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ABSTRACT

A faculty member involved with the HELDS (Higher Education for Learning Disabled Students) project describes ways in which Psychology of Adjustment courses can be modified to accommodate LD students. He describes the goals and general approach (structured informality) of his class, which features group evening meetings and written assignments in which students analyze situations presented via film, case study, or videotape. Grading, it is explained, is based on class participation and papers as well as on a series of tests. A brief narrative description of the course and a behavioral checklist for LD adults are included. (CL)

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PSYCHOLOGY OF ADJUSTMENT AND THE LEARNING DISABLED STUDENT

**Alternative Techniques for Teaching
Psychology to Learning Disabled
Students in the University**

by

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HEIDS Project
(Higher Education for
Learning Disabled Students)

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THE HELDS PROJECT AT CENTRAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The acronym HELDS stands for Higher Education for Learning Disabled Students. It represents a model program funded for three years (1980-1983) by the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), a division of the Department of Education. This project was funded as a model for other colleges and universities that are preparing to provide equal academic access for the learning disabled students.

Project HELDS had three major focuses. The first was to provide such access for the learning disabled student under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This we did for learning disabled students; most of whom were admitted without modified requirements to Central Washington University. These students were not provided remedial classes. They were enrolled in classes with other college students. The help that we gave was habilitative, rather than remedial, teaching them how to compensate for their weaknesses.

The habilitative training began with identification of those who were learning disabled and included, but was not limited to, such support services as taped textbooks (provided through the services of our Handicapped Student Services Coordinator), readers, writers for tests, extended time for tests, pre-registration with advising to ensure a balanced schedule, the teaching of study skills and tutoring by tutors from the campus-wide tutoring program who were especially trained to tutor learning disabled students.

The second focus of the project was to give a core of twenty faculty teaching classes in the basic and breadth areas a sensitivity to the characteristics of students who were learning disabled so that they could modify their teaching techniques to include the use of more than one modality. This ensured an academic environment conducive to learning for the LD. The faculty members participated in monthly sessions which featured experts in the field of learning disabilities, and in the area of the law (Section 504) that deals with the handicapped student and higher education. There were several sessions in which Central Washington University graduates and currently enrolled LD students shared their viewpoints and experiences with the faculty members. As a result of this some faculty members used the students as resource people in developing curricula for their various disciplines published in this series.

The third focus of the project was to make the university community aware of the characteristics of learning disabilities and of the program at Central. It also sought to encourage other colleges and universities to initiate such programs.

WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABLED STUDENT?

People with learning disabilities have handicaps that are invisible. Their disability is made up of multiple symptoms that have been with them since childhood. Many of them have been described as "dyslexics," but if they are categorized as dyslexic, this will be only one of their many symptoms, as a sore throat is only one of the many symptoms of a cold.

Three concise descriptions of the learning disabled children are provided in Hallahan and Kauffman:

The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (1968) proposed the following definition, which was adopted by the 91st Congress:

Children with special disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written thinking; talking, reading, writing, spelling, or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do not include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantage.

Task Force II of a national project (Minimal Brain Dysfunction in Children: Educational, Medical and Health Related Services, Phase Two of a Three-Phase Project, 1969) wrote the following two definitions:

Children with learning disabilities are those (1) who have educationally significant discrepancies among their sensory-motor, perceptual, cognitive, academic, or related developmental levels which interfere with the performance of educational tasks; (2) who may or may not show demonstrable deviation in central nervous system functioning; and (3) whose disabilities are not secondary to general mental retardation, sensory deprivation or serious emotional disturbance.

Children with learning disabilities are those (1) who manifest an educationally significant discrepancy between estimated academic potential and actual level of academic potential and actual level of academic functioning as related to dysfunctioning in the learning process; (2) who may or may not show

demonstrable deviation in central nervous system functioning; and (3) whose disabilities are not secondary to general mental retardation, cultural, sensory and/or educational deprivation or environmentally produced serious emotional disturbance.

