



Digital Culture & Education (DCE)

Publication details, including instructions for authors <http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/>

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Online Publication Date: 12th, August 2014

To cite this Article: Barden, O. (2014). Exploring dyslexia, literacies and identities on Facebook. *Digital Culture & Education*, 6:2, 98-119.

URL: <http://www.digitalcultureandeducation.com/cms/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/barden.pdf>

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EXPLORING DYSLEXIA, LITERACIES AND IDENTITIES ON FACEBOOK

Owen Barden

Abstract

This paper examines the role of identities in underpinning and activating literacies learning in a small class of adolescent students labelled with dyslexia. It derives from a project in which teacher-researcher and student-participants co-constructed a Facebook group page about the students' scaffolded research into dyslexia. The study investigated an apparent paradox: that although literacy demands are often cited as barriers to learning and participation for students labelled with dyslexia, social networking technologies seem to motivate at least some such students to willingly undertake significant amounts of reading and writing. Two interrelated potential explanations are investigated to attempt to resolve this paradox. Firstly, that the social and collaborative nature of Facebook literacy events and practices, which promotes a sense of shared identity amongst the participants, is itself motivating. Secondly, that identity strongly influences engagement with texts. Three intertwined strands of identity work emerged from analysis of the data. These three strands underpinned the students' literacy events and practices. Each strand is elaborated, through reference to interview data and classroom dialogue. The study concludes that Facebook offered an affinity space in which the students inhabited projective identities which reciprocally shaped their literacy practices.

Keywords: Facebook; dyslexic; identity; adolescents; social network site; new literacies

Facebook and education

Digitally mediated social networks are a relatively new phenomenon, yet use of social network sites (SNS) is one of the most popular everyday activities on the World Wide Web (Stirling, 2011). One person in twelve on the planet has a Facebook account (Aydin, 2012), and the site is almost ubiquitous in some countries, with approximately 1.3 billion current monthly users worldwide (statisticbrain.com, 2014). Some people's engagement with the site is so intense, and such are its communicative affordances (O'Brien & Voss, 2011), that Allen (2012, p214) claimed Facebook offered "something of an equivalent to the internet." That is, their experience of the internet could be almost entirely mediated through the site. The appeal of digitally-mediated social networks to students and young people is widely documented (e.g. boyd 2008a, 2008b; boyd & Ellison 2007; Davies 2012). Despite some signs that UK teenagers are now abandoning the site in favour of others, at the time of this study the UK had the second largest number of users worldwide at 29.8 million, or 58% of the 54.1million people online (Arthur, 2011). True to its heritage at Harvard, students are amongst the most prolific Facebook users, with the site part of the fabric of their lives as they weave complex tapestries of communication which combine multiple online and offline threads (Allen, 2012; Hulme 2009; Facer 2011). Despite this ubiquity, there is a large degree of uncertainty over how, and even whether, educators should use SNS like Facebook to engage students in academic study. For instance, there are claims that

Facebook has a detrimental effect on engagement and grades (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), and that some students simply don't want Facebook in the classroom, preferring to keep the social sphere separate from the academic (Prescott, Wilson & Becket, 2013). Although there is an emerging body of research on pedagogical applications of SNS, as yet knowledge in this area remains limited (Coates, 2007), the evidence is mixed, and the student voice is largely absent from the literature (Prescott, Wilson & Becket, 2013). In addition, there is some evidence that a significant proportion of young people are prolific yet unsophisticated internet users (Crook, 2008; Pangrazio, 2013; Zimic, 2009). Therefore, one task facing researchers is investigating and developing understanding of the educative practices and tools afforded by digitally mediated social networks (Asselin & Moayeri, 2010; Greenhow & Robelia 2009; Moayeri, 2010).

Decisions about whether to exploit SNS in education will inevitably be determined by context as well their affordances (Allen, 2012). What cannot be denied is that many young people seem to be interested in and motivated to learn by digitally-mediated social networks, and many are open to the idea of using them in the classroom (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty, 2010). A number of advantages are posited for exploiting SNS. There is the claim that the kind of collaborative learning SNS promote is in tune with broader cultural, Web 2.0 influenced shifts towards social constructivist epistemologies (Dede, 2008; Kress, 2010). Such learning can be deemed more authentic by students because it involves collaboration in the construction and distribution of knowledge, and may combine informal and offline elements (such as classroom discussion) with more formal aspects (Deng & Taveres, 2014; Moayeri, 2010.) There is also the claim that SNS offer opportunities to think creatively and solve problems, again working collaboratively (Alvermann, 2011). Moayeri (2010) claims that SNS can foster closer classroom communities. Echoing this, Alvermann, Hutchins & McDevitt (2012) write that SNS can bridge space between more and less popular or shy students, and between genders, promoting sociality.

