

# Our teachers and what we have learnt from them

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*In this contribution to the Widening Participation Special Issue of Psychology Teaching Review we consider our experiences in education as people who can't spell using an auto-ethnographic methodology (Sparkes, 2007), specifically, evocative auto-ethnography (Anderson, 2006) and guided by a social constructionist approach to identity (Burr, 1995). We consider how we have become the people we are through the ways others have responded to the Dyslexic or Dyslexic type aspects of ourselves. We start with Paul ruminating about life in education as a terrible speller<sup>1</sup>. We then move on to explore Stella's experiences as a Dyslexic student and on into the early days of her academic career. We finish conversationally by questioning each other about the significance of our experiences and their implications both for education and the social construction of identity. The overall aim of this article is to ask teachers who are intolerant of poor spellers to take a more supportive approach, mindful of the impact they can have. We also seek to support University students who suffer at the hands of their teachers and important others on account of their Dyslexic type symptoms. The students will know who they are as they will have been labelled so many times but we do worry that the teachers may not be able to identify themselves, such are the power relations inherent in the social construction of identity (Phoenix, 2007).*

I AM PAUL, sitting at my desk at home, looking out over the hills and fields of my part of south Wales, contemplating how lucky I am to live where I do and the contrast with the correspondence I am having to deal with. Once again I am being told that there are deficiencies in my academic writing which should have been picked up prior to submission. This is nothing new for me. Nor is the reaction it produces in me despite not years but decades of familiarity. I find myself thinking back to landmark moments in my 'I am a rubbish speller' journey in life. The memories inevitably take me back to my school days. Like most, I had one or maybe two inspirational teachers but what I really learnt from my teachers was that I was useless at spelling and that, in their not very humble opinion, I should do something about it. As if it was that easy; not even the alphabet stays still for me. With the wonderful advantage of hindsight I now know that what they were trying to say was they could spell so why couldn't I.

In this journey, one of my earlier memories is of an English teacher at a lesser-known English public school not far north of Leicester. With considerable irritation and in front of the whole class, presumably for maximum humiliation, he demands to know why I had written 'ort', holding up the offending (and inevitably scrappy) exercise book and stabbing the characters that have upset him so that all could see. I couldn't think of a better answer than that it seemed to me to be the most appropriate word; an answer that did nothing to calm the man as it turned out to be the spelling that was his concern and nor was he going to tell me how to spell the word, as I should have known. Fortunately after the class, the helpful Paul Holmes told me that I should have written 'ought'. What a strange way to write 'ort'.

Into a negative frame of mind, I ruminate over the fact that I continued to make blunders. The typist of my undergraduate dissertation changed all occurrences of the 'kitterns' to 'kittens'. It would have been

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<sup>1</sup> It is very unlikely, but if you are reading this Paul, thank you.

much easier to have written ‘baby rabbits’, but one had to be academic. I recall writing letters of job applications to college Principles but then, I did by chance discover that I should have been writing to Principals, which led to interviews and jobs. Apparently, Yeats was turned down for a job at Trinity, Dublin, due to a spelling mistake in his application (Eagleton, 1999) so I am in good company but, believe me, that doesn’t help. In fact, it makes me angry. I start to defend myself in my mind against the Spelling Police. I argue that my poor spelling has not seriously affected me as a teacher in either further or higher education. I quickly learnt to only write words on the board that I could spell, or once I got to know a class (another reminiscence lurks – in those good old days when the classes were small and I knew everyone), I would ask the students how to spell the words I wanted; in part this was to show solidarity with those who couldn’t spell.

Recalling these coping strategies puts a smile on my face, but I know that I am acutely sensitive to and hurt by the stinging criticism that comes my way as a bad speller. Punctilious readers seem to like to draw my attention to errors that have, for me inevitably, got through into publications or abound in drafts. However, my favoured strategy of saying that I can’t spell, please would you proof-read for me provokes a stubborn insistence that that would not be possible. Is it more fun to criticise than help? Both take the same amount of time. Again I am reminded of my belief that those who are the most intolerant of bad spelling are those who can spell and because they can, they believe that everyone else should be able to. Of course, things are easier now with word processors that can correct my spelling as I go along, but I could give examples of words I would spell so badly that the spell-checker wouldn’t know what I was trying to say and no matter how many times I find the right spelling, I can never remember it for next time. It was just the same with trying to learn French or Latin

vocabulary at school. I recall the times I was accused of being lazy, not doing my homework but however much time I spent on a list of largely unrelated words, they would not stay in my memory all the way to the dreaded vocabulary test. Unsurprisingly, being caned did nothing to aid my memory.

