

# What can online courses offer in teacher education for learning difficulties?

**Course Review: Kristin Anthian on Supporting Children with Difficulties in Reading and Writing: University of London, UCL Institute of Education & Dyslexia International**

**E**ducators supporting young people with learning difficulties are often confronted with challenges in meeting their students' complex needs in reading, writing and spelling. One of the persistent challenges that educators face is their capacity to enhance their own academic and practical knowledge in supporting this cohort. Increasingly, the demands of the teaching profession, and the ability of schools to provide teachers with release time, impact on teacher facility to attend face to face professional learning opportunities. It may be particularly difficult to access courses that are grounded in evidence based practices. This is noticeably problematic for many teachers in remote and rural areas. One recent solution to this challenge has come about in the form of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses).

The University of London, UCL Institute of Education, in collaboration with Dyslexia International is currently offering a large scale free online learning

platform, through Coursera, titled Supporting Children with Difficulties in Reading and Writing. This course is currently in its second year of operation and it is anticipated that it will continue until 2017. It grew out of an online course which Dyslexia International designed in 2009 and presented, in both English and French, at the first World Dyslexia Forum in 2010 run by UNESCO. The original course was adapted by the Belgian Ministry of Education into an optional teacher training programme. Consequently, Dyslexia International sought a more permanent platform and Coursera and the University of London came on board, with the option made available for a course completion certificate.

The first session-based version was launched in October 2014 with 90% of enrolled students (819 altogether) finishing the course which is a higher than average percentage of course completers (University of London, MOOC report, 2014). When asked to rate the course, 84% of participants rated it as excellent or very good and 95% were likely or very likely to recommend it to others (University of London, MOOC report, 2014). As the original course was session based, many teachers missed out and others found it difficult to complete in the time frame with their teaching schedules. The course was relaunched in August this year as an on-demand course, meaning that commencement dates and deadlines are flexible. As of October the course has had 4916 registrations, 3349 active learners and 94 completers.

The course consists of six modules, with each module including a selection of video lectures, professional readings

and assessment quizzes. Some modules also include peer reviewed assignments. While there has been some contention over the effectiveness of this, as the diverse participants bring with them a broad range of knowledge and experience in this field, such a large cohort of registered learners can only be assessed by employing this sort of process. Within each module there is the opportunity for questioning to clarify meaning, and queries are attended to promptly by teaching staff, volunteer mentors and other enrolled learners.



**There is much merit to this course and I would recommend it to any teacher, parent or professional who would like to extend or update their knowledge and skill in the learning difficulty field.**

Each learning module has a particular focus. Module one includes information on various orthographic and logographic writing systems and explains the differences between those that are more opaque, such as English (where there are typically 44 phonemes and only 26 letters to represent these), and those that are more transparent,

such as Spanish (where letter-sound correspondence is more consistent). This first module also draws on the research of Australian experts Coltheart and Castles and their dual route reading model, encompassing the direct access lexical route and the phonological decoding route. The importance of automatization of code knowledge is addressed, to ensure reading fluency develops, which is highly correlated with reading comprehension. The information on bilingualism in this unit was particularly informative. The identification of students who are English Language Learners (ELL) and may also present with risk factors for a specific learning difficulty was enlightening.

Module two focuses on the definition and identification of dyslexia and possible risk factors across age ranges, from pre-primary to later secondary years. It provides participants with informal avenues to identify students who may be at risk of having dyslexia. The course administrators explicitly state that participants should not draw conclusive statements regarding a possible dyslexia profile. Rather, by administering the informal assessment tools and screens provided, teachers can begin to collect data that can be used as a starting point to inform classroom intervention and to refer students for additional assessment, if warranted.

Dehaene's research, on how the brain learns to read, was referenced throughout the course and the underlying causal factors of many reading difficulties were linked with phonological processing, which is consistent with much of the evidence in this field. An apprehension I had about the recommended identification process was that the scope of 'at risk' behaviours for dyslexia, was perhaps too broad. Many were not directly related to the act of reading. While these behaviours may certainly be concomitant with dyslexia, it might be confusing for teachers that the core indicator, an absence of fluent and accurate single word reading, is not at the forefront.

Additional modules included comorbidity and psychological and social aspects of dyslexia, including attention, dyscalculia, auditory processing, oral language impairment, self-esteem, as well as the pros and cons of labelling. Siegel's work was presented in light of the psychological and societal impact of unidentified learning difficulties. An overriding philosophy throughout the course was the importance given to early

identification of learning difficulties and appropriate intervention.

The practical teaching approach components had a strong emphasis on teaching phonological and phonemic awareness skills and alphabetic code-based knowledge within a multisensory, explicit, and systematic teaching approach, which included corrective feedback. Reports by the US National Reading Panel and UK Rose review were referenced in terms of evidence-based practice in reading instruction. Further, it was clearly articulated within the video lectures and reading materials that whole-language based pedagogical approaches were not effective for students experiencing persistent learning difficulties in the acquisition of reading.

Practical and theoretical knowledge was also shared on the teaching and acquisition of spelling skills, comprehension, written composition, and the use of inclusive technology for students with learning difficulties. Some additional instructional videos on developing the skills of decoding for reading and encoding for spelling, as well as grapheme-phoneme correspondence, may assist course participants to transfer and apply learning to their classrooms more effectively. As this course is a global course, it encompasses dialectal differences in English phonemes, and participants need to ensure they are producing pure sounds consistent with their own dialectal form, and not using letter names to try to blend sounds in phonetically decodable words.

There is much merit to this course and I would recommend it to any teacher, parent or professional who would like to extend or update their knowledge and skill in the learning difficulty field. The continual reference to current research is commendable. While it can't replace direct hands on professional learning and feedback, it can certainly fill a much needed gap in terms of accessibility. It is also free of cost for participants unless they require formal graded certification. One of the prevailing and most striking comments made by many participants has been that they felt ill-prepared from their teacher training to support students with learning difficulties. A great strength of this learning platform has been the ability to connect people on a global scale to engage in discourse related to the identification and intervention of learning difficulties.

## Links

### Dyslexia International

<http://www.dyslexia-international.org/our-projects/on-line-teacher-training-course/>

### Coursera

<https://www.coursera.org/learn/dyslexia-difficulties/>

### University of London MOOC report 2014

[http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=OCCEQFjABahUKewi53r\\_y7vPIAhXFtqYKHcsVDcA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.londoninternational.ac.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fdocuments%2Fmoc\\_report\\_2014.pdf&usg=AFQjCNEFKt24YhPTQfcASQ3F90J5gEksqg&bvm=bv.106379543,d.dGY](http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=OCCEQFjABahUKewi53r_y7vPIAhXFtqYKHcsVDcA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.londoninternational.ac.uk%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fdocuments%2Fmoc_report_2014.pdf&usg=AFQjCNEFKt24YhPTQfcASQ3F90J5gEksqg&bvm=bv.106379543,d.dGY)

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