

Karen Marshall is a private, classroom and peripatetic music teacher in York teaching students of all ages and levels. She has worked with dyslexic students in school and privately, is a member of the British Dyslexia Association's Music Committee and specialises in multi-sensory music teaching. A writer for Music Teacher magazine and published author, Karen trains teachers across the UK on teaching students with special needs (working with the ABRSM, EPTA and others). Karen is also a Kodály practitioner and former pupil of the late Christine Brown. In this article, Karen talks about her experiences teaching dyslexic students, giving practical teaching tips on how to overcome the problems they may encounter.

The first dyslexic student I ever taught was diagnosed at a young age. His parents brought him to me for theory lessons in his early teens with a wealth of information on what dyslexia was and how it affected him. As a teacher I was very lucky to be given information because, the only thing I knew about dyslexia was that it caused spelling difficulties. After spending time with this student I noticed other students – who had not been diagnosed as dyslexic – displaying some of the same traits. Over the next couple of years, some of these students were also diagnosed with dyslexia.

People often ask, “Does dyslexia affect reading and learning music?” The answer is almost invariably yes, since the skills required to do it are things a dyslexic student finds difficult. For a dyslexic student, music can be like a code. As a teacher, you can facilitate that code-breaking process by teaching in a way that helps to make learning and reading music possible. The important question is: how do you do this?

Multi-sensory teaching

For me, multi-sensory teaching is the greatest tool for helping both dyslexic students and non-dyslexic students. Strategies that help dyslexic students can benefit all who may find learning or reading music difficult. Multi-sensory teaching is just as it sounds: teaching by using a number of different senses in order to learn. My own daughter has learnt to read words by a multi-sensory method. She has been shown pictures of the letters (visual), listened to how the letters are pronounced (auditory), and drawn the letters in a tray of sand (kinaesthetic). We all have preferred ways of learning and as teachers we must be very careful not to teach in the way we personally learn. “If they don't learn the way you teach, can you teach the way they learn?” is wise advice.” The dyslexic student greatly benefits from multi-sensory teaching because learning is reinforced. Sheila Oglethorpe in *Instrumental Music for Dyslexics: A Teaching Handbook* (Whurr, 1996) states: “The foremost advice that is given to teachers of dyslexics in the classroom is to teach in a multi-sensory way. They are exhorted to employ as many of the child's senses as possible in the hope that the stronger senses will compensate for the weaker ones and a pathway into the brain and the memory will be found.” I try to focus on three questions with a student: *What do you see? What do you feel? What do you hear?*

It may be simple to read about what multi-sensory teaching (MST) is, but it can be difficult to think of ways to teach principles in this way. A useful tool currently available for teaching note-reading using MST principles is *Let's Read Music* by Christine Brown (Contact the Christine Brown Trust website www.christinebrowntrust.org.uk). I have also found Dalcroze (*Eurhythmics: Art and Education*, 1930) and Froseth's methods (*GIA Publications, Inc.*) helpful.

Here are a few suggestions on how to teach the scale of C major on a piano using MST techniques. I always try to combine the auditory and kinaesthetic senses. It sometimes helps if pupils hear themselves say aloud what they need to learn, re-enforcing this by feeling their fingers where possible.

These exercises can be adapted for instruments other than the piano. If you are teaching the flute let the student see, hear and feel, the fingering on the pads, if the trumpet, the position on the valves, the violin, the fingering on the strings.

Auditory

- Sing to 'la' the C major scale with the student, making it more fun by providing a chordal accompaniment (if possible). You could sing it fast then slowly, louder then softer.
- Sing the ascending scale again **for the student to listen to**, using the letter names C D E F G A B C, and then sing them descending while the student follows the progress on the keyboard.
- Sing the scale again to the student but this time using the finger numbers 123 12345 etc. as you sing up and down.
- Play the intervals of a major 2nd and a semi-tone. Help the student aurally identify these intervals within the scale.

Visual

- Provide the student with a picture of the keyboard with the finger numbers of the scale on it. *Scale Shapes for Piano by Frederick Stocken (Chester Music, 2003)* gives illustrations of many piano scales using this method. N.B. Some students do not think in terms of finger numbers: if this is the case, try another way.
- Show the student the scale written out as notes on the staff.
- Get the student to look at the keyboard and see the shape of the scale in relation to the white and black notes.
- Can you help the student come up with any picture that helps them remember that this is a scale where all the notes are natural (white on a piano). I have a student who always remembers the D major scale as the one with Fish and Chips in – the Fish representing F sharp and Chips reminding them of the C sharp.

