



▲ Home

◀ Contents



Exploring the Role of the Learning Strategist at a Canadian College and University: The Tale of Two Professionals

By Vera E. Woloshyn and Caitlin Munn

Abstract

In this article, we synthesize literature related to the experiences of students with learning disabilities in postsecondary settings, including support service initiatives. We also synthesize the role of the learning strategists in context of working with these students. We then explore the daily experiences of two senior learning strategists situated in a college and university. We highlight changes in role enactment over the last decade and explore their perceptions of the factors that facilitate or hinder their role enactment as well as the resulting tensions. Finally, we highlight the differences in role enactment across the two participants and discuss the associated implications for students with learning disabilities and other service providers.

Many students struggle to succeed in postsecondary education. In part, these difficulties reflect their challenges in meeting the demands for independent learning, time management and self-advocacy in the context of rigorous and demanding academic workloads, distant faculty, and reduced family and peer supports (Flippo & Caverly, 2009). Such learning contexts may be especially challenging for students with learning disabilities who are often reluctant to self-identify and seek out relevant support services (Estrada, Dupoux, & Wolman, 2006; Hitchings et al., 2010; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Reed et al., 2006; Tsagris & Muirhead, 2012). In addition, these students may encounter faculty and peers who possess limited knowledge about the nature of exceptionalities and/or hold negative attitudes about them (Erten, 2011; Reed et al., 2006; Tremblay et al., 2008). Without proper supports, students with learning disabilities are less likely to complete their programs relative to their peers without exceptionalities or graduate with lower GPAs (Anctil, Ishikawa, & Scott, 2008; Gregg, 2007; Orr & Goodmna, 2008; Reed, Lewis & Lund-Lucas, 2006). They may also experience learned helplessness and emotional challenges (Abreau-Ellis, Ellis & Hayes, 2009; Lightner, Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, & Trice, 2012; Trainor, 2007).

In an attempt to facilitate the success of postsecondary students with learning disabilities, the Government Ontario formed the Learning Opportunity Task Force (LOFT) almost two decades ago (Tsagris & Muirhead, 2012). Thirteen colleges and universities participated in a 5-year pilot project (1997-2002) intended to provide students with access to specialized services predominately delivered by learning strategists and assistive technologists (Nichols, Harrison, McCloskey, & Weintraub, 2002).

Nicholas et al., (2002) described learning strategists as qualified individuals with expertise in teaching evidence-based learning strategies, particularly with respect to time management, study skills, reading, writing,

test preparation, memory techniques, and note taking. They provided a variety of services including coaching, academic counseling, and skills instruction and adopted advocacy roles on behalf of students with faculty, campus services, and community agencies as well as assisted students in understanding available services and their legal rights (Block, 2006; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). Nicholas considered the learning strategist as “pivotal in helping students to understand their learning disabilities, to assess their capacity to use learning strategies and to apply such strategies to better actualize their academic abilities” (Nichols et al., 2002, p. 48).

In 2002, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities allocated financial support (Enhanced Services Fund) to all Ontario colleges and universities in order to provide supports consistent with the LOTF approach. In 2007/2008, these monies were integrated into a larger funding support (The Accessibility Fund for Students with Disabilities) intended to support the efforts of postsecondary disability centres to provide general disability services (Tsagris & Muirhead, 2012).

Recently, Harrison, Areepattamannil and Freeman (2012) documented substantial student gains associated with participation in the LOTF programs including increased GPAs relative to national averages, self-advocacy and understanding of LD. Consistent with the findings of other researchers (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004), students confirmed that they value the services provided by learning strategists, being especially appreciative of interactions with caring individuals who listen and empathize with their daily struggles (Harrison et al., 2012).

Today, students with exceptionalities including learning disabilities represent an increasingly growing sector of postsecondary enrolments (Cawthorn, & Cole, 2010; Connor, 2012; Henderson, 2001; Orr & Goodman, 2008). In turn, every publicly-funded postsecondary institution in Ontario has an office that provides disability-related services and supports including access to learning strategists (also referred to as disability service providers, disability specialists, learning disability service providers, learning skills advisors and learning disabilities specialists providers). A review of several postsecondary websites (see [Appendix A](#)) suggests that the position of the learning strategist can be a multifaceted and layered one servicing a range of academically-diverse students. While learning strategists continue to provide individualized programming, support and consultation, in some institutions their roles also may involve working with small groups of students, peer mentors and faculty across multiple venues including classrooms and online learning sites.

