

**Expert research & practice:
improving the workplace for adults with dyslexia**

**The Winston Churchill Memorial Fund Travel Fellowship –
Visit to the USA October 2011**

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The Background

Currently I work at Cass Business School as a Professor of entrepreneurship. During my work some years ago I came across an interesting finding; many entrepreneurs are dyslexic. This sparked my interest and I started to research dyslexia and how it affects entrepreneurs. I found that successful entrepreneurs who were also dyslexic had usually been supported by someone who really believed in them; a teacher; parent or sometimes an employer. I also found that for many people coping with dyslexia is a daily struggle. People with dyslexia are less likely to finish university and less likely to hold down employment. Our prisons are full of people with dyslexia and many people who struggle with addictions are also dyslexic.

Over the last few years I have become more and more determined to raise awareness of the needs of adults coping with dyslexia. To this end Judy Stewart (CEO of British Dyslexia Association) and I set up the Dyslexia Mentoring Pilot scheme to see if mentoring could make a difference to those with dyslexia. This scheme which was run with the help of the British Dyslexia Centre and Cass Business School has shown me there is definitely a need for help for adults with dyslexia. The scheme was sponsored by Intel and Cannon and their funding helped us run the pilot for two years. Now we must do more.

I applied for the WCMT fellowship because I want to see what is being done in the US to help those with dyslexia and what we might learn from their experiences. I was very grateful when I received confirmation of the opportunity to visit and put together my itinerary which would involve visiting key organisations based between New York and North Carolina.

The Meetings

So I started my journey by flying to New York to meet Sheldon Horowitz at the National Centre for Learning Disabilities. The centre has a mission: to ensure success for all individuals with learning disabilities in school, at work and in life.

This was a very interesting meeting and the centre does amazing work with young people and their families. They focus on learning disabilities in general but a large percentage of the people they help have dyslexia so there are many similarities between the needs of their target group and ours. They are a not for profit trying to influence policy, support parents and schools and provide information and advice.

At the moment their focus has been primarily children and young people but they want to be able to support adults with learning disabilities. Sheldon had read my research so he knew a little about me and my work with entrepreneurs but much less about what I will be trying to do when I get back to the UK.

I learnt quite a lot from the meeting and Sheldon gave me their recent report which revealed some startling facts. It seems that despite the legislation the battle to gain support of those with learning difficulties is just as difficult in the US as it is in the UK. The economic recession has only made the situation more acute in both countries. Sheldon was very warm and open and the meeting went well; we agreed that there are ways we can work together in the future.

Then Sheldon introduced me to a colleague who is just been given responsibility for developing support for adults. We talked about what we are trying to do and how we might share. Marcel was very pleased to see the videos that we had made as part of our project and would like to use some of them. We talked about how we might be able to go for a bit of funding to get a really useful website up and running. This would provide information for adults with LD or dyslexia.

Whilst this organisation has been primarily focused on young people and their families they have a will to work with adults so I think we can help each other.

Outcome One

We will exchange best practice and materials and we will aim to find a small amount of funding to develop information for adult users of our websites.

The meeting was useful for catching up on where we are in terms of support for young people with dyslexia. The support a young person receives directly whilst in school impacts on how they develop and cope with their difficulties moving forward into adult hood.

After meeting Sheldon and Marcel I travelled to Baltimore to meet Ben Foss. Ben and I have been in touch for a little while now and he had been planning to come to the UK to meet me when the air cloud struck. I had been planning to go to see him in San Francisco but luckily he was going to be near Baltimore when I was near there so that saved me a long journey and a couple of days.

Ben, a dyslexic entrepreneur/ inventor is the creator of the Intel Reader, an aid for people with learning difficulties or impaired vision. He was in special education all the way through school, despite this he graduated from Stanford University with an MBA. He worked at the Intel Corporation until fairly recently.

Ben founded Headstrong Nation in 2003, it is a not for profit that has been set up to form a dyslexic community who can support each other. Ben now works as the Executive Director of Disability Rights Advocates in Berkeley, California, leading their national civil rights, legal center to fight for the rights of individuals with disabilities.

Ben explained about his mentoring project and the technology he is using. We also discussed what he is doing with Headstrong and his civil rights work through Disability Rights Advocates. This organisation fights inequality and stigmatization for all people with disabilities. This work is desperately needed.

Ben has also set up a network of those with dyslexia to try to improve things for adult dyslexics. The mentoring organisation Judy and I are going to set up can become part of that network.

