

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Arts University Bournemouth		
Unit of Assessment: D33: Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies		
Title of case study: Transforming Shakespearean actor training for dyslexic students		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009 to 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Petronilla Whitfield	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Associate Professor in Voice and Acting, BA (Hons) Acting	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2006 - to date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013 onwards		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Student actors with dyslexia experience significant challenges in reading, understanding and memorising Shakespearean text. Whitfield's work has raised awareness of the challenges faced, but more importantly devised metacognitive strategies to support individuals. This has enabled dyslexic acting students to gain self-confidence, take control of their learning, realise their potential and ultimately to progress into professional employment. In an area where there is little dissemination of pedagogical support, Whitfield has influenced other teachers to change their practice to accommodate those with dyslexia and other specific learning differences. Her innovative teaching strategies have been adopted by other teachers, influencing the efficacy of their teaching of text-based work, where fluency, accuracy of word and self-confidence are at the core.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) Shakespearean performance often plays a central role in actor-training syllabi, as it requires intellectual, physical and technical proficiency, which can significantly advance student learning. Learning support services in British drama training institutions have reported that some 10-25% of acting students studying in drama schools are assessed as dyslexic (2016). Universities in the UK and the US also report similar numbers of dyslexic students in actor training departments (2017). These individuals experience substantial challenges in reading and understanding Shakespeare's unfamiliar language. Whitfield found there was little discussion or published literature concerning support for such students who can experience considerable stress within traditional teaching approaches. Whitfield's research investigated methods of working that accommodate preferred learning styles in accessing the content of the written text.</p> <p>Whitfield adopted a case-study approach integrated with action research, set within a constructivist-interpretivist framework. Working with dyslexic acting students as co-participants, Whitfield identified the challenges the students faced in accessing the written text and the methods the students were using, devised by themselves, to try to overcome them.</p> <p>Major findings from the research included:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Weak working memory and speed of processing difficulties can severely affect the practical development and outcomes of dyslexic students' work. These processing difficulties in holding information in working memory, remembering meanings, ordering, and sequencing of actions can have as detrimental an impact on class work and performance, as the reading difficulties connected to dyslexia. Teaching strategies therefore, must consciously support the faculty of memory. 		

2. When reading Shakespeare's words, ideas extrapolated from the text are created in the mind through the medium of mental images. For those with dyslexia difficulties, these mental images are often translated into external conceptual models, represented through physical actions, or as drawn symbols, colours and pictures onto a surface. These symbols provide concrete representations of the individual's ideas, which are constructed from the written text. These create a parallel text, overcoming the need for the individual to re-engage with the alphabetic text. This automatic system used by some individuals with dyslexia in creating their individual versions of the text can be further developed into methods of teaching practice in studio exercises.
3. The exploitation of mnemonic devices (using pictures and actions, expressive marks and PowerPoint presentations) can aid the individual's comprehension, articulation, interpretation, memory (spatial and verbal) and performance of Shakespeare. This mnemonic approach to the text can serve as an acting method, not only as an aid to thinking and memory support, but in unlocking creative forms of expression.
4. When working on the text, the content should be organised into small units of focus in order to reduce cognitive overload, and then processed through structured pathways, which guide the recognition of the words and their meaning, before being placed into long-term memory.
5. Acting and voice teachers need to possess not only a deep knowledge of their specialised subject, including a knowledge of pedagogical theory, but crucially, a knowledge about dyslexia. Pedagogical support can be significantly improved if the teacher has studied the characteristics of dyslexia in close observation of their dyslexic students rather than relying on generic learning support information offered across institutions.
6. Humanistic approaches of pedagogy, which emphasise a nurturing of the individual and their differences and a fostering of their distinctive strengths, are necessary for the individual to achieve their potential.

The research led to Whitfield developing new practical tools and teaching methods as a solution for the problems of dyslexia, and to highlight individual abilities that had been previously masked by dyslexia. Whitfield devised several distinctive strategies, including a guide of procedure and underpinning theory for studio exercises, when working with Shakespeare's text. The strategies include the compensatory measures utilised by those with dyslexia, as being advantageous to their individual cognitive styles. They were extensively trialed with actors to test their value in facilitating memory, accuracy of word and freedom for the individual in their process of acting. These approaches were shared with other teachers, dyslexic students and those in similar communities of teaching and learning.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Whitfield, P. (2019). *Teaching strategies for neurodiversity and dyslexia in actor training: sensing Shakespeare*. London: Routledge. [Submitted to REF 2021]
2. Whitfield, P. (2018). Entanglement in Shakespeare's text: using interpretive mnemonics with acting students with dyslexia in: Prior, R. W. (ed.) *Using Art as Research in Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Intellect. pp. 181-198. [Available on request].
3. Whitfield, P. (2017). The Micro Grasp and Macro Gestus Strategy as a facilitation of dyslexia in actor training: reconstructing the written text when performing Shakespeare. *Theatre, Dance & Performance Training*. Vol.8.3 pp. 328-347. [Submitted to REF 2021]
4. Whitfield, P. (2016). A facilitation of dyslexia through a remediation of Shakespeare's text. *RIDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*. Vol 2. Issue 3. pp. 385-400. [Submitted to REF 2021]

