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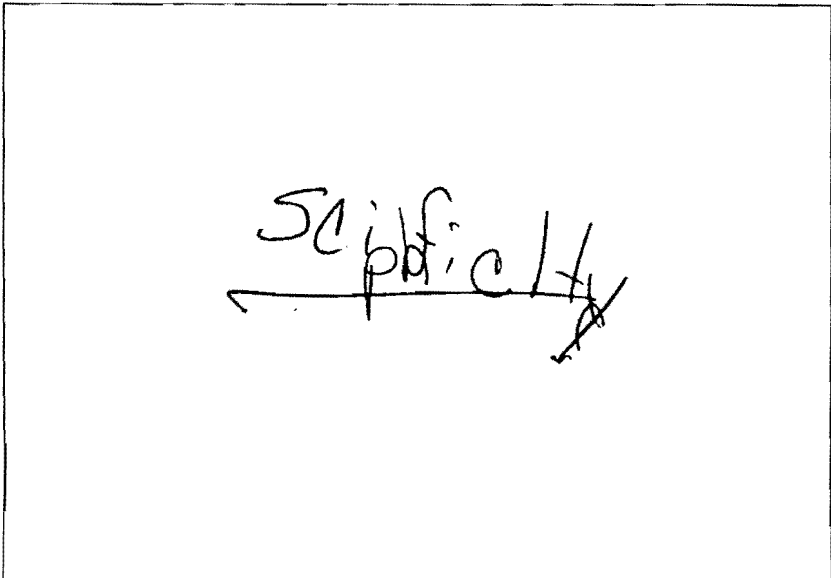
## Introduction

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One day Barbara<sup>1</sup> came to the university Writing Center because she said her phonetic spelling was interfering with her job as a secretary. She thought if she studied spelling rules and “spelling demons,” she might write better. I watched this bright, articulate young woman as she tried to write *specifically*, a word she was using in a draft. It came out *scipbficly*—the *b* squeezed in between the *p* and the *f* as an afterthought (see Figure I-1).

She kept writing this word over and over in different ways, hoping that it would eventually look right to her. As we talked about words and letters, Barbara also told me she frequently had trouble distinguishing *sign* from *sing*. While we examined the two words, she asked me, “Don’t the letters look weird? Don’t they jump around?” I had to answer, “No. Not for me.” What alarmed me was

**Figure I-1**  
Barbara’s attempt at *specifically*.



that after seven years of teaching high school English, five years of teaching four to five sections of composition per semester at a two-year college, and then three years of concentrated study in a doctoral program in Composition, I was stumped. Not only did I have no clue about how to help Barbara, I could not even comprehend the kinds of difficulties she was describing.

Shortly after that tutorial, I was walking to my office from the campus parking lot and telling a colleague I thought one of my students with unusual spelling problems and a tendency to transpose letters might be dyslexic. A woman walking in front of us (and apparently listening to our conversation) turned around and said, "Did I hear you say you thought a student of yours was dyslexic?"

"Yes," I said.

She smiled and informed me, "You know, dyslexia is really very rare."

Everyone has something to say about dyslexia and learning disabilities. Opinions regarding these terms are so entrenched that educated people are sometimes not even aware that equally educated people hold opinions completely opposite to theirs. What to call it, how to define and test for it, and how to remedy it have far-reaching implications for researchers, educators, psychologists, and parents, not to mention the students themselves. What labels and treatments are chosen by those in a position to choose them affect the self-esteem, the education, and perhaps even the personality of those on the receiving end of the treatment.

My reasons for investigating learning disabilities were both personal and professional, and had existed even before I met Barbara. During the five years I taught composition at the two-year college, I had encountered several students whose numerous, inexplicable errors were so puzzling to me that I did not know where to begin helping them. One student sometimes, but not always, wrote *has* for *as*. For example, "Has for me, I prefer to drive," or "It was bright has day." One-to-one conferences left both of us frustrated and discouraged. She knew perfectly well that *has* did not fit in that sentence, and she never made such errors when she spoke, yet she did not see it when proofreading unless someone read her draft aloud.

Another student in one of my literature classes had always made interesting, perceptive comments in class regarding whatever short story we were discussing. However, her essay on the same short story was an almost incomprehensible jumble of bad spelling and strange idioms, not at all reflected in her oral language. My professional conscience nagged me no matter how I graded her work. If I graded high because of her valuable contributions to class discussions, my allegiance to "standards" would scream, "But look

at her papers! They look like a first grader wrote them. What would the academic dean say if she saw Tracy's papers and the *B* you gave her this quarter?" If I graded low because her essays were not "college level," my duty to fairness would start in: "How can you give her a *D*? She has more insights about those stories than anyone else in the class!" I simply did not know what to do for Tracy. Our one-to-one conferences were pleasant and chatty, and we discussed her papers until we were both satisfied she could recognize and fix any problems. Then in her next piece of writing, she would make another strange, but different, batch of errors.

