A bit of a rant really …

In the domain of university education, my view, which is broadly based on over a decade's experience of trying hard to be a good academic guide, is that there is a burgeoning need to influence a change in the system of delivery, and most definitely assessment, of learning at university. As universities open their doors to a much broader spectrum of students through widening participation and alternative access schemes, I believe that many of these new faces, together with existing students, would benefit academically were there a better institutional-level understanding of the impact that individual differences have on educational engagement, ownership of learning (Conley & French, 2014) and hence, likely attainment.

The learning environments and processes that are generally prevalent at university are not informed by psychological knowledge and appear to be increasingly driven by the 'student experience' of university with the annual National Student Survey having a strong influence on what this is. Because high ratings in the NSS have implications for funding – which in itself is a reflection of the continuing marketization of higher education – my view is that educational models based on communities of knowledge are being displaced by ones that are more focused on the *social* experience of studying at university. This may be more apparent in institutions that are less driven by research funding because these universities have to rely on a more unidimensional income source generated from student fees to meet their costs – more students equals greater income. Having worked in both WP (widening participation) and Russell Group universities, and networked with colleagues across the sector, this is my observation. However, the knowledge model is not without its failings either: snared into a rigid pedagogy that in many cases remains rooted to a didactic approach for transmitting knowledge, this kind of university learning appears underpinned by the idea that it is sufficient to inculcate knowledge through a kind of osmotic process. Notions of 'student-centeredness' and inclusivity are less important to this ancient, traditional and somewhat elitist approach than is a desire to maintain qudos and reputation. A case in point is the situation that my nephew has found himself in throughout the early part of his study at a highly respected London University college. Even as a top-grade A-level student, he has not only found his course extremely challenging (which is fair enough and as he was expecting) but he feels that his academic confidence is being slowly eroded because he has yet to find a route to the learning development and support

from his academic tutors that he feels he desperately needs if he is to progress. So far, his 'university experience' is an unhappy one and he tells me that he has considered giving up and leaving his course many times throughout these opening months. Surely we are coming to realize that if universities are to be part of an academically rigorous, tertiary education system that anyone with the right academic credentials can attend and which includes aspirations towards fostering social mobility as well as the maintenance of strong academic standards, this isn't good enough and a middle ground must be *properly* developed that truly focuses on student-***learning***-centredness. Perhaps rebranding the NSS into the NSLS – the National Student *Learning* Survey – might be a good start towards flagging up the need to more effectively tackle the demands of providing a properly *inclusive* curriculum that everyone is able to engage with so that they might truly aspire to their academic potential.

Learning diversity

When challenged, or driven by new legislation even, The Academy wriggles a bit and then blusters and bluffs when it comes to really tackling issues of learning inclusivity. If truth be told and despite some pockets of excellence that really make a difference to some learners, a rather tokenist 'nod' is more usually made towards genuinely making things (i.e. 'learning' in its broadest context) better for **all** participants in the knowledge community of university. For those who fall outside the envelope of the conventional learning needs broadly met by the existing 'one-size-fits-all' provision of higher education, the current processes of 'compensatory adjustment' tend to apply strategies targeted at 'fixing' unconventional learners – well-meaning as these may be – rather than focusing on the shortcomings of an outdated 'system' which originally evolved to serve the academic elite. In the face of sector-wide challenges ranging from widening participation to developing business-focused strategies that can respond to the government-imposed marketization of higher education (and the funding challenges that this is bringing), tackling the institutional entrenchment of traditional teaching and learning processes with a view to making the learning experience better for everyone appears to be slipping further down the 'to do' list.

Never is this more sorely felt than amongst communities of learners who come to university with spectra of learning profiles and preferences that are outside the box and who often feel disenfranchised and not properly accommodated. Many researchers agree that these unconventional learners

are often labelled with difficult-to-define 'learning disabilities' and point out that whatever these so-called 'disabilities' are, they are dynamic in nature, not necessarily an objective fact and that it is learning institutions that translate broad profiles of learning strengths and weaknesses into difficulties and disabilities through the strongly literacy-based medium of transmission of knowledge (Channock, 2007).

The stance of this PhD project strongly advocates the belief that the time is well overdue for an overhaul of the processes for communicating knowledge through current, traditional curriculum delivery, and also calls for a paradigm shift in the conventional assessment procedures that learners are required to engage with in order to express their ideas and demonstrate their intellectual competencies. That said, there are some glimmers of hope on the horizon where enlightened providers appear to be leaning towards the adoption of elements of 'universal design' in the construction of university courses which places the emphasis on embracing learning diversities at the core of its processes (eg: Passmann & Green, 2009).

So with the focus of this research being 'dyslexia' – whatever this is, and which at the moment (Autumn 2016) remains labelled as a learning disability at university, I find myself researching the characteristics of a disability label that is at variance with my own views as broadly outlined in this rant. This is because in my ideal university, teaching, learning, assessment and access to resources would be offered in an equal variety of ways to match the diversity of learners who choose to consume and contribute to it. Everyone would feel included and properly accommodated in the knowledge community that they are part of. Whether someone has dyslexia or not wouldn't matter – indeed, categorizing a set of learning profiles as 'dyslexic' would be inappropriate, unhelpful and unnecessary.

Which brings me to the key feature of the research that supports this project's stance:

The aim is that by exploring the relationship between the learning disability/difference of dyslexia and academic confidence – as quantified using an existing measure of Academic Behavioural Confidence (Sander & Sanders, 2006) – the research objective hopes to establish that attributing a **dyslexic label** to a particular set of learning and study profiles can inhibit academic confidence and hence for the owner of this profile of attributes, indicate a reduced likelihood of gaining strong academic outcomes. In

other words, it is testing the idea about whether is it better to label a so-called dyslexic person as 'dyslexic' or not, when it comes to guiding them towards getting a good degree at university. Academic confidence, through being a sub-construct of academic self-efficacy, is widely reported as a potential marker for academic performance (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016).

Initial analysis of data I have collected appears to be supporting the hypothesis that a student who knows about their dyslexic learning difference demonstrates a lower level of academic behavioural confidence than both their non-identified peers and their non-dyslexic peers. The point here is that if this is the case, then in the first instance this would seem to indicate that dyslexic students may be best left in blissful ignorance of their so-called 'learning difference' because if they are to have better prospects of gaining a higher academic outcome to their studies that is comparable to their non-dyslexic peers, they should be encouraged to battle on as best they can within the literacy-based system of curriculum delivery, despite it not being suited to their learning profiles, strengths and preferences. Hence there would be no recourse to 'reasonable adjustments' that identify them as 'different' because the identification itself might be more damaging to their prospects than the challenges that might be considered to be attributable to their dyslexia. Secondly, this research outcome will add weight to an argument advocating a shift in 'the system' to one which embraces a much broader range of curriculum delivery and assessment as the most equitable means for establishing a level playing field upon which all students are able to optimize their academic functioning.

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