

Getting around my dyslexia: A personal evaluation of coping strategies

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I am severely dyslexic. I was identified at the age of 10 and had a statement of special educational need by age 12. At 15 my reading speed was 7 years 3 months and my spelling age was 8.5-9 years. I had brilliant support from my parents and teachers, without which I am certain I would have failed many of my GCSEs and left school at 16. I relied completely on a laptop with assistive software throughout secondary school, and was always devising and adapting coping strategies to put me on a level playing-field with my peers. In 2009 I graduated top of my class, with a first-class degree in psychology from Cardiff University. Now I am the director of a successful business that develops assistive software for people with dyslexia. And in June of this year, at the age of 22, I was named the British Dyslexia Association's Young Achiever of the Year, for my contribution to the dyslexic community.

In this article, I will take a personal perspective, reflecting on and briefly evaluating some of the coping strategies that have helped me in education and beyond. Please feel free to skip through the headings and focus on any bits that interest you. I hope you will find some useful ideas to adapt and pass on to your students.

Why I needed coping strategies

It is a sad cliché that people with dyslexia think they are stupid. Though obviously wrong, it is a logical conclusion for us to come to. We do not just struggle with the skills directly affected by dyslexia, but everything that relies on those skills. We cannot critically analyse a poem if all of our brainpower is spent on decoding the phonetics. We cannot be the best at sport if we always forget to bring our P.E. Kit. And we cannot express our thoughts coherently while we are trying to work out how to spell each word.

I worked so hard on my difficulties, with help from great teachers. But although my skills improved significantly they could never keep up with the level my mind was thinking on. I knew I had the ability to understand concepts and articulate them verbally, and I did not want my dyslexia holding me back. I used a whole range of coping strategies – some that I was taught and some that I devised or adapted myself. These strategies reduced my stress levels and helped me to focus on higher level tasks, so that I could achieve my full potential.

Being open and honest

Being open and honest was my overarching coping strategy, and it was the most important one I learned. There were two main reasons for this:

1. Specific coping strategies helped me to get around specific difficulties, but sometimes I just needed someone to help. When there was a notice that needed reading, I quickly needed to know how to spell a word, or for some reason I could not use one of my regular coping strategies, I learned to just ask.

2. Many strategies required me to do something that would seem odd to someone who did not know me. Using a laptop in lessons, for example, is prime bullying fodder. I dealt with this by pre-empting it. If anyone ever asked me why I was using a laptop, I would tell them in a matter of fact and open manner, as though it was usual. Sometimes I felt extremely embarrassed, but I never let this show. I also made sure people did not feel they were asking stupid questions. This allowed them to ask more questions, eliminating any element of the unknown.

Organisation and memory

My problems

- I forgot what I was thinking very quickly.
- I could not remember where I was supposed to be or when I should be there.
- Irrelevant (but often important) things would pop in to my head all the time. If I tried to remember them, it took all of my mental energy and I just could not function.

What I needed

- A system to quickly store my irrelevant thoughts so I could carry on with what I was doing.
- A system to tell me exactly where to be and when.
- To train myself to automatically input everything into this system immediately, before I forgot it.

Small notebook

For the first half of secondary school, I carried a small notebook and pen everywhere I went. I always had it easily accessible and trained myself to write down everything that came into my head. I also had a colour-coded school timetable stuck inside the front page. It provided a quick reference and had everything I needed to know: lessons and locations, lunchtime activities and what to bring to school each day (homework, PE kit, etc.). I felt so much less overloaded, and I could periodically check my notebook at appropriate times to sort through my thoughts.

Dictaphone

I tried using a dictaphone to record my thoughts, but I personally found it too conspicuous, and I usually did not want everyone around me to know what I was thinking about. Also, it was much less simple to organise my thoughts, compared to a notebook where I could cross off or highlight certain items. But, of course, as with all of these strategies, it is whatever suits the individual that works.

Mobile phone

Later on in school I started using my smartphone for everything, in much the same way as I had been using my notebook. I would use the calendar to tell me where to be and when. I used the to-do notes to remember anything, and ordered them by urgency/importance so that the things I needed to do soonest were always at the top. Anything I thought of that I did not do instantly went in here, even down to “text Helen back” and “fill water bottle”. I also used a different notes feature to make longer notes if for example I suddenly thought of a solution to a problem. This was a better system for me than a paper notebook because the alarms could remind me to do things, and I never forgot to take it anywhere with me. A few things to note:

- Some teachers did not like it because it looked like I was writing a text message, so I still kept my notebook with me.
- I synchronised my phone with my laptop, so that I could have a large visual overview of the day or week.
- Automatic backups are vital.
- I preferred phones with a QWERTY keyboard because, unlike traditional predictive text, I could enter text very quickly without having to spell it correctly. Predictive text only works if you can spell!

Lists

If I had enough time, I could think things through very thoroughly, but in a rush I would always forget something. So I made lists of everything: “Take to school”, “Take to band practice”, “Take to athletics”, “Take on holiday”. This way I did not always need to ask my parents to run through things with me – I was more independent.

Reading

My problems

1. My reading speed was prohibitively slow.
2. I would be concentrating so hard on the decoding process that I had no idea what I had read.
3. The majority of school work relied on reading, so I could achieve very little without help.

What I needed

- To access all information in written form immediately and easily, so that I could focus on the more important higher level tasks.
- Independence wherever possible – being able to access the information on my own.
- To improve my reading skills for those times when alternatives were not available.

