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Specific Learning Difficulties as a relational category: reconstruction, redistribution and resistance in higher educational practice

Harriet Cameron

Introduction

‘Specific Learning Difficulties’ or ‘Specific Learning Disorders’ (both shortened to SpLDs) are two terms which gather a number of conditions and disorders within their grasp. One of the most recognised of these is dyslexia, a contested condition connected to particular difficulties in literacy. Although discourse around SpLDs is laden with the deficit-heavy language of the various Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals of Disorders and Diseases (DSMs), the acronym itself is used in education in a way that cuts across DSM lines. In practice, ‘SpLDs’ is sometimes used to include dyspraxia, ADHD and autism, even though these categories are not listed under the DSMV’s ‘learning disorders’ section (APA, 2013). Well-meaning educators sometimes use the alternative wording ‘Specific Learning Differences’ rather than ‘Disorders’ or ‘Difficulties’ in order to minimise the negative association; however, the question still remains, different from what, or from whom? Although disability rights activists achieved much in pushing institutions to recognise disability as socially and environmentally constructed (Oliver, 2013), it will be no easy job to end the reign in education of the ‘normal’, gifted to us by an emerging 20th Century Euro-American Psychology.

In this chapter, I pay particular attention to the UK higher education context, because this is where my experience lies both in research and in practice; however, my suggestions for practice are internationally applicable. I argue here (as I have elsewhere, e.g. Cameron & Billington, 2015a & 2015b) that SpLDs are socially constructed. By saying that SpLDs are socially constructed I do not mean that they do not exist. Socially constructed existence can be every bit as real as any other kind of existence. My position does not deny the material body, neurological happenings, or human interaction with a physical environment. Bodies, neurons, and the ways they develop, matter; but these things alone cannot constitute a specific learning difficulty, disorder, or disability; indeed, their nature is not separable from the social. The materiality of bodies and brains is entangled with the social and the discursive, rather than being the surface upon which the latter act (Barad, 2007).

I begin by considering how SpLDs can come into being, morph, or even disappear, before bringing in some examples of current practice in UK higher education. I spend the remainder of the chapter sitting with the question: what might social constructionist practice look like for students identified with SpLDs in the UK and beyond?

How do (Sp)LDs come into being?

In much of the scientific literature, there is a focus upon what causes dyslexia, and other developmental conditions and disorders. From a social constructionist perspective, the question of cause (and effect) is problematic from the outset. It is problematic because the question itself makes certain presumptions about the nature of the category under investigation. Whilst Psychology would acknowledge it does not yet have all the facts about dyslexia, autism, or ADHD, it generally works under the assumption that science is taking us towards an ever-greater understanding of what are fundamentally neuro-biological or neuro-psychological extant categories, even if it makes errors along the way. From this perspective, autism, dyslexia, and ADHD exist in individual brains, minds and bodies, awaiting full discovery and final definition. It makes sense from this point of view to look for a (biological, genetic, neurological, psychological) cause, to seek the true boundaries of a given category, to design tools of measurement, to map and predict its effects, and to design intervention. However, from a social constructionist perspective, categories of SpLD do not pre-exist their definitions: their existence is rooted in the social: in language, and in the active relations between people, communities, ideas, spaces, discourses, places, histories and time. As such, the facts of SpLDs do not stay still: they are murmurations on a rotating skyline.

There is much excellent work tracing the ways in which learning disabilities and disorders, along with 'the disabled' and 'the disordered' come into being in the spaces and discourses of education and society more broadly. For example, Ray McDermott (2014), offers a wonderfully detailed story of how a boy called Adam is acquired by the learning disability category through classroom dynamics and relationships; Amanda Melissa Baggs shows eloquently how her communicative style and relationship to the world became evidence of disorder and inhumanity (Baggs, 2007/2013); and Mattias Nilsson Sjöberg (2017) follows the becoming of a child-with-ADHD via discursive and material relations in school. In previous work, I have discussed how constructions of dyslexia can be mobilised by dyslexic students in higher education as a means of positioning themselves positively in an environment where their difficulties with reading, writing, and performing academically are presented as a continual threat to their human value (Cameron & Billington, 2015a and 2015b). However, these positionings are insecure, particularly for students of colour (Cameron & Greenland, 2019). It is even possible for students to have their diagnosis go out-of-being, to find that the difficulties they experience have been socially reconstructed. This disappearance might follow new diagnostic assessment (e.g. Cameron, in preparation) or the removal of a category from the diagnostic nomenclature (e.g. with the removal of Asperger's Syndrome from the DSMV (APA, 2013).

