Working with a Dyslexic Student

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Betsy Emerick asked me to write down my experiences tutoring a dyslexic student at Reed this year in the hopes that other tutors encountering students with dyslexia or other learning disabilities might be able to use some of what I learned. As we all know, Reed does not at this time have any formal facilities or staff to be able to meet the needs of students with these kinds of learning disorders [note: this is no longer true; Reed does now have specific staff who handle learning disabilities on a case-by-case basis], yet as writing tutors, we need to be aware that these students exist at Reed, and may require our attention in special ways. I want to emphasize that I am in no way an expert on dyslexia; I just happened to end up working intensively with a student who did not tell anyone involved with the Writing Center that he was dyslexic until we had been working together for four hours a week for several weeks. I am happy to have the opportunity to share what seemed to work for our particular tutoring relationship, but this information is very subjective and based on my experiences as a writing tutor who was completely unprepared to deal with a dyslexic student and tried to make myself a little more prepared to do so as the year progressed. Please read the following with this in mind. First of all, many members of the Reed community, students, faculty, and staff alike, know very little about dyslexia and the challenge it presents for students, particularly at place like Reed, where the work is constantly overwhelming and challenging, and where being "smart" (i.e. a good writer and speaker) is expected by both teachers and peers. As my own experience demonstrates, Reedies with learning disorders may be reluctant to share this information with others for fear that they will be assumed to be less intelligent or capable than their colleagues. Actually, according to some studies I've read, dyslexics as a group test as being more intelligent than the general population, not less. Dyslexia affects a person's ability to organize, store, articulate, and recall information, not the ability to think or understand. It is important to keep this in mind, and to explain it to the students you tutor and the faculty members you interact with. It is possible to help dyslexics learn how to reorganize the way they process and present information so that they can write and articulate their ideas more clearly.

Despite these "facts" about dyslexia, the student I worked with had a very negative self-image of himself as a student. He constantly asked me if I thought he was too stupid to go to Reed, expressed feeling intimidated about participating in conference, and generally had low self-esteem. While this description could be applied to practically all Reedies at some point during our time here, I believe that it is impossible to overcome dyslexia only by learning new techniques for taking notes and writing papers, although these techniques are valuable, as I will describe below. Students, and particularly students at Reed, who have learning disorders need to work to overcome their feelings of inadequacy, and their tendency to use the disorder as an excuse for not doing better. Because I'm also trained as a peer counselor, I began combining tutoring with some basic self-esteem counseling early on in my tutoring relationship. While ultimately things worked out well in this case, I would have to say in retrospect that this was a mistake on my part. The student became very dependent on me for emotional support, and wanted to turn our tutoring relationship into a kind of friendship. I think this is ill-advised and will certainly hamper the tutoring work that is our primary concern. I explained this to the student, and urged him to seek support at the Counseling Center. While some supportive reinforcement is absolutely necessary in a long-term tutoring relationship, I would urge you as tutors not to take on more than you feel comfortable with, and to encourage the students to seek qualified help with their very real and legitimate feelings of inadequacy and frustration, which must be particularly acute in a small and intense academic environment such as Reed's. In fact, I think it is crucial that we acknowledge both the intellectual and emotional challenges these students face if we want to help them write better.

As far as tutoring itself is concerned, be aware that it is often a frustrating process for both tutor and student. You both need to be prepared for a long and committed struggle. As a tutor, you cannot force a student to devote intensive time and energy to such a project. The student has sought help, and the student must be willing to put in the extra hours meeting with you, revising drafts, re-reading books, re-taking notes, etc. If they don't put in the time, it probably won't work very well, and both of you will have a rotten time. The student I worked with was very committed to overcoming his dyslexia, and so he was able to use my knowledge of writing and note-taking to help himself get where he wanted to be. This is the essential foundation from which every successful tutoring relationship is constructed. This student met with me for at least four hours a week for most of the school year, rewrote every paper we worked on at least twice and sometimes as many as four

times, and was brave enough to talk to his professors about his dyslexia and the fact that he had a writing tutor. Not all of them were supportive or understanding, but his determination is what enabled him to dramatically improve his writing skills over the course of the year. What follows are some of the techniques we devised through many experiments during our tutoring sessions. Many of these experiments failed miserably, and so we had to come up with others. There is no guarantee that these suggestions will work for every dyslexic student, but I have seen them work for several and I think they can also be useful for students who do not have learning disorders. Anyway, use what you can, devise your own approaches where these fail you, and ignore what doesn't seem to work for your particular student(s).

It took me a while, but I finally figured out that, for this particular student, the problem was one of structure and organization, rather than an actual case of "bad writing" (actually, I have come to believe that this is usually the case). Because dyslexia affects the brain's ability to take in and store information in an organized manner so that it can be articulated clearly verbally or on paper, the tutoring process needs to start with the way students read texts, take notes, and listen to lectures and in conferences. I also found that this student was much better at explaining things verbally in non-academic language than on paper in proper "academic-speak". Especially at first, I did a lot of listening and questioning, and he did very little writing in our sessions. His inability to identify what parts of the text or lecture were key points (rather than examples of or supports for key points) was causing him to write "shallow" papers that were mostly summary with very little analysis. In addition, because this student doubted his own intelligence, he was very reluctant to give up his opinion of a text or idea, and so had difficulty coming up with thesis statements. (This is why I think that counseling cannot be separated from tutoring.) I found that by asking him to tell me about what he had read, and then questioning and pushing him at every point to go deeper in to the material and trust his own sense of what the author was saying, even if he had trouble articulating it in a clear or "academic" way, he was able to get some understanding about what an academic paper was supposed to address. Beware that this can be a very slow and frustrating process for both parties involved, and that it works best when it is combined with lessons on how to take notes effectively, both in conference and on assigned material.

