A Novel Way to Develop Policy and Practice

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Abstract. *In this paper I explore the relevance to Q methodology of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), the Russian philosopher and literary theorist whose concept of human language emphasised the interrelationship of all utterances, and a value-governed experiencing of the world from a multiplicity of unique perspectives. Bakhtin theorised novelistic discourse as a polyphony of contesting voices, with an interacting diversity of characters' voices valued over a monologic authorial voice. This preference for heteroglossia over monoglossia has not only an aesthetic but also an ethical dimension, with wider implications beyond literature for our individual lives and public society. Bakhtin emphasised the plural nature of subjectivity and the development of meaning and understanding through the interplay of multiple voices. This developmental process requires respect for the voice and values of, and an answerable attitude toward, the other. I consider the theoretical underpinnings of Bahktin's work in relation to that of William Stephenson and describe how Bakhtin's concepts and related sociocultural theory might be combined with Q methodology to develop more ethical, democratic and efficacious policy and practice in a range of contexts. I explore and illustrate these developmental possibilities at a range of levels with reference to a Q study on policy and practice (Deignan, 2012) that I carried out in the UK higher education sector.*

Introduction

The title of this paper alludes to the polyphonic theory of novelistic discourse developed by Bahktin, its relevance to Q methodology and activity theory, and the potential for their combined application in research aimed at improving policy and practice by modelling the complexity of individual contexts and using multiple perspectives to improve system performance. By way of background, I will first outline briefly my own introduction to Q methodology and to activity theory before going on to describe the origins and development of activity theory and what I believe to be its complementarities in relation to Q methodology. I will then consider the significance of Bahktin to activity theory and to Q methodology. Finally, I shall illustrate the application

of an approach combining activity theory and Q methodology, informed by Bahktinian concepts and analysis, with reference to a study on dyslexia support in a UK university context (Deignan, 2012).

I first encountered Q methodology during my doctoral research at the University of Manchester. I was looking for ways of modelling the views of students and staff in relation to policy and practice issues in the post-compulsory education sector, where I had been working in colleges of further education as a tutor and a manager in learning support. Doing this work, I had experienced various policies and interventions, which I felt did not often respect the complexity of teaching and learning. Like many of my colleagues and students, I felt that interventions were often ill-conceived and had unintended consequences which could have a negative impact on end-users. Such problems, resulting from misunderstanding contexts and learners' needs, occurred at a range of levels from top-down government interventions to micro-level interventions involving relationships between individual educators and students.

I wanted in my doctoral research to theorise a better way of developing policy and practice that could benefit more effectively all the stakeholders involved. I felt it important that policy-makers, educators, and students should be answerable to each other. I wanted an approach that had an ethical element to it, which acknowledged, respected and incorporated the diverse views of stakeholders, actively using them to enhance system performance in a collaborative way. This motivation, and the contextual circumstances of my research at Manchester, eventually led me to combine Q methodology with activity theory, and with Bahktinian concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia. My first doctoral supervisor, Professor David Reid, who was nearing retirement, first mentioned Q methodology to me as a possible research tool (Reid, 1999). At Manchester, there was also a group of academics who used sociocultural theory, which led to my introduction to activity theory through another supervisor, Professor Julian Williams (Williams, Davis & Black, 2007). It seemed to me that combining activity theory with Q methodology, supported by Bahktinian concepts relating to philosophy of language, would enable me to theorise the interplay of activity and subjectivity, and to develop a research framework which would give multiple perspectives and diverse values a central role in the development of policy and practice in education systems.

The Development of Activity Theory

A sociocultural view of learning, according to Sawyer (2002), argues that 'the individual learner cannot be meaningfully separated from the social and cultural context of learning' (p. 283). Wertsch (1991) comments that 'the basic goal of a sociocultural approach to mind is to create an

account of human mental processes that recognises the essential relationship between these processes and their cultural, historical and, and institutional settings' (p. 6). Wertsch (1991, p. 8) stresses that in this approach, 'what is to be described and explained is human *action*'. Understanding subjectivity is particularly significant in sociocultural research. Lave and Wenger (1991) describe multiple viewpoints as a characteristic feature of participation in a community of practice, where 'objective forms and systems of activity, on the one hand, and agents' subjective and intersubjective understandings of them, on the other, mutually constitute both the world and its experienced forms' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 113, 51).

Stetsenko (2005, p. 70) comments that 'cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is one among a number of approaches that move away from the individualist and mentalist notions of human development, toward viewing it as embedded within sociocultural contexts and intrinsically interwoven with them'. In this approach, development, activity, and context are inseparable. 'Contexts', as defined by Engeström (1993, p. 67), 'are activity systems. An activity system integrates the subject, the object, and the instruments (material tools as well as signs and symbols) into a unified whole'. With regard to such instruments, Engeström (1999, p. 29) notes the central role of mediation in activity theory and cites Wartofsky's (1979, p. 205) view that, 'the *artefact* is to cultural evolution what the *gene* is to biological evolution'. From an activity theory perspective, Stetsenko (2005, p. 72) points out that 'one of the central pillars of CHAT . . . is the idea that human development is based on active transformations of existing environments and creation of new ones achieved through collaborative processes of producing and deploying tools'.

Nardi (1996, p. 7) describes how the cultural–historical research tradition 'originated in Soviet psychology in the 1920s, and 'today is commonly called activity theory'; she describes it as 'a research framework and set of perspectives', and emphasises that in their research, 'activity theorists from the outset have addressed practical needs'. Engeström (1993, p. 64) states that activity theory is grounded in the notion that human beings use tools to work on an object, or problem space, in order to achieve a desired outcome. Engeström (2001) describes how activity theory has evolved through three generations of research. The first generation of research centred around Vygotsky's (1978) idea of mediated action. Engeström (2001, p. 4) describes how Vygotsky's basic triangular model, shown in Figure 1, transcended the conditioned model of stimulus (S) and response (R) by inserting cultural artefacts (X) into human actions.

