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Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

[About Us](#)

Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2009 \(Volume 6 Issue 2\) - Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Centers](#)

Adapting Consulting Practices for Struggling Students

Spring 2009 / Columns

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Responding to the needs of students with learning disabilities

Since 2007, the **Undergraduate Writing Center** (UWC) at the **University of Texas at Austin** (UT) has consulted with over 22,587 students. In the majority of consultations, the standard 45-minute consultation gives students confidence in their abilities to produce quality papers and empowers them to feel strongly about the improvements they have made.

Our over-arching goal is to help students become better writers through non-directive consultation sessions; however, it may be more difficult to achieve this goal with a subgroup of students seeking to overcome internal struggles with the writing experience. Over 23% of the students who utilize the UWC's services indicate (by self-report) that they struggle with some aspect of the writing process.

Upon entering the UWC for a consultation, we ask all students to complete a short "Intake Form" with basic information about what type of assignment they are working on and what they would like to work on with their assignment. In addition, we ask on the form, "Do any of the following affect your current writing process?" Students can indicate if they struggle with one or more of the following:

- (1) Writer's Block
- (2) Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
- (3) Dyslexia (Reading Disorder)
- (4) Dysgraphia (Disorder of Written Expression)
- (5) Unfamiliar with College Writing
- (6) Confusion about Assignment
- (7) Unable to Focus on Assignment

Stephanie Wolfe, the Disabilities Service Coordinator with UT's **Division of Diversity and Community Engagement** in the Services for **Students with Disabilities** (SSD) office, reports an increasing trend in the number of students struggling with psychological disorders as well as the complexity of the disorders these students face (Accessible Attitudes and Awareness: Serving Students with Disabilities, 2008). As the profile of students on our college campuses shifts, we can expect the students who seek consultations at the UWC to reflect these changes.

The purpose of this article is to increase the awareness among UWC staff that many students struggle with various aspects of the writing process. Furthermore, many may cope with some form of a learning disability throughout their academic careers. The UWC would be remiss if we did not consider that this particular subgroup of students may better respond to nontraditional consultations. Perhaps the standard format of the 45-minute consultation without a break is too long for some students, or maybe communicating with certain students differently would encourage more improvement in their written work. We propose that consulting practices may need to be adapted to better serve their needs. Furthermore, gaining a fuller understanding of the type of struggles many of these students endure could help both consultants and students have more productive and empowering consultations at the UWC.

Signs of a Disability

The UWC would be remiss if we did not consider that this particular subgroup of students may better respond to nontraditional consultations.

To be diagnosed with a disorder, such as AD/HD or a learning disorder, one must experience a significant amount of distress and dysfunction in his or her daily life. A student who is not formally diagnosed may not experience the full spectrum of problems or the severity of distress as someone who is suffering from a diagnosis of AD/HD. However, we can expect that he or she will have similar challenges, symptoms, and concerns, perhaps only to a lesser extent.

According to SSD, there are telling signs that a student may have an “invisible disability.” These may include: grades not reflecting ability, delayed response time, slowness in completing work, and poor organizational skills. Students may also appear to be easily distracted or frustrated, display disorganized thinking, and have poor short- or long-term memory or difficulty setting goals.

Moreover, many students struggle with both reading and writing. Many of them have difficulty reading new words, tend to have slower reading rates, and experience poor comprehension and retention of reading material. Many of these students also struggle with the writing process and with organizing and ordering ideas. They also may display local writing problems such as poor sentence structure, frequent spelling errors, and issues with letter formation, spacing, capitalization, and punctuation. Many of these students struggle with changing from one task to another, have difficulty organizing notes and expressing their ideas clearly (even if they understand the concepts), and have poor vocabulary and difficulties with word retrieval.

Adapting Consulting Practices

Students with disabilities often experience attitudinal barriers on campus. Additionally, many of the programmatic challenges they face are more related to the structure of the University than to the limitations of the student. We at the UWC must therefore examine our practices to ensure we are creating an environment conducive to students’ success.

According to SSD, some common barriers students with disabilities experience are related to the rigidity of the University. Students often find that teaching and learning processes have always been implemented in a certain way, and staff and faculty find it challenging to break that mold. For example, many

instructors implement “free writing” assignments to students to encourage brainstorming during the initial stages of writing. However, this traditional teaching method can be devastating and not an effective strategy for this population of students because it is overwhelming to not have guidelines or structure.

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In addition to facing barriers with daily assignments, these students also struggle with the desire to be seen as equals to avoid the inaccurate stigmas associated with being a student with a disability and needing special accommodations. In actuality, students with disabilities are more similar to their peers than they are different. Simply because a student learns differently does not mean he or she cannot learn just as adequately or proficiently. However, because of the stigma related to needing special accommodations, a student may not self-advocate. More specifically, he or she may not contact the SSD office or voice specific challenges during consultations at the UWC, and, more generally, during their academic careers. Furthermore, if students lack self-advocacy, they may not seek the assistance or help that they desperately need to succeed in the classroom. “

To clarify, we do not specifically ask students to disclose their disability status or report any diagnosed learning disability, but it is possible that many students who report struggling with an aspect of the writing process experience many of the same frustrations. How can we accommodate and adapt the learning process to be more effective for students who struggle with writing and may have a learning disability? The remainder of this paper will discuss methods for teachers and consultants to help these students succeed with the writing process.