We had a great meeting and Ben is going to let us use his video mentoring technology for our project. He put me in contact with Katie Coleman who is going to help us to understand the technology, so this was a really helpful meeting.

Outcome Two

Access to the video mentoring is a great outcome because this means that we can help a person with dyslexia regardless of where they live and without them having the expense of travelling.

Next I met John Burns who turned out to be absolutely charming and very hard working. He is the Chair of the Maryland Branch of the International Dyslexia Association. He is also an entrepreneur and has ADHD.

John and I were able to spend some time together and he explained how he was raising money to fund the Maryland IDA. This was helpful because fund raising is very difficult and we need to do some if we are going to get our organisation off the ground.

John also gave me an overview of the work the Maryland IDA are doing and about the Finishing Line awards and event. The event which I subsequently attended is a way of recognizing those with dyslexia who are both successful and contribute to their local community.

John works with Paula Moraine, secretary of IDA Maryland Branch, Board of Directors. Paula was also very interesting; explaining about how her school promotes self esteem and confidence in their young people who are dyslexic. Here is a picture of the winners of the awards with John and their sponsor.



The event at Loyola University proved an excellent opportunity to talk to staff that teach at and run special fee paying dyslexia schools including the Odyssey School and the Jemicy school. These schools help young dyslexic people to really believe in themselves. The schools were also sponsors of the Finishing Line Event. I also learnt about how US state schools cope with students with learning disabilities and about the special schools which parent have to pay for. It seems there is very little help in the state system; it is much like the UK. I also met parents of dyslexic young people including a number of dyslexic entrepreneurs.

In addition, Dr.Vince Culotta shared with us the latest research on brain imaging. We are learning so much more about the brains of those with dyslexia and ADHD and autism and how the brains are different to those without these disabilities. The brain imaging techniques show those with dyslexia use different parts of their brain to process information; the problems they experience.

Furthermore those with autism have different shaped and smaller brains. This knowledge whilst providing a clinical explanation for the

symptoms is disturbing. Will it lead to pregnant mothers aborting children because their brain size suggests they may have one or other of these learning disabilities?



This is me with Noah Obuchowski, prize winner and Paula Moraine, secretary of IDA Maryland Branch, Board of Directors. I think the idea of an award is great and maybe we could do something like this later on.

Support is essential as people move from education into work but life can be made a great deal easier if help and understanding is provided from early childhood. A dyslexic child becomes a dyslexic adult and both need help and understanding.

Outcome Three

Baltimore was more about building knowledge and building useful contacts than practical outcomes, however I think there may be scope in the UK for an event such as Finishing Line.

My next stop was Richmond Virginia on Monday but in the meantime it was the weekend so I travelled from Baltimore to Washington where I would need to change trains. I stayed over the weekend in Washington and thought I might as well visit some museums. I awoke on Saturday morning to really heavy rain which then turned to snow. I was not to be deterred so off I set. The National Air and Space Museum was just as interesting as it had been thirty four years ago when I last visited. I also went to the Hirsh Horn Museum by which time I was more than a bit wet. I returned to the hotel to work on the presentation that I had been asked to give at my next stop.

Richmond Virginia was an important part of my stay. Here I am meeting the first endowed professor of dyslexia in the US; Paul Gerber, the Ruth Harris Professor of Dyslexia.

On Tuesday Paul collected me from the hotel and took me down to Williamsburg which was wonderful. The town is much like it was at the time of the revolution, very interesting. At the same time we spent the day discussing our work with a view to how we might work together moving forward.

Paul is currently working on research which will hopefully change legislation around disabilities in the US. He has written about successful individuals with dyslexia but also about the problems of holding down work and the need for those with dyslexia to control their environment if they are to succeed.

On Wednesday Paul picked me up and we went to the University, I gave a presentation to the learning disabilities department on my work. This was fun and there was quite a lot of interest.

Before and after the presentation I had the opportunity to meet members of the department individually and hear about what they are doing.



The following day I had discussions with Michael, the Dean; Henry, the Provost as well as Evelyn the Head of Department. The department is very well respected and there is some interesting work on both Dyslexia and Autism. On Thursday evening Paul and his wife Ronnie hosted a small dinner party for me which was great fun. Paul and Ronnie are lovely people and everyone was so welcoming and friendly.

Outcome Four

Paul and I are going to do some work together on Dyslexic Entrepreneurs but also on creativity in art students with dyslexia.

