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Riley N. Dandurand

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Destigmatizing Working with Dyslexic Learners

Riley N. Dandurand
(Kansas State University)

Abstract In the field of writing center research there is a paucity of information regarding tutoring students with dyslexia. This comes as no surprise considering it is only in the last 50 years that there has been a conscious effort to include those who have exceptionalities in all areas of education. In addition to a lack of research and training there is another issue that arises with disclosing exceptionalities. Those studying dyslexia have found that students are hesitant to disclose their learning disability because of the stigma and feelings of differentiation from their peers (Brizee et al., 2012). The question then becomes how we prepare tutors so they may approach a diverse group of learners and feel they have the skills to work with any student without disclosing their disability. Part of implementing the Universal Design for Learning approach is preparing tutors to accommodate a range of learning disabilities, exceptionalities, and cultures. It is important for tutors to understand common characteristics of dyslexic writers and strategies for working with them. Effective strategies include repeating explicit instruction, emphasizing phonetics, and mind mapping/chunking information. This project is focused on helping secondary writing center tutors and faculty to feel they have enough knowledge about dyslexia to help students who choose not to disclose their disability and offer strategies that they may utilize when working with dyslexic students. Furthermore, this project affirms the importance of creating an equitable learning environment for all students who seek the support of a writing center.

Keywords UDL, tutoring, postsecondary, secondary, Universal Design for Learning, mapping, scribes, multiple modes

In the last 50 years there has been a conscious effort in education to shift from a generalized form of teaching to a design that is flexible enough to be adapted for any specialized learning needs. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework allows educators to intentionally create lesson plans and activities that are versatile enough to go above or below grade level, or any other specifications to meet a student's needs. The UDL approach is applicable in all educational settings, not just in the classroom. When it comes to making the classroom an equitable learning environment

for all students regardless of their abilities, the writing center provides support that levels the field. Students with learning disabilities, more specifically, dyslexia, find it difficult to approach the writing center for fear of being stigmatized or treated differently from their peers once they disclose their disability; additionally, tutors often lack the hands-on knowledge and training to appropriately assist these students. Since writing centers often lack the funding, training, and resources that they need to train their tutors in working with dyslexic students on a larger scale, I plan to contribute to the

conversation with more background into what students with dyslexia experience and the best methods for assisting them in their writing process.

The goal of all writing centers is to aid writers in their creative process through collaboration with a tutor, “where the tutor acts as more of a sounding board for the student. There are instances, however, when the tutor must take a more hands-on approach rather than the standard approach of guiding the student with questions. Specifically, research on learners with disabilities (LDs) conducted by Dr. Kathleen Spencer found, “Writing poses particular challenges for students with literacy-based learning disabilities (LBLD), including problems with spelling, punctuation, sentence formation, text generation, text organization, and the use of genre conventions. . . . [Students] often lack knowledge about the criteria for good writing and have trouble understanding the communicative purpose of their compositions” (Spencer, 2008, p. 6). With so many working components, writing is already a complicated task. Adding other factors like difficulty with phonetics or distinguishing between letters can result in cognitive overload for dyslexic students. Lower order mechanical problems that might resolve naturally for other writers through the revision process may be less intuitive for students with disabilities as they are unable to identify the mechanical errors they make. So, for these students the writing center may be somewhere they go to fix lower order concerns like grammar, spelling, and audience identification, rather than higher order concerns like clarity, diction, or voice. However, that isn’t to say that dyslexic students do not struggle with higher order concerns as well. In fact, Spencer’s claim supports the idea that higher order concerns are equally difficult when the student has trouble articulating their argument or understanding the “purpose” in their writing.

