

5,000 word assignment replaced by 40 minute presentation.



Student with dyslexia and anxiety

York St John University. Occupational Therapy (part-time, in-service programme)

Presenting situation:

A high-achieving, mature student with dyslexia and anxiety was offered the opportunity to do a 40 minute presentation, followed by questions, in place of a written assignment. This alternative was offered as, during times of stress, the student found the process of academic writing raised her anxiety levels to the point where she was sometimes unable to write at all. It was clear that the student's anxiety was specifically related to the act of writing, rather than understanding of the assignment content, as during these times she was still able to verbally articulate a clear, detailed and analytical understanding of the subject matter.

The decision to assess using the presentation format was agreed by the University and External Examiners.

Alternative assessment:

The student completed a 40 minute presentation, with 15 minutes for questions. The questions were written down after the presentation and given to the student. The student was then given time to prepare her answers.

Reflection: Academic tutor

I was the Module Leader for the final reflective assignment which is based on the student's final professional practice placement.

I had known the student throughout her studies and was aware of the anxiety caused by the thoughts and process of written assignments. The student was able and capable and could articulate her thoughts well orally. I suggested a way of reducing the anxiety was to complete an oral presentation which would meet all the learning outcomes for the module. The process of agreeing the change of assessment was relatively straightforward; Suggesting the change in format to the student, agreeing the change in format with the subject area, Faculty, External Examiner, Academic Registry and study development tutor.

The student worked with me to discuss the learning outcomes and then with the study development tutor to develop the ideas for the delivery of the presentation.

Outcome:

The student produced and delivered an excellent presentation which met the learning outcomes for the module. I was delighted that the student was confident and clear in her delivery and she was able to achieve a mark of 72. The student had also developed transferable skills and confidence in her ability which would help when applying for her first post as an occupational therapist and beyond into her future career.

Post Script:

I suggested an alternative oral presentation to a written assignment for another student with severe dyslexia and again the student found the experience positive.

Reflection: Student

The student reported feeling anxious initially about the alternative format. Her previous experience of delivering a presentation earlier in the programme was not positive due to poor health, lack of support and high stress levels which had exacerbated the impact of her dyslexia and anxiety.

For the alternative assessment, however, the student felt she had all the necessary elements in place. As a part-time, in-service student, she had learned to manage her time to suit her learning style; she also had a supportive tutor, and had developed her understanding of academic work through her 1:1 study development sessions.

“My take on it is that I personally compute knowledge and information in a particular way, and a written format is not conducive to the reproduction or evidence of my knowledge. I believe that my tangled-up fashion of storing information does not follow the flow and format of academic written work, requiring much more effort to translate the knowledge into such. The result is an increase of pressure in the already stressful process of assessment.

For the recent presentation, once I'd accessed the support, and learned and applied the strategies of how to give an academic presentation, I found translating the tangle so much easier and much less stressful. I honestly believe that had I completed more assessments as presentations, my need to access dyslexia support would have reduced and the support would not have needed to be so consistent and regular. Perhaps too, my health might not have deteriorated as much had the assessment process been less stressful.”

Reflection: Study Development Tutor

Having witnessed the paralysing effects of anxiety on this student during the process of academic writing, I responded very positively when her tutor suggested an alternative assessment format. Once I had worked with the student to understand the practicalities of presenting academic information in this way, I was inspired to see how her need for my support reduced and she became much more autonomous. The assessment format was better suited to her learning style, developed a useful skill for her future career, and greatly reduced the impact of dyslexia on her work. I could see it was also a huge boost to her self-esteem and confidence to gain a mark which more accurately reflected her ability and understanding.