkable conclusion that … ‘Dyslexics are not just futurists, they are the future’.

Guest blog by Dr Vincent Walsh (Ecological Innovation Fellow, Academic & Practitioner) Part 2:

The Unknown Truth

The school system taught me I was an underachiever, not that I had an inability to learn, but they said I did not want to learn. This fuelled me with frustration, which in turn created a disruptive family situation, directing me to a very destructive period between the age of 15 to 19 years old. I believe this was due to the lack of empathy, a lack of understanding of dyslexia and an overall lack of professionalism within the school system.

Around the age of 20 years old, I began to reflect upon my time, frustration and unhappiness I felt due to my educational situation to date. Surprisingly this brought up an unfamiliar & overwhelming feeling to reassert my energy and focus into mainstream education, maybe this was the way I would gain confidence I needed to grow. I began investigating the pathways to get back on the educational ladder. Due to no qualifications, the BTEC Level 1 National Foundation Diploma, one year qualification, was my only option, but this gave me a pathway I needed. Even at this very early stage of my academic career, I already knew my aim was to go as far as possible through education, to the highest levels. Maybe if I had any idea of how difficult that journey would be, well, it wouldn’t have happened, but I didn’t, and that was in my favour.

Dyslexia was first brought to my attention following a basic screening I attended at Stockport College in the year 2000 while on the BTEC. In 2002 in my first year on the BA Moving Image Design course at Ravensbourne institute, the institute sent me to an independent Psychologist to perform a full assessment to evaluate my learning difficulties. It was at this point I was professionally diagnosed with moderate to severe Dyslexia and Irlen Syndrome. You would think being professionally assessed and being diagnosed with moderate to severe Dyslexia, would have been an empowering time in my life, and for a moment it was (knowing the reasons for my difficulties in the traditional educational system), unfortunately that empowerment was snatched away by the report that followed the assessment.

My own experience, being diagnosed with dyslexia did not help, in fact the report reduced me into a mere formula, ‘Vincent cannot do A, so he cannot do x’. I found it interesting that a psychologist spends no more than 3 hours with you, while doing a series of reductionary tests that highlight the severity of your learning abilities (only). My report was 9 pages, and it had a range of statements in it like this.

‘Even without the presence of dyslexia Vincent would find a degree course very challenging. His Vocabulary and Similarities scores are average ones, and the language of both lectures and textbooks assumes an above average level of verbal ability. It may therefore be that a HND course may be more appropriate and Vincent was asked to bear this in mind if he finds his current degree course, even with suitable support, too demanding. Vincent’s levels of reading and spelling, allied with a very weak working memory, point toward failure on written assignments without appropriate support and teaching and assessment accommodations’.

It is not that I disagree with the statement, it’s the point that the report made my tutors at Ravensbourne Institute question my ability to complete the moving image design course. Consequently, a meeting was called with several staff and myself to discuss the report and my ‘options’. In short, directly due to the report, they had decided that I should no longer continue with the BA course, and I should now look for a HND course. Is that a helpful outcome for any young person with dyslexia? What the reports fails to highlight or take into consideration is one’s imagination, creativity or sheer determination to go beyond what is needed or expected to succeed.

What the psychologist, the tutors and the institute did not know, throughout my primary and secondary experiences, I was pushed pillow to post, and year after year I did not learn and become confident in any aspect of my life due to mainstream thinking in education. But, I was no longer a child, nor an unconfident young adult who could be pushed around. I told my tutors in no uncertain terms, that I was not leaving the course, and even if it meant me retaking my first year, to get to the standard “I” feel confident at, that is what will happen, and nothing less. True to my word, I retook the first year, on the BA course, at the dismay of my tutors. The BA course took me four years to complete. If there is one way to motivate young determined dyslexic student, tell them they cannot succeed.

Rethinking Myself

Is it enough just being diagnosed with dyslexia? Is it a comprehensive approach to just identifying the difficulties to dyslexics will encounter due to the “disability”, and even if you are diagnosed and told what the difficulties will be, is that still enough?

Going back into education was a difficult act, specially starting on a BTEC course which was for 16 year olds, and I was 20 years old. 10 years later after beginning the BTEC at 30 years old, I began a PhD programme of investigation. After dealing with dyslexia for 26 years of my life, through primary, secondary, and a destructive time between 16 and 19 years old, to enrolling on a PhD, I still did not understand what and how dyslexia works. Therefore, I did not know who I was, but that was about to change.

I had an Epiphany when I met Dr David Haley (artist and academic), he was the appointed Director of Study for my PhD programme of investigation, and now good friend, and someone I own so much too, I will forever be in his debt. I will always remember the day and moment I met David. We met to discuss the PhD programme. I have always been very open about my ‘learning difficulties’ so I had a book prepared, so I could read out loud to David, with the aim to illustrate to him, my lack of reading ability.
I started to read to him, well, tried, 3 or 4 sentences in, David lent over, pushed his hand down on the book, then sat back, and gently said, do you realise that you’re a ‘system thinker’? The conversation we engaged in after his statement changed everything. David for the first time in my life, did not see the person in front of him as someone with a disability, but someone who see’s and interacts with the world in a diverse & holistic way, he called me a; whole system practitioner. The first hour I spent with David changed the rest of my life.

Dyslexics are not just futurist, they are the future.

What did David see in me that no one did before, and what did his knowledge and perspective give me. His insight and imagination gave a positive way of understanding my so-called disability, he gave me a platform to grow from. David provided a theory of knowledge, especially regarding the methods I intrinsically use to interact with the world.

I began to read about how the dyslexic brain works, how whole system thinkers think, how generalist see subjects. Dyslexics, system thinkers and generalists are all right brain thinkers. They all see, think and process information in wholes, images, therefore, they do not use a step-by-step method to reach a conclusion. Understanding the way, my brain thought about the world, knowing that you know, knowing that you think in a holistic, joining up method is a very exciting place to be.

Questioning how one thinks and why is a powerful tool, it supports the distinction between you and others (non-dyslexics), and the important of my own perception in the world. This gave me a huge sense of new confidence, maybe like the kind of confidence that Batman has, it brought a smile to my face, I was laughing, laughing like a clown. I now understand, as an academic, I’m not just dyslexic, but a generalist, that has developed a system thinking approach to my practice.

‘Generalists, are those very rare individuals who have the capacity to bring together many aspects and branches of the intelligence problem and organization, and wish to do so’ (CIA).

The Inevitable:
I would suggest that dyslexics are professionals in hyper-connectivity, making new connection and insights that most don’t, we make new perspectives by bring new parts, that create new wholes. We understand that innovation in universities tend to happen in the gaps between disciplines, we can make long-connections between research and industry activities. We understand that density and diversity, diversity of minds, density of people is a formula to drive new ideas across sectors and markets, but more importantly, we know wholes and more many parts, the hive is more than the sum of bees, the biosphere is more than the sum of living organisms, technology more than the 15 billion devices. This perspective, that whole system practitioners, generalists, i.e., Dyslexics, have a unique skill set to make long-connection across, between and beyond disciplines, sectors, markets, is also hinted at in the new report by Made by Dyslexia by founder Kate Griggs – [mention in ‘Dyslexia is in the air’ (18/52)]. After twenty years of wishing I was not dyslexic, now I am so proud of the fact.

In the future, everything will be one, very large complex thing. This is the time when biological and technology infrastructure linked together on a planetary scale. We have 15 billion devices wired up to one giant circuit that already exceeds our brains in complexity (www/Internet of things), and it’s doubling every few years. Therefore, whole system practitioners, generalists, dyslexics will be major actors in the future, connecting the dots & bots across and beyond planetary scale activities. Dyslexics are not just futurists, they are the future.

A huge thank you to Vincent!
A year in the life of The Dyslexic Professor

Guest Blog: ‘Reflections from Thick to Dyslexic Lecturer 1’ (21/52)

A recently retired lecturer reflects on their journey from school, where they were labelled as ‘thick’, to being a dyslexic lecturer, where they were not really labelled as anything. Both presented their own challenges. In part 1, we see the painful reality of the move from school through university.

Reflections on Thick to Dyslexic Lecturer Part 1:

I am now in my early sixties and have never been asked to review my experience of living with dyslexia; so I am thankful (I think) for Nigel giving me this opportunity to write about my experience. At this point I have no idea what can of worms I am about to open! I have spent much of my life in academia and have had to struggle with my dyslexia on a daily basis.

This is my personal reflections on the past and may well be different from other people’s view of events as mine is coloured by considerable emotion. As you look back you see events from a different and perhaps a more informed position.

I was diagnosed as being dyslexic at the age of 11 in the first year of High School. At that time the 11 plus was still in fashion and I had been coached by my father to make sure I got into High School as he was determined I was not going to the secondary modern school. This was the only time my father coached me, or put me under this kind of direct pressure to achieve in school. At this time, I was very unhappy and at times would not go to school. Previously, I had enjoyed Primary School and had not objected to going to Junior School although the weekly spelling test had become a nightmare where I had to go over the spellings every night at home until I got most of them right, but was always in the bottom one or two and had been labelled as thick. It was at Junior School where I was first told that I was officially different and classifiable; this was by the boy who sat next to me in class he told me I was word blind! He had told his mother about me and how I was in class and she had told him I was word blind or dyslexic! Fantastic how a 9-year-old child who is your friend and in your class can see things that teachers can’t! I would have only been 9 or 10 at this point.

Things came to a head in the High School as I would be sent to school and return shortly afterward complaining of stomach ache and I achieved the remarkable score of 0% in the Latin exam, it was this remarkable score that made the school take notice as apparently this was a first for them! It was my mother who took up the challenge and made the school call in an educational psychologist. I can still remember parts of that day and the tests that I undertook. In one of the tests I had completed the task and was looking around the room, the person who was running the test told me to get on with it and I said I had finished he was taken aback that I had finished so I guess we are all good at some things.

The school had to accept that I was different and they were going to make sure I knew it and so did everyone else. I had no longer to take Latin but had to sit at the back to the class and be quiet and behave. This was announced to the whole class and was quickly a hot topic of conversation amongst the boys; how to get out of the hated Latin classes. This was the only ‘help’ the school would or did give. The other idea given by the physiologist was that I was taught to ‘touch type’, luckily for me my parents were reasonably well off and paid for private lessons after school. The idea was that as you learnt to copy type you would use a different part of your brain. For me this was the start of a new era, my writing went from, ‘we can’t read it’ to ‘your spelling is terrible’. Luckily my father changed jobs and we moved from Stoke-on-Trent to Manchester.

My new school in Manchester was a Grammar School (not ‘the’ Grammar School), This was much better and forward thinking where each subject was setted from 1 to 4 and I even got special help with my English. Still my most vivid memory is spellings in class where each person had to spell a random word given to them by the English teacher, I never got the word right and it became an amusement to the class the ticking started as soon as my name was called out, it felt like being asked to stand up to be laughed at.