Although the preceding definitions are concerned with children, the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped, in their booklet *Learning Disability: Not just a Problem Children Outgrow*, discusses LD adults who have the same symptoms they had as children. The Department of Education (Reference Hallahan & Kauffman) says that two to three percent of the total public school population are identified as learning disabled and that there are over fifteen million unidentified LD adults in the United States, acknowledging, of course, that people with this problem are not restricted to the United States but are found all over the world.

We know that many learning disabled persons have average or above average intelligence and we know that many of these are gifted. In their company are such famous gifted people as Nelson Rockefeller, Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Edison, Hans Christian Anderson, Auguste Rodin, William Butler Yeats, and Gustave Flaubert.

The causes of learning disabilities are not known, but in our project each of our identified learning disabled students shows either an unusual pregnancy (trauma at birth, such as delayed delivery, prolonged or difficult delivery) or premature birth. They oftentimes have a genetic family history of similar learning disability problems.

An excerpt from my *Criterion and Behavioral Checklist for Adults With Specific Learning Disabilities* has been included as Appendix A.

/s/ MCS
6 June 1982
Ellensburg, Washington

¹Daniel P. Hallahan and James M. Kauffman *Exceptional Children* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978), pp. 121-122.

I. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of Psychology of Adjustment courses has increased rather dramatically in recent years as students have become aware of the need for psychological survival skills in addition to technical skills. The ideas and concepts presented in adjustment courses are of special importance to the learning disabled (LD) students, since their learning disabilities contribute, in many instances, to more extensive problems in academic situations than those faced by their non-LD peers.

It is my opinion that the Psychology of Adjustment course can be one of the most meaningful classes taken by any student, and especially the student with a learning disability. It is essential, therefore, to create situations within the context of the class that optimize the skills of the LDs to enhance their chances of getting the most out of the class.

It is not my intent to tell the reader how to teach a university level class. The basic techniques are presumed. This paper presents some suggestions for methods that have proven useful to me in enabling the LD student to achieve at a meaningful level.

The old saying, "If you've seen one, you've seen them all" does not apply to students with learning disabilities. Instructors need to be aware of the diversity of problems LD students encounter as they attempt to cope with the tasks presented in a university class. There is a need to structure and conduct the class in a manner that provides for the LD student without slowing down or watering down the course, thus depriving the rest of the class of learning opportunities. I am convinced, however, that most of the classroom techniques and procedures I use to better reach the LD student will also benefit the other students.

II. GOALS AND GENERAL APPROACH

The goals of my course as stated in the class overview (Appendix B) provided students at the beginning of the quarter are not as specific as they might be in a number of other university classes. I could sum up my approach to the adjustment class as an attempt to "stimulate thinking" rather than to advocate fixed practices.

Some students already possess some of the interpersonal skills that others are trying to develop. Some have had experiences that contribute to insights that others have not yet achieved. Through class activities, small group participation, and individual study, students help each other achieve awareness, personal growth, and sensitivity to their own needs as well as the needs of others.

My general approach to the class is one of structured informality, with high interest and low anxiety. I make an effort to learn each student's name early in the quarter. Attendance is stressed, since some of the grade is based on participation and one cannot participate unless

present. Even without the 10-15% of the grade attributed to participation, there is a very high correlation between final grades and attendance. The additional explanations provided in lectures and other classroom activities provide concrete examples of theoretical models presented by the text. Thus attendance results in better test performance.

My class presentations are intended to clarify, elaborate, and supplement the text. I use the chalk board extensively with oral presentations, outlining the material or writing key phrases on the board. I use case studies and daily occurrences with frequent references to current events and news items, tying in events students may have read about or heard about or watched on television. I make frequent references to areas students may have studied in other classes, such as Shakespeare's great psychiatric descriptions of mental abnormalities, the personalities of historical figures such as King George III or Herman Goering, or the influence on artistic creations as in the case of Van Gogh.