Social constructions of learning differences, disorders and disabilities, are necessarily dependent upon the social constructions of learning, and of the learned person (Cameron, 2019) and connected to constructions of race (Mendoza et al. 2016). The disorders which are closely linked to the shifting concept of 'learning' are likewise inconstant. In the current era, and increasingly across the globe, ideas about learning and individual (un)intelligence, are tied to ideas about individual human worth(lessness) and shame (Cameron & Billington 2015a&b). Universities are structured to capture presumed learning ability via the grade;

and, as such, lecturers and students are condemned to make and remake the worth and shame of themselves and others (Cameron, 2019; Cameron & Billington, 2015a & 2015b). If students find it difficult to articulate their ideas in a seminar, if they find it hard to remember knowledge for exams, if they cannot read as quickly as their peers, if they do not find it as easy as their classmates to sequence ideas in writing, if they find it hard to organise their time, to concentrate in class, to navigate learning spaces, or to take notes in lectures, if their 'knowledge', way of speaking, or world view is not recognised as valuable, if they do not 'fit' in the higher education environment; if any of these things are named, seen, noted down, assessed, or discussed, especially by those in a socially dominant position, the way is paved for the production of a disorder and a disordered human. Naming the disorder and situating it within a person is much less disruptive to the hierarchical *status-quo* than naming and changing the oppressive constructive relations in the wider socio-environmental web.

Current practice?

The structures for formal recognition and support of students identified with SpLDs in higher education in the UK often help to reproduce and reinforce ideas of individual psychological or neurological deficit. This is partly because access to formal supports and 'reasonable adjustments' are granted only after formal diagnosis has been evidenced (or, occasionally, when there is formal evidence that diagnosis is soon expected). Diagnostic assessment for dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, and similar, is based upon the identification of specific deficits via psychometric tests, or medical interview, administered or led by a suitably qualified practitioner. Confirmation of formal diagnosis allows disability services to contact academic departments so that adjustments can be put in place. A positive diagnosis can also be used to support a student's application for Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), a fund which will pay for a full Needs Assessment. The Needs Assessor can recommend the funded provision of, for example, non-medical helpers (mentors, specialist teachers) and assistive technology, as well as the provision of adjustments for the student. These adjustments might include additional time in exams, additional tutor time, recognition of the student's literacy difficulties in assessment, alternative assessment, allowance for the extension of coursework deadlines and extended library loans (see Cameron et al. 2019 for a discussion of 'reasonable adjustments', unseen disabilities, and the 2010 Equality Act). Without a formal diagnosis, it is very difficult for students to access these supports. The upshot here is that many students who do not fit the narrow academic mould come to submit to the neuropsychological or medical model, at least to some degree, in order to make it past the gatekeepers to access anything like an even-playing field for academic participation. In many cases this submission means accepting the results of an I.Q. test as evidence of underlying (in)ability, and coming to terms with their 'poor working memory' or 'slow speed of processing', as if those these were observable objects in their heads. The institutional structures re-establish the deficit each time the student begins a new module or unit of assessment. Furthermore, the fact that adjustments and accommodations are tied so tightly to diagnoses means that a firm line is drawn between those who qualify for specialist support and those who do not qualify for any specialist support. When a student falls just short of a diagnostic threshold, or if their diagnosis changes (See Cameron, in preparation), or if they prefer not to undergo diagnostic assessment, they are vulnerable to another set of dehumanising constructions: as lazy, or stupid, or both, and thus as undeserving of additional support.

Higher education practice is largely bound to a model of individual summative assessment in the form of timed examination and written coursework, and to delivery of content via large, teacher-led lectures (though this does vary according to discipline). Higher education also operates as a market and is, correspondingly, a place of more impersonal relations than it might otherwise be (Weber, 1978). If we consider that a focus upon relations between people and environments is central to purposeful social constructionist practice (Gergen, 2009), then a market-oriented higher education is a problem. It is arguable then, that the most obvious route to social constructionist practice in higher education is the collective rejection of the market in defining human learning and human value. Given that this goal is not achievable by the individual educator, in my next section I make some smaller-scale suggestions for practice: small relational acts of reconstruction and resistance which might be enacted by a module leader, specialist teacher, or disability advisor.

What might social constructionist practice look like?

