

Dyslexia should be viewed as a different lens to see the world through.

Dr Robert Phillips
Senior Tutor, Design Products, RCA
Product Designer
(PhD Design Products, 2015)

Dr Robert Phillips is a product designer and Senior Tutor in Design Products at the Royal College of Art.

Robert has worked in a variety of design domains, from mass manufacturing, material development and user engagement to ethnographic research.

His principal interests reside in user interactions, responding to participant observations with a focus in social design and user-centred interventions.

He creates user-orientated solutions and generates design workshops that are intent on educating, using design approaches for commercial and academic situations.

During his PhD, Robert investigated the relationship between open design, citizen science and resulting methodologies in relation to beekeeping technologies.

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I found out that I had dyslexia whilst I started my MA at the RCA. To be honest, before that, I just thought that all people thought like that. I have not seen my dyslexia as a barrier, as I went on to get a funded PhD, produce journal articles that have been internationally peer reviewed and am currently working on a book.

I see the dyslexic approach as a different way of seeing things, as a development that we all work around. Personally I feel that we all carry a different view of the world and would encourage others to get support and not let it limit their vision of a personal future. Dyslexia should be viewed as a different lens to see the world through.

It can feel like kicking an elephant through a cat flap.

Josh Philip Saunders
Animator and Illustrator
(MA Animation, 2016)

I push my drawing into the world of motion and sound and distill it back down to single images. Both animation and illustration influence and enrich each other but ultimately stem from the same place: storytelling.

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Dyslexia has always blocked the pipes that ideas and thoughts flow through from my brain to my mouth. This leads to incredible frustration, especially with an overworked imagination. At times it can feel like kicking an elephant through a cat flap.

It felt like I was brimming with ideas with no clear way to get them out, until I discovered communicating visually. That was my solution, really, and has always been my life raft throughout school and college and still today, to allow myself the freedom of communicating my ideas through drawing.

Dyslexia has definitely made me lean towards a more creative career and since being diagnosed very late in life (on my BA at Central Saint Martins), it gives me a great excuse for losing my keys and forgetting my friends' birthdays as well as – from time to time – where I live and how to spell Wednesday.

I honestly believe that all children have an urge to pursue the curious edges of their minds and learn about the world.

Cara George
Artist, Jeweller, Writer
(MA Jewellery & Metal, 2016)

My CV proclaims the experiences and academic history of a 'high achiever'. But for years the person behind all the A grades, prestigious awards and Oxford degree floundered with near-to-zero self-confidence.

It seemed to take double time, effort and will power to keep up in the classroom. Compensating and developing strategies to hide the horrible fact that I found school really hard: learning extra words to use to avoid spelling harder ones, sitting next to the clever boy in maths, who explained everything slower than the teacher, to avoid revealing that I was stuck.

What I did not find hard was wanting to learn, which is the main reason I applied to become a creative mentor; to not only assist but to inspire students who struggle as I did. I honestly believe that all children have an urge to pursue the curious edges of their minds and learn about the world. I'm interested in how dyslexic and/or dyspraxic young people approach and explore this curiosity.

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I officially discovered that I am both dyslexic and dyspraxic last year, before completing my MA in Jewellery & Metal at the Royal College of Art. Of course I have known for years that my brain is wired differently – I still get lost two streets away from my house and astonish myself with a total lack of direction, a typical dyspraxic trait!

The RCA was an experience of transformation, and I'm still collecting the pieces as I figure out why I make things and 'what' I am: artist, jeweller, writer, photographer, film-maker... all are 'labels' I shift between. Perhaps it is time to drop the notion of labelling altogether and embrace making art as a way of being in the world.

Ultimately dyslexia is not about weakness, it's about knowing your strengths.

Kate MccGwire
Sculptor
(MA Sculpture, 2004)

I went to a very academic school and the only thing I was good at was art. I left school at 16 having only just scraped through my O Levels, which had a huge impact on my confidence and belief in myself.

I did an Art Foundation and loved every part of it. I knew I wanted to continue to BA level but my parents would only support me if I did a vocational degree, so I went to Manchester to study Interior Design.

I started my own interior design business, which I ran for over 10 years. The design and visualisation felt like a great fit but I struggled with the 'backroom' aspects of it, so didn't really enjoy it.