Dyslexia, literacies and identities

Identity is shaped in reciprocal relationships with texts (Alvermann, 2011; Barden, 2009; McCarthy & Moje, 2002). Dyslexia is almost invariably defined and conceptualised through reference to significant difficulties with meeting normative cultural and curricular literacy demands (Bell, McPhillips & Doveston, 2011; Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh & Voeten *et al* 2010; International Dyslexia Association 2002; Miles, 1996). Students labelled as dyslexic therefore frequently inhabit identities as literacy 'strugglers' or failures. Rather than being valued as "thriving, literate, intelligent human beings with important contributions to make" (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009 p.4), all too often students labelled with dyslexia become protagonists in socially constructed narratives of failure (MacDonald, 2009). Exclusion from, and rejection of, reading and writing, frequently has negative long-term effects on self-concept and senses of identity, educational trajectories and hence life chances (Alvermann, 2001; Collinson & Penketh, 2010; Gee, 2001; Madriaga, 2007; Tanner, 2009; Williams, 2003 & 2005). To use Foucault's (1975 & 1980) terms, such students become 'docile bodies', disciplined by the normalising gaze and techniques of the social institution of the school into internalising identities as failures.

Issues of identity are particularly pertinent in adolescence when identities are relatively fluid and particularly susceptible to influence from peers and role models. Although identities are lived by individuals, they are also socially constructed (Pangrazio, 2013), and paradoxically both possessed by and possessive of the individual (Jabal & Riviere, 2007). SNS make social networks that might otherwise remain invisible visible

(boyd & Ellison, 2007), and demand that users construct, manage and perform what (Gee 2000, 2001; see also Alverman, 2011) terms their Discourse-identities within those social groups. Discourse-identities are ways of being, belonging and being recognised, sustained in part through literacies. Mallan (2009) argues that SNS provide new ways for virtual identities to be constructed, presented and narrated in public. Identity is therefore not simply a manifestation or marker of an individual's internal states or dispositions, nor merely how individuals are recognised; individual and group identities in SNS are also performative, collaborative and collective.

Using Facebook to communicate with peers requires encoding, decoding, interpreting and analysing significant amounts of text, often whilst simultaneously 'dealing with' several conversations (Lewis and Fabos 2005). Given that Facebook demands not only significant amounts of reading and writing, but reading in writing in public, where potentially stigmatising weaknesses are exposed, we might reasonably anticipate that students labelled dyslexic, and who may inhabit identities as literacy strugglers or failures, would avoid the site. Put another way, such students might perceive the literacy demands of Facebook threatening their Discourse-identities within peer groups. Unsurprisingly, studies have found that students labelled with dyslexia continue to struggle in virtual environments like chat rooms and discussion fora that require them to work read and write in much the same way as they would be expected to with pen and paper (Woodfine Baptista Nunes & Wright, 2005; Williams, Jamali & Nicholas, 2006; Hughes, 2007). In addition, and as Alvermann (2011) observes, social networking - and other online activities - require adolescents to decode and encode a complex mix of words, symbols, and genre-specific syntax as well sounds and images - skills not typically taught in traditional literacy classrooms, but which are nevertheless gaining social value (Moayeri, 2010). We might anticipate that this multimodal complexity would act as a further deterrent to those deemed to struggle with literacy. In addition, SNS can create anxiety and pressure to appear popular (Pangrazio, 2013). However, rather than exacerbating the difficulties associated with typographic literacies, it seems, the shifting balance from linguistics to multimodal semiotics (Kress, 2003 & 2010), combined with developing economies of recognition and recognition (Allan, 2012 p214; Mallan 2009 p57), participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2006), opportunities to connect with others based on interests and personality (Mallan, 2009; Alvermann, Marshall, McLean, Huddleston, Joaquin & Bishop, 2012), and the ability to draw on diverse digital materials and tools (Moayeri, 2010) suggest the potential to realise the possibility of positive shifts in self-esteem, power and agency for students labelled 'dyslexic' and therefore literacy failures. They may thus enable such students to use power positively and productively to resist dominant epistemologies and discourses of deficit (Foucault, 1980).

For example, some evidence suggests that undergraduates reporting low satisfaction and low self-esteem, a group likely to include those with labelled with dyslexia (Pollak, 2005), gain more social capital from intensive Facebook use than their non-dyslexic peers (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007). Barden (2012) found that Facebook offered an arena for critical and playful learning about and through literacy for a small group of adolescent students labelled as dyslexic. The social imperative to maintain peer networks and increased exposure to language have also been shown to improve spelling and contribute to motivated wordplay by some dyslexic students when SMS "texting" (Veater, Plester & Wood, 2011). Hughes, Herrington, McDonald & Rhodes (2011) describe the ways in which social learning via e-portfolios boosted two dyslexic university students' perceptions of their literacy skills. Positive reframing of dyslexic selves as successful learners resulted (Gerber, Reiff & Ginsberg 1996; Tanner, 2009). As part of the shift towards social constructivist epistemologies, SNS thus appear to offer

opportunities for meaningful, authentic "knowledge work" (McNely, Teston, Cox, Olorunda, & Dunker, 2010) and developing agency. A sense of an appreciative audience motivates authorship (Alverman, Hutchins & McDevitt, 2012). Motivation to engage with multimodal content in order to write their worlds into existence means students produce texts which help construct Discourse-identities in ways that allow them to present themselves as literate beings, rather than literacy failures (Alvermann 2011). They can also prepare for the future by developing critical digital literacies, engaging with web-based resources to foster literacy skills that are rapidly gaining symbolic capital in our increasingly high-tech world (Alvermann, Marshall, McLean, Huddleston, Joaquin & Bishop, 2012). Developing a sense of agency, with students engaging in knowledge work that helps them write themselves into the future through participating in digital networked publics (boyd, 2008a, 2008b; Facer, 2011; McNely, Teston, Cox, Olorunda, & Dunker, 2010; Merchant, 2007), may also be valuable in preparing young people for future careers and life choices.

