

Participant Feedback from the First McKee Learning Lunch

Dyslexia: Disability or Blessing?

November 19, 2013

This learning experience was co-sponsored by the Tennessee Center for Dyslexia, Middle Tennessee State University; and the McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Introduction

O.D. McKee, founder of McKee Baking Company and a major funder of the Challenger Center, where we were meeting, was dyslexic—as are and were many of the world’s most innovative individuals. Among such individuals are financier Charles Schwab, movie producer Steven Spielberg, comedian Jay Leno, author Hans Christian Anderson, technology pioneer Steve Jobs, and physicist Albert Einstein. And because debate about the existence of dyslexia exists, we wanted to feature the subject from a number of points of view.

The select group of participants represented a cross-section of community members, and we extend special thanks to James Herman, Director of Tennessee’s Center for Dyslexia at Middle Tennessee State University, for providing the basis for an animated multi-disciplinary discussion. As a result of his comments, learning-lunch participants learned a great deal about dyslexia, including the meaning and implications of the term.

In accordance with the process used at every McKee Learning Lunch, there were three general feedback opportunities, or Assignments 1, 2, and 3. The participants, who are listed at the end of this report, provided their insights into and questions about the topic. These responses are presented below.

Assignment 1

Pre-discussion Question: Prior to the presentation and discussion, we asked participants, “What question(s) do you have about this topic?”

Examples of their responses follow.

Diagnosis

- Is dyslexia a genuine condition?
- Who makes the initial diagnosis of dyslexia in an individual?
- Is a diagnosis of dyslexia based on research?
- Is dyslexia primarily a neurological issue, an acquired problem, or some combination of the two?
- Why do many people in minority groups go undiagnosed?
- Is it possible that, in some cases, dyslexia can be seen as a blessing?

Possible Causes

- Is there research to suggest that dyslexia is more of an environmental and social issue than a neurological or brain-function issue?
- Is dyslexia a hereditary problem?

Manifestations

- Does dyslexia affect only the way people process numbers as well as text? And does it impact only the processing of printed information?
- Does one gender experience dyslexia more often than the other?

Technological Assistance

- How can design (fonts, color, contrast) help people who are dyslexic read with more proficiency?
- What technology is being used to help/assist dyslexic students?
- Do glasses with yellow-tinted lenses help a person with dyslexia?

Educational Assistance

- What types of instructional techniques work best to serve students with dyslexia?
- How does one prioritize instruction for a middle-school or high-school student with dyslexia?
- How do most schools and colleges help prepare teachers to work effectively with students who have dyslexia?

Assignment 2

Discussion Question: After the presentation, participants, in groups of four, discussed the following three questions:

Question 1. Is dyslexia a real condition?

Question 2. How important is literacy?

Question 3. How old were you when you learned to read?

Note: Unfortunately, the responses to these questions are not available for analysis.

Assignment 3

Post-discussion Question: After the discussion, we asked participants to respond, in writing, to these two additional questions:

Question 1. What is the most important thing you learned today?

Increase in Knowledge

- I really enjoyed the learning session! It brought much light to an issue that students are being faced with.
- Would love to have more information about the instructional intervention strategies for students in the secondary setting.
- The history of the word itself—"dyslexia"—and its range of perceived meaning from the time it was first coined to the present

Genetic and Neurological Components

- Dyslexia is not a vision problem but a neurological one.
- Until more research is done on how the brain works, the best weapons against reading problems to use in the teaching of reading are experience and instinct. In addition, prior knowledge and time are the variables that students need most.

- Dyslexia has a genetic component.
- Dyslexia is a neurological and genetic condition, and for a community to approach solutions of literacy, everyone from parents to schools to community centers must take responsibility.

General Educational Issues

- Dyslexia cannot be “tamed,” but with key communication, all learners with dyslexia can be successful!
- I learned a great detail about dyslexia and learning styles.
- Individuals in a variety of settings consistently experience the challenges that those of us in the public-school system experience. I am hopeful that we will make strides in meeting the needs of students as a result of our common concerns.
- Dyslexia is still being concretely defined.
- A sense of the variety of ways in which dyslexia can reveal itself, as well as perceived symptoms that do not necessarily indicate the presence of dyslexia.

Reading-specific Issues

- Different types and degrees of dyslexia exist, and interventions can help with the effects and can enable people to be successful, literate learners.
- Dyslexia is a category of reading disability that can cover a multitude of different reading problems, some of which may only be the result of poor teaching.
- The difference between “whole-word” and “phonemic” methods.

Question 2. What unanswered question are you leaving here with?

Encouraging Community Involvement

- As a society, how do we create a community to address literacy?
- How can we bring more awareness about dyslexia to our community in partnership with UTC and other community agencies?
- How do we get the community to care?
- How can educators promote literacy in the community? And how can the community address literacy as a whole?

Diagnosis and Treatment

- If there is no absolute test for dyslexia and no consistent diagnosis as such, what is gained from such a diagnosis?
- Are there specific neurological treatments for dyslexia?
- Why is literacy such an issue and problem . . . in [the current era of] information access and emphasis on higher education?
- How can I help people with dyslexia and their families access resources that would be helpful to them—particularly existing, free resources?

The Phonetic Factor

- What about phonetic languages? What’s the incidence of dyslexia in Spain, for example?

Participants

We would like to thank the following participants for their interest in and contribution to this McKee Learning Lunch.

Angela Ballard. Chief Learning Officer, WTCE.

David Bird. Founder and rector, Foundations Collegium.

Laura Bond. Staff writer, Office of University Relations, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Sophia Campbell. Director, *Reading with Passion*.

Andrew Cole. Graduate assistant, McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning; School Psychology Program; College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Pamela Guess. Coordinator, School Psychology Program; College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Creech Hardee. Adjunct professor, Chattanooga State University. Developer and director, Aethra Project.

James Herman. Director, Tennessee Center for the Study and Treatment of Dyslexia, Middle Tennessee State University.

Alex Hill. Graduate assistant, Office of Multicultural Affairs, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Ron Hughes. Principal, Apison Elementary School, Apison, Tennessee.

Leslie Jensen-Inman. Co-founder, Center Centre, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Linda Johnston. Interim Director, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Ellsworth McKee. Chair, McKee Foods; Collegedale, Tennessee.

Kathy Petros. Exceptional-education Supervisor, Hamilton County Department of Education; RTI Consultant, Tennessee Department of Education.

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Perry Storey. Director, Challenger STEM Learning Center.

James A. Tucker. Professor and McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, College of Health, Education, and Professional Studies; University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Priscilla Tucker. Developer of teaching materials and science-based curricula for multi-age, multi-disciplinary elementary and middle-school classrooms and homeschools. Free-lance author and editor of educational articles and books.