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RHET-302

12 November 2020

Learning Disabilities in the Writing Center: Creating an Inclusive Environment for all

Introduction to Learning Disabilities: My Experience

My name is Julia Greenbaum, and I am a senior and first-year Writing Associate at Trinity College. When I was in preschool, my teacher told my parents that they were concerned because I was having more trouble learning the alphabet than my peers. In kindergarten my teacher suggested that I be tested for a learning disability (LD), as I was unable to write my name and had still failed to learn the alphabet. My parents took this advice and had me tested; this is when I was diagnosed with dyslexia. Throughout elementary school, I felt myself falling further and further behind my peers as they progressed in their academic learning and I remained stagnant.

In fifth grade, my parents decided to send me to the Carroll School: a school which specializes in educating children with dyslexia. I studied at the Carroll School from fifth to eighth grade. During that time, I grew tremendously as a student and learned skills necessary to succeed in mainstream schools. Reflecting back, what it came down to was that I learn differently than other people. The teaching styles used to educate non-dyslexic students were not working for me. When I went to the Carroll School the teachers worked with each student individually to teach them in a way that worked with their specific learning style. At Carroll, I was taught the skills and strategies required to succeed in main-stream schooling and have since

found great success in my academics. From this experience, I believe every student can succeed if the teaching methodology used is adapted to fit their individual learning style because everyone learns differently.

Though I believe no two students learn exactly the same, I feel strongly that all students with LD need to be taught in a different style from their mainstream peers. According to Lori Clapis, coordinator of student accessibility resources at Trinity College, 12.9% of the Trinity College student body has been diagnosed with some form of a disability, a majority of which are LDs and are therefore using accommodations (L. Clapis, personal communication, November 2, 2020). This means that a significant percentage of the Trinity student body does not conform to traditional methods of learning when compared to their peers.

As Lori Clapis has stated, this 12.9% has grown exponentially in the past 20 years, as it is becoming progressively more common for students with various disabilities to attend college (L. Clapis, personal communication, November 2, 2020). One reason for this is that many colleges, including Trinity, have become test-optional, meaning that students do not need to submit their standardized test scores when applying. Typically, students with LD perform much poorer than students without LD on standardized tests, putting students with LD at a disadvantage in the college application process (Standardized Testing and Students with Disabilities, 2017). Going test-optional has allowed students with LD to have a better chance of being accepted into numerous colleges and explains the increase in numbers of students with LD. Additionally, college administrations have been recognizing students with LD and addressing the support that they may require as they have been making many more accommodations for students with disabilities. For example, Trinity College established the Student Accessibility Resource Center

(SARC) which gives academic accommodations to students based on their individual needs

(Accommodating Students, Student Accessibility Resource Center, Trinity College). As colleges

continue to become more accommodating to students with LD, it makes sense for the Writing

Center to ensure that all Writing Associates are well prepared to support students with and

without LD.

As Writing Associates, we must be prepared to help students with LD. The best way we

can do this is to be able to identify what LD a student has and what tutoring techniques might

work best for that student. Additionally, by having different tutoring strategies prepared to help

students with various LD, we will be more versatile tutors. As previously stated, students without

LD learn in different ways, too. By being prepared to help students with various LD, we will be

able to help more students who benefit from different teaching and tutoring techniques. This

means students without any LD will benefit just as much as those with LD, benefiting the

institution and entirety of the student population as a whole. In this paper I will look specifically

at how to identify signs of dyslexia, dysgraphia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

(ADHD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as well as the best ways to tutor students who

have these various LD.

Universal Design

A useful tool in identifying and addressing student disabilities in the writing center is by

adapting the approach of universal design (UD). According to Ron Mace, UD can be defined as,

"the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent

possible, without the need for adaption or specialized design -" (Case, 2008, p. 2). This paper

will elaborate more on the concept of UD and how it can be applied at the Trinity College

Writing Center. By adopting a UD at the Trinity College Writing Center, our tutors will be prepared to help students of all abilities, as they will have been trained in various tutoring methods to meet the needs of all students. Tutors must be trained to recognize that a tutee often cannot be categorized as a single type of learner (Cherney, 2017). According to the Center for Applied Special Technology, "an unanticipated benefit of universal design is that addressing the divergent needs of special populations increases usability for everyone -" (Case, 2008, p 2). Rather than designing a writing center to help the average user, writing centers should be designed for people with a broad range of abilities and disabilities (Cherney, 2017). This will also eliminate any pressure for a student to disclose any LD that they feel uncomfortable disclosing (Cherney, 2017). By adopting UD in our Writing Center, we will be able to create a more inclusive environment in which tutors are adequately prepared to meet the needs of all students alike.

