
Conclusion

This book has been about gaps in Composition pedagogy and about the lack of awareness even the best-trained writing instructors often have concerning learning disabilities and the controversy surrounding them. With all the confusions and contradictions that exist in the field, learning disability practice may not have answers, but it suggests questions about writing and learning that instructors today need to ask.

Those who most closely study the human mind are also most acutely aware that we understand very little about how it works. We can, however, argue the following points. First, many talented people have almost inexplicable difficulties processing written language, resulting in unsuccessful experiences in an education system that is based almost exclusively on books and writing. Second, regardless of the original cause of their difficulty, students treated as inferior beings often will simply fulfill low expectations. Negative reactions from school authorities, parents, and peers wreak havoc with students' self-esteem, exacerbating any difficulties they may already have. Third, the potentially substantial contributions from supposedly learning disabled people toward more lively, instructive, interactive classrooms may be lost because of unfounded fears they will "slow down" regular classes. Ironically, these classes may already be stagnated from over-dependence on same-thinking, linguistic-based minds. We need, therefore, to remain open to a broad range of theoretical and practical possibilities that may result in the educational reform that everyone today seems to want but no one can determine how to achieve.

As has been reiterated throughout this text, the main difference between disagreeing camps in the LD controversy is *why* some students have trouble with written language. Neuroscientists at one end of the continuum are convinced that a neurological difference accounts for the problem; sociologists at the other end believe language difficulties are societally caused. Extreme views that unquestionably eliminate either view are, however, premature, considering what we know (or, rather, what we do not know) about how people learn to speak, read, and write. If available research proves anything, it is that reasons are complex, and answers are not simple. Regardless of the proliferation of research on composing that

occupies the Composition and Rhetoric field, and the reading experiments and brain research of the LD field, we simply do not yet know enough about learning to exclude each other's work.

The LD controversy is important to Composition Studies for two reasons. First, the debate concerning top-down or bottom-up teaching strategies does not end with whether to teach phonics or interesting stories first. It continues through secondary school and college in the discussion about how to design not only composition courses, but also writing-intensive courses across the curriculum. Second, the LD controversy is important because of the heterogeneous perspective it offers on ways of knowing. The "universality of experience" argument has been attacked recently because it denies certain groups their unique experiential reality and allows their voices to be lost. Similarly, the belief that everyone learns the same way may be more a blissful hope than a reality—and an avoidance of a complicated issue.

The different experiences of women and ethnic groups have long been ignored in academia, and their voices are just now beginning to be heard. Before learning disabled people can be heard, they must be recognized—not as *disabled* but as *abled* in ways they and we must discover. It is partially the overemphasis on linguistics-based knowledge that has resulted in these students being labeled LD in the first place; if we open the curriculum to a wider spectrum of ways of knowing, these students can become re-abled. Norman Geschwind called learning disability "the pathology of superiority," implying that some dyslexics have a perspective so different from the majority that they are misunderstood and cast aside as inferior (Rawson 1988, 13). Although what we know about people's minds is at this point far too limited to make such a claim, it is interesting to consider the ironic possibility that we might be harming our best young minds by forcing them to conform to a way of thinking far more limited or two dimensional than what they do naturally.

How can students with learning differences be recognized without being ostracized? How can they participate in mainstream courses in ways that allow their talents in other areas to bolster their learning, as well as that of others? Composition Studies needs to explore what the LD field can tell it about alternate, multisensory learning. The LD field needs what Composition Studies can tell it about environments most nourishing to people's development as writers. As discussed earlier, Stephen North points out that even within the same field, one kind of research vies with another for respectability. Empirical research may be valued over case study, and classroom practitioners' observations may not be as influential

as the reports of those doing funded empirical research. With the present dearth of knowledge about writing development—the reams of reports notwithstanding—we need to privilege more than one kind of research. Many special education teachers and others who work with LD students do not hold doctoral degrees. Many well-published Ph.D.'s do not work directly with first-year college students who exhibit the language difficulties this book has addressed. We need at least to consider the personal knowledge and testimony of students, parents, and teachers who must deal every day with learning differences about which most college professors and academic writers know very little.

I have attended meetings at which people ridicule and dismiss whole language, and where invented spelling is viewed as the ultimate educational horror. I have been at conferences attended by New York State language arts teachers at which a keynote speaker's disparaging reference to DISTAR, an Orton-based, reading/writing method, was met with concurring, sympathetic laughter and shaking heads from the audience. Ironically, this confidence about how writing should or should not be taught comes in a poststructuralist time when certainty is being rightly exposed for its tendency to blind those who have it, preventing them from envisioning other perspectives. As writing instructors, we must of course make informed decisions about what we will do in our classrooms. We must form convictions about how students best learn to write, and then we must act on those convictions. However, the theory that informs practice stays healthier when it remains somewhat in flux and when we periodically and critically examine what we are doing; we are better theorists if we are, as Paulo Freire puts it, "less certain of 'certainties.'"¹

As instructors, we need to believe that people think in many ways. We need to break out of binary categories regarding right and wrong ways of learning, and to challenge ourselves and our students to change classroom culture from over-reliance on single-modality teaching. Questions about writing need to be recast, with ideas regarding what it means to compose solicited from people with a variety of learning styles. Composition specialists, who are for the most part people who like to write, may have a hard time tolerating or even imagining unconventional ways of writing, much as they might want to include and respond fairly to all students. Incorporating multisensory options into regular coursework and assessment will expand educational opportunities for everyone and reveal talents that many students, LD or otherwise, may not have known they had.

We also need to rethink how students use the limited hours available for reading, studying, writing, and other intellectual work. Editing and proofreading issues need to be examined and discussed publicly with students, educators, and people from the business and professional communities. Can we agree that clean, well-edited text is *both* vitally important *and* achievable in a variety of ways? Can we appreciate good writers that may need more support than others do from editors or from state-of-the-art computerized aids? Can we recognize different processes of writing?

As researchers, we need to work more daringly with colleagues not just from other disciplines, but also from different research traditions and to cooperate in the full sense of the word—both speaking with and listening to each other, and producing better knowledge. While all research should be subjected to a healthy examination of its procedures and conclusions, it should not automatically and cynically be dismissed in favor of more familiar approaches. Negativism can kill creativity. Research projects that may be plodding around the same territory for years may break into a run with the help of new perspectives. Both Composition Studies and the LD field are now in need of this kind of synergy.

This book is not a claim to know. It is an invitation to explore, to include, to not exclude. It is a call for a rethinking of writing and learning, for a positive yet critical examination of all research methods, and for an open-mindedness regarding intelligence. It is also a challenge to broaden and enrich the learning of all students and teachers by recognizing all the ways of knowing that will allow learning disabled people to become re-abled.

Notes

1. Quoted by Ann E. Berthoff in the Foreword to Freire and Macedo's *Literacy: Reading the Word And the World*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1987, xii.