

# Effective Learning and Motivation – Ideas and Strategies for Independent Learning

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Motivation and the nature of the learning experience are important factors for all students, but particularly for students with dyslexia. These factors need to be taken into account when developing a programme of learning for students with dyslexia.

It is also important to ensure that the learning experience and the learning skills of students with dyslexia can be extended through 'constructivist' approaches to teaching and learning.

## Learning

### **How dyslexia affects children's learning:**

One of the key factors about learning is that learning is a process. This process can be described as dynamic one. This means that different parts of the brain interact with other parts and each relies on and interacts with the other. For example the various parts of the brain that deal with visual/ auditory/memory/understanding/co-ordination may all be used simultaneously to tackle a task. It is often this simultaneous use of learning skills that is challenging for children with dyslexia. For that reason tasks need to be structured, clarified and preferably focussed towards the student's stronger areas of learning. Children with dyslexia are usually stronger visually or kinesthetically, as opposed to auditory. That means initial learning will be more meaningful if presented visually or through the experience of learning (kinesthetic).

Kinesthetic experiences can be helpful to re-inforce learning. Kinesthetic means experiencing learning. Activities that involve drama and role playing, or investigation and enquiry activities, such as in a survey, interview or questionnaire, all utilise kinesthetic skills. Each of these activities involves experiential learning.

### **Cognition**

Cognition is important for learning. This describes the actual processes involved in learning a piece of information. This relates to memory, understanding, organising and generally making sense of information. Often children with dyslexia have what can be described as cognitive difficulties. This includes memory and organising information and often these can be quite serious difficulties that the dyslexic child needs to overcome for effective learning.

What is important however is that good teaching can help to overcome all of these cognitive difficulties. Much can be done to aid the child's memory, and assistance by the teacher to help the dyslexic child organise information can help him/her learn more effectively. The teacher can play a key role therefore in helping dyslexic children overcome cognitive difficulties.

### **Metacognition**

Cognition, as indicated above, means learning, metacognition means learning to learn. This implies that children can be taught to be more effective learners. This is very important for dyslexic children. The research indicates that children with dyslexia may be weak in metacognitive awareness and therefore have difficulty in knowing how to go about tackling a problem. This means they may not be sure on **how** to, for example, interpret a question or to work out the most efficient way of answering it, or in fact to remember any piece of information. The development of metacognitive skills can be aided by programmes that are essentially 'study skills' programmes. Often study skills are seen to be part of examination preparation, but in fact this is too late. Study skills, particularly for learners with dyslexia should be provided as young as possible. Becoming efficient in studying and learning helps the learner make connections between different pieces of information and this can help with transfer of learning and generally more efficient use of information.

### **Self-esteem**

Self-esteem is important for learning. A child will learn more effectively and will be more motivated to learn if his/her self-esteem is high. This is also very important for learners with dyslexia. Young children with dyslexia very soon after commencing formal education quickly realise that some aspects of school education, such as reading, spelling and writing are challenging for them. This can result in feelings of

failure and frustration. This can lower the child's motivation and self-esteem in relation to learning. Effort needs to be made to ensure children with dyslexia are provided with opportunities to gain some success, as it is only through success that self-esteem will be enhanced. Activities such as circle time (Mosley 1996) can help to provide opportunities for enhancement of self-esteem.

### **How the teacher and the school can help**

Many of the points mentioned above will benefit all learners. This is important as it indicates that good and effective teaching practices will greatly aid children with dyslexia without the necessity of having to resort to expensive commercially produced programmes. It is certainly important to know about these programmes and it is also important to appreciate the characteristics of dyslexia and to recognise that children with dyslexia need to be seen as individuals as each child may show different characteristics to varying degrees.

### **Communication**

One of the important aspects in dealing with dyslexia is that of communication. Often the controversy and confusion that can exist in the field of dyslexia result from a breakdown in effective communication between the school and the home. There are many conflicting views on how dyslexia can be dealt with. Some of these conflicting views emerge from information in commercial web sites and other types of uncontrolled and often untested commercial outlets. It is important that the school should be able to advise on the suitability of programmes for dyslexic children. This can be done by assuring parents that the best is being done for their child. This can be achieved through the school communicating with parents effectively. This means informing parents how the school has recognised the dyslexic characteristics of the child and how they are meeting his/her needs. It is important to re-assure parents that the school does take dyslexia seriously; otherwise parents will be swayed by persuasively appealing commercially-orientated programmes that purport to claim unrivalled successes. It is useful if the school has a member of staff who has undertaken training in dyslexia, and this person can provide information to parents on any new programme that they may have seen advertised on the web or elsewhere.

## Motivation

### 10 strategies for motivation

1. ***Encourage diversity in learning styles***

Children's learning patterns are often the result of how they were taught and the learning environment and ethos of the school. For some children this is perfectly satisfactory as their styles and preferences match those of the school. For others however this may not be the case. For that reason it is important to encourage diversity in children's learning preferences. This can be done by offering them choice and given them the opportunity to utilise their own learning style in the classroom. Some mediating factors that can influence the use of learning styles are culture, school climate, teacher and parent expectations, teaching style and classroom norms and practices. It is therefore important to reflect on the above and ensure that flexibility is used to encourage diversity.