Selected films are used to present concepts and illustrations of self worth, stress, values, adjustment problems, etc., and students are asked to react to them.

Effort is made to present material in a variety of ways with an approach to more than one modality, i.e., seeing, hearing. The learning of some LD students is maximized by seeing the term as it is pronounced. This combined experience seems to provide the LD student with better comprehension than when seeing or hearing the term separately. Reports from LD students seem to support this, as they say it facilitates note-taking and memory functions.

Students are free to sit wherever they choose, but certain students are encouraged to sit nearer the front of the class if they appear to have difficulty concentrating. Students who must both see and hear the words simultaneously to enhance understanding find it helpful to sit closer to the front. Students who are easily distracted by miscellaneous classroom activity that may limit their attention to the instructor's presentation also seem to find distractions diminished by sitting nearer the front.

Another method of keeping attention is to involve class members frequently by asking them to respond to questions, even if it is only a simple "yes" or "no" response, i.e., "How many of you read the article on...?" "...saw the news item...?" "...were in attendance at...?" A show of hands or verbal response draws their attention back to the discussion.

III. NIGHT GROUP SESSIONS

Class size ranges from 90 to 100 students. Students meet with the instructor four class periods a week, and meet in small groups one night a week for 2 or 2 1/2 hours.

Groups are made up of 11-12 students, with an effort made to balance the group composition as to male/female ratio. Roommates and students

from the same high school are separated and placed into different groups, so that each student starts out with the equal task of getting acquainted and having to work with new people.

Groups are led by advanced students who meet with the instructor in training sessions for two hours a week to plan activities and develop leadership skills. Leaders are chosen from former Psychology of Adjustment students and thus have had the "group experience" themselves.

The group sessions are an extension of the daily classes and enable students to practice and develop interpersonal skills as they share personal information and work on tasks together. It has been my experience that most LD students do very well in the group situation. There may be several reasons for this. For many LD students, reading is not initially rewarding. Therefore, they seldom enjoy experiences vicariously through the reading process. One student described his problems with reading like this: "It is like taking off on a trip with a number of other people driving cars. Your car has a flat tire and you have to stop to change it. The job is not pleasant, but has to be done. When completed, it merely gets you back to where you were before. In the meantime, everyone else has gone on ahead."

The group situation provides an opportunity for the LD student to experience in action some of the theories read about or explained in class. Experiences of others can be shared as they are reported verbally, or can be participated in as they are created in working with problem solving activities with group members.

IV. WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

Students are presented with a case study, film, or video tape showing a specific problem concerning personal adjustment or conflict. The students are then asked to analyze the situation presented and suggest theoretical solutions in terms of the concepts being studied at that point in the class.

LD students have reported they feel their ideas are not given much credibility because of their generally poor writing ability (i.e., spelling, grammar, etc.). Historically, in education, papers are graded from a "mark the mistakes" orientation. In many instances, the LD student has found that the shorter the written response, the fewer errors made. Unfortunately, with this approach there is a poverty of content, and it denies the LD student a much needed writing experience. LD students have reported to me that knowing I give credit for good ideas and do not mark off for the specific writing problems they have, allows them to write with less anxiety, with the result that they are willing to write considerably more.

While immediate feedback and early return of student papers is generally recommended, I do not return papers. The papers assigned are

generally concerned with the student's ideas, personal thoughts, reactions, and experiences. Evaluation in terms of percent correct or letter grade is meaningless. The student does get an appropriate number of points toward the final grade for completing the assignment, however.

Not returning the papers prevents a lot of "recycling" and allows the students to do their own thinking. Students have the opportunity to review their papers with the instructor if they wish, but they form their own conclusions as to the quality of the paper.

Feedback on the papers comes as the instructor shares a range or sample of reactions obtained from class members as well as his own. In this way students get to share the ideas of others and compare and evaluate their own thoughts and ideas, rather than the narrower view of students to professor and his comments back to the student.