As Hall (2012, p.369) notes, and remedial literacy programmes for dyslexic students endlessly exemplify: "What gets ignored in the rhetoric of helping students become "good readers" is that doing so requires more than helping them learn specific skills. It requires a shift in their identities." Identity thus has important literacy pedagogy implications, especially among those who have been characterised as "slow" or "struggling" readers (Anderson, 2007; Lenters, 2006; McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001). However, the available literature currently "comes up short in terms of detailed analyses of the ways in which youth use web-based resources to construct their online identities, while simultaneously developing the digital literacy skills needed for learning in a world where attention, not information is in short supply" (Alvermann, Marshall, McLean, Huddleston, Joaquin & Bishop, 2012 p185).

The fact that digitally-mediated social networks are so popular and can motivate learning through literacies amongst students traditionally marginalised by school literacy suggests that their classroom use is an issue which has not been sufficiently explored. Technologically-mediated emerging literacy practices also challenge assumptions about the relationships between so-called 'dyslexics' and literacy. The deficit model of dyslexia assumes literacy is an individual technical skill, whereas Facebook exposes both the social and ideological nature of literacy practices, and the deployment of new literacies (Street, 2003, 1984) Against this backdrop, the study reported here investigated the classroom use of Facebook by a small group of adolescent students labelled as dyslexic. It attempted to answer the following research questions: What does the students' engagement with Facebook reveal about their motivation to learn through literacy, and their sense of identity? It was hoped that investigating these questions would generate ideas for developing a more inclusive contemporary pedagogy. This study therefore represents an attempt to let go of tired practices and join in the exploration of new forms of text, and enable students to engage meaningfully in learning that both extends and elaborates on the literacy practices they already own and value (Alvermann, 2011).

Methodology & methods

Methodology

For this study, a "fledgling methodology" (White, Drew & Hey, 2009 p.21) combining elements of action research and case study with an ethnographic sensibility (Green & Bloome, 1996) was devised (Barden, 2013). This methodology and combination of methods was deliberately complex in order to try and provide thick descriptions of what was happening "on the ground", here-and-now, in what Selwyn (2011, p164) calls the "messy reality" of digital technology use.

Williams (2008) counsels that in thinking seriously about students' identity figures in their literacy practices, we must talk to students about how and why they write online, in order to find out from them about their practices and social skills. Accordingly, the methodology of this study permitted an extensive range of qualitative methods including participant-observation, classroom video recordings, semi-structured interviews, dynamic screen capture (Asselin & Moayeri, 2010; Cox, 2007) and protocol analysis (Ericsson & Simon 1993; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Dynamic screen capture involves making, with participants' informed consent, video recordings of everything that happens on a user's computer screen over a given period; in this case, during two of the five 90-minute project sessions. Protocol analysis is a procedure for obtaining participants' verbal reports about their actions, thought processes and emotions whilst or after completing tasks. In this study, retrospective verbal reports were obtained by playing back the participants' screen capture videos and asking them to explain what they were doing and why (Barden, in press). Through the constant comparison procedure advocated for grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008 p259), this data was aggregated with that obtained through the more orthodox methods to reconstruct a strongly emic account (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klinger, Pugach & Richardson, 2005) of how and why the students read and wrote online, the sorts of literacy practices that shaped literacy events, and how all this was underpinned by identity work. In addition to these methods, a doctoral candidate working on his own, unrelated investigation of children and young peoples' perceptions of their experiences of being researchers (Hughes, 2011) asked to collect Q-Sort data (Van Excel, 2005; Watts & Stenner, 2005) from the participants. Q-Sort is a systematic way of studying viewpoints, opinions, beliefs and attitudes, in which participants sort by ranking a carefully worded and selected set of statements into a quasi-normal distribution, with these "sorts" then subjected to a statistical pattern-analysis called by-person factor analysis. Having an independent researcher use statistical methods to explore my participants' views of themselves as researchers on my project helped triangulate and add additional depth to inform my own analysis of their identity work.

The classroom setting

The empirical work for this study took place in a classroom in a sixth-form college in north-west England¹. The five volunteering participants were a sample of convenience: had I not been doing this research, I would have been teaching them conventional literacy and study-skills anyway. The participants professed interest in the project, and had a variety of experiences and knowledge of dyslexia. Three of the group had been identified as dyslexic through educational psychologists' assessments earlier in their school careers. Two were formally assessed shortly after enrolling at the college. The five expressed different attitudes towards and purposes for online social networking. The collaborative research used a strategy of "scaffolded co-construction" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p.180). This involved me as teacher-researcher and participant-observer, designing, facilitating and documenting the students' largely self-directed online research into dyslexia. The students' regular "study support" classroom was reconfigured as "an inquiry-oriented learning environment that positioned students as active collaborators investigating their learning, personal responsibility, and construction of identities as self-sufficient learners" (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p.11; see also Coffield, 2008). The classroom thus combined with the group's Facebook page to become an "affinity space" (Gee, 2005) for the collective endeavour of exploring interest in dyslexia. The space was dissociated from institutionalised literacy norms, with "no requirements concerning 'correctness,' style or format" (West, 2008 p.588).

