A Strategy towards supporting neurodiverse students in Higher Education.

James Robertson

Librarian at Glasgow School of Art

**Introduction**

Glasgow School of Art Library have been developing a neurodiversity strategy to support students with learning differences. Following a focus group with students who identified as having learning differences, we spent the summer months assessing our facilities and resources to identify key areas for development. The crux of the idea was to tackle the anxiety inducing fear of the classification system, a fear that is perhaps magnified by social anxieties or other cognitive conditions, but can be problematic for the majority of new students.

However, upon addressing this it became clear that we had to expand our focus and concentrate on a library wide strategy that would allow us to support our students in all aspects of their learning. It was equally important that any strategies that we implemented or technological or cosmetic changes that we made did not impact upon our need to support all library users.

**Understanding Neurodiversity**

Neurodiversity is a broad and encompassing term that cradles a multitude of conditions such as autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, ADHD, Meares-Irlen Syndrome, OCD and mental illness. Some may dispute the use of the term *learning difficulty* or *condition* and would prefer *learning difference* instead. Similarly, there are people in the autistic community who protest against being considered as having a disability, whereas others will sternly state that they consider ASD (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) to be just that. People with dyslexia are often labelled as *print-disabled learners*, but again not all agree that it is a disability. This was very important for us to consider as it is not for us to define people. That is why *neurodiversity* is an effective term as it represents an array of neurological differences that should not be separated from other human cognitive variations.

**Focus group with neurodiverse students.**

We held a focus group with students and together we compiled a list of ways in which the library could better support them during their studies. The fact that I am autistic was advantageous as it allowed me to assess the library environment from a neurodiverse perspective but we also gained insight into dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD and OCD. It was made clear that it was not necessary for participants to disclose their condition, but students were very open and we quickly compiled a list of support needs.

**Colour coding**

The first matter that we addressed was the lack of orientation signage; everything relied on students understanding of the Dewey system. Although we are a small specialised library sourcing books through classmarks is the main stressor for many of our students and library patrons in general. To tackle the aimless wandering around trying to make sense of the classification system, we devised a simple colour map. It allowed us to split the library into sections; not by subject but simply by allocating a colour to the bays on the left hand side, the middle and the right hand side. The Dewey system remained but what students could now do was consult the map which would tell them that painting began at Orange 7 through to Orange 9 or that Urban Design was located at Yellow 1. It functions as a browsing map, one that directs you to subjects and once there you can refer to the classmarks. To save from any confusion, we kept the colour scheme simple and opted for the primary colours, red, yellow and blue for the ground floor and upstairs the secondary colours of orange, purple and green.

**Library Support**

On our library site we have a neurodiversity page which introduces students to their designated librarian who can be their sole point of contact throughout their studies. This is not a necessity, but its purpose is to support students with anxiety or who find reassurance in familiarity. The main services provided were designed to tackle the most problematic and anxiety inducing aspects of a library visit:  
  
**Designated Librarian:**All our ­librarians are friendly and always happy to help, but some students may prefer the familiarity of a designated librarian who will be their point of contact throughout their studies.  
  
**Individual inductions:** I will introduce you to the library and support you during your visit so that you feel safe, can assess the environment and gain the confidence to visit independently.  
  
**Catalogue searches:** I can assist you with catalogue and database searches.  
  
**Dissertation support:** Proofreading of bibliographies and footnotes.  
  
**Borrowing:** Should you need particular items from the library, I can retrieve them for you and have them ready for you to collect.  
  
**Meet ups:** I can visit you in your studio and we can work out what items you need and I will collect them and deliver them to you.

**Collaboration.**

The next logical step was to contact Learning Support and combine our services to better support our neurodiverse students. There are certain overlaps between our services but up until this point there has been a missing step, however we have since rectified that. Now when students meet with learning support they are provided with our guide and the resources that we have to support their needs.

**Silent Room for everyone and sensory room.**

We are in a similar situation to most institutions in that we have very little space available to accommodate the increasing demand for more study spaces within the library. Regardless, we decided that we wanted to create a space for calmness and wellbeing. These issues are important to us all but particularly neurodiverse students who can often become overwhelmed with sensory and environmental stimuli and need a space to regulate themselves. The challenge was to create a space that would support that while also addressing the need for additional work spaces.

Our solution was to create a silent and technology free space. With a modest budget we painted the room a forest green and decorated it with large bean bags and reading lamps. It was specifically designed to encourage wellbeing and to allow students the time to free themselves from technology and simply read or just take some time for themselves.

**Reading Tools**  
At our focus group a student voiced their feelings of anxiety at the sight of all the library books available to them that they could not read as a result of being dyslexic. This was one of the most significant elements of the strategy that we had to overcome. We do buy in eBooks whenever possible, but we also signed up to the RNIB Bookshare, which is a tremendous service that allows us access to a significant amount of resources in accessible formats. With over 700 publishers on their database, this free service has meant that we can provide students with key texts from their course in a format that suits them. To ensure that the service is used appropriately, students must be referred to us through Learning Support.

As an addition, we have digital pen readers that students can borrow on their cards. These devices scan the text and read it back to you as well as saving it as a PDF. With these things in place, we have minimised the disadvantages that some of our previous students may have had.

**Next steps**.

We already have a series of short video guides on various aspects of using the library catalogue and we would like to expand on this and use the format to introduce students to our neurodiversity support which will include tutorials on how to use pen readers and access RNIB Bookshare

Now that our strategy is in place and the academic year is about to begin, the challenge that we face is in determining its success in the day to day functioning of the library. A further focus group which will be held towards the end of the first term that will allow the students to feedback to us their experiences so that we can adapt our strategy and continue to develop it in a way that supports neurodiverse learning.