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## **Reframing dyslexia as a result of customised educational provision in an adult learning environment**

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### **Abstract**

Reframing has been identified as a process used by people with learning disabilities to change their beliefs and understanding about themselves and their learning disabilities (Gerber, Reiff and Ginsberg, 1996). This paper will discuss the influence of a specially designed course for people with dyslexia conducted through the tertiary TAFE (Technical and Further Education) system in Western Australia and how it provided the catalyst for participants to reframe their perceptions of their dyslexia through empowering them with knowledge and understanding of dyslexia alongside current societal perceptions toward people with literacy difficulties. Findings revealed that all 10 participants reframed their perceptions of themselves and 'their' dyslexia in a positive and informed context that led to proactive, as opposed to reactive, choices after the completion of the course.

### **Introduction**

There exists a group of people for whom day to day living in a literacy-based society presents unique challenges. They live with the societal expectation that all members should be able to read and write. This value having been instilled from an early age when they were institutionalised within the education system that provided limited recognition of specific learning needs for people with dyslexia, and therefore inadequate provision to suit their learning needs. In an Australian context acknowledgement of dyslexia as a discrete learning need is not clearly identified in educational policy, and educational provision is based on a state-by-state or territory basis (Elkins, 2000). In 2003 the Western Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) tertiary system recognised the existence of dyslexia and its life long implications. It developed a nationally accredited course specifically for people with dyslexia: *Certificate 1: Foundation Skills for People with Dyslexia*. The course was designed to empower participants with knowledge and understanding of their dyslexia and develop skills to further their

vocational prospects and life skills. Not only did the course provide these skills, but research suggests it provided the catalyst for participants to reframe their perceptions of their dyslexia.

The reframing process is defined by Gerber and colleagues (1996) as:

... a set of decisions relating to reinterpreting the learning disability experience in a more productive and positive manner (Gerber et al., 1992, p. 481). It clearly allows for one to identify strengths and parlay them into success experiences, while still being aware of weaknesses that have to be mitigated or bypassed ... reframing promotes life adjustment and success for adults with learning disabilities (p. 98)

Reframing encompasses four stages (Gerber et al., 1996; Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg, 1997; Reiff, 2004) – recognition, acceptance, understanding and plan of action. Gerber and colleagues (1996) claim that from a psychological perspective reframing is a ‘change in reality’ (p. 98), brought about by a reinterpretation and change in life’s meaning which allows an individual to take positive control of their life.

Recalling and retelling personal events or experiences, particularly negative experiences, during the reframing process, provides “the likelihood of reconstructing a negative event into a positive attribution ... if the individual currently has a set of positive experiences that cast the event in a new light” (Reiff, 2004, p. 195). In the case of adults with dyslexia, Scott (2003) and McLoughlin (2001) claimed that when and how dyslexia is identified and the resulting influence of individual/institutional responses throughout different stages can also influence an individual’s perceptions of themselves and their life.

This study will present the influence of a customised TAFE course for people with dyslexia. It will discuss how the course acted as a catalyst for participants to reframe their perceptions of their dyslexia in the context of a narrative process.

## **Method**

This paper has been developed as part of research for a doctorate revealing the lived experiences of adults with dyslexia and exploring their perceived educational

experiences. The study was situated within an interpretive paradigm using a narrative approach presented within an ecological framework based on Bronfenbrenner's PPCT (person, process, context, time) social ecology model (1992). In-depth one on one interviews conducted over a two year period, and a focus group discussion with the 10 participants enabled the researcher to develop individual narratives of each participant's life and, in particular, perceptions of their educational experiences. This life story approach enabled participants to recall, reflect and retell their perceptions of their educational and life experiences in the light of knowledge gained through their participation in the customised TAFE dyslexia course.

### **Participants**

Seven females and three males ranging in ages from early 20s to late 60s were involved. Two ran their own business, two were students, two had full-time employment, three had part-time employment and one was unemployed. The majority of participants had gone undiagnosed throughout their post-secondary school experiences although some had been identified as experiencing difficulties with their learning. . In order to enrol in the course participants required an assessment by an educational psychologist or dyslexia specialist.