We worked together to co-construct a Facebook page over five 90-minute sessions. As teacher-researcher I initiated the project, helped set its direction and ensured progress was made. The students chose to construct a group Facebook page, recording their largely self-directed research into their freely chosen topic, dyslexia. The participants decided to use Facebook to explore and record ideas around dyslexia, hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli, disability and diversity. I encouraged them to bring their pre-existing “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez 1992; also Davies & Pahl, 2007: 119; Wellington, 2001 p.236) to the endeavour, and take the opportunity to link curriculum content to personal experiences, local knowledge and relevant artefacts of popular culture, such as songs, press articles and online videos. Over the weeks as the students pursued their own interests the page developed organically, with little direction from me. We had regular, spontaneous discussions about their learning as well as more formal weekly progress meetings.

Ethical considerations

A major ethical principle was that the students' preferences and curriculum demands had to take precedence. This significantly influenced the timing of the project and some opportunities for data collection and analysis. For example, at points in the term coursework and revision had to take priority over research activity. Some students participating were under 18 years old. Having undergone formal diagnostic assessment for dyslexia, all were legally classified as disabled. Both these factors mark them out as potentially vulnerable and high-risk. Although I thought that participating was something they would enjoy and benefit from, before starting I warned them that people might post hostile comments on their Facebook page: one danger of SNS is that have the potential to reinforce stigma and stereotypes, owing in part to the way they unsettle the public/private distinction (Mallan, 2009). I attempted to manage this risk by piloting the project using the closed SNS Ning, but like Moayeri (2010), found that students were reluctant to use this site. Instead, the participants were unanimous in wanting to use Facebook as a vehicle for promoting better understanding of dyslexia amongst their peers, and so were willing to accept the risk. They also had an explicit political agenda, set out in the aims they authored for the project, wanting to persuade the College to overturn its Facebook embargo by proving to senior management “*that Facebook can benefit education.*” As a practitioner I felt it was ethical to support the students in trying to make education work better for them. All students gave informed consent for confidential audio and video recordings to be made. I used a dedicated Facebook profile for myself, isolated from my personal one, to maintain my professional identity.

Data Analysis & Presentation

The project generated a considerable quantity and variety of data (summarised in Table 1). These data were analysed using the rigorous, reflexive procedures advocated for constructing grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Essentially, this involves multiple iterations of ipsative coding of the entire dataset, moving from initial open coding through focused coding to inductive, thematic categories which offer explanations of all the collected data. Because of the large volume of my data, and because I felt I had already immersed myself in my data enough to have some inkling of the major emerging themes, I switched from manual coding to using NVivo9 at the focused-coding stage of the analysis. Waiting until this point takes account of the criticism that computer programmes are not sensitive or “clever” enough to do grounded theory analysis (Becker, 1993). A final stage of theoretical sampling and integration analysis rendered

three intertwined strands of identity work which underpinned literacy practices. These categories and their interdependencies are elaborated in the subsequent sections:

1. Developing individual dyslexic identities
2. Developing a shared dyslexic identity
3. Becoming experts

Table 1: Data summary

Data Type	Number of Instances	Volume of Data	
		Duration (mins)	Words
Initial Interviews	5	130	19722
Second interviews	5	104	16615
Observation notes ⁱⁱ	5	n/a	11055
Video recordings	5	356	n/a
Video transcripts	10	n/a	11687
Wink recordings	10	20	n/a
Protocol analysis	7	n/a	1155
Q-sort	1	n/a	11333
Total	n/a	n/a	71567

Charmaz's (2006) approach is reflexive and pragmatic, recognising "that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the observed" (p.273), and demands sensitivity to one's own influence on the participants and the analysis. Constructivist grounded theory attempts to give opportunities for participants to tell their stories in their own terms and to clarify their perceptions of their own lived experiences. In this sense, it is emic and ethnographic. Authenticity is sought, as opposed to positivist notions of validity. Indeed, Charmaz (2006) rejects the concept of validity, yet her methods for attaining 'authenticity' are so similar to those Silverman (2006) advocates for 'validity' that this debate risks being reduced to the level of semantics: both insist on the systematic and rigorous application of strategies for data collection, and for analysis of the entire data set. These procedures, together with the relatively naturalistic classroom setting (I had already taught the group literacy- and study-skills for two months before starting the project) go some way to addressing potential experimenter effects inherent in such a research design.

Figure 1 is a screenshot of the group Facebook page, which illustrates the kinds of contributions the students posted, and how these evidenced identity work. The top post is a link to research from the Dyslexia Research Trust, which attempts to explain the visual distortions some people labelled with dyslexia experience when reading. The bottom post is a video which attempts to simulate these perceptual effects. In the middle is a YouTube video of the British stand-up comedian Eddie Izzard, who identifies as dyslexic and is performing a routine about dyslexia. This supplied the audio for a video the students produced, which is discussed later.



Figure 1: Screenshot of the group Facebook page

Developing individual dyslexic identities.