I start to think through my own experiences as a teacher, hoping that I have been rather better than the many poor examples that I had to endure. I know that I have become sadly aware of the dismissive or aggressive way that some university lecturers treat poor spellers and what I see as their intolerance exists almost whatever the cause of the poor spelling, including the inevitably weak spelling of those for whom English is not their first language. I have also come to know that they are hurt just as I am.

Looking back at my desk, I wonder what I am going to do with the academic paper which is apparently so badly written that even the third-rate journal I sent it to doesn’t want it. It is never the ideas that are wrong or the statistics that are poor. It is always about the way I write. I know; for not the first time I will ask friendly colleagues to co-author the paper with me.

But I am still on a downward slide. Rejected papers, editorial criticism; why are supposedly clever people just so rude, so aggressive? Where is the teacher in them? This is supposed to be the world of education. Through my research, I recall, I came to find out two really important things. One is that a cause for poor spelling can be dyslexia. I have no idea if I am dyslexic, but in developing the Academic Behaviour Confidence Scale (Sander, 2009; Sanders & Sander, 2009), I had been using the Vinegrad Assessment Scale (1994), which, out of curiosity, I completed. My ‘results’ suggest that I might be borderline dyslexic; certainly, dyslexia runs in my family. Secondly, three keen, able and diligent project students who had a particular interest in dyslexia<sup>2</sup> and dyslexics found that dyslexic undergraduates have significantly lower

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<sup>2</sup> They were Dyslexic themselves and able students with an interest in education.

Academic Behavioural Confidence and global self-esteem (see Sander, 2009). For me, these results were profound at a personal level. What I had assumed was just part of me and who I was, turns out to be true for others as well. Objectively, I knew that from what I had experienced and from what I have heard from students that have talked to me, these results were only to be expected, but at a personal and more emotional level, it was shocking and surprising. Methodologically, we don't know for sure that the low self-esteem and academic confidence that these project students identified in dyslexic university undergraduates was the product of how important others had behaved towards them (Cooley, 1902, Gergen, 1999), but it is a most plausible explanation. Under current equal opportunities legislation dyslexic students in higher education are able to access help and support, especially in computing equipment and other technological aids, but they continue to be treated unsympathetically by some of their teachers – teachers I suspect for whom spelling is not a problem. An attitude change from ridicule to helpful support is required, I feel. After all, teachers are supposed to educate not humiliate and belittle.

At this low point of rumination I remember a landmark moment. Sitting, not so long ago, in a counselling room in Student Services, I noticed a poster proclaiming all the good things that can be associated with dyslexia (see Figure 1) which I now proudly display on my office door. On bad days, I pause on my way in to my office to take in some of these qualities. I like to think that I see some in me.

Students who are poor spellers are in good company, I now know from another of Student Services' posters (Figure 2). I recall the attention surrounding the publication of a poorly spelt letter from the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown and the subsequent discussion about whether the current Prime Minister of our country, like Winston Churchill before him, is dyslexic (Sutherland, 2009). The list of famous dyslexics

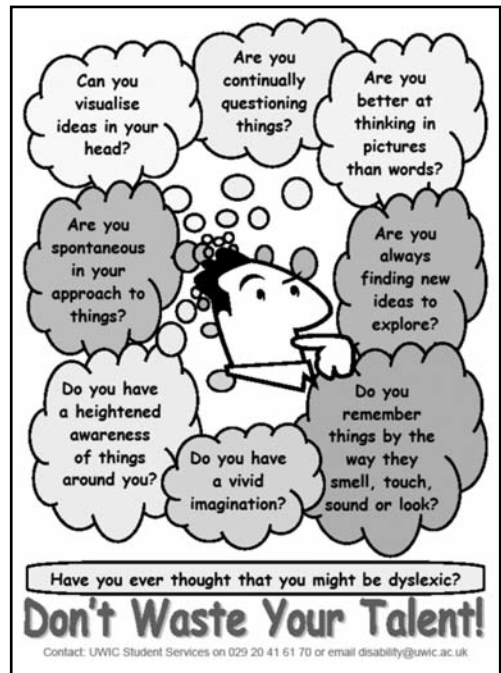


Figure 1: Benefits associated with Dyslexia.

contains people from all walks of life. Successful writers like Hans Christian Anderson, Agatha Christie (Famous People, no date) as well as W.B. Yeats (Miner & Siegel, 1992) are included, so there is no reason to suppose that poor spellers or dyslexic students can't succeed, but if the educational system they are studying in disadvantages them through a prevalence of prejudice attitudes on account of their spelling, they are less likely to succeed. I will share with you that it is easy to find examples of successful dyslexic people through a quick Google search but you may not have realised that this is just an excuse to tell you that the name Google itself is reputed to be the result of bad spelling by its founders, themselves notoriously bad spellers, who had intended to register the name Googol (Oldfield & Mitchinson, 2009).