Engeström (2001, p. 4) argues that Vygotsky's development was revolutionary as 'the basic unit of analysis now overcame the split

Figure 1: Cultural Artefacts in Human Actions

Mediating artefact

S

R

X

Subject
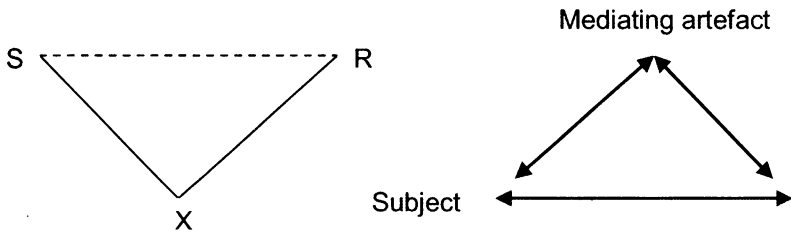
(Source: Engeström, 2001, p. 4)

between the Cartesian individual and the untouchable societal structure. The individual could no longer be understood without his or her cultural means; and the society could no longer be understood without the agency of individuals who use and produce artefacts. . . Objects became cultural entities and the object-orientedness of action became the key to understanding the human psyche'. Also in this regard, Packer (2008, p. 24) comments that Vygotsky, 'reworked reflex theory to overcome the distinction between subjectivity and behaviour'.

Engeström (2001) notes that while Vygotsky had thus reunited the individual and society, his unit of analysis remained focused at the level of the individual. The second generation of activity theorists, centred around Leont'ev (1981), then expanded Vygotsky's original model. Leont'ev, according to Engeström (2001, p. 4), 'explicated the crucial difference between an individual action and a collective activity' through his analysis of a primeval collective hunt. While this example of the concept of activity as depicted in the hunt (see Leont'ev, 1981, pp. 210–213) highlights the complex interactions and relationships between the individual and the community, Engeström notes that Leont'ev never actually depicted this expanded model of the Vygotskyan activity system in a graphic form. Engeström (2001, p. 5) however, did expand it graphically, as shown below. In the original diagram, of which Figure 2 is a slightly simplified adaptation, Engeström places arrowheads at the ends of the lines which connect the different elements of the activity system. The arrowheads emphasise the dynamic nature of the inter-relationships between the elements of the system.

Engeström (2000, p. 964) emphasises the importance of the object in the activity system. He describes how 'a collective activity system is driven by deeply communal motives. The motive is embedded in the object of the activity'. Engeström (1993) suggests that the object in activity theory functions as the 'problem space' at which the activity is directed, and that (2001, p. 5) 'object-oriented actions are always, explicitly or implicitly, characterised by ambiguity, surprise, interpretation, sense making, and potential for change'. Foot (2002, pp. 132–133), also highlighting the centrality of the object in activity theory,

Figure 2: The Structure of a Human Activity System

Tools

Object

Sense

Subject

Outcome

Meaning

Rules   Community   Division
of
Labour
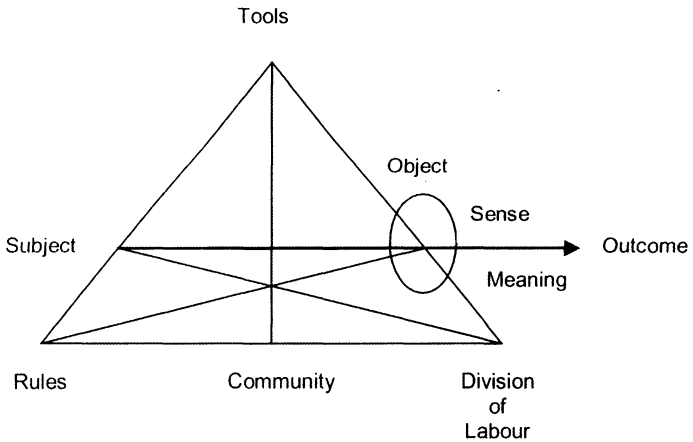
(Based on Engeström, 2001, p. 5)

draws on Leont'ev's (1978) work to argue that human activity is prompted by, motivated by, and oriented towards its particular object. Foot (2002, p. 132) cites Engeström's (1999) view that the motivating force of the object shapes and directs the activity, determining the 'horizon of possible actions', and suggests that 'understanding of an activity system hinges on understanding its object'. Foot (2002, p. 148) encourages the researcher to focus on the desired outcomes of the activity system, suggesting that

> the most illuminating questions a researcher in pursuit of object understanding can ask are toward what is the collective activity oriented, and what is energizing it? The 'catches' in the form of manifested object-concepts, though partial and transitory, are worth the pursuit.

The difficulty, or paradox, of attempting to capture the quarry lies, she suggests (2002, p. 132), in the fact that because it is 'an ever-evolving object that is simultaneously material and ideal', it is in principle, 'uncatchable'. However, although the pursuit of the object may appear to be a wild goose chase, Foot (2002, p. 132) argues that, in fact, 'an activity system's object can be identified through the varying perspectives of multiple participants in an activity system'. This can be achieved 'by "catching" facets of the object as it is conceived of and engaged by the participants in an activity system through empirical research'.

Engeström (1999) also emphasises the importance of analysing internal 'contradictions' within an activity system. Kangasoja (2002, p. 200) describes contradictions as
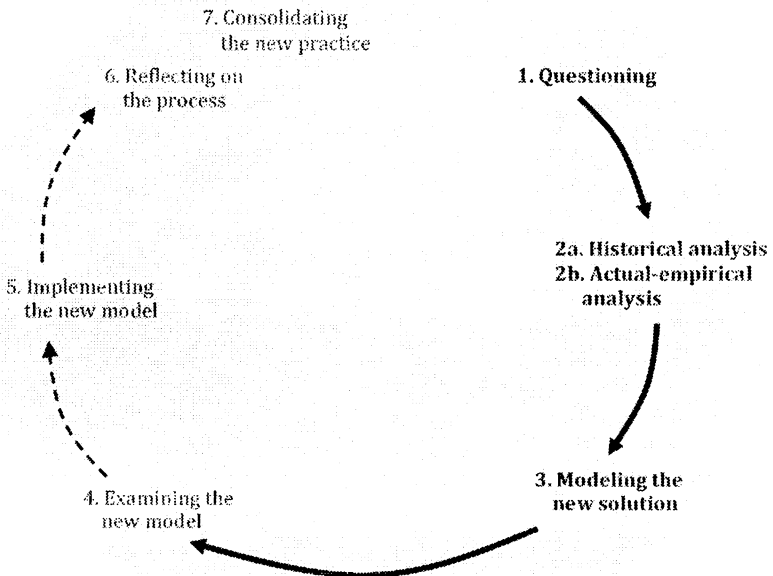
> the driving force of development. They are manifest in the daily

practices as breakdowns, tensions, ruptures and innovations. They call for reworking, both conceptually and very concretely, the objects and motives that sustain the activity, and for remediating the activity system by way of improving and inventing new tools.

