

Do institutional or subject referencing style choices create barriers for students with specific learning disability?

Fiona Watkins

University of Northampton, UK

Presentation abstract

Models of information literacy (Coonan et al., 2018; SCONUL, 2011) are explicit: critical thinking and ethical information use are essential skills within higher education (HE). Referencing is key to this, demonstrating how students select and apply information to create knowledge (Buckley, 2015; Angelil-Carter, 1995).

Within HE there has been an increased focus on inclusivity and accessibility (Equality Act, 2010; United Nations, 2015; Department for Education and Department for Health, 2015). Growing numbers of students are declaring a disability (Advance HE, 2019) and reports suggest they are increasingly dissatisfied with their courses (Office for Students, 2020). Proportionally, students with disabilities achieve lower grades than students without (Advance HE, 2019), suggesting needs and expectations of students with a disability are not being met within HE provisions.

The presentation discussed an ethically approved small-scale mixed-methods study carried out as part of a MA in Special Educational Needs and Inclusion. The research investigated student perceptions of referencing, whether adherence to specific referencing styles is a barrier for students with dyslexia and began investigating the impact of referencing styles on reading comprehension.

The largest disability declared within HE is Specific Learning Disability (SpLD) (Advance HE, 2019), which includes dyslexia (American Psychological Association, 2013). Students with SpLD report lower confidence with academic writing than non-SpLD students (Kinder and Elander, 2012). Academic literacy skills are arguably intertwined with a sense of legitimacy and belonging (Gourlay, 2009): it is therefore vital to consider ways of improving inclusion for all students (Office for Students, 2020).

The presenter observed that students with SpLD spent more time and energy on referencing than their non-disabled peers. This perception is corroborated by others (Sanders, 2010) and when combined with slower reading speeds (Hendricks and Quinn, 2000; Sanders, 2010; Serry et al., 2018) reduces time students have for critical subject engagement (Wengelin, 2007).

Attendees gained an understanding of how students view referencing and whether the choice of referencing system disadvantages students with dyslexia. Attendees also took part in a reading comprehension test giving a taster of the next steps for research which requires collaborative partners.

Keywords: referencing; dyslexia; Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD).

Community response

A major part of student transition into HE is to learn to engage efficiently and with integrity with sources of information used in their academic work. The level of engagement and the ability to acknowledge sources of information are often measured through the students' citing and referencing skills. This presentation shared research revealing some of the challenges students with SpLD face when citing and referencing sources of information in their academic practice.

Students were queried about their feelings in relation to referencing. More specifically about the time it requires, their level of confidence, their associations for the referencing process, the different styles they use, and the available support for such tasks.

The quantitative data revealed that the level of confidence when using in-text citations of students with SpLD varied from 'very confident' to 'not confident', with the majority of them choosing 'slightly confident'. Similarly, the level of confidence when creating reference lists for students with SpLD varied across the given options, with the majority of them choosing 'slightly confident'.

Interestingly, the words students associated with the referencing process were split into eight areas, but no quantitative data was provided in relation to the frequency of each

area. As expected, the majority of the associations (and association areas) reveal the challenges that students with SpLD face when referencing sources of information – ‘stress/anxiety’, ‘dislike’, and ‘fear’. Surprisingly, a minority of students with SpLD indicated that the process was ‘achievable’, ‘beneficial/ important’, and ‘not problematic’ for them.

The presented research sparked a lot of interest from the audience and resulted in an interesting discussion afterwards. Some attendees reflected on the related professional experiences and challenges they face in their institutions:

Fiona’s session made me think about a topic that I hadn’t previously considered, and I work on a daily basis with SpLD students. Thanks for bringing this topic to my attention. However, my concern is that now I am not sure how to reduce the impact of Harvard referencing on my students, as this is the referencing system that they use. I left the session feeling that I’m not sure what my next steps should be.

Other attendees not only shared their challenges but also suggested a possible solution for the limitations support for students with SpLD in relation to referencing styles:

Similar to the comment above, I was really interested in the findings of Fiona’s study but feel restricted in terms of how I can really support students or bring about change. I think a good starting point will be to talk to our Disability and Neurodiversity team within our institution and see whether we can take a collaborative approach to this issue.