Not all dyslexics have problems with analysis and reading comprehension. I worked briefly with another Reed student whose dyslexia manifested itself only in the area of articulating the ideas in her head onto paper in a clear and organized way. If this is the case, your work as a tutor is usually easier and can progress more quickly, because you can focus right away on "structure" the way a paper is organized. If you also encounter the kinds of analysis problems described above, you will need to combine work on structure with verbal questioning and work on note-taking, etc. In any case, my tutoring mantra is that "structure is the foundation of all good writing". I have found this to be true for every student I've worked with, both in high school and at the college level, on everything from practicing for timed exams to English essays to history research papers. By structure I mean stuff like outlines, rigid essay formats, and especially a rigid introduction format that includes a very precise one-sentence thesis. Now, I know that Reedies hate words like "rigid" and "outline", but these words turned out to be the keys that helped this student improve both his writing and his overall class grades in the time that we worked together. As a tutor, you have to be mean about this in the beginning. Begin with short essays, if possible, and work up to longer stuff, make your student show you outlines, and spend absurd amounts of time just getting the student to talk and write out introductory paragraphs and thesis statements until you both think you'll go nuts. It's the fastest way to help students who are pressed for time improve their writing, and they have the rest of their lives to experiment with form. For now, be a structure fanatic, and keep it constant, so that at each meeting you ask the same questions over and over: what's your argument? Where's your thesis statement? How are you showing the reader where your paper will go? Where's your evidence? Who's your audience? Etc. Once they can answer these kinds of questions with some consistency, you can move on to work on deepening their level of analysis, writing in a more academic fashion, learning to choose better words to express exactly what they mean, and so on. Often I found that after asking these kinds of questions, my student would demonstrate that he knew the analysis quite well, but had not included the detailed explanation and supports from the text(s) into the written version. Structure helps prevent this from happening.

If the student ends up producing several well-structured book reports at first, this is still better than trying to work on analysis and vocabulary without organization, because it is the structure of outlines and the five-paragraph essay we all hated writing in high school that enable students with learning disorders (and everyone else, for that matter) to recall and articulate their ideas clearly. In other words, the structure you encourage

them to use on paper and in talking with you acts as a substitute for the information-organizing process that their brains are unable to perform well. During these stages of the process (which lasted all year in the case of my student), enlisting the help and understanding of the student's professors can be invaluable (although some of them will not be at all helpful or understanding, so be prepared and prepare your student in advance). If you can get the professor to agree to read drafts and permit re-writes after the deadline, to give extremely detailed instructions and criticism, to permit several shorter assignments in place of longer ones to facilitate the process, and most importantly to support the student in the tutoring process, this can be helpful. As a tutor, you can help the student devise a strategy for talking with various professors, particularly if you have taken classes with them in the past.

Although this is not always possible, it is also very useful to have a working knowledge of the student's field or courses (I nearly went crazy trying to figure out how to help my student analyze anthropology articles and write anthropology research papers having never taken anthropology myself, for example, and I ended up learning quite a bit of anthro in the process). Of course, as Reed writing tutors, you have lots of experience tutoring outside of your area of expertise, so just rely on your sense of what is good, clear, organized writing, and what is not. If you can't tell if an argument is correct, have the student talk to you about it and answer questions; you can usually tell if the analysis is sound by pressing for details.

Above all, the students must do the work themselves. Particularly in the case of dyslexia, demonstrating the way to choose better words, reorganize sentences, or create thesis statements by rewriting the student's paper while they watch will not work, because she or he will generally be unable to take in and then recall the information. I succumbed to this temptation several times at the end of a frustration session when we seemed to be getting nowhere, and found every time that my student was literally unable to remember that I had made the changes, or that we had talked about them even one day later. Instead of coming up with better words, have the student make lists of every synonym they can think of, and push for more until they come up with one that works it is better to have them look the word up themselves in a thesaurus than for you to tell them, no matter how hard it is for you to sit through the process. In this case, "putting your pen down" is essential for good tutoring. Drafts, in case I haven't run this topic into the ground enough yet, are also essential if actual learning is going to take place. Look for a little improvement each time, be very encouraging, and send them back with new ideas to work on it some more.

I don't know if any of this will be helpful for you, but please use what you can. Above all, see the good in small improvements, rather than expecting perfection after one draft or session, either from your student or yourself. As Reed writing tutors, we are not trained to handle learning disorders, but this does not mean that we can't be helpful. Just don't beat yourself up if you aren't being a good tutor for these students. I feel like this for most of the year. Believe me, you are helping a lot, even when it seems like you're not. Just hang in there, and feel good about your work; it's invaluable, and if nothing else, you will learn as much as your student by going through the process.