At this point in time technology came to my rescue, this was the start of computers and we were allowed a calculator in class (if your parents would buy you one) and then spell-checkers came along. There was even a version that took account of dyslexia, of course you had to know you didn’t know how to spell the word [in my case just about every word] and you had to know how the word started, in some cases a hopeless task, this is exactly the same problem with using a dictionary. Despite this I managed to jump the academic hoops, with scrapped knees at times, getting a place at university.

University was much more accepting and little comment was made. My dyslexia only came up on two occasions. The first time was when the university did some kind of survey on dyslexia and the university did not have a problem with dyslexia as out of its over 7000 + students there were only 2 students registered with dyslexia [1 in 10 people are dyslexic]. I know this as I and the other student were taken out for lunch in celebration! Nothing else was done. In my third year one of my tutors took me aside to suggest to me that he thought that I might be dyslexic.

Later in life I completed two Teacher Training courses, one at a Further Educational establishment and one at another University no comment was made in either case. This I am not surprised at as technology had moved on from spell checkers to computers that check your spelling and grammar and all work, by then, had to be completed on a computer i.e. type written.

I feel I was very lucky that I had my parents support and they had the money to do something when the schools wouldn’t. Despite that I know the traumatisation and the lack of self-confidence created in school has stayed with me throughout my life.

By a strange quick of circumstance, I found myself teaching. I never expected it to be a career move, but and after the initial shock many teachers go through, I found I enjoyed being on the other side of the desk.

Not much sign of a dyslexic advantage yet.

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Guest Blog: ‘Reflections from Thick to Dyslexic Lecturer 2’ (22/52)

Part 2 of the Guest Blog (Part 1) from a recently retired lecturer, considers the implications and adaptations required to survive in academia. What is immediately evident, at least to me, is the resilience which shines through and together with the personal support from family members demonstrates how a Lecturer with dyslexia can prosper.

Reflections on Thick to Dyslexic Lecturer Part 1:

When entering the world of employment being dyslexic and not being able to spell was always a problem and a point of contention, but when I became a lecturer in an Agricultural college the position changed and you were checking the English of the students. This set-up a new challenge, how not to spell everything wrong on the board!

The solutions were relatively simple:

1. I was lucky that overhead projectors were the in thing by then and in many ways better for teaching than the fancy electronic boards of today; but they gave the same advantage computers do today in that you presented pre-prepared notes to the students, but all these had to be hand written. So, in the first year of teaching every night was spent writing notes having the spelling checked by my wife and then copying them out by hand onto acetate sheets. At times, I even had my wife copying out notes onto OHP sheets for me. If I had not had my wife to check my spelling I do not know what I would have done! The last thing you want as a new teacher is spelling mistakes every were on your work.

2. Photocopying was not a common thing and hand outs were rare and very special so these were limited to diagrams and tables of information; so these had very little spelling/writing and the information was often taken from another source which meant the spelling had already been checked. (Bonus!)

3. Student participation was seen as a good thing so getting students out to the front of the class to take turns in writing on the board was seen as a positive thing! (Double Bonus!)

As soon as I was confident in front of classes and this took a couple of years teaching, I found that being completely honest with the students was usually a good thing, they knew when it was not my hand writing on an OHP sheet. The solution was to tell them that I was dyslexic this was always accepted without a problem and it even made some of the students more comfortable in my classes and for some it even gave them encouragement.

The staff on the other hand were completely the opposite, firstly I could not be dyslexic as someone with dyslexia could not be bright enough to be a teacher and if I was it was morally wrong for someone like that to be a teacher. I learnt to tell the students but to keep it from my colleagues! I even got to the point of telling parents and potential students at interview (when I was Head of Department) that we did our best for dyslexic students and gave what help we could and that in fact I understood, as I was dyslexic. The relief in the potential student and particularly the parents was palpable. The down side was I was told I was going over budget in student support and this was not fair or appropriate and I should reduce the demand for this from my department!

You would expect things to improve but some 15 years after starting teaching (in the 1990’s), in a senior staff meeting including the Principle and a few other not worthy individuals, my line manager accused me of being dyslexic as a put down “any one would think you were dyslexic”. I informed him that indeed I was and that if he did his job properly and read his staff files he would in fact know this! There was deadly silence, the principle restarted the meeting without comment and the matter was never alluded to again. My line manager never spoke to me about it and acted as if nothing had happened. He was not disciplined over the matter or given any pointers over the matter, I was an anomaly and this problem of a dyslexic teacher would never appear again!

Things improved with the use of computers and spell checks; such a fantastic improvement! Soon we will be able to talk into a microphone and the computer will fill the screen with your words. I have tried several times with current software but without success, I know some people have found software that works for them, so it can’t be far away for all of us to have software that can read and write for us if we have the means to buy the new software; the same applies to dictionaries that are not limited to words in common use. Some of the time delay maybe down to management who do not see the importance of these steps forward in technology.; but the future is bright!

The down side is that the less you use your English skill the worse they get, practice does help!!!

Being dyslexic has had a profound effect on me from the time I had to go to school and be judged (aged 4 & 3/4). I am disabled and have been so since I was about 30 getting worse until I retired on the grounds of ill health; I was seen as disabled for only the last 5 years of my working life although my physical disability had stopped me from doing certain tasks at work for 20 years. Being dyslexic was never seen as a disability. Being dyslexic has had a much greater effect on me than the mobility problems which I encounter.

There are positive attributes to being dyslexic you learn to develop coping strategies and how to problem solve very early in life. You learn how to stand up for yourself. There are aspects where having a dyslexic brain helps; you can see the big picture and find a way through the maze, but you need to be a master in diplomacy. Being in a meeting and finding the solution to a problem in 3 minutes which has taken your boss 3 weeks to find, does not go down very well.

Having to stand up for yourself and work hard to overcome a difficulty can build up your resilience; this strength can be very useful in many aspects of life.

Dyslexics, with the use of new technology and better understanding by the public, should find it easier to rise to the level where their planning, problem solving and strategic competency skills can be brought to the fore.

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What can we do to help? Tell our story, perhaps offer a long-distance mentoring. Real change will only happen when people understand disability and what it means. You can have a disability and never be disabled by it because you never encounter situations where the disability comes into play. You can have a disability that affects you all the time. The more of the time a disability affects you the more impact it has on your life, it is not just a bout severity although the level is also very important.

A person who is permanently in a wheelchair faces many physical and mobility difficulties every day, many of these can be reduced or removed by planning and changes to the environment. If they work at a desk perhaps at a call centre their disability can be negated while at work if sufficient care is given to the environment. This level of attention is just beginning to appear for these people.

As language is critical at all times in our modern society and there are no longer thousands of factory jobs where those who find language difficult can work, it is critical that dyslexia is given the same standing as other disabilities and it is recognised very early on in life. It is understood that language skills are established in children at a very early age, the first 2 or 3 years of life, we could think of teaching children more than one language and include a language which is basically phonetic. Strangely even English elocution lessons would be a massive help as then spell-checkers stand a chance.

There are many solutions out there and we are all individuals and we have to work out our own strategies but with modern technology the future is brighter than it has ever been!!!

A huge thank you too another dyslexic blogger!
There’s going public about dyslexia and there’s GOING PUBLIC! (23/52)

We all know that any post on social media is public – but how many people actually read our blogs? The answer is, that depends how many followers (and follower’s followers) you have and whether your blogs contain anything offensive, funny or illegal! Understandably, at least so far, my digital impact has been somewhat limited.

Perhaps this is all about to change. And, if it does, what are the implications for me?

This week, the Times Higher Education (THE) decided to publish a series of articles about Disability on Campus and ‘first up’ was: ‘I have decided to go public as the Dyslexic Professor’! Of course, THE has a far greater reach than I do. Proof of the pudding came pretty quickly …

My post on LinkedIn citing the article has already had over 1,500 views – compared to the normal less than 50. In addition, THE (@timeshighered) has 234K followers on Twitter and posted a tweet on 14th May.

Perhaps more meaningfully, at least for me, is the number of direct emails from colleagues in universities. They broadly fall into two camps …

1. I’m also a dyslexic academic but have not felt able to declare this to my university and even less so declare it publicly.
2. I’m an academic or professional and don’t have dyslexia but one of my children or siblings does.

I was expecting the former and feel gratified for going public. However, I hadn’t expected the latter. In all cases the personal stories are both moving and shocking. We really have designed an educational system that rewards fine detail thinking and doesn’t just ignore big picture thinking but tries to crush it! The personal trauma is life-long and painful memories are just below the surface.

So, what next?

• I will (increasingly with the help of my guest bloggers – please do feel free to join us) keep blogging with a target of reaching 52 post by 5th October – World dyslexia awareness day.
• Look for groups to support: Dyslexia Champions, Made by Dyslexia
• Consider bringing a small group together to arrange a gathering of academics and professionals in universities with dyslexia. Of course, this could provide a peer-support network but also agree some actions that could persuade the higher education sector that dyslexia is not a difficulty or even a difference but actually a superpower!
Back on the [Dyslexic] road again ... (24/52)

After a fabulous response to the THE Disability on Campus: ‘I have decided to go public as the Dyslexic Professor’ article and a house move, I am now back to blogging on being the Dyslexic Professor or in the words of REO Speedwagon (3:10) ...

Reflecting on the numerous responses from the THE article, I am conscious of a number of themes – some ‘I am also dyslexic’ or more ‘I have a friend/child’ who is dyslexic and, interestingly, I am now getting a few ‘I had no idea’ and “thank you!’ From these, I conclude that academics know people with dyslexia or have children with dyslexia, that dyslexia can be hidden (I would argue that technology has helped considerably with this) and either there aren’t many academics with dyslexia or, if there are, they are not comfortable disclosing it – even to the Dyslexic Professor!

Regarding the latter or ‘Invisible Dyslexic’, I wonder if the exception that proves the rule is: a colleague who having had a public and painful reminder of their dyslexia when being required to read out in public, contacted me for support. They felt unsupported at the time and criticised. At no point in their career had they disclosed their ‘disability’.

I’m really not sure where we go next. Technology is undoubtedly helping dyslexic academics enter the profession. However, this keeps their dyslexia hidden and leaves them anxious of exposure at any point. Having been in this position until the start of these The Dyslexic Professor blogs, I can fully understand this anxiety.

Of course, one answer is to disclose dyslexia. However, this may not be plain sailing – ‘I’ve finally admitted that I’m a dyslexic academic – and I’m terrified’ (19 February 2016) from the Guardian’s Higher Education Network Academics Anonymous series.

At least for me, this brings it back to the real shift that is required ...

Dyslexia is not a disability, or even a difference but rather an advantage or, in my words, a superpower!

