

# Evolutionary Dyslexia? nary

**John Wood**, who discovered he was dyslexic in his fifties, ponders whether it could help to replace bureaucracy with genuine systems of quality?

ARE YOU A WEE BIT AMBIDEXTROUS? Can you naturally interpret things in a visual format? Can you easily visualise objects in their 'mirror-image' state? Are you able to imagine objects from different perspectives? Do you read complex diagrams quickly and easily? Do you grasp situations in terms of their whole context? Can you easily create new ideas, possibilities, and understandings? Are you able to interpret situations in a free and poetic way? Where are these questions leading? All of them are positive symptoms of dyslexia. If you are a creative person you have probably scored highly. On the other hand, the negative symptoms may be more familiar to you.

Reflect upon your childhood and ask yourself whether you ever had problems with your balance, co-ordination, or hearing? Did you find it difficult to co-ordinate several tasks at once? Did you learn to dress yourself or tie shoelaces later than your friends? Did you find team sports much more difficult than solo sports? Did instructions and messages easily confuse you? Did you miss out letters, or get them mixed up when writing? Did you often need to have information repeated before you could absorb it? Did you find that you took longer than others to do your homework? Did you find it hard to plan and write essays? Did you manage your studies more effectively on some days rather than others?

From the dyslexic child's perspective, the way s/he has been asked to think is probably one that does not seem to make much sense. If s/he is unlucky, s/he will also learn that asking questions is not cool, because non-dyslexics seem able to follow the most tiresome rules without needing to know why. By (official) definition, dyslexics are intelligent people who have problems with some, but not all of the capabilities required for effortless learning. In some cases their problem/s are extreme, thereby causing difficulties that are hard to ignore. Many conceal the symptoms from others, and themselves. Most acquire cunning strategies that compensate for it in other ways.

Is dyslexia more common than we have admitted? Although there are no clear statistics about the extent of dyslexia in our society, we are becoming increasingly aware of it. Many of my current postgraduate students are successful design practitioners from a variety of countries and from different cultural and professional origins. Our MA Design Futures degree calls upon them to use writing as a way to dream about the world, as they would like it to be. Putting it like this makes it sound easy but, for some, it can be more challenging than they had expected. Although they have deliberately chosen a course that requires quite a lot of reading and writing, many are uneasy about the task. Last year, about a quarter of the group was tentatively diagnosed as dyslexic. For the individuals concerned this was unexpected, disturbing, and sometimes quite distressing. For me, it is becoming less of a surprise, although I often fail to guess which individuals will come to realise how much extra time they have always put in to appear competent and normal.

Why do we take such a negative view of dyslexia? A few months ago I wanted to write a book called *The Gift of Dyslexia*, but was told someone called Ronal D. Davis had already done it. I checked out the book and was impressed by its unpretentious, self-styled approach. Basically, Davis claims that dyslexia is a self-invoked but disabling response to a state of cognitive disorientation. Disorientation is what happens when some clever and alert individuals are taught in a way that overloads their ability to think things through properly. Many children reach this point when the teaching environment ignores their holistic alertness and demands a standardised, simplified, coded way of thinking. Where the child is bright and imaginative this pressure can produce discomfort and confusion.

Davis claims that many respond by learning to focus or narrow their thinking so that it produces the 'right' answer. Arguably, this is potentially destructive and alienating for the child. If he is right, there are enormous economic, social, and other benefits that we can expect, once this issue is addressed in a creative and positive way. Our current failure represents a missed opportunity by schools, universities, companies, governments, and a host of other agencies. Sadly, instead of understanding dyslexics and supporting the way they think, we more often make them feel incompetent, or worthless within the often rather unimaginative modes of thinking that are expected of them. In very many