Another group of attendees focused on the more theoretical discussion about humans’ ability to absorb information while reading and the purpose of the writer when using different referencing styles. Their reflections extended to include the potential effect information about the author or date of a source might have on the reader and the reading process.

I found it interesting to talk about the different things the contrasting referencing styles offer the writer, and also the reader. For example, we considered whether there is something ‘lost’ for the reader if citations do not include author and date, and whether reading approaches change when referencing styles change; do people ‘take in’ the information about author and date in line with the point being

made as they read, and if so, does this interrupt the flow of reading, or is this part of the reading? The presentation also provided useful insight into some experiences of students with SpLD.

Such theoretical discussions might seem irrelevant to the presented research, but their answers will have a significant bearing on numerous strategies and approaches learning developers use to support students. Hopefully, through more research, clear answers to all the questions posed by this initial research project will be found.

Author's reflection

This summer I have presented the research I carried out during my Master's degree in Special Educational Needs and Inclusion to three different groups of people, firstly to a librarian conference, secondly at an internal institutional library research conference and finally at ALDCon23. Each opportunity to present was also an opportunity to engage with other people's immediate thoughts on my research but also to learn from their experiences.

ALDCon23 participants showed a willingness to engage with the research findings and a genuine openness to discussing their own experiences and approaches when reading and writing in an academic context. For example, within the room there were different opinions about the readability of the in-text citations being discussed (a numeric system and a parenthetical name and date system).

I love the comment above around whether the in-text citation is an interruption to the flow of reading or part of the reading and think that the answer to this is far more nuanced than a simple either/or. For some readers, particularly those who are new to reading academic sources, or who have other difficulties (e.g., dyslexia) then it is more likely to be an interruption. For others the in-text citation offers valuable additional information. This was reflected by session attendees some of whom spoke of being excited to recognise cited authors in topics they were reading about and that this gave them a greater insight when reading. For me, this response connected with some of the literature I read for my dissertation regarding the transition from a novice learner to an expert who would recognise and be familiar with the work of the authors being cited (Hendricks and Quinn,

2000). When students are new to university study there is an innate liminality as students learn the skills needed to succeed and increase their sense of belonging (Hutchings, 2014).

In the context of my research, I believe there needs to be further exploration around referencing practices and how they are taught, marked, and discussed. I believe that referencing is a key part of the academic skillset (Thesen, 1994), however I question whether adherence to a specific style rather than allowing students to use a system that works for them is fair. By forcing students to use a particular system I wonder if we are reinforcing the power differentials and the exclusionary nature of academia leading to students feeling that they do not belong in academic circles.

Discussions during the session touched on the need to provide structure and reassurance for students whilst respecting their status as learners and the need for flexibility to enable everyone to represent themselves well. The aim of the session was not to provide answers or solutions, rather it was to highlight the issues that some students (and staff) may be facing and to share the research with other interested practitioners. I think the session worked well considering that aim but am cognisant of the fact that participants have reflected that they are feeling unsettled and not sure how to move forward. My honest answer is that without more research into the topic is it incredibly difficult to affect any change to the status quo. I'd love to work with them to roll out a similar research project in their institution to see if the research findings can be replicated. Perhaps more practically in the short-term I would also suggest having open conversations with academic staff and students within your own institutions, use the research such as it is to begin conversations around referencing practice and how best to support students with dyslexia.

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Statement on AI use.

The author did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Author details

Fiona Watkins is the Digital Resource and Collections Manager at the University of Northampton. Prior to this Fiona was the Academic Librarian for the Schools of Art and Science and Technology. Having worked in HE libraries for nearly twenty years, Fiona has interest in referencing and inclusive practices. Fiona completed a master's in special educational Needs and Inclusion, graduating in 2022. As partial fulfilment of this degree Fiona undertook research into student perceptions of referencing alongside referencing styles and dyslexia.

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