Engeström (2001) uses icons resembling lightning bolts in the triangle graphics to indicate potential 'contradictions' within and between the elements (refer Figure 7, below, p. 116).

A further concept in Engeström's activity theory is that of 'expansive learning' (see Figure 3). Engeström (2010, p. 1) uses the term to describe 'learning in which the learners are involved in constructing and implementing a radically new, wider and more complex object and concept for their activity'. Engeström (2010. p. 7) notes that, 'expansive learning leads to the formation of a new, expanded object and pattern of activity oriented to the object'.

Figure 3: Expansive Cycle of Learning Actions

7. Consolidating the new practice

6. Reflecting on the process

1. Questioning

2a. Historical analysis
2b. Actual-empirical analysis

5. Implementing the new model

3. Modeling the new solution

4. Examining the new model

(Based on Engeström, 2000, p. 970)

Engeström (1999, pp. 34–35) emphasises that any decisions to eliminate internal contradictions must be made within the expansive cycle of an

activity system, which 'may be seen as the equivalent of the zone of proximal development. . . and any model for the future that does not address and eliminate those contradictions will eventually turn out to be nonexpansive'. Engeström (1999, p. 35) characterises an activity system and its expansive cycle as follows: 'an activity system is by definition a multi-voiced formation. An expansive cycle is a reorchestration of those voices, of the different viewpoints and approaches of the various participants'.

Engeström (2008, p. 6) describes how third generation activity theory 'built on the idea of multiple interacting activity systems focused on a partially shared object'. He notes (2001, p. 6) that 'in this mode of research, the basic model is expanded to include minimally two interacting activity systems', and suggests that 'it might be useful to try to look at the society more as a multi-layered network of interconnected activity systems and less as a pyramid of rigid structures dependent on a single center of power' (1999, p. 36). With regard to Figure 4, Engeström (2001, p. 6) explains how

> the object moves from an initial state of unreflected, situationally given 'raw material' (object 1) . . . to a collectively meaningful object constructed by the activity system (object 2) . . . and to a potentially shared or jointly constructed object (object 3). The object of activity is a moving target, not reducible to conscious short-term goals.

Figure 4: Two Interacting Activity Systems as Minimal Model for the Third Generation of Activity Theory

(Source: Engeström, 2001, p. 6)
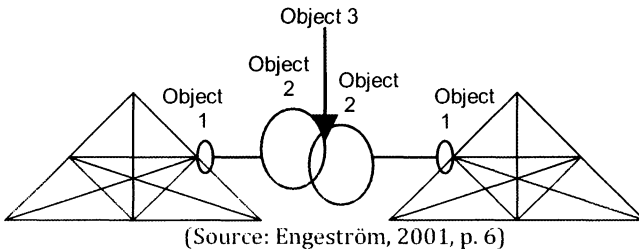
The third generation of activity theory, according to Engeström (2008, p. 8), 'tackles issues of subjectivity, experiencing, personal sense, emotion, embodiment, identity, and moral commitment'. Describing the international growth of activity theory research in recent years, Engeström (2001, p. 6) explains how this has led to a challenge for the third generation of activity theory research, which 'needs to develop conceptual tools to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems'.

While Engeström (2000) emphasises the importance of making manifest the multi-voicedness inherent in a collectively constructed activity system, he acknowledges that a methodological approach for analysing the diverse perspectives involved has been lacking. Similarly, Roth, Tobin, Elmesky, Carambo, McKnight and Beers (2004) suggest that subjectivity is an important but overlooked feature of activity-theoretic studies, and emphasise the importance of a better understanding of subjective realities in activity systems. Likewise, Billett (2006, p. 11) has criticised

> theories of thinking and acting (i.e., learning) that emphasize the social contributions to human cognition, yet in which the position of the subject is denied, minimized or otherwise underplayed, such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), activity systems (Engeström, 1993) and distributed cognition. (Salomon, 1997)

More recently, Engeström (2010, p. 18) has acknowledged criticism by Langemeyer (2006) of 'a certain neglect of the subjective problematic' in activity theory, to which acknowledgement he adds that, 'switching between the perspective of the subject and systemic perspective is foundational . . . the switching is aimed at transcending the dichotomy between the subject and the system'.

Activity Theory and Q Methodology

In summary, with regard to activity and subjectivity, there appears to be a significant scholarship gap in that subjectivity has been under-theorised in the activity theory literature. I suggest that there is a role here for Q methodology to support and complement activity theory research. A blend of activity theory and Q methodology (see also Deignan 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) is depicted graphically in Figure 5. The single triangle and oval shape represent an activity system and its object, while the elliptical shapes represent the diversity of perspectives within an activity system which may be modelled and interpreted using Q methodology. Alongside is a pair of interacting activity systems. Seen from multiple subject perspectives, the problem space may be constructed differently. The perspectives may include contextual understandings and desired outcomes which are not necessarily sympathetic to each other. Q methodology provides a method to interpret diverse perspectives within and between activity systems and to escape current contradictions. An approach using Q methodology and activity theory may help to build consensus by co-producing a shared object for all partners to work on and by designing shared values into the tools used by stakeholders to work on the object (Figure 6).

In relation to blending Q methodology and activity theory, the rationale for systems development that is multi-voiced and values-respecting may be extended further by drawing on the work of the
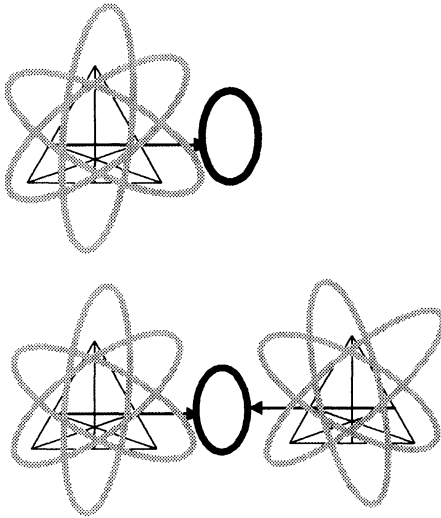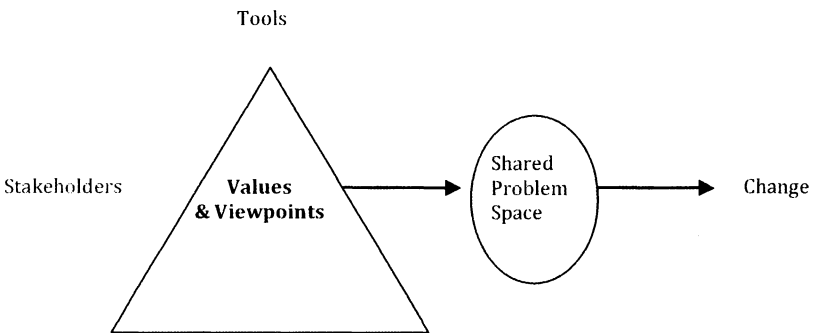
Figure 5: Activity and Subjectivity