The criteria for selection required all participants to have completed the *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia* unit of Certificate 1: Foundation Studies for People with Dyslexia between 2003 and 2005. Although not explicitly intended, an age balance occurred, as did a mix of employment status.

### **Course Information**

The Certificate 1: Foundation Skills for People with Dyslexia is an Australian accredited course through the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system. From its inception in 2003 until 2009, it has had over 300 enrolments. The course was designed to empower participants in providing them with knowledge and understanding of dyslexia as well as enabling them to develop skills to further their vocational prospects and desires

During the period 2003-2005 when participants were involved, the certificate comprised of the following six modules:

1. Understanding and Managing Dyslexia
2. Identifying, selecting, using and evaluating different support mechanisms to assist adults with dyslexia
3. Strategies for developing basic literacy for adults with dyslexia
4. Maths Skills for Adults with dyslexia
5. Working effectively with others
6. Keyboarding Skills

To graduate with the certificate all modules needed to be completed. However modules could be completed as single entities. It was strongly recommended that all students complete the *Understanding and Management* component as a minimum. This module was made up of the following five Learning Outcomes:

Table 1: *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia* – Learning outcomes

<b>Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>Topics and Indicators</b>
<b>Describe personal and practical problems associated with dyslexia</b>	Discuss personal experiences – childhood and present. Identify characteristics of own dyslexia in the classroom, home, workplace, social environment.
<b>Describe current theories of dyslexia</b>	Genetic vs acquired dyslexia Differences in brain structure and activation Differences in processing Phonological deficit Identify personal characteristics
<b>Describe how dyslexia affects short term memory and working memory skills</b>	Discuss how we use our senses to learn Define short, long and working memory Identify personal learning style and preferred modality Identify characteristics of the processing styles of left and right brain hemispheres Discuss how the brain reads words
<b>Identify strengths associated with dyslexia and apply this knowledge to self</b>	Identify typical strengths of dyslexics Identify areas of success and management strategies of successful dyslexics Identify personal strengths and reasons for these
<b>Identify and Use strategies for managing dyslexia</b>	Identify strategies for the workplace, home, place of study, social situations Identify programs and therapies designed to reduce impact of dyslexia Identify relevant sections of the Anti-

(Central TAFEWA, 2004	discrimination Act and Disabilities Act Identify appropriate ways of being a self-advocate
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The key components of the *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia* module were to provide students with the following knowledge and skills:

**Self-knowledge** – an understanding of their own dyslexia, individual learning style, strengths and limitations, and compensatory strategies.

**Societal values surrounding literacy** – an awareness of societal infrastructure and attitudes and alongside vocational expectations, including the culture of the workplace and government agencies.

**Self-efficacy enhancement**– through the identification of successful, positive role models and their attributes of success, networking with others, identifying emotional coping strategies and risk and resilience factors.

**Self-advocacy skills** – in a vocational and life context, identifying past and current barriers – identifying and articulating adjustments or accommodations based on knowledge of strengths and limitations, social competence skills (Module 5: *Working Effectively with Others* also focussed on this). Understanding of legislative rights.

**Awareness and accessibility of support systems** – (Module 2: *Support Mechanisms* provided additional specific knowledge for this component).

The course both reflected, and goes beyond, the three areas of assistance Kerka (1998) argued should be provided “once a learning disability is identified”. These include the categories: 1. psycho-social; 2 technological; and 3. educational

In the psycho-social area, an individual’s self-esteem can suffer from years of internalizing labels of stupidity and incompetence and experiencing dependence, fear, anxiety, or helplessness. Four ways to strengthen self-esteem (NALLD, 1994) are awareness (knowing about and documenting the disability), assessment (understanding the disability and one’s strengths and weaknesses), accommodation (knowing what

