

Julie Logan

Professor of Entrepreneurship

Cass Business School

City University

London EC1

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Title: Are we teaching potential entrepreneurs in the best way to enhance their career success?

Governments in the UK and US have made much of the need to nurture and enhance the entrepreneurial skills of the next generation, but does the education system support those who are most innovative? Many entrepreneurs claim to be dyslexic¹. These include Richard Branson, and Charles Schwab (Morris, 2002). They have suggested that being dyslexic has helped them succeed but education has failed them.

There is also evidence that the UK/US school curriculum does not encourage the development of skills, particularly soft skills, essential for creating enterprising young people (NESTA, 2007). Frey (1990) suggests school curriculum is becoming geared to left brain learning and weeding out some of our most innovative people.

This study explored: whether there is a higher incidence of dyslexia in entrepreneurs than in corporate managers or the general population; whether the dyslexic entrepreneur has soft skills that are of benefit in the new venture creation process and

whether their experience of education (including entrepreneurship education) has been of value in their subsequent careers. The study also examined how entrepreneurship is taught in universities and whether this meets the needs of our most innovative students. This study examined the UK and US, an Australian study is about to start.

Data collection included a questionnaire and follow-up in depth interviews. These explored: the business; early years: school experience and, included a series of questions to identify those who were dyslexic. Data sets were the Kauffman business data-base (US), and UK business directories.

35% of US and 19% of UK entrepreneurs in this study reported as dyslexic. This compares with an incidence of 1% in US corporate managers, 3% in UK corporate managers and 10% in the US and UK general populations².

The dyslexic entrepreneurs reported as good or excellent at: visualisation; oral communication; problem solving and delegation, whilst non-dyslexic entrepreneurs reported as average or good. Dyslexics had a clear vision of how their business would grow and seemed to have exceptional ability to communicate this vision, allowing them to motivate those around them. They were good at delegation and this seemed linked to ability to grow their companies quickly. They also reported enhanced ability to apply creative solutions to overcome the various problems they encounter whilst running a successful business. This may be the result of growing up with a learning deficit and dealing with the uncertainty and obstacles that this has brought.

Fitzgibbon & O'Connor (2002), suggest that successful dyslexics develop ways of controlling; coping and compensating for their deficits. These strategies may become transferable skills, giving them an edge in business. For example: Some dyslexics in this study reported learning at an early age to ask others to carry out the tasks they found difficult. One entrepreneur who was captain of the netball team used to ask another team member to write the names of those selected to play each week because she found spelling names impossible and wished to hide this weakness. Having learnt at an early age to trust others with tasks the dyslexic entrepreneur may find it easier to delegate leaving more time to focus on growing the business.

The study also found that US dyslexic entrepreneurs were more likely to own several companies (statistically significant at the 99% confidence level), and to grow their companies more quickly than those who were not dyslexic. Furthermore they employed more staff (statistically significant at the 95% confidence level) suggesting their perception of their ability to delegate was correct. Non-dyslexic entrepreneurs stayed with their companies longer than dyslexics who seemed to prefer early stage ventures.

Dyslexic entrepreneurs in both studies reported under achievement at school, university or college, the UK study found this also to be true for many non-dyslexic entrepreneurs. Whilst US entrepreneurs had enjoyed their school experience despite underachieving, UK entrepreneurs who were dyslexic reported a negative school experience. Does this mean that our school system is failing those who may have the potential to be innovative and create new ventures?

There are implications for those teaching entrepreneurship. The study revealed a high incidence of dyslexia in entrepreneurs so it is of great importance that entrepreneurship teaching programmes are dyslexia friendly but entrepreneurship lecturers reported their most commonly used teaching pedagogies were the lecture and case study, methods that dyslexics struggle with and which do not encourage soft skill development. Dyslexics need to be placed in a more holistic and practical teaching setting which will foster their skills and enhance their potential. This approach to teaching entrepreneurship will be beneficial to all and in turn will produce a more flourishing entrepreneurial society.

Notes:

- 1) Dyslexia - difficulty with organisation, learning, working memory, Parker C. (1998) British Dyslexia Association Handbook. Reading.
- 2) National incidence dyslexia US/UK- 10% (International Dyslexia Association, <http://www.interdys.org> Accessed: 1st June 2007) / (Parker C. (1998) British Dyslexia Association Handbook. Reading).

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