Figure 6: Satisfying Different Stakeholder Needs by Designing Shared Values into the Activity System

Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975). Engeström (2008, p. 8) comments that Bakhtin's 'concepts of social language and voice may be seen as complementary to the concept of activity'. Also of significance, in relation to language and consciousness, Collins (2000, p. 62) suggests that the work of Leont'ev can be used to 'further extend the existing degree of commonality' between Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Akhutina (2003, p. 8) also notes 'the similarity of their

general theoretical frameworks' in that 'both start with ideas about the social nature of the human psyche and how it is mediated by signs'. Bakhtin emphasises the importance of dialogue in a developmental context. Gurevitch (2000, p. 243) describes Bakhtinian *dialogism* as employing 'alternative perspectives, polyphony and the crucial position of the Other for making sense of the world'. Emerson (1983, p. 248) describes how, for Bakhtin, 'every act of understanding involves an act of translation and a negotiation of values. It is essentially a phenomenon of interrelation and interaction'. Todorov (1998, p. x) explains that for Bakhtin 'the most important feature of the utterance' is its 'intertextual dimension'; dialogism is used 'to designate the relation of every utterance to other utterances' (Todorov, 1998, p. 60). Cheyne and Tarulli (1999, p. 11) describe dialogism as 'a way of thinking about ourselves and the world that always accepts non-coincidence of stance, understanding and consciousness.'

Operationalising the Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia and answerability may further support the use of Q methodology in combination with activity theory to develop more democratic and efficacious policy and practice in a range of contexts. Holquist (1990, p. 50) notes that Bakhtin's 'dialogism is very close to the thought of C.S. Peirce' and particularly in relation to 'what Bakhtin calls the science of ideologies, the study of differential relations between "I" and others'. Stephenson, Q methodology's originator, drew on Peirce to emphasise the importance of subjective feeling in the formation of meaning and the importance of this process in Q technique, where 'feeling is primordial, and primarily bifurcated into positive and negative' (1980, p.9). Brown (1993–1994, p. 46) similarly emphasises that 'feelings, not facts, are at issue'. Again consistent with this affective aspect, Bakhtin (1993, p. 74) speaks of 'two value-centers that are fundamentally and essentially different, yet are correlated with each other: myself and the other'. In fact, the correlation of individual values and meanings, as modelled in participants' Q sorts, is central to Q methodology. This modelling of diverse value and belief perspectives in turn resonates strongly with Bakhtin's concept of novelistic discourse, which aims 'to provide . . . a representation, a description of the actual, concrete architectonic of value-governed experiencing of the world . . . the whole topos of values, the whole architectonic of seeing' (1993:61–62).

Holquist (1998, p. xviii) describes Bakhtin's concept of language as involving a 'sense of opposition and struggle at the heart of existence, a ceaseless battle . . . present in culture as well as in nature, and in the specificity of individual consciousness'. These tensions are relevant to Vygotskyian perspectives on pedagogy and to activity theory. For example, Wegerif (2008, pp. 352–353) comments that 'a dialogic perspective argues that education more generally takes place within

dialogic human relationships in which students learn to see things from at least two perspectives at once, their own point of view and that of their teacher'. While there is no evidence that Bakhtin and Vygotsky ever met, Emerson (1983, p. 251) suggests that the two 'intersect . . . in the ultimate implications of their thought', and that Vygotsky 'can be read as an important predecessor and perhaps even as clinical underpinning to Bahktin's philosophy of language'.

Bakhtin theorised novelistic discourse as a polyphony of contesting voices, with an interacting diversity of characters' voices valued over a monologic authorial voice. Emerson (1983, p. 259) describes how Bakhtin valorised Dostoevsky as an exemplar of this approach, as being responsible for a 'Copernican revolution' in which 'the author is no longer the creator around whom characters are forced to revolve but is, so to speak, himself but a planet among planets'. Bakhtin's preference for heteroglossia over monoglossia has not only an aesthetic but also an ethical dimension, with wider implications beyond literature for our individual lives and public society. For example, Morris (1997, p. 15) contrasts the 'centrifugal force—the force of heteroglossia' with the 'centripetal force in discourse', which 'is put to use by any dominant social group to impose its own monologic, unitary perceptions of truth'.

Crucially here, monologue, according to Bakhtin (cited in Todorov 1998, p. 107) is 'deaf to the other's response; it does not await it and does not grant it any *decisive* force . . . . Monologue pretends to be the *last word*'. By contrast, Bakhtin emphasised the plural nature of subjectivity and the development of meaning and understanding through the interplay of multiple voices—a developmental process which requires respect for the voice and values of, and an answerable attitude toward, the other. Bakhtin (1993, p. 2) speaks of the inescapable nature of the 'never-repeatable uniqueness of actually lived and experienced life' as something which 'denies indifference and demands participation'. For Bakhtin (1993, p. 42) 'the fact of a unique person's being . . . becomes a center of answerability—where I assume answerability for my own uniqueness, for my own being'. Bakhtin (1993, p. 37) assumes 'an emotional–volitional attitude toward a state of affairs in its entirety, in the context of actual unitary and once-occurrent life . . . . It is precisely here that we find the roots of active answerability'. For Bakhtin, (1993, p. 54), all values 'are drawn toward and concentrated around these central emotional–volitional moments: I, the other, and I-for-the-other.' Indeed Bakhtin (1993, p. 13) suggests that, 'once-occurrent uniqueness or singularity cannot be thought of, it can only be participatively experienced or lived through', adding that (1993, p. 28) 'in its answerability, the act . . . unites the moment of what is universal (universally valid) and the moment of what is individual (actual)'. In relation to policy and practice, the concept of answerability appears to

challenge the validity of top-down monologic 'one-size fits all' standardised interventionist approaches to contexts, while simultaneously pointing to solutions beyond their limitations by emphasising context-specific sensitivity. This will be returned to shortly in an illustrative Q study.