Tantalisingly close to The Dyslexic Professor half-way point ... (25/52)

Yes, this is the penultimate blog to The Dyslexic Professor half-way point! Of course, I will reserve the 26/52 (or 50%) blog for some, no doubt, profound reflective insights ...

So, I will restrict myself to the mundane.

Firstly, I have updated the, type in Google “[University name] support for dyslexic students” league table that is complimented by the 10/52 blog. For me the top 4 sites were:

- University of the Arts, London
- Bangor University
- Falmouth University with links to specialist ‘Inclusive Learning’ website
- University of Strathclyde

Secondly, Strathclyde usefully link to some informative videos:
The True Gifts of a Dyslexic Mind (2015) by Dean Bragonier
What is dyslexia? (2013) by Kelli Sandman-Hurley

There are others:
What Is Dyslexia? (2017) by Margie Gillis

Dyslexia and the Brain (2016) by Guinevere Eden
4 Lessons in Creativity (2012) by Julie Burstein with Richard Ford (05:58)
Dyslexia Superpower: Seismic Shift (26/52 or 50%)
To be honest, I never thought I would reach the half-way point. I think there are three main reasons (why always three?!) I have got this far:
1. Readers’ engagement
2. Guest bloggers
3. A growing, and a rather worrying tendency, for self-actualisation!

Yes, readers’ engagement is definitely numero uno – No.1

I have been so surprised at the number of people prepare to ‘like’ and even ‘comment’ on the LinkedIn posts and contact me directly – particularly after the THE Disability on Campus: I have decided to go public as the Dyslexic Professor article. Thank you to one and all – and please keep commenting and sharing.

I secured two guest bloggers – Dr Vincent Walsh (one & two) and Anonymous Thick Lecturer (one & two). These have helped broaden the discussion, reaffirm the challenge and helped share the load. So, thank you both and please contact me if you want to write a guest blog.

I know it sounds a bit ridiculous that, why at the age of nearly 55, writing a blog exposing and explaining my deeply personal experiences of dyslexia and being a dyslexic academic (the Dyslexic Professor no less!) could be so empowering for me – self-actualisation. But, it has and I’m very glad to have ‘come out’ as a dyslexic.

So, what next?

Well it’s time for a seismic (try dropping that into a conversation!) shift in the editorial tone of the next 26 blogs. I’m going to entitle each future post – Dyslexia Superpower:

Why?

Because it’s time to move away from positioning dyslexia as a disability, or even a difference, and move to advantage or in my words superpower! I will be looking out for examples to support each blog – the next blog, Dyslexia Superpower: The System Entrepreneur 27/52, will be the first. Do share any stories of Dyslexia Superpower – I need the inspiration.

But, I am not alone:
• 21st Century Superpower – amazing video
• Dyslexia Advantage – great book
• Made by Dyslexia – good report & great Dyslexic Sperm Bank video
Also, their latest video with Jamie Oliver
Dyslexia Superpower: The System Entrepreneur (27/52)
The mission of the RSA (Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce), of which I am a member (more on that in the next blog), is to enrich society through ideas and action and their journal often includes suitably thought-provoking articles.

In 2017 Issue 1, Ian Burbidge argues for way to tackle the challenges faced by our public services is ‘to think like a system and act like an entrepreneur’. (Matthew Taylor (RSA Chief Executive) made a similar point in his 21st Century Enlightenment Revisited (2016) and System Thinking and Entrepreneurial Action (2017) articles). This is predicated on the sometimes unexpected consequences of shocks to society – or in system-talk, emergent properties. He gives the example of an increase in community spirit after a disaster and concludes that we need to recognise the inherent complexity of our world and develop an understanding of the bigger picture – of course, he really means big picture thinking (See – Time to see Dyslexia as a Superpower?) and seek flexible interactive responses which pinpoint and pursue opportunities – of course, he really means entrepreneurial thinking. Hence the think like a system and act like an entrepreneur.

For me, this all points to the value of big picture thinking so evident in dyslexics and it is no surprise to me that entrepreneurial thinking should also be highlighted. Both, are matters close to my heart.

Firstly, we now know the brain of dyslexics are different (see – The Dyslexic Brain: Words, words, everywhere). This big picture thinking is a function of a cortex structure – more precisely long axons and loose minicolumns, which slows down processing.

Secondly, there are a disproportionately high number of entrepreneurs who are dyslexic – 35% of US and 19% of UK entrepreneurs are dyslexic (see – Julie Logan’s ‘Dyslexic Entrepreneurs: The Incidence; Their Coping Strategies and Their Business Skills’ (2009) paper).

In Louise Tickle’s Guardian article (2015) she asks, ‘Dyslexic entrepreneurs – why they have a competitive edge?’ and cites Lord Sugar, Anita Roddick, Richard Branson, Jamie Oliver and Ingvar Kamprad (Ikea founder). In relation to the RSA article, she highlights the importance a dyslexia-friendly working environment. More specifically, Sharon Hewitt and Hugh Robertson, who are both dyslexic, were determined to create these in their own companies – Chiltern Relocation and RPM respectively.

So, whilst agreeing that to solve big societal problems we need to think like a system and act like an entrepreneur, I can’t think of a better place to start than enabling dyslexics to develop their full ‘big picture thinking’ skills and additionally recognising there could be a direct link between dyslexia and entrepreneurial thinking. If true, let’s have schools, colleges and universities prioritising big picture thinking and workplaces fit for a dyslexic!
Guest blog: Time to rethink dyslexia – ability not disability? (28/52)

I am delighted to be sharing this insightful blog from Victoria Tomlinson of Northern Lights PR. Two things immediately strike me about Victoria’s insightful blog. Firstly, her surprise, as a non-dyslexic, on learning that respected people in her network and client base are dyslexic and, secondly, that these individuals, with hidden dyslexia, stand out as having strategic thinking capabilities. At the end of her blog, her growing frustration of our educational and recruitment systems are palpable.

Guest blog by Victoria Tomlinson Time to rethink dyslexia – ability not disability?

Until four years ago my understanding of dyslexia was limited. The little I knew was gained from seeing friends of my children given extra time for exams, reading a few articles and hearing the despair of parents who were trying to help their children read or organise their lives.

The last few years have entirely changed my view of dyslexia. I am still no expert but I am left bemused as to why we call dyslexia a ‘disability’ and why our education system tries to shoe-horn everyone into tiny boxes that only suit a few. It seems to me we are missing out on huge talents.

So what changed four years ago?

A very senior and respected professional asked me to help them with their personal branding – to position them for non-executive director positions, write their LinkedIn profile and biographies and give them a focus as they approached headhunters. I had sat on a board with this person for some years, so thought I knew them pretty well.

I didn’t. At our first meeting, they told me, ‘I am dyslexic, I don’t want to talk about this openly, but what it means is I am an extraordinary problem solver. I seem to be able to look at problems really differently from most people and work out how to solve them, often in minutes. My career has been built on trouble-shooting.’

I was dumb-founded but so much suddenly became clear. They had often sent emails of one or two words which sometimes felt brusque if not rude. Some odd mannerisms now became understandable. And I could pin-point how they had done just this trouble-shooting for our own board, but we had not looked at it in that way.

The amount of work my business is doing with individual directors has grown in the last few years – similar work around personal branding, writing LinkedIn profiles and more. And I could not be more surprised at the number of senior people ‘coming out’ in my office and telling me they are also dyslexic but have never talked publicly about this.

And then earlier this year I read Nigel Lockett’s first blog as The Dyslexic Professor. He had come out.

I have known Nigel for ten years. He has been a client, he appointed me as chair of the advisory board at the University of Leeds, he has been a friend to our business and become a personal friend of mine. I call him one of life’s heroes. Until his article, I had no idea he was dyslexic.

But knowing he is dyslexic got me thinking. All these dyslexics are brilliant and quite outstanding in their fields. They are ‘successful’ by anyone’s standards and they all have something in common. They are innovative problem solvers – they look at the world differently, do things differently and create something very special in the process.

I mentioned some of this to another client recently and she suddenly said, “Oh yes, of course. My son is dyslexic. It’s a nightmare trying to get him through his schooling but at 15 he’s already got two businesses and they are doing well. He’s definitely an entrepreneur, he spots gaps and makes things happen.”

So as an outsider, I am looking at all this and thinking ‘why on earth do we call dyslexia a disability?’ Actually it is a huge ‘ability’ – but no-one is really tapping into this strength. What couldn’t they do to solve half our world’s problems if we only stopped wasting effort trying to straight jacket them into our dull, traditional expectations about reading and writing. Surely in this day and age, we can find a system that can educate these amazing people, but play to their strengths?

As I write this, two stories come to mind. The fantastic Sir Ken Robinson who gave a talk about education undermining creativity rather than nurturing it. I remember he talked about any parent who has two children will know they are completely different – yet come from the same parents, home environment, everything. So why do we force them to be the same through our schooling system? This talk has had 46 million views, yet still nothing changes.
And the other story was about Renee Carayol, a motivational speaker.

The story I remember is when he was working for a global corporate and was top salesman by a mile, year after year. Yet – year after year – in his appraisal his bosses would focus on the areas he was weakest at and his development plans were all about how he could improve these. Never once, he said, did anyone talk about his extraordinary success and discuss how to make more of this or pass it on to others!

All this has left me thinking. Our education system needs overhauling, top to bottom – I know, nothing revolutionary in that. But also, shouldn’t businesses, governments and higher education be actively looking for dyslexic talent to be the innovative and trouble-shooting wisdom we need for the future? Should we specify dyslexia as a key attribute for some of our top jobs?

This final point resonates well with an earlier blog – Vacancy: Dyslexics need only apply.
Dyslexia Superpower: Is EdTech missing an opportunity? (29/52)

Just how many ‘...techs’ can we cope with? BioTech (Biotechnology businesses) FinTech (financial technology businesses) and, the focus of this article, EdTech (education technology business). Apparently, the latter could grow from $75bn in 2014 to $120bn in 2019.

This week’s Economist leader, Brain gains, and feature, Technology is transforming what happens when a child goes to school, argue that education technology and teachers could revamp school and, more specifically, that this will require three things to be successful:

1. Edtech must be evidence-based (that is based on how children learn) and this needs to acknowledge the role of the teacher.
2. Edtech needs to narrow inequalities in the education system.
3. Edtech will only have an impact if teachers adopt it [I suppose 1. will help with this].

Perhaps not surprisingly, it cites many examples of learning facts and tutoring – such as Mindspark (India) with 45,000 questions generating 2 million answers a day; Geekie (Sao Paulo); DreamBox (US); Siyavula Practice (South Africa). I can see the huge advantage for maths, science and fact-based subjects.

Of course, as The Dyslexic Professor, I’m just as interested in how EdTech can support learning of languages and to engage with language. I’ll come back to this in a moment.