Kinaesthetic

To help dyslexic students identify finger numbers I use the crab-walking exercise devised by Sheila Oglethorpe can be found on page 86 of her book (Crab walking using the whole keyboard, Figure 5.11 *Instrumental Music for Dyslexics: A Teaching Handbook by Sheila Oglethorpe, Whurr, 1996*). This identification is essential before any scale can be learnt.

- Invite the student to use the right hand and depress the first three notes of the scale (notes CDE) together on the keyboard, then place the thumb on F and depress the next four notes with fingers 1234 (notes FGAB) – ascending up the keyboard.

- Get the student to close their eyes and feel the fingering of the scale.
- Ask the student using their right hand to put finger 3 on the E and then tuck their thumb under onto the F.

Other helpful techniques, materials and methods when teaching dyslexic students

Pattern

I once had a dyslexic student who could only remember telephone numbers by the pattern that appeared on the keypad, being unable to memorise the numbers themselves. I noticed pattern as being important to many of my dyslexic students. They wouldn't necessarily read individual notes, but rather shapes as they appeared on the music. Pointing out pattern – both melodic and rhythmic – can help to decipher the music; it simplifies things. Ask questions such as: Can you see any rhythms in the music that keep appearing? Shall we clap them? Are there any scales, arpeggio or broken chord patterns in the music? I often invite students to silently choreograph the notes on the keys, feeling the pattern under the fingers as they do so. Sometimes in a piece of music there are only a few bars to learn as many bars are repeated. Don't presume that the student has noticed these: point them out.

Colour

I specifically mention colour as a tool as it has been widely used with dyslexic students by music educationalists. I use colour in my teaching in the following ways. I have three different colour highlighter pens – one colour which I use to highlight sharps, another for flats and finally one for naturals. I also colour-code repeated bars in music for easy recognition. Dynamics again can be helpfully identified in this way. Note reading can also be taught using colour. The colour staff system of notation devised by Margaret Hubicki relates each note to the colour of the rainbow in a cyclical way. Teachers can read about this useful tool for teaching note reading in *Music and Dyslexia: Opening New Doors* edited by Tim Miles and John Westcombe (Whurr, 2001). You may be able to adapt some of the principles for your own students.

Recorded music and demonstration

One of the main focuses of the Suzuki method (developed by Shinichi Suzuki in the 1960s) is to learn to play a piece of music by listening to it, as babies learn to speak by hearing their mother speak. I remember a dyslexic friend explaining how he began to fall behind in science when the teacher changed. He realised that the first teacher *spoke* every word he wrote on the board: the second teacher merely wrote on the board. It was this auditory reinforcement that helped him to understand. We can do this so easily with music by providing recordings of the music to be played and regularly demonstrating phrases and passages in the lesson. Whilst listening to the music, use a finger to follow the line (shape) of the music on the page.

Some final thoughts

No two students are ever the same, and in particular no two dyslexic students. All students both dyslexic and non-dyslexic have strengths. As teachers we need to seek

out these strengths and use this information to aid learning. Working with dyslexic students is a wonderful opportunity to develop creativity in your teaching while also gaining a greater understanding of how all your students learn. It is a great privilege to work with dyslexic students.

Here are some more general hints and tips for teaching dyslexic students:

- Teach in a multi-sensory way and use colour, pattern and music recordings to aid your teaching if helpful to the student.
- Be aware that dyslexic students may confuse left and right. Avoid using these terms: find other ways.
- Sensitively encourage students to say things out loud what they need to learn. This is a good way to check their understanding.
- Produce well-structured lessons. It helps to use a regular format so that the student knows in what order you do things.
- Watch the body language to see if “Yes I understand” really means “No I don’t but I don’t want to say”. Test the understanding without challenging the student and then teach the concept in another way.
- Always OVER-TEACH information. Poor short-term memory is a particular weakness for dyslexic students. Use mnemonics if they help.
- Beware of sequencing problems. Many dyslexic students can find it difficult to sequence note names backwards.
- Build the student’s self-esteem: focus on strengths.
- Do not speak too much or too fast, and try to use short sentences.
- If the dyslexic student complains about the notes dancing, produce enlarged or simplified copies of the music, try covering the music with coloured acetate, or copy the music onto coloured paper.
- Set realistic goals and ensure all results are rewarded.
- Help with personal organisation. Try highlighting things to be practised by putting a small bookmark in the music, with no more than three things to practise listed on it. Even better, use pictures.
- Work in partnership with the parent.
- Be flexible and persistent. If something isn’t successful, keep on trying new things.