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# allan's blog - Agile & Digital Business

I help companies and teams that create software.

Monday, December 22, 2014

## Dyslexia makes me stronger: Is Agile dyslexic?

*I'm signing off from 2014 with a rather personal blog post, perhaps my most personal ever, that also means it is a little long, sorry about this, Happy Christmas, please leave all the comments you wish...*

Have you ever read, or seen, Macbeth? Towards the end of the play he is battling MacDuff, but Macbeth is convinced he will win because the witches told him "No man born of woman can harm Macbeth" and obviously MacDuff is a man born of woman isn't he?

Except, MacDuff was torn from his mothers womb, what we call a caesarian birth these days. MacDuff is not like other men, not necessarily better or worse, just different, and that difference means he can kill Macbeth, which he does.

I feel like that about my dyslexia. OK, when I'm feeling arrogant I might actually feel it makes me superior but most of the time just different.

(Regular readers won't be surprised to learn this, they've put up with my misspellings, poor grammar and abusive treatment of the English language for years!)

I'm not a professional dyslexic, I rarely mention it, I'm just a professional who happens to be dyslexic. [Beth Anders-Beck](#) widely circulated post earlier this year got me thinking about this again. And a few weeks ago I attended a meeting at my son's schools about dyslexia that me reminded of the advantages I think dyslexia has given me. (I was probably the only parent in the room hoping his child had dyslexia.)

Dyslexia does mean I learned things differently. Like MacDuff, my difference might not be obvious but it is there.

I spent four years outside of mainstream schools, mostly in two different special schools.

I learned to read three times. Really, I had to learn to read English three times in three different ways.

But I think all of this made me stronger.

Depending on who you read dyslexics think more holistically, what we might call "systems thinking", dyslexics are more creative, dyslexics are more lateral thinkers, dyslexics are more visual. Not everyone - there are different forms of dyslexia - but some people in some ways.

So what has this to do with Agile?

Well, it strikes me that many of the things we do in Agile software development parallel the way I was taught by specialist teachers and the ways I found to overcome my dyslexia.

For example: Dyslexics are usually more visual thinkers than average. In Agile we use the "visual management techniques" such as task boards, physical cards and progress graphs to track our work. In my special schools we used lots of illustrations, I remember constructing a giant "bed" to help me remember b and d.

When I was learning to spell one of my teachers gave us difficult spellings "Blue Meanies" and "Green Meanies" (yes, she was a Beatles fan) on pieces of card. And now I colour code work on team boards - see my full description in [Blue-White-Red](#) or [Xanpan](#).

Dyslexics aren't do good with the written word - although I'm not one of those who see the letters swirling around - and so we prefer verbal and visual communication. Doesn't that sound familiar? - stand up meetings and "placeholders for a conversation."

Dyslexics have learning problems centred on symbols there are some who think that before the written word, before the printing press, dyslexics gave their communities and advantage. Sure writing a program involves manipulating symbols but its more about thinking, perhaps abstractly, perhaps holistically, when I'm programming objects I see the objects in my mind, I see them fitting together.

I could go on but I think you get the point.

Here is my first point: many of the techniques which help dyslexics have parallels in the way we do Agile software development.

In the same way that I approach learning - specifically reading and writing - differently to most of the population I increasingly see my approach to organizing and managing software development differently to most of the population. After all, as I have long argued, software development is a learning exercise.

### Contributors

- Allan Kelly
- [allankelly2015](#)

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- Xanpan
- Little Book of User Stories
- Business Patterns
- Changing Software Development
- Agile Reader

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TechCityCoffee: 25 July 2017  
2pm-4.30pm at Near Old Street Roundabout

**Evolving Project Management for the Digital Age**  
Unicom: 21 September at London

**Planning for Value**  
Private: 15 September at Oxford

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Which brings us to point two.

