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Dyspraxia in the Workshop

Dyspraxia is a developmental coordination learning disorder. Little is known about how dyspraxia influences artists and craft practitioners. This research explores the impact dyspraxia has on applied artists, specifically those working with materiality, and their craft practices. Silversmithing, textiles and ceramics involve complex skills and the organisation of combinations of processes, tools and physical approaches so therefore it is particularly interesting to study dyspraxia within applied arts.

The research is a qualitative study, carried out in the form of in depth case studies. It comprises of an autoethnographic case study along side six case studies with adult craft practitioners with a formal diagnosis of dyspraxia. Participants are Silversmithing, Textiles and Ceramic MA students at the Royal College of Art. Ages range from 25-65 across both sexes and world nationalities. Case studies are conducted with attention to detail and a holistic approach to the individual's life history together with exploring how dyspraxic traits and abilities have had an impact on their craft practices.

Early findings suggest that motor difficulties such as the regulation and sustaining of grip pressure, tool accuracy, body awareness and posture control may lead to difficulty with some workshop practices and a choice to use machine processes when complete accuracy is required. Additional difficulties with executive function can result in over compensatory or avoidance coping mechanisms that have been reported by participants as potentially counter-productive to their overall creative process. The research also investigates the role of making as a method of thinking; a way to manage executive function otherwise difficult to access. Such functions include working memory and the processing and organization of information in a healthy way. As most participants were diagnosed at post graduate level, some innovative self-developed coping strategies have facilitated great professional success by using their neurological divergence to their advantage. Investigating these innovations and strategies may offer vital information on alternative approaches for conquering difficulties that affect adults with dyspraxia, and utilising potential aptitude.

This research, which is a work in progress, will contribute to knowledge of dyspraxia and provide insight into it's bearing on the applied arts. It can also be applied to dyspraxia in adulthood in general, helping to identify which dyspraxia traits are continuing to effect functionality into adult life and when perceptual differences may be advantageous in craft practices. I hope that the research will provide more data to contribute to advancements in supporting children and adults with dyspraxia, especially but not solely in art and design. I am approaching this research from the perspective of a professional silversmith with dyspraxia.