At the same time I was teaching at the two-year college, my nephew Joey was reaching the age of two, and then three, and then four, without speaking the way I heard other children speak. His first (and for a long time only) word was *Up*, which could mean "Pick me up," "Put me down," "Look over there," "Carry me across the room," or "Give me back to Mom." At four, he was still speaking primarily in monosyllables, which were not always pronounced correctly and which he seemed to have a difficult time recalling.

When he was seven years old, he was speaking in short sentences, but they didn't come out quite right. For many months he would say, "No don't know," for "I don't know," and "I want go yours car," instead of "I want to go in your car." He was always producing odd combinations of words such as "I want need help," and "I no can't member" (I can't remember). We all kept giving him the benefit of the doubt, believing that in time he would pick up language the way he was supposed to. One incident, however, made me wonder if that would ever happen.

Most of the family referred to Joey's younger brother as "Beaner." One day Joey was attempting to say something, but could not remember his brother's name. "Give it um—um—what him name?" Someone supplied "Beaner." Embarrassed, Joey laughed nervously, hit himself in the head, and said, "I forgot Beaner's name. I don't know. My head sometimes." While Joey frequently had trouble recalling my name—I was sometimes "Mom, I mean Nanny, I mean Dad, I mean Aunt Pat"—he *always* said "Beaner" easily. This day, when he had trouble even with this frequently said word, I knew Joey's problem was not the same as when I might occasionally forget a student's name.

My sister had been doing a lot of reading about speech, language acquisition, and reading difficulties. She had heard people speak about children who were having problems similar to Joey's—problems recalling the words they wanted to say, problems pronouncing them, problems putting sentences together in conventional ways. As I leafed through some of the material my sister

brought home from the library, I began recognizing some of the kinds of errors the college students had made. Most of the case studies and accounts of children and adults with language difficulties like Joey's and with spelling and idiomatic problems like Tracy's and Barbara's appeared in books and journal articles about *learning disabilities*, something I had heard of, but to which I had not given much thought. An older term was *dyslexia*.

The more I read about dyslexia and certain kinds of learning disabilities, the more I talked with my sister and with the parents of children in the special school Joey was attending, the more I observed his struggle with language, and the more I noticed the error patterns of several other students who came into the Writing Center, the more I became intrigued with this condition. Was it indeed a cause, or was it an outmoded label for a multifaceted problem? Could Joey be helped? What about Tracy and Barbara? I was determined to find out all I could, to try to separate fact from myth, and to use my professional judgment to analyze the remediation recommended by reading and learning disability professionals.

The helplessness I felt in listening to my nephew struggle to recall his brother's name, along with the frustration I experienced in not being able to help some of my students, suggested to me that the theories of writing I had been studying in my own field did not account for all types of errors. I felt there was a gap in Composition pedagogy, a crack through which a small but significant number of college students were falling. Although Composition Studies, traditionally, does not deal with learning disabilities, I felt it was a subject I needed to investigate. Why do some students have more difficulty than others in learning to read and write well? Is there a way to help them? While research in Composition has addressed these questions, the answers put forth, although impassioned, are appropriate to many, but not all, people. Meanwhile, more and more bright students such as Tracy and Barbara continue to experience frustrating difficulties with the words some of their classmates mastered in first grade.

I began my research from the perspective of a Composition specialist convinced of the sociological nature of reading and writing (and, for that matter, of any kind of research, "scientific" or otherwise). I am an instructor who uses a pedagogy based primarily on the assumptions that reading and writing form a whole process of discovery and cannot be separated into parts. However, I also began this exploration with a nagging question about why some students seem to have such a difficult time learning to read and write. When social factors, which, granted, can never be eliminated, do not

*appear* to account for an individual's uphill struggle to become literate, is there a cognitive-based theory that would explain it? If there is a neurological reason for some people's problems, could there be a way to help them?

I thought that perhaps the learning disability (LD) field could provide the answers to some of my questions. I soon discovered, however, that the LD field was fraught with confusion and controversy. The very term *learning disability* is a problematic one that reflects the many disagreements surrounding it. Whether or not such a phenomenon exists at all is being debated. What the condition should be called is a constant point of contention. Throughout this book, I will use terms I have encountered in my research—*learning disability*, *specific learning disability*, *dyslexia*—terms whose meanings sometimes overlap and blur. Although I recognize that *learning disability* and *dyslexia* are problematic terms for many reasons, I will employ them for lack of a better phrase with which most readers would be familiar.

By *learning disability*, I am not referring to hearing loss, poor eyesight, or other physical challenges. There are also such things as attention deficit disorders (ADD) and difficulties with math (dyscalculia). Because I am a writing instructor, I am interested in language-processing problems, which will be the primary focus of this book. I mean by *learning disability* or *dyslexia* the inexplicable difficulties some people have in learning to read and write. Chapter One provides a more detailed explanation and critique of this and other terminology.

