

Bess Goldstein
Research Paper Final Copy
12/13/22

Challenging Writing Center Practices to Comprehensively Include Students of All Abilities

The first thing a dyslexic student will notice is red pen. Anywhere on the page, a mark of red pen signifies the years of failure to avoid a simple spelling mistake in writing. To this day, a red pen mark is still the first thing I notice when I'm involved with any writing center or peer tutoring program. Those small mistakes are embarrassing, frustrating, and always take away from the main goal of my writing. In past writing center visits, many tutors of mine would circle any misplaced letters, misspelled words, or confusing sentences while they ignored my questions about tone, style, or organization. The people who typically helped me with my writing tended to focus on my dyslexia rather than my writing or thesis. I would find myself leaving most tutoring sessions frustrated and unsatisfied, and most of all, confused about what I could actually do to improve my writing.

Usually, young students diagnosed with dyslexia have a hard time with phonemic awareness, which is the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds of spoken language. This often leads to problems with decoding words, reading fluency, and spelling. (Univ. of Oregon, 1997) Throughout middle and high school, it was difficult for me to deal with the lack of understanding from my tutors; they thought dyslexia was an ailment that just jumbles words rather than a difference that presents differently in each person. This is typically why high school students with dyslexia are discouraged when prompted with writing and writing center visits;

what I really needed help on was not with grammar or dyslexic accommodations, but instruction on phonemic awareness, and how to decode words and large bodies of text.

These experiences with tutors can sometimes scar a dyslexic student over time, scaring them away from writing. Christine M. Hamel, a writing program professor invested in inequality in the writing center agrees that those experiences are why many students with learning disabilities who attend post-secondary institutions bring negative impacts with them. This can make it difficult for the writing center to ultimately help them. It is not only the negative experiences that concern me, but also how there is a rising number of reported disabilities within educational institutions. Recent studies from 2016 have shown that 1 in 5 students have learning and attention issues like dyslexia or ADHD, and struggle with it on a day-to-day basis.

(Corcoran, 2017) This means that in a graduating class of 100 students, 20 of them would most likely struggle in the traditional academic forms. This number has significantly increased in the past 10 years or so, especially affecting students once they reach college. In a thesis submitted by Kaliah Hardy, dedicated to studying communication sciences and disorders in writing rhetoric, finds that of the students that do report their disabilities in college, 70% of those dyslexic individuals in postsecondary institutions report having difficulty in notetaking, organizing their writing, and expressing ideas through writing. (Hardy, 2020) It's disappointing, but not surprising as a student with a learning difference to read these statistics. It makes sense that students retain their negative experiences from the past and believe they are unable to write well in a rigorous academic setting. I understand the embarrassing feeling of not being able to read out loud in class, mixing up words in a conversation, or unable to take notes in class while listening. But I do know, however, that with the right resources and attention that anyone can be a writer.

I believe that the rise in numbers of reported disabilities in college pose a difficulty for traditional writing center pedagogy and practices. In order to fully address dyslexia and other learning disabilities in a university community, (which 1 in 5 students struggle with), the writing center must center their concept of dyslexia within disability studies and find multimodal strategies to comprehensively include students of all abilities in the university.

Dyslexia is a quite common difficulty that presents itself “in various aspects of writing skills, making the individual unable to develop age-appropriate and ability appropriate functional skills.” (Murphy, 2020) This is why dyslexia usually negatively impacts one’s writing, comprehension, spelling, or even memory. According to clinical research done by Roxanne Hudson on dyslexia and the brain, dyslexia affects the part of the brain important for speech articulation, which helps with the connection of auditory input with letters. (Hudson, 2013) While it is typically found in young children learning to read, dyslexia can present in any age, and significantly impacts an adult’s written communication if left untreated.

It is interesting to compare the number of reported disabilities in college to the amount of students with disabilities seeking help from the writing center. Writing centers may strive for inclusion and accommodations, training their tutors in various ways to accommodate someone with dyslexia. Writing centers may teach their tutors that they may need to provide specific instructions or accompany their lessons with visual aids. However, recent studies do not show how many of these students are getting the help they need. There is unfortunately still a clear

barrier between students with learning differences and writing rhetoric in order to be successful in the university.

