

Disabled but Able: Assisting Students with Disabilities in the Writing Center

In the United States, there is a storied history behind individuals with disabilities and the right to receive accommodations. From the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990 to the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) founded in 1964, establishments and regulations exist today to support those with disabilities, laboring to improve quality of life through assistance in the workplace, in school, and at home. For example, in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, colleges and universities are required to provide academic adjustments for individuals with disabilities; since this legislation took effect in 1977, the United States has seen the development of disability services on campuses, defending students with disabilities from discrimination and offering educational aid up through graduation (Leuchovius). At Winthrop University, the Office of Disability Services (ODS) "helps to create an accessible campus community where students with disabilities have equal opportunity to participate fully in their educational experience," actively promoting the variety of resources available on campus, like the Academic Success Center and the Math Lab, used by students with and without disabilities ("About Disability Services"). However, a lack of a thriving relationship between the ODS and Winthrop University's Writing Center has been observed. In an anonymous survey distributed to students registered with the ODS, 61% reported having not attended the Writing Center for a tutorial. Yet, 22% of those who stated they had not been to the Writing Center reported that they would start attending once relations between the Writing Center and the ODS had better developed. Ultimately, the results from this survey illustrate a need for improvement from the Writing Center and its tutors in order to better assist students with disabilities. Through raising awareness, preparing tutors, and promoting attendance, ultimately reaching for open communication, the Writing Center can fulfil its promise as an

invaluable resource at Winthrop University, building a connection with the ODS and better assisting students with disabilities.

Formally, the ADA defines disability as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities [of an individual]," taking into account "a history or record of such an impairment" and when "a person . . . is perceived by others as having such an impairment" (United States). As a result, the Writing Center is required to accommodate individuals with disabilities that are obviously presented, such as when a student enters with a service animal or an interpreter. However, when it comes to disabilities that are not visible, both sides are at a disadvantage: the Writing Center tutors have to adapt to a tutorial that they assume is normal, based simply on what the student presents as an academic issue, while the student has to struggle with relaying the fact that the tutorial requires a unique structure, based on his or her disability and what needs must be met. Disabilities that are not visible are categorized as learning disabilities, as explored in "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center" by Julie Neff: ". . . learning disabilities are generally a varied group of disorders that are intrinsic to the individual" (377). Defined "as 'a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written languages'" by the Learning Disabilities Act of 1968, learning disabilities can manifest as cognitive impairments, as seen with attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, or dysgraphia; there even exists students with learning disabilities that are not clearly distinct, placed in an "other" category (377). Overall, Neff writes, "Individuals with learning disabilities are likely to experience trouble with 'listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling, or arithmetic'" and "cannot be 'cured'," but "those with learning disabilities can learn to use their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses" (377).

Yet, in the Writing Center, the presence of a learning disability often remains unsaid: in the anonymous survey distributed to students registered with the ODS, 33% of students reported having not told the Writing Center that they have a disability and have accommodations that should be taken into account in a tutorial. Considering 39% of students registered with the ODS stated that they had or do attend the center, it is clear that there is lack of understanding between tutors at the Writing Center and students with disabilities, particularly concerning impairments that are not visible. As Neff points out, "A learning disability is the result of a malfunction in the system in one or more areas. We cannot look into the brain and see the malfunction, but we can see the results in a student's performance on a discrete task" (377). By raising awareness that the Writing Center is accessible to students with disabilities of all types, as well as preparing tutors of the possibility of working with a disabled student in order to gain understanding of various disabilities, we can confidently promote attendance and step closer to reaching open communication between the Writing Center and the ODS.

RAISING AWARENESS TO PREPARE TUTORS

According to *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences*, "Learning disabled writers often come to tutoring with a long history of frustration at low grades and low self-esteem" (McAndrew and Reigstad 100). Unfortunately, while this is a large generalization, it is the only precursor to a meek attempt at preparing tutors for working with students with learning disabilities; advice ranges from "[setting] up a risk-free environment" to "[boosting] the self-image of learning disabled writers," which are excellent points to follow but significantly lack further insight (100). Although tutors cannot be prepared for every individual student that enters the center, regardless of if the student has a disability or not, it is still critical for the tutor to be aware of the possibility, especially since a student with a learning disability may require