Bakhtin's valorisation of the polyphonic novel can be considered in relation to the potential of Q methodology to inform the development of a multi-voiced activity system. Bakhtin (1963, p. 102) describes how Dostoevsky, 'thought not in thoughts but in points of view, consciousness, voices'. The novel, according to Bakhtin (1981, p. 332), 'requires speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language . . . that which makes a novel a novel is the speaking person and his discourse'. Dostoevsky's creation of a fundamentally new novelistic genre is described by Bakhtin (1963, p. 89) as one in which 'a character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word'. Similarly with Q methodology, by completing and subjecting their respective Q sorts to correlational analysis, a university student's voice, for example, may be given the same weight in Q-factor space as that of a government education minister. In this way, stakeholders' views and the logic of their respective beliefs may be included and weighed in the balance in relation to informing decision-making on policy and practice.

Regarding different perspectives, Bakhtin (1993, p. 56) argues that 'life can be consciously comprehended only as an Ongoing Event' and, significantly again in relation to Q methodology, Bakhtin (1993, p. 45) notes that 'the compellently actual "face" of the event is determined for me myself from my own unique place . . . there are as many different worlds of the event as there are individual centers of answerability . . . the emotional–volitional picture of the world, presents itself to me in one way, whereas to someone else in another way'. In fact, for Bakhtin, 'it is not possible to define one's own position without relating it to other positions' (Bakhtin, 1953/1979, p. 271, cited in Akhutina, 2003, p. 4). In this regard, Holland and Lave (2001, p. 16) cite 'Bakhtin's focus on practices and discourses as the means through which we build or tear down boundaries between ourselves and others'. Q methodology, in combination with activity theory and drawing on the Bakhtinian concept of answerability, offers a method to sample the diversity of interacting voices and to render them mutually understandable in their polyphonic complexity. While power is not distributed or held evenly among stakeholders, asymmetries of power may be ameliorated over time through the better identification and pursuit of shared interests in a way which encourages answerability.

Goldman (1999) comments that Bahktin theorised power more so than did William Stephenson. Regarding power, Todorov (1998, pp.

104–105) cites Bakhtin's description of how, in Dostoevsky's novels,

> [W]e have a *plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights, each with its own world*, combining in the unity of an event but nonetheless without fusing . . . The position from which a narrative can be unfolded, a representation constructed, or information given, must be set in a new mode in relation to this new world—not a world of objects but of subjects vested with full rights.

Accordingly, in relation to interacting activity systems, Q methodology and activity theory may be used to sensitise powerful stakeholders to the voices of others. In doing so, exposure to the other may have a moderating and democratising effect, in which, as described by Crowley (2001, p. 180)

> monoglossia is superseded by polyglossia when the self-sufficient language becomes conscious for the first time of otherness. . . once the perception of differences has entered then the self-enclosed Ptolemaic language becomes irreversibly transformed into the open Gallilean set of languages in a variety of relations with one another.

The approach outlined here is also consistent with Fischer's (2003, p. 173) comments on reframing public policy, where 'the analyst needs to identify the multitude of voices and hear their stories, as . . . the metanarrative holds out the possibility of removing or easing the intractable elements of the controversy, thus enabling the discussion to move to new grounds'.
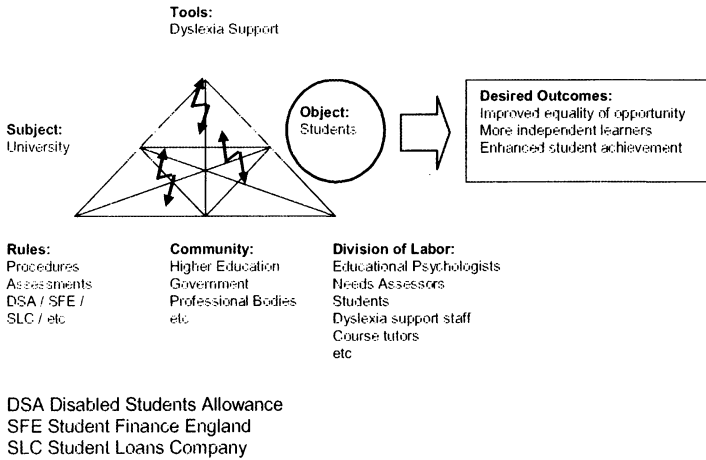
In relation to the polyphonic novel, Morris (1997, p. 89) describes how Dostoevsky, 'centres the whole novel upon the interactive consciousness of the characters'; this ceding of authorial power, 'goes along with a shift of focus from seeing to hearing. Dostoevsky's new novelistic form is a design for discourse; a great dialogue of interacting voices, a polyphony'. Such an approach is consistent with Wenger's (1998) views on harmonizing participation and reification. It is also consistent with Engeström's (1999, p. 35) characterization of an activity system being 'by definition a multi-voiced formation', with an expansive cycle being 'a reorchestration of those voices, of the different viewpoints and approaches of the various participants'. Engeström (1999, 34–35) emphasises that decisions to eliminate internal contradictions must be made within the expansive cycle and that, 'at the level of collective activity systems, such an expansive cycle may be seen as the equivalent of the zone of proximal development, discussed by Vygotsky (1978) at the level of individual learning'. Engeström (2001, p. 138) argues further that 'in important transformations of our personal lives and organizational practices, we must learn new forms of activity which

are not yet there. They are literally learned as they are being created'. Engeström (1999, p. 33) suggests that 'the trajectory of an activity system moving through such an expansive cycle . . . requires reflective appropriation of existing culturally advanced models and tools that offer ways out of the internal contradictions'. One tool which might facilitate this process is Q methodology.

Application: Dyslexia Support

Having pointed to some of the complementarities between Q methodology, activity theory, and Bakhtinian philosophy of language concepts, I will now exemplify the application of this blended approach to systems development with reference to a small-scale exploratory study investigating activity and subjectivity in relation to perspectives on dyslexia support at a university in the north of England. The study (Deignan, 2012) used a combination of activity theory and Q methodology to model activity and subjectivity in relation to dyslexia support. The 32 participants were a mixture of students with dyslexia and their specialist dyslexia support staff. To provide some contextual background, the study took place against a changing national regulatory landscape in relation to dyslexia support. In England, specialist one-to-one tuition for students with dyslexia (until recently called 'study skills' tuition) is funded through the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) (SFE, 2010). From their introduction in the early 1990s until the end of 2008, most DSA applications were processed by the individual student's Local Education Authority (LEA), since renamed as Local Authorities (LAs). A transfer of responsibility occurred with effect from the 2009–2010 funding cycle, when the Student Loan Company (SLC), also known as Student Finance England (SFE), took over the administration of the DSA application process for all Year 1 undergraduate and postgraduate students (NADP, 2009a, p. 3). The study described here was conducted at a time of transition, shortly before responsibility for the administration of DSAs was passed formally from LAs to SFE.

