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## Chapter Four

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# Learning Differences: The Perspective of LD College Students

After reading dozens of books and hundreds of articles by experts in the LD, reading, and writing fields, professionals who had themselves studied LD and conducted classroom and laboratory research, I still had almost as many questions as when I began my research several years ago. I also realized that these experts, for all their education and experience, were most likely not learning disabled. Like me, they were researching a phenomenon that happened to others, not to them. In a way, learning disabled college students are the most expert people of all in this controversy because they have lived amidst its chaos for a long time. No matter what the various Ph.D.'s were currently deciding about the existence and extent of learning disabilities, I wanted to hear from young people whose lives had been influenced, for good or for ill, by being labeled LD.

Michael Polanyi and others<sup>1</sup> have argued for the validity of personal knowledge and experience. However, if these things were really valued, it would not be necessary repeatedly to cite testimony to that effect by respected scientists. The fact that personal knowledge cannot stand by itself, the fact that such high-level approval, a dropping of the biggest names, inevitably accompanies accounts of personal experience, almost by way of apology or permission, shows dramatically that personal knowledge is most definitely not valued for itself. It must always be “theorized,” and “contextualized” by other, more academically acceptable evidence. The constant need to claim (even as I am doing here) that something matters because Polanyi or Bakhtin or Vygotsky says it does has a kind

of "This is so because my mommy or daddy says so" ring to it. It should go without saying that the personal experience of our students matters, that what they say about themselves is credible, that their stories are true, that what they know about the way they learn, what they must do as they read, write, and study, is informed by years of life experience.

Students have been silenced, their stories discounted. Some critics of the LD field claim that what LD students say about their experiences with reversals and unstable letters should really not be taken seriously. It has been argued that these students' perceptions of what happens when they read or write has been heavily influenced by what they've been told, shaped by what they've read, and molded by the professionals with whom they have spoken. But whose perceptions have not been so shaped and molded? If these critics' doctoral studies and reading lists were shaped primarily by one or another side of the LD controversy, if they read basically from a fairly closed set of journals, and if in their professional lives they are surrounded principally by like-minded researchers, then the judgments of these experts should be heard with similar caveats. Without question, students' perceptions are influenced by others. But so are the perceptions of anyone who dismisses what students claim, or who says that students' perceptions about their learning styles are less valid for having been so influenced. If there is no objective knowledge, then there is no objective knowledge for LD students, for scientists, for theorists, for philosophers, for anyone. What's good for the student is good for the theorist. It evens the game a bit if we remember that those with twenty years of education are just as influenced by schema as are students. Young people's versions of their experiences should be just as valid as the version given by the most credentialed among us.

That said, I present in this chapter the stories of three college students who are currently labeled LD. I asked to interview these particular individuals because I felt fairly confident they would not be embarrassed speaking about their experiences. I deliberately chose students I knew were open and apparently comfortable about being labeled. They were neither randomly selected nor meant to represent all LD students. In fact, all three were quick to point out that LD people are all different. It may indeed be likely that these three are somewhat atypical: many LD students drop out of high school, never attempt college, or leave after initial frustration with their first semester. These three are successful, confident college students who are maintaining a *B* average in competitive majors (criminal justice and occupational therapy). Each is officially labeled LD and takes advantage of available academic support services. They

all seem to possess a metacognitive awareness of where their strengths and weaknesses lie, and they all seem to have come to terms with the way they learn. Although they would prefer not to draw attention to themselves as different learners, they have found ways to ask for, even insist upon, accommodations they believe they need to succeed.

All three are white middle-class, only partially representative of Utica College, which has a student body that is currently about 15 percent African American, Asian, or Latino. According to Steve Patarini (1994), the Director of Academic Support Services at Utica College, 13 percent of the forty-five students labeled LD this year are from this latter group. As the students interviewed will attest, being labeled LD throughout elementary and high school can be a curse or a blessing, but it does guarantee certain legal rights. There are, undoubtedly, many LD students at Utica College and across the country who are not officially labeled as such. (See Coles 1987, 203–07 and Chapter One of this book.) According to a recent *New York Times* series on special education, the labeling of students in New York City is influenced by discriminatory practices based on race, gender, and class. (See Dillon 1994; Winerip 1994; and L. Richardson 1994.) Marilyn Wessels, the president of a New York-based organization called “Schools Are for Everyone,” reports that her state has one of the worst records nationally for placing LD students in the least restrictive environment (Nelis 1993, B10). The three students I spoke with were not isolated, as so many LD students still are, in separate classes or separate institutions. Their experiences may be quite different from those of students who *are* so isolated from the mainstream.

These students, therefore, do not purport to represent all LD students. They cannot speak for other people with similar linguistic processing difficulties who may be first-year students on the verge of giving up. They cannot speak for returning students (or those who never return), who attended elementary and high school long before LD was routinely diagnosed and people could receive the help they needed, or for those who were labeled but relegated to unenlightened programs that did not expect much from them. They cannot speak for LD students who may have other problems stemming from socioeconomic factors or racial discrimination, which may have prevented them from being included among the officially labeled group, or perhaps caused them to be labeled and then separated so completely from the college-bound groups that they never considered higher education. They cannot speak for the percentage of illiterate prisoners, some of whom may have been helped by an LD label they never received, or harmed by a label that

doomed them. Nor can these students speak for the children and adults socially imprisoned by the shame often accompanying reading and writing difficulties.