In an interview I conducted with a dyslexic student and her parent, they offered insight that supports much of the research out there. Sophia is the student with dyslexia, but her mother explained her daughter’s experience with the diagnosis and learning to work with the disability. Her mother states, “Spelling is

especially challenging for Sophia’s writing. I didn’t even know that was a part of dyslexia until we started learning about what she was going through. Dyslexic people hear things differently and their brains compute what they hear differently than the rest of us. So, she can be told someone’s name and then call them something completely different because she heard something different. Same with spelling words, she writes as she heard it” (Riley, 2022). This explains to the tutor why it is so frustrating for dyslexic students when they struggle to find the right words or the correct spelling of a word when writing a paper, especially when they hear something different from what the tutor says. For the student to work through the cognitive barriers associated with dyslexia they sometimes need to see, hear, and write the word multiple times to fully comprehend the spelling and sound of the word. Sophia’s mother also mentioned that she often says words, “slowly, clearly, and loudly as well as repeat it,” and that conducting spelling tests one-on-one with her teacher allowed her to fully understand the word (Riley, 2022). Dyslexic students are working through the phonetics and spelling of a word while trying to develop their arguments in a paper, so chunking information in smaller pieces makes it easier when working through writing concerns with a tutor.

Writing may be a particularly daunting task for students whether or not they are dyslexic. Spencer clarifies, “Writing is a complex task involving the coordination of many skills, ranging from lower-level mechanical skills to higher level planning and composition skills” (Spencer, 2008, p. 1). Spencer expands on the components of writing that make it feel overwhelming for many students, but reassures tutors that with the UDL approach they can account for lower and higher order concerns. By starting from the beginning with each student, going over the basics, then working up to higher order concerns, tutors are employing UDL and scaffolding student learning for all students, not just those with dyslexia. Additionally, in Michael Herbert’s “Why Children with Dyslexia Struggle with Writing and How to Help Them,” he explains, “A writer with poor spelling skills may need to rely more on

his or her working memory when spelling words, which leaves fewer working memory resources available for generating ideas for his or her writing or holding them in memory throughout the writing process” (Herbert, 2018, p. 844). Herbert explains to tutors what occurs in the minds of dyslexic students when they write and shows why it is so difficult for them to get into a “flow.” For general education students it is not a conscious effort to recall the spelling of a word as it often comes with little to no thought required, but with dyslexic students spelling requires them to interrupt their thought processes to recall spelling rules. Then once one considers the number of times recalling spelling requires a student to stop the fluidity of their thoughts and then refocus, it becomes clear where the struggle with organization may stem from. Writing center tutors should use this information to better understand their tutees and consider how applying UDL works in this instance, and how they can translate techniques from one session to the next.

The approach when working with dyslexic students is similar to that of general education students because the session must be individualized to each student. Not every student with dyslexia finds lower order concerns like spelling to be their problem area. In fact, Spencer found, “struggles with text generation and organization could negatively impact lower-level skills, such as spelling. Therefore, poor spelling in a composition may reflect generally poor spelling, or alternatively, indicate that the writer has difficulty considering spelling and other composition issues simultaneously” (Spencer, 2008, p. 6). Just as every person is unique, so are their needs when they come into the writing center. The one size fits all approach does not account for how lower order concerns might affect higher order concerns, or the inverse, when it comes to writers with disabilities. Some people may believe that dyslexic writers would struggle the most with spelling, but this is not always the case as some students become so focused on accurate spelling that they lose sight of their organization or argument. When working with dyslexic students it’s imperative that the tutor be able to recognize patterns in a student’s writing so

that the tutor can begin scaffolding from what the writer already knows to what the tutor can help teach them. In tutoring sessions where instruction is individualized to the student, one might find that general education students struggle with the same issues as exceptional students. This further supports the idea that a UDL approach that is flexible for each student is the most beneficial. The point of UDL is to make inclusivity less a conscious effort than a standard practice where classrooms and writing centers alike account for the diverse needs of their students in natural practice.