Social constructionist practice is relational practice; and as such is not a new idea at all. If we put Eurocentric world views aside, there is a wealth of writing around relational modes of being and learning which is social-constructionist practice in all but name (Steinam, 2004; Deloria, 1992). We do not need to reinvent the wheel here, but it may be helpful to think about how relational and social constructionist world-views might be used to shape every day pedagogical higher education practice in specific relation to students labelled with SpLDs or otherwise constructed as neurodiverse.

I would like to undertake the consideration of practice with attention to the writings of Native American scholars including Gloria Steinam and Vine Deloria; disability self-advocates, for example, Melissa Amanda Baggs; educators sharing decolonising pedagogical practice such as Chris Emdin; as well as explicitly social constructionist authors such as Mary Gergen and Sheila McNamee. Part of what the works of these authors offer is a window onto a way of coming to know the world by coming to know and understand relationships: ‘everything is connected to everything else’ (Deloria, 1992: 40). Native American authors on this topic come together in their commitment to ‘respect, relevance, reciprocity, [and] responsibility’ (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) in both teaching and research. It seems to me that these qualities are equally suited to guiding social constructionist practice with students diagnosed as learning disabled, autistic or attention deficient in the UK and beyond. In the sections below I add to this collection of Rs with ‘reconstruction’, ‘redistribution’ and ‘resistance’ as helpful constructs with which to frame a discussion of practice around teaching, assessment, diagnosis and specialist support practice in higher education.

Social constructionist practice in higher education assessment and teaching

Global norming is melting the pleasure of knowing things (McDermott, 2015: p.338).

University courses, modules and lectures are often designed around specific, measurable learning outcomes. Learning outcomes commonly take the form of brief, bullet pointed items which an individual student hopes to tick off once the unit of study is complete. Learning outcomes, in turn, are often drawn up under the disciplinary shadow of a university's market-friendly promise of student 'employability' and over-exaggerated claims to produce the 'ideal' graduate. Assessment outcomes are fed into the construction of standards for the sector, and into the sinister system of global education 'norms'. Assessments normally take the form of a written essay or a timed exam (with some wonderful exceptions). Students identified with SpLDs (alongside other 'non-traditional' students) can have difficulty with this design for a number of reasons. Dyslexic students, for example, often find it harder than other students to write quickly and with conventional grammatical accuracy, to order their ideas, to memorise information divorced from context, and to read or process instructions quickly (Mortimore & Crozier, 2006). They can also struggle with formal academic conventions, and with linear design of modules, with some research suggesting dyslexic students may have particular strengths in global processing; or in other words, a talent for seeing the whole picture rather than the parts (von Karoli, et al. 2003). Autistic students, on the other hand, may find focusing on the detail rather than the whole to be preferable, and may have a good memory for what they are taught, but may experience low academic motivation (Gurbuz et al. 2019) and may meet more challenges in communication with peers and lecturers in class (Anderson et.al. 2018). It cannot be overstated that all dyslexic or autistic students will not experience these strengths and difficulties. Social constructionist practice must recognise that students diagnosed with neurodevelopmental conditions are a very heterogeneous group. One means of teaching and assessment will not suit all.

Below I expand upon two concrete suggestions for enabling social constructionist practice in teaching and assessment which are sufficiently malleable that they embrace heterogeneity:

1. ***Resist the language of Learning Outcomes. Instead, useindividual and collectively negotiated Learning Directions***

Sometimes learning outcomes can be useful in providing unity for a module. However, this unity need not be lost if we change course. Rather than 'At the end of this module, the student will be able to…', I suggest language such as 'Over the course of this module, students will be supported in their exploration of the relationships between x theories and x practices and to share their reactions to what they learn'. This will enable student and teacher, in dialogue, to focus upon elements of learning which cannot be contained in tick boxes and bullet points. Space for negotiation of learning direction is key, and learning directions may shift along the way: '[h]ierarchy…is minimised, and knowledge is viewed as co-constructed… shared both ways, negotiated, and jointly developed' (Sutherland et al. 2013: 375).

This approach means becoming critical of the assumption that fixed, pre-determined learning goals are neutral and automatically good for everyone. Instead of drawing 'non-traditional' students 'away from who they are' to turn them 'into something [they're] not' (Native American student in Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991: 4), broad, flexible and negotiable learning goals would help enable modules to embrace a student's knowledge, learning preferences, predispositions and life experiences. It would also shift the focus away from final outcomes and towards learning processes, and it is 'in the process: what people are doing together', argues Sheila McNamee, that knowledge and meaning emerge (Lugo et al. 2014: 386). A dyslexic student who first nurtured their relationship with the 'big picture' of a given topic, rather than with detailed specificsmight negotiate a different learning direction to an autistic student who preferred to approach learning in clearly defined stages with a focus on finer detail. And they might choose different types of assessment which allow them to share their learning in a way that best suits their ways-of-knowing (see below).