Despite the evidence supporting the effectiveness of the LOTF-based initiatives including the learning strategist position, there are few, in-depth studies that explore these individuals' beliefs, perceptions, and day-to-day functions. To this end, we explore the daily experiences of two senior learning strategists situated in a college and university setting, and their perceptions of factors that facilitate and hinder their roles. We especially were interested in their perceptions of change in their roles and/or academic environments. Finally, we highlight differences in role enactment across the two participants and discuss associated implications for students and service providers.

Methodology

The findings presented here were derived from a larger study intended to explore the lived experiences of learning strategists across southern Ontario. A basic interpretative qualitative design was used (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative methodologies are appropriate when researchers wish to gain deep understanding of individuals' experiences, perspectives and histories in the context of their personal circumstances or settings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002).

Participants

Participants were two senior learning strategists employed at either a medium-sized college or university in southern Ontario (identified by the pseudonyms Helen and Liz respectively). Participants were identified as learning strategists at their places of employment and were certified through Cambrian College. Both held graduate degrees in education (Liz completed her doctoral degree while Helen was enrolled in a doctoral program) and had over a decade of employment experience as learning strategists in their respective institutions as well as previous teaching-related professional experiences (e.g., literacy instructor, subsequent language instructor, guidance counsellor). The position of their role as learning strategist differed across the institutions, with Helen's being part of a unionized faculty and Liz's part of nonunionized staff. We feature the experiences of these participants as we believe that they are well qualified to discuss dynamics and tensions associated with their roles as learning strategists.

Data collection and analysis

Participants completed two to three in-depth, semi-structured interviews throughout the fall academic term with each interview lasting between 90-120 minutes. The interview questions were open-ended and focused on their experiences as learning strategists, as well as their interactions with students with and without learning disabilities, faculty and other relevant stakeholders. Participants were asked about conditions that facilitated or hindered their roles and how they negotiated challenges. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Data analysis consisted of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. Participants' interviews were analyzed first as single cases (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), with cross-case analysis then completed in order to compare and contrast their experiences (Merriam, 2002). Conclusions and interpretations were summarized and shared with the participants who verified their accuracy.

Findings

While the participants expressed similar beliefs about the characteristics of effective learning strategists, they also expressed critical differences with respect to role enactment and positioning in their postsecondary environments. After acknowledging participants' convergent beliefs related to working with postsecondary students, we elaborate on their perceptions of role differences and resulting tensions. Specifically, we address differences across the two participants with respect to student demographics and expectations, service provision and role parameters, and faculty interactions.

Student demographics and expectations

When asked to define the characteristics of effective learning strategists, Helen and Liz provided similar responses, emphasizing the importance of professional care, the provision of individualized services that the recognition of students' strengths and areas of need. They acknowledged their students as "learning partners" (Helen) who were responsible for their learning experiences. They recognized the many challenges that faced students including increased demands for independent learning, time management and self-advocacy, the desire for a "fresh beginning" and adjusting to the postsecondary culture. They also agreed that students' postsecondary expectations were shaped by their secondary school experiences. To this end, they discussed a growing trend where many students with learning disabilities (and their parents) expected to receive accommodations similar to those provided in secondary school when on campus: "students come expecting what they received in high school... student and parent expectations are high" (Liz).

For Liz, students' expectations for academic programming sometimes were problematic and reflected differing ministry mandates and regulations. She explained that accommodations provided to some students in secondary school were carried out in the absence of formal identification or involved accommodations that extended beyond specific diagnoses and thus extended beyond the scope of those eligible in the university setting:

A lot of students are receiving more supports in elementary and secondary school, whether they have a learning disability or not. They're getting a broad range of support . . . In elementary and secondary school, it's about *Education for All*. The goal is to make students successful, to finish high school and finish well. In postsecondary, it's the *Human Rights Code* and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*. Those are the laws that tell us [postsecondary] what to do.

For Helen, tension existed between students' beliefs about their abilities and, at times, their unrealistic expectations about success in college. She also commented about the financial ramifications associated with these expectations:

I have students that are under-prepared to be at college, and yet, they came out of high school with the requisite grades that they needed to meet our entrance requirements, and now they are paying good money or they're going into debt, and they're failing their courses.

Helen also experienced tension related to students' expectations for success and their abilities to acquire requisite knowledge and/or skills for professional standards and licensing. While she believed in advocating for as many accommodations as possible for students, she sometimes questioned how such accommodations related to the professional duties that they would be expected to complete upon graduation and stressed the importance of "case-by-case" considerations:

You have to ask yourself, "Does this person have the skills

and cognitive ability to be safe in the workplace without accommodations? If they get their diploma and work in the field will they put their life or someone else's life in danger?"