When I had my second son, I took the opportunity to step back from my practice and start at University College for the Creative Arts, Farnham, after that I started my MA in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art. Since graduating, I have worked full time as an artist and have a busy international schedule.

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As a child my dyslexia made me miserable, my mum was primary school teacher and she was adamant that dyslexia was just a myth, an excuse for people that were thick.

At Manchester, I fell apart over essays, and left when it came to dissertation time feeling completely overwhelmed. At Farnham, it was brilliant, finally I was doing something I was good at, but again I began to fall apart at dissertation time. I would read a paragraph over and over and still not retain any of the information.

I cried everyday for a month, until a very kind friend helped me structure and tackle the research in bite-sized chunks. Getting a first was one of my proudest moments. I couldn't have done it without him.

At the RCA I was tested for dyslexia and the results showed that I was extremely dyslexic: I scored 97% in non-verbal and 3% in verbal reasoning. I was 38. Can you imagine how it felt to finally be able to explain the embarrassment and shame I had felt all my life?

The tools and help that I got at the RCA were invaluable, and I finally began to enjoy the research. It liberated me from my insecurities and gave me the techniques I needed to learn things my way. Ultimately dyslexia is not about weakness, it's about knowing your strengths.

**I see writing as a puzzle where
you have to find the right bits
that fit together.**

Dr Katie Gaudion
Senior Research Associate,
The Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design, RCA
Textile Designer
(PhD Innovation Design Engineering, 2015)

I will always remember the anxiety I felt in a GCSE history class where I had to stand up in front of everyone and read out a section of a book. Moments like this really chipped away at my confidence. I developed coping mechanisms to deal with these situations which for the most part involved being quiet.

But during that time I would also seek solace and comfort in the art room. This was a space where I felt I wasn't being judged and was able to be myself. This is where I became interested in texture and would spend hours drawing the texture of things e.g. the shadows and dents in rocks, folds and bends in shells and ripples in leaves. I think this is where my love for textiles began.

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I was diagnosed with dyslexia and dyspraxia in 2008 during my first year at the RCA, where I was studying for an MPhil in Textiles Design. The diagnosis was a huge relief and a revelation, as for 29 years I often thought I was slow, clumsy and a bit disorganised. My twin brother Oly was always so much better than me at most academic things.

After completing an MPhil in Textile Design I went on to complete a PhD in Innovation Design Engineering. I had never foreseen myself doing something that involved so much reading, writing and public speaking, but I did it!

No longer do I get panic attacks about writing, but instead I see writing as a puzzle where you have to find the right bits that fit together. During my textile and PhD journey I have learned a lot about myself and the importance of being comfortable in your own skin, and that it's okay to do things differently. After all isn't that what every designer strives to do?

I am fascinated by the learning differences and preferences within each individual's brain.

Qona Rankin
Dyslexia Coordinator, RCA
Freelance Jeweller
(MA Design Education, 1984)

Having completed a BA and later an MA at the RCA, I was appointed Senior Tutor at the University of Hertfordshire teaching 3D Design on the Foundation course and Product Design BA.

I also set up a jewellery business, undertaking commissions and supplying retailers, and this I continue to do.

In 1998 I qualified as a dyslexia specialist, and in 2002 I was appointed the first Dyslexia Coordinator at the RCA. With the help of key individuals, we set up the Dyslexia Support service.

Working with brilliantly creative students is a real privilege, and being able to teach them ways of organising and communicating their ideas, whether that be through written or spoken words and although challenging at times, is hugely rewarding. I am fascinated by the learning differences and preferences within each individual's brain and this is what drives my teaching and research here at the College.

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I was assessed as having dyslexia in 1962, which was before extra time for exams or any sort of accommodations for learning differences was acknowledged.

I remember vividly being taken out of the only subjects I was any good at (art and sport), to have weekly lessons with a terrifying woman, (Massie Holt), who shouted at me for not having learned the spellings she had given me, before giving me another 10 spellings to learn for the following week. It never seemed to occur to her that she needed to teach me how to learn spellings. I hated her, and I hated school.

I can still remember the relief I felt when I started my Foundation course at Kingston and realised that my ideas and making skills were rated, and I was no longer considered useless.

It took me the best part of 20 years to master the art of learning.