5. Whitfield, P. (2016). Towards an emancipatory praxis of pedagogy: supporting acting students with dyslexia when working on Shakespeare. *Voice and Speech Review*. Vol. 9. pp.113-138. [Available from AUB repository <https://research.aub.ac.uk/>]
6. Whitfield, P. (2013). Shakespeare, pedagogy and dyslexia. In: Cooke, R. (Ed). *The Moving Voice: The integration of Voice and Movement. The Voice and Speech Trainers Review*. Vol. 6. pp. 254-262. Published on line in *Voice and Speech Review*, 213. [Available from AUB repository <https://research.aub.ac.uk/>]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research has impacted globally on students, actors and teachers of acting in two main areas: professional actor training and inclusive teaching.

Professional actor training leading to employability

Whitfield's new teaching strategies improved the self-confidence and emotional wellbeing of dyslexic students enabling them to successfully train as actors, as former students note:

'When I first started university, I had no idea how to deal with my disability. I found it hard to even talk about it because of embarrassment. Dr Whitfield was the first person in my life to offer an alternative to how I was dealing with it. Being an actor, possibly the biggest part of your job is learning lines. Not only do you have to remember lines but in order to give a truthful performance and engage your audience, we have to completely be at peace with the meaning and weight of the words. This was all something I was unable to do'. (S1)

'It was the moment I started to believe in myself, that I was good enough to pursue this as a career and finally it gave me a deeper understanding of Shakespearian text, which at school I really struggled to grasp and connect with'. (S1)

Students were enabled to audition successfully for Shakespearean roles:

'To this day, I still use the same monologue (Cymbeline - Posthumous Act 5, Scene 5) to successfully gain work at the prestigious Globe Theatre in London (Blue Stockings) and toured with The Globe in Eternal Love. I can certainly trace it all back to that one [taught] unit, a turning point for me'. (S1)

And secure ongoing roles in TV series such as the BBC's *Doctors* (2016-18) requiring the reading and learning of lines quickly over many episodes:

'I put Petronilla's method into place constantly. Rather than a detailed drawing, I would establish a shape for each section of my script and draw it repeatedly whilst saying the lines. Because of Petronilla's development of this method in working with me at university, I have found a method that assists me as a professional actor with reading and remembering my lines in the text'. (S1)

Whitfield's work has raised awareness of the challenges faced by dyslexic actors who have gained employment:

'I see them [dyslexic actors] often having to work harder to get there and feel it would be desirable to give them more support so that they can get the job done with less stress and anxiety. Petronilla really helped me become more aware of dyslexia, of the different ways that it manifests. Not every dyslexic reads or learns in the same way, which is not something that I

really had any awareness of at all. (Head of Voice and Text at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival 2017) **(S5)**

'It has been my experience as a trained theatre director who has neuro - diverse issues that there has been little, if any, open discussion on the subject on neuro –diversity. Petronilla's guidance has been invaluable in my journey in developing my idea of directing a play focused on working on Shakespeare and actors with disability.' (Theatre Director and Disability Arts Advocate, Sydney, Australia 2020). **(S2)**

Stimulating changes in inclusive teaching practices

The research was widely shared at events that attracted broad audiences, including acting, voice specialists, learning support teachers, theatre directors, school teachers, applied arts practitioners, art/drama therapists, specialists in drama and autism and Shakespeare specialists, (Shakespeare in prisons, Shakespeare and autism etc.) For example, Whitfield presented her research at the *Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, and Actor Training* symposium, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, 2017; *Art as Research in Teaching and Learning International Conference*, University of Wolverhampton, 2016; *Connectors, Communicators & Culture*, Voice and Speech Trainers' Association International Conference, Orlando, USA, 2019; *Applying Shakespeare I and II*, Shakespeare Institute and Surrey University; *British Educational Research Association International Conference*, Sussex University, *Theatre and Performance Research Association Conference* (TaPRA), Bristol University; *'The S Word: Stanislavski and the Future of Acting'* International Symposium - held at Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance.