In the field of writing center research many articles will touch on the importance of improvisation during tutoring sessions. Improvisation is key when working with a diverse student population and a wide variety of topics/subject matter. This means that coming up with something on the fly is a skill that tutors must possess. Adaptability is essential in a writing center. Training tutors in writing centers on how to improvise with a variety of techniques helps them when they are actually working with students in the writing center. Stressing to tutors that improvising comes not from a lack of preparedness but rather from an understanding of individualization helps them feel more confident going into their tutoring sessions. With improvisation comes some understanding of the writing process as well, and how to break it down for writers who are struggling. So, when working with a dyslexic student who chooses nondisclosure, there may be more improvising involved with writing tools. Tutors improvise all the time with nondyslexic students as well, because one never knows what a student will bring to a tutoring session. Additionally, research from Rebecca Babcock and Kim Wewers found, “tutors knew little about dyslexia except for folk knowledge gleaned from the media, most of it stereotypical and unscientific such as dyslexics switch letters around when reading.” In fact, dyslexic tutees may have trouble decoding words and be more reliant on context when reading. When writing they may have trouble both at the mechanical and discourse levels. Based on the interviews with dyslexic students she suggested that tutors be flexible: “Certain assumptions about how we expect a

tutoring session to be conducted may need to be revised" (Babcock). The unknown shouldn't be a cause for anxiety for tutors, but rather cause for excitement as every tutoring session is different. Tutors should be well rounded enough in their training to feel comfortable training writers with any issue. Furthermore, tutors should be trained on how to approach students when they suspect there might be more going on than just confusion in the writing process.

In her article "Creative Solutions to Making the Technology Work: Three Case Studies of Dyslexic Writers in Higher Education," Geraldine A. Price speaks with higher education dyslexic students about their experiences with writing. Through interviews conducted with dyslexic students Price gained valuable insights into what dyslexic students perceive as their problem areas in writing, and what resources or strategies they have found to assist them in the writing process. Student A in Price's study said, "I get really confused trying to work out and organize what I want to say. I had to do a written assignment for a tutorial and I got all confused. So I started using Inspiration (electronic mind mapping tool). I did a flow chart of my outline ideas to help me to sequence things so that I know where I am going" (Price, 2006, p. 28). This student benefited from seeing their ideas in physical form and grouped together according to topic, making the process of determining what fragments of information to include less overwhelming. For many students, not just those with dyslexia, being able to physically organize their ideas before or during writing makes sorting through sources to find relevant material less time consuming.

When preparing tutors to work with students, training instruction should emphasize the benefits of mind mapping for dyslexic students and all other students of educators sincerely believing in employing the ideas of UDL. Making mind mapping a standardized practice in writing centers, where the tutor creates a mind map of the student's paper, which models to the dyslexic student how to utilize the technique, may narrow the lens for the writer by decreasing the amount of information the student focuses on at once. Mind mapping helps

with organization because the student is able to see the way that their paper is structured and visually/physically reorganize information so that it appropriately builds their argument. In his article "A Guide for Writing Tutors Working with Dyslexic Students," featured in the *Writing Lab Newsletter*, John Corrigan found, "A step-by-step manner must be emphasized. If the process is mastered one step at a time, the dyslexic student will see the product take form and better understand how it was accomplished" (Corrigan, 1997, p. 3). Just as with any other instructional practice, it is helpful to use multiple modes of teaching like lectures, videos, graphics, and hands-on activities in tutoring. Additionally, sometimes visualizations of the abstract ideas that students have flowing through their minds is the best way for them to discern which points are salient enough to include in their argument. A mind mapping or grouping practice is effective for those who find writing in a linear manner to be difficult because it allows the student to visually track their thought process and physically see how their ideas connect to build an argument.

Furthermore, the breaking apart of topics and sorting information appropriately under each topic heading helps students to "chunk" or work on their writing in sections. Student B in Price's research found this method particularly useful. Price writes about the student using a "brainstorming session" as his "working document" that was flexible and changed many times during the writing process. The breaking down of information into parts enabled him to focus on one part before moving on to the next, and then bringing each completed part together at the end (Price, 2006, p. 31). Price's research shows that certain students need something tangible to work with when sorting their ideas before putting them into a fully formed argument. Working in a sectioned manner allows dyslexic students to process information over time without being overwhelmed by the amount of information presented all at once. When working in writing centers tutors should have a plethora of graphic organizers at their disposal for instances when they encounter students that need help organizing their thoughts into distinctive groups.