Toby Baring
Orthopaedic Surgeon, Homerton University Hospital

DEGREE DETAILS

I am a shoulder specialist and chief consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Homerton University Hospital. I chose this speciality not just because it can make huge difference to people's lives, but also because I can make the most of my strengths and most importantly the things I enjoy: manual dexterity, spatial awareness and interacting with people.

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I was diagnosed with dyslexia aged five, having an older sibling who was also dyslexic. Thanks to my motivated parents, I was provided with the support I needed to get through school with relative ease.

Aged 12, I decided that becoming a doctor was the best and only real option for me, and this gave me great direction and focus, which aided getting into medical school.

Medical school is where my problems started. I failed my first year, my second year (and almost gave up medicine) and my fourth year. I was clearly missing the spoon-fed style of teaching that had helped so much at school. I struggled with the self-teaching and problem-based learning expected of me, but I eventually managed to get through finals.

Suddenly a doctor, I found myself, very soon, facing more exams, membership to the Royal College of Surgeons: I failed part 1 once, part 2 twice and part 3 three times! Undeterred, I decided to do a postgraduate doctorate – the thesis I spent four years writing was initially rejected and required major revisions.

The last (I hope!) and hardest exam I ever took was to become a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, and I managed to pass both part 1 and part 2 first time, to my immense relief, while surrounded by failing non-dyslexic peers. Maybe it was a bit of luck, but I think it was more that it took me the best part of 20 years to master the art of learning.

Although I am still aware of my dyslexia on a daily basis, it seems to become less and less of a hurdle and easier to work round. Although my career to date has been hard going at times, it has also been immensely rewarding and enjoyable, and I would recommend it to anybody who has the will.

It explains the direction my work took in investigating relationships between physical movement, space and time

Birgitta Hosea
Head of Animation, RCA

Being dyspraxic doesn't affect my ability to do my job – in my case, it hasn't influenced my fine motor skills, but it badly affected my confidence when I was younger as I felt awkward about participating in sporting and social activities.

Perhaps it explains the direction my work took in investigating relationships between physical movement, space and time through a career in theatre design and art direction for films then moving images, animation, installation and performance art.

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I was recently tested and officially diagnosed as dyspraxic, which explains a lifetime of tripping over, banging my head and dropping things, inability to participate in team sports or country dancing, failing my driving test three times and often getting lost with no sense of direction. It makes me understand how my sense of spatial and embodied presence is slightly faulty.

However, perhaps not quite knowing my place in the world was no bad thing for a small-town, Scottish girl whose first job was in a chip shop. I discovered punk rock and techno was much more fun than Scottish country dancing. Perhaps it also explains my interest in phenomenology and affect. Perhaps it hasn't been such a bad thing after all.

For me, ideas, whether visual or text based, are a series of superimposed lenses that are compressed together to form a geology of transparencies that I can either peel apart or compress even tighter.

Denise de Cordova
Sculpture Tutor, School of Fine Art, Royal College of Art
(MA Sculpture, 1983)

I studied sculpture at Brighton Art School and the RCA. After graduating I spent a year at The British School of Rome as a scholar, where my interest in mythic narratives originated. I am a Henry Moore Foundation Fellow, a Stanley Picker Fellow, and in 2006 was made a Fellow at the RCA. I have taught extensively throughout the UK, as well as abroad. I have a studio in London and am represented by the Eagle Gallery.

I consider myself to be a kind of Victorian Magic Realist, with wilderness fantasies. At the moment I'm working on a series of 'heroines', some more doubtful than others. I also exhibit under the name Amy Bird to produce specific ceramic works based on the idea of collection.

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I couldn't write my name until I was seven years old, spelling and arithmetic were a complete mystery and my desk companion did everything for me. When she left, my considerable shortcomings were exposed.

Fortunately, at home I was surrounded by illustrated encyclopedias, and relatives that didn't speak English, but with whom I spent weeks at a time just looking at things: cave paintings, Romanesque churches, bullfights and costumes. Words didn't seem to matter much when one was immersed in a world that was so intensely visual.

I'm still interested in cultures where written language is a relatively recent development, and curious as to how the sound of a spoken word ends up being spelled in a particular way. Student reports always used to be handwritten, and it was only spell check that revealed that I had been spelling 'spatial' incorrectly for years.