Role Parameters

Participants provided role descriptions consistent with the parameters associated with the initial conceptualization of the learning strategist position as described by Nichols et al., (2002). Both participants also indicated that the parameters associated with their positions had changed over time, however, with seemingly divergent emphasis. For Helen, role enactment had become more encompassing and complex, relative to her initial years in the position. She commented about working with a wide range of students beyond those with learning disabilities, including those with other exceptionalities (e.g., Mild Intellectual Disorder, Autistic Spectrum Disorder) and/or co-morbid mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, depression). She elaborated that counseling had become more inherent to the learning strategist position and a necessary prerequisite to providing learning assistance:

One of the things that has happened [evolved] in this role is the counseling element . . . They're [students] anxious or that they have depression, or some of them have some personality disorders. . . . So that part, the counseling part, you can't separate it from the LS.

And sometimes a [student] says, "I'm here because I've failed a test" and it ends up being an anxiety issue . . . I will rarely move on to the academic concepts until we've cleared up this other emotion . . . because it [anxiety] clouds his/her ability to function academically.

Helen cautioned about the importance of recognizing professional limits when counseling students as well as the importance of consulting colleagues and utilizing the services of other professionals, especially mental health counselors:

So when I have a student that is struggling with his/her learning, but there's some mental health issues — there are emotional issues or anxiety issues — I can go to my counseling colleagues (we meet once a week to discuss things) and describe what's happening . . . and if I feel it's beyond my professional capabilities, I refer them to someone I feel has more experience.

Both Helen and Liz acknowledged that referring students to other service providers (on or off campus) create seemingly artificial dichotomies between and within students' affective, emotional and cognitive lives as well as exacerbate service wait times. On the other hand, these participants questioned whether they possessed sufficient expertise and training to assume intensive counseling responsibilities in context of addressing students' mental health needs. Liz acknowledged the tensions associated with not being able to address concerns related to anxiety and other mental health challenges while working with students with learning:

There is a line that, when we're working with a student... when this student needs professional therapy for mental health issues, and then that's not us (*learning strategist*). We're not trained counselors.

You physically see the anxiety in the student. And I say, "I see these things that you're doing, and they may be signs of anxiety. You need to go to personal counseling. You need to talk to someone there." The demand for service here at the university goes beyond what is available.

For Liz, role enactment had become more restricted or "document bound." She explained that initial visions of the learning strategist position involved long-term service delivery that included meeting students' learning needs broadly and across several years:

There was an expectation of working with the students for their whole first year. . . . And then the expectation is every year, you work less with the students, that you're giving them the skills they need to be independent . . . I was giving students a broad range of support . . . now supports have to be directly justified by students' disabilities.

In contrast, provision of current services were restricted by students' specific diagnostics and the academic task at hand. Students were directed to other service providers on campus (e.g., learning services, peer tutoring) for assistance with learning tasks beyond the specifics of their diagnostics:

If students don't have a learning disability that affects their writing, I would still do writing strategies with them before, and I don't do that now . . . If students don't have an LD that affects their writing, but they need writing support, I send them to Learning Skills. . . . We are careful about what services we provide, that they are supported by the documentation . . . because of litigation.

Role Enactment

When asked about their primary functions, Helen and Liz provided similar responses in terms of assisting students' success in academic tasks, emphasizing the importance of modeling strategic processes. They commented about the importance of developing meaningful, individualized, strategy repertoires for students. They commented that effective learning strategists "think outside the box" and "need to be creative," especially in the context of adapting research and professional literature that focused on intensive, strategic instruction for younger learners.

Participants also discussed the importance of helping students develop their metacognitive skills and awareness. However, the focus of these discussions differed. For Helen, much of her interactions focused on assisting students to develop an appreciation of their existing skills and "preferred learning approaches," in order to develop and strengthen them and promote transfer across new learning tasks. "They really don't have a true understanding of their strengths and weaknesses . . . they haven't taken ownership." Helen describes this process as analogous to a buffet.

She also described instances where she assisted students in acquiring prerequisite knowledge for tasks by exploring online information sites, videos or print-based materials outside of course syllabi:

I'm not imposing something on them, but I'm working with them to find something [that is effective] . . . It's like going to a smorgasbord and you don't like the liver pate, but you really like the shrimp. Well, I'm going to give you some strategies that you can try. . . . You have to then give them support so they experience a different reality where they say, "Okay, this will work for me."

I tell the student, "We have to go back in the material to a point where you were 80% successful and then move forward with the information that is confusing you." . . . Meanwhile, they want to be four chapters ahead and doing that homework, and I understand that, but tell them, "We have to understand this." We look at those gaps . . . We go on the Internet. We go to a textbook.