I decide to leave the rejected paper until I feel stronger. I will ask around for co-authors to help me write but now I have another project. Having thought about my persistent poor spelling and my poor writing



Figure 2: Some famous Dyslexics.

in general, I have decided that I should share my story in the hope that I can help teachers be more sympathetic to their students and to show students who are themselves poor spellers that they are not alone and that there is a life with poor spelling. Perhaps the best way forward with this is to get the experience of one such student.

### Stella's experience of dyslexia

Even as a psychology undergraduate it is easy to avoid knowing much about particular topics others expect you to be aware of (as I am sure we all know). Up until three years ago I knew relatively little about dyslexia. Maybe my avoidance was some sort of defence mechanism or a heightened fear of psychology student syndrome (Hardy & Calhoun, 1997). I know that I felt that it was probably more than a coincidence that there were more dyslexic students at university due to Widening Participation (Farmer, Riddick & Sterling, 2002). Back then, I would have never have wanted to have been labelled dyslexic as I would have seen that as a convenient label

exempting me from taking responsibility for not being able enough to graduate. Dyslexic or not, I viewed my errors as evidence that I might not be cut out for studying a degree. It never even crossed my mind that it might be the system that was in error.

My view of dyslexia as a convenient way for people to avoid responsibility for their weaknesses and preventing people from facing the fact that they were not as clever as everyone else, can be seen as typical of the stigma surrounding dyslexia. Having no interest as a psychologist in dyslexia and no contact with people who were openly dyslexic, I had no information to the contrary that would challenge this view of dyslexics as not being able to succeed as undergraduates (Corrigan & Penn, 1999). I could not see the reality of what dyslexia meant or that many people with dyslexia did not shy away from a need to address their 'problems'. Perhaps if I had, I would have seen dyslexic symptoms in myself. This experience highlights for me, the difficulty in changing people's negative perceptions of

dyslexia and other labels. If people avoid information or have no interest in it, and are not aware of the connection between these abstract labels and real individuals with whom they have contact, how can the stigma be tackled?

This view that I had of what it meant to be dyslexic was challenged two years ago when it was suggested to me by my independent study tutor (and line manager at the time) that I might be dyslexic. This suggestion led to anger – ‘I am that bad there has to be something wrong with me’ and fear ‘What if I am dyslexic? What if I’m not? How would this impact on my tutor’s view of me and my hope of a career in academia?’ This was a significant moment in my career, but at the time I presumed it could only be a negative development.

### *Losing my individuality*

Of course, then I **had** to explore dyslexia. On one particular website<sup>3</sup> I found a list of common symptoms or signs of dyslexia, the impact of which are burnt into my memory. I was horrified! What I had felt all these years to be part of my personality, little quirks such as the unattractive way I hold a pen when I write, the numerous errors in map reading resulting from confusion between left and right, reading words in the wrong order and missing or adding words, were all just signs of dyslexia. Characteristics and habits engrained into my daily life, which represented challenges throughout my education and had led to humorous moments and experiences, things that made me **me**, were there for all to see as a sign of my problem.

I took the dyslexia assessment as I had to show my line manager that I had addressed his concerns. I think part of me was glad of the excuse to do so. I was mortified to be informed that I was dyslexic, although relieved that I didn’t have to go back and say to my boss that I wasn’t dyslexic, just really bad at producing a well-structured essay quickly, or reading numerous reports within

a single day. But these challenges remained fact, and now I feared that every tutor or employer I ever came into contact with would discover my dyslexia and instantly be aware of these weaknesses. I might as well write on any application ‘The requirements of this role are my biggest weaknesses’. Who would employ me over a non-dyslexic? I started to question my own intelligence, as well as colleagues’ and student’s views of my competence.

### *The impact of being dyslexic*

The way in which people respond to discovering that they are dyslexic must vary greatly depending on the support they have available from understanding others. For me, I was fortunate enough to have just completed a Master’s degree, with a merit and I had been selected for a job with the Division for Teachers and Researchers of Psychology (DTRP) who really appeared to appreciate me. I had also worked on a number of research projects receiving lots of positive feedback on my performance and contributions. This led to a choice, either I was very good at faking my own competence, which in itself is useful, or these achievements reflected my real ability.

