

Dyslexia: a way of thinking

By Bruce Ansley



People with dyslexia can succeed brilliantly

Ever felt words were a struggle? That it would be better if you could just grab a piece of paper and draw what you meant? Or would you prefer to explain by picking up some material to work it out with your hands? You may have that special way of thinking that's visual and whole-of-picture and is called dyslexia.

So often the dyslexic way of thinking has not been recognised. And that's what it is — a way of thinking, not a disability.

Too often, teachers have referred to pupils as slow or backward simply because their pictorial view of the world does not suit teaching focused on word expression. The New Zealand case studies we feature here are also typical of those who think differently but have not been recognised early in their life for this ability.

Pioneering research at Auckland University by Dr Karen Waldie found that

fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) brain scans during reading activity show a striking difference in brain activity between average readers and those with dyslexia when reading. Activity in the left hemisphere which organises word functions is present for typical readers but largely absent

for those with dyslexia.

The Dyslexia Foundation in New Zealand places great emphasis on the principles of recognition, understanding and action. They appeal for people to RECOGNISE someone is dyslexic, not "thick," "slow..." Read on...

They won with dyslexia

Sam Donaldson always struggled with reading and writing. But his thinking skills took him into a new career that saw him named Apprentice of the Year by the print industry last year.

In primary school Sam found himself falling behind the rest of his class.

"I struggled, slipped behind, played

up," he says. "Then my mum saw it was dyslexia; my father had it as well. She took me back to basics. She put in a huge effort. But I was never much good at school. I was told by my teacher that I'd never go to high school and I grew up believing that."

Yet he did go on to secondary school — and suffered.

"I struggled with confidence, exams, tests. They used to freak me out. I'd see words back to front. I passed some School Cert subjects then left school early and went into panel-beating for a couple of years. But I wasn't enjoying it too much."

Then came Sam's lucky break. He became interested in the martial arts.

FACTS

<http://www.dyslexiafoundation.org.nz/about.html>

Dyslexia IS an alternative way of thinking and seeing the world.

Dyslexic individuals think in pictures not words.

Dyslexics are often high-level conceptualisers who provide "out-of-the-box" thinking.

One in ten New Zealanders is dyslexic.

Dyslexia is real—brain research shows that dyslexia has a neurobiological basis.

Dyslexia is a learning preference, favouring visual and multi-sensory teaching.

Dyslexia's greatest problem is self-esteem; it only becomes a disability if not appropriately addressed.

Dyslexia IS a lifelong challenge.

Dyslexia DOES tend to run in families.

Dyslexia DOES affect both boys and girls.

Dyslexia is NOT an illness or a disease.

Dyslexic people are NOT less intelligent.

Dyslexia does NOT affect only reading and writing.

Dyslexia is NOT caused by brain or nerve damage.





PHOTOGRAPHS: WETA WORKSHOP, DYSLLEXIA FOUNDATION.

Sam Donaldson: Dyslexic and top apprentice.

His instructor, Steve Wallace, saw Sam's potential and offered him an apprenticeship in his screen printing business, Screen Printing Solutions in Hamilton.

"It was really good and good working with a friend. And I got excellence all the way through."

That led to the supreme accolade, the 2008 Apprentice of the Year (awarded 2009). That award involved both interviews and written tests, once Sam's pitfall.

"They really would have bothered me in the past," he says, "but now I believed in myself. Dyslexia now doesn't affect me in my everyday life. But it would have, if mum hadn't sorted it out, or if Steve hadn't built up my confidence. That's the biggest thing. In martial arts I have my third degree black belt and I'm an instructor."

Now he has been promoted to production manager in his company and is halfway through a diploma in management, no small feat for the boy who was once voted unlikely ever to go past primary school.

He and Steve have started a new company, Shirt Addiction, selling shirts on the internet.

"I'm satisfied as long as I'm growing," Sam says. "I never want to be complacent."

Allan McDonald

Ten percent of the population, mostly

males, could prove dyslexic if properly diagnosed. Allan McDonald believes. Along with many others Allan struggled through school, simply thinking he was "thick." He did not realise he was dyslexic until his own son repeat-

RICHARD TAYLOR

Sir Richard Taylor of Weta Workshop, creating a sculpture "Inner Struggle" for the Dyslexia Discovery Exhibit in Christchurch. Sir Richard says on the Weta Workshop website that the primary motivation behind the creation of the Dyslexia Discovery Exhibit is to challenge the views that dyslexia is a hidden disability and instead offer a seed of hope that may grow in power to shift mindsets and remove the shame that so often surrounds dyslexia. He says "the gallery provides knowledge, inspiration and encouragement for all dyslexics." The exhibit showcases the artistic, engineering, creative and business achievements of four leading "picture thinkers," one of whom is Richard Taylor. <http://www.wetanz.com/dyslexia-discovery-exhibit/>





Allan McDonald: Dyslexic and top in technical drawing.

ed the pattern at school. When the boy was diagnosed as having dyslexia, Allan realised the true nature of his own problem.