Participating in the group and contributing to the Facebook page was itself a significant signalling of a dyslexic identity for each individual: dyslexia is frequently a source of shame and my participants admitted as much, yet they publicised themselves as dyslexic to a potential global audience of 500m Facebook users. The actual size of the audience who joined the group was only around 70 people, but this is still a significant number to make a potentially stigmatizing disclosure to (Riddick, 2000). Early on Danny, for example, talked about how he wanted to ‘smash’ a friend and fellow rugby player who had mocked him as a ‘cheat’ for being entitled to extra time in exams, and how he wanted to make people understand dyslexia ‘by force.’ Much of the students’ subsequent individual work during the project could be interpreted as them making sense of, and sometimes then communicating, their personal experiences of dyslexia. The motivation to make meaning through literacy was such that quite often the students would engage with texts that they would probably otherwise consider too difficult. As evidenced on the screenshot above, Chloe, for example, investigated the magnocellular theory of dyslexia (Stein, 2001) and undertook reading on the influence of

chromosomes on literacy acquisition. In her post-project interview she spoke about “*getting really nerdy*” and “*enjoying the sciencey part*” of the research. In the context of the project, she was happy to engage with challenging academic texts she would otherwise have avoided. Likewise, Charlotte talked enthusiastically about an article from a Singapore Medical Association journal she had read (Lyens, 2002), which helped her understand the purported relationship between dyslexia and creative thinking. The article is written for clinicians, and demands some understanding of the psycho-medical domain and its vocabulary in order to be fully understood. Charlotte was a seventeen year-old Arts student. Despite our work earlier in the year on the nature and theories of dyslexia, she did not have the command of the subject-specific technical vocabulary anticipated by the author. Yet she was motivated enough to persist with the text, and then post a link to it on the group page, because it helped to answer her research question. In addition, the article resonated with her lived experiences, and with the offline classroom discussions about dyslexic “geniuses”, dyslexic role models, and the group's own perceptions of their being creative, independent thinkers:

“...I was just like oh woh yay!”

OB: *How does madness promote genius do you remember adding this?*

Charlotte: *Yeah it's the whole thing about dyslexics being able to be superhuman and um having like erm one of their senses being heightened...and like how a blind person has really good hearing and they can find a way around it like that but then we've got...certain things that are better for us...like being able to look at something completely different to everyone else...and see round the different ways around like think outside the box and stuff and yeah this one was quite long this one and this is one that you were like oh you're reading this!*

OB: *Do you remember how you came across this?*

Charlotte: *Erm my question was something to do with advantages of being dyslexic or something and I think I just typed it into Google and something came up but...*

OB: *Okay yeah it is quite a tricky article but you were obviously you took something from it... how did you go about reading this article ...I'm asking you what motivated you to read this...when you probably wouldn't read usually something that was this difficult to read?*

Charlotte: *Well I think it is an actual experimental like write-up or something so I thought that would be quite an accurate look onto how dyslexics work and how other people with disabilities work...so I think it I was just like oh woh yay!*

OB: *So because it was, it had accurate information and would be a reliable answer to your question?*

Charlotte: *Yeah.*

Charlotte's choice of research question indicates a desire to make sense of her own experiences of dyslexia, and thus engage in individual identity work. Charlotte was a visually creative “alternative” Arts student, studying Graphic Design and Photography. The article she chose to read reported on perceived links between “madness”, “genius”, “powers of creativity” and dyslexia. It made positive associations between dyslexia and visual- and creative-thinking, and gave examples of “eminent people” with dyslexia (Lyens, 2002, pp4-7) who were thereby offered as potential role models. The article thus spoke to Charlotte's sense of self as a creative, visual-thinking dyslexic person. The research question, the overall tenor of the article and the specific role models given

provided Charlotte with an opportunity to engage with re-framing work, developing an individual dyslexic identity that included *"being able to be superhuman [...] certain things that are better for us [...] the thinking like being able to look at something completely different to everyone else [...] and see round the different ways around like think outside the box..."* Although positive, this re-framing does evidence a potential tension between developing an affirmative dyslexic identity - of not being part of "the grey amorphous mass" of non-dyslexic people (Swain, French & Cameron, 2003 p.27) - and reinforcing 'superhuman' disability stereotypes which in turn perpetuate the Othering of disabled people (Barnes, 1992; Wendell, 2006). With hindsight, this tension could have been useful to explore with the group. Nevertheless, Charlotte's reading here can be interpreted as an important part of her re-framing her dyslexic identity as something more positive for her.

This data also speaks to the other two elements of identity work identified in the analysis. The second identity in play is that of the group dyslexic identity. By posting a link to the article on the group Facebook page, Charlotte is contributing to the shared identity. She is also providing her peers (and wider audience) with an opportunity to undertake similar re-framing work and hence come to understand dyslexia in a more positive light. Charlotte's account of her engagement with the article also shows that the third "becoming expert" identity is also in play. Charlotte positions herself as diligent researcher who is judicious in choosing what she shares with others. This is evident in her celebratory *"I was just like oh wob yay!"* when she finds an authoritative source that *"is an actual experimental like write-up or something."* In asserting that she values "actual" science and "accuracy" in the learning she shares with others, Charlotte can be seen to be positioning herself as someone who carefully chooses only reliable information to pass onto others via the group Facebook page. She chooses "accurate" information believing that this is the best way to inform and help others, even if the information is likely to make challenging reading for her audience.

Developing a shared dyslexic identity.