accommodations. In an interview conducted with several tutors from Winthrop University's Writing Center, I asked, "Do you have experience with working with learning disabled students at the center?" The general consensus was mediocre: tutor Rachel Phillips explained, "I rarely see students in the writing center that have severe learning disabilities. In fact, I don't know if I've ever worked with a student with a severe learning disability," while Nicole Drown stated, "Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to work with many students with learning disabilities" ("Interview for WRIT 500 Research Paper"). However, some familiarity was indicated, like when asked, "What approaches/techniques do you use when you are aware that the student you are working with has a learning disability?" Katey Murphy expressed, ". . . I typically take down the notes when helping students to make outlines; however, when I work with a student with attention problems, I have the student write down the notes for the outline"; by "[giving] them something to focus on," Murphy adjusts her tutoring approach just enough to take into account the student's impairment, without detracting from the student's ability to work independently ("Interview for WRIT 500 Research Paper"). Additionally, Melissa Gilbert stated, "I ask lots of questions to make sure the student understands and have the student repeat things back to me, in their own words, so I can make sure they're getting it," again showing the adaptability needed from tutors when working with learning disabled students ("Interview for WRIT 500 Research Paper"). It is clear that, on the surface, the tutors at the Writing Center grasp the basics of what to do when working with a student that has a disability, such as a learning disability.

Thus, it becomes a question of where the disparity resides. In the anonymous survey distributed to students registered with the ODS, I asked, "If you have not been to the Writing Center, why have you chosen not to go?" On this query, students were given the option to

explain their reasoning personally, where one specifically confessed, "My anxiety. When it comes to meeting new people, the fear of being judged for my writing or lack of writing keeps me from going." Again, on the surface, this appears to be an average fear tutors are taught to anticipate from students, but when it is a matter of an anxiety disorder, a disability that can handicap an individual's ability to learn, a new set of parameters must be taken into account; as indicated by the student in the survey, it is unknown whether or not the Writing Center tutors would understand what type of assistance the student would need. Ultimately, the tutors appear to be prepared, but students from the ODS are not comfortable enough to believe this, leading to the disproportion; tutor Nicole Drown noted this as well when she said, "Many students feel as though they're being judged for even bringing their writing to the center; for students with learning disabilities, writing anxiety is even worse" ("Interview for WRIT 500 Research Paper"). Moreover, without enlightening both ends, misconceptions are bound to rise, as reflected in *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Peer Tutoring* by Toni-Lee Capossela: "Because [learning disabled students] need additional time to process language, they are often assumed to be slow or even mentally deficient. This is hardly ever the case--most . . . test at average or above average intelligence" (97). Capossela further points out, "The learning disabled have the same legal rights as the physically disabled, including access to alternative forms of education," reinforcing the fact that a compromise needs to be met (97). In order to establish a connection between the Writing Center and the ODS and, as a result, between the tutors and students with disabilities, visible or otherwise, preparation is needed, even if it does not appear to differ much from what tutors are taught originally.

As documented in my interview, the tutors at the Writing Center agree. When asked, "Do you feel that you are prepared to work with students with learning disabilities? Or do you believe

more preparation would be useful?" general consensus wished for more training; tutor Melissa Gilbert said, ". . .it has not been mentioned at all in WRIT 500, so I think students . . . would have trouble," while Katey Murphy confirmed, "No, I don't think we are prepared. It would be nice to have a section of WRIT 500 dedicated to this group of students," followed by Rachel Phillips adding, "I don't know if we really discussed this as much in WRIT 500--from what I remember, we probably spent a class period on working with these types of students" ("Interview for WRIT 500 Research Paper"). It is evident that the tutors at the Writing Center see the need for more preparation in order to develop awareness in the event of working with a disabled student, such as one with a learning disability or an anxiety disorder. Simultaneously, the ODS acknowledges the importance of enlightening the tutors. In an interview with Gena Smith, director of the ODS, she explained that her office "refers students to the Writing Center" and Dr. Jane Smith, director of the Writing Center, "works with the ODS," but there is definite room for improvement; from "providing students with a letter from the ODS to give to the Writing Center" to "including ODS availability on a form for students to fill out when entering the Writing Center for a tutorial," Gena Smith suggested several ideas to bridge the gap between the two services, understanding the fact that being open with personal impairments, especially ones that are not visible, is daunting in an unfamiliar setting ("Interview with Gena Smith, Director of ODS"). As Capossela summarizes, "Because learning-disabled writers do not process language through normal channels, the key to consulting with them is to exploit other channels," which Gena Smith is well aware of (98). Her best idea was providing a disability workshop with the Writing Center tutors, using a presentation that includes information on a variety of disabilities and how to work with students with such disabilities--one she had given to the Academic Success Center and Math Lab tutors, admitting that she was not sure why the same thing had not