The purpose of these interviews was to give several individuals labeled LD a chance to explain how having a learning disability affects their lives. These three happen to be fairly confident, mature, and self-assured about their strengths. Whatever demons may have plagued them earlier about whether or not they would finish college have been for the most part expelled. These three students refer to themselves as “lucky,” and all three express concern about those LD students younger than themselves who may not, for whatever reasons, have the same opportunities they did. It is hoped that these three narratives will somehow help educators gain a broader perspective on the learning environment of students of any gender, race, or class, labeled or not, who may have a learning difference.

I asked the first person, Nick, to speak with me because I had worked with him several times in the Writing Center on both global and surface revisions of his papers. I also knew him from a literature class I had taught several years ago. The second person, Monica, I knew only slightly, but I was aware that she was a strong supporter of accommodations for LD students. I did not meet the third person, Janine, until the day of the interview, but I was aware that she had asked to take the college writing exam in the academic support office, rather than in a lecture hall, an accommodation for LD students. I had seen an essay of hers that caught my attention because of its peculiar error pattern, and I wanted to ask her about it.

It is important to hear these people's stories in their own words. For the sake of brevity, I have summarized some sections of the interviews, but others are transcribed word-for-word so that readers can hear, first of all, these students' determination, their sense of humor, their passion for what they believe, as well as their experience with frustration—a word used by all three of them. The interviews, conducted individually, ranged from an hour and a half to over two hours, and each person's speech was intense and fast, so fast I had to rewind the tape over and over in some sections in order to transcribe what they said.

It was during this transcription process that I realized these students sometimes omitted words, or used the wrong word or the wrong tense. I did not notice this during the interviews themselves. I suspect I unconsciously filled in left-out words, or “heard” words that they meant, but did not actually say. As I listened to them speak in person, my impression was that each student was extremely eloquent, grammatical slipups were barely noticeable, and the stories and examples they related were vivid and detailed. It



may be that all people make occasional mistakes in speech that are obvious only in a transcript of the conversation, or it may be that the errors these students occasionally made provide insights into their written work. The purpose of these interviews was to hear these students' experiences, not to analyze their speech, so when I began transcribing the interviews, I was automatically fixing any slipups I heard, in order to make the transcript more readable and to more closely convey the overall quality of the students' speech patterns. As I heard more and more errors on the tape, however, and began to recognize that these oral errors fit the pattern of errors these students said they made in their written texts, I decided to go back and transcribe exactly what they said. In most cases, I have supplied in brackets the word I think they meant, where applicable, and sometimes I have simply used *sic*. Often the student heard the error and rephrased the sentence. I view these occasional slipups as perhaps a significant footnote to the compelling experiences they relate. The names of all three students have been changed as have those of any teachers or professors they discuss.

## Nick

The first person I talked with was Nick, who currently maintains a *B* average in college and participates in many social activities—dramatic productions, fund-raisers, and residence life workshops—all of which capitalize on his speaking skills, none of which involve a lot of reading and writing. He had been a physical therapy major, he told me, but the technical, complicated vocabulary of the major muscle groups had plagued him beyond his frustration level, so he switched to criminal justice, where he said he could learn more through listening.

His writing, while sophisticated in ideas, organization, sentence structure, and vocabulary, is typically peppered with surface errors. These written errors often involve subject-verb agreement, such as *rights that an individuals has*, and *powers has*. He often uses plurals when he should use possessives, or vice versa: *the students ability for the student's ability*; *courts for court's*; or the possessive *college's* instead of the simple plural, *colleges*. His writing also exhibits frequent spelling errors that may be simple typographical problems, or they may be connected to an impaired ability to envision them mentally: *discission* for *decision*; *untied* for *united*; and *abloshed* for *abolished*. Very often, he writes the wrong word: *supple* for *supply*; *quilt* for *guilt*; *behave* for *behalf*; *tear* for *tier*; *sold* for *solid*; *well* for *will* and so on. (See Chapter Five for further discussion of errors and

cues to learning disabilities.) These wrong word errors remain difficult for him to eradicate because the computer's spell checker reads them as correctly spelled words. Although Nick has been no doubt told that he is being careless or lazy because so many surface errors appear in his late-stage drafts, I can safely say, from watching him edit, that he is neither. He has to look at a sentence again and again before he sees an error, and he may read the right word out loud, even when the wrong one is on the page. While everyone does all these things from time to time, Nick's writing has many more of these kinds of errors than is usual, even when he is doing his best work, even when he has proofread it carefully many times.

I learned much from my two-hour interview with Nick because his narrative provided a unique perspective not available in the scholarly research. Although Nick's elementary school teachers wanted him to be tested for LD, his mother did not want him to be stigmatized. In his early years of high school, another teacher wanted Nick to seek help, but he was too proud to risk going to the "resource room," a place he refers to in an autobiographical essay as the "reject room." He remained in a regular classroom, using what professionals might refer to as "compensatory strategies." He calls them "survival instincts." By listening carefully in class and craftily arranging group study sessions, Nick managed to get average grades through high school. Then he experienced several incidents, detailed below, that made him decide to get tested for LD, and ultimately labeled and provided with special services.