Sophia's mom spoke about how her daughter would get overwhelmed if too much information was presented to Sophia at one time. She says, "She [Sophia] also knows when she needs her parents or teachers to just slow down and give her a little while to take things in if there is a lot of instruction or things coming at her. It can make her upset" (Riley, 2022). Writing can be an overwhelming process for all student writers, so adding a layer of complexity with a phonetic and spelling barrier can make the whole process daunting for dyslexic students. Graphic organizers benefit dyslexic students and may benefit general classroom students as well by modeling how to structure one's thought processes when formulating an argument. Additionally, taking time to transition the student from one task (or focus) to another by offering time warnings or easing them forward in another way allows the student's brain time to transition (Riley, 2022).

Another interview was with Dr. Felicity Post, an associate professor of special education at Peru State College in Nebraska with a bachelor of science in elementary education and special education and a doctorate in special education with an emphasis on literacy. Our discussion was about what writing centers and tutors can do to help their dyslexic students and what she recognizes as the most common issues among dyslexic writers. She states, "Organization of ideas is huge. Students have amazing ideas and no way to put them on paper. It all gets stuck up in their brain" (Post, 2022). With so much already going on inside their heads as they try to decode sounds and symbols, dyslexic students may benefit from breaking down information in this way.

The voice-to-text option is one that tutors can suggest that comes at no cost to the student, tutor, or writing center. In Anita Satapathy's article "Applications of Assistive Tools and Technologies in Enhancing the Learning Abilities of Dyslexic Children," she recommends various resources for dyslexic students, students without exceptionalities, and educators as well. She finds, "Web-based text-to-speech resources, Chrome, Google Chrome, has a wide variety of Chrome extensions that help dyslexic students with learning. They can

perform numerous functions that are helpful to dyslexic students, including dictation, word prediction, and text-to-speech" (Satapathy, 2019, p. 121). Most applications like Microsoft Word and Google Docs or technology like smartphones and computers are voice-to-text compatible. This tool takes away the element of figuring out which letter is the one that the student is looking for and types the words out for the student.

Similarly, in the writing center the tutor may act as a "scribe" for the student as Post suggested. Post also says, "In these instances [where one must find alternative adaptations for writing], students should be allowed the opportunity to use voice-to-text, trained in graphic organizers, or provided a scribe to help them get their thoughts on paper. It can be a laborious process, but a huge celebration when the student is able to share and write successfully" (Post, 2022). Taking away a stressful factor of the writing process isn't eliminating the amount of work that the student must complete; rather it levels the amount of time they may spend decoding letters and sounds on a given writing assignment to that of those students who do not have dyslexia. Assisting dyslexic students in this manner ensures their train of thought isn't interrupted so frequently by trying to figure out the sounds and letters.

Additionally, for students who find the researching process to be difficult because they must sort a significant amount of information, suggesting multiple modes of media is helpful. Murphy finds, "If a student comes to an appointment to brainstorm for a paper the tutor may suggest referring to multimedia sources such as audiobooks, videos, podcasts, pictures, etc. This way, the student can find more about their topic without having to rely purely on written sources. For someone with dyslexia, consuming information presented through different platforms may make certain aspects of their topic more accessible" (Murphy, 2020). Rather than having to read every bit of information on their topic to find the best suited for their paper, offering students visual and auditory alternatives might alter their whole perception of the researching process. The headache that was reading and

decoding articles now becomes an enjoyable process where the student can see and hear the information pertinent to their topic.

Dr. Post provides more suggestions for working as a peer tutor with dyslexic students. She says, "I also recognize that students may do well with a technique for a period of time but then stop responding. I am always at the ready. Some popular choices for a lot of my students include lots of repetition, setting a purpose for reading, read alouds so that they can hear the 'appropriate' way to read, and working with words (time for students to break down and build words in a particular word family)" (Post, 2022). Even things like having putty in a student's hands while they work through something that challenges them helps to hone in a student's working memory.

