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The hidden toll of dyslexia in art and design schools

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Abstract

This paper explores the prevalence of dyslexia and neurodiversity among art and design students, drawing from my PhD research titled 'Visualising the Invisible: An investigation into dyslexia and absence through visual art practice'. The paper highlights the challenges dyslexic students may face in tertiary education environments and how this may impact their transition to careers in arts industries. Current research lacks data on the prevalence of neurodivergence, such as dyslexia, among art students and suggests that this may create limited awareness of dyslexia in art and design schools. Existing studies suggest dyslexic individuals may exhibit enriched creative abilities, potentially making them well-suited for creative professions like art, design, filmmaking and architecture. As an initial investigation, I anonymously surveyed artists and designers who identified with dyslexic traits. The results informed my practice-based research through personal experiences as a dyslexic artist and university lecturer. Additionally, the paper addresses the lack of dyslexia awareness in Australian creative industries and art education, questioning the reasons behind non-disclosure of dyslexia by students and staff. I argue that enhancing dyslexia awareness and support can improve wellbeing and retention rates in art and design schools.

The hidden toll of dyslexia in art and design schools

This paper is based on initial research I conducted as part of my current PhD project titled 'Visualising the Invisible: An Investigation into Dyslexia through Visual Art Practice' using practice-based and autoethnographical methodologies. Early on, I sought to better understand dyslexia and neurodiversity through diverse artistic individuals who may be interested in knowing more about traits associated with dyslexia. One method to gain information was surveying anonymous participants recruited through social media. The survey was supported through ethics approval from Federation University. In this paper, I have reflected on the data collected to better understand dyslexia and neurodiversity in art and design schools through my lived experience as an artist, designer, lecturer and dyslexic.

Comments made in this paper are based on my 20-plus years' experience as a sessional tutor at Oxygen College, Federation University and RMIT University in the schools of design and visual art. A recent study conducted by Federation University, titled 'Enhancing the Inclusion and Success of Neurodivergent Students in Regional and Remote Higher Education: A Co-Developed project' (Edwards et al. 2023), the questions favoured autism and ADHD concerns with only a few questions pinpointing issues relating to dyslexia. In October 2024, I participated in a workshop at Federation University facilitated by re:Think Dyslexia and attended by Disability Services and undergraduate students, responding to concerns regarding dyslexia. During this workshop, questions raised by Disability Services staff indicated a lack of knowledge and, therefore, training regarding the needs of dyslexic students. I am also involved in a Neurodiverse discussion group at RMIT, which provides casual support and resources for staff and researchers at the School of Art. And I am a member of Dear Dyslexic PhD Dyslexia Group consisting of researchers from across the UK, Europe, Australia and the USA where we have the opportunity to discuss and compare dyslexic support, services and awareness available in several global universities.

Dyslexia affects at least 10% of the population and sits under the banner of neurodiversity, sometimes known as neurominorities (Australian Dyslexia Association). This paper discusses the hypothesis that dyslexia is more prevalent in creative professions (Alexander-Passe 2010; Bacon 2013; Eide and Eide 2023; Phillips 2022; West 1997; Wolff & Lundberg 2003) and considers how art and design schools can enhance the overall experience for dyslexics through increased awareness of both the perceived challenges and benefits. My PhD research questions how being dyslexic affects my visual art practice. As part of my initial research, I surveyed over 60 individuals who have studied art, work in creative industries or are practicing artists.

The International Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as 'a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities.'

Secondary effects include working memory (Berg 2020), processing speed (Dyslexia Support South) and executive functioning (Brosnan 2002). Students and staff to require adjustments to learning and work activities and tasks to accommodate these

effects.

Based on my experience as a university lecturer and on recommendations by peak bodies such as British Dyslexia Association, there is an advantage in segmenting tasks into discrete components by sequentially providing instructions and limiting them to one or two instructions at a time. Delivering information through diverse modalities, including verbal, visual and kinesthetic approaches, can increase success through enhanced understanding and learning outcomes. Dyslexic students and staff also may require additional time and more frequent breaks. They often work harder than their peers to achieve the same tasks because of lower literacy capabilities (British Dyslexia Association); the cognitive load of reading, writing and comprehension may slow down or inhibit the student or staff's capacity. However, like many deficits, there is a flip side, which is dyslexic people are more efficient at activities that require visual-spatial awareness (Cowen 2014), narrative reasoning, and pattern recognition, attributes often associated with art and design (Colgin 2009; West 1997).

