Supporting students with dyslexia on practice placements

Guidance for supervisors and mentors working with students on health and social care courses
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3 WHAT IS DYSLEXIA AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT THE WORKPLACE?

What is dyslexia and how does it affect the workplace?

Dyslexia is a combination of abilities and difficulties that can affect reading, writing and spelling as well as organisation, memory and sequencing.

Under the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act, dyslexia is considered to be a disability and dyslexic health professionals are therefore entitled to receive ‘reasonable adjustments’ both in the educational institution and in the workplace. However, they still have to demonstrate that they are fit to practise and meet all the learning competencies and skills in the same way as others.

Students devise many ‘coping strategies’ to help with any difficulties their dyslexia may cause them in the academic setting. Some of these strategies may translate well into the practice placement, but others may be inappropriate in the workplace.

Dyslexia affects students in different ways and strategies that might have worked for one student on a practice placement may not be helpful for another.

People with dyslexia are often ‘quick forgetters’ rather than ‘slow learners’. When faced with a task requiring new learning, they may have more difficulty than others, despite a similar level of ability. The level and quality of work might vary from day to day. Initially, students with dyslexia may need instructions repeated several times in order to learn the different procedures and tasks.
The emotional impact of dyslexia in the workplace

Dyslexia can sometimes have a negative emotional impact for students in the workplace. Some students with dyslexia are under emotional stress as they are struggling to conceal their difficulties because of fear of discrimination. They may find the workplace more tiring than others because of the extreme mental effort that is required.

Many adults with dyslexia struggle to come to terms with low self-esteem. They may lack confidence in their abilities, which could affect their performance in the practice placement, particularly if they have only recently been assessed as dyslexic. They may feel isolated and think that other students are learning procedures and tasks far more quickly than they are.
The positive aspect of dyslexia

People with dyslexia are considered to have a different way of thinking and learning. They often have many strengths as well as weaknesses: an ability to think holistically and to see the ‘big picture’; creativity and imagination; good visualisation skills and spatial ability; or good problem solving skills.

Through discussion, solutions can usually be found which are helpful to both students and the staff working with them. Students are often well aware of their strengths and potential challenges and are able to outline their needs to staff working with them.

This document sets out some of the challenges that might occur on placement and suggests some strategies that can be adopted by mentors/supervisors and students working together to ensure that ‘reasonable adjustments’ are in place. It is very unlikely that students will experience all the difficulties outlined here and it is quite likely that many of the strategies are already part of general good practice within the workplace. Many strategies useful for professionals with dyslexia are useful for everyone.
Students may take longer to ‘fix’ information into their long-term memory and may require information presented more than once. They can appear to have a short attention span and be easily distracted in meetings. People with dyslexia often find it more difficult to discard irrelevant or redundant information which could lead to ‘memory overload’ and confusion.

Some people with dyslexia will experience difficulty with:
- following instructions
- ordering their ideas
- remembering names and job titles
- remembering drug names and medical conditions
- recall of procedures, instructions or observations taken
- retaining information that is given verbally
- filing and looking up information
- alphabetically or sequentially reading dates and times
- remembering phone messages accurately
- remembering all the information to pass to other colleagues
- sequencing the order of tasks correctly.

Students may have difficulty with:
- managing the balance between coursework and placement commitments
- planning ahead or planning their work schedule
- estimating how much time is needed for a specific task
- allocating a realistic time-frame to different placement tasks
- completing tasks on time
- reacting quickly in busy environments
- learning routines/procedures quickly
- understanding exactly what is expected of them
- multitasking – this is the ability to do several things at once and it demands good memory and time management skills, as well as the ability to work sequentially and to be organised
- retaining information that is given during handover/change of shift.
Strategies for mentors and supervisors

- Together with the learner, draw up a plan for the placement at the beginning, highlighting important, information and dates.
- Set clear, measurable learning outcomes, using Student Agreements where appropriate.
- Provide additional time in structured supervisory sessions to go through administrative procedures and routines for placement. Explain tasks more than once at the beginning.
- Give lots of opportunities for observation of yourself or other qualified staff with patients/clients in the first few days. Demonstrate and explain procedures simply, relating to the individual patient/client. Ask the student to repeat/outline what s/he is going to do. Encourage reflection.
- Do not give too many instructions at once, particularly if the instructions are only given verbally.
- Give instructions in both written and verbal form wherever possible.
- If a task involves following a sequence, this could be set out clearly on a wall chart, manual or instruction sheet.
- If available, provide the student with a placement pack, setting out useful information and standard procedures.
- Give the student a map of the building.
Strategies for the student

- Devise your own template for recording information received during the hand over/change of shift.
- Repeat back/paraphrase instructions given to check understanding.
- Agree realistic target dates with your mentor for fulfilling placement competencies and daily tasks, and record these on the plan.
- Use coloured pens or highlighters to help organise and prioritise work.
- Use a small personal notebook or electronic diary.
- Create a simple flow chart on a small card as a memory aid.
- Have appropriate telephone pads to hand for taking messages, with as much information as possible filled out beforehand (eg. date/ref/from).
- Read key information back to a telephone caller to double check the accuracy of your message taking.
- Devise some prompt sheets to help with tasks or sequencing of tasks. Mentors and supervisors could help with this.
Some students may:

• feel embarrassed about reading aloud; misread unfamiliar words; read very slowly and find scanning or skimming difficult; find text is distorted – particularly black print on white; find it difficult to read with noise distractions;

• have difficulty understanding medical and pharmacological language and abbreviations and/or differentiating between technical language such as drug names – particularly those which look or sound similar;

• have difficulty reading information from whiteboards;

• have difficulty reading information on charts if different layers of information are presented on one chart or if information is presented on different levels – reading both across and down;

• find it hard to work out readings and might give an inaccurate reading without being aware of it.

