Dyslexia and High School

By: Melinda Pongrey (2008)

Last week I visited a local high school to observe a freshman. Even though the end of school is near, I wanted to see first-hand how the teachers were implementing accommodations and modifications for his severe dyslexia.

Before school began in the fall, I had met with this student twice a week to build his reading, writing and study skills. He began the year rating school as a "-1" on a one-to-ten scale. By mid-winter, he had moved his self-assessment of school to a "10." Since then he had become increasingly discouraged. Finally I realized that I better get a first-hand look at what was going on in his classes.

So, his teacher kindly let me sit in the back of the class. I spent the hour noting the tasks that he was asked to complete along with the other students in his literature class.

First task: Copy the definition of a vocabulary word from the overhead

This task is very difficult for him to do, especially in the time allowed.

Having severe dyslexia means that he has trouble making accurate and automatic memories for print. Spelling words requires an accurate memory. Even copying from the board is tedious, slow, and oftentimes, not very accurate. At this point, probably a real waste of time.

Alternate ideas:

Students could scan the board with their cell phones using ScanR Or the teacher could have text available online so students could use various software, for instance CLiCk, Speak for text-to-speech support. Helpful, as students could access the vocabulary words at home or at school on their computers.

Second task: Note the date of the upcoming vocabulary test

Again, this went by too fast for him to write down.

Dyslexia is a language-based disability. For many students, processing language is slow. For instance, when I was traveling in Germany, I had a moment in the train station when I heard an announcement with my ears, and after a long pause, my brain translated the meaning. If you are sitting in class trying to listen to the teacher, but your language is being processed slower than your ears take in the sound — watch out! Students zone out just from the fatigue of trying to "translate" meaning and keep up.

Alternate ideas:

The teacher could post assignments on Google Calendar and have reminders sent to students' cell phones automatically. Also, calendars can be set up so parents can check assignments, too. At this point, many of his assignments were illegible when he brought his written notes home.

Third task: Read a paragraph aloud from the overhead

The teacher good-naturedly asked him if the print was too small or if he could read the paragraph aloud,

seeming to include him with the other students who read aloud.

I have to admit, I was pretty surprised by this one. Most students who read well below grade level will not even attempt to read a passage aloud in front of their peers. When you read to yourself, you can skip over big words, or unfamiliar names — words don't have to be pronounced correctly to get the meaning.

The student quickly agreed that the print was still too small to see; however, I knew this was an excuse. The teacher called on students around the room to read aloud and meant to be inclusive.

Alternate ideas:

Don't do it! Let students volunteer to read aloud.

Are you tired out yet? Already, this student has barriers to accessing the curriculum akin to walking a minefield — and this only in the first 15 minutes of class. Whew! Halfway through the 50-minute class and already, I could see the difficulty of really understanding what having severe dyslexia means for a student in our educational system.

Being inside a learning difference or disability can feel so invisible. Imagine that you have to go through your day walking across a tightrope. Imagine that no one, including yourself, can see that you are always walking on a tightrope. So everyone treats you as if you can walk without any special considerations. You keep trying to keep up, and can't figure out how everyone else seems to zoom ahead of you all the time. Teachers tell you to try harder and then assign extra laps for you as an incentive when you are too slow! You get so tired, when others seem to expend any effort...

Back to the class — I sit in the back of the literature class and note the remaining activities and the tasks that the teacher assigns. The student I am shadowing has a very high IQ, most likely one of the highest in the class. Yet, having a dyslexic learning profile affects his ability to use language efficiently. Everything language computes slower. Reading and writing are labored, inaccurate and so slow that he frequently loses his train of thought. Seemingly simple tasks, like copying a definition from the board, or writing down a question dictated by the teacher, become Herculean challenges.

Fourth task: Read To Kill a Mockingbird silently for 15 minutes

This student has documented difficulty reading.

From my work with this student, I know that this is a waste of time. He will have to go home and listen to an audiotape or use reading software on his home computer so that he can read with audio and visual support. Probably, his parents will read the book aloud to him. In class, he sits with his book open, appearing to read, yet I know that this is difficult and inaccurate at best.