The conceptual framework for the study itself treated specialist one-to-one learning support for university students with dyslexia as activity that is socially situated (Engeström, 1999) and explored the perspectives of the study participants in relation to their communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Accordingly, in Figure 7, the university is shown as a *subject* which uses dyslexia support as an educational *tool* (or mediating artefact) to work on an *object* (students with dyslexia) with the intended *outcome* being improved equality of opportunity, more independent learners, and enhanced student achievement. This object-oriented activity involves a *community* with *rules* and a *division of*

Figure 7: Object-oriented Activity: Dyslexia Support in the University

Tools:
Dyslexia Support

Subject:
University

Object:
Students

Desired Outcomes:
Improved equality of opportunity
More independent learners
Enhanced student achievement

Rules:
Procedures
Assessments
DSA / SFE /
SLC / etc

Community:
Higher Education
Government
Professional Bodies
etc

Division of Labor:
Educational Psychologists
Needs Assessors
Students
Dyslexia support staff
Course tutors
etc

DSA Disabled Students Allowance
SFE Student Finance England
SLC Student Loans Company

(Based on Engeström, 1993)

labour among the various participants.

Procedurally, the research study participants represented their viewpoints by rank ordering (or 'sorting') a 48-statement Q sample on dyslexia support (see Appendix), using a seven-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The Q sample was developed from an initial concourse of diverse views drawn from a wide range of sources including the academic literature, and communications with dyslexic students and other individuals from a range of backgrounds who had personal experience of inclusion policy and dyslexia support in university settings. In selecting the final set of statements, care was taken to ensure that the 48 Q-sample items provided thematic coverage of the different elements of the activity system. Accordingly, statements were selected which related to the subject, tools, object, outcomes, rules, community and division of labour. These relations were not exclusive; individual statements may be related to more than one element, reflecting the dynamic and interconnected nature of the elements in the activity system. Below are some examples the statements which were sorted by the 33 participants in the study:

Students with dyslexia should be seen as having learning differences, not 'learning difficulties'. (Statement 1, relating to the *object*)

Dyslexia support provision should be standardised to meet the needs of all dyslexic students. (Statement 10, relating to the *tools*)

There is a danger of dyslexia support tutors doing their students' work for them. (Statement 36, relating to the division of *labour*)

After completing their Q sorts, the participants were asked to comment on their ranking of the statements, with particular focus on those statements with which they had most strongly agreed and disagreed. Following factor analysis of the Q sorts, using principal components analysis and varimax rotation, four distinct factors, or viewpoints, were interpreted. These four factors are synthetic composites of those Q sorts which loaded significantly on each respective factor. (See Appendix for the factor arrays.) Key differences in emphasis between the four interpreted perspectives are headlined below (see Deignan, 2012, for details).

Factor 1: Dyslexic students are frustrated and isolated—they need unorthodox teaching methods to help them cope

Factor 2: Dyslexic university students have learning difficulties— their study skills need to be good enough to cope on entry to university

Factor 3: Dyslexic students are unprepared for university— course tutors are aware of their needs but don't address them

Factor 4: University does too little for dyslexic students—dyslexia support tutors can do too much

The Q-sort data, when analysed using an activity theory framework, suggested several 'contradictions' or tensions in the activity system. These included issues highlighted within the four factor profiles, and specific issues including the significance of terminological labels relating to dyslexia, the awareness and response of course tutors regarding dyslexic students' needs, and the value of spelling interventions in specialist dyslexia support tutorials.

Firstly, regarding the terminology issue, there was near polarization of the four viewpoints in the ranking of statement 37, which stated that 'dyslexia is a vague concept'. One member of staff disagreed strongly with statement 37, and attributed such a view to 'people with their own internal political agendas'. He commented that dyslexia 'is not a middle-class construct and added that statement 37 was 'one of the most insulting comments I've heard in a long time'. Other participants saw it differently. A student remarked that 'it just seems to be a label. It doesn't tell you specifically how everyone's affected. Everyone's affected differently and cope with that effect differently to varying degrees'. There were also different views on the terms 'learning differences' and 'learning difficulties' in relation to dyslexia (statement 1). One student commented that 'some people's ideas of what dyslexia is can really hold you back . . . I've come across students and tutors who just think because you are bad at spelling you are not intelligent'.

Secondly, course tutors' awareness of dyslexia and their attitudes to dyslexic students were seen as problematic by many of the participants

(e.g., statements 33 and 45). Criticising written feedback from course tutors on his assignments, one student described how 'a fair few of my tutors, their writing is so bad I couldn't understand it'. Another gave an example of negative tutor feedback, commenting that 'she didn't actually take into account that I was dyslexic so the feedback that she'd given . . . it was a bit of a kick in the balls really'. Criticisms were also made of course materials. One member of staff suggested that because of 'academic snobbery' among some course tutors, course materials were too often inaccessible to dyslexic students. Another felt that course tutors should use more multi-sensory approaches in their teaching. A student described how course tutors had given her handouts in size 6 font on white paper which she found impossible to read. She commented 'if they just discussed how you are coping, how they could help you in their lectures'. Another remarked that 'in my opinion I'm treated as if I'm thick by the majority of tutors I come across, and there's only one who is very understanding because he is dyslexic himself'. Asked how he thought this situation could be improved, he replied that 'if there was a way of giving them dyslexia for a couple of weeks it would be very useful'.

Thirdly, in relation to the curriculum in specialist one-to-one dyslexia tutorials, none of the four interpreted viewpoints felt that improving students' spelling should be a priority (statement 2). A member of the support staff commented that 'it's not just about spelling . . . It's a whole host of other things they might have problems with or, you know, do differently'. A student explained how he very nearly did not access dyslexia support at all in his final year of university as, because of experiences earlier in his degree programme, he was concerned that the dyslexia support tutor might focus on improving his spelling:

> I can go into ways that dyslexia support has not helped me . . . previous dyslexia tutors have worked on things like spelling and reading certain words. I don't really think that is what my problem is at all. You know, my problem is organizing stuff—organizing written work, structuring it—I think that's where my problems lie . . . . Certainly in the first year of uni it were just a bit of a waste looking at certain spellings of words and stuff. It's just not what I needed at all really. . . . I very nearly didn't come for any support this year based on all the things that have happened previous.