In order to apply this theory, the Center for Universal Design (1997) published seven principles of UD with associated guidelines that can be applied to the Writing Center. The first is equitable use, meaning that we must provide the same means of use for all users and avoid stigmatizing any users of the design (Case, 2008). By training tutors on how to identify LD symptoms and how to best help students with various LD, we are creating a more equitable environment for all users. If tutors are only prepared to help mainstream learners, it further disadvantages those with LD; contrarily, with UD, we will be able to help all students with a variety of needs, creating a more inclusive environment.

The next principle of UD is flexibility in use. This means providing choice in methods of use (Case, 2008). In other words, Writing Associates must consider varying methods and

techniques to tutor students of different needs. What works for one student may not work for another. A teacher who can only explain a concept in one way would not be considered a good teacher because they are not adaptable or flexible. By training Writing Associates to tutor students with various LD, we will be preparing them to be more flexible in their tutoring techniques with all students.

UD, in theory, should be simple and intuitive. When using UD, it is important to eliminate unnecessary complexity. UD should accommodate a range of literacy and language skills as well as arrange information in order of importance. Using effective prompting and feedback techniques will be necessary when tutoring students (Case, 2008).

The next step of UD is using perceptible information. This means to use pictorial, verbal, and/ or tactile modes for presenting information (Case, 2008). Some students may learn best auditorily, meaning they would benefit from a tutor who verbally explains things. On the other hand, many people are more visual learners, meaning they would benefit more from having a tutor write information down and create visual images for them. As tutors, we should be prepared to identify and adapt to whatever learning style each student benefits from. Tutors can do this through methods of trial and error and being perceptive to how students react to specific tutoring techniques.

Next is tolerance for error (Case, 2008). When working with any student, but specifically students with LD, there will be errors in their writing and when we as tutors explain something the student may not understand the correction and will continue to make errors. We must be tolerant and patient in these situations.

The sixth step in adapting UD is low physical effort. This means that we must allow users to maintain a neutral body position and to minimize repetitive actions and sustained physical effort (Case, 2008). This is more relevant when speaking about individuals with physical disabilities as opposed to LD.

The last step is keeping in mind the size and space of the room. It is important that individuals have a clean line of sight to the information that is being taught and that individuals are comfortable wherever they are sitting or standing (Case, 2008). Ensuring that students are physically comfortable is necessary for them to learn to the best of their ability. Additionally, we must provide adequate space for the use of assistive devices or personal assistance (Case, 2008). Though this relates more to physical disabilities and not to LD, it is important to remember that the Writing Center must be physically accessible to all. For example, to avoid causing a student in a wheelchair to feel isolated from their peers in the Writing Center, it is important that the student can comfortably fit at a table and that there is minimal rearranging that must be done to physically accommodate the student. This accessibility should therefore be built into writing center spaces, not viewing those with disability accommodations as an afterthought and therefore needing adjustment.

By preparing Writing Associates to tutor students with various LD, they will develop different tutoring techniques allowing for UD. These techniques can then be used for all students, not just those with LD. UD helps to prevent the idealized notion of a "typical" tutee (Cherney, 2017). Instead of focusing on how to tutor students with disabilities differently, we should explore how to bring aspects of individuals' identity to the tutoring session and how we can personalize each session to fit the needs of that student (Cherney, 2017). It is important that the

Writing Center fosters the expectation that all tutees will have various challenges, needs, and learning styles, and the consideration of these factors are crucial when accommodating students with specific needs (Cherney, 2017).

Criticisms of Universal Design

Despite the benefits of UD, some people still push back on this concept and question why it is important to address the needs of all. Some people argue that UD is utopian, as if at the end of the day it is impossible to accommodate everyone (Buelens, Cauwer, Clement, et al., 2009). To counter this argument, yes, it is unrealistic to create a design that works for everyone, but there can be a design that is flexible and accommodating to all. Additionally, some people may ask why there should be such a focus on helping students with LD when they are a minority of students. To counter this, the Writing Center strives to be an inclusive space for all, meaning we must address the needs of all students. Additionally, as previously stated, UD will benefit all students with and without LD as tutors will be more versatile in their tutoring techniques.

In order to move towards a pedagogy of UD in Writing Centers, it is important to be educated on various LDs, be able to notice different symptoms, and to be familiar with the best tutoring practices for each LD. With this preparation, Writing Associates will become more versatile tutors who are prepared to help students with various disabilities and abilities.