To understand the barrier between dyslexic students and the writing center, one must understand how students must integrate themselves into the academic language of the university to be successful. It is known that a student must involve themselves in the commonplace language of a university in order to fully be a part of it. According to Bartholomae, author of 'Inventing the University', a student must appropriate a specialized academic discourse "as if they were easily and comfortably one with their audience." This entails confidence, creativity, and rigor in writing that dyslexic students are not encouraged to participate in. He says that a student must appropriate a specialized discourse "as if they were easily and comfortably one with their audience." (Bartholomae, 5) This idea of a student mimicking the language of the university's standards in order to invent the university makes sense to me, as most of the learning done outside of the writing center is focused on mimicking and memorizing. Bartholomae even mentions how much of the written work for basic writers at a university is test-taking, or work "that places them outside the working discourse of the academic community." Here, I can see that Bartholomae is arguing for beginner student writers to be included in scholarly projects, places that would allow them to act as though they were colleagues in an academic enterprise." (Bartholomae, 11)

Bartholomae continuously argues the significance of student involvement within academic discourse and mentions that without being included in the language of the university, it's difficult for these student writers to take on the role of a scholar with authority in their writing. This makes most composition assignments very difficult for a dyslexic student, and they may struggle with authority, voice, and language. And when these students are sent to the writing

center for help, they often leave frustrated and confused by the overwhelming amounts of spelling mistakes; unable to fully integrate themselves into the academic language of the university.

According to Hamel, the professor dedicated to research on learning disorders in the writing center, it is widely known that universities teach students to “value 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 in this rhetoric is only possible when one conforms to these demands. While it may be the standard way to communicate within academic discourse, many worry that our educational system works to produce people who fit into the existing economic and social structure. (Hamel, 2012) This is likely to be true, as college institutions still focus on standardized testing to determine who is fit to attend a university. Even when these students make it into a post-secondary university, they still find that they are seen and treated differently.

According to Alison Hitt, a writing and research professor at Syracuse University, when these students with learning differences come into the writing center, dyslexia is a disability “positioned as something that tutors must cope with”, as peer tutors understand that these students need more help than others, which may lead to tutors to treat dyslexic students differently, which can create even more frustrations. (Hitt, 2012) By treating dyslexic students that their ailment is something to be worked around or to be fixed, it can actually deepen the divide between the academic discourse of the university and its access for dyslexic students. This leads to the question each writing center participant must ask themselves: how might writing centers accommodate dyslexic students without forcing them to adopt the university’s academic

language, or how might tutors begin to recenter or reevaluate their disability practices to be more inclusive?

*“For all students to have access to those things composition has to offer—
literate ‘skills,’ a voice, the words to write the world—we must ensure
that disability is recognized and respected.”*

-Jay Dolmage; English literature author bringing together rhetoric, writing, and disability studies.

Recent research by Sarah G. Wood and others show that there are effective teaching and tutoring strategies when it comes to students with dyslexia and difficulties with phonemic awareness. One effective strategy that may avoid ‘fixing’ dyslexia would be to use assistive technology. This includes text-to-speech software, which suggests words as the student types to help them find the right word more quickly. (Wood, 2019) Another important aspect of supporting students with dyslexia in the writing center is to provide accommodations and modifications to the writing process itself. This can include extra time for writing and editing, allowing the use of a word processor or other assistive technology, and providing written feedback rather than just verbal. (Wood, 2019) While these are small practices to implement, they may be beneficial for all students in the writing center, and not just to accommodate or fix dyslexia.

An additional extremely beneficial form of learning within the learning disorder community are multimodal practices. These practices essentially are including forms of learning that are not just bound to text. These multiliteracies are “an opportunity to move beyond the dominating limitations of print- and word-based literacies, to reach other modes of representation such as visual, aural, gestural, spatial, and multimodal.” (Hitt, 2012) This multimodal practice of utilizing multiple forms of media and literacies supports accessibility in the writing center. According to Alison Hitt, its attention to multiplicity in various modes and media, and it’s focus

on flexibility offers students to have more agency in their learning process. Writing centers should include and train their tutors to use these practices, along with making their pedagogy more flexible in order to include more students in their discourse. For example, if a dyslexic student is wanting help on a research assignment, the tutor should encourage them to utilize multimodal sources, offering them multiple types of media to learn from rather than just text. As someone with dyslexia, I find that consuming sources through different types of mediums makes the topic more accessible and enjoyable. And Hitt agrees, stating that by applying multimodal strategies, writing centers can create a physically accessible space for a diverse student population, establishing a foundation for flexible tutoring, learning, and composing practices.