What struck me, whilst reading the article, was the number of education technology entrepreneurs I knew personally. This is even more surprising when you realise I’m not that well networked and haven’t been specifically looking for them! I will share four with you:

1. Amazing Twinkl – co-founded by Jonathan Seaton – probably the leading online provider of learning resources to teachers across the globe.
2. Explosive Webanywhere – founded by Sean Gilligan – spans both corporates and schools with their global e-learning platform.
3. Innovative Synap – co-founded by James Gupta – a rapidly emerging online platform for creating, practicing and distributing educational quizzes.
4. Wordy Wmatrix – lead by Paul Rayson – a truly innovative online tool for mapping and comparing large bodies of text to help find meaning.

Of course, it’s the online nature of each of these that unites them but also the deep knowledge and commitment of the founders.

Now, back to my hobby horse, how EdTech can support engaging with language – and for dyslexics in particular. A Google search on ‘dyslexia educational software for adults’ results in relevant adverts for:

- Dragon Dyslexia Solutions
- Dyslexia Intervention Software

Then links to:

- Dyslexia.com (Iansyst) – suppliers of assistive technology products and services
- British Dyslexia Association – educational software partners
- Inclusive Technology – dyslexia software

There is also the British Dyslexia Association’s New Technologies Committee website that lists a wide range of assistive technologies under:

- Spellcheckers
- Prediction
- Text to speech and e-books
- Speech Recognition
- Organisation aids
- Mind maps

For me as an adult dyslexic engaging in the workplace I particularly rely on prediction tools such as:

- Penfriend
- Co:Writer – I haven’t used this product but it looks comprehensive.
- ClaroRead – I use the version for Apple Mac. I’ve even done a product review!
- Read & Write Gold

So, The Economist is right to highlight the growing market for EdTech and this applies equally to assistive technologies for dyslexics. I can also see how recommendations 1 (evidence-based) and 2 (narrowing inequalities) are relevant. But, what about teachers?

How can we expect busy teachers to gain the insights they need and, perhaps even more importantly, identify the learners that need the support? Remember, an individual test for dyslexia can cost over £500 and over £700 by an Educational Psychologist (see BDA). There are also a number of online test costing between £20 & £50 (see BDA).

Given that eyesight tests are free for children, why isn’t this also true for dyslexia?
Dyslexia Superpower: 50% of Africans live in areas without adequate water (30/52)
No, I’m not claiming that dyslexia is directly relevant to tackling the big challenge that 50 percent of Africans live in areas without adequate water – this will be 800 million people by 2025.

However, as The Dyslexic Professor, I am extremely pleased to be part of the team at Lancaster University that has just announced a £6.8M RECIRCULATE project to focus on "joining up" the different ways in which water supports communities, from sewage disposal to energy generation and water used in food production. It is based on the co-creation of solutions with leading researchers in Ghana and Nigeria in the first phase and the second phase bringing in partners from Malawi, Kenya, Botswana and Zambia. Interestingly, it is part of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) a £1.5B fund announced by the UK Government in late 2015. It has been specially designed to stimulate research on the challenges faced by developing countries.

For me, it’s a great example of big picture thinking in action. Yes, I do mean big – it will probably be the highest value research project I will ever be a co-investigator on! But, I really mean big in terms of complexity. I’m co-leading the work on entrepreneurship, innovation and knowledge exchange, which seats at the heart of this four-year project.

But why is this so important?

The Lancaster University’s award-winning Centre for Global Eco-Innovation, is quite literally full of bright scientists who are working across a number of areas related to water. The project brings four of these together (Energy; Food; Pathogens; Sanitation) and using the expertise on entrepreneurial learning in the Lancaster University Management School works to develop capacity in Ghana and Nigeria and develop the water economy. This means bringing together all the stakeholders – including entrepreneurs to co-create and take solutions to market.

Talking of the Centre for Global Eco-Innovation, you might remember me working with some of their PhD students ...

The full video of Stimulating Entrepreneurial Thinking in Scientists programme:

My quote for the press release states: ‘Our goals are clear – to grow capacity and capability in Africa’s eco-innovation community. We are in no doubt that co-creating sustainable and scalable solutions together will be hard but the rewards of success to the people of Africa will be huge.’

Now, all we have to do is deliver!
Dyslexia Superpower: Know your superpower and World Around Me (31/52)
Following on from Victoria Tomlinson’s guest blog: ‘Time to rethink dyslexia – ability not disability?’ (28/52) and Sarah Robinson’s TED Talk: ‘How I fail at being disabled’, I thought I should explore further the notion of dyslexia as a superpower before giving an example of big picture thinking.

Sarah Robinson proposes five tips for how to fail at being disabled:
1. Know your superpowers
2. Be supremely skilled at getting it wrong
3. Know that everyone is disabled in some way
4. Point out the disability in others
5. Pursue audacious goals

Particularly relevant to dyslexics is, ‘Know your superpowers’ [at 02:21] because big picture thinking could indeed be a significant superpower prevalent in dyslexics.

Imagine if our education system, having firstly screened (free of charge) all children for Dyslexia, provided support not just to engage in language but also develop their emerging big picture thinking into a superpower. If nothing else, it would move the agenda away from disability!

Tarun Sainani, a former student and founder of WT InfoTech – the company behind the World Around Me (WAM) App. To the best of Tarun’s knowledge, he is not dyslexic – but, at least in my opinion, possesses big picture thinking and, what’s more, has developed an App that embodies this thinking and, wait for it ..., invented a new word! Wamification.

Tarun explains wamification in his press release announcing the partnership in Genova, in Italy, and a BBC radio interview [for definition of wamming see 05:40]. Genova seems to be a sweet spot for the WAM App, which overlays information on a phones camera. Imagine arriving in a strange city looking for an Mexican restaurant, city art gallery or a place of worship. Hold up your phone, activate your camera and the image now includes relevant places of interest – then click on one to find out more. No more exiting a tube/metro station not knowing which direction to travel!
And, what about World Around Me (WAM)?

In May 2016, WAM was selected as one of only ten apps for outstanding achievements as part of the inaugural Google Play Awards! And, the last time I spoke to Tarun he was flying off to another city looking to enhance their visitor experience.

STOP PRESS In December 2017, Google Play selected WAM as one of five Most Innovative Apps.
Most Innovative

Interactive new ways of budgeting time and money, helping others, and experiencing the world around us.

1. Pokemon

Pod expansion everywhere – including the world around you. With the launch of "Luna," Pokemon’s newest search tool, you can now research, organize, and share items of interest without leaving the virtual world.

2. BookFlicks

Movies, TV, Plays

From just another video streaming app, BookFlicks has transformed itself into a complete entertainment platform, offering movies, series, and plays via a simple interface, providing both music and podcasts.

3. Tic - A new payments app by Google

No devices on the go? No problem. Simply use your voice. This unique wallet feature enables mobile payments without the need to share numbers, and can also send and receive money through instant messaging.

4. Biographist

A journal to keep on the go! Designed for digital and augmented reality features, from "Sky-Finders" and environment-based 3D holograms to digital art installations.

5. World Around Me

From augmented reality and virtual reality, World Around Me ensures that you will never be away from something you want - a restaurant, a pet store, or even a cup of coffee. "You can find it in the app in front of your eyes!"
Dyslexia Nightmare Fortnight: GSCE and A-level Results (32/52)

Quite rightly, we now have numerous ‘awareness weeks’, with our very own Dyslexia Awareness Week in October, which celebrate ‘good causes’. However, at least in the case of dyslexia, we have other weeks in the year which are particularly significant.

In fact, I would argue that for people with dyslexia in the UK, it’s a particular fortnight each August – the two sequential weeks that start with A-level results and ends, the following week, with GSCE results day. Of course, there are other exam results days but these are big two and attract all the media attention – such as:

- A-level – Guardian results day
- GSCE – Telegraph results day

So, why are these important and how are they linked to dyslexia? (or the Dyslexia Nightmare Fortnight!)

You may recall that myself and guest bloggers commented on the experience of compulsory education in emotional terms: failure or labelled stupid (The Dyslexic Professor, Vincent Walsh). For most of us this sense of failure is personified by GSCE, and if we got that far, A-level results days.

Leah Jacobs, a 31 year old undiagnosed dyslexic, puts it simply – ‘I felt like the world was telling me that I was stupid’ in the Guardian’s ‘A-level students whose results were a lesson in life’

I think it has something to do with the public nature of it all – the list of results posted on the noticeboard, the envelope distributed in the school hall or text which you are expected to share. For those who have been recognised as dyslexic and had extra tutoring or support it might be mitigated but for the undiagnosed dyslexic there is no lifeline – the storm of unmet expectations that turn a glorious extended summer holiday into a nightmare fortnight. The pressure to respond pragmatically to this underachievement is overwhelming and leads to rushed decisions, make with all good intent, to change well made plans: ‘Don’t worry there’s always Clearing’ or ‘Never mind you can go to college and resit’

But behind it all sits ‘failure’. One could also argue that this has been exacerbated by the recent changes to single point exams for both GSCEs and A-levels, which increase the pressure on students with dyslexia which results forced underperformance. Just another example for rewarding fine detailed thinking above big picture thinking.

But what happened Jack Horner’s results day? No, not Little Jack Horner but palaeontologist Jack Horner

See 0:23 ‘Dyslexia, Learning Differently, and Innovation’

Time to start a movement to reposition dyslexia as a superpower …

But where to start?
Dyslexia Superpower Toolkit 1: Rich pictures (33/52)

I first mentioned ‘big picture thinking’ in ‘Time to see Dyslexia as a Superpower?’ (3/52) and in ‘Stimulating Big Picture Thinking’ (11/52), which explained how to design a workshop to help develop this skill in environmental scientists. However, I thought it might be useful to explore one specific technique (tool) to help with this – rich pictures.

I first encountered rich pictures in 1998 as part of a lecture given by Professor Peter Checkland on Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). Just Google, ‘soft systems methodology rich picture’ to see lots of examples. I was captivated by SSM not particularly because of rich pictures, it is only one part of the approach, but because as a Managing Director of my own company I use to say, ‘We don’t have problems, we only have situations and every situation has a solution’. This was a simple way of empowering staff to pause for a moment when they encountered a problem [or situation!] to think about possible solutions before coming to me. It worked!

However, when using SSM to ‘take action to improve’ a situation, I came to value rich pictures as a way of improving my own understanding and engaging stakeholders to see the essence of a problem. Little did I know, that being dyslexic gave me a built-in head-start. Let me explain how it works in practice …

When I encounter a thorny issue, one that seems very difficult to crack, I take a piece of A4 plain paper and start to draw out the situation with the objective of condensing it all on to a single page (in landscape). It now takes me just two attempts – the first drawing to capture all the ingredients and the second to reshuffle items to make it simpler – I also use colour. I try to use as few words as possible. Once I am happy with it, I start to think about possible solutions.

