Approaches to Tutoring the Special Learner

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Approaches to Tutoring
The Special Learner

by Char Heitman

At the University of Northern Iowa Center for Academic Achievement, we tutor students from all disciplines at all levels. I have worked with a variety of students on a variety of writing assignments, from freshmen in a “Fundamentals of Writing” class, to international students, to graduate students doing doctoral dissertations. In working with this wide array of students, all with different needs, I use many different approaches.

Having mastered the flexibility that a job like tutoring writing demands, I should not have been so disconcerted the first time I found myself across the table from a learning disabled student—but I was. Not only did I feel uncomfortable having to deviate from the tried and true strategies I had developed in working with my regular tutees, but I had not had any special training in dealing with learning disabled students and thus felt unqualified to work with them.

What I discovered was that not only are the strategies I use with the special learners merely modifications of techniques I use with nonspecial learners, but also that I did not need to be an expert to tutor a learning disabled student. With a little background about learning disabilities and some insights into the way in which different types of disabilities manifest themselves, I could develop strategies that worked for each individual. More importantly, I could take the time necessary to help them get their ideas down succinctly.

Student writing problems can be grouped into lower order concerns such as mechanics and proofreading, and higher order concerns, which include organization and paragraph development. In working with a student on editing, for example, I have the student read her paper out loud. Many times in one reading a student can find mistakes that were, more than likely, a result of last minute recopying or simple oversight: “book are” should be “books are” or “walked” should be “walk.” In working with problems such as organization or paragraph development, I ask the student questions about her writing to force her to look critically at what she wrote and help her discover if she needs more explanation or to write something differently so it is more clear. Often it is just a matter of moving some sentences around or adding or deleting a couple words or sentences here and there.

With LD students, using such techniques is not as helpful. When reading out loud, they often either read what is not there, or don’t read what is there. Thus, they do not find their mistakes during proofreading as non-
learning disabled students do. Also, what they have written often makes perfect sense to them. Even when their sentence and paragraph organization is very illogical, they don’t see anything wrong. As a result, one can not use the same questioning techniques to get the student to see the higher order problems. It is necessary to take a different approach to get the students to rewrite.

The temptation in working with learning disabled students is to rewrite for them. It is easier to just make corrections for them and tell them what to write in order to “fix” their papers than to spend a lot of time with them editing and revising. The important thing is not just to help them correct their mistakes, but also to give them something they can take with them so they don’t always have to rely on someone else to help them write their papers or proofread them for every last -ed ending. For me the real challenge lay in helping these students fulfill the writing assignments they brought to me and acquire skills that they could transfer to future assignments as well. Some of the strategies I came up with were to: 1) be flexible in letting the student get his ideas down in any way possible, 2) give lots of positive feedback, 3) work with the student on non-assigned writing, 4) set up realistic goals according to the student’s needs and desires and 5) help with time management and task discipline.

The first suggestion, letting the student get his ideas down in whatever way possible, is one which moves away from the myth that the only good writer is one who can automatically transfer his ideas from head to paper. With some learning disabilities the person is very articulate verbally but the idea gets lost in the transition to written language. For many learning disabled students, taking words and ideas from the mind and transferring them to paper is as difficult as transcribing musical notes from a record. One approach a tutor can suggest is for the student to use a tape recorder to “write” the paper which he could then edit and hand in to the instructor. A colleague had a learning disabled student compose on the tape recorder. They then spent their sessions editing and revising while he helped her write down the final version. This method gets rid of the graphemic aspects of the writing and helps the student concentrate on what really matters: the content. A tape recorder isn’t a necessity either. The tutor may simply have the student brainstorm or freewrite his ideas as thoroughly as possible and then spend the session talking through the paper and deciding the best ways to word and organize the ideas. The tutor can then help with writing down what the tutee and she have decided sounds best. Although this is a tedious task for the tutor, it focuses on what the student can do and helps give the student confidence about his competence. This ties in with the next suggestion: giving the student lots of positive feedback.
Though this applies to the non-special learner as well, it is especially relevant to the special learner. People working with learning disabled students should realize that the student feels frustrated because he knows what he wants to say and realizes his difficulties in actually expressing it. In addition to this, more than likely in the past the student's disability has been interpreted as his not working hard enough. Many times the special learner's best efforts end up looking like a non-serious student's night-before-the-assignment-is-due paper. Thus, along the way as I help special learners get their ideas down, I try to give them lots of positive feedback and emphasize the things the students can do, not always focusing on what they can't. Hearing "good idea" or "That sounds good" every once in awhile can help bolster the student's confidence and let him know he is progressing. Positive feedback from someone who realizes all the effort the student has put into a paper can be highly rewarding.