Because he was not officially labeled LD until his junior year in high school, he had limited, but insightful, experiences in that "resource room," a place where LD high school students are sent for extra help after they have been singled out from their classmates. (Christopher Lee, in *Faking It* [Lee and Jackson 1992], calls his high school resource room "the stupid trailer.") In highlights of the interview, Nick talks about the students in this room, as well as about specific moments in his life that most shaped who he is today. He talks of ongoing problems and painful moments in his current college career that are related to his disability. Since his telling of his story is more vivid than my summary of it would be, I have reproduced substantive sections of the interview transcript, with some retrospective commentary of my own.

**P:** How did your being labeled come about?

**N:** That's an interesting story. I was labeled end of junior year in high school. I was labeled LD very young, but my mom refused to recognize that, and later my ninth grade teachers wanted to test me again, and I refused, and my mom respected that. Then, in junior year, a chemistry teacher sat

me down and said, "Look, you have the knowledge and ability to go to college, but you're not going to be able to do it without additional support." I admire her as a teacher. She was probably one of the most intelligent teachers I've ever met. And so she pushed me toward it. So I, respecting her, agreed to it. I was tested, and they found a discrepancy in the English/reading/writing area, and therefore, I went through the official process.

**P:** Do you think that it has helped you or hurt you—being labeled? Do you think it helped or hindered you early on by *not* being labeled?

**N:** Ah—regarding early on. It helped me *not* to be labeled, I feel, because I had to work, because I didn't have that support, so therefore I had to come up with ways to learn in class because I never took notes. I never—I didn't have the skills of the regular, normal students, so therefore I learned to overcome my disability on my own.

**P:** What did you do?

**N:** I never missed a class, never missed school. In my whole high school career, I think I missed like maybe ten days. Class time was where I learned everything. I would just ask questions, and I just listened. Studying-wise, I always studied in groups, and everyone else would talk, and I would just pick it up auditorially.

**P:** That's interesting. How did you get the groups together?

**N:** Oh, just friends, you know. When you have a disability, you learn to be—ah—deceiving, and you just, you know, like, "Well, do you want to study in a group?" I like studying in a group, and usually everyone likes to study in a group because you can chat and have a conversation when you study, so it's not as boring, so most people are willing to study in groups. And if they weren't, then, I usually didn't study at all. [laughs]

**P:** Now, these people in the group—they were not aware of your . . .

**N:** [laughs] No. Some of them were aware of my situation just because it was such a small school, and they knew I went to the resource room. Well, they knew I had a problem because in class, I wouldn't ever read. The teacher would ask me to read, and I refused. But they never asked anything. They thought that I was just being myself: stubborn. That was before I got labeled.

**P:** Would you say that when you were studying in groups, a lot of your knowledge came in through listening?

**N:** Oh yeah. Definitely. I learn auditorially, and I think that was because of my disability, but also I had to adapt and overcome. I couldn't read in the books; I mean, I didn't read the books. I never did.

**P:** You never read the books?

**N:** Oh no. I never read one. I read one book in high school, and that was a book I read leisurely.

**P:** What was that?

**N:** *Friday Night Lights*. It's a sports book. It's about a football team in Odessa. It's quality. I like that. And that's the only book I read in its entirety.

**P:** In all of high school?

N: Yeah. I never read a book in high school.

P: That's amazing.

N: It is. Actually, it's sad, in my eyes. It's really sad that I was able to do that, and teachers never picked up on it.

P: And nobody knew?

N: No. 'Cause, you know, you're in class, and teachers discuss the books, and they're not going to test you on something they don't talk about, so you just pick up what they talk about in class. And you just—just—I don't know—you learn. You're able to see what teachers test on, I think.

P: Tell me more about those adaptive strategies.

N: [laughs] I don't know if they're—like—strategies. I don't know. They just came to me, and I guess it was—ahh—I don't know, survival instincts?—because I knew that if I didn't learn it somehow, I was going to fail, and my mom would have killed me. I mean, that's basically what it was. But even though I was able to do that, I wasn't getting great grades. I mean, I was getting all right; my high school average was about 70 percent. My stepfather said that I could do the work, and I said, "Yeah, yeah, whatever," so he bet me fifty bucks one semester that I couldn't get on the honor roll, which was 85.

P: That you *couldn't*?

N: That I couldn't. He bet me fifty bucks that I couldn't. I said I could. And I did. I got an 85. But then the next semester I was like—I didn't do it. You know, it was sad because I proved that I could do it. But he showed me I could do it, but I didn't learn my lesson. I was just like, "Whatever. Give me my fifty dollars and that's it." So I did get decent grades, but it wasn't what I could've got.

P: You said you never read entire books, only sections. How did you know what to read to get by? How did you figure that out? How did you know what the tests would be like?

N: Oh—teachers are funny. They give you answers. I don't understand why, but I guess it's their human nature. They don't want you to fail. So they will—actually, they spoon-fed me. I mean, I knew what was going to be on the test. Pretty much in general you know this chapter is going to be stressed, this chapter, blah, blah, blah, and you just learn when the person stressed it. I had a very energetic English teacher my senior year, and you just knew when she got really excited about it. When she went ecstatic and went running around the room, you knew that was going to be on the test. Just stuff like that. Other than that—teacher stressing things—they say, "This is important."

P: So would you just take that from class? Would you go back to the book at all? Read some stuff?

N: Just listen.

P: Just listen?

N: Just listen. Yeah.

P: So how did you handle the reading comprehension on the Regents? Were you used to reading chunks like that?

N: I—luckily I was able—I got labeled. I was able to take the Regents exam untimed. If I didn't take it untimed, I would have never passed. So that was a tremendous help because I never would have been able to finish the reading. Like—a paragraph that takes most students, say, five minutes, would take me twenty minutes. My reading deficit is bad. That exam I was really nervous about because I didn't think I was going to pass. But I did.

