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# Editing is Easy; Tutoring is Hard: Helping Writers with Learning Disabilities

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## Abstract

Tutors often feel uncomfortable in unfamiliar tutoring sessions. For new tutors in particular, tutoring students with learning disabilities proves to be a daunting task and may lead to panic-based tutoring decisions during sessions. Ultimately, there are two notions for tutors to keep in mind when tutoring those with learning disabilities: 1) work on what the student wants to work on in a session, and 2) don't abandon standard tutoring practices (e.g. asking questions) simply because of panic in an unfamiliar circumstance.

## Key Words

Learning Disabilities, Tutoring Techniques, Proofreading, Panic, Intuition

## Editing is Easy; Tutoring is Hard: Helping Writers with Learning Disabilities

I only had my role as a tutor for two weeks before I betrayed the parameters of the Utah State University Writing Center mission statement.

As a tutor at USU, I am supposed to help students “find answers to their writing questions” and “increase students’ confidence in their writing.” While interviewing for the job itself, I implicitly agreed to comply with the mission statement’s principles; while reviewing the mission statement, I internalized the goal to bolster confidence in student writing; while meeting with my first ever students, I made sure to highlight the strengths in their writing. However, due to my own discomfort and implicit biases, I abandoned all logical tutoring knowledge and principles in the face of tutoring a student with a learning disability.

It was a typical afternoon in USU’s Library Writing Center. We had a full schedule, and I patiently waited for the supervisor to bring a student to my cubicle. Tutoring, at this point in time, was a calculated thrill; I was learning my style of tutoring through stumbles and feats, which made each appointment an exploration of the unknown. This particular appointment appeared to be one I could handle.

As the writer sat down, he explained that he brought a complete draft for an introductory English class, and he simply wanted to read over the essay to make sure it was cohesive and “grammatically correct.” This scenario presented a perfect opportunity to read the essay out loud, which is what we began to do after I suggested it. As we read, the student presented the extraordinary history of the small town in Idaho in which he grew up. The paper itself was a chronological, fascinating retelling of events; however, as we took turns reading out loud, every couple of sentences there would be a syntactical error. A simple mix up of subject and verb

placement and the occasional implementation of unnecessary transitional phrases made us both stumble over his writing.

After seeing some repetitive mistakes, I decided to interject:

“This sentence does not quite make sense, seeing as we had a hard time reading it. I think the simple rearranging of the sentence will make it easier to comprehend.”

At this point in the session, the student began to appear nervous. The carefully crafted comfort levels plummeted. Out of an obligation of sorts, the student decided to explain the source of the syntactical errors: “I see what you’re saying, but the thing is, I have a learning disability. So, when I write, I don’t even notice that I am making these errors. Maybe you could just show me what the mistakes are...”

His response immediately altered my approach to the session, and I did not even know the implications of his disability. We continued to read through his paper, but instead of teaching mini writing lessons, I edited the remainder of his paper without hesitation.

As the session wrapped up, I engaged in my usual small-talk and wished him luck on his paper. All the while, my internal dialogue was raging.

*You aren’t supposed to be an editor!*

*He can’t take away anything from a session like that!*

*What should you do differently?*

Since that session, I have been on the hunt for answers; how should writing center tutors engage with students that have learning disabilities? Should proofreading and editing be a resource available in writing centers? Upon embarking on a research journey, the answer to my

questions appear to be quite convoluted. Rebecca Babcock, professor of writing and linguistics at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, argues that editing and proofreading (the path I took in my own session) are necessary accommodations for those with disabilities. She posits that adamant anti-proofreading notions in writing centers translate into refusal to accommodate for writers with learning disabilities (Babcock 65). If anything, all writing centers should be working closely with their university disability service centers in order to incorporate editing as a necessary accommodation (67). This would not eliminate standard tutoring protocol; it would expand the inclusivity of writing centers by making editing an *option*. With all this in mind, it is evident that Babcock provides an intriguing perspective. If a student comes in for help with grammar (like in my own scenario), as tutors, don't we have an obligation to help them through whatever means necessary (e.g. proofreading)?

Despite Babcock's compelling argument, I still felt uneasy about how I handled my session. I wanted to find specific strategies for tutoring students with learning disabilities. In continuing my research, I realized that I did not quite understand the extent of what it means to have a "learning disability." The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a learning disability as, "any of [the] various conditions (such as dyslexia or dysgraphia) that interfere with an individual's ability to learn..." ("Learning Disability"). In accordance with that definition, the label of "learning disability" appears to be an umbrella term for a lot of diagnosable disorders. Mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety can be considered covered by the umbrella. The typical connotation of 'learning disability' tends to pertain to ADHD and dyslexia.

Once developing a better definitional understanding of what may constitute a learning disability, I moved on to see if university writing centers had specific approaches in helping student-writers with learning disabilities. Landmark University, a post-secondary institution for

those with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning disabilities, uses a variety of strategies in its own writing center to help its unique student-writer audience. Jan Thompson, a professor at Landmark University, concludes that questions are an imperative part of any tutoring session (i.e. they are useful in tutoring students with and without learning disabilities) (2). Questions in tutoring sessions serve a variety of purposes. Questions can unveil to a tutor where the writer stands in the writing process and in their own knowledge of assignment descriptions. Questions can help writers determine their purpose and appropriate audience. Questions can even clarify confusions and bolster communication between the tutor and writer. At USU's writing center, we are encouraged to guide sessions using open-ended questions. This strategy prevents tutors from projecting assumptions onto the writer, which subsequently allows for sessions to be tailored to the student. Ultimately, when I began my research, I assumed tutoring students with learning disabilities to involve a different protocol from the standard procedures; however, at the end of the day, tutors have a responsibility to help writers, and questions are one of the key ways to ensure that sessions remain tailored to *all* students. This does not mean that proofreading does not have a place in the writing center; it simply means that, before proofreading in a session, the tutor should always use clarification questions to ensure that it is what the writer needs and wants.

So, with this knowledge in mind: what would I do differently in my own aforementioned tutoring session? To my surprise, I would still proofread the student's paper because it is what the student needed and requested in order to work in accordance with his learning disability. With this in mind, not all tutoring sessions involving writers with learning disabilities require proofreading. The learning disability label should not alter a session; the writer should alter a session. In my session's case, the student-writer informed me of his learning disability and asked

for me to proofread and edit rather than explain grammar and sentence structure to him. With all learning-disabled students, we should allow editing/proofreading accommodations, but it is ultimately up to each individual student if that is the mode of help that they need to assist their writing. Conversely, if I were able to change something about my session with that student, I would ask more questions. I would ask all sorts of questions (e.g. open-ended questions about his interest in his topic, clarification questions about the assignment description, etc.) including a confirmation question about it being okay to proofread his paper.

Upon examination of the definition, it is clear that the word, 'learning disability,' can categorize large portions of student populations. This fact alone makes it important for writing center tutors to be able to help students with said disabilities. Despite this, it is difficult to arrange a "cookie-cutter" method for an all-encompassing term. The most important thing for tutors to remember is that tutoring sessions serve the purpose of helping student-writers. This means that tutors should be prepared to proofread if necessary. It also means that tutors should be prepared to ask a variety of questions. With thoughtful questions, tutors can determine what students need and want out of tutoring sessions. Tutors will always have assumptions and implicit biases; however, it is the acting upon these biases that can drastically hinder the helpfulness of tutoring sessions.

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