

THE SILENT NETWORK: DYSLEXIA AND THE INVISIBLE WEIGHT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Dear Editors,

I remember the first time I heard the word ‘dyslexia’. I was in primary school, sitting beside my parents while my teacher explained why I was struggling with reading and spelling. I didn’t really understand what it meant, only that I was being taken out of class for extra help and that my pages were suddenly printed on blue paper. At that age, it felt less like support and more like separation. What I couldn’t yet name was the quiet message beneath it all: that I was different, and that difference meant something lesser.

That feeling of separation followed me through school. I was often placed in different classes from my friends, and some teachers confused my struggles with laziness. One even called me ‘brain dead’ when I asked for my work to be on coloured paper. Comments like that don’t fade easily. They echo for years, shaping how you see yourself and how you believe others see you. In interviews with dyslexic students, Thompson (2021) found that dyslexic students often internalise this kind of early misunderstanding, carrying it into adulthood. I know I did.

But there were moments of light, too. In art and music, I found spaces where my way of thinking wasn’t a problem; where pattern, rhythm, and intuition mattered more than speed or spelling. Those subjects became my sanctuary and, without realising it, I was beginning to understand how I learn best.

During the pandemic, when learning moved online, I finally had the space to study in a way that worked for me. I approached physics problems like songs: breaking them into rhythm, repetition, and structure. My grades improved and, for the first time, I felt capable in a subject I had once been told wasn’t for me. It’s a strange thing, finding success through methods that don’t fit the system, but that’s often how dyslexic students learn to survive.

When I arrived at university to study physics, that optimism collided with reality. Lectures moved too quickly, readings were dense, and assignments demanded constant focus. It is, by any measure, a difficult degree, and I don’t say that in complaint. Everyone struggled; everyone was pushed to their limits. But while others seemed to keep their chins just above the water, I felt as though I was sinking beneath it. I worked relentlessly, often late into the night, just to keep pace. I was granted 25% extra time in exams, yet the rest of university life continued at full speed. Coursework deadlines and group projects assumed identical processing speeds for everyone. It was as if my difference only existed on paper.

That experience doesn’t make me weaker or less capable, it simply means I had to work differently. The effort it took to reach the same point as my peers was constant, invisible, and draining. It’s an exhausting kind of perseverance, with adjustments being made at the edges but leaving the structure itself untouched, the kind that few see and even fewer understand.

It was within that exhaustion that I began to recognise something deeper, a quiet, unspoken connection between those of us facing similar battles. Dyslexic students often share the same strained silences, the same late nights, the same sense of pushing uphill against an invisible weight. We might never speak about it openly, but the struggle binds us. Our interconnectedness isn’t forged through conversation or community, but through endurance, through the shared experience of swimming against a current that others barely feel.

Hamilton Clark (2024) notes that while many dyslexic students conceal their diagnosis to avoid stigma, their shared experience of marginalisation becomes a source of unspoken unity. That interconnectedness born from mutual recognition of effort, of always having to do more just to stay level is what sustains many of us. It is proof that even when we feel isolated, we are not alone.

Still, the stigma lingers. I’ve lost count of how many times someone has said, ‘but you don’t seem dyslexic’, as if it were a compliment. Others have suggested my exam results were easier to achieve because of ‘extra time’. What they don’t see is that I work until the last second of that time, not because I can, but because I must. The misunderstanding runs deep. Perfectionism and self-stigma often lead to overcompensation, driven by fear of being seen as less capable. That’s an exhausting way to live.

And yet, despite everything, dyslexic students persist. We adapt, we invent, and we connect with each other and with the world in ways that are often more creative and empathetic than the system allows. Pino and Mortari (2014) argue that true inclusion in higher education requires institutions to design learning environments that anticipate difference, not merely accommodate it. I would add that inclusion also means listening to those of us who experience it first-hand. Much of the labour involved in

navigating education as a dyslexic student goes unseen and, because of that invisibility, institutions often don't know how to help, unless they ask us.

Behind every dyslexic student's story is the same thread: separation, struggle, and eventually, solidarity. We find one another through shared experience, and in that shared understanding, there is strength. We remind each other that difference is not a deficiency, and that intelligence takes many forms. Universities often celebrate diversity of thought in theory but struggle to support it in practice. Yet, if we pay attention to the ways dyslexic students endure, and to the unspoken bonds that form through that endurance, we might discover a model for something better: an interconnected learning community that values every way of knowing.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Darragh Blake

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