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Study Skills for Dyslexic Students

Sandra Hargreaves (ed)

London: Sage Publishing, 2007, 166pp. plus CD-ROM, ISBN: 978-1412936095 (pbk)

Sometimes those working to support disabled students in higher education become frustrated and disillusioned by what might be perceived to be slow progress towards becoming a genuinely inclusive system. However, some progress has been made. The number of students declaring that they have an impairment either on entry or during their time in higher education has grown year by year since the 1990s, although in some institutions and within them in some faculties and departments, there is still the need to improve participation rates. At the level of policy and provision, there has been a shift in focus since the mid 1990s. From access and increasing numbers, which appeared to be the major focus of the first national survey of disabled students in universities (National Innovations Centre, 1974), the major concern has become the quality of the higher education experience, especially in learning, teaching, and assessment. This can be demonstrated by considering the projects and initiatives supported by both the English and Scottish Higher Education funding Councils.

In England, some of the Higher Education Academy Subject Centres have published very useful guides about the inclusion of disabled students into their curricula (e.g. in engineering, geography, and social work). In Scotland, the excellent 'Teachability' project has prompted all teaching staff to review their classroom practices in order to evaluate the extent to which there are barriers to inclusion (SHEFC, 2004). In both England and Scotland, there have also been important research projects which have tried to explore the quality of the learning experience from the students' perspectives (Fuller *et al.* 2004; Riddell *et al.* 2005). So, whilst there seems to be a growing quantity of practical advice and support for staff, this does not seem to have been matched by a similar growth in helpful information for disabled students. This book edited by Hargreaves is a significant step towards filling the gap in what is available currently.

'This book is for students with dyslexia and has been designed to be used independently. It provides strategies to help dyslexic students and those with Specific Learning Difficulties such as dyspraxia, but would also be helpful for a wide range of students, for what is specifically useful for dyslexic students is useful for everyone'

(p.xx). This quotation says exactly what the book does and does so effectively, I would argue. I would also want to support strongly the assertion that it is useful for all students. It has been compiled by a team of experienced staff, all of whom have successfully completed a postgraduate qualification relating to teaching adults with dyslexia in higher education.

There are 11 fairly short chapters in which the major focus is always on strategies which might be helpful in ensuring that learners with specific learning difficulties work successfully and effectively during their time in post-compulsory education. There is also a helpful glossary of key terms at the end of the book. The chapters adopt the same structure. Each starts with a summary of the main points to be covered and ends with a list of points which it is suggested that students should remember. All chapters include plenty of what are, in effect, good practices in study skills for all students. Two examples will suffice to illustrate this. In Chapter 1, which is about managing workload, students are urged to plan ahead and are offered a choice of means of doing so. Chapter 5, on answering essay questions, reminds students to look carefully at the instruction (e.g. describe, discuss, etc.) and to ensure that they comply with it. I like, too, the exhortation to consider carefully the advice given by teaching staff when written work is returned (p.66). The writing also makes use of the work of others who have pioneered some of the strategies described. For example, Chapter 2 ('Understanding your preferred learning style') owes much to the work of Buzan on mind mapping. It is also good to see the inclusion of a chapter aimed at helping those who experience difficulties in mathematics and statistics (Chapter 8).

Despite my enthusiasm for the book, I have identified what I perceive to be some significant matters which I think would benefit from further attention. At some points in the text, the suggestion is made that students use cassette recorders in lectures. Whilst under the terms of anti-discrimination legislation this might constitute a 'reasonable adjustment', the good manners shown in terms of asking permission from teaching staff seem not to be considered with the seriousness which they merit when this is mentioned first (p.20/27), although there is more attention given to this towards the end of the book – guidance which could be missed if students use the book selectively, which is what the authors advocate. I am also concerned about some of the discussion in Chapter 9 on exam techniques. There is a focus on the allocation of additional time in exams without considering other possible modifications (e.g. asking students with specific learning difficulties to complete fewer questions within the time frame allocated to all students) or real, genuine alternative

approaches to assessment. A lot of recent work has been undertaken in connection with the latter, often funded as special initiative projects by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). In addition, there have been some interesting, thought-provoking papers published in the USA which have explored assessment strategies (e.g. Williams & Ceci, 1999; Ofeish & Hughes, 2002). Knowing of these might be helpful both to staff and students if challenged about their efforts to achieve equity in assessment procedures.

My final concern is that the book does appear to be based for the most part around both a traditional transmission approach to learning (although the final two chapters are about the potential value of role play and of advances in ICT) and a deficit model of specific learning difficulty. On the latter, it is interesting to consider what the consequences might be of advocating use of the term 'learning difference' instead of 'learning difficulty'. I think that this would transfer the onus for pursuing inclusive classroom practices from the student to the tutors and would constitute a clearer statement that a social/educational model of disability is being implemented.

It would be wrong and misleading to give the impression that the book has more shortcomings than strengths. Indeed, the opposite is true, but what about its competitors on the bookshop shelves? There is a lot of material available on the market currently which is directed towards helping students with learning difficulties and those who support them. How does this book compare with what is already available and familiar? Is it value for money, given limited student budgets? My answer is that the book should be seen as complementary to books such as those by Farmer *et al.* (2002) and by DuPre *et al.* (2007). Perhaps its most serious rival in the marketplace is the excellent guide to study skills written by Stella Cotterell (2003), to which Hargreaves *et al.* themselves make reference. However, what Sandra Hargreaves and her collaborators have done to make their book much more appealing is to ensure that all its content is provided on the CD-ROM which accompanies the book. This is the book's unique selling point - to use a marketing title - and represents very good value for money. The fact that the various diagrams, tables and pro forma which are helpful to students with specific learning difficulties are easily available and can be changed to a format to meet individual needs makes this book stand out from the others. It could also appeal to another sector of the market in that blind and visually-impaired learners can have immediate, independent and personal access to the text. In this respect, the book is in the vanguard of the development of materials designed to ensure increased inclusion of

students with a range of impairments in post-compulsory education. This is something of which the editor and authors can be proud.

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