When I searched 'Art,' 'Dyslexia' and 'Australia,' no appropriate or relevant search results appeared; there was a similar finding by Bruce E. Phillips in New Zealand (2022). There are no current qualitative or quantitative studies confirming the percentage of dyslexics and other neurodiversities like Autism or ADHD in art and design schools in Australia, and this suggests that further research would be beneficial to art and design schools.

In 2002, Wolff and Lundberg conducted a study at Goteborg University School of Art, Sweden, which reported 30% of enrolled students demonstrated a prevalence for dyslexia. In 1997 a study of students at St Martins School of Art, UK, 75% of the foundation year students tested as dyslexic (Applegate 1997). These numbers are supported by research across a selection of primary, secondary and tertiary schools in France and Belgium (Kapoula 2016) that tested dyslexic and non-dyslexic students who were studying creative subjects using a method called Torrance Test of Creative Thinking.

This test was comprised of 4 areas:

- *Fluency* is the ability to produce many figural images.
- *Flexibility* is the ability to produce different ideas.

- *Originality* is the ability to produce uncommon responses.
- *Elaboration* is the ability to develop and elaborate an idea.

The paper found 2 key results:

1. Dyslexic children and teenagers can possess higher creativity.
2. The educative environment plays an important role in the development of creativity in dyslexic individuals.

These findings open potential conversations regarding the role that art and design schools could play in nurturing dyslexic individuals and would benefit from future research.

In 2023, I conducted an anonymous online survey using a social media recruitment strategy. Federation University endorsed the delivery of my survey through ethics approval (2022). Based on my initial research into the challenges and successful attributes that may be commonly associated with dyslexia, I developed a series of questions. I asked whether the participants had a formal diagnosis of dyslexia, which the majority did not, yet they self-identified as dyslexic.

Out of the 68 participants, 50% said that they had 'difficulty with organisation tasks', 60% said that they 'struggled to stay focused', and 60% said that they prefer to 'verbalise ideas than write them'. Difficulties such as these are expected, as they correlate to low executive functioning (Farah et al. 2021) which relates to organisation competencies, low processing speed resulting in requiring a longer time to process new information, and low working or short-term memory applied to cognitive tasks such as day-to-day activities that require manipulation of information (Cowan 2008). Although many individuals may experience similar challenges, these are common attributes in dyslexics and across other neurominorities such as ADHD (British Dyslexia Association; re:Think Dyslexia; ADDitude Magazine).

The focus of my research is not only to discuss the challenges associated with dyslexia but rather to celebrate some of the attributes that may explain why many dyslexics may excel in creative careers. It has been suggested that 'dyslexic strengths' were commonplace for artists, and I designed the questionnaire to investigate this opinion (Bacon 2015).

The survey found that 75% of participants said they were good at problem-solving and critical thinking, almost 80% said they found cohesion in seemingly disparate ideas, 70% had self-reported good spatial awareness and self-reported good pattern recognition, and over 80% considered themselves big picture thinkers. Of the people surveyed, 45% had post-graduate qualifications despite the learning difficulties many dyslexic people experience. The results supported the opinions provided in books such as *The Dyslexia Advantage: Unlocking the hidden potential of the dyslexic brain* (Eide and Eide 1999, 2023) and *In the Mind's Eye: Creative Visual Thinkers, Gifted dyslexics and the rise of visual technologies* (West 1997), which claim that attributes such as these may contribute to the popular notion that dyslexics are more attuned to creativity.

Everatte et al. (1999), agree that dyslexic adults presented with greater creativity in tasks requiring insight, novelty and innovation and another study found that dyslexics were faster at solving impossible problems that required visual-spatial skills (Cowen 2014).