This student's account is particularly significant given that, at the university where the study was conducted, the institutional guidelines for specialist dyslexia support tutors urged them to ensure that the support they offered was in line with the student's educational psychologist's report. This advice was exemplified with direct reference to students' spelling abilities, noting that if a report identified spelling as

an area of weakness then the support tutor should work with the student to find ways to help overcome their spelling difficulty in order to minimize the impact of their dyslexia. There is a danger here in relation to this recommendation. Given that a difficulty with spelling might be expected to feature frequently on such reports, an institutional deficit model emphasis on spelling, however well-meaning, may inadvertently discourage students with dyslexia from accessing learning support.

University policy statements, main course tutors' views, and dyslexia support tutors' views on dyslexia may all have implications with potentially undesirable consequences. As a further example of unintended potentially negative impacts, specialist support tutors at the university where the study took place were expected to develop dyslexic students' study skills against the following specified learning outcomes: research, composition, proof-reading, note-taking, time management, and examinations. Accordingly, the university provided an 'Individual Learning Plan' to identify learning outcomes. However, there is a danger that using a pre-specified 'one size fits all' skills-based pro-forma may constrain support by not being sufficiently sensitive to identify students' individual and context-specific needs. Similarly, at a national level SFE recommended introducing a standardised support package for dyslexic students in higher education. However, the findings from the present study suggested that participants did not want standardised packages (see statement 10), and in fact dyslexia support organisations spoke out strongly against the SFE standardisation proposal (DSA-QAG, 2010, p. 4). Other potentially constraining aspects of SLC/SFE provision also caused alarm. In a letter of guidance to the sector, the SLC (2008) stated that 'for the majority of customers [i.e. students] 10 hours study skills should be sufficient to meet their needs', and that any request for further hours had to meet internal criteria set by the SLC. Again, these proposed changes, along with other aspects of the SLC's service to disabled students, drew considerable criticism from dyslexia organizations.

Within activity theory, system tensions are considered a normal feature of activity, and their identification is a necessary step in enhancing system performance. Roth, et al., (2004, pp. 50–51) describe contradictions as 'potential growth points that allow the system to improve'. Failure to acknowledge and address system tensions carries a risk of serious consequences. This was to prove the case in the example of the SLC in its DSA activity. Following the transfer of DSA administration to the SLC, disability organisations were critical of the SLC's DSA service provision. The National Association of Disability Practitioners (NADP, 2009b, p. 4) felt that SLC staff appeared to 'lack understanding of the general HE student environment'. They also suggested (2009b, p. 8) that the SLC had 'failed to engage appropriately and in a coordinated fashion with key

stakeholder organizations'. Similarly, Skill, the national organisation for students with disabilities, referred to 'a breakdown of trust between the stakeholders' (2009, p. 1).

Following the voicing of these and wider concerns about its service, the Hopkin Review (2009) was commissioned by the government to investigate SLC provision. Hopkin (2009) stated that 'rebuilding trust and confidence in the Student Loans Company amongst external stakeholders will be a challenging but essential task', and recommended that the SLC 'should work closely with key stakeholders in the higher education sector to ensure they are well sighted on possible risks and emerging issues and are able to work together to overcome them' (Hopkin, 2009, p. 39). Lack of trust was also mentioned in a report by the National Audit Office (NAO) into the service provided by the SLC. The NAO (2010) recommended that the government Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and the SLC 'urgently need to strengthen their relationship so that there is mutual trust, open communication and shared understanding of how to deliver the service' (p. 10). Following these criticisms, the Chief Executive and the Chairman of the SLC both resigned (BBC News, 2010). This case study raises important questions of answerability at numerous levels with regard to relations and responsibilities between university staff and students, and between universities and government bodies.

Developing a complex system in a way that effectively promotes stakeholder trust and confidence presents a serious challenge. For example, terms such as 'disability', 'dyslexia' and 'learning difficulties' have different meanings for different people. The complexity of the concepts involved and how this complexity relates to individual value systems needs to be recognised. Valsiner (2008, p. 73) comments that, 'values are internal subjective meaning fields that totally capture and guide the person who has constructed them'. This is an important point, as decisions regarding dyslexia support interventions at a range of levels will inevitably be influenced by how decision makers, including support tutors, higher education institutions, and national policy makers, define the problem space and how they perceive that which they seek to transform. Problems and unintended consequences such as those outlined above might be avoided by giving multiple perspectives and diverse values a central role in the initial and ongoing development of policy and practice.

For example, in relation to the dyslexia support context described above, timely stakeholder consultation using activity theory with Q methodology and Bahktinian philosophy of language concepts could have been used to minimise unintended consequences by building stakeholder values into policy and practice. The findings of exploratory

Q studies into the diverse perspectives involved could have been followed up using survey research methods to further investigate their prevalence in the stakeholder populations concerned (Brown, 2002; Danielson, 2009). In this way, rather than powerful stakeholders appearing deaf to weaker others and imposing a monologic authority on the policy landscape, Figure 8 reflects Bakhtin's (1981, p. 366) alternative: 'Galilean perception of language' which 'denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language' and which 'refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world'. As Bakhtin (1981, p. 368) notes, 'it is necessary that heteroglossia wash over a culture's awareness of itself and its language, penetrate to its core, relativise the primary language system underlying its ideology and literature and deprive it of its naive absence of conflict'.