Dyslexia – Noticing the Signs

An example of a prevalent LD is dyslexia, which is a specific reading disability in which someone with normal sensory abilities and intelligence levels experiences learning deficits with reading (Chaix, Demonet, & Taylor, 2004). By the time a student is an adult, they have typically developed strategies to cope with reading challenges, but they continue to have considerable

difficulty with spelling and writing (Klein, 1995). By understanding the signs and symptoms of

dyslexia, tutors will be able to identify if a student is potentially dyslexic and be able to work in a

way that progresses a more successful tutoring session.

For instance, if a Writing Associate notices consistent errors in spelling, they should

consider if the student might be dyslexic. There are many spelling errors that are common for

dyslexic students in which they show persistent difficulty in acquiring sounds, letter patterns,

and/ or the conventions of English spelling (Klein, 1995). An example of this is logical phonetic

alternatives, which is when someone follows English spelling conventions such as writing

"serface" instead of "surface" or "groops" instead of "groups" (Klein, 1995). Another common

spelling error to note is the visual sequential error in which two letters are out of order, such as

"claer" instead of "clear" or "dose" instead of "does" (Klein, 1995). The rule base error shows a

lack of awareness of spelling rules or consists of unacceptable phonetic alternatives, such as

"copys" for "copies" or "jocked" instead of "joked" (Klein, 1995). These are only a few

examples of spelling mistakes that are common among dyslexics, but if a Writing Associate

notices spelling errors such as these they should consider the possibility that this student is

dyslexic and tutor accordingly, instead of assuming that the student is uneducated or unknowing

of grammar rules.

Below are patterns that a dyslexic student may manifest and ways that the Writing

Associate could assess if the student has dyslexia:

Patterns in handwriting: *Is the student confusing their "b" and "d" or "p" and "b" or any other*

letters that look similar? Does their construction of letters appear to be awkward and

confusing? (Klein, 1995).

Patterns of punctuation: *Does the student use commas correctly? Can they grasp when a*

sentence is complete or not? Does the student use apostrophes appropriately? (Klein,

1995).

Patterns of syntax: *Does the student use tense consistently? Does the student ever omit words?*

Does the student have trouble using subject-verb agreements consistently? Is the student

able to restructure sentences when asked to do so? (Klein, 1995).

Patterns in vocabulary: *Is the tutee using incorrect forms of words, for example, difficultness or*

is the student frequently confuses meanings of words? Is the student confusing words with

similar constructions, such as switching "underlying" and "underlining"? (Klein, 1995).

Other patterns to pay attention to: *Is the student struggling with sequencing or putting ideas in*

order? Does the student struggle to keep to the point, select a main idea, to expand on an

idea, or group ideas together? Is the student's paper disorganized in this sense? (Klein,

1995).

 If a tutor finds themselves consistently answering 'yes' to any of these questions they should

consider that the tutee may be dyslexic.

Tutoring Students with Dyslexia

Now that we understand what the signs of dyslexia are, how can Writing Associates adapt

their tutoring practices to best support these students? First, if a tutor suspects that a student may

be dyslexic, they should ensure that they are in a quiet environment where they are free from

other conversations or distractions (Alden & Carmichael, 2006). Also, it will be more beneficial

for the Writing Associate to read the students work aloud as opposed to having the tutee read

their own paper (Alden & Carmichael, 2006). Given that dyslexia can cause significant reading challenges, having the student read aloud could be both upsetting and unbeneficial to the student.

Dyslexic students may have a harder time picking up new concepts or techniques that could aid their writing process; in this case, use logic to explain why the method is effective as opposed to having them memorize a list of steps (Types of Learning Disabilities, 2018). Allowing students to have a deeper understanding of this technique will be more beneficial and will motivate the student to incorporate the strategy into their writing.

If a student is overwhelmed by a large assignment, the Writing Associate should help to break the task into smaller subunits (Types of Learning Disabilities, 2018). Now the student can focus on each subunit, allowing the assignment to seem less daunting (Types of Learning Disabilities, 2018). Dividing the work into a series of minor milestones allows the student to work on little pieces of the task at a time (Ahl, Åke, Olofsson, et al., 2012). With this the student can feel a sense of accomplishment as they complete each minor milestone which will motivate them to continue to do their best work on their assignment.