Note-taking in lectures was a nightmare – how any one could listen, absorb, look and write simultaneously was beyond comprehension. Exams were even more ghastly, because of time restraints, when there was so much to say, and so many possible interpretations of a question. They didn't allow enough time to be interesting.

Conciseness seems to elude me. I didn't really 'get' writing until undertaking my dissertation at the RCA, when I found a way to capture all the paths of my thinking. For me ideas, whether visual or text based, are a series of superimposed lenses that are compressed together to form a geology of transparencies that I can either peel apart or compress even tighter. If left to myself, I rather enjoy writing now.

I channel my dyslexia into my creative practice, where it allows me to make these changes and produce objects for others to look at and wonder about.

Henry Franks
Director of Dubloon Ltd
(MA Design Products, 2015)

Dubloon (pronounced 'Duh-bloon') is a London-based design consultancy that produces varied physical work with a focus on creating exciting experiences.

Dubloon has worked on large-scale installations and batch-produced products, through to creating props and bespoke pieces for advertising events.

The company was founded by James Boock and Henry Franks after graduating together from Design Products at the Royal College of Art in 2015.

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It is hard to describe the effects dyslexia has on my life to someone who doesn't have dyslexia or has a different sort of dyslexia, because firstly I am bad with words so can't articulate what it's like, but secondly I don't know any other way of living, so I don't know what it's different to.

It affects everything I do, I guess, and now I have finished school where the one-dimensional format of educating doesn't bode well for the average dyslexic, it affects everything I do for the better.

I still remember vividly what it was like reading when the lines would merge, the letters would swap with the next word's letters and I would feel sea sick almost instantly. This meant that I hated reading, and spent most of my time drawing and making things.

I read the physical world instead of the written world, fascinated in how things looked, worked and how they came to be the way they were. I would spend ages looking at these things and reimagine how I would change them.

Now I channel my dyslexia into my creative practice, where it allows me to make these changes and produce objects for others to look at and wonder about.

It took more than half a century in education before I was finally diagnosed not only with ADHD but also with dyspraxia.

Joe Kerr
Head of Critical & Historical Studies, RCA
Architectural Historian & Bus Driver

Thinking back to my early childhood, I'm genuinely puzzled as to why nobody wondered why I was such a contradictory child: on the one hand curious, bright and excited by the world around me, but on the other hand disruptive, restless and unable to concentrate on anything challenging for too long.

It's even more disconcerting and disappointing that at school there was no one to question my inability to realise my evident intellectual potential, or to challenge my innate resistance to all forms of authority; I was merely labelled as lazy and as a troublemaker.

I had a few good teachers, and one or two great ones, but from start to finish the education system largely failed me. I was cursed with sufficient intelligence, and with a formidable short-term memory, which together allowed me to sail through school and university with the minimum of effort and yet with consistently good results.

Jumping forward many years to my chosen profession as an academic, I became increasingly confused as to why I found it well-nigh impossible either to read enough, or to write in sufficient quantity or to sufficient length, to forge a successful career.

It became clear to me that I was rather less clever or able than I'd hoped, and my sense of inadequacy became my dark secret, to be hidden at all costs from my cleverer colleagues, and most of all from my wonderful, inventive and creative students.

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One group of students I found that I could help, and with whom I instinctively empathised, were those who had been diagnosed with dyslexia. It eventually dawned on me that although I wasn't dyslexic, perhaps I also suffered from some kind of learning difficulty.

It was another 20 years until I finally learned about ADHD, and instantly knew that I discovered the root cause of all my problems. It's very sad really that it took more than half a century in education before I was finally diagnosed not only with ADHD but also with dyspraxia.

Now that I know, I am determined to devote the rest of my career to ensuring that my students with learning differences are properly supported, and to campaigning for the rights of staff and students who experience discrimination on a daily basis within our education system.

Disorientation is geometrically very useful, allowing me and my students to design unpredictable silhouettes never before constructed.

Julian Roberts
MA Tutor, Mixed-media Textiles,
School of Material, RCA
Inventor of Subtraction Cutting
(MA Fashion Menswear, 1996)

I lecture creative garment construction in 25 countries internationally, as well as tutor, mentor and support the fantastic textiles talent at the Royal College of Art.