Any institution that offers writing support for students or the public can use these techniques. In fact, these techniques work for below the collegiate or professional level, as well. While teaching a class of eighth-grade English language arts, there were a few students for whom these techniques worked well. Out of 62 total students there were 5 who had dyslexia. While these 5 students were working on a writing project, they all asked for help at some point or another. For this study, only 3 were included.

Student A found it difficult to organize their thoughts before writing, so having a pre-write graphic organizer that broke down the information they were working with was helpful for finding direction; additionally, the organizer helped the student identify points where they needed more research to back their argument. They found there were several gaps in their research and analysis, so being able to see this information grouped on a piece of paper was helpful. When students can look at large amounts of information broken into smaller amounts, it helps them to see whether their argument is well rounded without being overwhelmed with the amount of reading, sorting, and decoding that they must do. Tutors at any level can utilize this technique. Tutors may choose a more detailed or broader graphic organizer depending on the student, but this, much like everything else in tutoring sessions, must be individualized to the student.

Student B struggled with hearing the grammatical errors in their paper. When asked to work on revisions, Student B said that there were no revisions to be done on their paper, when on the first page, at first glance, there were several grammatical errors. This student was then asked to reread their paper and make sure that there were no revisions to be made. The student came back after a while and said there was nothing. So, after seeing that typical methods of revision where the student rereads their work to check for mistakes wasn't working, it was clear that a new approach was needed. To help the student identify the errors in their paper, a few factors needed to be eliminated. The first factor was reading the paper by themselves. Obviously, the student couldn't identify the errors alone; however, after having the paper read to them by someone else, the student was able to identify the mistakes almost immediately. Research by Sarah Murphy reinforces this technique as she writes, "Forcing a student with dyslexia to read their paper aloud may be very difficult for the student and they are less likely to benefit from this practice" (Murphy, 2020). In the case of Student B, having them read the paper aloud or even quietly by themselves was not going to be productive. Student B would get caught up in decoding words and making sure they were spelled and pronounced correctly, rather than focusing on the order of those words. Additionally, the frequent starting and stopping while reading made it difficult for Student B to keep track of ideas, so having the paper read aloud to them allowed Student B the opportunity to complete revisions by themselves.

Student C found it difficult to stay focused on reading their sentences repeatedly for extended periods of time as they tried to write their paper. When they were asked how their paper was coming along, the response was less than enthusiastic. Student C said that the letters were blurring together, and it was giving them a headache to continue reading their paper. Allowing them to take a break was a temporary fix. Something that was more helpful to the student was increasing the font size and spacing; also, choosing a different font that was easier to read over long periods of time helped significantly. Research by R. Tariq

and S. Latif found, “While it is appropriate to use any font the student feels comfortable with, studies show that certain font types are easier for dyslexic people to work with. Generally, a sans-serif font group in black ink is best, with a fourteen to sixteen-point font size” (Tariq & Latif, 2016). This technique was useful for Student C because they were then able to see the words and letters more clearly, not blurring the words. Fonts that have swooping on the letters like “PT Serif” are easier to read for dyslexic students. Additionally, S. King says, “typical effects of dyslexia—the mirroring, swapping, rotating and crowding of letters—are only enhanced and magnified by most fonts” (King, 2018). So, by simply allowing students to choose the font that is easiest to read for them will make it easier for them to work with letters and words for longer periods. This practice may be useful in instances when the student has trouble focusing on their words, and giving them a little bit of choice makes the process more engaging.

One of the main concerns for writing centers is meeting a student’s needs without their having to disclose any disability unless they feel comfortable doing so. An article written by writing center professors from Loyola University Maryland and Oakland University, and software engineers from IBM found, “Each year, thousands of students with disabilities attend institutions of higher education. Some of these students disclose their needs, while others navigate college with little or no support” (Brizee et al., p. 1). We offer dyslexic students support for disabilities starting in primary and elementary school, and support is often provided at the secondary level as well. Encouraging students in elementary and secondary schools to utilize the supports and resources made available means they will be more likely to seek support from places like the writing center when at the collegiate level. Seeking support becomes harder as students mature and reach a point in their development where peer opinion is extremely important. This is often because of the stigma that still surrounds disabilities and special education, which makes those with exceptionalities feel ostracized or isolated from their peers.