This study will resurrect some painful, stubborn questions regarding what it is we think we are doing when we teach writing. It will, by necessity, touch upon areas not usually considered the concern of composition instructors. However, the students we teach often reflect and are the products of the philosophies and practices of our predecessors, people who in turn have been exposed to professional preparation and theories of writing different perhaps from those with which we in Composition are familiar. Composition Studies cannot be a self-contained field. The students it affects have been doing various kinds of writing since kindergarten, under the direction of many and various teachers. Therefore, any investigation into how writing development occurs becomes a complex and intricate web that extends throughout the educational system. We cannot, obviously, be familiar with everything studied by education majors, reading specialists, and special education teachers. However, if we are claiming to know how our students learn best to write, we need *some* awareness of what other professionals claim is best.

In this book I examine what I now see as gaps in the preparation and professional reading of Composition specialists. The controversy regarding the cause and treatment of linguistic difficulties is something all writing instructors should be cognizant of as more and more students enter college announcing themselves as learning disabled. Some say the percentage of disabled students in college has doubled in ten years (Vogel and Adelman 1992, 430), while others say it has tripled (Satcher and Dooley-Dickey 1991, 47). Although precise numbers vary, experts do seem to agree that LD students are entering college in greater numbers than ever before (Whinnery 1992, 31). This book is for educators willing to explore ways of knowing unfamiliar to themselves and also willing to re-examine what they have always believed about composing.

The main arguments in the LD controversy involve the causes of the difficulty and its remediation, as well as what research is useful. Many people believe that LD is caused by a neurological difference in the way some people process linguistic symbols. Others believe that dyslexia or LD is a myth, or at best an unnecessarily technical term for those who cannot read well because of the powerful negative social forces that shaped their opportunity and desire to read. Juxtaposed in Chapter One are the conflicting views of Samuel Orton, Gerald Coles, Albert Galaburda, Frank Vellutino, James Carrier, Marie Clay, Peter Johnston, and others. The ambiguous terminology of recent legislation regarding learning disabilities has also sparked different interpretations. Who will pay for needed accommodations? How might the new law impact classroom practices? These are also issues examined in Chapter One.

Chapter Two presents an overview of how learning disabilities are typically presented in the journals and conferences of Composition Studies. Most college composition specialists have limited knowledge of learning disabilities, stemming in part from the limits of their graduate school preparation. Composition Studies tends to discount neurological differences in people and instead emphasizes socioeconomic factors as the primary cause of writing difficulty. How we teach writing is a function of how we think people learn. Even if it is unacknowledged, even if the individual teacher is unreflective, we make an assumption about how learning occurs. As Ann E. Berthoff has pointed out, all practice is based on an epistemological grounding, whether or not it is consciously recognized (1981, 11). A writing teacher's practice, like any teacher's practice, is influenced by that individual's deeply rooted beliefs about learning. Whatever vocabulary is used to describe it, writing instruction today, as evidenced by the topics at writing conferences and in professional articles, is based more and more on a philosophy that stu-

dents will develop as writers and readers the more they immerse themselves in and become engaged with occasions for meaningful writing. It is assumed that all people have more or less the same ability to use language and that students will develop facility with academic discourses and conventions as they have opportunities to use them. Chapter Two will show how most current Composition theory fails to account for a percentage of students who may not respond as well as others to teaching practices designed for the majority.

Regarding pedagogy, experts disagree on whether an explicit, multi-modal, phonics-based teaching method should be employed with LD students, or whether they should receive the same instruction as everyone else. If we are basing our philosophy of writing development on a particular theory of learning, and, of course, we must be, what evidence is there that this is a viable theory? Are there others? What are the conflicting arguments, theories, and research results touted on either side of this issue, and what are the risks involved in not being aware of the controversy? How might the pedagogy of a writing teacher utterly convinced that dyslexia is a real phenomenon differ from that of another teacher equally convinced that it is not? Contrasted in Chapter Three are the theoretical assumptions underlying whole language practices with the assumptions supporting explicit, phonics-based, multisensory approaches. The circumstances under which my nephew Joey learned to make linguistic connections are recounted, and these results are interpreted with regard to older students.

Chapter Four gives the perspectives of experts not often consulted in this controversy: college students labeled LD who are successfully completing programs designed primarily for people who learn differently than they do. The stories of these three students are for me the strongest argument for a rethinking of composition pedagogy, a stretching of multidimensional thinking, and an open-mindedness regarding what—and how—other people know.

The last chapter suggests ways in which writing instructors might adapt their theory and practice to include the learning styles of all students. It calls for educators at all levels and in all disciplines to reexamine their assumptions about reading, writing, and learning.

I used the word *re-abled* in the title of this text to argue that so-called *disabled* people *do* have abilities, which have been disabled in part by a society and school system that insists on a way of learning convenient or familiar to a majority of learners, but which does not tap into the substantial intellectual resources of 1 to 5 percent of the population. Many “disabilities” have come about

because of a hegemonic insistence on outdated schoolroom methods, inadequate measures of intelligence, and intolerance for differences. Reforming general education and broadening ways of learning will not only benefit all students. It will *re-able* those whose substantial talents have been underused for too long in a linguisto-centric education system.

### Notes

1. The names of all college students and instructors mentioned in this book have been changed.