V. EVALUATION AND GRADING

With all the teaching profession knows about encouragement and discouragement as forces in learning, there are some who still use an arbitrary cut-off point on exam scores and label it "Failing."

My approach is based on total points and involves numerous opportunities to earn points. Test scores contribute approximately 50% of the total points for the average students. With five tests, each test is worth about 10% of the final grade. This seems to do a lot toward lowering the anxiety level for students, especially the LD who frequently has more than usual test anxiety.

LD students take the same tests as other students, but modifications are permitted such as test readers, aid or modification in recording answers (answering on the test booklet itself instead of recording answers on machine scannable answer sheets if transfer is a problem), and ample time to finish the test.

My goal, other than to stimulate study, is to sample the LD student's knowledge without contamination from the learning disability as far as it affects the ability to answer the question. My tests are not designed to see how many questions a student can answer in a 50-minute class period.

Participation in group and written papers contribute the other 50% of the grade. Thus, the LD student is provided with a variety of ways in which to demonstrate his skills and knowledge as far as grading is concerned.

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APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A

Criterion and Behavioral Checklist for Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities

1. Short attention span.
2. Restlessness.
3. Distractability. (The student seems especially sensitive to sounds or visual stimuli and has difficulty ignoring them while studying.)
4. Poor motor coordination. (This may be seen as clumsiness.)
5. Impulsivity. (Responding without thinking.)
6. Perseveration. (The student tends to do or say things over and over. Mechanism that says "finished" does not work well.)
7. Handwriting is poor. (Letters will not be well formed, spacing between words and letters will be inconsistent, writing will have an extreme up or down slant on unlined page.)
8. Spelling is consistently inconsistent.
9. Inaccurate copying. (The student has difficulty copying things from the chalkboard and from textbooks; for instance, math problems may be off by one or two numbers that have been copied incorrectly or out of sequence.)
10. Can express self well orally but fails badly when doing so in writing. In a few cases the reverse is true.
11. Frequently misunderstands what someone is saying. (For instance, a student may say, "What?"; and then may or may not answer appropriately before someone has a chance to repeat what was said previously.)
12. Marked discrepancy between what student is able to understand when listening or reading.
13. Has trouble with variant word meanings and figurative language.
14. Has problems structuring (organizing) time. The person is frequently late to class and appointments; seems to have no sense of how long a "few minutes" is opposed to an hour; has trouble pacing self during tests.

15. Has problems structuring (organizing) space -- The student may have difficulty concentrating on work when in a large, open area -- even when it's quiet; may over or under-reach when trying to put something on a shelf (depth perception).
16. Has difficulty spacing an assignment on a page, e.g., math problems are crowded together.
17. Thoughts -- ideas wander and/or are incomplete in spoken and written language. Student may also have difficulty sequencing ideas.
18. Sounds -- A student's hearing acuity may be excellent, but when his brain processes the sounds used in words, the sequence of sounds may be out of order; e.g., the student hears "aminal" instead of "animal" and may say and/or write the "aminal."
19. Visual selectivity -- May have 20/20 vision but when brain processes visual information, e.g., pictures, graphs, words, numbers, student may be unable to focus visual attention selectively; in other words, everything from a flyspeck to a key word in a title has equal claim on attention.
20. Word retrieval problems -- the student has difficulty recalling words that have been learned.
21. Misunderstands non-verbal information, such as facial expressions or gestures.
22. Very slow worker -- but may be extremely accurate.
23. Very fast worker -- but makes many errors and tends to leave out items.
24. Visual images -- Has 20/20 vision but may see things out of sequence, e.g., "frist" for "first," "961" for "691." Or, a student may see words or letters as if they are turned around or upside down; e.g., "cug" for "cup," or "dub" for "bud," or "9" for "L" for "7," etc.
25. Makes literal interpretations. You will have to have them give you feedback on verbal directions, etc.
26. Judges books by their thickness because of frustration when learning to read.
27. Has mixed dominance; e.g., student may be right handed and left eyed.

