



Investigating strategies for supporting dyslexic students in instrumental education

Julia Kiggell, Head of Vocal and Instrumental Studies

Introduction

Learning an instrument is both hugely rewarding and beneficial for intellectual development. At Sevenoaks School we deliver over 700 individual lessons each week. It is important for me, as both an educator and musician, that this experience is as positive and enjoyable as possible for every student, whether just playing for fun or considering a career in the profession. The aim of this project was to find out about the learning experiences of musicians with dyslexia, and how we can best support them in their musical education.

Background

Learning a musical instrument is a highly cognitive process: neuroscientists have discovered that playing instruments makes the brain process different information in complex, interconnected and remarkably fast events, simultaneously using the visual, auditory and motor cortical regions. For any pupils embarking on this astonishingly impressive activity, I would love to think that as music teachers, we can facilitate any type of learner who wants the experience.

A flexible approach

As many instrumental teachers will testify, no pupil learns in the same way; there are a plethora of external influences which affect instrumental progress (time, practice, environment, motivation, support of parents, goals, natural ability). Even teaching the same technique will involve creativity on the part of the teacher, to adapt to the best way a pupils can pick up the concept. Having a flexible approach to teaching a dyslexic musician is no different – and in fact, most reputable teachers will have a tool box of ideas and strategies they regular draw upon in day to day teaching.

The challenges of dyslexia can manifest in a number of ways for young musicians: sight reading, rhythm work, sustaining focus, remembering theoretical facts e.g. key signatures, interval names, recognising cadences are just a few. Engaging the help and experience of some current instrumental teachers, the case studies below show how some strategies are being developed already.

Case study: a string teacher

Challenge: I feel there are three things to connect on a string instrument: the note of the page, the name of it, and where it lies on the instrument. Some students, with and without dyslexia, find one or more of these three things difficult to grasp. This was perpetuated in one of my pupils who was extremely slow to name what a note was from seeing it on the page, and instead relied almost completely on following the curve of a melody. This was an early indication that he had developed his own strategy to cope with this particular obstacle. However, there was also a problem in identifying where a given note laid on the fingerboard, so all three of the points mentioned above were disconnected.

Strategy: In the end, just not worrying about it too much seemed the best way forward, as it caused more anxiety than it was solving. Getting away from the page and more playing by ear, using an audio input more than visual lessons and from recordings at home seemed to work. Recording pupils' pieces straight onto their smartphones was helpful- it's a valuable shortcut to getting them playing the piece and therefore enjoying their playing sooner.

Case study: a piano teacher

Challenge: Reading the notes and following the music can be an issue, following a steady beat and coordination between hands too. Some pupils used coloured paper, and I always make sure they have a clear edition, not too small.

Strategy: I do a lot of work away from the keys, note reading, writing the notes of the pieces, note singing, basing everything on intervals. For coordination, I do a lot of clapping exercises. We practise by very small sections so that the students are always in control. For the rhythm, I use a ball to develop a downwards movement, also counting missing numbers to internalise the counting. I use a lot of praise and make sure students never feel pressurised.

Case study: a woodwind teacher

Challenge: My student had difficulty correlating the fingering of a note with what was on the music: she knew the fingering for a note, and could recognise a pitch on the music, but the two just wouldn't correlate. Another challenge was getting her to remember theoretical information, even just names of rhythmic lengths and how they relate, and concentrating was also a really big challenge for a full length lesson.

Strategy: I would colour coordinate similar pitches, so the visual association with a particular pitch had a direct relation to a combination of fingering and pitch. I had to be inventive in the ways I would encourage her to remember things – pictures, diagrams and amusing word games! However, it is well known that musicians have high levels of executive function which in turn has an effect on helping the memory so maybe the music helped the memory skills and vice versa. To help compartmentalise the lesson, I would start by summarising what the lesson content would be; during the lesson I would frequently recap key points, repeating important information and finish by summarising what we had done. I am sure this helped her think about how she could plan her practice sessions at home.

Case study: a brass teacher

Challenge: A particular student of mine just could not remember the fingering for scales. However, he had a very good ear and loved improvising. His difficulty in organisation initially had an impact on progress as he forgot music and found it difficult to practise.