Increased mental health risks for those with dyslexia persist in schools and the workplace. A recent La Trobe University study found that a higher-than-average proportion of dyslexic adults suffered mental health issues. Sixty-seven per cent of those interviewed said that they did not feel good about themselves, 38% were underemployed based on their qualifications (Wissell 2022), and a study from Canada said 46% of dyslexic interviewees had higher odds of having attempted suicide (Wilson 2009). Nearly 50% did not feel safe disclosing being dyslexic in their workplace due to the stigma associated with being dyslexic, and concern about repercussions within the workplace, including being overlooked for promotion and being misunderstood or treated differently (Wissell 2022).

In my own experience, I have engaged complex strategies to navigate tasks within school and in the workplace and therefore, as a university tutor, I recognise students struggling with cognitive loads whilst trying to uphold learning expectations. Often these struggles remain hidden as the student has not disclosed their dyslexia or other neurodiversity. I question how universities and schools can create spaces where students and staff feel safe to disclose. My own decision to disclose my dyslexia was difficult and one that I spent time weighing up against the possible ramifications. I am still nervous about openly announcing being dyslexic for fear that I

will not receive the same opportunities as others in both research spheres and as a sessional tutor with the hope of future full-time employment.

Through my art practice, I aim to open discussions about dyslexia within creative industries and learning spaces. My recent exhibitions visually divulge my experience of growing up as an undiagnosed dyslexic and the relief of receiving an assessment.

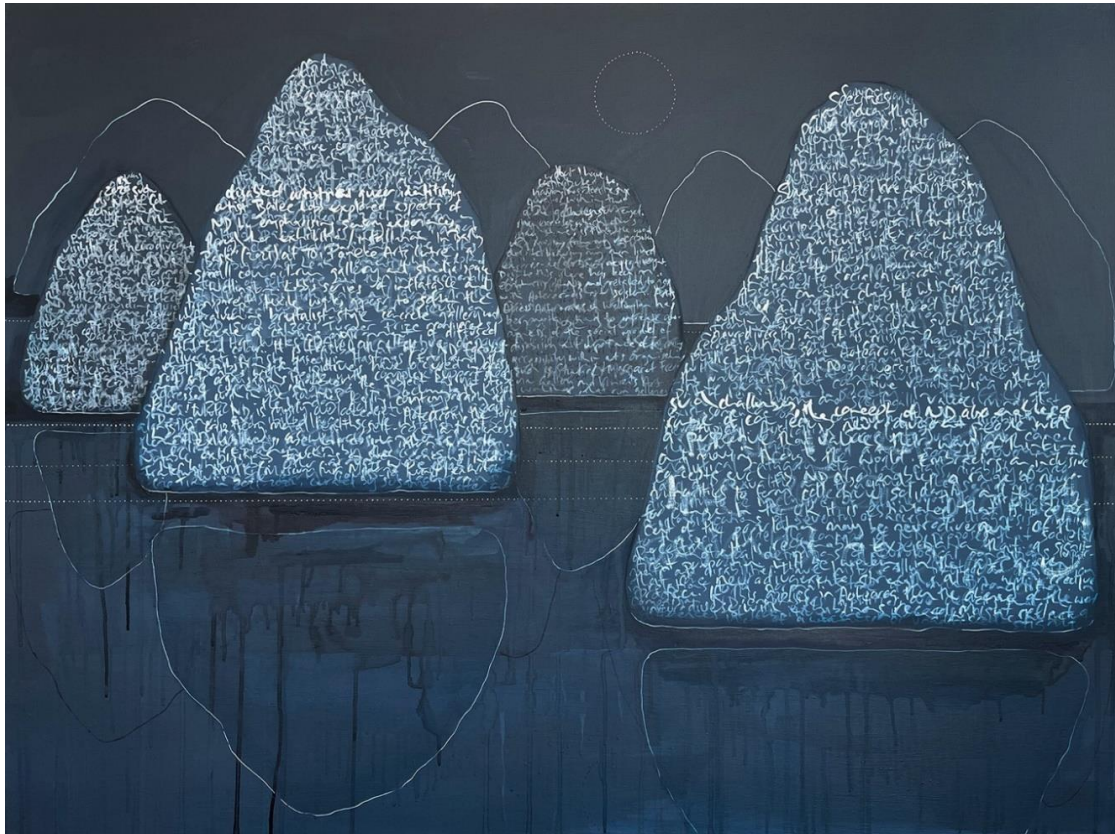


Figure 1: Kim Percy, *Some Struggles*, 2023, oil, acrylic and ink brush on linen.