Several points here are noteworthy. First of all, while parents may occasionally be criticized for refusing to have their children tested, or accused of denying them what is viewed as needed help, it should be recognized that at least some of the time, parents know more about their children than do education professionals. This is not to say children should not be tested for LD or given extra help, but parents should not be automatically condemned for disagreeing with their children's teachers regarding proposed programs about which they may have many legitimate questions. While it may be argued that Nick may have become a better reader by getting labeled early on, it might just as easily be argued that, left to his own devices, he was able to discover how best to hone his auditory skills, closely observing human behavior and reading people's expressions. He found out for himself the benefits of what is just now becoming a respected educational tool: collaborative learning. Group projects, discussion-based classes, and study groups would be inexpensive, relatively easy ways of restructuring much of what happens in college classrooms. These student-centered approaches, which can be used for everything from memorizing definitions to analyzing discourse, would no doubt enrich college experience for everyone. For LD students, these approaches might make the difference between success and failure.

It should also be noted that his mother's high expectations ("because I knew that if I didn't learn it somehow, I was going to fail, and my mom would have killed me") also no doubt motivated him to find these alternative methods. Using reverse psychology, his stepfather also motivated Nick, at least temporarily, to make the honor roll. What made him not try for it the next semester is not clear. Perhaps it was simply too time consuming.

Although not being labeled early in his educational career may have worked to Nick's advantage in some ways, he reached a point when the label became useful. Without it, he could not have taken the English Regents exam untimed, an element he feels was necessary for him to pass it. Nick said that he scored almost 300 points higher in an untimed SAT than when he took a timed version. In

the next section, Nick speaks indirectly about the power of attitude. In the same way his mother's high expectations and stepfather's reverse psychology motivated Nick to find alternate ways of learning, the perceived low expectations of some of his teachers invited him to do less than his best.

**P:** If you could speak to writing teachers, are there any specific dos and don'ts you would tell them regarding LD students?

**N:** I guess there's numerous dos and don'ts, but probably the number one don't would be to look at them differently—because a student usually is uncomfortable with their disability anyway, and any time a teacher almost looks down upon them and says, "You don't have to do this quality of work because you have a disability," that, in my mind, says that they don't think that we can do the work, so therefore they're not making us do the work. Therefore, they set a lower standard, and that perpetuates a continuously low quality of work. I see that happen continuously in high school as well as college.

**P:** Can you think of examples?

**N:** High school I can think of tremendous examples where many of my friends, because they're in the ah—resource room—that's what most high school uses [*sic*—teachers allow them to have late assignments in, allow them to do assignments poorly because they assume that because they're in that room that gives them permission or the ability to do that quality of work. Specific examples? I can name numerous times when I myself have gotten away with not my best work because teachers would look at it and say, "Oh, that's all right. It's because he has a learning disability." And, you know, I used it to my advantage sometimes in high school. I'm that way sometimes, but you know, when I look back on it, I say they should have forced me to do the equal work, compatible to everyone else in the class, because I was capable of doing it. It just took me longer to make that final copy, to get that finished work.

**P:** If they allow late assignments, if they allow more time, how can you not be singled out?

**N:** I think it turns with writing assignments outside of class. They shouldn't get any extended periods of time unless the circumstances are substantial. They can say, "No, we want it at the same time, but I will work with you." They *should* get extra time for in-class exams. They might need an extra half hour to think it out.

**P:** I don't know if you can judge this, but what happens when you read? Why do you think it takes you that long to go through a passage?

**N:** Oh, that's very simple. I can't read the words. I can't read them. Like, for example, in a paragraph, there's probably—there's my law journals. Like, I'm a college student. It's junior year, and there's probably in a paragraph of law, out of one of my cases, I couldn't read probably ten to fifteen words. Like, I can't read them. Like, I don't know what they say.

**P:** Is it the vocabulary?

**N:** No, because—see, again. An example I can give you is, I used to help out at a nursery type school. I used to do community work there. I mean, literally, I was reading a book to the student, a little—I mean, it's like a third—it's like a book—and I couldn't read one of the words, and I had to make it up.

**P:** A third-grade book?

**N:** No. I don't even know what it was. It was like—kindergarten. I wrote a story on it, and that was like, one of the reasons I got tested, because I made up this word, because I couldn't read a kindergarten book, or whatever it was—a kiddie lit book, and I couldn't read it. So it's not just the vocabulary in the law book. It's everything. I can't pronounce things. Like the way I learn something is like if someone said the word before, so I know the word—what it sounds like? I can't—like names are really difficult for me. Like reading names off a sheet. I've never heard the words before, so therefore I always pronounce them incorrectly.

**P:** Can you tell me about that story you mentioned?

As Nick recounted this incident, his speech became halting and agitated, especially when he tried to remember the name of the book.