The students coalesced into what Gee (2007, p.212) calls an affinity group: people "bonded primarily through shared endeavours, goals and practices." Their endeavours to understand and communicate experiences of dyslexia, habitual Facebook use, and digitally-mediated literacy practices helped establish the participants as affinity group. I interpreted much of the off-screen and on-screen dialogue and interaction as the group bonding through the tacit co-construction of a shared identity. This shared dyslexic identity reciprocally shaped individual identities. It was established and maintained through participants sharing aspects of their individual experiences of dyslexia in mutually supportive dialogue. Paradoxically, the students wanted to be seen as 'normal' whilst simultaneously establishing and promoting individual and group identities which were explicitly Other. For example, in a meeting to clarify the students' aims and objectives for the project, Charlotte asserted that *"we are normal"* - by which she meant not being *"weird"* - yet at the same time *"greater than everyone else"* with *"great brains."* Danny on the other hand, distanced himself from *"normal"* and *"great."* Although playing partly for laughs, Danny identified himself as *"not great"*, a *"freak"* and a *"black sheep."* Josh, echoed by Chloe, wanted to identify the group as *"not generic"*, again asserting a group identity of Otherness. This Otherness was reinforced by the way *"normies"* and *"muggles"* - non dyslexic teachers, peers and family - were frequently described in hostile terms. Over the weeks, there was conversational thread expressing the anger and frustration they felt as a consequence of negative interactions with *normies*. The affinity group seemed to be working towards a complex shared dyslexic identity, seeking acceptance as *"normal"* whilst at the same time being *"non-generic."* In line with social models of disability and inclusive perspectives on education, the group appeared to be

calling for an expanded definition of "normal" which includes dyslexia and themselves, and recognises that "normal" embraces a wider range of differences than current popular perceptions allow.

The strongest conversational thread which ran through the weeks was the nature of reading and writing and how English orthography worked to disadvantage the participants. These discussions were rich and often insightful, as the following example shows. It is taken from a session when the students, at my prompting, were expanding on ideas for a short film they were planning, summarising what they had learnt so far. In the full discussion, the students drew on knowledge of self, family, genetics, biology, neurology, medical science and role models as they tried to decide what to write down to answer the question "What is Dyslexia?" In doing so, they co-constructed a collective dyslexic identity by acknowledging shared experiences. The stated purpose of this conversation is to generate script ideas for a short film the students made about what they learned from their research. Throughout this sequence, one of the group is mindmapping key phrases onto a piece of flip chart paper. This exchange therefore constitutes part of a literacy event, with the students developing digital literacy skills that will help them compete in the online attention economy (Alvermann, Marshall, McLean, Huddleston, Joaquin & Bishop, 2012):

- Josh:** *Erm what it is what dyslexia is just put down what it is.*
- Charlotte:** *We don't know.*
- Chloe:** *Learning disability.*
- Josh:** *To me what I see is I see dyslexia is a thing it's the problems y'get. There isn't an easy way to describe it without y'know usin' the problems.*
- Chloe:** *They don't know what the cause is yet so...*
- Charlotte:** *Learning disability can't read write.*
- Chloe:** *It can be genetic.*
- Josh:** *It is genetic isn't it.*
- Charlotte:** *Yeab I think mine's genetic.*
- Chloe:** *Mine's genetic.*
- Josh:** *I think my Dad's got it.*
- Chloe:** *Me Dad me Nanna and me Great Nan.*
- Charlotte:** *My mum and my Grandad.*
- Josh:** *I think it well it is in my stepdad's family he's got it his dad had it and his son's got it but no-one in the female side's got it.*
- Chloe:** *That's just chance.*
- Charlotte:** *Yeab because it depends on the mixture doesn't it cos my brother's not got it he is clever he got he's got an artistic flair but he's not got a design flair if you get me.*

This data illustrates the students sharing aspects of their individual experiences, in this case families and genetic inheritance, to construct a group dyslexic identity. Chloe and Charlotte talk of "my" dyslexia, before the group exchange information on how dyslexia has passed through their family lines. Then Charlotte notes how her brother is not dyslexic, and she seems to decide that this explains his lack of design flair. This remark

helps maintain a group sense of Otherness, and with its undertone of superiority (West, 2009), hints at positive reframing of dyslexia (Gerber, Reiff & Ginsberg; Tanner, 2009). The discussion shows the group constructing a shared understanding of dyslexia ("a genetic learning difficulty that means you can't read and write") and hence a shared identity ("we all have family members with dyslexia, are dyslexic, and find reading and writing difficult"). Note how they do so in a mutually supportive way, with no arguments or significant disagreements. Through this sort of dialogue, which is prompted by a writing activity, the students expanded their collective knowledge of dyslexia, which in turn helped them develop their identities as budding experts.

Becoming 'experts'

I detected a paradox in the student's discussions and presentations of identity. When asked directly in their interviews, the students tended to try and give the impression that they "*weren't bothered*" or didn't have "*strong feelings*" about their own dyslexia. However, the anger and frustration expressed elsewhere in their conversations and interviews towards their peers, teachers and former schools is at odds with the emotional disinterest they professed in relation to their own dyslexia. In her pre-project interview, Chloe admitted that curricular literacy demands left her "*feeling down and defeatist*." This contrasts strongly with her later claim that "*I've never had never had an issue with being dyslexic...I never sort of had any major feelings towards it I still don't*." Also, it is difficult to see why the group would be so keen to help others unless they felt the difficulties and challenges dyslexia presents were significant. The students' self-determined aims for the project included:

1. Making people more aware of dyslexia and its effects; and
2. To find ways to overcome dyslexia, and prove that the participants and other people with dyslexia aren't stupid and are normal.