I studied a Menswear MA at the RCA, and from that super-technical, hands-on making expertise background I developed 'subtraction cutting'. Textiles and Material thinking enrich this practice.

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I am very attuned and sensitive to numbers, but they often get in the way when sizing, cutting and constructing voluminous garment forms. I regularly confuse opposites: left, right, back, front, inside, outside...

This skill helps me re-orientate patterns in less conventional ways: disorientation is geometrically very useful, allowing me and my students to design unpredictable silhouettes never before constructed.

My dyspraxic cutting tricks are therefore a gift I gladly share with thousands of others.

I have always felt that I was looking at the world through the wrong end of the telescope and that a proper sense of belonging remained elusive, out of reach and diminished.

Kate Davis
Artist and Senior Tutor (Research),
Sculpture, RCA

My work moves between material object, drawing, photography, video and text-based works, although I consider my core thinking to be centred in the discipline of sculpture.

Central to all the work is a sense of my physical body and events at the edge of consciousness that speak of those moments before and beyond language, and deal with primordial or transformed states of being.

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Dyspraxia – a country I had never heard of yet a land I've been travelling through all my life.

I was diagnosed as dyspraxic in July 2016, so I am still absorbing this information and what it may or may not change in my approach to work and my experience of life.

I have always felt that I was looking at the world through the wrong end of the telescope and that a proper sense of belonging remained elusive, out of reach and diminished.

As a child I never mastered riding a bicycle and envied my brothers and sisters' sense of freedom, power and control that cycling seemed to allow them.

I cannot drive a car, and I have no road sense.

Crossing the road causes me huge anxiety many times a day. As a consequence I only feel comfortable using pedestrian crossings, which can make short journeys far longer. Paradoxically, as a coping strategy, I recently moved to Kings Cross...

People who know the anxiety I feel as a pedestrian and who have endlessly waited for me on the other side of the road questioned why I would choose to move to such a busy area. And I tell them; it is because of the many pedestrian crossings there are and how much less anxious I feel when moving in large volumes of people unisolated, protected like a minnow by the shoal. In and part of the crowd.

Writing my dissertation took a long time (and contained mice instead of mica and hypnosis instead of hypothesis).

Siân Fogden
Founder of Anionica
Communications Officer for the Graphene Flagship

NEED Imperial PHD DETAILS

I'm an Oxford-educated chemist with a PhD from Imperial College London, specialising in technology commercialisation. During my PhD I invented some cool science, patented it and worked for five years in California on its commercialisation.

In 2011 the multinational industrial gas company Linde LLC licensed the technology I developed and patented during my PhD. They created a new division, Linde Nanomaterials, based at their southern California research and development facility.

My technology focuses on the reductive dissolution of single walled carbon nanotubes to produce inks. At Linde Nanomaterials this technology was developed into world-class nanotube transparent conductive thin films.

Now I'm back in London with my technology and my new start-up company Anionica, with a core of ground-breaking science aiming for commercialisation in flexible displays, touch screens, smart windows and solar cells, to name but a few possible markets!

I'm also the Communications Officer at the Graphene Flagship.

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I was good at school but terrible at anything related to language. Failed spelling tests saw me standing outside the headteacher's office on multiple occasions. At 13 I was diagnosed with dyslexia and with the help of my parents I began to memorise how words are spelled – three words a night for years. It wasn't until my A Levels that I received extra time in my exams.

I went on to study Chemistry at Oxford University and complete a nanotechnology PhD at Imperial College London. My dyslexia was most difficult to manage during my PhD due to the sheer volume of scientific papers to be read, and writing my dissertation took a long time (and contained mice instead of mica and hypnosis instead of hypothesis).

**Like a lot of people who
attended school in the 1970s
and '80s dyslexia wasn't on
the radar. In fact, it wasn't
even in the vocabulary.**

Stuart McCaffer
Sculptor
(MA Sculpture, 2010)

My work is based on the area in north-west London, where I have lived since moving here.

Like a lot of London, Harlesden is undergoing its 'gentrification' with people citing the imminent arrival of Crossrail/HS2 and the fact Holland & Barrett have opened a shop on the High Street. My interest is how the old and new mix or don't.

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Like a lot of people who attended school in the 1970s and '80s dyslexia wasn't on the radar. In fact, it wasn't even in the vocabulary, well not in Dunblane or Callender.