Another way tutors can help students gain confidence is by working on non-assigned writing such as letters, journals and personal experience writing. Working on writing tasks such as these takes the writing out of a threatening environment where a grade depends on the student's turning out a "perfect" paper and puts it into a context where the student feels less anxious about making mistakes. It allows the student sufficient time to draft a text that is acceptable to him instead of forcing him to skip over problems due to time constraints. Also, if the student can see the relevance and importance good writing has in his life, he may feel more motivated to do what he can to improve his writing.

Along with working on non-assigned writing, I also talk to many learning disabled students about setting goals. Rather than imposing my expectations on the student in terms of what I know I could do in a given time, I work with the student to set goals he feels are realistic and that match his desires and expectations. If the pressing need is to work on assigned writing, we set up goals for that, but if there is a desire on the student's part to work on other writing as well, I am more than willing to arrange for additional tutorials to work on out-of-class writing. The important thing is that I don't force my expectations onto the student and then become frustrated because he isn't meeting them. The student and I come to an agreement about what he feels he can manage and then work with that. Some learning disabled students also need help with time management or at least to have someone break the work into more manageable chunks so the project doesn't seem so overwhelming. It is not a matter of the student not working hard enough; it is a matter of the student producing a small quantity of quality material.
The reason there is more need to set up goals (and schedules for reaching them) with learning disabled students than with non-special learners is because non-special learners tend to have specific problems that can be addressed in a shorter period of time. When these students come in, they may be able to point to the areas that need work in their papers and not feel a need to go over every last sentence. Within several sessions, they usually have a better idea of how to read critically and make corrections on their own. With special learners, those skills take more time to develop.

In order to make sure the student is progressing instead of doing things that on the surface appear to be helping but in actuality are hindering progress, it may be necessary to keep the student on task. I learned this working with Al. He would bring in pages and pages of work that he had composed on the word processor, but when we went over the work, he always seemed to come up with yet another aspect of the Cuban missile crisis which he felt he just had to include in his General Education history paper. This would have been fine if he were working on a 25 to 30 page research paper, but he was just doing the standard 8 to 10 page research paper required for a General Education class. The key was to get him to choose only the most relevant ideas and then develop them, instead of just touching on each. Though this may sound like a problem any non-learning disabled student might have, I have discovered that it is often a special difficulty for students with learning disabilities. Coming up with new ideas rather than working on the existing ones may have been a way of avoiding the actual writing task. Whether it was or not, I do not know. I handled it, however, by continually bringing Al back to the idea at hand rather than letting him trail off. If he was very persistent about the idea, I would have him write it down on another piece of paper but had him return immediately to the point at hand. This made our sessions more productive in allowing us to develop one idea at a time.

It is important to realize that writing ability is represented on a continuum, not by a clear division of those who can and those who can’t. Therefore, there may be some overlap of learning disabled students with students who do not have a disability but have simply not made an effort to improve their writing skills. In working with students in the latter group, it may be necessary to employ some of these suggestions as well. However, it is also important to make the distinction between non-learning disabled students and students with special learning needs in order to best serve those who require special help.

Working closely with a learning disabled student can help the student experience some of his first successes in writing. This initial success helps
the student feel more confident about his abilities and less apprehensive about the process of writing. A tutor can foster student confidence and interest in writing by working on non academic writing projects. Finally, the tutor must help the learning disabled writer stay on task and structure the process of writing in manageable steps. These suggestions are by no means an exhaustive list of things to do with learning disabled writers. A tutor is only limited by her imagination and commitment to her student. The most important thing I learned is to maintain the flexibility necessary to meet the student’s individual needs.