There are many other strategies that can be beneficial when tutoring a student with dyslexia. One important strategy that could benefit a dyslexic tutee is to take notes when reading or underline important information or use post-it-notes (Ahl et al., 2012). No, this does not directly relate to writing, but if a student needs to incorporate sources into their writing, efficient reading and note-taking skills will greatly benefit their writing. Using color coding or symbols can help students to organize their knowledge (Ahl et al., 2012). This can be another helpful note-taking skill when a student is reading, but it can also be helpful for organizing ideas for a paper or creating an outline, especially if the student is a more visual learner.

As one is reading the section in this paper about the signs and symptoms of dyslexia, they may notice that many of the symptoms are common writing mistakes that many students make. One does not need to be dyslexic to have these errors in their writing and they do not need to be dyslexic to benefit from these tutoring strategies.

Dysgraphia – Noticing the Signs

Moreover, dysgraphia can be defined as a disorder of writing ability at any stage, including problems with letter formation/ legibility, letter spacing, spelling, fine motor coordination, rate of writing, grammar, and composition (Chung, Nizami, & Patel, 2020). Signs of dysgraphia consist of slow writing speed, illegible handwriting, inconsistency between spelling ability and verbal intelligence quotient, and processing delays in graphomotor planning, orthographic awareness, and/ or rapid automatic naming (Chung, Nizami, & Patel, 2020). Specifically, young adults with dysgraphia will have difficulty with written organization of thoughts and struggle with written syntax and grammar that is not duplicated with oral tasks (Chung, Nizami, & Patel, 2020).

Tutoring Students with Dysgraphia

When working with a student that may have dysgraphia, it is important to utilize technology, including automated spellcheck and voice-to-text recognition software (Chung, Nizami, & Patel, 2020). Voice-to-text support can decrease some of the stress that writing may bring to such students. As has previously been suggested for helping students with dyslexia, it may be beneficial to consider breaking down big assignments into smaller assignments to make the writing process seem less daunting (Chung, Nizami, & Patel, 2020). Students with

dysgraphia may need extra support in the more complex parts of writing, including planning, drafting, and revising (Chung, Nizami, & Patel, 2020).

ADHD – Noticing the Signs

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, ADHD is a disorder marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/ or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.

Inattention is one of the main signs of ADHD. This consists of when a person wanders off tasks, lacks persistence, has difficulty sustaining focus, and is disorganized. It is important to note that these problems are not due to defiance or lack of comprehension (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020). In a writing center appointment, symptoms of inattention could include overlooking or missing details in the paper, which may make the work appear to be careless, even if this is not the case (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020). The student may also have trouble sustaining their attention for the entire writing center appointment. Students with ADHD may appear not to be listening when spoken to directly. These students may also have trouble following through on instructions or may begin a task but then quickly lose focus or get easily sidetracked (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020). Additionally, students with ADHD may have trouble with organizing tasks, such as what to do in sequence, keeping materials and belongings in order, having messy work and poor time management, and/ or failing to meet deadlines. It is also known that students with ADHD will often avoid or dislike tasks that require sustained mental effort, especially reviewing lengthy papers which is often what is done in writing center appointments (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020).

Hyperactivity is also one of the main signs that someone may have ADHD. Hyperactivity consists of a person seeming to move about constantly, including situations where it is not appropriate, or excessively fidgeting, tapping, or talking (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020). In the Writing Center these symptoms can be observed when a tutee is fidgeting or squirming in their seat. It may also appear that the tutee is talking "nonstop" (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020). A student with ADHD is more likely to blurt out answers before the tutor has finished asking a question, or to finish the tutor's sentence or speak without waiting for their turn in the conversation (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020).

A few other symptoms of ADHD are that the tutee may have a very hard time focusing (Types of Learning Disabilities, 2018). The student may be checking their phone with more frequency and is less likely to follow along with the tutor as the paper is being read aloud (Types of Learning Disabilities, 2018). Students with ADHD may also have trouble expressing a complete thought as their ideas may be more scattered (Types of Learning Disabilities, 2018). ADHD can also cause challenges with executive functioning, causing students to have difficulty remembering questions asked to them while in the middle of answering said questions (Types of Learning Disabilities, 2018).

Tutoring Students with ADHD

First, if a student appears to be easily distracted consider moving to a more quiet environment that is distraction free so that the student can focus as best they can. As one can imagine based on the symptoms of ADHD, staying organized can be a challenge which can have a negative impact on one's writing. If a student struggles to stay organized, it will be harder for

the student to complete long-term assignments, such as a paper (Culpepper, 2011). If a Writing Associate notices that a student is struggling to stay organized, they could give suggestions on how to make lists for different tasks and activities or show the student how to use reminder notes (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, 2020). Though these organization skills do not directly relate to writing, by being more organized, students will be able to plan ahead so that they can budget enough time to write their paper and not feel rushed.