My overriding memory of school boils down to my first day at a new school, McLaren High School (in Callender). I was just starting third year so would have been about 14. I was sitting at the back of an English class trying to be invisible when a girl came into the class and handed the teacher a note.

The teacher then turned to the class and said, 'Stuart McCaffer this is your two periods of remedial,' Remedial was, for those who have never encountered it, a place where all the 'slow', 'thick', 'dunces' were put. All I remember doing was learning to spell lists of words, which by the end of the day I had completely forgotten.

Up until that point I had been a keen if not brilliant student with quite good grades, but the stigma from this moment meant I no longer cared about school or my education. It took me a long time to get over the chip on my shoulder, and it was to be about 20 years before I would dip my toe back into the educational system.

In my first year at Edinburgh College of Art I was diagnosed as dyslexic.

Being dyslexic is not something that I even think about now, it just means that I don't give myself a hard time for not being able to spell.

I can take things apart and explain how they work. The reason for this is that so little makes sense to me *prima facie*.

Jonathan Antonio Edelman,
PhD (Mech Eng) MFA (Design)
Head of Global Innovation Design, RCA
Multimedia Artist

I am currently the Head of Programme for Global Innovation Design (GID) at the Royal College of Art, a joint programme with Imperial College London. The ethos of GID is to cultivate activated people who will make change in the world. It is a pleasure to work with passionate designers in their journey to realise and articulate their visions.

I joined the dyslexia committee at the RCA last year, so I could understand the educational needs of a significant number of very gifted, intelligent designers enrolled at the RCA. I was continually struck by how familiar their stories were. I began to wonder if their story was indeed my story.

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I was assessed in September 2016, just a few weeks ago. We found that I was not only dyslexic, but also dyspraxic, and I suspect several other dys+.

I have spent the past few weeks replaying the events of my life, particularly in the educational milieu. As a child, I was a terribly slow reader and still am. In grade school I am sure they did not know what to do with me, and I sometimes got teased by the smart kids (maybe not so nice kids). I had trouble catching balls, and paying attention... you get the picture.

By the time high school rolled around, I realised that I was also a deep reader, as I had to look long and hard to make sense of things. This meant I had to look under the hood to see how things were put together, and could take very little for granted. During college I had the good fortune to have tutors for whom being a slow reader was not an issue. I went on to get an MFA in Design and a PhD in Mechanical Engineering at Stanford, where different ways of working and seeing are encouraged and celebrated. It turns out that Stanford and Silicon Valley is full of dyslexics.

I have been told that I am a good teacher because I can take things apart and explain how they work. The reason for this is that so little makes sense to me *prima facie* (though oddly enough ancient languages come fairly easily to me, hence my proclivity for Greek and Latin phrases).

I get lost often, but usually find something wonderful in the course of being lost. Indeed I have made this orientation a creative method that leads me to so many wonderful new places. It is still frustrating to friends and family, and a big challenge for me is to stay patient when they are impatient.

There are many, many ways of thinking, analysing and being creative – ‘dyslexia’ is an inadequate term that incorporates myriad deviations from the norm.

Barry Curtis
Tutor (Architecture & Design), Critical & Historical
Studies, RCA

I lecture and write on a range of design-related issues, but also on literature, film and cultural theories. I have taught at Middlesex University, Birkbeck University of London and the London Consortium and am currently supervising PhDs for those institutions as well as for the RCA.

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I was not aware that I was dyslexic until I took the test administered to my older son, about fifteen years ago. He was 'bright', but having difficulties at school. He is now a Games Designer.

Although I have had an 'academic' education and career, I have always been aware that I have issues with logic and ratiocinative thinking. My memory works in unusual ways, particularly in relation to visual information. I have particular and irritating difficulties with digital technologies (beyond the usual age-related ones) and have been forced to realise that my version of 'logic' differs fundamentally from experts in this particular field.

My teaching has taught me that there are many, many ways of thinking, analysing and being creative – 'dyslexia' is an inadequate term that incorporates myriad deviations from the norm. Teaching art students for nearly 50 years has been a joyful encounter with thousands of incompatible and beneficially antagonistic minds. I'm not aware of particular 'strengths' that result from dyslexia, but I do enjoy the complex, contradictory and excessive in all their forms.