yet come to pass with the Writing Center ("Interview with Gena Smith, Director of ODS").

Considering the value of Gena Smith's knowledge, I asked in my interview to several tutors at the Writing Center whether they would be interested in the seminar, with each tutor responding positively. I believe teaching the prospective and current Writing Center tutors about disabilities, the ODS, and the possibility of working with a student with a disability that is not visible will raise enough awareness to have foresight and further prepare the tutors, which ultimately impacts one of the key elements tutors have to learn to begin with: adaptability.

RAISING AWARENESS TO PROMOTE ATTENDANCE

However, the relationship between the Writing Center tutors and students with disabilities needs to be a symbiotic one. Once the tutors at the center are trained about disabilities and how to assist students with various disabilities in a tutorial, awareness needs to develop on the part of the student in order to promote attendance. In my interview with Gena Smith, she called it a "campaign for advocacy," or taking steps to encourage students to acknowledge the center, attend the center, and finally be open with the center's tutors; if the Writing Center can put out the fact that a union has been forged between it and the ODS, advertising how the tutors have been enlightened and know how to receive and work with disabled students, then that might be all it takes for a student with a disability, like anxiety, to give the Writing Center a chance ("Interview with Gena Smith, Director of ODS"). This potential is also seen in the results of my survey distributed to students registered with the ODS, where 39% answered, "I have not been to the center, but I do believe that I would be assisted and my accommodations would be considered" after being asked, "As a student with disabilities, has the Writing Center adequately assisted you and considered your accommodations?" The struggle evolves from preparing tutors

to linking students with disabilities to the information that the Writing Center tutors now have the knowledge to assist them.

In "It Begins with a Mentality: Disability and the Writing Center" by Sarah Groeneveld from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, this pursuit is echoed: "What becomes immediately relevant and important . . . is the question of accommodation and accessibility -- are we, as Writing Center staff, making sure that our spaces and services are accessible to all students?" She emphasizes that "this isn't just about making sure students can get in the door" but that "it's about expanding our definition of accessibility to make sure that we are encouraging, welcoming, respecting and helping all students" (Groeneveld). Thus, the mission becomes establishing the Writing Center as a resource known to help students with disabilities, from obvious impairments to ones not visible. By developing "the mentality of adaptability and flexibility, a mentality that is necessary when meeting any student we encounter" to the point of carefully taking into account students with disabilities, then the Writing Center is prepped to announce its readiness -- but how can this be done beyond the ways the center is already publicized to students on campus (Groeneveld)? When this was considered in the interview with several tutors from the Writing Center, tutor Katey Murphy suggested, "If possible, it may be helpful to have a list of students who are registered with the [ODS] so that tutors know how to help these specific students to the best of their ability," while Nicole Drown pointed out, "Because it isn't exactly acceptable to ask every student if they are learning disabled, and many either are unaware of their own learning disabilities or will not want to talk about it . . . helping students on an individualized level is very difficult" ("Interview for WRIT 500 Research Paper"). It is challenging to find a solution that does not involve signaling any individual out, especially when the intent is inclusion. As recognized in Groeneveld's research, ". . .as important as it is to

not construe difference as 'special,' difference does matter," where "ignoring disability can cause just as much damage to a tutor/writer relationship as blowing a bullhorn that announces it.