- 28. Moodiness - Quick tempered, frustration.
- 29. Cannot look people in the eyes and feels uncomfortable when talking to others.
- 30. Has trouble answering yes or no to questions.

Students with specific learning disabilities which affect their performance in math generally fall into two groups:

1. Those students whose language processing (input and output) and/or reading abilities are impaired. These students will have great difficulty doing word problems; however, if the problems are read to them, they will be able to do them.
2. Those students whose abilities necessary to do quantitative thinking are impaired. These students often have one or more problems such as the following:
 - A. Difficulty in visual-spatial organization and in integrating non-verbal material. For example, a student with this kind of problem will have trouble estimating distances, distinguishing differences in amounts, sizes, shapes, and lengths. Student may also have trouble looking at groups of objects and telling what contains the greater amount. This student frequently has trouble organizing and sequencing material meaningfully on a page.
 - B. Difficulty in integrating kinesthetic processes. For example, a student will be inaccurate in copying problems from a textbook or chalkboard onto a piece of paper. The numbers may be out of sequence or the wrong numbers (e.g., copying "6" for "5"). Problems may be out of alignment on the paper. Graph paper is a must for them.
 - C. Difficulty in visually processing information. Numbers will be misperceived: "6" and "9," "3" and "8" and "9" are often confused. The student may also have trouble revisualizing, i.e., calling up the visual memory of what a number looks like or how a problem should be laid out on a page.
 - D. Poor sense of time and direction. Usually, students in the second group have the auditory and/or kinesthetic as their strongest learning channels. They need to use manipulative materials accompanied by oral explanations from the instructor. They often need to have many experiences with concrete materials before they can move on successfully to the abstract and symbolic level of numbers.

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APPENDIX B

PSYCH 205 - Psychology of Adjustment

GOALS:

The goals of this class are related to, but not limited to, the following: To discover more about ourselves -- how we cope with challenges and frustrations, how we attempt to attain our goals, how we determine our priorities, how we relate to one another (our biases and prejudices), how we deal with the expectations of ourselves and others, and how we deal with success and failure. In other words, Who am I? Where am I going? How am I going about it?

It is my hope that through class attendance, group participation, and your readings that you will develop additional insight into your "real self", that through self-discovery you will enhance your ability to get more out of life; and that through your study of the lives of others and their methods of dealing with the adjustment problems they encounter, you will discover ways of dealing with your own problems and improve your relationships with others.

To reach the above goals, *you* will have to put some effort into the endeavor!

Participation in "group" is an integral and essential part of the class. If you are unable to attend group on a full-time basis, please get in touch with me *immediately* to arrange a substitute assignment.

You are expected to study the material presented in the text. I will discuss some of the points presented in the text and class presentation and my case studies will relate to your readings. However, it is not my intention to rehash or duplicate the text. Test questions will deal mainly with the textbook material.

Papers written for this class should be, in essence, a personal communication from you to me. You might think of them as the things you would tell me if we were to sit down and talk in one-to-one situation. None of your papers will be returned. The reason for this will be explained in class. If you have difficulty understanding my reasons, I will be happy to discuss it with you personally. I want you to understand my position on this matter.

Do not put your papers in folders, covers, or jackets. They serve no useful purpose for me. While I appreciate typed papers, handwritten papers are equally acceptable so long as I can read them. I'm most interested in your thoughts and ideas -- please convey them legibly.

The basis for your final grade will also be discussed in class. Again, if you do not understand my explanation, or if you have some suggestions you feel have considerable validity in your situation, please discuss this with me as early in the quarter as possible. My office hours are listed below.

If there is anything about your particular situation that relates to the

class and your performance that you feel I should know, please discuss it with me as soon as possible -- in any case before finals week. That is usually too late for either of us to arrive at a constructive solution to the problem.

EVALUATION: 5 exams all of equal value one approximately every 2 weeks. You are to make up any missed assignments or exams soon as it is feasible.

TEXTBOOK: Calhoun: *Psychology of Adjustment*

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