This can be useful for helping me make decisions but the real power of rich pictures comes when you need to share a problem, when there are many views or it would just help to have other people’s opinions.

Something strange happens when you place a rich picture in the centre of a table with a few pens (preferably in different colours). I think because the picture is hand-drawn, people seem happy to add their own drawings, cross out, circle and write on it. It just seems to grow. This is really helpful because you get a better understanding (both what you have got right but also what is missing or contentious) and people feel their opinions matter and are more engaged. It’s important to remember, the rich pictures are just a ‘moment in time’ not a work of art!

I have started to scan rich pictures and email them to everyone after a meeting.
As part of writing this blog, I started to look through some of the more recent rich pictures with a view to sharing a few. However, I realised that they all contained sensitive information that couldn’t really be shared beyond the participants – an interesting observation in itself. So, in order to give you an example, I decided to draw (in 30 minutes) a rich picture of a more public thorny issue … The “e” rush to low pollution transport.

Perhaps you feel a strange urge to add your own highlights, images or words!
Dyslexia Superpower: Making grown people cry! (34/52)

What a good week! Apart from the namecheck in today’s FT.com article, ‘Inside the project to fix Britain’s low-performing businesses’, I’ve connected with four people who have reminded me that each of us with dyslexia and our supporters have their own personal [and more than likely moving] story to tell.

Firstly, my father read-through my now 33 posts as the Dyslexic Professor. Not only did it bring back memories for him and a chance to reflect on all those decisions made in the dark (we just didn’t know any better) but also allowed me to revisit that sense of failure the education system ingrained in me.

By the time I went to boarding school, aged 8, I was already struggling – a feeling only enhanced by homesickness. Interestingly, I recently returned to this school (now apartments for the over-60s) and walked by the classroom which did so much to reinforce my sense of failure. It’s hard not to feel a bit moved by that little person in grey shorts and long socks – although I’m pleased to see knitted ties are back in fashion!

Secondly, through the power of LinkedIn, I connected with Professor Tim Conway of the The Morris Center, which seeks to put into practice the learning from research-based evaluations and treatments of dyslexia. Tim sent me a link to a moving account of a parent struggling to find the best way to support their dyslexic son and illustrated the power of appropriate intervention.

And finally, the next two connections came as a pair. Following a recommendation from a University Vice-Chancellor who read my article in the Times Higher Education, ‘I have decided to go public as the Dyslexic Professor’, Rosa Weber and Sally Gardner made contact and we finally met this week. We all share a passion for moving the dyslexia agenda from a disability to a difference and ultimately a superpower! I think the best name for us is – dyslexia activists. Meeting with fellow activists is a simultaneously cathartic and empowering experience.

Sally’s personal story is moving and needs a separate blog (maybe even in her own words). Now a successful author [my summer holiday reading!], she is challenging the established thinking in schools and prisons. Rosa and Sally have founded an enterprise to take this agenda forward: NUword – imagining a world beyond the word dyslexia.

Imagine what could be achieved by an organisation full of dyslexia activists!

What could the collective noun for dyslexia activists be? Taking inspiration from Sally’s school and prison talks about dyslexia and her analogy to swans (quite rightly, Sally draws a picture of swans looking serene as they swim upriver but are, in fact, paddling furiously below the waterline), I wondered about:
• A ballet of swans
• A bank of swans
• A bevy of swans
• A drift of swans
• A eyrar of swans
• A flight of swans (flying)
• A flock of swans
• A game of swans
• A herd of swans
• A lamentation of swans
• A sownder of swans
• A squadron of swans
• A team of swans
• A wedge of swans
• A whiteness of swans
• A whiting of swans
(Source: http://www.animalsandenglish.com/swans.html)

Given the amount of discussion at our first meeting, I did wonder about a gaggle or flock of Dyslexia Activists!
Guest blog by Dr Julie Holland: Dyslexia Nightmare 2 (35/52)

You can’t beat a good horror story sequel!

To be honest Alien (1979) would have been quite an enough without Aliens (1986), Alien 3 (1992) and Alien Resurrection (1997) and prequels Prometheus (2012), Alien: Covenant (2017)

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Dr Julie Holland: Dyslexia Nightmare 2

Twice a year I get that sinking feeling! An email alert tells me that I’ve got three boxes of exam scripts to pick up. “You’ll need a trolley and you’ve got ten days” the administrator says. Sounds familiar? Yes of course it does but for the dyslexic academic marking coursework and examination scripts, particularly handwritten, can be one of the most stressful aspects of academic life. I often give myself a talking too. I imagine the students taking the exam. Their paper is so important to them personally, but when added anonymously to an ever-increasing pile of papers, it becomes just another number. I want to make sure that I consider each piece of work carefully but with shortening deadlines, I know that this will mean many hours of reading with inevitable fatigue that can’t be good for the student or my wellbeing.

Yes, it’s the same for all academics, but spare a thought for those with dyslexia. We want to give every paper our full attention but it will take us many more hours to mark papers than our non-dyslexic colleagues.

To be frank, I’ve tried all sorts of tricks to get through this essential academic task in order to meet the exam marking deadline. I’ve used a magnifying ruler given to me by a dyslexic friend, and a coloured transparent page to put on top of the script. Nothing has worked. In fact, it has slowed me down even more. I had to do something radical, and while a solution to my handwritten exam marking problems has yet to be found, I have at least found help with marking electronic documents.

A couple of years back, I was faced with the usual three boxes of pink examination papers. The first twenty scripts were in a special packet; those students tested by disability services and granted extra time. If only the dyslexic academics could get the same. So having spoken to one or two colleagues who I knew wouldn’t betray my secret, I gave the disability centre a ring. The answer was sympathetic but disappointing. ‘We only really provide help for students, not staff’ was their reply.

Undeterred, I decided to see what external help I could get. There must be technology available? I’d seen an MBA student, dictating to her computer using an app called Dragon. Perhaps this would help me write. I certainly don’t have any problems talking! Then there was software to help keep your eye in the right place. It helped, but how do you get through a 120 page masters project one word at a time? My technological saviour came in the shape of Read & Write, Gold, computer software developed to assist with reading and writing disabilities. It seemed at first to be predominantly aimed at children and students, but I found the trial really helpful particularly because the voice, while computerised, was of a very high quality. Although lacking the silky smooth tones of a BBC newsreader, I could actually listen to the voice for more than ten minutes without needing to take a break. Progress at last.

Read & Write is expensive, but it’s well worth the investment. I’m doing much better and although I only use the software for electronic documents, I use it for every aspect of my work from reading papers to reading email. In an environment when marking on line is becoming the norm, things are certainly looking up for this dyslexic academic. Perhaps one day, technology experts will create software that will turn every handwritten exam script into something that can be listened to. I expect that this software already exists and speaking to a research collaborator at IBM, I was assured that computers would soon be able to do the marking for us (Dr Watson, I presume!). I would also make a plea to university exams offices, departments and schools. Please spare a thought those of us who read at half the speed of our non-dyslexic colleagues and certainly ask the question of staff as well as students, confidentially of course...... ’Do you need more time during the exam period?’

Many thanks to Julie for sharing this challenge.
Dyslexia Superpower: Clearing the decks for creativity (36/52)

It’s clear that big picture thinking (visual thinking or creative thinking) is a prevalent skill in dyslexics (one of our superpowers) but how do you create the space for creativity?

This week, a couple of things have brought the need to clear space [clearing the decks!] for new projects and enable some creative thinking.

Firstly, Dr Michael Bloomfield’s article in Tuesday’s Guardian, ‘Forget about work and keep a dream diary: how to think creatively’, suggested: i) Relax and meditate, ii) Make time for undemanding physical tasks, iii) Practise connecting ideas, iv) Keep a dream diary.

No doubt we all have our own way of clearing space for creative thinking. For me, knowing I’m on top of my to-do-list helps me relax (i), striding alone on a familiar walk (ii) and drawing big pictures (iii). However, I’ve never tried keeping a dream diary (iv). In fact, I don’t seem to be able to remember my dreams – in direct contrast to other members of my family.

I wonder, is this a characteristic of the dyslexic brain?

Secondly, I have been asked to get involved in a new charity [more on this in a future blog] – one very close to my heart. I have been looking for an opportunity to change perceptions of Dyslexia for a while and this has meant, I hope gently, exiting from two important charities – Foundation (after 6 years) and the Small Business Charter (after nearly 4 years). My role in Foundation and the Small Business Charter has been strategic but that doesn’t mean not paying attention to the detail and caring passionately about their purpose – both are very different:

**Foundation** – Transforming lives: Inspiring Individuals
Providing support for the homeless and vulnerable. With experienced and dedicated teams across Leeds, Yorkshire and the North of England, Foundation is here to provide help and support vulnerable people in our community. Our services extend to individuals and families who are affected by the following issues: i) Homeless or at risk of homelessness, ii) Leaving prison or on probation, iii) Leaving care and iv) Domestic abuse. We work with hundreds of people every year, helping them to build a better, healthier and more positive life – we’re here so that you don’t have to face your challenges alone.

My role: To help recruit a new Chief Executive and help navigate the choppy water of austerity.

**Small Business Charter** – The Small Business Charter award is a mark of excellence for business schools, which recognises their expertise in: i) Supporting small businesses, ii) Student entrepreneurship and iii) Engagement in the local economy. For business it means that Business Schools, which hold the Small Business Charter award are the go-to source of information for businesses who want to benefit from expert advice, training and courses. They can provide business support, sometimes even a space for local businesses as well as access to consultancy and mentoring.

My role: To bring insights on bridging the worlds of academia and business. In my view, a marriage made in heaven!

These roles have provided me with interesting challenges but above all a chance to work with great people on delivering a common goal for society. Not a bad way to spend your day!

In both cases, the last board meetings are this month. So, October should see some space emerge to think creatively about the new charity and engage with the founding team.
Dyslexia Superpower: Time for ‘Visual Thinking’ GCSE, NVQ, A-Level, BSc, MSc, PhD! (37/52)

Whether you call it big picture thinking, spatial thinking or visual thinking, there is something rather special about the way the dyslexic mind processes complex information – let’s just call it the dyslexia superpower!

Of course, our education system recognises and rewards other types of vital thinking. Such as, the fine detail thinking so evident in subjects that are linear and structured and can be assessed by clear rubrics and produce well distributed marks with clear grade boundaries. In fact, these also lend themselves to examinations rather than coursework. The recent changes to GCSE and A levels have reinforced the rewards for fine detail thinking assessed by examinations.

However, there have been failed attempts to develop subjects which broadly test thinking:

- Critical Thinking (AQA – no longer offered from 2017)
- Critical Thinking (OCR – no longer offered with statement “OCR is currently reforming its GCSEs, AS and A Levels in line with the government programme of reform. However, it was not possible to develop content for Critical Thinking that met Ofqual’s principles for reformed AS and A Levels”)
- Thinking Skills (CAIE – a lone survivor?)