Therefore, subtle measures need to be taken for the sake of confidentiality. It is always the individual's right to determine whether or not details about his or her disability should be expressed, but by at least displaying the opportunity to share, the way could be paved for students with disabilities to become aware of the Writing Center's approachability, promoting attendance to and advocacy in the center on their part. In "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center," Neff states, "Although learning-disabled students come to the writing center with a variety of special needs, they have one thing in common: they need more specific help than other students" (382). The image of the Writing Center then cannot remain stagnant; Neff describes that "the writer and the writing advisor [sitting] side by side, the writer holding the pencil, the writing advisor asking probing questions about the development of the topic" serves as a basic idea of how a tutorial is conducted, but "one group of students does not and cannot fit into this pedagogical picture: students with learning disabilities" (376). As a result, the Writing Center needs to exhibit malleability as much as it is demanded of its tutors upon meeting a new student, which Neff confirms: "By changing the picture of the writing conference, the writing center . . . can ensure that learning-disabled students, no matter the disability, are being appropriately accommodated" (382).

According to my interview with Gena Smith, this can be done through simple means without straining the budget, starting as small as posting visuals around the Writing Center. Comparing it to the likeness of the GLoBAL initiative seen around campus, which signifies an area as a place of equality, the Writing Center can put up the image of the ODS for students and tutors to see as they enter, validating the center as a place that supports understanding and

emboldens openness in the event of welcoming a student with disabilities ("Interview with Gena Smith, Director of ODS"). Gena Smith additionally shared with me a new image representing the ODS that her team has been working on -- an enlarged key that encapsulates the phrase "access the Office of Disability Services" -- and is set to be revealed on the school website soon; by using positive imagery of unlocking a resource, as opposed to the customary sign of a wheelchair-bound figure, it is the ideal message to display in the Writing Center as a gesture to students who may not be aware that they have the option of sharing information about their disability that needs to be taken into account in a tutorial ("Interview with Gena Smith, Director of ODS"). For further clarification, a small memo can be added to the ODS signature, explaining that if a student has a disability and accommodations that he or she needs to let the center know about, Gena Smith of the ODS or Dr. Jane Smith of the Writing Center can be contacted, keeping the information private but setting up a tutorial plan per the student's needs. It is with this initial suggestion that students with disabilities will be encouraged to share information about their impairments, an idea that is supported by the results in my survey distributed to students registered with the ODS, where 56% reported positively that they would be comfortable when asked, "Would you be comfortable with sharing the fact that you are a student with disabilities and have accommodations that need to be considered in a writing tutorial?" This is one, small step in the "campaign for advocacy," as Gena Smith termed it, with more room still for ideas on how to improve, but it is still enough to start the process, as by including visuals in the Writing Center that showcase the center's ties to the ODS, students with disabilities can become aware of their options without the worry of being signaled out, ultimately leading to open communication between the two services and the students who require them ("Interview with Gena Smith, Director of ODS").

In conclusion, through raising awareness, preparing tutors, and promoting attendance, the Writing Center and the ODS can ultimately establish open communication, building a better connection between the tutors and students with disabilities. My research into ways of developing this relationship is best summarized by an answer given on my anonymous survey distributed to students registered with the ODS, in response to being asked, "Whether you have attended a writing tutorial or not, how do you believe the Writing Center can improve in order to best assist students with disabilities and accommodations?" The student's reply: "Everyone can improve." This is a sentiment that rings true for every college student looking to succeed, but it is important to remember that some students struggle more than others; individuals with disabilities, physical or emotional impairments that hinder them daily, work just as hard as everyone else while equally working much harder. However, the purpose of the ODS is to support students with disabilities through the transition into adulthood, where responsibilities demand that they be able though they are disabled; the purpose of the Writing Center is to encourage a rapport between students and tutors through the power of words and writing, where expectations require that they be able though they may be momentarily disabled, delayed by something like grammar or disorganization. At the heart, there is not much difference between the two services, as each simply strives to assist the students that come to it, furthering the possibility of a promising coordination between them. As expressed in her article, Groeneveld states, ". . .encountering disability at the Writing Center is just another opportunity for us to expand on and apply [our] sets of tools. Since we work with individuals, we are able to tailor our instruction to individual needs and wants--a fact that I think is both exciting and challenging." By acknowledging the lack of communication between the Writing Center and the ODS and, as a result, tutors and students with disabilities, it will be difficult to start the process of developing

better relations, requiring time, patience, and extra effort from all parties involved. But we can take it as an opportunity to improve and, by simply taking the first step, we have already begun.

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