“Reading pack”

The first line of defence was to improve my reading. Although not technically a coping strategy, my “reading pack” helped me significantly. This pack of cards had letter combinations on the front (e.g. “ea”) and examples on the back (e.g. “eat – ē; bread – ě; break – ā”). I would run through the reading pack every day, reciting the words and sounds on the back of each card. It really helped me to decode written words much faster. And although I have not looked at it for years, I can still remember some of them (those examples above are from memory!).

People reading to me

My parents, teachers and school-friends would read to me with no objection. In part, this was because I had learned to be open and honest as I described earlier. I still ask people to read things to me today, such as subtitles in a film, but it really is not viable as a primary strategy. I was dependent on everyone around me and I felt self-conscious. And one pet hate of mine was paraphrasing. When someone read to me I would get extremely frustrated if they paraphrased, as though I was not capable of understanding the written text. When I did struggle with a long sentence, I would ask the person to read it again or occasionally to summarise that one sentence. If you read aloud to someone please do not paraphrase without their permission!

Text to speech software

Using text to speech software has been the single most important coping strategy throughout my life. I still rely on it heavily today for reading emails, articles, websites, my own writing – everything. I initially used ReadPlease Plus (around £30) which read aloud everything I copied to the clipboard, essentially converting Ctrl-C to a hotkey to read the selected text. This was great for a basic reader, but I progressed on to Texthelp's Read and Write software (£320) for its more advanced features. The majority of the information I required for my degree was either in PDF journal articles or in textbooks that I scanned to PDF. The combination of click-to-speak and synchronised highlighting made reading PDFs extremely easy and almost instantaneous. In fact, over the years I got so used to the synthesised voice that I could have it (her) reading out loud faster than others could read to themselves! As an aside, I now use a very simple program that I developed for myself, which reads text from any application by pressing F3. It is much more primitive than most of the screen readers out there, but it is slightly faster to initiate reading and I like it because it is mine.

Scanners

Over time, more material became available in electronic form, but for the information that was still locked into the printed word, I needed to use a scanner. Most scanners were incapable of scanning into the spine of a textbook without distorting the image. The words were not recognised, and I got an annoying jumble of letters at the start or end of each line. Text-to-speech could not cope with it and I would have to set it to read slowly, while I concentrated on decoding its jumbled output. I was given the OpticBook scanner (£150 – £180) at university and it solved the problem perfectly. It had a deep edge which fitted into the spine of the book, and scanned right up to that edge, so the text remained completely undistorted. It was a lot more bulky than other scanners, but that was definitely a worthwhile sacrifice, as it saved me a lot of frustration!

Spelling

My problems

- While I was writing, I would always be distracted by spelling.
- I would often stop mid-sentence to correct my spelling, and lose the flow of my ideas.
- I felt overwhelmed because I had so many words to learn.

What I needed

- To take spelling out of the equation while I was trying to get my thoughts down.
- To focus on the flow of my ideas while I was writing, without worrying about spelling.
- To identify and focus my learning on the spelling mistakes I made most often.

Trying to ignore spelling as I wrote

I am a perfectionist, and I would keep stopping to correct my spelling as I wrote. This was absolutely the worst strategy I could use, as the flow of my ideas was constantly disrupted. I tried turning off the red underline in Microsoft Word, to stop me thinking about spelling. The trouble was that I still knew that what I was writing was wrong, and I would still have nagging doubts about spelling while I was typing. And of course, I would have the long and disheartening process of spell-checking my numerous mistakes at the end. My spelling did not improve either, because with so many mistakes, I did not know which ones to focus on.

AutoCorrect

I tried using the AutoCorrect feature in my word processor, which partially solved the problem. It meant that fewer words would flash up as I was writing, and I could start to focus on my ideas. This really helped me to compose more coherent essays, but there were a few issues. When I wanted to type an email, fill in a web form or produce a mind map, I was back to square one. My ideas could not flow because I was distracted by spelling. Also, my spelling was still not improving as well as it could, because I did not know what mistakes I was making.

Global AutoCorrect

At age 15 I was confused and frustrated because it was so difficult for me to write and my spelling was just not improving. By this time I had significant experience of both using assistive software and developing my own coping strategies. So I created a software tool for myself, to automatically correct my spelling as I typed in different programs. It was very crude at first, but it really did enable me to focus on my ideas, because I was not worrying about spelling.

Over many years, and with a lot of hard work, Global AutoCorrect was born, and became fully fledged assistive software. The software automatically corrects the user's spelling as they type in any program, enabling them to focus on the flow of their ideas. The user can also print a list of their most frequent mistakes, focussing their learning on the spellings that are most important to them. And because there is a constantly expanding list of thousands of spelling mistakes (collected anonymously from users who agree), people using Global AutoCorrect do not have to spend much time adding new corrections.

Global AutoCorrect (£109) was released as commercial software in November 2009, and is now regularly purchased through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and Access to Work. It is also used in schools around the UK and internationally, as well as in HE and FE institutions. And as I mentioned earlier, I was named the British Dyslexia Association's Young Achiever of the Year last June, for my contribution to the dyslexic community. All this from what started as my own individual coping strategy.

Conclusions

Many of you reading this article will be directly involved in devising and teaching coping strategies to dyslexic individuals. I hope this article has helped to reinforce how much of a long term difference those coping strategies can make – increasing motivation, reducing stress levels and enabling the dyslexic person to achieve their full potential. But just as importantly, I hope I have given you some ideas to try. I would be really keen to hear any thoughts you have on any of the strategies discussed here, or any that you use yourself!

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Useful links

www.LexAble.com – Global AutoCorrect free trial.

www.Lexdis.org.uk – Collection of tips and coping strategies submitted by students with disabilities.