Advice for Mentors when Working with Dyslexic Students on Placement
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This document has been prepared by Additional Learning Support at the University of Surrey. It is designed to give advice about dyslexia and how dyslexic students may be affected.

It looks at the kind of support that dyslexic students may need in the clinical setting.

It is acknowledged that there may be difficulties in providing support for dyslexic students on placement, and that also the mentor may need to be supported as s/he may feel unable to give the appropriate support.

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What is Dyslexia?

Dyslexia is a type of specific learning difficulty (SpLD) which affects around 10% of the population. However, dyslexic individuals are often drawn towards careers such as nursing and midwifery which involve caring for people, and therefore the percentage of those students with dyslexia in these professions may be higher. For this reason, it is possible that as a mentor, you may well have to work with dyslexic students at some time.

Dyslexia is a persistent condition and exists where literacy skills are hindered by one or more of the following:

- **Reading** – weak decoding / poor word recognition / inadequate comprehension / lack of fluency / slow speed
- **Spelling** – inaccurate / inconsistent / erratic
- **Writing** – untidy handwriting / poor grammar / inaccurate punctuation / non-academic and waffly style / slow speed

When on placement, dyslexic students may also encounter **day to day problems** associated with dyslexia. These may include:

- **Short-term memory problems with poor retention of information**
  - On placement, the student may have difficulties with remembering:
    - verbal instructions
    - telephone messages
    - complicated medical terms and drug names
    - names, faces and job titles
    - all the necessary information to be passed onto other staff

- **Difficulties with processing information quickly**
  - On placement, the student may take:
    - a few moments to think things through and so may seem slow
    - longer to learn routines or procedures
    - longer to understand exactly what is being demanded
    - longer to read calibrations on equipment

- **Organisational skills and time management problems**
  - On placement, the student may:
    - have problems with planning ahead and scheduling tasks
    - estimate incorrectly finishing a task on time
    - find it hard to remember appointments
    - have problems with prioritising work

- **Difficulties with sequencing**
  - On placement, the student may have difficulty in correctly ordering of:
    - letters (NSH instead of NHS)
    - numbers (53 instead of 35)
    - tasks
    - files alphabetically or sequentially
    - retelling an incident starting in the middle rather than the beginning
Difficulties with spoken language
On placement, the student may have problems with:
- mispronunciation of familiar or unfamiliar words
- word finding and expression
- understanding
- sticking to the point when speaking

Problems with motor skills
On placement, the student may have:
- untidy handwriting
- slow speed of writing

Difficulties with orientation
On placement, the student may:
- have problems identifying left and right
- lose their way easily
- have difficulty following lines across charts correctly

Problems with concentration and distractibility
On placement, the student may:
- become more distracted especially on a busy ward
- find it difficult to stay on task
- need more effort to focus which may lead to tiredness

Inconsistency of performance and so may have good days and bad days

A dyslexic student may have just a few or many of the above difficulties, but often dyslexic students have feelings of **inadequacy** and **low self-esteem** which is often the result of years of continual reinforcement that they are ‘lazy’ or ‘stupid’.

They are sometimes ‘perfectionists’ with high expectations of themselves. They frequently do not allow themselves to get things wrong and keep trying until they get it right. The student often feel a sense of frustration, feeling incapable of doing something that other students appear to do easily.

All these can result in high levels of **stress** and even **anger**, although this is typically directed at themselves rather than at others.

Usually, dyslexic students are particularly vigilant about their practice because they are aware of the errors that they may make on placement and the implications that this may have on the health and safety of themselves and others. However, mentors may need to reinforce the significance of some student’s own limitations and highlight the potential risks involved when using dangerous equipment and administering drugs.
However, all dyslexic individuals have relative strengths which may have been enhanced and developed as a way of compensating for the weaker skills. Many dyslexic students have consequently developed strategies and ways of coping. Some individuals may have outstanding talents. Dyslexia is often associated with:

- Good problem solving and ‘trouble shooting’ ability
- Ability to look at information in a holistic way – seeing the ‘big picture’
- Good interpersonal skills
- Good verbal abilities
- Creative – lateral thinkers
- Good visual-spatial skills
Dyslexia, the Law and Disclosure

It is unlawful for individuals with disabilities (including dyslexia) to be treated less favourably for a disability-related reason (Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA)).

According to the Royal College of Nursing (2005:11) “These Acts establish that both the education and practice setting have a legal, as well as moral, obligation to provide students with the best support they can – and this includes mentors”.

