

Visual thinking

Many talented creative thinkers find it difficult to express themselves through conventional methods of communication. Oliver West is one of them.

A Falmouth graduate, Oliver is now an internationally recognised landscape artist. He is also classed as a chronic dyslexic. "I went to nine or so schools, perhaps because teachers didn't know how to support my learning style," he recalls.

Many Falmouth students share dyslexic tendencies. Highly creative people with strong visual imaginations often do and are drawn to Falmouth because of the support that is offered. All first-year students are offered screening when they arrive, and having Oliver to help them overcome the traditional requirements of an academic course is a huge added bonus – especially as he is an international leader in his field.

Oliver's personal experiences have informed his unique approach to supporting others. His expertise is sought by international schools and specialist equipment manufacturers, and he has spearheaded a radical new approach through visual thinking. (A Visual Thinking conference was held at Falmouth in 2003; the next one is planned to take place in Geneva in 2007.)

According to Oliver, some people struggle with reading and writing because their brains deal with a lot of different information all at once instead of in a logical order. So he uses visual thinking strategies, where students draw pictures that encapsulate information instead of writing words. This helps them clarify their thought processes before 'translating' them into the conventional forms of communication that are necessary in an academic environment.

Oliver lectures on Falmouth's courses about visual thinking. "Often students come up to me and say, 'You could have been talking about me! What do we do now?' So I tell them to book a tutorial with me, and we take it from there. Some of them have one tutorial and it's enough to see them through their degree, while there are others who need tutorials every week. I've been tutoring one student to the point where she now has a new language that works for her in a personal way. She can quantify how much a picture is worth; one picture might represent 30 words or 3,000 words."

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I created a font out of my own handwriting to help me. What works for you?
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Oliver's techniques also help improve short-term memory, concentration skills, time management and note-taking in lectures.

A lot of people talk about thinking in visual terms, but very few, if any, are working within an educational environment in the way that Oliver does. "Every now and then people from the international community say they've never heard of anything like the way that I do things," he says. Maybe not – but it certainly appears to be working.

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a picture says
a thousand
words