Throughout the weeks, the word "help" was used very often, with the group keen to position themselves as "helpers", informing others about dyslexia. This suggests a developing sense of agency through writing and negotiating the self as an expert (Davies, 2006), with the students beginning to value the literate contributions they could make (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Of course, the students were already experts on their own experiences of dyslexia, but they were able to expand their understanding of other people's experiences and perceptions of dyslexia, as well as the theoretical and scientific understanding gained through their research. The Q-Sort data indicated that as well as being able to take on and exploit identities as 'experts', the participants were able to take on identities as 'young researchers.' Josh acknowledged that as their teacher I "*went out on a limb to trust us with the use of Facebook*." This led to an appreciative sense of being involved in what Charlotte described as "*a more grown-up way of working*." The Q-Sort data suggested that the five students reacted differently to their independence and research role. Mohammed felt satisfied with being involved with the project. He saw it as very teacher-led, but this did not stop him enjoying the activities. Through his research, he was able to become a more effective learner. For example, he changed his revision strategy in light of what he learnt about dyslexia and reading:

Yeah I do I feel I different now because before I just used to like read the page and then just write cover that up and write again but after I come here I changed my method of revising. I used to like just skip on my reading and then put it on mind maps or like structure the notes I have differently than I used to do before and I think it's changed the way I revise now.

The Q-sort data also indicated that the students felt they were more-or-less equal partners in the project, but would sometimes have preferred greater involvement in decision making. There was a sense that a different and more collaborative way of learning alongside adults was possible and even preferable:

- OB:** *Danny, what are your thoughts about being involved in the project as a whole?*
- Danny:** *I thought it was good because y'get other people's point of view on it and it's not something boring either it's not like a boring project it were quite good quite interesting.*
- OB:** *Why did you like it do you think?*
- Danny:** *I don't know because we got to act pretty stupid for a bit y'know we weren't taking it too seriously which were the thing like none of us took it proper serious...erm we did take it serious but not like we had a laugh with it as well so it just made it more enjoyable.*
- OB:** *Okay when you say taking it seriously d'you mean you think you think learning in College is generally too serious or d'you mean people tend to take dyslexia and deal with it in a really serious boring way?*
- Danny:** *No I mean like some people instead of laughing and joking about it they'd just like read the notes and be dead clear and boring and it's not like that I don't think and yeah College is boring the work it's just it is too serious.*

Danny's comments are indicative of the way the students felt a sense of legitimation, ownership and control, and this sense of "grown-up-ness" was another motivating factor for their literacy and identity work. They also hint at the preference for self-directed learning through exploration, and of the importance of affirmation, partly through playfulness and humour: *"we did take it serious but we had a laugh with it as well."*

Discussion

My analysis of the data suggests that, contrary to popular beliefs about dyslexia, these students were highly motivated to learn through literacy. Away from the constraints and expectations of the formal classroom and curriculum, the students were able engage in three important kinds of identity work, resisting and challenging dominant power/knowledge regimes, and mediated by their multiliteracy practices on Facebook. One of Josh's first posts to the group Facebook page was an image of Professor Xavier from the X-Men movies. To the image, located through a Google search, he added the caption "Professor X is disabled and he's epic" (Fig 2). Unfortunately he chose to work with a rather low-quality image but the message is clear:



Figure 2: Josh's Professor X image

On one hand, the X-Men movies and the character of Professor Xavier can be read as deeply problematic in the way they perpetuate stereotypical views of disability (Berube, 2005). On the other, for Josh, creating and publishing this multimodal text was an affirmative expression of a dyslexic/disabled identity. His picture is just one of the wide variety of multimodal texts the students produced and interacted with: text-only compositions, text-image compositions, "poached" (Jenkins, 1992; also Hughes, 2009 & Williams, 2011) and "mashed" texts and text-image compositions, original graphic and photographic artwork, and original videos. These texts served, explicitly or tacitly, to communicate aspects of the students' dyslexic identities. They also evidenced playful, new literacies learning (Davies, 2009; Veater, Plester & Wood, 2011; West, 2008). Josh's picture exemplifies the way many contributions and discussions were characterised by a somewhat defensive humour. This evidence supports the contention that issues of identity are central to motivating dyslexic students to learn through literacy in Web 2.0 contexts (Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2009; Hughes, Herrington, McDonald & Rhodes, 2011). The reach and affordances of digitally-mediated social networks are contributing to the state of flux in contemporary literacy practices. However, as Williams observes (2008 p.686):

What will not change, however, is the importance of identity in terms of literacy practices. If anything, new literacies reveal to us how important it will be to continue to consider how people position themselves in changing cultural contexts and how that influences their ability to communicate with others.

