Learning disabilities in the writing center: Challenging our perspectives?

The greatest need for growth in composition studies lies now in the ways we create meaning beyond what is currently considered knowledge. (Brand & Graves 5)

Athoughtexperiment
I am the Writing Skills Coordinator at the Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) Center at the University of Arizona (UA); SALT is an academic support program for students with learning disabilities (LD). My background is a mixed one: I have two Master’s degrees, one in Cultural Studies, the other in Rhetoric and Composition; I have taught first-year composition here at UA; I have worked as a co-coordinator of the UA’s Writing Center; I have tutored students with learning disabilities. I consider myself a compositionist who has ended up in the field of learning disabilities services not by design, but by necessity (I had enough experience with students with LD to land a job I needed once I was done with my graduate work). Loving writing, and the teaching of writing, I came to my current position...
assuming I would be doing much as I had when I was in a FYC classroom: I would be working with students’ ideas, helping them to develop critical thinking skills and to express themselves in academia.

But the position has asked me to do much more than that, and demanded a commitment from me I did not expect. Everyday I see how discouraged most students with LD are about writing. They learn very young not to put their thoughts on paper, as that often leads to frustration and/or ridicule. The scars born of these negative experiences stay with them forever—they build walls against writing out of fear and hurt, and often extend this fear to any personal expression, since they come to believe the social stricture that writing is the paradigm of personal expression. If students with LD actually get to the college level (and many do not), they bring these scars with them; these scars then interfere with our abilities to help these students. How many students have scars great enough that they never even make it to our colleges and universities, to our composition classrooms and writing centers? How can we begin to change the culture of schooling such that more and more of these students are able to persist in their post-secondary careers?

Because of the tremendous effects of these scars, I ask you to participate in a thought experiment. I call on us to imagine what could happen if we recast the expressive attempts of students with LD in a positive light: what are the implications of learning to see and deal with LDs not as disabilities, but as different processing and expressive modes? When we take on this viewpoint, we see that writers with LD challenge both the primacy of writing as knowledge expression and production, and our ideas of what it is to own written texts. These students literally stretch our vision of composition to include more than written texts. They have scars great enough to make it to our colleges and universities, and to begin effecting this thought experiment in the reality of higher education.

The problem
Ask any student with LD, and she will tell you that it is difficult to always be the one who has to compensate in order to get her ideas heard—and that when she does, even then she is heard only in compromised formats. Yet if we pursue the implications of my thought experiment, and we were also all prepared to learn to communicate with and through a myriad of modes (including the old standby, the linear, printed text), then everyone would be free to explore the modes that best suit them, while still providing everyone with the basic skills to communicate with each other.

Traditional teaching styles and assignments tend toward linearity, but human thought processes are associative (Speziale and La France 32); and interestingly, not just the processes of those with LD, but everyone’s. Those who are successful in school learn to alter how they process, and express their command of, information; they learn to think the way school asks them to. Some choose not to do this—others, like our writers with LD, simply cannot even make that choice. James Clifford explains that writing conventions are presented to students as choices they can decide to make as they compose, and are often relegated to being mere style choices about how to organize their thoughts. But, he says, form is much more than a mere style choice, it “is also an attitude toward reality; it is rhetorical power, a way to shape experience, and as such it constructs subjects who assume that knowledge can be demonstrated merely by asserting a strong thesis and supporting it with three concrete points” (43). So universities teach our students to value and pursue a certain way of thinking, a particular mode of knowledge expression and production, regardless of that mode’s compatibility with the students’ own intellectual strengths; success results only for those who can conform to these demands.
Those who are not successful, who cannot conform, get classified very quickly by their schools. The labels stick, and begin to form the students so identified. And this is how, according to Marie Clay, children learn to be learning disabled. They “adjust to the demands of [their] programme and different programmes bias children’s response patterns in different ways” (163). So if students do not fit into the mainstream mode of expressing and processing knowledge in school early on, they quickly move into another realm, that of being disabled rather than simply (or not so simply) different. That label then becomes who they are and how they see themselves (171) — disabled, needing to be fixed, valued for how well they “compensate” and subsequently “fit in” with mainstream schooling demands.

Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede write that “our society locates power, authority, authenticity, and property in an autonomous, masculine self” (234). What this means for writers with LD is that they can never fully engage with that power, authority, authenticity, or property. Writers with LD often simply cannot function in written language alone (they require dictate services, proofreaders, extensive help with moving their thoughts from, say, a visual form to the written one), and thus by the current rules, cannot ever “own” the written texts they manage to produce after as much as three times the labor a non-LD student would put in. Further, when these students do manage to get a paper written, the work is often less than what most professors would consider “A” quality, due to the difficulties of translating their ideas into the medium of written, linear text. And when, as one researcher notes, “the ability to express oneself in writing clearly and precisely is considered by some faculty to be synonymous with the Bachelor’s degree” (Vogel qtd. in Scott 170), students who require the work of another to make their papers “clear and precise” are in grave danger of being seen as cheaters, pretenders, plagiarizers.

Much recent theorizing has promoted the idea that the educational system, one of our society’s most powerful institutions, works to produce citizens who fit into the existing economic and social structure. Because of this, we must “broaden the perspective from which we view LD by stressing that individual differences in learning must be understood as embedded within larger cultural and social contexts” (Stanovich 288). Students with LD challenge us to see our schools as constructed, not natural, and thus as validating a certain type of learner. Originally, “the concept of LD was embraced as a reform measure because, unlike other critiques made during the 1960s, it was not a call for fundamental changes in schools and society” (288). LD has been medicalized, written off as a “brain malfunction” and thus not a threat to the status quo of our schooling methods. Legislation was passed to ensure that students with LD received the compensatory measures they needed to survive the current schooling environment. But this medicalization of LD may not be correct, and even if it is, it may not be relevant to how we treat our students with LD.

Compositionist Patricia A. Dunn enters the debate here, raising a political challenge to both LD specialists and the writing community. Students with LD are not so radically different from the rest of us. All of us who have worked with students one-on-one on papers for classes across the disciplines know that not everyone is adept with written, linear text forms. What schools demand of students is a specialized type of intelligence, only one of several (there are at least seven according to Howard Gardner). Humans have myriad ways of processing and expressing knowledge, and yet we are all expected to learn to produce one certain type of text in the academy. Students with LD are often just a bit further removed from being able to adapt than non-LD students. What this means is that we can all benefit from an expansion of acceptable modes. What this also means is that schooling needs to reconsider why it has made one particular type of expression primary, and to begin to revise what text forms are acceptable for students to produce as they gain knowledge and make meaning within academia.

Many may balk at considering such a drastic change in our conception of LD (and the implications that change has for our conceptions of intelligence and its various modes of expression) when we do not truly know what causes LD. Many may advocate waiting until the research proves conclusively where LD comes from before we act. Dunn acknowledges that we do not know enough currently to settle the debate on what causes LD. But frankly, says Dunn, we do not need to. What we know is enough. And what do we know? First, that there are people out there who “have almost inexplicable difficulties processing written language, resulting in unsuccessful experiences in an educational system that is based almost exclusively on books and writing. Second, [that] students treated as inferior beings often will simply fulfill low expectations” (199). We are losing the contributions these students could be making to our classrooms, our universities, and our society because we persist in the belief that everyone learns and expresses that learning in the same way. Dunn explains that just as other voices and their ways of knowing have begun to be recognized recently – women, minorities – so must the voices of those with LD be recognized. Not labeled, but truly seen. She writes that

[b]efore learning disabled people can be heard, they must be recognized—not as disabled but as abled in ways they and we must discover. It is partially the over-emphasis on linguistics-based...
knowledge that has resulted in these students being labeled LD in the first place; if we open the curriculum to a wider spectrum of ways of knowing, these students can become re-abled. . . . [I]t is interesting to consider the ironic possibility that we might be harming our best young minds by forcing them to a way of thinking far more limited or two dimensional than what they do naturally. (200)

Dunn points out that “[r]egardless of theoretical persuasion, most of us recognize knowledge as not limited to textual, logical, fully conscious thought. It is naïve and inaccurate to believe that all ways of knowing may only be represented intellectually” (3). As such, she continues, “[q]uestions about writing need to be recast, with ideas regarding what it means to compose solicited from people with a variety of learning styles” (201). Other ways of expressing ideas, critiques, and insights need to be explored. We need to ask if writing can be good when the author relies more heavily than others on editors and proofreaders (because we all know that we all do indeed use these services widely). We need to ask if the university’s brand of writing is the only way to express knowledge, to create meaning. We need to ask if writing is indeed thinking for everyone, as we compositionists so often seem to believe. And where better to begin asking these questions than in the writing center, where these types of questions are already part of the fabric of the environment?