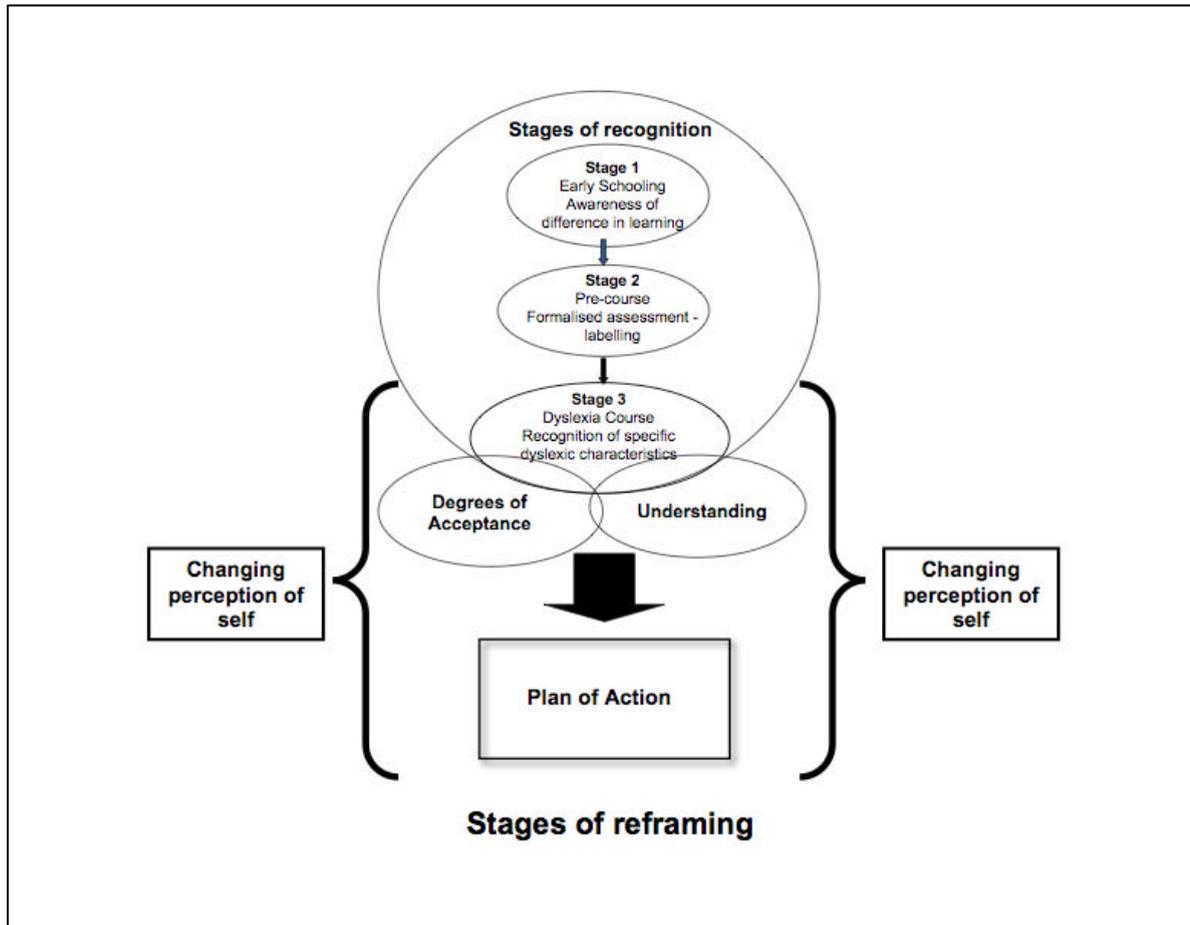
compensatory strategies and techniques help, and advocacy (knowing their legal rights and services for which they qualify) (p. 3).

## **Reframing and the Dyslexia Course**

For the majority of the participants the dyslexia course was the first acknowledgement, within the education system and throughout their lifespan, of the reality of their dyslexia. It provided an opportunity for them to gain knowledge and understanding about theirs and others' dyslexia, and openly discuss issues within a safe educational environment (Tanner, 2009). Interviews were conducted two years after the completion of the Understanding and Managing module and participants' narratives revealed the emergence of a reframing process that their comments attributed to the course.