I had thought this would be the highlight of my stay and it was certainly a great experience but what came next was also invaluable.

I caught the train down to North Carolina. On Sunday afternoon I was met at Wilson Station by Blace Nalavany. He had kindly offered to collect me and drive me to Greenville where I would be staying with his colleague Lena Carawan. Blace was so welcoming and kind we talked non stop all the way to Lena's about our work. Then we

arrived at Lena's and I was made so welcome. I had not met either of them before and yet I was welcomed with open arms.

Lena showed me around and then I had a short rest before dinner, then it was time to meet their families. We had a wonderful evening, truly excellent company and the Italian cake was divine. Lena is an excellent cook.

Blace and Lena gave me their latest two papers to read. They are truly excellent; no wonder they have been accepted for publication so quickly and they really move the field forward. The papers are extremely robust because their study is with a large cohort of adults; over 240 people with dyslexia were in the study. They proved several things that I had thought might be the case.

The first paper proved that the level of parental support had a direct impact on the emotional consequences of dealing with dyslexia. The next paper clearly showed how the school experience also played a vital role. Furthermore the difference between the experience of those who had attended a dyslexia friendly school (all fee paying) and a state school was very highly significant.

We had a great day at the University on Monday discussing our work and the way forward.

That evening I met Sheila the Head of Department and was able to thank her for the great opportunity I had been afforded in visiting her school but also to talk about the tremendous work that Blace and Lena are doing.

We talked about how we can network together and make a real difference. There are very few of us doing this work so if we want to facilitate change we must all work together.

Lena and Blace are really limited in terms of financial resources and we also talked about how we might raise some funds to continue our work and for them to come to the UK to tell us about their work.

This visit was so worthwhile and I am very grateful to the foundation for making this possible. I did not know Blace or Lena but I think that

something truly good happened as a result of meeting them both and I look forward to working together from now on.

Outcome Five

We are going to collect data and write two papers one about the spousal role and one about mothers coping with dyslexic offspring. Lena and I think that we can produce a book of mothers' stories that will help other mothers whose children have been diagnosed with dyslexia.

We are going to work on some joint fundraising initiatives for the research and we are going to see if we can get the key researchers together in the UK or the US. Good research is vital because with good reliable evidence we can influence those who can truly help people living with a condition which is often misunderstood.

The next day I travelled from North Carolina back to New York, I had two more meetings to go.

That evening I met Linda a schools consultant and heard about her work going into state schools trying to improve the way these schools coped with those with special needs. Linda was fascinating and I think we could certainly benefit from someone like her going into our schools.

Finally I went to meet David Flink and Marcus Soutra and what an inspiration they proved to be. They have set up an organisation that is really changing the lives of young people with dyslexia. They have founded a not for profit organisation. 'Eye to Eye' now has chapters in 18 states. They are all about building self esteem in young people and are using young students in schools and colleges to help build self advocacy in those who are younger still. They had heard about my work and were also keen to meet me. They want to work together and would like me to get involved and I hope we can make this happen.

Outcome Six

David and Marcus have ideas on how we might get some funding and we are going to keep talking so that we can find away to make our aim of working together a reality.

In Summary

The trip has been an exhausting but invaluable experience. I have met people that I would not have met because there is no conference or meeting point for those of us who are trying to improve the outlook for those who are struggling with dyslexia. I have come away with enough new work to last me a life time but when I see what these amazing people are doing in the US I know that we can do the same in the UK.

So where do we go from here?

There are six of us who are determined to get things going here in the UK. We have been working on a plan. I registered us as a not for profit company just before I left for the USA. Our company is called Mentoring Hubs Ltd. We have a model for our own mentoring scheme and the associated services and we have written a bid document to get our mentoring platform going across the UK. We have submitted the bid and will need to wait until December to see if NESTA are interested in our proposal. If they are we may get some initial funding but we will continue to seek funds regardless both for the not for profit and for the research.

So I intend to continue to influence policy but also to try and put into practice some of the research findings. I have some further decisions to make about how I will go forward with this work as I can see that at some stage very soon it will take over my life but I will cross that bridge when it happens.

I would like to thank the Winston Churchill Memorial Foundation for the invaluable opportunity they have afforded me and now I need to get on and provide a return on their investment.

Post script 10/1/2012

Well we did not get the funding from Nesta to start the mentoring hubs project but this is not going to deter us from going forward. I have started helping two young men who have set up an entrepreneurship teaching company and we will be able to work with them to set up the teaching side of the mentoring project.