As a student with a learning difference who has also participated in the writing center, I know there are ways to better help students struggling with language. Sometimes, I would even argue that disclosing a disability or learning difference is not fully necessary for a successful tutoring session. Allison Hitt estimates “that only half of college students report their disabilities.” They even add students often “forgo accommodations (for which they are eligible) because they believe their instructors will treat them differently.” (Hitt, 2012) Knowing a student’s specific diagnosis for an individual writing center meeting may be more harmful than helpful, as it perpetuates the idea that tutors must cope with dyslexia and predict the problems they may have, which can be very limiting.

Sarah Murphy, a professor at the University of Dartmouth, writes about dyslexia in the writing center and interviewed multiple people about learning differences. One of them was Kerri Rinaldi, a deaf writing center consultant, who said “My disability does not impact my

knowledge of myself. I will tell you what I need, and you don't need to know my disability so you can make that decision for me." (Murphy, 2020) She argues that writing centers do not need to know a student's specific diagnosis in order to have a successful session, which I agree with. It is thought that dyslexia is the result of a neurological difference, but according to the Dyslexic Center of Utah, it is not an intellectual disability, as people of many intelligence levels are diagnosed. Writing centers should recenter their concept of learning disabilities and discourage tutors from training their minds on "how to adapt their tutoring for students with disabilities, because all students come to writing centers with different types of knowledge and abilities." (Hitt, 2012) Recentering how tutors treat disabilities is one step writing centers should additionally take in order to foster an inclusive environment regardless of abilities. This can be done through understanding dyslexia not as a disability but difference in ability.

Unfortunately, not every student with a learning difference has had the opportunity to get a diagnosis, or even have extra help on their assignments throughout their life. Most have quietly struggled, hidden under the radar. It should not be this way, as having dyslexia or another learning difference never means a student is incapable of learning, or unintelligent. In fact, many people with dyslexia are highly smart and innovative. This is why many scholars studying learning differences have identified dyslexia to be part of the neurodiverse community, rather than a learning disability of its own. According to Alice Batt, a professor and writing center manager at the University of Texas Austin, if writing centers are able to subscribe to the "neurodiversity paradigm, it may allow them to see disabilities as differences in identity rather than medical issues to be pathologized and treated." (Batt, 2018) She argues that the term

‘neurodiversity’ neutralizes stigma traditionally associated with learning disorders, presenting an alternate view. In order for dyslexic students to begin to feel welcomed and valued in the writing community, writing centers should take that first step in interrogating their views on dyslexia, understanding that these individual “conditions are normal variations within a wide spectrum of human neurodevelopment.” (Batt, 2018) The writing center is a place that should value varied strengths and abilities; how many more dyslexic students have worries deep enough that they avoid a composition class, or the writing center completely? Writing centers should begin to change their internal culture and pedagogy of addressing learning differences, so these millions of students are able to persist as strong writers included in the academic rhetoric.

Elliot Spaeth, a researcher part of Academic and Digital Development at the University of Glasgow, has found that neurodivergent students are “often not considered in the facilitation of learning experiences.” (Spaeth, Pearson, 2021) Therefore, most of the academic and classroom spaces are not designed with students with learning differences in mind. This has led to a massive failure on the part of most academic institutions and has led to many repercussions for these students, as we’ve seen. As mentioned before, students struggling with learning differences may tend to avoid the writing center and not seek help when it’s needed. However, it’s also important to mention that there is an accompanying emotional impact these students experience when their social communication style is not understood, but reprimanded. By placing students with learning differences in programs with accommodations that are aiming to help ‘fix their problem’, these students inherently learn that their behavior that is central to their identity is wrong. This can lead to a person with these differences to mask their behavior, which is “to modify or suppress aspects of their identity and behavior to fit in with others’ expectations or avoid negative judgements.” (Spaeth, Pearson, 2021) It’s important to mention that

neurodivergence in education has been a topic more recently studied than in past years. And while these self-advocacy movements have increased, research suggests that “increasing awareness does not always lead to more accepting attitudes and practices.” (Spaeth, Pearson, 2021) Therefore, this places students with learning differences within the neurodivergent community in a vulnerable place and will make it difficult to succeed without struggle. These positions are not typically considered by most composition professors, or writing center tutors, and are rather seen as an issue that needs to be overcome.