To avoid placing dyslexic students at a substantial disadvantage, reasonable adjustments should be put in place. Any adjustments should be made on an individual basis, and this involves a process of evaluation and assessment of what would be reasonable within the context of their work placement. However, dyslexic students must still be able to demonstrate their fitness to practise, and learn the required skills and demonstrate competencies as would any non-dyslexic student.

However, any reasonable adjustments can only be put in place if the student has disclosed their disability. A student has the right to confidentiality about their disability, so if they limit their disclosure, they restrict the reasonable adjustments that can be implemented.

Students may feel reluctant to disclose for fear of stigmatisation and/or discrimination, but if they feel that disclosure is a positive thing and would lead to support, students may be more inclined to be open about their difficulties.

Where a mentor provides a supportive environment, the student is more likely to disclose his or her disability. Disclosure is important in that it allows the mentor to become more aware of the student’s difficulties and to be able to implement positive strategies that can help overcome the student’s weaknesses. This, in turn, may help the student to feel more positive about disclosing in future, and also in providing a more effective placement experience for both student and mentor.

Disclosure to other staff should only be made on a need to know basis and with the consent of the student.

For more information on Disability, look at the website by the Disability Rights Commission, available at http://www.drc-gb.org/
How to Support Dyslexic Students on Placement:

If a student does disclose that they are dyslexic, in general terms there are a number of things that can be done to support and help them:

1. **Meet with the student** before or at the beginning of the placement to discuss support

2. It is recommended that the student obtain a copy of the *Practice Placements – A Guide for Dyslexic Students* booklet available from Additional Learning Support

3. Consider the specific needs that the student may have and discuss the following:
   - Ask whether or not the student has **difficulty with any particular areas**
   - **Discuss any strategies that they may already have in place to compensate for these difficulties** – how do they normally cope? As their mentor, is there anything you can do to help support them?
   - Ask if there are **any other areas of difficulty** that have not been covered
   - **Talk about possible solutions and strategies** for supporting them
   - **Discuss the effectiveness** of these strategies, and how plausible or implausible those strategies may be (for example, tape-recording handover)
   - **Discuss alternative strategies** that may be beneficial
   - **Write these down** for further reference

4. Meet with the student **regularly to discuss progress** and evaluate how the support strategies are working for both student and staff

Bear in mind that most dyslexic students will do well on placement, but will do even better with the appropriate support.

*The following pages contain tips to help support dyslexic students*
Area of difficulty: **Speaking, Listening and Remembering**

**Mentor support:**

- Be **patient**
- Give verbal instructions in a **quiet place** if at all possible
- **Speak slowly, pause** between phrases and maintain **eye contact**
- Give concise **instructions in the same order** as they are meant to be carried out
- **Repeat or rephrase** if necessary
- Say complicated words, medical conditions or drug names clearly and if appropriate ask the student to say them back to you
- ‘**Anchor**’ instructions on your fingers (with the student watching) as you say them
- Ask the student to **repeat back** information/instructions whilst ‘anchoring’ on his/her own fingers – this will ensure that there has been no misunderstanding
- **Break down** long, complicated **instructions** into smaller, manageable steps
- Be aware of **information overload**; the student may find it difficult to remember too many things at once
- Encourage the student to use a **notebook** to write down verbal instructions – check these to make sure the student got it right!
- **Provide written instructions** if necessary – prioritise tasks and highlight the main points
- Visually **indicate left or right** when giving verbal directions, and make sure that the student has a map of the hospital or placement area
- Demonstrate **practical skills** to the student whilst giving verbal explanations using straightforward language. Encourage the student to repeat back what has been learned and to reflect on why
- Allow the **student to practise a task** under your observation before meeting the patient
- Encourage co-workers **not to interrupt** the student whilst carrying out a task
- Encourage students to take **telephone messages** using **L3R:**
  
  **Listen** – **Repeat** – **wRite** – **Read**
Area of difficulty: **Writing and Recording Information**

**Mentor support:**

- Be **open to providing** help
- Allow the student to write in a **quiet place** if at all possible
- Allow **extra time** to write notes if it is needed
- Try to avoid students having to write in group situations which may lead to **embarrassment**
- Encourage co-workers **not to interrupt** the student whilst writing
- If possible, allow the student to dictate notes onto a **digital recorder** (but make sure that confidentiality is maintained)
- **Check notes** written by the student: make suggestions for a clear format and use of colour (multicoloured ball-point pen)
- Be prepared to **help proof-read** notes
- Encourage the use of a **portable electronic medical spell checker** if the student already has one
- Allow the use of a **computer** or laptop if the student's handwriting is illegible
- Provide the student with a **glossary of terms**
- Allow the student to **practise filling in documents** and forms before doing it for real
- Allow the student to practise putting information and data onto **graphs** before doing it for real
- If possible, use **other methods of noting information** eg allow handover to be taped (keep on the ward and wipe clean once the student has taken action or made notes from this)
- Assist in discerning key points at handover by **going over the student's notes** after handover
- **Help in determining what needs to be written** down in the student's notes
- Encourage the student to attend learning support at **ALS** if writing is a persistent problem
Area of difficulty: Reading