What I failed to realise, was that the only reason my tutor had been aware of my likely dyslexia was because he was able to see my work progress, from the unstructured mess riddled with spelling errors to the report that I eventually submitted, as by this point in my life, I had developed various techniques and habits to overcome the weaknesses that I was aware of. Clearly, I had a number of marketable strengths and now with my dyslexic status, specialist help and software, I could tackle my weaknesses.

However, the label of dyslexia is also negative; you can’t do this well, you’re slow at that, so when my students come to see me for guidance, I get them to focus on what they are good at, not what they are struggling with. I have become aware of a multitude of

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<sup>3</sup> [www.beingdyslexic.co.uk/pages/information/general-information/common-signs-of-Dyslexia.php](http://www.beingdyslexic.co.uk/pages/information/general-information/common-signs-of-Dyslexia.php)

methods of revising and studying from my trial and error approach to establish effective study habits for myself. One measure of their effectiveness is that they hid my dyslexia from fellow students and tutors for nearly 20 years (although I am sure some were aware). I now see my dyslexia as an indication of my strengths. With this awareness and from challenging my weaknesses, I believe that I could be a valuable worker in educational settings.

### **Based on these accounts, Paul and Stella talk to each other**

**Paul:** I am amazed as it was clear to me at least within a very, very short time of knowing you that you were dyslexic or dyslexic like, yet you say that you had gone through compulsory schooling, post-compulsory education to get to university and then an undergraduate degree course before anyone suggested that you might be dyslexic. What does that tell us about the knowledge that those in education have about dyslexia?

**Stella:** I also found this odd. I was in the top group for all other subjects at school but nobody ever questioned why I was close to the bottom for English. It makes me wonder whether I was just written off without any effort to identify why. I think this happens a lot with students. It's just assumed that it is not the tutor's place to go that extra mile to explore with the student what might be causing the problem. I do think dyslexia is better publicised now, knowledge about it is slowly filtering down to the everyday teacher.

Being aware of dyslexic like symptoms in yourself, why have you not chosen to get officially tested given that you have identified yourself as possibly dyslexic? Is it a way of avoiding finding out if you really are dyslexic?

**Paul:** In my mind, I am just a rubbish speller; after all, that is what I had always been told. It was only through my recent work validating the Academic Behaviour Confidence Scale and the interests of three specific project students that I even put together the

possibility of my atrocious spelling and dyslexia. Completing the Vinegrad Assessment Scale was a product of probably not benign office banter. I really am borderline and at this point in my life, I can't see that there would be any benefits to being tested. However, this whole episode did force a re-evaluation of me as me, in the same way that your official diagnosis of dyslexia forced you to reconsider yourself and your identity. These experiences of ours, I suggest, show how we are constructed through our social experiences (Burr, 1995; Cooley, 1902; Gergen, 1999; Mean, 1934; Phoenix, 2007). In particular, I feel that my low confidence in academic writing has been the product of others' reactions to it and realising that has fuelled the empathy I have with dyslexic students when I discovered just how low their academic confidence was (see Sander, 2009). My experiences as editor of *Psychology Teaching Review* were a catalyst in bringing these strands together into this article and, of course, created the opportunity for us to talk.

Seemingly in contrast, you are saying that the 'pathologisation' of your thinking and writing through the diagnostic label of dyslexia has taken away some of your identity. I don't think that it has taken anything away from me, but it suggests that a 'diagnosis' of dyslexia has effects beyond getting help to students who needed it. What you say reminds me of Oliver Sacks (1985; see also Couser, 2001) talking about, I think Witty Ticky Ray in *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. Sacks wonders how much of Ray is Tourettes and how much is Ray. Can these be separated or is Ray and his Tourettes all the same thing? When I read this, I liked it. I am always impressed by how much Sacks is aware of his 'case studies' as real human beings. Ray didn't like his Tourettes being controlled by drugs and chose to only medicate during the week. Has the diagnosis of dyslexia worked in a similar way for you? Like with Ray's medication, has a label of dyslexia helped you to survive in a world dominated by non-dyslexics?

**Stella:** I wish I could be like Ray and not use my software, not spend extra time trying to perfect work before passing it on to someone else, just talking and writing how it comes out of my head. However, there is an important distinction to be raised here, Ray wasn't conducting academic writing classes and if he wanted to do that, I am sure he would have grabbed at any straw. I want to be a respected academic and in order to be taken seriously I need to work hard to negate this part of my identity or at least the parts that conflict with my career goal. It may not be fair but I don't see an alternative, I can't afford to be 'abnormal'. I don't see the label of dyslexia helping me to survive. It helped in providing access to more effective ways of circumventing it but it hasn't given me acceptance into academia; not at all.