What is good for dyslexics is usually good for non-dyslexics too. Techniques and changes which help dyslexics actually help non-dyslexics too. Dyslexics have difficulty when presented with teaching techniques that work for the majority of the population but the reverse is not true. Teaching techniques which are good for dyslexics are good - perhaps better - for the majority of the population.

When I first encountered the techniques which are now called "Agile" it was on challenged development efforts. Those of us undertaking the work found a better ways of working, the standard approaches weren't effective; but the techniques we found happen to work well for the vast majority of development work.

To be clear: Techniques which help troubled development work happen more effectively actually help all development work - troubled or not.

I think one of the ways these techniques work is by lowering the cognitive load we all experience. When the load is lowered we can focus more clearly. A physical task board needs very little mental processing. Traditional status reports are pretty meaningless to me.

With a Blue Meanie spelling there was no question about what word you had to learn. It was written on a small piece of card. Cognitive load was lowered.

And third...

One of the ways dyslexics learn to cope is by developing their own learning strategies.

When a non-dyslexic person goes to school they learn like everyone else. They learn the same techniques as everyone else. They are given the learning strategies.

Most of these strategies don't work for dyslexics. When a dyslexic person goes to school they need to learn how to learn. They need to find and invent their own learning strategies and they need to learn to improve their own learning experience. Unfortunately many dyslexics fail at this step and have reading and writing problems throughout their life. But those who master these issues can be very successful.

Think about this in a work context: if you work somewhere where everything works then great, it works.

But if you work somewhere where things are difficult and you need to come up with a new strategy, a new approach, well, how much practice have you had?

I've been practicing since I was six.

In fact dyslexic people can be so good at this that they over compensate. For example many of my closest friends and family consider me a very organised person. I don't. I think I am a very disorganised person - my form of dyslexia means I have a poor short term memory. In addressing this problem I over compensate, the strategies I have come up with for overcoming my disorganisation make me far more organised than many others. (One way is to over use my long term memory).

The thing is: software development and dyslexia are all about learning.

Software development is all about learning - we learn about technology, we learn about the domain we are working in and we learn about the process. Software development is best done when done in a learning organization environment. (Remember, I wrote a book on this).

If you believe writers like Arie de Geus this is true of all business: **"We understand that the only competitive advantage the company of the future will have is its managers' ability to learn faster than then their competitors."**

In my experience, most organizations are poor at learning. I have heard it said that: "Companies suffer from dyslexia." Only someone who doesn't appreciate the advantages of dyslexic might say that. Companies may well have from a collection of learning approaches which kind of work most of the time for most of the people, techniques that have been handed down without much thought. But those learning techniques are the problem.

Many companies do suffer from learning disabilities but they don't suffer from dyslexia. What these companies need is a good dose of dyslexia to help them get better. They need to learn to learn. They need new learning strategies.

Right now the closest thing we have to dyslexia and new learning strategies for companies are some Theory-Y ideas of which Agile and [Beyond Budgeting](#) are the most prominent.

Posted by Allan Kelly at 5:06 pm



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**Anna Filina**  
@afilina

Pro tip: if your method is 225 lines long, then you should probably refactor your code ASAP. I frown at methods over 50 lines.

18h

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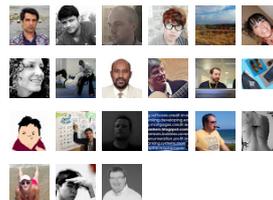
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Allan Kelly 2 years ago - Shared publicly

Ironically, given the topic of this post Richard Howells pointed out a mistake in the above text (which I'm about to fix). In the original version on sentence read:

"I could go one but I think you get the point."

+2 Reply



Heather Hagg 2 years ago - Shared publicly

Great post! I'm a systems engineer and the mom to a teenage son with dyslexia. I've definitely seen the innate ability to detect systems and patterns with my son. I hadn't considered the similarities between the methods that he uses to compensate for the dyslexia and Agile and other approaches to reduce cognitive burden. I think your assessment about how/why these approaches might benefit the larger population is

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