The reframing process presented in this section best reflects the order of stages indicated by Reiff (2004): recognition, awareness, understanding and plan of action, as opposed to Gerber and colleagues (1996). Reiff's ordering is more reflective of participant responses, suggesting one does not need to fully understand the complexities and nature of dyslexia before accepting it and that it is possible to recognise and become aware of one's own difficulties without a clear understanding. Analysis also revealed that the stages are not static and separate but blend together as well as are revisited throughout. The following diagram indicates the stages of reframing that became evident as a result of the study.

Figure 1: The reframing process linked to the Dyslexia course



### Stages of Recognition

Three stages of recognition became apparent during this phase of the reframing process. All participants revealed that the first stage appeared early on in their schooling when they were aware of learning differences between themselves and their classmates. A sense of disempowerment linked to a lack of self-awareness of themselves (both as an individual and a student), and a lack of understanding, knowledge and recognition by teachers incurred. comments linked to negative self-efficacy and self-attribution. Hellendoorn & Ruijsenaars (2000) in their study of adults with dyslexia claimed that “almost all participants ... knew that something was the matter with them long before

they were diagnosed” (68) and Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg and Herman (2002) confirmed this point in their study of adults with learning disabilities.

The second stage of recognition also occurred prior to the course and involved the recognition that their difficulties had a ‘name’. This became evident as a result of formalised assessment and the subsequent identification or ‘labelling’ of dyslexia. For eight of the participants this occurred close to, or immediately prior to, the commencement of the course. For the remaining two this had occurred during high school and in adulthood.

The third stage of recognition has been ongoing since completion of the dyslexia course and with all participants able to recognise and articulate their individual characteristics and learning styles. This knowledge directly indicated content learned through the *Understanding and Managing Dyslexia* module. Seven of the participants, used terminology linked to diagnostic terms such as “disorientation” “neurotransmitters” “visual and auditory dyslexia”. The other three, although more general in their descriptions and recognition of the difficulties they faced, indicated a sense of ownership by using the term ‘my’ in reference to their dyslexia.

An important element in this stage of recognition was the realisation that their difficulties were not as a result of an intellectual disability or mental illness. Furthermore, their language use indicated that they did not define themselves by their dyslexia but rather their dyslexia was part of their unique make-up.

In the context of the course, a number of participants spoke of how they had recognised the differences in the degree or severity of their dyslexia in comparison with others. Individuals not only recognised their own characteristics and learning styles, but found themselves making comparisons with other students in their group.

It is within this third stage that the boundaries between recognition and acceptance become blurred as participants begin to see the link between the content of the course and how it related to them as individuals, as well as the beginnings of the reflection process regarding their current self-perception.

## Degrees of Acceptance

Acceptance is the second stage of reframing (Reiff, 2004) in which negative and positive aspects of dyslexia are acknowledged and individuals are able to make changes based on their individual limitations. Increased self-awareness can enable an individual to accurately identify “accommodations to achieve personal goals” (Adelman & Vogel, 1990; Speckman et al, 1993 cited in Greenbaum, Graham & Scales, 1996, p. 171). Willingly accessing personal or pragmatic-based support is an important component in this stage.

Participants in this study indicated the following four changes in their comfort level about their dyslexia during this stage of acceptance and identified specific components of the course that influenced their changes. Changes in self-esteem and self-worth also became evident at this stage.

*1. Changing one's perspective of dyslexia from negative to positive.* The course provided accurate information about dyslexia that enabled participants to reinterpret or shift their acceptance and understanding of their dyslexic characteristics. For the majority it negated the beliefs that had been perpetuated by significant others that had led to their sense of personal failure.