Pre-Consultation

Our policy at the UWC is to “provid[e] upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. We will make every effort to support [a student’s] success with writing projects and . . . development as a writer.” We also want to work with each student in a way that fits within the parameters of our work as consultants and is in keeping within our mission. At the UWC, we work

to help students develop strategies to improve their writing. The assistance we provide is intended to foster independence. Each student determines how to use the consultant’s advice. We cannot guarantee better grades, nor do we proofread or edit essays for students; rather we encourage students to take an active part in the consultation and become more confident writers.

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If a student feels that a standard 45-minute consultation may not meet his or her needs and requests additional accommodations, we encourage a team approach between students, the UWC, and organizational resources on campus, such as SSD, the UT **Learning Center**, and the **International Office**. With regard to diagnosed or possible invisible disabilities, we will ask that the student first meet with a representative from SSD. The SSD representative will work with the student to determine how the UWC can be of assistance and

provide documented recommendations to the UWC explaining what adjustments would be beneficial.

Consultation

Importantly, the “nature and degree of learning disabilities vary greatly among individuals and so too should the response” (O’Hearn 302). With this fact in mind, below are some helpful strategies for any consultation and in particular consultations with students who have self-reported struggling with the writing process.

Ask a student what he or she needs. In every consultation, consultants should first review all information on the “Intake Form” and then ask students how they best receive and understand information. Doing so will give the consultant an idea of how to approach that particular consultation. The consultant should also check in throughout the consultation to determine if the approach to the consultation is working for the student or if a modified approach would be better.

Provide verbal as well as written comments. Students have different learning styles — students may be aural or visual learners, or they may learn best through a combination of aural and visual strategies. Writing down recommendations or having a student take notes reinforces what a consultant and student worked on during the consultation and provides a useful checklist or reference for the student after he or she leaves the consultation.

Move consultations to a quieter location. If a student indicates having trouble with focus, a consultant may offer to hold the consultation in the back of the UWC or in the UWC’s off-site meeting room, both of which are quieter locations that provide greater privacy.

Vary the interaction during the consultation. To help keep a student interested in and focused on the consultation, a consultant may consider varying reading strategies (meaning switching between reading aloud and reading silently) or readers (meaning the consultant and student take turns reading aloud). If a consultant decides to read silently at any point, he or she can give the student an activity — outlining a section of the paper, writing down questions, working on rephrasing a sentence, or reading through a handout — to keep the attention on the consultation.

Provide breaks during the consultation. If a consultant notices that a student is having trouble focusing, he or she can ask the student if it would be a good time to take a brief break at any point to, for example, stand up and walk around or get water before continuing. Taking a break can give a student time to recharge and come back ready to work on his or her writing. “

The undergraduate community at The University of Texas is a dynamic one; as the demographic we serve changes over time, we at the UWC must continually reassess our role on campus.

Extend the length of consultations. Consultations at the UWC typically last up to 45 minutes. By providing certain students with longer consultations, consultants can help give them enough time to understand and apply information.

Use technology. One way to improve the efficacy of a consultation may be through technology. For example, if a student has trouble with spelling, a

consultant may consider holding the consultation on a computer using a word processing program that will enable the student to perform a spell check as he or she writes.

Conclusion

Creating a dialogue about how best to assist students with learning disabilities can have numerous potential benefits. As we at the writing center become increasingly attuned to the needs of this underserved student group, we learn to avoid traditional assumptions. Many of the strategies advocated here may benefit even those students who do not report experiencing particular problems with the writing process. As consultants explore innovative responses to the challenges of a consultation, they hone their abilities to adapt to the needs of any student.

The undergraduate community at The University of Texas is a dynamic one; as the demographic we serve changes over time, we at the UWC must continually reassess our role on campus. The writing center's mission includes constantly seeking to improve our services. Moreover, if many students with learning disabilities are not speaking up for themselves, we must advocate on their behalf. We hope that this article will serve as a tool for consultants as they adapt their practices to meet the needs of the disparate groups on campus, and that using the strategies outlined here will help writing centers improve the experience of struggling students.

Online Resources

These additional resources may prove useful for interested consultants, instructors, and students alike:

[Hack Your Way Out of Writer's Block](#)

[Writer's Block/Writer's Anxiety](#)

[Teaching College Students with Learning Disabilities](#)

[The Undergraduate Writing Center](#)

[Division of Diversity and Community Engagement at UT](#)

Work Cited

O'Hearn, Carolyn. "Recognizing the Learning Disabled College Writer." *College English* 51.3 (1989): 294-303.

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