But, what of visual thinking?

With the culling of so many subjects from the list of approved GCSE and A levels, what hope this there for developing a new subject, which rewards visual thinking skills? Given this current climate, what hope is there to assess visual thinking skills by a wide range of methods: animation, video, presentation, digital media, portfolio or just plain old coursework?

We could just ask the RSA to develop a GSCE based on RSA Animate!

I (and 1,806,538 other people) really liked the Divided Brain (2011):

Or the The Power of Networks (2012):
I don’t have the answer to this problem but I do recognise it is a problem. The first step along the way.

I think it’s time to mobilise an army [or peace corps] of people to address this fundamental flaw in our education system. Or even better a flock of dyslexia activists!
Dyslexia Superpower: Building the ultimate dyslexia library (38/52)

The ultimate book on dyslexia has just arrived through my letterbox!

More on that in a moment – since the beginning of the year I have been gently adding to my library of books on dyslexia. It’s looking something like this:

Reference shelf:
• ‘The Dyslexic Advantage: Unlocking the hidden potential of the dyslexic brain’ (2011) by Brock Eide and Fernette Wide.
• ‘The Power of Different: The link between disorder and genius’ (2017) by Gail Saltz.
• ‘Creative Successful Dyslexic: 23 High achievers share three stories’ (2016) by Margaret Rooke.
• ‘Connecting the Dots: Understanding dyslexia’ (2017) by Made by Dyslexia.

Self-help shelf:
• ‘Grammar Rules: Writing with Military Precision’ (2011) by Craig Shrives.
• ‘Defeat Dyslexia! The parents’ guide to understanding your child’s dyslexia’ (2016) by Holly Swinton and Nicola Martin.

And the ultimate book on dyslexia?

But, why am I so positive about Positive Dyslexia?

I simply think that Rod Nicolson captures, in a mere 150 pages, the issue, the strengths, the what, the how and the why! I will attempt to summarise his main points below [and in a rich picture in next week’s blog] but you could just watch his 2013 speech for www.dyslexicadvantage.org

Positive Dyslexia is about recognising the 9 strengths of dyslexia that culminate in unconventional thinking and doing so demands the cessation of sinking into a ‘failing to learn, learning to fail’ cycle and replacement with positive assessment. This catapults (positive acceleration) dyslexics by inspirations (positive ambitions, positive career) to success in school, work and society by building these strengths into a Dyslexia Superpower [my words] needed by successful organisations and achieved by talent diversity. It ends with a call to action: ‘Positive Dyslexia will change the world for good. Its time has come. Please help!’


Yep, looks like a superpower, sounds like a superpower, smells like a superpower, so, it must be a superpower!

So, we now have a guide book for the journey of creating a grassroots organisation committed to moving the agenda from learning disability, through learning difference to positive dyslexia – that is the Dyslexia Superpower.

All we need now is to gather the flock of Dyslexia Activists to make it a really …
Dyslexia Superpower: The Incredibles minus (39/52 or 75%)
I can’t believe it either! How did I get from going public with my first blog, The Dyslexic Professor, to this, the 39th (of 52) blogs? And, how dare I use ‘The Incredibles’ in the title – even with a minus?!

I am unashamedly promoting dyslexia as a superpower. But, very importantly I want to jettison the negativity associated with the word Dyslexia – hence the reference to The Incredibles – a film based on unrecognised superpowers. But why the minus? Just skip forward to the moment Edna Mode says, ‘No capes!’ in reference to the sad tales of Thunderhead, Stratogirl and Metalman. I want us to say, ‘No’ to the negative portrayal of dyslexia and to focus on the value it brings to our society.

Judging from the only trailer for The Incredible 2 I can find, it looks like Edna Mode’s time has come too!

I do not claim any originality – just look at:
- Positive Dyslexia – Roderick Nicolson
- Dyslexic Advantage – Brock and Fernette Eide

However, I do claim an equal passion to other Dyslexia Activists to take action to improve this lamentable situation. Look out for next blog (40/52).
Guest blog by Rosa Weber: We’re all in this together (40/52)

The actual title of Rosa Weber’s, Co-Founder of the Nuword charity, guest blog is ‘Why I became a Dyslexia Activist’ but I couldn’t help highlighting the power of people with dyslexia and people effected by dyslexia working together or in the words of High School Musical, ‘We’re all in this together …’ Sorry – you won’t be able to get that tune out of tier head all day!

Perhaps this image will help ...

Guest blog by Rosa Weber: Why I became a Dyslexia Activist

Many of my friends from school and beyond are dyslexic, so I’ve always known about it generally. They’re now a multi-talented bunch of film makers, painters, designers, social workers, leather workers, graffiti artists, lawyers, music makers… to name a few. They have succeeded despite all the difficulties on their journey through the school system. Yet it’s vital to remember that this is not everyone’s story: many dyslexic children, teenagers and adults are still being left behind, isolated, sidelined and woefully misunderstood.

It wasn’t until working closely with author Sally Gardner, as her assistant, that I began to truly understand what dyslexia is. Sally is severely dyslexic and what I’ve learnt from her is that it’s not about extra time, free computers, problems with spelling, reading, organisation. No, no, no. This is only what we are conditioned to associate with the word dyslexia. What this obscure word really means is huge imagination, holistic problem solving, visual thinking, 3D processing, divergent thinking… all skills that are now highly sought after by the creative and corporate sectors. Valuable, measurable skills that are usually repressed by Primary and Secondary schools – they go unnoticed, unnourished, unmarked.

It is the education system and the curriculum that marginalise dyslexic thinkers. It is not the fault of our teachers, for they’re being forced to work in an increasingly underfunded and unimaginative framework. The issues lie with the heavily text-based, out-dated, mind-boggling, memory-centric load of questionable questions that are perpetually asked to thinkers with dyslexia – who do not decode in text, but in images. What, then, if we were all required to draw our exam answers instead of write them? All of us strong spellers, readers, text thinkers – well, we’d probably be pretty screwed. We’d be the disenfranchised group with the ‘disability’ label.

The bottom line is this: we are still wasting generations of brilliant minds. And it’s not the 1950s anymore. Through working with Sally – who’s experience of education was, as for many dyslexic thinkers, horror-filled – I have learnt how to develop my visual thinking, hone my imagination, solve problems from all angles – not just the angle that ticks the establishment box. What more, then, can dyslexic thinkers teach non-dyslexics? So much about resilience, grit. Hard work. Emotional intelligence. The beautiful languages of the image.

Collectively we must bring a halt to years of disenfranchisement and discrimination. We must call on schools to diversify measurements of academic attainment. Allow visual essays, spoken exams. The working world must stop binning CVs with spelling mistakes. And non-dyslexics must demonstrate more solidarity with the dyslexic people in their lives by getting to know their many strengths, not just accepting the generalising weaknesses that are associated with that misrepresentative word.

This is why I became a Dyslexia Activist. This is why, after six years of research, and with some initial core funding from the brilliant George Koukis of Temenos, Sally and I have recently set up Nuword Charity. Learning and talking about the strengths of dyslexia will open up your mind. As a non-dyslexic, understanding and developing your own typical dyslexic skills will diversify, and therefore improve, the ways in which you engage with the world. It also might help us bring a halt to all these cruel years of educational and social injustice: it’s time to imagine a world beyond the word dyslexia.”

So, having read Rosa Weber’s powerful blog, what do you think the right answer to the following question, from Rosa and Sally Gardner, should be?

Nigel, would you like to be the first Chair of the Board of Trustees for the new Nuword Charity?

For more information about Nuwords’ upcoming projects, please email Nuword.london@gmail.com, see www.Nuword.org (site in beta), or follow @Nuword_dyslexia

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Dyslexia Awareness Week: Survival of the Species (41/52)

I'm supporting Dyslexia Awareness Week
#positivedyslexia2017

It is Dyslexia Awareness Week – #positivedyslexia2017 and World Dyslexia Day on Thursday 5th October.

Why might this be of interest to non-dyslexics and what has this got to do with survival of the species?

The publication of 'On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life' by Charles Darwin on 24th November 1859 caused consternation. Nearly 158 years on, there is still debate in many parts of the world on whether evolution or creation theories should be taught in schools.

In popular culture, the notion of *survival of the fittest* (actually first used by Herbert Spencer in 1864 on reading Darwin’s work) has gain a strong foothold – not least in business (*Survival of the fittest*).

Just imagine if the survival, up until this point, of the human species was dependent on neural-diversity – that it is the collective abilities within communities (from tribes to nations).

This may seem a little farfetched – but bear with me a little longer.

Before the first great civilisations (in Africa, Andes, China, Europe, Egypt and Indus Valley), small communities were dependant on their combined abilities, including fine detail thinking and big picture thinking. I imagine it would be difficult to identify any reason why one might be favoured more than the other.

With the advent if languages systems this was all set to change. Initially pictographic (i.e. Aztec) and logorahpic (i.e. Egyptian and Chinese) based systems probably had no or little impact on big picture thinkers. However, about 3,000 years ago alphabet-based languages emerged and with the aid of printing technologies, in wide use in Western Europe by 1500, came to dominate the sharing of knowledge (and power).

So, perhaps not surprisingly, over just 500 years we have managed to design education systems which favour the learning of alphabet-based languages and in so doing have selected for negative attention our big picture thinkers.

If only I had realised this in my English class aged just 8! I could have stood up to Mrs W and said, ‘Could I remind you that big picture thinkers have insured the survival of the species to this moment in time and perhaps a little more respect of my superpower is called for at this very moment’.

Alas, with corporal punishment still widely in use, at that ‘moment’, in the English boarding schools’ system, I may have been ‘rewarded’ for my insight in a less constructive way!

So, as we contemplate Dyslexia Awareness Week we should think how our society might be better served by embracing neural-diversity. That might mean reinventing the education system to celebrate neural-diversity.

On a practical note, this could mean introducing free (positive) testing for every child to identify the big picture thinkers and then support them in the development of their superpowers – remember our very survival might depend on it!
Guest blog by Ross Duncan: It takes one to know one! (42/52)
This really is a triple layered blog, which demonstrates the power of networks – in this case a dyslexia network.

Ross Duncan writes regularly for Dyslexia Scotland interviewing high profile dyslexics – most recently with Judge Dhir (see below). Ross kindly shares his early experiences of dyslexia that have resulted in a passion to write. His treatment is all too common – his reaction less so.

Guest blog by Ross Duncan: It takes one to know one!
I vaguely remember reading something about Judge Dhir talking about glass ceilings and how this can act as barrier either for yourself or by others who don’t think you have what it takes to be successful. But Judge Dhir is a good example of someone who as a child was only thought suitable to be a hairdresser, but has crossed many barriers other than being dyslexic to carve a success out of being an established judge.