Consistent with the wider literature, the evidence suggests that the participants began the study with relatively low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority. This is evident in, for example, Chloe's admission of "*feeling down and defeatist*" when confronted with some reading her peers seemed to have no difficulty with; in the way the participants associated dyslexia with deficiency and stupidity; in the way they saw their efforts at literacy as being childish and unsatisfactory; in the frequent use of humour as a defence mechanism; and in the oft-stated desire to help other students with dyslexia. By inhabiting 'projective identities' (Gee, 2007) as a 'superhuman', 'nerdy scientist' 'creative genius', or 'expert-helper' the students were able to reposition and affirmatively reframe their identities as "thriving, literate, intelligent human beings with important contributions to make" (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p.4). In other words, the temporarily transformed classroom and the group Facebook page provided sites where the students were able to resist the dominant power/knowledge regime which usually casts them as failures or at least deficient in some way (Foucault, 1975). This is significant for four important reasons. Firstly, this type of inquiry based learning, solving personally meaningful real-life problems is known to be effective and appealing to many students labelled as dyslexic (Mortimore, 2003; Reid, 2009). Secondly, learners who perceive themselves to be capable and valued despite the difficulties associated with dyslexia, and who are able to envisage themselves as successful, tend to be more successful than those who don't (Burden, 2005 & 2008; Mortimore, 2003). Thirdly, inhabiting and reflecting on projective identities in a safe and stimulating educational environment is a way of provoking active critical learning (Gee, 2007), in this case for soon-to-be undergraduates and "budding professionals" (Willett, 2009 p.14). Such learning is crucial if education is to involve students exploring ways of becoming and ways of being scientists, researchers and the like, rather than relying on simple transmission and drill-and-skill pedagogic models. Fourthly, at the end of the project, I showed the College Principal the stop-motion Lego video the students had made and

posted to the Facebook page to summarise what they wanted to say about dyslexia (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WA7ddfkp3E>). I explained how I saw it as evidence of the students learning through literacy, even though they saw what they were doing as "making a video." As a consequence, she suggested convening a group of teaching staff to explore ways of exploiting social networking in the College for educational gain. Obviously, my position as a teacher will have had influence here, but the Principal would not have made her suggestion without seeing some value in the students' work. She contacted them individually afterwards to thank and praise them for what they had done. The ability to influence your Principal and College's approach to teaching and learning is, I would argue, a potent signifier of agency for any student, and moreso for a student who is from a traditionally disadvantaged educational minority.

I interpreted there being three conditions which fostered motivation to engage in literacy events, potentially with a challenging text or for a prolonged period: when the student had an inherent interest in the topic; when the student was seeking to develop further understanding of their experiences and/or self (the text content resonated with lived experience); and when the student was seeking (consciously or subconsciously) to communicate something about themselves. A contemporary inclusive literacy pedagogy could cultivate these conditions to capitalising on students' intrinsic motivation, perhaps through ensuring students have access to a range of appropriate texts, choice and control, and critical awareness of different types of text and their own abilities. Designing a learning environment which enable students to positively reframe their ability to read would be one potential way of mobilising these principles.

I found it helpful to conceptualise Facebook as an "affinity space" which prompted active, critical learning through the literacy-based projective identity work done by the students (Gee, 2007). In such spaces, and with technologies and literacy practices changing, teachers may wish to consider approaches which fit with social-constructivist digital epistemologies (Dede, 2008; Kress, 2010). Maintaining the "building" metaphor, such approaches may cast teachers as designers or architects of learning experiences, scaffolding and framing collaborative tasks within affinity spaces. The primary role of the teacher in such settings may be characterised as facilitator and mediator (Somekh, 2007), providing direction, challenge, and access to the relevant technology (Davies, 2009). In this instance, the group Facebook page can be seen as a sort of collaborative blog (Davies & Merchant, 2009; Mills & Chandra, 2011). Its construction suggested two pedagogic principles similar to those observed in other blogging contexts. Firstly, play and playfulness. Much of the interaction was characterised by humour and playfulness. The students often posted what they described as, for example, "hilarious" pictures. They also "played" with different technologies including Powerpoint, digital cameras and video-editing software in the process of composing their texts. Secondly, it has been argued that blogging involves learning in a distinctive way: "read-write-think-and-link" (Richardson, 2006 cited in Davies & Merchant, 2009 p.88). The evidence from this study suggests that collaborative blogging is a literacy practice that can reciprocally and positively shape identity whilst developing collective subject knowledge and critical literacy skills (Davies & Merchant, 2009). For example, an extensive account of the students developing awareness, through this project, of the way orthographies and literacy norms and practices are culturally and temporally situated is given in Barden (2012).

The discourse of dyslexia has long been dominated by talk of deficits. Perhaps we now need to think about developing a literacy pedagogy which is neither predicated on deficit and failure, nor heroic stories of "conquering" literacy difficulties (Williams, 2003). Instead, it could recognise an expanded definition of "normal" and that every student has their own individuality, abilities and aspirations, reflected in different

learning preferences and pace. In doing so, it might have to take into account stereotypical representations of disability in mass communications media; exploring ‘superhero’ characters might be one way of doing so (Dyson, 1997). The multiliteracy affordances of digitally mediated social networks like Facebook, coupled with the motivating identity work they precipitate, suggest they could have a significant role to play in such a pedagogy.

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ⁱ Sixth form colleges are important stepping stones between high school and university in England and
ⁱⁱ This refers to contemporaneous fieldnotes later augmented by video observation.