Whitfield's book which details her methods for teaching dyslexic acting students is included on the reading list of many actor training institutions, including the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance. Further dissemination has been achieved through global distribution sales of the book to the USA, Finland, Sweden, Israel, India, Singapore, China, Taiwan, and Australia. **(S10)**. Her work was referenced in articles in the newsletters of leading global charities working to support dyslexics such as 'Dyslexic Advantage', USA **(S9)** and promoted via public media channels such as KQED based in California **(S7)**.

As well as in the UK, teachers in the USA and Australia, are using Whitfield's methods to build a more informed, equitable and self-conscious pedagogy in actor training environments, promoting enablement of those with neurodiversity, rather than a disablement:

'I was extremely touched by this experience. Not only could I see and hear the results - even if we had worked ...in a pressured context (the assessment deadline), but also, I could see for the first time that there are practical things to do to help a student who is struggling with the traditional way of learning in the context of my voice class. I felt excited, and happy. I also felt that I had learned something fundamental, and that I wanted to know more about dyslexia in the context of voice/text. (Voice teacher at Birmingham School of Acting, City University 2017) **(S6)**

'The young woman, cast as Hermia was dyslexic and was having a lot of difficulty in learning her role. Due to her disability, she was fearful of attempting Shakespeare and did not feel confident in her ability to understand nor remember the lines. Using the techniques outlined by Whitfield, we were able to break the verse down into vivid and specific images. The actress then created drawings - pictographs of a sort - to help her 'see' the words. Through this creative and detailed work, the actress gradually gained understanding and

confidence. She was solidly "off book" by the time the show opened and actually enjoyed the process of rehearsing and performing Shakespeare. [Whitfield's] work has deepened my understanding of learning differences and expanded my ability to support student artists on their journey towards expression' (Professor of Voice, Movement and Acting at Florida International University 2019). (S3)

Whitfield's strategies have also been adopted by those teaching English as a second language. For example, an English dyslexic teacher, working in international schools in China, directing Shakespearean plays and running workshops with Chinese head teachers about how to understand and learn Shakespeare noted:

'I used exercises straight from Petronilla's work. I got the teachers to feel the words of a sonnet and express them in different ways, including physicalizing them, or vocalising the vowels to find the emotion and drawing the feel of the words on to paper to connect the words to the body and imagination. This work went down well with all the Chinese teachers and provided some great results, in the help of understanding and connecting with the words of the text. Dr Petronilla's specialism is in helping people with dyslexia understand Shakespeare; however, her exercises are perfect for teaching people in a second language as demonstrated with my classes in China. At the end of the workshops, the teachers expressed how interesting and accessible the methods were which they will take back to their schools when they are teaching English or drama lessons. Whether it's working with children who are studying English and Shakespeare for the first time, or working with teachers who want a more in depth look at his language, and ideas for teaching, Dr Petronilla's methods are inspirational ... and are easily adaptable for most situations'. (S4)

Whitfield's work has been recognized internationally by the American Alliance for Theatre and Education by awarding Whitfield the 'Johnny Saldaña Outstanding Professor of Theatre Education Award' (2020). This award was given for demonstrating outstanding research, scholarship, teaching and mentoring of students. (S8)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1) Testimonial:** Former students. [Impact on teaching within institution and employment as professional actor].
- S2) Testimonial:** Theatre Director and Disability Advocate, Sydney. [Raising awareness of the challenges faced by neuro-diversity students].
- S3) Testimonial:** Associate Professor of Voice, Movement and Acting at Florida International University. [Impact on teaching beyond the institution].
- S4) Testimonial:** Teacher of English as a Second Language, China. [Impact on teaching English as second language].
- S5) Testimonial:** Head of Voice & Text Oregon Shakespeare Festival. [Raised awareness of actors with dyslexia].
- S6) Article:** Voice Teacher, Birmingham City University. [Using Whitfield's methods to promote enablement of those with neurodiversity]
- S7) www.kqed.org** [Utilisation of Whitfield's methods by teachers in the USA; dissemination via public media channels].
- S8) Johnny Saldaña Outstanding Professor of Theatre Education.** [Recognition of pioneering work with dyslexic acting students].
- S9) Dyslexia Advantage USA.** [Promotion by leading dyslexia charities].
- S10) Report from publisher** [Global book distribution, circulation and sales].