Strategy: When reading the scales, I colour co-ordinated all the fingerings that were similar, for example all the first valve notes were green, first and second valve notes were yellow and so on. This helped enormously, but I concluded that it was more of a memory problem than a fine motor skill/coordination issue. He loved improvisation, so we used the scales as a basis for this

and the patterns became more musical and natural: making a reverse connection i.e. knowing what he wanted to sound, and then playing it. In order to help his organisation, we assembled one folder with all of his music in an orderly fashion: pieces, scales and studies so everything was together. Weekly practice sheets also helped him focus on what to do between lessons, with short, simple instructions.

Two music students' perspectives and reflections

"I learnt to read music from an early age, about the same time as my dyslexia was diagnosed: actually, this seemed to help with my normal reading - perhaps because it was at an age when the brain is most receptive to new ideas – like learning a second language has shown to boost problem-solving, listening skills, memory, and concentration. Instrumental performance gave me more confidence to read out loud, something which my friends with dyslexia never wanted to do. I realised that, as with music, if you read something wrong or play a wrong note – it actually doesn't matter. My own methods included recognising musical patterns and knowing how they should sound, rather than reading note for note. Learning intervals for theory and aural tests was always hard, but I was given helpful tips such as well-known tunes (e.g. Somewhere over the Rainbow begins with an octave). Because I have always had to work at things just a little harder due to my dyslexia, it has given me a diligent work ethic which has benefitted me throughout my education".

"Reading for me has never been the problem – it's more that I struggle with multi-tasking, and losing concentration easily. Early on, strategies I devised to self-help just became habit, and I learnt to cope with the challenges: writing lists and being very disciplined in my organisation. I find it difficult to hold multiple pieces of information at once and find this quite stressful, so just drilling information over and over has just become habit and therefore repeating the information or the process has become second nature: this has helped with recalling information – and something which I learnt from regular practice. The technique became second nature, I was able to focus more on the music reading and didn't have a problem with the multi-tasking involved with playing music."

For consideration

We have an excellent SEN Department at Sevenoaks, and a thriving Music Department with committed, passionate teachers and pupils. As examples above suggest, there is already very good work going on to support musicians with dyslexia, but in order to get the best out of the musical experience, these suggestions are ways in which we could improve what we do in the Music Department:

- Adapting the general advice from IEP to be more music specific to instrumental learning
- Continue to collect, analyse and disseminate the experiences and teaching strategies of current music teachers and pupils
- Continued encouragement of involvement in musical education for dyslexic pupils
- Keeping abreast with good practice and pedagogy
- Providing appropriate teaching materials and resources
- Encouraging the use of all the sensory processes with instrumental teaching

Some strategies used by the teachers in the case studies, and suggested by the British Dyslexia Association could be of use to teachers in other disciplines too:

- A good working relationship between teacher and pupil will give students confidence to say when they don't understand.
- If teachers and pupils are flexible in their approach, then both parties can put in place strategies to overcome challenges. Students can work with teachers to devise tailor-made strategies for themselves.
- Using technology to help record/photograph instructions, so the student has an accurate record and can take their time assimilating the information.
- Engaging multi-sensory devices in lessons (sound, vision, colour).
- Keeping instructions short, clear and simple – and chunking information with summaries at the beginning and end of the lesson.
- Continually repeating and recapping key points.
- Ensuring the student knows exactly what is expected for next lesson (revision/practice or homework).

On a positive 'note'

Dyslexia can affect musical activities, but music can also affect dyslexia, in a positive way. As shown by the pupils above, disciplined and structured practice in playing an instrument can reinforce the analogous brain functions, and applying these skills elsewhere is notably advantageous.

"I used to look at my dyslexia as a disadvantage or problem I needed to solve: now I feel it is the gift I was given to make me into the creative person I am"

References:

Collins, A. (2014) How playing an instrument benefits your brain. TED-ED. Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/anita_collins_how_playing_an_instrument_benefits_your_brain?language=en (accessed 09.09.20)

The British Dyslexia Association (2012) The Dyslexia Handbook. Bracknell: BDA.

The British Dyslexia Association (no date) Music and dyslexia. Available at: <https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/advice/adults/music-and-dyslexia-1> (accessed 09.09.20).

The Rose Review (2009) Identifying and teaching children and young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.