Mentor support:

- Emphasise to the student the **importance of accuracy** when reading certain information.
- Encourage the student to work with a **non-dyslexic member of staff** to ensure that unrecognised/important words are read accurately.
- At a time of crisis or **emergency**, make sure that the student asks someone else to read the information out.
- If the student makes an error when reading, do not make any **judgemental** comments; simply provide the correct word.
- Encourage the student to **cross check drug names** on bottles and packets with patient’s written notes/drug dosage.
- Suggest to the student that s/he reads aloud (or **whispers**) to aid comprehension.
- Encourage the use of a **Reading Pen** or **SuperPen Professional** if the student has one.
- If possible, allow the student to read in a **quiet area** away from distractions.
- Ask co-workers **not to interrupt**.
- Allow the student **more time to read** information as s/he will very likely need to reread it a few times.
- **Highlight important words** so that they are easier for the student to pick out later.
- Provide **written material in advance** if possible.
- Avoid using too much **jargon or acronyms** to avoid confusion.
- Printed material should be in arial or comic sans **fonts** as these are easier to read.
- Print information on **coloured paper** or allow the use of coloured acetate / tinted glasses.
- **Colour code information** on dry-wipe boards in bullet points rather than long sentences.
- If possible, allow the use of a different coloured **background** on the computer.
- Avoid asking the student to read **aloud** in front of others.
- Encourage the use of a ruler or **magnifying bar** (if the student has one) to assist finding information on charts.
- Encourage students to attend learning support sessions at ALS if reading is a significant problem.
Area of difficulty: **Dealing with Medication and Calculating Drug Doses**

**Mentor support:**

- Alert the student to the **dangers of inaccuracy** in drug calculations and administration.
- Ensure that the student has **cross checked** all the patient’s names and date of birth.
- Make sure s/he has checked the drug names on the packet or bottle and **cross checked** these with the patient’s written notes/drug dosage.
- Where possible, allow and encourage the student to work with a **non-dyslexic member of staff**.
- Allow the student plenty of time and ask co-workers not to **interrupt**.
- Clarify with the student that s/he is working in metric and that **calibrations** on syringes etc have been checked.
- Encourage the use of a **calculator**, notepad (and fingers if needs be).
- Ask the student to **estimate** the answer before doing the calculation – can s/he predict what a **sensible** answer would be? Then do the calculation. Is that answer in line with the expected answer?
- Ensure that the student always **double checks** his/her work **methodically**.
- Encourage the student to **write down each stage** of the calculation. If an error is made, this will make it easier to spot which part of that calculation is causing a problem to the student.
- Offer support when doing a calculation, but bear in mind that ultimately the student will need to be able to do this **independently** without that support.
- Where possible, allow charts to be **photocopied** so that they can be colour coded and/or divided into segments for easier reading.
- Encourage the use of a ruler or **magnifying bar** (if the student has one) to follow lines across charts.
Area of difficulty: Handover Tips

Mentor support:

- Make sure that the handover procedure is the same every time so that it becomes automatic for the student
- Ensure that handover is not rushed
- Encourage the use of tick lists, handover sheets and the student’s notebook
- Assist in the design of a formatted text for taking notes at handover
- Make sure that the student has understood everything before the other member of staff has left the shift
- Go over the student’s notes after handover and assist in discerning key points
- Consider allowing handover to be taped (but bear in mind issues of confidentiality and the need to wipe the tape clean once it is no longer needed). However, do not simply ‘tape’ handover without the student attempting to take notes and understand
Further Information:


- British Dyslexia Association: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

- Dyslexia Action (formerly Dyslexia Institute): www.dyslexiaaction.org.uk

- Adult Dyslexia Organisation: www.futurenet.co.uk/charity/ado/adomenu/adomenu.htm

The guidance and advice in this booklet are not to replace the professional guidelines as set out by your professional body (eg NMC, HPC).

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