2. ***Encourage creativity***

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that many creative people can only take control of their own learning after they leave school. Many fail at school, or certainly may not shine. This is because the examination system often does not encourage creativity. There are certainly signs that progress is being made in this area but often the pace of learning to ensure that all examinable areas of the curriculum are covered is fast. This means that there is little scope for digressing and indeed for encouraging creativity. For many learners creativity is the principal motivating factor. For example the young, rising pop singer who is directed by his record company to record covers by other artists all the time may soon tire of this and become de-motivated. Artists in particular need to be encouraged to use their creativity and this can in fact apply to all learners. Many when asked if they are creative would quickly reply – no – that is because they have not had the opportunity to be creative.

3. ***Ensure success with small achievable steps***

Success is an essential factor for motivation and for successful learning. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the learner meets with success. If success is not evident then the task has to be further differentiated. Most

learners take to learn new information in steps although holistic learners do need to have an overview of the whole area first. The key point is to ensure that each of the steps is achievable and to ascertain that knowledge of the child's learning style and previous knowledge is available.

4. ***Provide feedback to students about their own personal progress***  
Progress is personal - progress for one may not be progress for someone else. It is important that the criteria for progress is not generalised but instead it should be individualised. Once it is decided what exactly constitutes progress for the individual this should be discussed and negotiated with the learner and then personal goals can be established and progress more easily identified.
5. ***Learners need to believe in their own abilities***  
Self-belief is crucial if one is to accomplish any degree of success and motivation. Yet often the education system is geared to select and to grade. These factors can totally wipe out any element of self-belief. It is important to recognise and acknowledge any achievements – no matter how small they may seem to others. They can be huge to the individual learner. Even those who seem to have achieved a great deal of success – in the class or in the playing field still need and rely on positive feedback to ensure that can believe in their own abilities. It is often those who seem to have achieved a great deal who have a surprisingly low level of self –belief. This can be because they are not receiving the positive feedback they actually need. The common perception might be that these children do not need it because they know they are successful. The key point here is not to take this for granted and not to assume that some successful learners do not need positive and continuous feedback and encouragement in order for them to develop and maintain self-belief.
6. ***Acknowledge the individual styles of each child***  
This is important although it can be challenging in today's inclusive classrooms. Even if the young person is made aware of his/her learning style then this can set them up for independent learning at home and beyond school.
7. ***Use group work effectively***  
Working in groups can be as great motivator but at the same time it is important to ensure that the dynamics of the group provides a positive

experience for all. It is too easy for one or several children to be passengers and feel 'left out' of a group. Even in groups it might be an idea to pair children who get on well with each other together. Group work should also be closely monitored and the group should report on their progress after short intervals.

8. ***Encourage self assessment***

This is important as it helps children take control of their own learning. They should be encouraged to assess their own progress and this can be a motivator in itself. The key point is that they should be able to decide what they want to achieve and the teacher's role in this is to guide and monitor their progress. Self-assessment encourages self-reflection and this helps to develop higher order thinking skills.

9. ***Develop student responsibility***

The key to successful learning is student autonomy. This is important as it provides the learner with some control over his/her learning. It is this control that fosters responsibility and makes it possible for the student to move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation.

10. ***Focus on learning as well as teaching***

It is important to identify and recognise the strengths shown by children with dyslexia and to attempt to incorporate these strengths into a teaching programme. Knowing about how child learn and how to make learning more effective through study skills and good teaching practices can be extremely beneficial for children with dyslexia. It is important to recognise the need to boost the self-esteem of children with dyslexia as it is too easy for them to become discouraged and lose interest in learning.

## **Creativity**

It has been suggested that dyslexic people can have particularly creative skills and abilities and this can be noted in people who have succeeded in business, the arts and the sciences (West 1997; Dyslexia – Genius, Criminals and Children, 20/20 television 25.7.99).

In relation to learning style and creativity Treffinger and Selby build on their four basic components of creativity through practical applications to the learning situation.

- **Characteristics** – How am I creative?, How can I create a learning or working environment that will bring out my best?
- **Operations** – how can I use my preferences best?, why do some strategies seem to work better than others?, what conditions make it more difficult for me to learn and use strategies?
- **Context** – what environmental conditions seem to enhance or inhibit my performance?, what conditions distract me?, how can I contribute best to a group?
- **Outcomes** – where will I most likely need the support and help of others?, how will I know when I have reached my goal/, how can I build on my natural style to achieve my goal?

## Self-esteem

Often people with dyslexia have relatively low self-esteem, and significantly this low self-esteem is not confined to only academic self-esteem. It can be concluded that there may be a number of risk factors in the lives of dyslexic people which can contribute to low self-esteem. Literacy is only one aspect of a much bigger picture and clearly low self-esteem and possibly accompanied by high anxiety need to be considered as these factors can affect every aspect of the lives of dyslexic individuals.

It is important to value the dyslexic person as an individual first and foremost to ensure that all their individual needs are met. It should also be remembered that the presence of dyslexia can accentuate some of the difficulties and barriers which often prevent individuals from reaching their desired goals. Though the dyslexic person can have considerable skills in some areas it is important that a holistic view is adopted in relation to support so that their emotional and social needs can also be considered alongside their strengths.

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