*2. Acceptance of the need to use compensatory strategies.* This degree of acceptance revealed a realisation that practical and pragmatic strategies can be used to support the individual in dealing with their limitations. Many told how they had developed and employed ‘passing’ strategies (Goffman, 1963) to hide their dyslexia. However, they also conceded how, as a result of the course, they became more willing to openly use, and even identify to others, the purpose and reason for their adjustment and, that interactions with others in the course had provided them with strategies as well as preparedness to use them. This indicated a personal shift in their sense of shame, sense of failure, and perception of ‘normalcy’, as well as their understanding of their personal and practical needs

3. *Acceptance of the need to access external support for pragmatic purposes:* Where individuals realised that their limitations required more than a compensatory strategy, they were willing to access other support systems, in particular those linked to vocational choices. Components of the course focused on identifying specialist support and networks that have emerged to cater for the demands on small business, particularly from an administrative and legal perspective. It allowed participants to recognise and understand that their strengths may lie in areas other than literacy and that it is part of business ethic and practice to outsource where necessary. It also reflected a shift in the fear of stigma attached to disclosure.

4. *The importance of the awareness of positive and successful well-known role models who have dyslexia:*

Part of the course content focused on well-known and successful people with dyslexia in the real-world. This realisation was a ‘critical incident’ in the gaining of knowledge required to help each individual reframe. Although it was a very small component of the module, it proved to have a significant impact on all participants’ attitudes about themselves and, in some instances, provided a prop for disclosure or explanation of what dyslexia is. Comments by participants reflected a cognitive shift in their thinking and awareness of dyslexia, in particular the understanding that good literacy skills are not a precursor or pre-requisite to high intelligence.

Gerber and colleagues (2003) believe “[h]ighly successful adults with learning disabilities have had and are having powerful effects on motivating other individuals with learning disabilities. In some cases, these successful adults with learning disabilities are creating opportunities for others that, in earlier times, would not have existed (p. 327)”.

## **Understanding**

Understanding is the third stage of reframing (Reiff, 2004) that constitutes a form of ‘sense making’ and a way of knowing about oneself. It is within this stage that evidence of a further change in the participants’ perceptions, about themselves and their life, occurred as their continual process of ‘knowledge gain’ evolved.

The data revealed an overarching positive sense of 'differentness' (Higgins et al., 2002) and a shift from an egocentric and exclusionary perspective to a sense of belonging, both on an individual and group basis. Analysis and evaluation of the knowledge gained through the course, in conjunction with their interactions with other students, created a sense of belonging to a unique group for the participants of this study. Three participants created their own support group external to the course. They sought research and strategies to help them improve their learning, life style and personal well-being. This demonstrates their evolving understanding as to their 'differentness'. It also reflects their resistance to the way in which they are perceived and how current societal services perceive them. "Unlike evident disabilities, where there exists a culture of 'support groups' that represent political needs, as well as responding to personal needs, 'support groups' for non-evident disabilities such as dyslexia are not as prevalent or evident" (Tanner, 2009, p. 795).

Dale and Taylor (2001) stressed the importance of the "significance of bringing people together in a group where they implicitly learn that they are not alone and can find solidarity with each other" (p. 1001). Whilst Choenarom, Williams and Hagerty (2005) cited an earlier study by Hagerty and colleagues (1996) that "showed that sense of belonging was related to both psychological and social functioning, with a higher sense of belonging promoting better functioning"(20) and in this instance understanding in the context of reframing.

Mixed messages regarding intelligence and literacy skills provided confusion throughout each participant's lifespan. The course content and open discussion times highlighted these inconsistent messages that participants had experienced and provided opportunities to deconstruct and understand the negative life experiences in the light of gained knowledge. Dealing with mixed messages revealed the degree of determination, and persistence that participants developed, alongside other attributes such as flexibility, resilience and a high level of motivation (Gorman, 2003; Hellendoorn et al, 2000; Raskind et al, 2002) however for a number of participants understanding was linked to emotional stability which appeared dependent upon the resurrection of past negative experiences.

For two participants it was not entirely evident that they had developed a clear understanding of their uniqueness and appeared unsure of the mixed messages they were receiving. Both indicated a sense of confusion. This is particularly evident with one participant who exhibits a co-morbidity of difficulties that are linked not only to dyslexia, but also expressive and receptive language processing difficulties and a mild hearing impairment. Her transition from recognition to understanding was in limbo as it appeared that the course provided her with insufficient content that linked directly to her individual needs.

