

# Wellbeing Writing with Move Beyond Words



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## Dyslexia in Dance

### WHAT IS DYSLEXIA?

**Elizabeth:** If you were to Google this question, you would find this definition:

‘Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed.’ (Rose, 2009, p. 9)

Dyslexia is an incredibly complex label and affects people in various ways and severities. Like all humans we are unique and one way of working with dyslexia doesn’t suit everyone. If I were to answer this without the support of Google’s search engine I would say:

Dyslexia is a valuable neurological tendency when placed in an environment that encourages visionary skills, problem solving, complex pattern recognition, strategic thinking, empathy, extreme keen sightedness, and observation among many other skills; these are ones that are primarily connected to those who dance (not literally) with the label of dyslexia. Dyslexia is a label which can negatively impact people when unsupported with practical tools to navigate the label’s complexities, but for those who are given the required education to dance with this label, they most often thrive.

Like all labels we can choose the meaning we attach to them and we must never forget this. We can create our working environments to reflect our preferred ways of working with the help of [access to work](#). There are 48 different tendencies connected to dyslexia – getting to understand your dyslexic tendencies in depth takes time.

## **HOW MIGHT A DYSLEXIC DANCE STUDENT OR PROFESSIONAL APPROACH LEARNING DIFFERENTLY IN THE STUDIO?**

The mind of the neurodivergent person is overly intricate. There are many layers from cognitive abilities to imagery-based and pictorial strengths. By this we mean that dancers and artists who identify with dyslexia are able to imagine and use imagery as an important source of expression. Creativity is also a huge strength that fuels artistic mediums, such as dance.

Move Beyond Words like to use imagery in the creation process as a way of explaining narrative, as it provides the dancers who dance with the label of dyslexia, with an aid which supports them to respond to an instruction. Some people like to think in colour, others like to think in words and numbers. We all have our strategies to help us retain information and execute tasks and encompassing all of these things helps us communicate both inside of the studio and out.

To artists who identify with dyslexia, Move Beyond Words encourages you to share with collaborators, work colleagues and peers what you need in place to help create a smoother working environment for yourself and others. We all have strengths and weaknesses and it is important to lean into your strengths and thrive rather than to feel snowed under by your weakness. This transparency allows an openness to communicate how we can work together and combine our strengths to support one another. If you are unsure what your strengths and weaknesses are, turn to a few good friends, teachers, colleagues and ask.

For dance artists looking for practical work methods inside the studio here are a few suggestions:

- Repeat the marking of the exercise or choreography by going last in group exercises, this gives you some practice time to get the movement in the body.
- Trust your muscle memory and yourself.
- Ask for the music to listen to in between rehearsals and create meaning to the movement.
- Use a metronome to help establish the counts of the choreography or exercise
- Give yourself a couple of minutes to mark the movement and listen to the music before running the piece.
- Have a notepad nearby to minute the movement and write down your corrections.
- Invite peers to buddy up and go over the choreography with you.
- Utilise your imagination for remembering movements by connecting images, words or sounds to choreography e.g tulip arms could represent a fluid arm gesture.

## **WHAT MIGHT OTHER DYSLEXIC STUDENTS OR PROFESSIONALS BENEFIT FROM THEIR DANCE PEERS AND TEACHERS KNOWING MORE ABOUT?**

Our industry moves fast, we work fast and create incredible content within these time frames. This isn't something that can be changed, yet. We believe that there is a lot to be

said for an introductory period when creating dance works. It is important to us to know the people we work with and their experiences and stories so we can bring out the best within them which ultimately makes for interesting, thought provoking and personal works. This method of working doesn't need to slow the process down, in some cases this has sped the process up and makes for a very inviting and welcoming space for creativity to occur, especially when working with dancers with dyslexia.

At MBW we have been trialling ways to introduce our ways of working with our dyslexia to collaborators within our professional practice. We have also spent time consulting organisations on making their workshops, webinars and learning environments more accessible and inclusive for people with dyslexia. Most recently Move Beyond Words have collaborated on a webinar with The Space, which is titled '[Neurodivergent artists and practitioners discuss how they work with digital](#)'. The webinar this went live on 5th July and can be found on The Space's YouTube channel. During the process we [designed an icon](#). The icon, developed by The Space and Move Beyond Words, represents the steps we have taken to make this webinar welcoming to people with dyslexia.

We have also taken smaller steps, such as adding to the base of our emails, 'Delightfully dyslexic excuse the typos' (encouraged by Pip Jaimison). We have also tried sharing our [Access Rider](#) with our collaborators. This Access Rider was created by Alexandrina Hemsley.

We are constantly inspired by the way neurodivergent people navigate themselves through obstacles by creating their own solutions to overcome them, but every day should not feel like a hurdle, and we are increasingly aware of this.

Our intention in sharing ourselves more openly and honestly at the start of a collaborative process means we save time having to have a detailed and raw conversation with colleagues when work becomes too confronting. The things we share are how best we work, i.e. images and videos to convey a film narrative or pitch, how long a task might take and how best to communicate.