Additionally, it is important to help students that appear to have ADHD to break down large assignments into smaller, more manageable steps (Prevatt & Young, 2014). By breaking down the assignment into smaller steps the student can then focus on smaller goals, helping the student to stay focused and avoid distractions. According to Summer Dow, another Trinity College Writing Associate who has spoken about her personal experiences of being a student writer with ADHD, some of the best ways to help students with ADHD are to use an outline to organize a cluttered paper. The tutor should use non-directive questioning, guiding the student to describe their ideas which can then be put into a more organized outline (S. Dow, personal communication, November 3, 2020).

Lastly, it is important to help build the student's self-esteem (Prevatt & Young, 2014). Being patient with students who display symptoms of ADHD and pointing out strengths in the students' work can positively impact sessions greatly. It is important to acknowledge that sitting down to write a paper can be a daunting and challenging task for individuals with ADHD. It is important to build the student's confidence in their writing ability to minimize the fear that writing assignments may bring.

Autism – Noticing the Signs

The last disability that will be discussed is autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD is considered to be a developmental disorder, not an LD, but ASD can still interfere with a student's writing ability and may require Writing Associates to tutor in a different style.

According to Alpine Learning Group, ASD is a developmental disability that can affect one's ability to communicate and engage in social interaction. A student with ASD may appear to be apprehensive or disengaged in a Writing Center appointment. This could include avoiding eye contact or having difficulty verbalizing thoughts (Cherney, 2017). Writing center appointments may be especially challenging for students with ASD because of the close proximity of the student and the tutor, the intensity of eye contact, the stress of conversational give-and-take, and the stress of misinterpreting social cues. All of this can trigger anger or anxiety for a student with ASD (Cherney, 2017). For these reasons it is important to understand how to communicate with students with ASD efficiently so that the writing center appointment can be as productive as possible.

Tutoring Students with ASD

Generally, students with ASD often have extremely sensitive sensory input systems, meaning they can become overloaded easily. If a tutor suspects that the student has ASD and is overwhelmed by the stimuli in the room, the tutor should consider moving the appointment to a private room with dim lights (Barton, 2015). When tutoring a student with ASD, ask more direct questions and consider writing the questions down to give the tutee time to process the questions (Barton, 2015). It is important to show and not tell when working with an autistic student. For example, if a tutor is trying to explain sentence structure, they should write examples down on

paper instead of verbally explaining it (Cherney, 2017). Also, the tutor should take notes for the student while they speak so that they can focus on processing the information from the session (Barton, 2015). Additionally, Writing Associates should not press for eye contact if the tutee appears to be uncomfortable sustaining or returning it (Cherney, 2017). It is important that tutors remember to be flexible when working with students who have ASD (Barton, 2015). If the student appears distracted the tutor should repeat the question as many times as is necessary (Cherney, 2017). The Writing Associate should also avoid socially derived humor and non-verbal cues as people with ASD might not understand (Cherney, 2017).

Concluding Remarks

When looking at the different techniques used to tutor students with dyslexia, ADHD, dysgraphia, and ASD, some techniques overlapped and some were very different. It is important to note that the tutoring techniques recommended for students with each specific LD will not work for all students with that LD. One student with dyslexia may actually benefit more from the suggestions made for working with a student who has ADHD and vise-versa. No one is the same and no one learns the same, meaning no Writing Associate should tutor students in the exact same way. It is important to note that any of the symptoms discussed in the above sections can also be made by students without any LD. Just because a tutor may recognize these traits as being symptoms for specific LDs does not mean that they should assume themselves qualified to diagnose an LD. Instead, they should use this information to tutor accordingly. By educating tutors on how to work with students with these various LDs, Writing Associates will be able to better identify tutees true needs and will have more varied tutoring techniques so that they can help all different types of learners.

I may never learn the same way as the non-dyslexic student that sits next to me, and likewise, that non-dyslexic student will not learn the same way as the non-dyslexic student that sits next to them. No two students learn exactly the same, as every student takes their own individualistic approach to learning in some way. Why should one of these students benefit more than the others from a writing center appointment because their Writing Associate tutored in a style that was conducive to their learning style? The answer is that they should not. In order to be successful tutors, we must be well rounded, patient, and flexible. This will create a more inclusive and equal environment for students with varying disabilities and abilities, and the opportunity presents itself to make the writing center a place of learning and growth for all.

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