Figure 8: Interacting Activity Systems with Different Objects Causing System Tensions
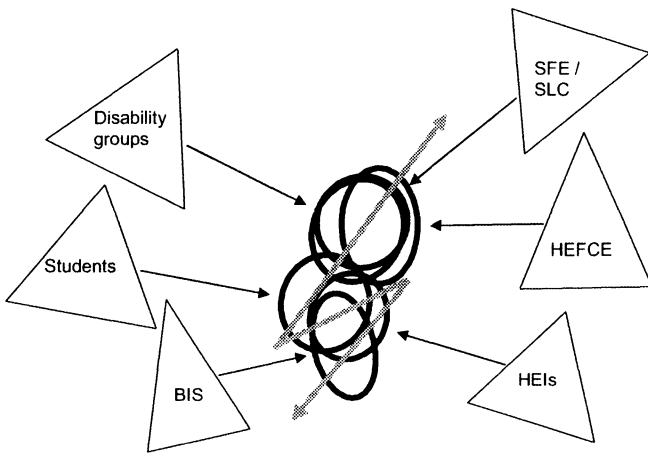
SFE Student Finance England
SLC Student Loans Company
HEFCE Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEIs Higher Education Institutions
BIS Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

Conclusion

Leont'ev (2009, p. 402) comments that, 'man's activity is regulated by mental images of reality'. The approach outlined in this paper, and as illustrated in Figure 8, speaks to Bakhtin's (1981, pp. 414–415) description of:

> languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world

[which] force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror.

A cultural tool such as that described here, blending Q methodology with activity theory and informed by Bakhtinian philosophy of language concepts including answerability, might be used to reflect in a developmentally productive way the subjectivities of diverse stakeholders within interacting activity systems in a variety of contexts. Such a modelling process holds potential benefits for all participants, whether they be individuals or organisations, and hints at 'the reflection in the fairy-tale mirror' described by Leont'ev (2009, p. 40) 'in which is seen not only what is happening directly before it but also the whole real world, even that which has never directly thrown its rays on the mirror'.

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Appendix: Factor Array

	Factor Array			
	F1	F2	F3	F4
Students with dyslexia should be seen as having learning differences, not 'learning difficulties'. (1)	2	-2	0	3
Dyslexia support should concentrate on improving students' spelling. (2)	-1	-3	0	-2
Getting clear assignment feedback from course tutors is important to dyslexic students. (3)	3	3	0	2
Course tutors understand how to support students with dyslexia. (4)	-1	-2	-2	-2
With learning support provision, dyslexic students have a better chance of coping at university than non-dyslexic students. (5)	-3	-1	0	0
The main priority for dyslexic students is getting through their course. (6)	0	0	3	-1
Providing alternative forms of assessment for dyslexic students can undermine academic standards. (7)	0	0	-2	-3
Dyslexic students need help with developing their study skills. (8)	3	3	2	1
The university values the contribution that students with dyslexia can make. (9)	0	0	-1	0
Dyslexia support provision should be standardised to meet the needs of all dyslexic students. (10)	-2	-2	-1	-1
Dyslexia support should be mapped against critical moments in the student's learning program. (11)	-1	1	1	0
Dyslexic students get the coursework grades that they deserve. (12)	-3	1	-2	0
Students with dyslexia can learn from hearing other students talk about their experiences of coping at university. (13)	1	0	0	1
The quality of dyslexia support provision in the university is satisfactory. (14)	0	1	1	0
Course tutors are explicit about what they expect from students. (15)	-1	0	-1	-2
Having effective learning support is important to dyslexic students. (16)	3	3	2	2
Course tutors incorporate the needs of dyslexic students into the design and delivery of programs. (17)	-1	-1	-3	-1
Dyslexia support should involve human contact, including counseling, so that the emotional effects on students' learning can be addressed. (18)	2	0	0	2
Course tutors have the training needed to support students with dyslexia. (19)	-2	-2	-2	-2
Students need specific help with understanding how dyslexia affects their learning. (20)	2	2	2	2
Dyslexia support provision should aim to reduce academic culture shock. (21)	0	0	0	0
The academic culture of the university makes it easy for dyslexic students to talk to other students and staff about their concerns. (22)	0	0	1	-1
The university's dyslexia support provision helps students to progress through their program of learning. (23)	0	1	2	1
The importance of course tutors needing to take account of students' different learning styles is exaggerated. (24)	-1	-1	0	-2

	Factor Array			
	F1	**F2**	**F3**	**F4**
Dyslexia support is really just about spoon-feeding weak students. (26)	-3	-3	-3	-3
Dyslexic students worry about not meeting their course tutors' expectations. (27)	2	1	2	0
The university meets all the needs of its dyslexic students. (28)	0	-1	-1	-3
Course tutors should help dyslexic students to improve their study skills. (29)	0	1	1	-1
Dyslexic students can be empowered by learning how to use appropriate information and communication technology. (30)	1	1	1	1
The informal peer support that dyslexic students get is more effective than the support provided by the university. (31)	0	-1	0	0
Dyslexia support should help students to cope holistically with the combinations of complex challenges that face them. (32)	0	2	2	3
Course tutors are aware of their dyslexic students' support needs. (33)	-2	-2	1	-1
On entry to a programme, a student's study skills should be good enough to cope with the academic demands of their course. (34)	-1	1	-1	-1
Students with dyslexia are sometimes unprepared for the academic demands of their university programme. (35)	1	0	3	1
There is a danger of dyslexia support tutors doing their students' work for them. (36)	-3	-3	-2	1
'Dyslexia' is a vague concept. (37)	-3	2	-3	2
The support that dyslexia tutors can provide over an academic year is not enough to substantially improve a student's academic performance. (38)	1	-2	-1	0
To combat the effects of dyslexia, non-standard or unorthodox methods of teaching are needed. (39)	1	-1	-1	-2
The transition from school or college to university is equally challenging for dyslexic and for non-dyslexic students. (40)	1	1	1	2
By being 'dyslexic-friendly', course tutors can actually discriminate against non-dyslexic students. (41)	-2	-3	-1	-1
The co-ordination between dyslexic students' Local Education Authorities and the university is satisfactory. (42)	-1	-1	-1	-1
The learning support offered to dyslexic students should help them to become independent learners. (43)	-1	2	1	3
Dyslexic students play a central role in determining the nature of the learning support they receive. (44)	1	2	0	0
When marking assignments, course tutors make sufficient allowance for the effects of dyslexia on their students' written work. (45)	1	-2	-3	0
University can be a frustrating and isolating experience for dyslexic students. (46)	3	0	1	1
Meeting the needs of dyslexic students requires huge amounts of additional work by course tutors. (47)	-2	-1	-2	-3
To be effective, university learning support needs a holistic and coherent approach to policy design which engages all those involved, including dyslexic students, non-dyslexic students, course tutors and support staff. (48)	1	2	2	3

Note: Statements in bold italics indicate a consensus in the responses to that item (i.e. the values are all positive, all negative, or all neutral). Shaded cell values in the factor array columns indicate an item ranking difference of two or more points relative to the other three factors.