What emerged from this stage of understanding was a willingness by all participants to engage in a dialogue about dyslexia. Dependent on the participant, the context was key to the type of dialogue and degree of disclosure. One participant even chose to talk on a local radio about dyslexia and its impact on her life. In doing so it allowed her to analyse, synthesise and evaluate the knowledge she had gained from the course and contextualise it within her own life in a public forum.

### ***Plan of Action***

Plan of action is the fourth stage of reframing. It is based on the degree of recognition, acceptance and understanding that an individual has of the strengths and limitations of their dyslexia and culminates in a realistic and achievable positive adjustment to life.

Results indicated that both pragmatic (linked to employment and study) and personal plans (linked to a sense of passion) of action occurred after the dyslexia course that encompassed a change in mindset. A further component that emerged was the advocacy roles that the majority of participants actively chose to engage in.

Five participants spoke of employment and study plans that had changed since their involvement in the dyslexia course. Within these plans it is evident that those with a well-developed awareness and understanding of their characteristics made choices that suited their strengths and limitations. Linked to this was their sense of emotional stability and flexibility that allowed them to cope with stress and frustration as well as their personal motivation and desire to be valued as economically productive individuals.

Niche and non-niche picking of employment that was “compatible and appropriate” (Goldberg et al., 2003, p. 226) to one’s identified strengths and limitations, was a variable that reflected a degree of reframing. Two participants did not demonstrate this self-awareness and found it difficult to “find a niche due to the global nature of their disabilities, which influenced their success across multiple contexts” (Goldberg et al., 2003, p. 226).

Since completing the course, one participant has devoted his time to finding a cure for dyslexia. He is currently experimenting with natural elements claiming these may enhance long-term and working-memory. He identifies memory as one of the most difficult characteristics to deal with in terms of his dyslexia. He claims to have “turned it into a real passion and a real drive” which “I’m just working on day and night inside and outside of my head”.

Another participant has developed the personal belief that she can achieve if she finds the appropriate method that suits her learning style. She has made the decision to never give up. This adjustment in her reframing indicates the attributes of success, namely perseverance.

The dyslexia course provided the content and support to assist participants gain the knowledge and understanding to take on an advocacy role. Participants were presented with opportunities to disseminate current legislation and state policies and were involved in role-play scenarios based on vocational, educational and daily contexts.

Eight of the 10 participants indicated they were now active advocates for creating an awareness of dyslexia and associated literacy difficulties and this advocacy had been closely linked to their gained knowledge and understanding of dyslexia and increased self-awareness. Three types of advocacy roles were apparent: (1) Public advocate - where disclosure of dyslexia was not context determined and revolved around educating and informing others of dyslexia; (2) Advocate for others with literacy difficulties – particularly in the roles of caregiver and work colleague in fighting for appropriate educational and workplace provision indicating a shift from self-absorbed awareness to

the awareness of others in similar circumstances; and (3) Self-advocate – informing others of one’s own needs – emotional and practical.

## **Conclusion**

Results indicate that the course provided key elements for participants to reconsider and analyse their lifelong perception of themselves. It acted as a catalyst to enable participants to adjust their perception of their difficulties and take control of their personal responses. It provided the stimulus for the reframing process to occur as influenced by the knowledge and understanding gained from the course content. Within this process each individual’s degree of reframing was dependent upon their self-awareness of their strengths and, more importantly, realistic expectations and limitations.

The course provided for both pragmatic reframing (for example: advocate for accommodations) and a personal reframing (for example: “I always thought I was dumb, now I know I’m not”).

Within the context of the course and assimilation of the content, the dialogue that participants engaged in allowed them to consider success and failure from both an internal and external perspective due to their: (a) self-awareness, (b) understanding; and (c) knowledge of their dyslexia linked to their degree of individual reframing. The course enabled them to take control of their self-awareness and acceptance and, through this change in perception of self, become active agents of change in their personal development and reframing. Therefore this highlights the value of adult learning environments to acknowledge and provide similar courses for people with dyslexia and that programs such as the certificate 1: Foundation Studies for people with Dyslexia can assist people with dyslexia understand and ‘deal with’ their uniqueness in a positive and informed way.

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