**N:** The story that I wrote—about the kindergartners? Yeah, well, what happened was, when I had to write my admissions essay for college, my resource room teacher, Mrs. Alvarez, she knew about the story, and she suggested I write about it. So I did because it really bothered me. And what happened was that I was doing community service. I was there and one of the little kids, I mean, not even in kindergarten, asked me to read something. It was the title, actually, I remember—I think—I remember it was the book—it—a fire eng—a fire comp—a fire engine—and the title—I still can't remember the title 'cause it's like blank. I guess it's like, shock or something, but I looked at the title, and they were like, "What's the book about?"—and I'm like—I couldn't read the title. And at that moment—just to—I don't know how to describe it. It's like—I was insulted? And I don't even know like the right vocabulary to describe it, but at that moment I was just—it was appalling to me to think that this kid asked me to read something that *he* could read—and I couldn't. And that—it was just like—"What am I going to be? Am I going to be a bum?" or, you know, it was like from that time forward I couldn't believe this. And there's been numerous examples when that's happened—when I just couldn't read a word. Another example was—and this also is—this is really bad; you're going to hate this. It's called *Slave Day*? And we don't do it anymore, and what—

**P:** Fraternity stuff?

**N:** No, no. It was for high school. It was to raise money. They would be a slave for someone for a day. It was in this chemistry class, and the teacher asked me to read, and I couldn't read a word.

**P:** She asked you to read something?

N: Out of the text, and I couldn't read a word. And it was a *stupid* word, but it took me ten minutes to decipher it. And she's the type of teacher that won't let you give up?

P: Um-hm.

N: So we sat there for ten minutes with my girlfriend sitting next to me and the whole class sitting behind me—'cause I sat right in the front row—trying to decipher this word. And I didn't get it until, until one of my friends goes, "Nick, you *know* this word," and I'm like, "What do you mean?" and he's like, "What's N.J.?" And I'm like, "Initial." And he says, "Just put *ly*." And it was *initially*. The word was *initially*. And I couldn't decipher it. I didn't know what it was. And it wasn't helping that it was in front of everyone, and I just got nervous and nervous and nervous [sic].

P: Oh yeah. Yeah.

N: And that was—that was after I got labeled, but that was, I mean, it's the same example as before—a time when, as a junior in high school, I should be able to read.

P: Humiliating, yeah.

N: Yeah.

In the next section, he talks about his experiences at his former college, where he was admitted under a special LD program.

P: What about now that you're in college? Do you think that the label, overall, is good or bad? Does it make a difference?

N: If you're asking if I could get away with not being labeled, I probably could. Would I have come to college if I wasn't labeled? No.

P: Why not?

N: Because that step from high school to college is a tremendous step for any student, and for an LD student is a tremendous—it's like—it increases the gap greatly. I went to a school that had an official LD program, and they had specialists to work with you, an official testing process, someone to read tests to you.

P: What do the LD specialists do, when they work with you, that, say, a non-LD specialist could not do?

N: I don't know—I think they were more sensitive to the issue than some other people would be, but they, with me—I was different than a lot of students. I just needed assistance in writing. I don't need the total, overall guidance, and that's because I feel I hadn't had the guidance until my junior year, so therefore I didn't rely on it.

P: Right.

N: I had to rely on myself getting everything done. So therefore I just needed a minute—I guess—I just used a very small number of services, where other students would need like everything across the board. Like they would help them with emotionally, personally, you know, everything [sic].



P: So you were just mainly getting the writing instruction.

N: Right.

P: What did they do?

N: The sad part about it was it was nothing like what you've done here, where you made me sit down and read it over myself and try to learn why—what mistakes I'm making. They would just—I would hand them the paper and run. I really would just leave the office because I had this—I still do have this fear when people read my paper. I sit there and I get really nervous, and I'm uncomfortable. I feel like they're thinking to themselves, "Oh my God, this kid's made the same mistake twenty times!" And that's why, you know, I always left. It was bad—I mean, it was good that she was doing that for me, because she knew I was uncomfortable with it, but it's also bad in the sense that she was allowing me to continue to be—to not assist me to overcome my—to better myself, or whatever.

P: So what did she do with the paper?

N: She would just correct it, and I would come back like in, you know, a half hour or an hour and sit down with her and she'd say, "The idea is good, but you have a few mistakes here, and maybe increase, you know, be more specific here." Stuff like that. And she'd read the overall paper and give me feedback from it.

P: Would she actually fix the spelling errors?

N: Yeah, actually, she would, and that's what's—that's—actually, I had a spell checker on my computer, so I would fix the errors, but a lot of them, I'd have the wrong word, like um—

P: Yeah. And then it doesn't pick them up.

N: Yeah. And so—that's due to either laziness or just—I don't really know.

P: So did that special LD work help you with your academic life?

N: Yes, it did. Overall, I had like a 3.2 average. I got a 2.9 my first semester and a 3.38 my second semester, and I wouldn't have been able to get that without their assistance [*sic*].

Several professionals who advise LD university students share Nick's mixed feelings about LD support programs in secondary and postsecondary institutions and are adamant in their recommendations that LD students become "weaned from accommodations and guided toward self-sufficiency." Loring Brinkerhoff, Stan Shaw, and Joan McGuire base this advice on a study that found that only 38 percent of LD high school graduates had full-time jobs. Given what has happened in the high schools, they warn against advocating for all kinds of support that the student may not need and that may make the transition to professional life more difficult. They include a chart listing actions that foster dependence and ones that foster independence, the main idea being to "operationalize a mind-set" in which the counselor is not seen as helping the "passive" student, but is

rather a “facilitator” in helping the student make decisions (1992, 425–26). While they recognize the need for select accommodations, they also support the least-restrictive environment movement.

**P:** What about using the word *difference* instead of *disabled*?

**N:** I've heard that, and I don't know. Yeah, it is a learning difference, but it also is a disability, so I don't know *what* it is. I would say that *difference* is politically correct? I guess that would be it.