The ability to provide such programming was facilitated, in part, by having the opportunity to schedule multiple weekly meetings with students and by being involved in developing their accommodations — a process that often involved considering students' academic objectives and career goals; "Before recommending accommodations, I ask students about what works for them . . . Once we have that conversation, I look at the documentation to access the maximum that can be 'legally' supported." When asked to provide an example related to the range and nature of accommodations she might provide, Helen described providing metacognitive prompts to students while completing examinations, acknowledging that other learning strategists might not provide such an accommodation. Again, Helen underscored the importance of case-by-case considerations:

You're looking at where's the student going to go, what will he be doing on a daily basis, and maybe he won't be writing essay reports. He might be pricing out a job and have a check sheet. So to me, I haven't done anything wrong . . . this is changing this person's life.

I sit with the students who have high anxiety and I ask them, "What are you going to do? What do you know? What do you think you know? What could you do?" If I can actually sit with them and be that executive function in their head by asking those questions . . . And then they fly because they had a chance.

Helen assumed a number of other duties and responsibilities including interacting with community organizations, developing transition programs for incoming students, as well as communicating and advocating for students with faculty.

For Liz, student sessions often involved exploring the characteristics of learning disabilities and their influence on students' behaviours, cognitions and learning performances. Instructional assistance focused on completing

course-defined academic tasks in the context of students' defined exceptionalities, with students directed to alternative services for assistance outside these parameters.

I technically cannot see a student with only ADHD, because that's not a learning disability. And then, within that diagnosis of the learning disability, there has to be specific reference to skill sets involved with writing and reading for you to work within those target areas.

Opportunities to work with students appeared somewhat limited with sessions spread across time: "I see the same number of students, but they don't come in as often." While Liz considered herself as an educator, she also acknowledged that her role was distinct and separate from that of faculty. She did not interact with faculty in the context of her position as a learning strategist, with the understanding that faculty members who wished to adjust their instructional practices would work with other pedagogical services on campus. She described herself as working "invisibly":

If I step back and look at this role as a bigger picture, it's a teaching role. And it's an individual teaching role.... that's not always seen.... In many ways, I'm the support worker. I'm working, hopefully, alongside the professor in helping the student be successful in class. *But invisible at the same time?* Absolutely.

Conclusions and Discussion

According to these participants, the learning strategist position has changed since the LOTF program initiatives. While the participants shared a primary mandate of supporting postsecondary students' learning experiences, the format and focus of service provision differed. Helen demonstrated latitude in the provision of metacognitive instruction and mentorship to diverse learners, as well as increased duties related to faculty engagement, student advocacy, and mental health counseling. Liz, on the other hand, described a tightening of duties as defined by the parameters of students' diagnostics. In part, these participants' responses may reflect the differences between organizational philosophies and structures associated with either holistic or medical models of service provision.

The positioning of these learning strategists in their postsecondary institutes also was a source of role complexity and tension. Participants' ability to advocate and communicate with faculty reflected, in part, their status as either faculty or staff, as well as the institutional emphasis on teaching (college faculty predominately serve as instructors; university faculty participate in teaching, research and service). Membership in a unionized faculty that focused on instruction seemed to provide Helen with the opportunity to communicate with faculty directly about a wide variety of pedagogical issues. Liz's position as nonunionized staff (and resulting issues related to institutional structures and student confidentiality) did not permit her these same interactions and relegating her as a largely invisible, and sometimes unacknowledged, service provider. Questions arise as to how positioning forefronts and serves the needs of students with learning

disabilities as well as impacts the overall well-being of service providers and their sustained job satisfaction.

As increased numbers of students with learning disabilities and other exceptionalities enroll in postsecondary settings (Cawthorn, & Cole, 2010; Connor, 2012; Orr & Goodman, 2008), it is reasonable to assume that there will be increased demands on the learning strategists who serve them. It also is important that students and their parents understand the supports that they will be afforded in postsecondary education, as well as who will provide them and how they may differ across institutions. Such clarity will be especially important in light of student movement between postsecondary settings and as the number and popularity of college-university articulation agreements increase (e.g., Ignash, & Townsend, 2000).

To reiterate, the findings of this study provide insights about some of the daily functions of two senior learning strategists. Both participants expressed deep commitment to their positions and they underscored the importance of their roles in facilitating the academic experiences of students with learning disabilities.

While we realize that the experiences and beliefs of the two learning strategists described here cannot and should not be generalized to all learning strategists and/or postsecondary settings, we believe that these participants provide important insights about the nature of service provision to students with learning disabilities in at least one college and one university.