2. ***Reconstruct what counts as teaching and learning in higher education by offering varied possibilities for expression and participation with respect for how individuals differently communicate with, and relate to, one another and to the world. Offer choice in assessment, focus upon qualitative mutual feedback, and provide some opportunity to resubmit assessed work, without penalty, following reflection.***

'Stories count' (Deloria, 2004: v).

I grew up in a white village in England with two, white academic parents who were biologists. Despite sustained academic mediocrity through school, the language of the Academy was woven into my soul, spread around the dinner table, and always in physical reach (books everywhere). In other words, I consider myself 'pre-adapted' to Western academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). I benefited from my mediocrity through the freedom relative lack of expectation offered me: I was not hammered into the shape of 'a bright student', and I spent a lot of time in the woods. Now, when I do academic writing, I feel the comfort of home. I feel validated, valuable, and I love what a carefully composed sentence can do. I am extremely privileged to be able to communicate creatively in a way that is highly respected in educational institutions in much of the world. And this privilege is not a coincidence.

I worked for many years with dyslexic, dyspraxic and autistic university students, helping them to figure out what a module was asking of them, and helping them to push themselves into moulds not designed for them. My dyslexic students often flourished when I asked them to speak stories and to play with ideas in conversation, and withered when there was no space for recognition of the personal in the marking criteria. They could often feel and articulate the textures of ideas, and the connections between things, but had few chances to share these feelings. Their language 'errors', 'slow' speed of reading, and difficulties with sequencing meant they rarely gained the highest marks without all-consuming and anxiety-driven effort. My autistic students, contrary to the science, often felt enormous empathy with their fellow students, and took joy from being able to share their particular skills with others in their class, but group work was often not set up to allow contributions according to strengths.

Traditional teacher-led, and often, notionally student-led classrooms, are not usually set up with neurodiverse students in mind. The dominant expectation of academic communication tends to be for seemingly objective, impersonal, fact-heavy discourse delivered in dry, emotion-free, white-canon-filled prose. The academy is replete with tacit rules and assumptions about who can say what, and how and where they can say it. Students who are not familiar, comfortable, or accomplished in following these rules, students who receive indignant reactions when they can follow these rules (see Cameron & Greenland, 2018), and students who find the implicit difficult to spot, are at a disadvantage and are constructed as less academic, and sometimes as a little less human (Cameron, 2019).

Making room for students' stories, poems, or other creative takes on phenomena in the classroom and in assessment is one means to more socially just practice (Emdin, 2016). Instead of multiple choice exams and standard essays we might recognise that 'artistic and poetic reactions are as legitimate as measurements' (Gergen & Gergen, 2008: 145). My suggestion, then, is that students be allowed to choose how to express their changing relations to the subject of a module: to choose assessment type.

Moreover, if grades must be given, we might make them negotiable, and allow coursework to be reworked and resubmitted following dialogic feedback.

> *Through the process of dialogue, a comprehension and appreciation for different ways of knowing and seeing the world emerge. It is this process that makes differentiated assessment and renegotiated standards possible because the outcome expectations are transformed by the process of inclusion* (Carjuzza & Ruff, 2012: 74).

Social constructionist practice in higher education diagnostic and support practice.

Below I expand upon two concrete suggestions for enabling social constructionist practice in and around diagnosis and specialist support in higher education.

1. ***Resist the bureaucratic requirement for full diagnostic assessments as keys to unlock the gate to adjustments and specialist support. Instead, use listening and dialogue as the route to recommendation of specialist resources.***