In my own way, as someone who was subjected to unspeakable ridicule at home and at school, there wasn’t even an exit or open door where I could leave. But forty years on from a statement that was made on parent’s night that I was a ‘dreamer’, my mother would still, up until recently, perpetuate this. But on a home visit, I spoke to an elderly lady, a couple of doors down, where I wistfully said, that I was dyslexic. That elderly lady happened to be the same school teacher who described me as a ‘dreamer’!

But of course, ‘dyslexia wasn’t heard of at that time’. Everything the teachers says is correct and you didn’t question it. This was the reaction my parents would have most likely have deemed as appropriate at the time.

In my early 40s I discovered that I was indeed dyslexic – I didn’t think I was. My wife in her favour stuck by me and my difficulties and took on extra roles that I couldn’t handle myself. I couldn’t find any support or understanding to help me. It’s OK being a child with dyslexia because there is now a level of support and understanding that wasn’t available when I was growing up. But how do you support someone in their 40s?

My GP prescribed CBT, to my horror my counsellor was herself dyslexic!

So, for nearly ten years I have thrown myself into writing and contributing articles to magazines interviewing famous people with dyslexia to raise awareness and quall the myths about dyslexia. Would you believe it my latest published article is about Judge Dhir!

I may not have been good enough to get to university, but I’m smart enough to know how to talk to people and to engage with people regardless who they are and where they are from. This is something I didn’t a qualification in when I left school, in fact I didn’t get any qualifications when I left school.’

Interview with Judge Dhir by Duncan Ross – first published in Dyslexia Scotland, September 2017.
Ross’ story highlights the damage so often inflicted on dyslexic children which continues well into childhood. All the more reason to celebrate the work of Rod Nicolson’s Positive Dyslexia – Dyslexia Superpower: Building the ultimate dyslexia library.
Dyslexia Superpower: Testing times (43/52)

There is much to be said for a professionally supported dyslexia diagnosis. In the UK, it’s actually a requirement that a Dyslexia Assessment is performed by a specialist teacher (with an APC or HCPC) or Educational Psychologist. Once diagnosed as having dyslexia, schools, universities and employers need to respond with appropriate support that meets the Equality Act (2010). No wonder so much store is placed on an official dyslexia assessment.

However, this comes at a price – the British Dyslexia Association offers diagnostic assessments for £450 (+VAT) with a specialist teacher and £600 (+VAT) with an Educational Psychologist. This automatically prevents much of the population from accessing an assessment and reinforces the ‘middle class’ label associated with dyslexia assessment. Is there an alternative?

If you are not looking for an official dyslexia assessment, you could consider screening at a fraction of the cost. Nessy provide a range of screening tools including a free online dyslexia questionnaire for 5 to 7 year olds and a more detailed assessment from £10 per pupil. The latter covers: i) Visual Word Memory, ii) Auditory Sequential Memory, iii) Visual Sequential Memory, iv) Processing Speed, v) Phonological Awareness and vi) Working Memory and takes 20 minutes to administer. Do-IT Solutions provide Dyslexia+ Student Profiler for HE/HE students and adults, which takes about an hour in a one-to-one assessment and costs £25 per person. CognAssist provides a digital assessment tool for older learners, which covers: i) Verbal Memory, ii) Non Verbal Memory, iii) Literacy, iv) Numeracy, v) Visual Information Processing Speed, vi) Executive Function, vii) Verbal Reasoning and viii) Non Verbal Reasoning and takes 30 minutes to complete.

These are essentially rules based assessments.

But, let’s start from a different perspective …

If dyslexia is a superpower (learning advantage), then it could be useful to test for characteristics that positively indicate for this superpower – such as: big picture thinking, visual thinking and spacial thinking in order to further develop these abilities. But, why is this important?

By screening for the positive attributes associated with dyslexia and developing these further, an individual immediately gets recognition for their abilities and chance to excel at these. Remember our society needs these skills – Dyslexia Awareness Week: Survival of the Species. This week saw the Nobel Prize for Chemistry awarded to Professor Jacques Dubochet who describes himself as dyslexic and was in the team that invented cryo-electron microscopy, which images the molecules of life.

In only the last four years, the resolution of cryo-electron microscopy has improved dramatically. © MARTIN HÖGBOM/THE ROYAL SWEDISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Just, imagine if our society was able to identify everyone with this superpower and focused resources to help develop it to the full.
Dyslexia Superpower: Envisioning a better future (44/52)

After last week’s call to test for the positive characteristics of dyslexia (Dyslexia Superpower: Testing times), I have been struggling to find a single word that could capture all these positive skills – and therefore the title of a programme, course or module that could help develop them. I felt that dyslexia superpower (apart from being two words!) carried with it the negative connotations of dyslexia and seemed a bit lightweight for serious study.

The word needs to recognise i) problem solving, creativity, innovation skills; ii) big picture, visual, spatial thinking; iii) communicating ideas; iv) empathy, teamworking; v) systems thinking; vi) using assistive technologies; vii) selling the superpowered you! And, I’m sure much more …

Professor Rod Nicolson would call most of these unconventional thinking. However, this doesn’t really work for me – it’s not positive enough.

Then, whilst planning for a workshop I delivered to entrepreneurs considering the opportunities for their businesses from the low carbon economy (there was even a UK Government strategy published this week – The Clean Growth Strategy), I realised the word was … envisioning!

Let me explain.

Envision is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as, “imagine as a future possibility” or by Cambridge as, “to imagine or expect that something is a likely or desirable possibility in the future”. Possible origin in 1827, “endowed with vision.” I noticed Microsoft even have an Envisioning Center!

So, does envisioning capture all the positive characteristics so often found in people with dyslexia and also sound like a desirable skill non-dyslexics would like to acquire?

Could you imagine taking a course on envisioning and, at the end, being able to communicate your vision of a solution to a problem or plan to address a challenge? What if the essential criteria for your next job included – ability to envision a better future?

I wonder how you could assess the course or demonstrate your ability to envision a better future?
Dyslexia Superpower: Sally Gardner (45/52)

I did wonder whether I should just post this rich picture as a blog and give no explanation. But, the blogger in me couldn’t resist adding a few words!

**Sally Gardner**, is an award-winning author for children and older readers and a dyslexia activist. Sally says, ‘At eleven I was told I was word-blind. This was before anyone mentioned the un-sayable, un-teachable, un-spellable word dyslexia, which, hey-ho, even to this day I can’t spell!’

Sally is the founder of [NUword](https://nuword.org) a new charity committed to flipping dyslexia from being perceived as a disability to being an advantage.

The rich picture was drawn after listening to an inspirational and moving workshop delivered by Sally at University of the Arts London. Sally explained how our education system failed her by focusing on what she couldn’t do rather than her amazing ability (superpowers!) to think in pictures – what she called cinema thinking or picture thinking.

You just need to read some of her books, and having met Sally recently I’ve done just that, to see the creative power of cinema thinking or picture thinking in writing truly engaging books for all ages.

I won’t attempt to explain my rich picture of Sally further. Just look carefully and see what you can see!

Inspired by Sally’s commitment to change the perception of dyslexia, I’ve just agreed to be a trustee of the NUword Charity. Of course, I don’t know what I have let myself in for … or do I?!
Dyslexia Superpower: Reflection, projection and the success of the iPad (46/52)

It’s been another varied week for me in academia. One that served to highlight the superpower of reflection, projection (picture thinking, visual thinking or just envisioning) and resulted in a flashback to the launch of the iPad in 2010! [See Steve Jobs at 08:40]

Monday – was all about reflecting on someone else’s research. I was the external examiner for a rigorous PhD thesis which was robustly defended at the viva examination. The subject was small businesses’ capabilities to manage alliances that develop international opportunities and the candidate’s ‘defence’ was excellent. Like all good viva examinations, it left me with a profound feeling that, at that moment in time, the candidate knew more about their subject than anyone else. Difficult to explain but you know it when you see it!

Tuesday – saw the successful start of our Executives in Residence initiative, which brought together a dozen senior executives from a wide range of industries and sectors – including Brian Gregory, Jackie Daniel [STOP PRESS Jackie is Chief Executive at Morecambe Bay Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust cited in this week’s Economist], Leasil Burrow and Sean McIlveen to name but four. A great opportunity for us to learn from others’ experience and help us develop our executive education and professional development programmes and think through the potential impact of our research. I’m really looking forward to working with this committed group of ambassadors for Lancaster University Management School.

Thursday – was a chance for a little more personal reflection with long-arranged leave which happened to coincide with a beautiful day of autumnal sunshine in the Lake District.

Friday – saw the recognition of months of academic and industry endeavour with a campus visit by Sir Charlie Mayfield (Chair of John Lewis Partnership and Productivity Leadership Group – bethebusiness). Lancaster University Management School has worked hard with Industry to co-develop the Productivity through People programme to help address the productivity dilemma. This programme serves to highlight the ‘anchor institution’ role proposed by Sir Andrew Witty in “Encouraging a British Invention Revolution” (2013).

The PhD thesis, Executives in Residence and Productivity through People are all about the ability to think big – and that’s the link to the launch of the iPad in 2010. After a decade of Microsoft promoting the concept of a Tablet PC, it was Apple that launched the game changing iPad. But, why was the iPad so successful?

I remember delivering, with a practitioner, a two-day innovation course, in early 2011, to executives of a global electronics company and asking the question, “Will the iPad be successful?” The participants were fairly evenly split. I argued that the two key differences...
were, iTunes and the App Store. The former provided a popular platform for accessing digital content (music and video) and the latter provided an open platform that supported the innovation and creativity of programmers. And critically both offered a revenue model which rewarded the providers of content and apps. Of course, there might be other explanations.

More interestingly, my thoughts on the iPad in 2011 demonstrate the ability, so prevalent in dyslexics, to swivel between reflecting on the past and projecting into the future. Not a bad ability to have in any organisation!
Dyslexia Superpower: Conferences and the success of the iPod (47/52)

Following on from last week's Dyslexia Superpower: Reflection, projection and the success of the iPad (46/52) blog, I wanted to consider complexity and how we can access information in a world overflowing with information.

So, let's start with the iPod. More specifically, what became known as the iPod Classic (2001-14). I am part of a generation that expected to be able to access music on the move. It was the Sony Walkman cassette player (1979-2010), which achieved this for the masses and remained in production for 3 decades! It was simply a small cassette player with batteries and headphones – but it was also so much more! However, for this blog it was merely a stepping stone to the iPod – a truly mass music mobile device. But, what enabled the iPod to emerge and replace the Walkman in its entirety?

The storage capacity for digital hard drives and rechargeable battery life were both increasing rapidly and together these laid the foundations but did not provide the solution. It was the scroll wheel, and then the click wheel, which made accessing “1,000 songs in your pocket” a reality. A simple interface to masses of content – literally access to 1,000s of songs at the spin of a wheel. In other words, simplicity in a world of complexity. Interestingly, Steve Jobs, the driving force behind Apple during this period, is thought to have been dyslexic – although this hasn't been conclusively confirmed.