**P:** So it's just a word?

**N:** Yeah. And that—I'm not into that. I'm like, I don't know—If people want to say I'm stupid, I don't care because for most of the—sometimes I would agree with them—but I let them say what they want.

**P:** What were you taking at that college? What about the textbooks? Were you still not reading the textbooks?

**N:** No. That's funny. Actually, I began to read them, and I was reading everything. What is weird is I did read everything, and so therefore—that's why I left [his former college]. Not because I read everything, but because I spent so much time on academics that I didn't do much else. And that's one of the reasons I left. So I was reading the material, but it would take me, you know, hours and hours on end.

The supreme irony here is that serious, hardworking students like Nick are still being told, verbally or nonverbally, that they're lazy, when some are spending every waking moment doing school work. They internalize what uninformed people say or imply about them. No matter how deeply buried, the low estimations teachers, parents, or peers have about these students' intelligence, even their morals, are revealed in sometimes offhand comments these students make about themselves.

Nick's story was fascinating as I spoke with him in person. Later, as I was transcribing the tape, I became more aware of quickly muttered comments he made, almost under his breath. Sometimes I had to play the tape on my stereo's highest volume to translate his remarks, but in many ways they are more revelatory than his more clearly articulated comments:

“she was allowing me to continue to be . . .”

“I didn't have the skills of the regular, normal students. . . .”

“not to better myself . . .”

“. . . you learn to be ah—deceiving. . . .”

“If people want to say I'm stupid, I don't care because for most of the—sometimes I would agree with them. . . .”

“the wrong word . . . and that's due either to laziness or . . .”

In these words, Nick shows that he too, perhaps like some of the adults in his childhood, attributes his reading and writing difficulties to some kind of moral flaw. That young people are made to feel this way is outrageous. If we do nothing else in our various disciplines to alter educational philosophy and practice, if we agree on nothing else, we must change how society thinks of LD students, because students are absorbing these self-hating attitudes, in much the same way the self-deprecatory Brazilian peasants Freire describes began to think of themselves in the same negative way as did their oppressors (Freire [1970] 1988, 49).

And for LD students, *that* is the disability, and it is a learned one: the inner belief that one is somehow inferior to one's peers. Whatever initial difficulties someone like Nick might have with linguistic processing skills are compounded by the implication, or by the useless, potentially harmful advice, that if only he would try harder, concentrate more, spend more time—in short, if only he would be more normal—these problems would go away. When he follows this advice, spending far more time on schoolwork no doubt than are his self-righteous advisers, he sees only limited results and becomes even more alarmed with what he sees as his abnormality. Only the most determined, thick-skinned students continue to work so hard on written assignments. Many people feel it is not worth the aggravation and humiliation. They drop out.

It would not be that way, however, if educational institutions recognized different ways of knowing and if they took more advantage of computer technology. It would not be that way if students were allowed to *re-able* themselves by learning in ways that work best for them. In the next exchange, Nick talks about the role of computers in his life and the difference between handwritten and word-processed material.

**P:** What about written exams?

**N:** That's a—I just write them, and teachers give me a *B* too, on those, and I don't understand how because if I ever read my writing, like, just off the paper?—I don't know how they can count the information. I think they just go through and look for key words because I don't think it makes sense. I read it and it makes sense, but I know I write so much better on the computer 'cause that's the way I do it. I write it right on the computer and that quality—I think if you looked at my writing out of class and writing in-class test materials, there's like this huge gap. . . . But most teachers don't grade on your writing style. They grade on the information presented.

**P:** When you look at your writing, what would you say you usually do, or don't do?

**N:** Mistakes?

P: The mistakes, but also, what are the good qualities and what are the things you need to fix? I guess the mistakes, yes.

N: The things I always—Like I have a problem with past and present tense: *are*, *was*, *is*—stuff like that—*ed*'s. You know, should it be *needed* or *need*? I do that a lot. And spelling. I've gotten a lot better on writing, you know, complete sentences. I used to write incomplete, but not so much in college any more. The things I do well? I don't know. Um. Sometimes I think I have great intuitions. I come up with great things, but I don't know if it's an accident or if I can really write that way. [He showed me a letter to the editor he wrote that was published.] Like I think this is one of my best material that I've ever written [*sic*], and I don't know if that's because—I don't—. A lot of people that read it say, "Is this your writing? Did you write this?" And I'm like, "What do you mean?" They really question whether I wrote that or not.

Not only does Nick have to overcome many hurdles to get his writing into an academically acceptable form, but when he does write something he considers good, there are people who doubt his authorship (he didn't say whether they were teachers or students). Even he begins to doubt his own talent: "I don't know if it's an accident or if I really can write this way." I asked him more about the reception his writing usually receives.

P: Would you say that the instructors here, when grading the blue book [handwritten] exams, take off for the kinds of things you do—like the wrong words or the misspellings?

N: No, they don't, and I'm grateful for that. They usually don't take off for spelling mistakes, punctuation or structure mistakes, which is good, I think, because you just want the ideas. You want to know if the kid knows the material and can process it. So, no, they don't take off for that.

P: When did you start using the computer?

N: High school. My mom bought it for me Christmas my senior year.

P: Can you type? Touch type?

N: Yeah.

P: Where did you pick that up?

N: We were taught in school.

P: When did you start composing right on the computer?

