academic confidence self efficacy

Academic confidence and dyslexia at university

This project is interested in the impact of the **dyslexic label** on university students' sense of *academic confidence*.

The premise being tested is that students with an identified dyslexic learning difference present a lower academic confidence than not only their non-dyslexic peers but, more significantly, than their *non-identified, apparently* dyslexic peers. **Confidence** in an academic context has been widely identified as a significant contributor to academic achievement not least due to *academic* confidence being considered as a sub-construct of academic self-efficacy. Exploring how academic confidence is affected by learning differences widely attributed to dyslexia is thought to be a fresh approach to exploring how many students tackle their studies at university. The metric used to gauge academic confidence has been the Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale, developed by Sander & Sanders (2006) and which is gaining ground amongst researchers as a useful tool for exploring the impact of study behaviours on academic outcomes.

As for **dyslexia**, current metrics used for assessing dyslexic learning differences are coarse-graded and focused on 'diagnosing' the syndrome as a disability in learning contexts. The principle objective in identifying dyslexia at university (in the UK) is to provide a means to access learning support funding. Whilst this may have advocates amongst those outwardly pursuing social justice in learning, there is evidence that stigmatization associated with being labelled as 'different' can be academically counterproductive. This project sought to detach dyslexia from the learning disability agenda firstly because there remains a persistently unresolved debate about what dyslexia *is,* and secondly because the syndrome presents a range of strengths as well as difficulties in relation to learning engagement in literacy-based education systems. To this end, no current dyslexia assessment tools were felt to be appropriate for discriminating those with unidentified dyslexia-like learning profiles from both their dyslexia-identified peers and the wider student population at university. Hence, a fresh, Dyslexia Index Profiler has been developed which attempts to take a more neutral position as a study-preference evaluator, rather than adopt the difficulty/disability-loaded approach typically seen in other dyslexia assessment tools. (The Profiler is available to try at www.ad1281.uk/Dxr.html).

In the 166 university students surveyed, the research outcomes appear to be supporting the hypothesis that it may be the *identification* of learners as 'different' that can be the significantly affecting factor on their academic confidence rather than the impediments and obstacles to effective learning at university that are apparently attributed to their 'learning differences'. Analysis of the data collected showed a moderate effect size of g = 0.48 between the lower Academic Behavioural Confidence of students with identified dyslexia and the higher ABC of students with previously unidentified dyslexia-like study profiles, supported by a significant difference between the mean ABC values of the two groups (t = 1.743, p = 0.043).

It is recognized that a principle limitation of the research conclusion has been the untested validity of the Dyslexia Index Profiler. Hence it is recommended that further research should be conducted to develop this evaluator into a more robust, standardized tool.

The research is important because to date there are no existing, peer-reviewed studies specifically investigating the relationships between academic confidence and dyslexia. It is also important because the research outcomes may contribute to the debate about whether identifying so-called dyslexia amongst university-level learners makes a positive contribution to their ultimate academic outcomes or that the benefits apparently attributed to being labelled as dyslexic are outweighed by the stigma persistently associated with disability and difference, not only in learning environments but in society more generally.

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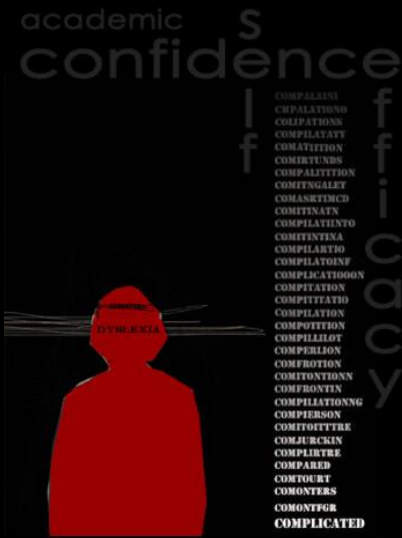
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This project has stemmed from professional expertise gained at the University of Southampton 2003 - 2010, where my role was in supporting the learning development and technology needs of the university's community of students with dyslexia.

Widely experienced in earlier-career teaching and learning across the education sector in the UK, the move into Higher Education followed completion of my first Master's in Adult and Lifelong Learning as a student at the University of Bath and latterly the Open University.

At Southampton, I completed a second Master's, in Specific Learning Difficulties, where the dissertation component evolved into the pilot study for this current research project based at Middlesex University, which I joined in 2014 on a university-funded Research Studentship.

In 2011 I gained the valuable CELTA qualification to become a Teacher of English as a Foreign Language, subsequently teaching international students at an EFL Study Centre in the South of England. More recently my professional role has been as a learning development tutor and academic guide at an East Midlands widening participation university. My expertise and experience in HE has recently been recognized through Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. Currently I am focusing on writing up this research project and preparing material for consideration for publication.

I am also an active member of the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) and of the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), where I am slowly building my portfolio to gain Chartered Librarian status.

I am planning for this research project to lead into further research with the aims of gaining a better understanding about the impact of dyslexia in tertiary adult learners – particularly in the context of the unhelpfulness of the label; to advocate a much more accessible and inclusive learning environment at university, and to develop fresh and innovative research instruments to exploit new developments in web-based data-collection and data-visualization techniques.

My wife is a library professional, my eldest son has recently completing his training in medicine and the younger one is currently studying undergraduate Chemical Engineering. The cat does very little.

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References:
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