While there are new ideas forming around neurodiversity and dyslexia in the writing center, there is still little space in academic discourse and society for students with a learning difference. I believe this is credited to the way universities and writing centers address and view disabilities. According to Cathy Davison, a writer and author addressing dyslexia and disabilities studies, writing centers are more likely to label a student with a learning disability if they fail to fit into our educational system. This is a damaging practice and does not accurately depict disabilities in academic rhetoric. It is stigmatizing for teachers and tutors to assume that because a student fails within the traditional school system, they have some form of a learning difference. Even so, many successful people were able to attain degrees without disability accommodations. “If you are a successful entrepreneur in the US, you are three times more likely than the general population to have been diagnosed with a learning or attention disorder.” (Davidson, 2011) Knowing this, it’s interesting to see how regardless of if a disability is reported, it doesn’t measure if they will succeed in the traditional academic forum. This is because disability is seen as something that needs accommodations, and makes someone slower, rather than just having different abilities.

With the rising numbers of reported learning disabilities in college, we must begin to question whether our practices are excluding different forms of expression and knowledge. Our education system assesses others against a standard that is believed to be static, but rather a shifting contrast based on thoughts and values. (Davidson, 2011) It is known that the nature of academia is always changing and branching into new forms of expression. Therefore, more scholars should be concerned about how this belief affects neurodivergent students. Are millions of students in post-secondary institutions really suffering from the same learning disorders, or does our academic discourse and way of assessment exclude most types of learners? This is a reflection that all writing center scholars and participants should indulge in for themselves.

We all know that writing centers are a phenomenal place for learning, growth, and reflection—peer tutors are able to offer their knowledge and guidance to help any student with any intellectual ability, and vice versa. I believe writing centers must make more room for the narratives of people who do not learn in the typical way our educational system promotes, whether that be through a learning, language, or motor difference. The writing center knows better than to reward only one expression of knowledge, they are built on the belief that anyone can succeed in writing! Therefore, they should begin to create more spaces for dyslexic students, and anyone else who feels that their way of learning has been condemned. According to Christine Hamel, “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.” If humans express knowledge in infinite different ways, then how can we expect one traditional education system to fairly evaluate and include students of all abilities?

Bibliography

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University" Ed. Mike Rose. New York: Guilford 1985.

Batt, Alice. "WELCOMING AND MANAGING NEURODIVERGENCE IN THE WRITING CENTER." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. Vol 15, No.2 (2018) <http://www.praxisuwc.com/325-batt>

Cocoran, Mimi, and David J Chard. "The State of LD: Introduction." *The State of LD*, National Center for Learning Disabilities, 7 Mar. 2020, www.nclld.org/research/state-of-learning-disabilities/.

Davidson, Cathy AND. *Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn*. New York: Viking, August 18th, 2011. Print.

Dolmage, Jay. "Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door." *Disability and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Brenda Jo Brueggemann. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 14-27. Print.

Hamel, Christine M. "The Writing Lab Newsletter." Edited by Muriel Harris, *Wlnjournal.org*, Writing Lab Newsletter, Apr. 2002, <https://wlnjournal.org/archives/v26/26.1.pdf>.

Hardy, Kaliah. "THE EFFECTS OF DYSLEXIA IN COLLEGE-AGED STUDENTS STUDYING SPECIAL EDUCATION." *DigitalCommons@EMU*, Eastern Michigan University, 12 May 2020, <https://commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1668&context=honors>.

Hitt, Allison. "ACCESS FOR ALL: THE ROLE OF DIS/ABILITY IN MULTILITERACY CENTERS." *Praxis*, Syracuse University, 2012, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/hitt-92>.

Hudson, Roxanne F, et al. "Dyslexia and the Brain: What Does Current Research Tell Us?" *Reading Rockets*, WETA, 12 Dec. 2013, <https://www.readingrockets.org/article/dyslexia-and-brain-what-does-current-research-tell-us>.

Murphy, Sarah. "Dyslexia in the Writing Center: Multimodal Strategies." *The Peer Review*, Issue 4.0. (June 2020). <https://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/issue-4-0/dyslexia-in-the-writing-center-multimodal-strategies/>.

Spaeth, Elliott, and Amy Pearson, Dr. "A Reflective Analysis on Neurodiversity and Student Wellbeing: Conceptualizing Practical Strategies for Inclusive Practice." OSF Preprints, 11 Oct. 2021. Web.

“Statistics.” Dyslexia, Dyslexia Center of Utah, 2022, www.dyslexiacenterofutah.org/.
University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning. “Big Ideas in Beginning Reading.” Phonemic Awareness: Concepts and Research, University of Oregon, 1998, reading.uoregon.edu/big_ideas/pa/pa_what.php.

Wood, Sarah G. “Does Use of Text-to-Speech and Related Read-Aloud Tools Improve Reading Comprehension for Students with Reading Disabilities? A Meta-Analysis.” *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Jan. 2018, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5494021/.