**The role of writing centers**

Writing centers already challenge how writing gets done in higher education, so they are a wonderful place to move beyond traditional ideas of what knowledge production and processing have to look like and to introduce the idea of alternative intelligences. The kinds of collaboration writing centers can engage in opens up spaces to validate oral and visual and kinesthetic modes of expression. People like Tom MacLennan have laid the groundwork for this type of questioning of the status quo, raising the idea of multiple modes of processing and expression in tutor training philosophies and methods. All of us, he writes, need to and can become aware of our processing/expressive styles. Further, we are all capable of finding ways to negotiate among them—we do this when we train our tutors in our writing centers in different learning styles and strategies. He explains that,

“[f]irst, all people perceive and order the universe in particular ways. Second, our individual “mind style” depends on how we employ…the four basic mediation channels: Concrete Sequential . . ., Abstract Sequential . . ., Abstract Random . . ., and Concrete Random. . . . Third, each person has the same basic mediation abilities at his/her disposal, making it possible for anyone to understand and relate to individuals and environments on common ground if we choose. Fourth, beyond the basic amount of mediation abilities, most of us function best by favoring the one or two channels which make us different and special. Fifth, what makes perfect sense to me, because of my own individual inclinations, may be totally useless to someone else. Sixth, we can either be broadminded and acknowledge and honor strengths and weaknesses in ourselves and others, or narrow-minded and attend to one point of view. (123)

The type of open-mindedness MacLennan calls for shows us how writing center collaborations with students with LD offer spaces for exploring views of intelligence and expressive modes that can re-able students with LD. We need to pursue moments for his “genuine dialogue” so that we can encounter each other fully and validate and work with each other’s styles. Andrea Lunsford’s third type of writing center—not a storehouse of knowledge, not a garret for individual genius to come forth, but a place of collaboration—already challenges the definitions of texts as needing to be autonomous to be valid. This claim speaks directly to one issue writers with LD confront us with: if a student cannot proofread her own work, is it still hers? The implications of such a challenge are huge: if one reality of what is authoritative and valid can be challenged, why not another? Why must a written, linear text be the revered mode of expression and knowledge production in universities if even the notion of a single-authored text as somehow more authoritative is being questioned? Do not students with LD ask us to work in and validate other modes on scales that reach well beyond our writing center doors?

**The charge**

The writing centers that can ask these questions—and propose answers—are those that Christina Murphy would call “radical.” Radical writing centers “should serve as advocates for literacy by respecting and encouraging multiple literacies rather than enforcing only one definition of literacy” (280). Because writing centers are places where LDs can be seen as differences, not disabilities, we can thus go beyond merely compensating for them (which takes us away from the inferiority and “fix yourself” complexes), and focus on incorporating the unique perspectives and styles of students with LD into our classrooms, our schools, our society (Bertamus 18).

Murphy sees writing centers as concerned constantly and simultaneously with two types of knowledge, the technical/practical and the emancipatory. This dual focus on negotiating and critiquing the status quo leads to the potential for a Freirean “capacity for transcendence” (283). Murphy explains that “[t]he potential writing centers have to transform the rhetorical com-
munities of college and university campuses by extending and redefining the dialogue on literacy represents their most significant power and makes them agencies for change within academies” (285). Because writing centers focus on individuals, and are pledged to serve a widely varied writing population, they can offer an alternative to normative educational assessments and labels. In their very mission statements, tutor training programs, and daily operations, most writing centers lay the groundwork for pursuing the challenge writers with LD present to us as regards the primacy and function of the autonomous, linear, written text in the academy. Unfortunately, the idea of the natural superiority of this form is still deeply embedded in the minds of many people, and deviation from it is seen as incompetent work at best, plagiarism at worst. Writing centers know better. We can meet this challenge, and begin to create spaces in the academy and society for the voices of our students with LD.

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Works Cited


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Learning Center Director
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Meredith College seeks qualified candidates for a full-time faculty position (half-time teaching and half-time administrative) as Director of the Learning Center and Assistant Professor in English to begin in August 2002. The Director of the Learning Center has primary responsibility for implementing the college’s tutoring program in writing and oversees the tutoring programs in mathematics and foreign languages. Applicants must have significant experience in teaching composition and literature. Preference will be given to candidates with a Ph.D. degree in English or a related field and evidence of administrative experience relevant to the position.

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