N: Probably when I got the computer. Even before that, I've always done that. I remember my senior paper, I did it then. Before that, I never wrote anything, so ever since . . .

P: Is there any difference for you, when reading it over? Between writing in the blue books and writing on the computer?

N: Is there any difference? Yeah, there's a big difference—on the computer—'cause I make a lot of mistakes. Like I write the wrong word, or I don't know how to spell it, and it's easy on the computer. You just go backspace

and go over it, or you just leave it, if it's a spelling mistake, and you just get it at the end with the spell check. Whereas when you're writing, if you make a mistake spelling it's like, scribble it out. And then most of the time I don't know how to spell it anyway, so I just leave it.

In many ways, Nick was more fortunate than many other LD students. He had a parent who realized what a computer could do for her son and who was able to provide one for him at home. He was also in a school system that enabled him to learn to type. Since so many other LD students have attested to the computer's role as a lifeline in their lives (see Chapter Five), providing them for such students should become a priority. Another priority might be a shift in emphasis from writing to speaking, or at least a sharing of emphasis, a point Nick makes below concerning the role of oral communication skills in what he calls "the real world."

**P:** This is probably a leading question—very unscientific—but do you think that reading and writing are the best measures of what you know?

**N:** No. You see, that's—this is the controversy I have about school, because when you get out in the "real world"—quote unquote the real world—we're in a fake world here—you're not given a written question you have to write down. It's more like, on the spot. You know, you're a salesman and the person says, "Well, why is this?" and you have to orally dictate, "Well, you know, it's because the economy is this way and this way." And you've got to know the things *orally*, and not writtenly [*sic*].

**P:** That's an excellent point.

**N:** Yeah. Just like in the criminal justice field. You've got to know the material orally. And it's hard to do oral tests. I mean, it's not feasible for teachers to be able to do oral tests, but I don't think it's the best—I guess written are the most efficient, but the most effective would be orally, I guess, because that's what you're going to be doing when you get a job and you have to communicate with other people. I've seen people that—people like my sister. Book smart. She's going to [Ivy League school]. She's applied early admission—just tremendous skills. Book smart. But IPC skills? [interpersonal communication skills] She can't get up and talk to people. She can't communicate. Like to a crowd or to someone she doesn't know. She gets real nervous and "Duhhhhh." And that's just her. That's her personality.

**P:** Here's another leading question. Do you think that schools should move away, a little bit, from the emphasis on the written? Do you think that college teachers should look at more alternate ways of conducting class or testing people?

**N:** [Pause] Yes and no. It would be interesting to see how people perform other ways, 'cause I think that's when you see how much information they do know. But writing is so important. It *is* important in our culture, and so I think college teachers *have* to teach and test that way, just to improve

writing skills, but I do think they should move towards, maybe, not just testing but having one or two tests that are alternate.

P: Have any suggestions?

N: That's hard. But like I said earlier, it would be interesting to see how students perform orally on a test.

P: Well, it would sure give people like you—

N: An advantage.

P: Do you learn more from the professors who are better orally?

N: Yes, I do. I learn more when they speak energetically and they go crazy like [names his favorite professor] does. 'Cause that—I can't get excited by written material—like readings and stuff. I'm like, "Yeah, you know, whatever." For some of us to read it out loud and put feeling into it? Then I'd be like, "Oh, okay. Yeah."

P: So you must have hated English 135 [a course I taught, Introduction to Literature, which had a lot of reading].

N: I didn't *hate* it. I mean, I did the work, and it was a fun class when we got in discussions in class, but what I remember about the class overall is the discussions we had when everyone used to yell at me 'cause I used to say things.

P: [laughs]

N: But I used to say them just to get people *talking*. And that's why I have a problem in classes when—I don't understand—people don't ask questions. They don't talk. Like we have a Counseling and Interviewing class, and I noticed just the other day, yesterday, I was really tired, and if I didn't say anything, no one would say anything. It came up that I'm taking Group Dynamics next semester, and they're like, "You're gonna *love* that class." And yeah, I will, because I'll *talk*. But I don't understand why other people don't. I guess because they don't—that's not their skill.

P: They're not good at it.

N: Their skill is writing.

As I listened to Nick speak about his love of talking and how it would give him an advantage in school were it allowed to matter more, I realized that *learning disabled* would quickly become a misnomer for him if oral and written talents were weighed equally in academia. Presently, Nick is "disabled," but only because those who read and write easily might be called "advantaged," or "overly abled" in our society. As Nick rightly observes, writing is certainly important and must continue to be stressed. His situation, however, seems to suggest that were oral skills valued more, many bright students currently relegated to the metaphorical trash heap of our educational system would be *re-abled* in ways that would enrich the overall classroom culture. In our discussion of the pros and cons of

labeling, Nick gives his views of the high school resource room. He seems to change his mind about labeling as he recalls its effects.

P: One of the controversies with LD is this whole business of being labeled.

N: The labeling theory.

P: Do you think that labeling from an early age is useful? Harmful? Do you have any thoughts about that?