References

Abreu-Ellis, C., Ellis, J., & Hayes, R. (2009). College preparedness and time of learning disability identification, *Journal of Developmental Education*, 32(2), 34-38.

Ancil, T., Ishikawa, M., & Scott, A. (2008). Academic identity development through self-determination: Successful college students with learning disabilities. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 31, 164-174.

Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods. (5th ed.)*. New York: Allyn and Bacon.

Block, L. (2006). Work with academic advisors to help students with learning disabilities. *Disability Compliance for Higher Education*, 11(9), 3-33.

Cawthorn, S. W., & Cole, E. V. (2010). Postsecondary students who have a learning disability: Student perspectives on accommodations access and obstacles. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 23, 112-128.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. 2nd Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Erten, O. (2011). Facing challenges: Experiences of young women

with disabilities attending a Canadian university *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 24(2), 101–114.

Estrada, L., Dupoux, E., & Wolman, C. (2006). The relationship between locus of control and personal-emotional adjustment and social adjustment to college life in students with and without learning disabilities. *College Student Journal*, 40, 43-54.

Fippo, R.F., & Caverly, D. C. (Eds.). *Handbook of college reading and study strategy research. 2nd Edition*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2009.

Getzel, E. (2008). Addressing the persistence and retention of students with disabilities in higher education: Incorporating key strategies and supports on campus, *Exceptionality*, 16, 207-219.

Getzel, E. E., & Thoma, C. A. (2008). Experiences of college students with disabilities and the importance of self-determination in higher education settings. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 31(2), 77-84.

Gregg, N. (2007). Underserved and unprepared: Postsecondary learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 22, 219–228.

Graham-Smith, S., & Lafayette, S. (2004). Quality disability support for promoting belonging and academic success with the college community. *College Student Journal*, 38(1), 90-99.

Harrison, A.G., Areepattamannil, S., & Freeman, J. (2012). Effects of the learning opportunities task force (LOTF) programs on postsecondary students with learning disabilities, *Exceptionality Education International*, 22(1), 55–69.

Henderson, C. (2001). *College Freshmen with Disabilities, 2001: Biennial Statistical Profile*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, HEATH Resource Center.

Ignash, J.M., & Townsend, B.K. (2000). Evaluating state-level articulation agreements according to good practice. *Community College Review*, 28, 1-21.

Lightner, K.L., Kipps-Vaughan, D., Schulte, T., & Trice, A.D. (2012). Reasons university students with a learning disability wait to seek disability services. *Journal of Postsecondary Education & Disability*, 25(2), 145-159.

Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nichols, E., Harrison, A., McCloskey, L., & Weintraub, L. (2002). Learning Opportunities Task Force, 1997 to 2002: Final Report. Toronto, ON.

Orr, A.C., & Goodman, N. (2010). "People like me don't go to college:" The legacy of learning disability. *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research* 4, 213-225.

Reed, M. J., Lewis, T., & Lund-Lucas E. (2006). Access to post-secondary education and services for students with learning disabilities: Student, alumni and parent perspectives from two Ontario universities. *Higher Education Perspectives*, 2, Retrieved from <http://hep.oise.utoronto.ca/index.php/hep/article/view/617/673>

Skinner, M., & Lindstrom, B. (2003). Bridging the gap between high school and college: Strategies for the successful transition of students with learning disabilities. *Preventing School Failure*, 47(3), 132–136.

Tsagris, D., & Muirhead, B. (2012). *Evaluating postsecondary supports for Ontario students with learning disabilities*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Trainor, A. A. (2007). Perceptions of adolescent girls with LD regarding self-determination and postsecondary transition planning. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 30, 31-44.

Tremblay, P. F., Harris, R., Berman, H., MacQuarrie, B., Hutchinson, G. E., Smith M. A., Braley, S., Jelley, J., & Dearlove, K. (2008). Negative social experiences of university and college students. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 38(3), 57-75.

Yost, D., S., Shaw, S. E., Cullen, J. P., & Bigaj, S. J. (1994). Practices and attitudes of postsecondary LD service providers in North America. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 27(10), 631-640.

Vera Woloshyn is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at Brock University; **Caitlin Munn** is a Learning Strategist at Assiniboine Community College and online facilitator for Brock University's Adult Education program. The authors may be contacted through Vera Woloshyn at vwoloshyn@brocku.ca

◀ [Contents](#)

The views expressed by the authors are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The College Quarterly or of Seneca College.

Copyright © 2014 - The College Quarterly, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology