

A Social Model of Dyslexia

We challenge the deficit models of dyslexia in favour of a social model that maintains that we are not 'disabled' by our dyslexia, but by the expectations of the world we live in. There is nothing 'wrong' with being dyslexic per se.

We would argue that dyslexia is an experience that arises out of natural human diversity on the one hand and a world on the other where the early learning of literacy, and good personal organisation and working memory is mistakenly used as a marker of 'intelligence'. The problem here is seeing difference incorrectly as 'deficit'.

Put in practical terms, for example, it is disabling to expect that everyone:

- thinks in the same way as each other, when dyslexic people are more likely to think visually than verbally (or laterally than logically, or intuitively than deductively....)
- learns to read in the same way; reading is about accessing meaning, the rest is merely strategy and there is always more than one way to learn anything.
- makes sense of information in the same way (they don't, which is why multi-sensory information is easier for everyone to understand).
- can take in multiple instructions.
- can learn to take notes while trying to listen.

We have learned to expect that definitions of dyslexia will focus on the precise nature of the difficulties dyslexics experience, rather than on the nature of the disabling expectations that lead to these difficulties. But the two cannot be meaningfully separated. For example, if we expected everyone to be able to think fluently in 3D as most dyslexics can, some other people would have difficulty with this. We might be tempted to describe this as a 'disability' and even look for 'causes'. But without this expectation, there is no difficulty. So the difficulty can be recognised as a result of the mismatch between the person and the expectations, but turning this difficulty into a 'disability' depends on the social value given to the expectation (early reading, good memory etc).

We could begin to map out all the specific requirements that are likely to disable dyslexic people. These might include requiring ideas to be expressed through linear writing, learning phonics, open-plan offices, using bleached white paper, sitting still while learning or working and so on. However, both 'disability' and identifying 'disabling' requirements are highly emotive terms. In practice, almost any specific requirement might disable someone. We would prefer to promote the development of attitudes and strategies that are more inclusive and less likely to disable anyone. In this way, we would argue that **dyslexia-friendly is user-friendly**, and values diversity and equal opportunities. This is why we would endorse the Freedom to Learn Report conclusion, "An explicit dyslexia policy is needed..."

Nevertheless, traditional forms of education, work environments and social

expectations continue to create unnecessary barriers and difficulties. Unfortunately, despite the many strengths and compensatory strategies developed by adult dyslexics, many of us become victims of educational and social expectations and systems, particularly if we are trapped at the level of our 'disability'. The experience can lead to problems of self-esteem, and lack of confidence as well as limiting educational and employment opportunities. This is why it is so important that we have the protection of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act that requires proactive measures to avoid disabling people.

Many of us who have been made to feel 'stupid' by these disabling experiences have adopted 'dyslexia' and 'dyslexic' as terms of empowerment that confront the deficit model, challenge disabling expectations and requirements, and promotes the many strengths associated with dyslexia such as visual thinking, entrepreneurial skills, vision, creativity, lateral thinking, as well as hands-on and artistic skills.

Ross Cooper, January 2006