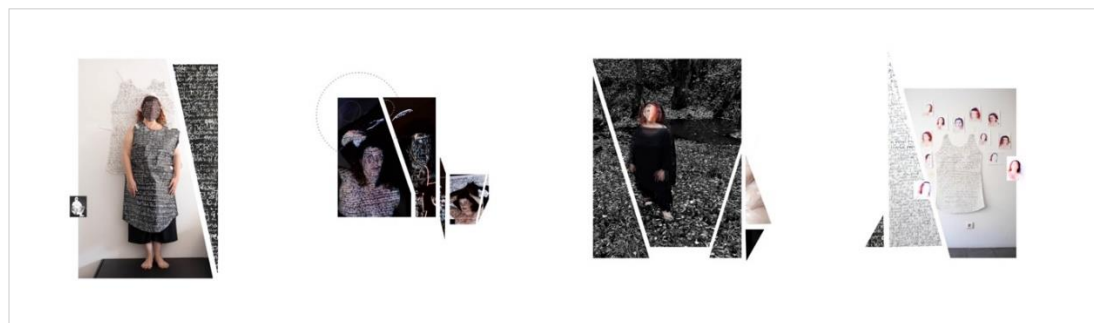


Figure 2: Kim Percy, Mockup of the series, *The Real Thing*, 2023, digital photography.

My painting, *Some Struggles*, from the series *Mountain Out of Words*, aims to visually articulate how dyslexic people may experience reading, with words and sentences jumbled up over themselves in a tangled mess (figure 1). Sometimes, it

can feel like climbing a mountain to complete a task, and this series aims to represent this struggle.



Figure 3: Kim Percy, *Hiding in Plain Sight*, 2023, digital photography.

The series from the exhibition *The Real Thing* (figure 2), featured at Ballarat International Foto Biennale 2023, asks what is being 'real' when an individual has spent a lifetime masking their difficulties and creating complex coping strategies. The photos within this series are fractured, suspended within a transparent frame, with text and lines forming marks over the body and face (figure 2), being permanent reminders of the challenges that dyslexic people experience. The paper dress symbolises the disruption dyslexia caused within childhood and is an attempt to unravel the impact that having a learning difference has had upon me. Taking portraits of myself brought up feelings of discomfort, vulnerability and exposure as an

artist publicly disclosing myself as dyslexic, for example *Hiding in Plain Sight* (figure 3).

The questions raised in this paper underscore the need for further research to determine whether art and design schools attract a higher proportion of dyslexic and other neurodiverse students and staff compared to other educational institutions. Art and design schools would benefit by gaining a better understanding of neurodiversities to effectively educate and support students who are dyslexic, Autistic, have ADHD, and other neurominorities. This understanding can serve as a foundation for developing more tailored support policies and creating safe spaces for students and staff to disclose their neurodiversity.

It's worth noting that neurodiversity encompasses a wide range of conditions beyond Autism and ADHD, including dyslexia, Tourette's, OCD and others. Therefore, policies and resources designed to support Autism and ADHD should be expanded to include these other neurominorities to ensure a truly inclusive educational environment.

In summary, dyslexia and other neurodiversities appear prevalent in art and design schools, and it is evident that further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of their impact on both staff and students, regardless of whether they have a formal diagnosis. Establishing truly safe and inclusive environments where students and staff feel comfortable disclosing their neurodiversity is foundational to building trust, fostering respect and enhancing overall wellbeing and perhaps better academic and creative results.

To achieve this outcome, this paper recommends that all staff members undergo training in best practices for supporting neurodiverse students. Crucially, this goes hand-in-hand with the comprehensive review and adaptation of the curriculum to incorporate multiple approaches to assignments and diverse methods of delivering learning resources. This is not a mountain too high: awareness is the foundation, followed by training. Additionally, clear guidelines on accommodations and strategies for positively aiding neurodiverse learners could be provided. Implementing these measures would not only benefit neurodiverse students but also support the wellbeing and retention of all students and staff within the institution.

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