Strategies for mentors and supervisors

• Where possible and if necessary, photocopy charts/clinical document templates onto coloured paper.

• Allow extra time for reading. Present the student with essential reading well in advance of meetings, highlighting important parts if appropriate.

• Provide opportunities to discuss reading.

• Any written information specifically produced for the students would benefit from being ‘dyslexia friendly’. Write in a logical sequence; avoid small print; use bullet points in preference to sentences; use simple words, and space the information so it is not cramped; avoid overuse of jargon or uncommon words.

• Use colour and space on whiteboards to differentiate sections.

Strategies for the student

• Use a small alphabetical notebook to record useful words and meanings of abbreviations.

• Devise a card system for particularly difficult medical terms and abbreviations, with spelling on one side and meanings on the other.

• Use an electronic dictionary.

• Use mind maps and/or flow charts where appropriate.

• Use a coloured overlay, if appropriate.
Some students may have difficulty with:

- legibility, writing in appropriate language, writing concisely
- writing accurately – work might contain inconsistent spelling and frequent grammatical errors
- writing under time pressure – some students may write very slowly and need to re-draft their work
- spelling technical terms such as drugs and medical terms, especially those which look or sound similar: for example, gastrectomy and gastrotomy; hypertension and hypotension
- identifying numbers and letters and/or getting them in the correct order
- filling in forms, especially when required to do so at speed.
Strategies for mentors and supervisors

• Explain the relevance of key information required.
• Help the student to compile a list of relevant professional terminology for the particular work area.
• Allow extra time to write reports and other paperwork. Allow students to write notes on rough paper to be checked before they are written up.
• Proofread paperwork at the beginning of the placement.
• Help the student to summarise the main points that should be covered using a mind map, spider diagram or flow chart.
• Provide sample or ‘model’ reports so the student has a clear idea about the level and content required and the expected format.
• Provide templates for letters, reports and forms etc.
• Where possible, allow the student to submit reports on cream paper with a dyslexia friendly font such as Arial or Comic Sans.

Strategies for the student

• If handwriting legibility is a problem, use a chunky pen.
• Ask your university dyslexia tutor (if you have one) to demonstrate multi-sensory spelling techniques for words you find difficult to spell.
• It is important to be familiar with the layout of forms. Take one home initially to familiarise yourself with the layout.
• Use a recording device to record ideas if possible, whilst maintaining patient confidentiality.
• Use a small personal dictionary or electronic speller. Keep a record of common words and words specific to the ward/workplace.
• Devise templates for letters, memos and assessment reports.
• Develop effective checking procedures and proofreading skills.
• Use a laptop or PC for writing case notes (if available).
A few students may feel embarrassed about language difficulties.

Some students may:
- struggle to find the right words or mispronounce unfamiliar words
- find it difficult to express themselves orally and talk in a disjointed way
- find it difficult to give clear instructions and/or information, and have a tendency to ‘go off on a tangent’
- sometimes experience a ‘mental block’ or are unable to express ideas clearly, particularly under stress
- take everything ‘literally’ or at face value (beware of words with double meanings).

Strategies for mentors and supervisors
- If the student has difficulty with pronunciation of medical or other technical terms, an audio tape of specific language would be useful.
- Provide a checklist of vocabulary typical in the placement, eg. drug names, common medical conditions and treatments.
- Give clear oral instructions. Positive statements are important as some people with dyslexia are not able to ‘read between the lines’ or pick up on implied meaning.
- Be willing to repeat instructions or allow the student to have the confidence to ask questions.
- Encourage the student to repeat instructions back to you to ensure understanding.

Strategies for the student.
- Build up a list of words and phrases frequently used in case notes, reports etc.
- Ask for clarification if you are not sure about any terminology.
- Use specialised reference books such as Mosby’s Medical Drug Reference which gives the pronunciation of words.
Some students with dyslexia:
- have right and left co-ordination difficulties.
- take much longer to learn to follow a sequence, eg. wound dressing.
- may find setting up equipment difficult.

Strategies for mentors and supervisors
- Break complex tasks down into manageable chunks/subtasks.
- Provide plenty of opportunity for the student to practise tasks repeatedly until confident.
- Demonstrate skills more than once at the beginning of a placement.
- Supervise practice until the student is confident.
- Diagrams and flow charts can help

Strategies for the student
- Ask for extra time to practise any skills you are unfamiliar with.
- In your mind, rehearse the sequence by visualising yourself working through it step by step.
- Practise talking through the sequence before doing it.
- Write the sequence down in the form of a diagram or flow chart.
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Further information
Association of Dyslexia Specialists in Higher Education
Supporting learners on placement.
www.adshe.org.uk

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

British Dyslexia Association
www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

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