

Inclusive Instruction for Dyslexic Learners in Higher Education White Paper

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What is Dyslexia?: While its specific definition and components are debated, dyslexia is usually considered a decoding (reading) difficulty associated with phonological processing in otherwise capable learners (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2014; First Step Act of 2018, 2018; International Dyslexia Association, 2020; Kirby, 2019, 2020; Shaywitz, 2020). “Phonological processing refers to the use of phonological information (i.e., the sounds of one’s language) in processing written and oral language,” (Wagner & Torgesen, 1987, p. 192).

Dyslexia Challenges - Barriers to Academic Achievement: Traditional types of classroom instruction can disengage dyslexic students, negatively impacting their academic outcomes (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006; Shaywitz, 2020). While not exclusive to dyslexic learners, common pedagogical approaches such as lectures, reading substantial amounts of text, and timed assessments are key elements related to dyslexic learner disengagement and classroom learning difficulties (Shaywitz, 2020). This can hinder students in keeping up with peers academically and, if unaddressed, can lead to “low self-esteem, behavior problems, anxiety, aggression, and withdrawal from friends, parents and teachers” (Mayo Clinic, n.d.).

Reframing Dyslexia - Opportunities for Academic Achievement: While current understandings tend to focus on dyslexia from a deficit framework, such as a decoding (reading) difficulty associated with phonological processing, emerging understandings are reframing dyslexia as a standard part of human diversity and not a disability or disorder (Chapman, 2012; Clouder et al., 2020; Doyle 2020; Taylor & Vestergaard, 2022). Providing dyslexic learners an equitable, inclusive, and supportive learning environment may offer transformative learning opportunities that include utilizing and self-actualizing their intellectual strengths and abilities, showcasing subject proficiency, and having their academic performance assessed beyond conventional teaching and assessment methods. An inclusive and welcoming environment also contributes to dyslexic students’ feelings of belonging and that they are valued class members. It also establishes an environment of collaboration and innovation amongst all students and instructors. Additionally, incorporating inclusive dyslexic instruction helps to recruit dyslexic students into education programs and to mitigate attrition from education programs, as well as builds an awareness of neurodiverse abilities.

Inclusive Instruction and Assessment Approaches:

Pedagogical approaches that enable dyslexic students to connect to their interests and utilize their abilities may increase student engagement and academic success. Successful pedagogical approaches include (a) instructors being flexible in teaching and assessment approaches; (b) providing student choice to demonstrate understanding; (c) incorporating active and experiential learning opportunities.

Examples of inclusive teaching approaches:		Examples of inclusive assessments:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Active Learning• Experiential Learning• Service Learning• Mentorships• Project-Based Learning• Team Problem Solving• Guest Speakers• Field Experience• Connecting to Interests• Role Play Activities• Virtual Reality Activities• Providing ‘Big Picture’ Context	<p>Use of content from multiple sources, such as books, newspapers, multimedia, websites, interaction with professional practitioners, games.</p> <p>Use of material artifacts, such as specialized tools, lab equipment, artwork, software, items from nature, building materials.</p>	<p>Opportunities to use creativity to demonstrate understanding, such as creating a website, video/film, artwork, game, experiment, model, or live demonstration.</p> <p>Utilizing capstone projects, learning portfolios, and other project-based learning artifacts to assess learning.</p> <p>Incorporating flexibility into contemporary assignments, such as allowing for more time to decode reading assignments and focusing on content rather than spelling and handwriting mishaps with exams.</p> <p>Utilizing student feedback and reflection assignments to assess learning, address misunderstandings, and modify curriculum when necessary.</p>

Helpful Hints for Successful Implementation of Inclusive Instruction:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teaching approaches can include more than lectures, substantial amounts of text, and timed assessments.• Being flexible with time requirements and offer opportunities for students to choose how to demonstrate their understandings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Becoming familiar with the challenges and abilities associated with dyslexia.• Shifting from a deficit mindset to strengths-based and growth-based mindset concerning dyslexia.• Incorporating student abilities into teaching and assessment.	<p>Open communication between instructors and students is essential. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establishing an environment where students feel comfortable and safe to engage the instructor in multiple ways,• Providing clear expectations and instructions,• Providing opportunities for student feedback on what is pedagogically effective or not effective for them,• Advising students on university resources.
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