What is your view on dyslexics in academia, should dyslexics be academics? Or by virtue of their flaws should they be excluded? How do you feel your role as *PTR* editor fits in with your identity as a potential dyslexic? I am sure this issue was in your mind when you 'signed up' for this role.

**Paul:** I guess that it is about the balance of strengths and weaknesses. Given that writing or rather communicating is an important aspect of our work, we would have to be able to do that. However, as we have discussed above, there are strategies for dealing with it. Fortunately, we don't have to write papers, prepare conference presentations or lecture notes under unseen exam conditions. However, we do have to write them. Maybe we are both able to find friends and colleagues to help us as they know that we have other strengths, which takes me back to Figure 1 again and which I suspect is related to central coherence (Happé, 1999).

In relation to your question about *PTR*, I originally got involved to assist a previous editor so the responsibility for final production didn't rest on my shoulders. I liked to think that I had strengths I could bring to the role, but I also knew I had significant

weaknesses. You may remember the committee meeting when we discussed the need for proof-reading help with *PTR* which has since caused problems that are, I hope, now sorted thanks to a generous volunteer<sup>4</sup>.

I am keen to see a discussion in *PTR* on academic communication and writing. I worry that there is, at times a concern with precision for precision's sake – a precision that is situated in historical time anyway as language is fluid and evolving and, as such requires a Postmodern approach (Gergen, 2001). As an editorial team, we offer to support writers who submit to *PTR* and it is for just this reason. There have to be standards; standards of research and data analysis, standards for engagement with the literature and also writing standards. We can support submissions in these respects but we both know that it is the writing one that we are really committed.

**Stella:** Your comments are mirrored in the stigma literature which stresses the role of reciprocity in stigma development (Reidpath et al., 2005). So long as powerful others see benefits in our inclusion within academia we don't have a problem, but as soon as we are judged to be not pulling our weight, resentment can build and provide a justification for stigmatisation (Heatherton et al., 2000).

Your comments provoke questions and concerns in me when I think about the difficulty I may face in publishing. Why is it that good work which may be less than ideally written is less likely to get considered? The HE sector works hard to offer students equality and fairness and aids them in participating in academia through Widening Participation schemes, but this doesn't carry on to aid postgraduate students and employees? If we were physically disabled, employers would have to make reasonable alterations to accommodate us. Why then do journals, for example, not make reasonable adjustments, like offering proofreading provision, to allow contributors from dyslexic authors to be judged on the merit of

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<sup>4</sup> You know who you are.

content? After all, this is essential for career progression and professional acknowledgment? Why is it justifiable to use a disability as a way of rejecting papers when there are too many to be published? Why are 'Clever' people so blind to their own hypocrisy?

As an academic with more experience than I have, can you offer some advice for coping with the rejection I may face in the future, how do you avoid internalising all this?

**Paul:** Not really, it always hurts but there are things that can be done to lower the likelihood of rejection. For me, it is to recognise that collaboration is a good thing. Papers published with others are not of lower quality than papers with single authorship. With a policy of collaboration, play to your strengths and work together to produce quality papers. I know I would not be where I am now without the help of one colleague and friend who I met in my first teaching job and has been with me ever since<sup>4</sup>.

Do you think it is possible for us to offer advice or guidance to others based on our experience, over and above what we have said, not least to help further widening participation in universities which we are both committed to?

**Stella:** Offering instructions or tips for tutors in the situation of supporting a student with poor spelling is not an easy task and it might be that each student would need specific support. Based on my own experience, however, I would suggest that assuming students haven't read through their work prior to submitting and writing a comment to that effect on their work can be counter-productive by raising a host of negative emotions in the student who has worked hard to produce the best work possible. It may not be the case that they neglected to read their submission and rushed it in; they may have reviewed their work and did not identify misspelt words. Identifying these

errors is much more valuable for a student striving to overcome their difficulty. For further 'tips' on supporting such students see [www.dyslexia-teacher.co.uk/t6.html](http://www.dyslexia-teacher.co.uk/t6.html) or write to us!

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In this article, we have tried to show dyslexia from the personal perspective of the dyslexic/poor speller as we suspect that this may not be accessible to non-dyslexics. Key issues we feel we have raised are that dyslexia is more than a label that identifies those of us who are likely to be poor at certain things and more than a collection of negative traits. Nor is it a convenient way of avoiding responsibility for specific reading and writing limitations. Finding out that you are dyslexic can be an emotional journey which leads you to challenge your very identity and worth, and if you are dyslexic and in academia you have succeeded above all odds so it is likely your strengths far outweigh your weaknesses. Your peers and colleagues should be aware of that and respect you for it. Sadly, the reality seems to be that we continue to need a range of coping strategies to help us survive the surveillance of the Spelling Police.

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