

Experiences with dyslexia

I was born in Berlin 1988, went to primary school and later to high school. During my generation conscription was still used for the German military, but it was possible to carry out civil service instead, which I chose to do. Luckily I found a place in the Berlin antiquity service and soon worked on an excavation. I liked the mix of intellectual work and manual work from the first moment, so I decided to study archaeology at the Free University (FU) of Berlin where I studied my BA and my MA at the Institute for Prehistoric Archaeology; now I'm writing my PhD at the Institute for Near Eastern Archaeology. I am still very interested in both theory and practice and while the practical part of archaeology is not a big problem the theoretical part can be very challenging.

This is because I have dyslexia. It was realised when I went to the high school. After finishing primary school the teachers did not recommend me for a higher education, but my mother thought that must be a mistake as I was a quick child. The Director of the high school talked to me and came to the same conclusion, but as my marks were poor he recommended checking me for dyslexia. After it was confirmed I had dyslexia he was in a problematic situation, because normally that disqualified me for a higher education. In the end he decided to ignore the rules and allow me to try. So, I just had to deal with the fact that my German was quite bad and my marks were always worse than the marks of the others. Some teachers were nice and did not evaluate my mistakes, others did; I was just at their mercy. But I want to underline, that a lot of sympathy was there and now the rules have changed so dyslexia is not considered something that should prevent you from higher education. (at least in Berlin – in Germany education is different from federal country to federal country).

Since then, I tended to just ignore that I have dyslexia. I always asked my friends to correct my text during the studies (I am very thankful for them!) and just went on with everything. I need more time to read and to write and this meant I had to work more than others in the university. But I was used to this from school. In the end that was maybe a trait that helped me to stay in archaeology. But the condition prevented me from a lot of jobs like editing and stuff. I was rejected from such jobs and I somehow understand it. But I really kept it secret most of the time, and sometimes felt very ashamed, because I know that my Excel tables and excavation diaries are filled with mistakes and someone else will read them. I mostly speak with people about my condition after I have already proved to be a good co-worker.

In the end all the discipline and secret-keeping take up a lot of time and I wished I could have been more open with it. The people that rejected me because of my condition are not worth working with, I say to myself. My PhD Supervisors have a lot of understanding and when I started my PhD I went to the commissioner for the disabled and asked if my dyslexia qualified me as disabled. They had nearly no experience with dyslexia but were open and helped me creatively. I should have done all this earlier! It was a mistake to ignore it and pretend not to be disabled.

To help raise awareness for others, I am in contact to some teachers and speak with them regularly about how to treat children with dyslexia (but that is nothing organized) and I also know other people with dyslexia in academia and I share my experience with them. The

biggest mistake is that I thought dyslexia is perceived as stupidity. I now realise that normally people are interested and open. I still would not mention it in a job interview, but if you keep it secret all the time, things will never change.

Also, I used two different spelling-programs for this text, and it is quite ok, isn't it? That was not possible 10 or 20 years ago. The future will make things easier for people with dyslexia. Also communicating in a foreign language helps – because then everyone just thinks 'it's not his mother tongue, but nice that he speaks it.'