So, when a student does not disclose their disability, it is up to the tutor to be able to identify when “standard” approaches aren’t working and that there may be an underlying issue, specifically in areas like understanding the prompt, structure of an essay, starting writing, or trouble with syntax. This is not to say that these aren’t concerns a student without dyslexia might have. Tutors should be trained to recognize the prevalence of dyslexic students’ common lower order issues being barriers that may causing higher order concerns to be more confusing. Notably, Brizee et al.’s research found that “feedback obtained during the third generation of usability tests on the Purdue OWL shows that users with disabilities, in larger numbers than we anticipated, access the OWL to help them write” (Brizee et al., 2012, p. 2). Their findings support the assumption that many students with learning disabilities like dyslexia seek assistance when faced with a writing assignment, and making these resources accessible and welcoming makes a significant difference in the number of students with dyslexia that come to the writing center for support.

One important thing for tutors to remember is that they are not doctors. They do not have the professional training to diagnose tutees as dyslexic, even if tutors might identify several characteristics of dyslexia displayed in one student. Sarah Murphy finds, “It is likely that a student with dyslexia may not disclose that information, and it is not appropriate for the tutor to assume or ask. Assuming or asking a student about potential learning disabilities crosses a boundary that may make them uncomfortable and damage rapport” (Murphy, 2020). The job of writing centers is to assist writers through the writing process, not to diagnose them. If tutors started asking tutees if they have disabilities, it might upset the tutees and deter them from coming back to the writing center for help. The point of this research is to help tutors identify when standard approaches are not working and to offer alternative methods if the tutee struggles with one of the steps in the writing process. Making the writing center a judgment-free and welcoming place increases the likelihood that students

will utilize the supports offered there and return in the future.

Additionally, the website LD Online: All About Learning Disabilities and ADHD is an excellent resource for students who have dyslexia and struggle with disclosing their disability. They recommend that students with dyslexia ask for support when they recognize a need for additional help while taking a class. LD Online also tells students that they should “determine your own personal privacy boundaries concerning the amount and type of information you want to share with others. Remember to focus on your abilities and be self-determined and practical” (Lynn-Chlup, n.d.). This advice is useful for tutors to know so they do not pressure the student into disclosing their disability; rather, they adjust their practice to fit a student’s needs and appropriately vocalize patterns that they notice in the student’s writing. Another notable point is for tutors to reinforce positive writing patterns by telling the student what they are doing well. Focusing on student strengths helps them to recognize what “good” writing looks like and gives them a model to refer back to.

If a student does choose to disclose their disability with the tutor, there are a few follow-up questions the tutor may ask to help guide the session. Dr. Post and LD Online recommend asking students what has worked for them in the past. Was there anything that made the writing process easier for them? What accommodations did teachers or other educators make that were successful when helping them to write? What hasn’t worked? (Lynn-Chlup, n.d.; Post, 2022). Questions that aren’t focused on what the student can’t do, but instead on what they can do well builds their confidence and builds rapport between student and tutor.

Writing center tutors may feel underprepared to work with dyslexic students, but research shows that UDL approaches are effective for all learners. Often with the UDL approach tutors scaffold student learning, beginning by modeling basic writing skills and then working up to higher order concerns. Being flexible with strategies, resources, and approaches allows tutors to successfully navigate a variety of tutoring sessions, not just sessions with dyslexic

writers. When training tutors it is important that they understand the common characteristics of dyslexic writers and be able to recognize when a strategy is not working. Offering various textbook, article, online, video, and other resources while training tutors may help them feel confident when working with dyslexic students. Furthermore, exposing tutors to exceptionalities works to destigmatize what might be considered the challenge of working with dyslexic students. Instead, tutors may realize that aiming to be flexible and having a wealth of resources in preparing for these sessions only makes them better tutors to those without exceptionalities as well.

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