For instance, when people share a lot of information via email, ask: "Please compile this into bullet points so I can process with ease". People may prefer using voice recordings or videos to communicate. These are all acceptable adjustments and methods of working and it is important to share.

In 2018 we (Elizabeth & Charlotte) conducted a Research and Development supported by Arts Council England and we realised the severity and lack of acknowledgement for the needs of artists with dyslexia. We looked at ways to support people practically within the dance studio and explored ideas to fuel a Move Beyond Words Tool Kit and resource page. Once completed, this will include a full array of practical tools and tips for professional creatives to utilise and make their working life fluid. We would like to launch this idea as a package for dancers to draw on the methods we have established during our careers to support them in the studio. These methods would support spatial awareness, numeracy, strategies for ways of communicating, and understanding information.

If you are interested in supporting this vision, please don't hesitate to get in touch: [info@movebeyondwords.co.uk](mailto:info@movebeyondwords.co.uk)



## **WHY DO YOU THINK THAT PROVIDING SUPPORT AND CREATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR THOSE WITH DYSLEXIA IN DANCE IS SO IMPORTANT?**

Because we are all human and deserve an equal footing in life. There are so many people who fall between the cracks – we are losing a drastic amount of people with dyslexia within the creative arts and much worse, to our prison systems. These people could have been the next Nikola Tesla. We cannot afford to lose any more people to a rigid societal structure that does not serve those with the label of dyslexia. As the planet suffers from our predecessors and our economy moves towards a dependence on technology, we need people who are forward thinkers, people who move beyond the reality of our current problems to find solutions, we need people with ideas, people who are in action. We need people with dyslexia.

Our work at MBW is to support people to reach their full potential, and our dance sector needs work that provokes more questions and disrupts our linear approach. We believe small steps have a ripple effect which will spread and begin to shift people's thinking and ways of working for our next generation so that we can have a dance sector that is more inclusive and neurologically diverse.

## **AS DYSLEXIC CHOREOGRAPHERS AND ARTISTS YOURSELVES, WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED IN THE DANCE STUDIO?**

Experiences in the studio have shaped us as individuals and artists and later on gave us the passion and drive to create Move Beyond Words. We have had some triumphant moments and challenges. The most bruising moments come when there is a lack of understanding of the label and situations can be quite debilitating. We have both lost confidence when we have worked in an un-motivational climate. For example, being accused of having a 'lazy brain' when becoming frustrated with not being able to pick up a dance exercise in school isn't going to instil confidence in young people.

It is so important for anyone in a leadership role to listen and find an understanding of people's differences, and have the compassion to change their methods or views of what dyslexia is to support people who identify with it.

We love to dance and perform and not feel bewildered by an overload of information which obstructs the performer within us. We have found many strategies to overcome obstacles within the studio and we would like to share these findings practically and physically. MBW are in the process of creating workshops for neurodivergent dance artists. During our first research and development phase, we focused on how to create choreography utilising the skills of dance artists with dyslexia. We also looked into ways we can create an accessible work environment for dancers with dyslexia. This enabled us to reflect on our own experiences and think about areas of change that we could implement to make sure dancers with dyslexia continue to fall in love with dance, and not out of love because of the lack of support. We have shared some of these experiences on the Move Beyond Words podcast, which you can access on Spotify, Apple Podcast, Acast or wherever else you listen to your favourite podcast. The podcast enabled us to discover more about how people 'dance' with the label of dyslexia. Darcey Bussell is a guest speaker on [episode 9, series one](#). Darcey shared so many helpful tips and tricks and one we particularly liked was that if you listen to relaxing music whilst reading or working it helps to retain information. Maybe when you're next reading an article, book or going through your emails you can try this.

We learnt so much about dyslexia and the resilience of human nature during the interviews, and we are thrilled to be launching our next podcast series in September 2021.

## HOW DOES DYSLEXIA BENEFIT THE WAY IN WHICH YOU WORK AND MOVE?

Dyslexia has benefitted us by making us fantastic problem solvers as there are many obstacles in life that we have to navigate through, developing an immense amount of resilience. When the pandemic hit, the arts (and many other sectors) suffered. It was up to us all to get creative, adapt to the situation and problem solve. Our company, Move Beyond Words launched during the global pandemic alongside our podcast and [short dance film UN\[BOX\]ED](#). These projects enabled us to continue to have artistic conversations surrounding dyslexia during a time of only connecting through digital means. It's times like these we thank dyslexia for the challenges we have faced along the way, as it has set us up to be adaptable humans that have thrived in such a complex time in history.

When we work in a team we bring creative and outside the box thinking, buckets of imagination and creativity to help be adaptable and push through challenging times.

Because we have experienced many challenges in our lives, we are very empathetic, transparent and patient. Although, you could say we are perfectionists as the thought of always striving to be better has been instilled in us since childhood from the UK's education system, and the vigour of our dance training and industry.

Dyslexia makes us think about our approach to 'conventional methods', and how unconventional approaches could be much more effective and efficient. We choose to embrace our dyslexia, exploring the brilliance it can bring to our work – just keep discovering.

*Rose, J. (2009). Identifying and teaching children and young people with dyslexia and literacy difficulties: an independent report.*

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