Dyslexia used to be known as "word-blindness" which is not completely accurate, but might be a helpful concept when thinking about assigning reading to students who have trouble reading print. You wouldn't ask a blind student to sit and read a book for 15 minutes. You would provide a different format for the book — audio or braille.

Alternate ideas:

The teacher, knowing that the class is behind on their reading and nearing the end of school, is trying to be helpful. Interestingly, quite a few students don't pick up their books, but sit doing other things for 15 minutes. I suspect many others in the class would benefit from using various types of software support to "read" the text.

I note that many students have iPods and cellphones. My guess is that because this class is the "rowdy" class, many of the students may not read easily. Perhaps the text could be accessible in various formats so that students could pick how they "read" best. Some might like to listen to a recorded book, usually read by an actor, in mp3 format on the iPods. Some might like to read along with audio and visual support, for instance using WYNN Reader. Of course, some like reading books the traditional way.

Fifth task: Listen and write four dictated questions on a piece of notebook paper

Too much writing, too fast, with difficulty trying to spell words correctly.

Again, back again to the language processing difficulties. Listening requires processing the meaning and being able to focus on what is important — quickly and automatically. Think of how quickly and accurately you process information when learning a second language.

Writing down a dictated sentence requires:

- translating what comes in your ears into printed shapes that make letters

- putting the right letters together to spell words

- funneling the correct information through the end of your pencil

This is easy if all systems are go. You need:

- an accurate memory for letters and for spelling words

- efficient language processing to sort all the information in your head

- an accurate, automatic fine-motor memory for forming letters and words

- motor-planning skills

- accurately "seeing" and being able to read your writing to edit spelling

Alternate ideas:

Because listening and writing are not accurate and automatic for many students who have dyslexia, the seemingly simple task of copying dictated questions is NOT EASY. Processing difficulties could be bypassed by using the traditional format of handing out a paper with the questions printed on it.

Or, more interestingly, the teacher could post the questions on a classroom blog or website for students to access in the class, in the library, or at home. Even more engaging, would be to text message the questions to the student's cell phones. Students could text-message the answers back to the teacher's e-mail using the free software Jott? Cool? Even cooler is the word prediction support on cellphones, which aids spelling and writing.

Sixth task: Listen to class discussion, then handwrite the answers to the dictated questions

Again, the information is presented in one format — through talking. The student must listen for the main ideas while trying to write down the correct answers — all quickly in a classroom full of distractions.

Okay. The teacher is asking good questions about the story. He has the students write the questions with the answers from the discussion in preparation for a test next week. Many students seem engaged by the questions of race and justice in the story.

Alternate ideas:

All of this information could be posted on a blog or webpage so that the material is already written, and available for text-to-speech support. Expanding from the paper-pencil modalities, the teacher could have the students watch a movie made from the book. Students could write a play and perform the important events from the book, and/or write a rap about the story. In other words, expand on multiple intelligences

using multisensory inputs.

By adding free software programs, like Microsoft Reader, or Click,Speak, Google Docs with spellcheck installed, Jott and ScanR for cell phones, mp3 recordings for iPods, as well as more complex programs, such as WYNN Wizard, the classroom becomes more accessible and engaging for all students. Integrating options into the classroom allows all students to access information in the way that works best for them. No student had to sit and pretend to read.

About the author

Melinda Pongrey, MSEd, established Sisiutl Center for Learning in 1997 in Port Townsend after training and working with Another Door to Learning in Tacoma. For the past fifteen years, she has successfully worked with children and adults who experience many types of learning differences, including dyslexia, ADHD, language delays, motor-spatial and visual-spatial difficulties.

Reprinted by permission, Melinda Pongrey. Originally published by Learning Connections Blog at Seattlepi.com, retrieved online June 27, 2008 from http://blog.seattlepi.nwsource.com/learningconnections/archives/140221.asp.

http://www.ldonline.org/article/25150/?theme=print