For some students, a diagnosis of dyslexia following formal diagnostic assessment is experienced as a huge relief, as a "good thing"; for other students, it can be an exhausting and stigmatising experience, and students may experience both of these together, or each at different times (e.g. Cameron & Billington, 2015). The desirability or not of a formal diagnosis for dyslexia, ADHD or autism is bound up in a complex web of relations which stretches back to historical conceptions of feeblemindedness, madness, whiteness and colonialism; and which locks tendrils with the marketization of human kinds in a globalizing world (Rose, 1999; Tomlinson, 2012). My position is that, despite the limited resources made available, and despite the bureaucratic mess that may ensue, the need for a formal diagnostic psychological, psychiatric or medical report should not be a requirement in order that support and adjustment be put in place for a student. Requiring such a diagnosis places students in a position where they must undergo a series of normed psychometric tests (often including IQ type tests) and/or subject themselves to invasive personal questions from someone they do not know, in order to evidence their 'disorder'. Instead, I consider that students should have the option of one or more informal conversations with a specialist teacher, disability advisor or psychologist to talk about what they feel they need and how that need can be met. The funding which would have been put towards diagnostic and needs assessment might be used to finance this support. What this approach says, essentially, is 'let's believe the student when they say they are experiencing academic difficulties beyond what might be expected, and let's help them.' The keeper of the gate thus becomes a porous collection of human relationships, rather than a stamped document and a white coat. As such, students do not need to expose themselves to a report about their in-the-head cognitive deficiencies. Moreover, those who miss the threshold for diagnosis, or those for whom there is greater cultural stigma attached to seeking diagnosis, are less likely to find themselves stranded without support, and at risk of becoming merely 'stupid' or 'lazy' (Cameron, in preparation). Diagnosis *does* something and students should have genuine choice in whether to take that route.

> *[T]he neuropsychiatric diagnoses of our time are redefining what it means to be a human being. The psychiatrization of (partly) school-related problems leads to situational and relational aspects being transformed into permanent flaws in individual traits …* (Sjöberg, 2017: 602)

I propose we (educators, practitioners, psychologists, students) resist this redefinition.

2. *Nurture a relational view upon what SpLDs 'are'.*

[D]iversity is linked not ranked (Steinam, 2004: xviii)

Psychology, hand-in-hand with Education, constructs sets of generalizations about groups of students which lend themselves to reproduction in every-day learning and teaching spaces:

autistic students will be like *this*, students with ADHD will be like *this…*and so on. Finer grained expectation is often set for neurodiverse students through the language of 'severity' (e.g. 'mild dyslexia', 'severe autism'). Generalizations and stereotypes can shape the ways in which teacher-student and student-student relationships develop from the outset and can eclipse a more open coming-to-know of one another.

> 'What our lives are like for each of us, as the unique individuals that we are, is reflected back to us by our scientific psychology in terms of a 'one-size-fits-all' set of generalities. The unforeseeable 'more' that we each expect of ourselves as living beings, continually facing new, and in recent times, turbulent and unstable circumstances, is left unheeded' (Shotter, 2017: 40).

Students are invited to self-define according to the reductive terminology of psychological efficiency or deficiency. Those identified as learning disabled may then play a part in their own oppression, for example, by staying quiet in a university seminar for fear of sounding 'stupid' (Cameron, 2016).

A goal for social constructionist practice, then, is to engage students in learning and teaching processes which nurture trust, connectivity, openness, emotional expression and storytelling so that individual students' experiences, strengths, and challenges can be shared. This trust is unlikely to develop without a focus upon shared activities and collective class goals alongside redistributed responsibility for learning. Tasks or assessments which ask students to work together on a project in ways which respect the individuals' learning strengths, cultures, and language are a useful tool here. The aim is for what bell hooks calls 'engaged pedagogy' (1994), and Chris Emdin, 'Reality Pedagogy' (2016): both of these authors argue that emotional connection and mutual respect are essential for deep learning. This is not the same as student-centred learning (Burman, 2008). The idea is not to focus on the individual student but to nurture their relations with other students, with ideas, with the teacher, and even with objects (Yergeau, 2018). The individual then becomes a shifting, relational self whose strengths and difficulties are recognised as fluid and contextual, rather than fixed through psychometric testing.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have made a number of small-scale suggestions for social constructionist practice with particular attention to students identified as specifically learning disabled. These are tiny loose nails in a great iron machine. This practice must be part of a larger, global movement for connectivity and kindness, mutual recognition and responsibility, and decolonization. There will ever be resistance, because '[q]uestioning academic practices is tantamount to acknowledging the lack of neutrality in academic rationality…' (Carjuzza &

Ruff, 2012: 75). And because maintenance of the myths of meritocracy and democracy is essential to the maintenance of current inequalities.

As educators we should take care not to hold social constructionism aloft as the one true answer (McNamee, 2015), as'[i]t is when people claim the truth of their foundations that others are silenced, punished or eliminated' (Gergen & Gergen, 2008: 146). Rather than assertion of the superiority of social constructionism, what underpins the sentiment of this chapter is a knowledge that formal Western educational practice inflicts 'soul wounds' upon certain people whilst it upholds the power and privilege of others (Emdin, 2016: p.27). Social constructionist practice, as relational practice, may make some small contribution to the prevention and healing of these wounds.

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