

Dissertation replaced by radio broadcast and support pack

Student with dyslexia

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Presenting situation:

Last year it was brought to my attention that a second year student taking a five credit (37.5 hours of study time) Semester 4 dissertation was so severely dyslexic that she needed to have a note-taker in lectures and would also need to have examination papers prepared as tape-recordings. The usual form of assessment for the dissertation module is an extended essay. I was asked if I would be prepared to set an alternative assessment.

Staff response:

I consulted various people to establish whether this was possible and what form the assessment should take. These included:

- the vice-dean responsible for teaching to check that an alternative assessment was permissible; it was, as the Module Catalogue stated that the exact form of assessment was at the module convener's discretion.
- the chair of the Student Disabilities Committee to seek his opinion; he was totally supportive.
- my wife, who is also an experienced university teacher, to see whether we could devise an alternative assessment that was equally challenging but did not involve an extended essay; she suggested the student be asked to prepare a 10 minute radio broadcast with an associated support pack for listeners to the "BBC University Radio World About Us" programme. The student would be asked to choose an area of environmental plant biology relevant to the parent taught module she was taking and prepare an interesting and newsy report.
- Margaret Herrington in the University's Study Support Centre, who has responsibility for on-going support for students with disabilities, to confirm that this proposal was acceptable and fair to the student; she was enthusiastic and offered studio support to help prepare the recording.
- the student to ensure she was happy with the proposed alternative assessment; she was, although slightly apprehensive about whether she could rise to the challenge. She was given approximately 8 weeks to complete the assignment.

Outcomes:

The student submitted the completed radio broadcast and listeners' support package on time and said she enjoyed the assignment. Her work was assessed independently by two academic staff and awarded a high 2/1 mark. The tape, though clearly made in several instalments, showed evidence not only of wide reading and good understanding, but also the ability to present the material effectively to meet the needs of the target audience.

Feelings and observations:

My feelings are that both the student and I enjoyed the assignment as something different from more conventional assessments, even though I was initially reticent about setting this student a different type of assessment from others, in case I discriminated against them, either positively or negatively. Once it was decided that I could set this type of assessment, no additional workload was involved in supervising or marking the work. I personally find it interesting and stimulating to set students a range of coursework that helps to develop additional skills, and believe they enjoy and benefit from the challenges provided.

An important point for me was that the exercise reinforced the view that, although some students may have difficulty in expressing themselves in extended prose or under examination conditions, they may nevertheless be able to show their full potential when set alternative challenges in areas requiring different communication skills. I am happy to continue to offer students advanced level coursework assignments that are tailored to meet their needs and requirements as I feel they and their teaching staff both gain additional benefit and satisfaction from assignments that are of mutual interest.

Postscript

After the success of the 'reasonable adjustment' described above, the idea was extended and offered to more students the following academic year.

We set a similar exercise for a second year group of about 80 students for the first time this year. We divide them up into groups of 5 and ask them to prepare a 5 minute clip on any topics related to the impact of environmental stresses on plants. Each group elects a team leader and decides how to structure their presentation - e.g. have an anchorman back in the studio, roving reporters and interviewees. They can use visual aids if they wish. One or two groups are even planning to video themselves. It should be interesting to see how things turn out!

The assessment criteria were: Originality (10); Knowledge of topic (10); Clarity of presentation (10); Communication skills (10); and ability to Enthuse / inform audience (10).