It seems that accessing new information in the digital age couldn't be easier – just type your query into Google! But one very 'old school' way of doing this still seems to survive – if not prosper ... conferences!

I attended two conferences this week:

1. Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Annual Conference in Birmingham at which I delivered a ‘Using digital technologies to support business engagement’ workshop – the output of which I expressed as a blog, ‘Eight steps to digital heaven for Business Schools?’ The conference had a professional focus with keynote speakers informing delegates on best practice and current events relevant to the Higher Education sector – such as ‘The role of business schools in enhancing the UK’s productivity, innovation and competitiveness’.

2. Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE) Annual Conference in Belfast at which I was a panel member on the 40th Anniversary Plenary Session. The conference had an academic focus with researchers and practitioners presenting their research, which was selected through a peer-review process of conference papers.

What struck me about the conferences was not the quality of the content, in both cases this was high, but rather the social interaction – what we could call social networking. The discussions between the presentations, often over refreshments, enable new and old members to interact, quality to be mediated, friendships to be renewed and, of course, job opportunities to be exchanged in whispers!

The ISBE conference also provided a platform to launch a new textbook! Exploring Entrepreneurship 2nd Edition co-authored with Prof Richard Blundel and Prof Catherine Wang and published by SAGE Publications.
All this serves to highlight the need to blend the digital with the physical. Perhaps it has never been more important to understand complexity. Fortunately, the repositioning of dyslexia from a learning difficulty, through a learning difference to a learning advantage or superpower is very timely and will help to unlock the full potential of 1/10th of the population.
Dyslexia Superpower: Amazing People (48/52)

With just four blogs to go until the ‘Year in the Life of The Dyslexic Professor’ is complete, I thought I would highlight someone else’s work. More specifically, that of Kate Power and Kathy Iwanczak Forsyth, who both have children with dyslexia.

Kate and Kathy (amazingdyslexic) have just produced a delightful, at least in my opinion, book called: ‘The Illustrated Guide to Dyslexia and Its Amazing People’.

It is written, or rather illustrated, with children with dyslexia in mind. I will discuss the content in a moment but what struck me was the cover (below left). If I were to publish a book entitled, Year in the Life of The Dyslexic Professor, its cover might look a little similar (below right)!

The book takes the young reader, or more correctly, the young picture thinker! From explaining what dyslexia is right through to the amazing people with dyslexia, their characteristics and to the jobs they do – including:

- Into fine detail, nanotechnologist, Dr Sian Fogden
- Grand designer, architect, Richard Rogers (who also wrote the forward)
- Connected, presenter, Sean Douglas of The Codpast
- A truly, fine artist, Kristjana S Williams
- Supercharged, mechanic, Kenny Handkammer
- And hot on their heels, shoe designer Natacha Marro

All are fine examples and a message of hope for younger (and older!) dyslexics. I am privileged to be increasingly meeting more amazing people with dyslexia. It really is a wonderful experience to meet other dyslexics – I hadn’t realised how isolated, from other dyslexics, I have become – probably part of a protective mechanism.

The book also responds to the need of non-dyslexic parents to explain the dyslexia to their children with dyslexia. I had been struck by the number of colleagues in academia who have thanked me for my blogs because they have been so worried for their dyslexic children and are very happy to share the idea of the dyslexia superpower with them.

I’ve already shared my thoughts on the collective noun for people with dyslexia – perhaps a flock or even a gathering. But,

*How many dyslexics does it take to change a light bulb?*

10, one to replace it with a low-watt LED lamp and 9 to imagine a brighter future!
Sorry :0)
Dyslexia Superpower: A new dawn (49/52)

Yes, a new dawn! But, why am I so positive on this rather damp morning when sunshine is but a distant memory?

I was in London yesterday evening to join the board of the new charity focused on flipping dyslexia from disability to ability, through learning difference to superpower – NUword – registered charity number 1174809. I was further delighted to be appointed to Chair the Board of Trustees.

And, now the hard work begins …

In the next year, we have to invent the business model that will fund the core NUword team who will work with our strategic partners to deliver transformative opportunities to people with the gift of dyslexia to help them develop their superpower. We need to be in every school, every university, every prison and every workplace. We want to:

1. Develop a free NUword positive dyslexia assessment and learning programme for children in some of our most challenging schools
2. Develop a free online NUword ability test to help anyone identify their superpower
3. Develop free NUword learning programmes to take this superpower to the next level
4. And finally, launch our first NUword campaign to highlight the organisational advantages of recruiting people with a superpower!

Of course, diversity, or more specifically neurological diversity, is at the core of this vision. Put simply, the best organisations celebrate diversity.

And now to recruit the NUword community of Dyslexia Activists …
Dyslexia Superhero or Survivor? (50/52)
This week, nearly a year from ‘going public’ as an academic with dyslexia, I was asked two questions I found difficult to answer.

Firstly, What have you achieved, as a person with dyslexia, to this point in your life – being widely acknowledged as a leader in academia, business and the community?
And secondly, What would you say to your eight year old self struggling to understand why others around him could read and write whilst he was increasingly being labelled stupid and lazy?

Whilst the questions were asked separately, I now realise the answers are inextricably linked and help explain why I decided to Chair the Board of Trustees at NUword - see ‘Dyslexia Superpower: A new dawn’ (49/52).

My answer to, What have you achieved? Was, I have survived – I am a survivor of dyslexia.

This immediate and heartfelt response says much about my journey through education and work – and is so often heard from people with dyslexia – success is to survive. I went on to explain that as a dyslexic, I live in a hostile world full of words and with the constant fear of exposure. So, to survive each day is a big achievement and far from any notion of public recognition or superhero status.

But, said the questioner, you have achieved so much – what would you say to your younger self? That mere survival is all he has to look forward to?

Therein lies the critical flaw in my position. To survive is not enough – we need also to hope. So, that is the message for my younger self – the hope of a better future, to reinvent dyslexia not as a disability or even a difference but an advantage. This is the mission of NUword.

Ask me again, What would you say to your younger self?

I would look that boy straight in the eye and say, You have been born with a great advantage. Nurture it and it will be your true superpower and it will help all around you to have richer lives.
Dyslexia Superpower Syllabus: Answers on a postcard (51/52)
In this penultimate blog, I am asking a simple question whilst knowing fully well the answer is complicated – or at least I hope it is!

What should be included in a course designed to help people, both with and without dyslexia, develop their picture thinking skills?

Of course, I’m using ‘picture thinking’ as shorthand for visual, spatial thinking that enhances problem solving.

What do you think?

Answers on a postcard by commenting on this blog or just email me at thedysexicprofessor@gmail.com

As a starter for 10, please see below some of my suggestions for ‘Envisioning 101’ for first year undergraduates and delivered over 10 weeks:

**Week 1: Introduction**
- **Content**: Module structure, pedagogy (flipped classroom and MOOCs), assistive technologies, expectations, formative feedback and summative assessment.
- **Format**: Workshop, ability assessment 1.

**Week 2: Developing your creativity**
- **Content**: Ideation and innovation skills.
- **Format**: Workshop
- **Video**: a) Julie Burstein, b) Janet Echelman, c) Amy Tan
- **MOOC**: Discover how to shape your world with innovation

**Week 3: Picture thinking**
- **Content**: Visual and spacial thinking skills, how to draw, mind mapping.
- **Format**: Workshop, poster presentations.
- **Video**: a) Temple Grandin, b) Sunni Brown, c) Neil Burgess
- **MOOC**: Big Data: Data Visualisation

**Week 4: Understanding multiple perspectives**
- **Content**: Empathy, listening skills.
- **Format**: Workshop, acted case study, role play.
- **Video**: a) Joan Halifax, b) Jeremy Rifkin
- **MOOC**: a) How to Read Your Boss, b) Social Enterprise: Business Doing Good

**Week 5: Working with others**
- **Content**: Team-working and networking skills.
- **Format**: Workshop, Lego game.
- **Video**: a) Nicholas Christakis, b) Howard Rheingold, c) Tom Wujec
- **MOOC**: Managing People: Engaging Your Workforce
Week 6: Communicating your ideas
- **Content**: Presentation skills.
- **Format**: Workshop, individual presentations.
- **Video**: a) Chris Anderson, b) Nancy Duarte, c) Julian Treasure
- **MOOC**: Persuasive Communication: What Makes Messages Persuasive?

Week 7: System thinking
- **Content**: Holistic thinking skills.
- **Format**: Workshop.
- **Video**: a) Eric Berlow, b) Peter Checkland, c) Tom Wujec
- **MOOC**: a) Systems Thinking and Complexity, b) Logical and Critical Thinking

Week 8: Problem solving in practice 1
- **Content**: Learning through case study of significant organisational challenge.
- **Format**: Workshop, group presentations.
- **MOOC**: Using Creative Problem Solving

Week 9: Problem solving in practice 2
- **Content**: Learning by responding to big societal challenges.
- **Format**: Workshop, group presentations.
- **MOOC**: Unleash Your Potential: Global Citizenship

Week 10: Reflecting on your experience
- **Content**: Learning through reflection of theory and practice.
- **Format**: Workshop, personal poster presentations, Ability assessment 2.
- **Video**: Diana Laufenberg
- **MOOC**: Learning Online: Reflecting and Sharing

What do you think? What have I missed?
A Year in the Life of The Dyslexic Professor (52/52 or 100%)

I've made it! 52 blogs over 12 months = A Year in the Life of The Dyslexic Professor

Of course, this is a moment to look backward and forward. Backward, to the highlights and unintended consequences and forward to 'so what' and 'what next'? What started, 12 months ago, with a single blog, has ended the year as a commitment to start a movement.

I have learnt two things about blogging:

1. They are intensively personal and, at least for me, cathartic.
2. People read them!

As a slight digression, this reminds me of Julie and Julia

So, by good foresight or good luck, I feel liberated and empowered and connected to fellow Dyslexic Activists (people with dyslexia and non-dyslexics passionate about the value people with dyslexia bring to our society).

I have moved from seeing my dyslexia as a disability to a learning difference and now a superpower, which guides my next steps ... to quite literally turn the perception of dyslexia on its head. The question is not, 'How do we support people with dyslexia in schools, colleges, universities, prisons and workplaces' to 'How can we attract people with this dyslexia superpower'.

This is in essence, a call for valuing diversity. Not because of a law or to do the 'right thing' but because it produces results for both parties - a win-win - better organisations and happier people.

It's time to 'commit oneself to a course of action about which one is nervous' or put simply to ... take the plunge!

Or as, Mary Oliver expressed it so profoundly in the last line of 'The Summer Day' ... Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?
The Summer Day
Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?