Allan's story is remarkable. Sheer determination took him from being a struggling schoolboy to a construction company executive with a university diploma.

He attended a primary school near Mosgiel.

"I couldn't spell, couldn't read," he says. "But being bottom of the class was balanced out by being good at sports, art, drama. But it became a problem heading into secondary school. All of a sudden I had to copy a lot of stuff, do a lot of reading. I got to the point in maths where everyone else seemed to have a grip on it and I

had absolutely no idea what was going on.

"I started to think I was really thick. I was top of the class in technical drawing and bottom in English. I got through, but I came out with low self-esteem."

Sheer hard work got him through School Certificate and he passed University Entrance on his second attempt. He left school and went looking for a job. He was interested in technical drawing and draughting, and won a cadetship in the then Department of Labour. The work sparked an interest in workplace conditions, occupational health and safety.

"I rose through the ranks, largely because I was doing face-to-face stuff, little in the way of reports and com-



municating with people suited my personality."

Then his wife Debbie took a hand in his career. She urged him to go to university.

"She didn't know that I was thick as a pig," says Allan. "But I went to the University of Otago for a mind-boggling two years. I found I had to do 3000-word assignments. They took me hours and hours. It was absolute hell."

Still, he graduated with a diploma in health sciences. He became occupational health and safety manager with the big construction company Calder Stewart Industries Ltd based in Milton, Otago.

Meanwhile, however, his son was making slow progress at primary school.

"He sounded just like me," Allan said. "But Debbie knew there was something wrong. Then he was diagnosed by SPELD as having dyslexia."

Suddenly Allan knew why he'd had so much trouble himself.

"Finally we were able to put a name to the problem. It was a great relief. Everything unravelled for me, all the

GIRLTALK, BOYS SEE

Dyslexia as a way of thinking is more visual than verbal. And research has shown that it's mostly boys and men who are more visually focused than girls and women. In a study in the journal *Neuropsychologia*, "Sex Differences in Neural Processing of Language Among Children," researchers from Northwestern University and the University of Haifa unambiguously identified that girls showed significantly greater activation in language areas of the brain than boys. Their performance accuracy linked with these language areas. As *Science Daily* reported, "To their astonishment,

however, this was not at all the case for boys. In boys, accurate performance depended—when reading words—on how hard visual areas of the brain worked." When hearing words, boys' performance depended on how hard auditory areas of the brain worked.

While girls can have dyslexic thinking, too, the study suggested that language processing is more sensory in boys and more abstract in girls. One explanation is that boys create visual and auditory associations; meanings are brought to mind simply from seeing or hearing the word.



The Bears Britten V1000. Inventor John Britten was dyslexic but visualised world-beating motorbikes.

experiences I'd had, the issues that had blocked me from achieving." They are determined their son will fare better. More help is available now. In secondary school he will be entitled to special assistance. Meanwhile Debbie works every day on his English skills

and he has extra maths tutoring. "We're aiming at getting him able to achieve. Having a diagnosis doesn't actually help. But it explains things. If my problem had been recognised, they wouldn't have done anything about it, but it would have made me feel better: I'm not thick."



John McCaughy: Dyslexic and good at running a business.

John McCaughy

John McCaughy echoes the pattern. At school he was good at art, bad at spelling, reading and writing. He left secondary school with no qualifications. He took a hairdressing apprenticeship and discovered an unsuspected talent: He was good at running a business. Then he went into engineering, because:

"It was real hands-on and practical. I sat my guilds for electric, gas and MIG (metal inert gas) welding and excelled in the theory and practicals, but struggled in the writing component. I



achieved a City and Guilds trade qualification as a fabricator/welder." His business skills saw him into a job running New Zealand's first private home for the intellectually disabled and he is now training to be a counsellor.

"My experience has made me very practical. Dyslexia can't be cured, but you can learn to live with it. Don't be frightened if you've got it. It makes you who you are." ■



Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand

Recognition • Understanding • Action

HARNESSING
THE POWER OF
THINKING
DIFFERENTLY



JOHN BRITTEN'S SCHOOL YEARS WERE A BATTLE WITH DYSLEXIA. HOWEVER NOT TOO MANY YEARS LATER JOHN WAS BEING HAILED AS A GENIUS ENGINEER! JOHN BRITTEN EMBODIED THE KIND OF CREATIVE SPIRIT AND ACHIEVEMENT THAT CAN BE CHARACTERISTIC OF THE DYSLEXIC MIND.

Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand (DFNZ) was formed in late 2006 to dispel the myths surrounding dyslexia and to provide a unified voice for dyslexic New Zealanders and those supporting them. Our launch was funded through the generous support of our principal sponsor, Cookie Time Charitable Trust, which has also funded several other key initiatives along the way.

Just six months after our launch, we were successful in having the New Zealand Government recognise dyslexia for the first time. Since then, we have been working hard to continue our mission.



One Man's Dream - the popular video about John Britten now remastered and available on DVD for Christmas 2010. Order now - visit www.britten.co.nz



The new
thinking
paradigm

www.4d.org.nz

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