N: Actually, I do. It's a necessity. There are some students that need to be labeled at an early age because they're just—their skills are just so deficient that it's impossible for them to function in a class without extra help. Do I feel that's fair? No. I've seen kids with more intelligence than I've have ever could have [sic] in my whole lifetime just get weeded out, just because they're in the resource room. If you're in the resource room when you're in the third grade, okay, when you go to junior high, you're in the resource room no matter what. You're not allowed to take Regents classes and then—it's just—it's just—. Like these kids—we're all together in elementary school, and we're all like, if you can picture it, we're walking down a path? All together. And then, one by one, they all just, like step off the path in different directions. And it's not in better directions, either. And I question whether that's right or not. I mean, not right or wrong, but whether that's fair to the students, because they have the ability, but by labeling them? They say, "Oh, all right, I'm a dummy. I'm gonna work construction the rest of my life." I mean, that was me. Up until that junior year when she told me I had the ability to go to college, I assumed I was going to go get a construction job and work construction the rest of my life. And that's not a bad job. It's not degrading. I mean, I could have made a lot of money working construction. But so many students have—they could do—they could achieve better goals than just giving up and taking that, but they don't because the schools says they can't early on. So then they just say, "Okay, I can't." And it's *terrible* because it's just taking their ability and saying, "You might have this ability, but we're not going to work to it because we just don't have the time or energy, so you might as well learn how to do this job and be happy with it. Be good at it." Fine, if that's what they want to do. But a lot of times, I would imagine that's not what they want to do. That they're just stuck with it.

The discussion about expectations continued. He referred again to his earlier story about his stepfather making a bet with him.

N: When people would say, "You're this way," I'd just to spite them, just to prove them wrong . . . And an example is that, when my stepfather bet me, he said, "No you couldn't do that," I'm like, "Okay. I'll do it." But once I proved it, it was like, "Whatever."

P: Not everybody would do what you did. Some people would say, "Yeah, you're right. I can't."

N: Yeah. And that's what I saw a lot of times. I used to sit in that room, and I'd get so frustrated at students because—

P: Which room?

N: The resource room. Because like, you know, you hang out in there and stuff, just sometimes. I'd go to my study halls there to get help, and I'd sit there and watch. I'd watch some students. They would—just to be *mad* and *stubborn*—they'd just sit there like this [He folded his arms in front of him] and not do the material.

P: Um-hm.

N: And it's like—I *know* they can do it. I've seen them do it before, when they're excited about something. You know, some of these kids—they—they can go into the garage, and like, know how to fix an engine—when it requires more skills than you could ever imagine!

P: Oh, I know.

N: I mean, you've got to know how to read. You've got to know how to calculate the numbers. And they could do it. And so I question whether it's the environment or—I don't know.

P: And also, the attitude has nothing to do with intelligence. It could have been caused by the emotional stress, or expectations, or something else—

N: Which could have been caused by the label.

P: Exactly.

N: And so, somehow they get in this circle, and then you don't know how to—that's how I see it—they're in a circle, and everything causes something, you know. They're being labeled does get them extra help, but it also causes them to feel this way.

Nick has discovered the paradox of LD labeling: it provides help in the form of readers, scribes, word processing, taped textbooks, and other necessary tools for many people, but at what cost? Who wants their peers to know they need "extra help" and must go to a special place to receive it? No matter what terms are used to describe learning disabilities or the room in which they are remediated, the targeted group will feel humiliated as long as they feel inferior to the mainstream. The solution, of course, cannot be an "either/or" answer. Total immersion in the mainstream, while not altering the mainstream, will not work because most classrooms from grade school through college are set up to accommodate linguistically talented people. Education is based on much reading and note-taking, and assessment is linked almost entirely with reading and writing ability. While "resource room" and other "extra help" places are more geared to the learning of LD students, they are, no matter how helpful and humanely staffed, by their very nature punitive because they make students feel inferior to the majority—that feeling being more disabling than anything. In the next section, Nick proposes ideas on making the mainstream more accessible to LD students.



P: Do you think that there are different kinds of intelligences?

N: People set these standards for writing styles—that this is right. This is the way they teach it. But why? Who said that was right? You know, someone came up with this idea that this is the way it should be, but now . . . You know, I think that people *do* think differently, and therefore, when they write, they *write* differently, so therefore people are *set* to learn a certain way, and some people just don't—they're just, you know, they would be intelligent if they were in an environment that was conducive to their learning habits. I mean, they would be, not everyone, but there are probably students who would be superior to the most intelligent people on this campus if they were in an environment conducive to their learning style. If people drilled me twenty-four hours a day, orally, I would be able to absorb a lot of information, but that's not the way it's done. You know, you've got to read it on your own. You've got to do it on your own.

P: Right.

N: So I do think there are learning differences. There are different intelligences.

Finally, when asked near the end of the interview to prioritize what should or should not be done, Nick talks about questioning the authority of experts—about those with Ph.D.'s not necessarily having all the answers.

P: Is there anything else you can think of? Absolute dos or absolute don'ts for college—

N: Students? For college professors?

P: For professors, or students, or anybody.

N: The necessity, the skill, is *understanding*. The biggest thing is, don't be close minded about the issue—because who says you're right? I mean, society says you're right, but society's been wrong before, and so how do we know that your way of saying "This is the way it's going to be" is the right way? So I think open-mindedness—being open-minded about allowing the person to come to you and say, "This is what I have difficulties with," and not immediately saying, "Well, what makes you different than other students? What gives you special privileges?" You know, I had—I have a teacher this semester I *despise*. And he says to me, he says, "You know what? I think I was learning disability [*sic*] when I was young because I couldn't do this. . . ." And I'm like, thinking, "Well, maybe he was," but, he kind of like was looking down and saying, "If I didn't have it, why should you?" And like, in the middle of class, he'll like—like I walked in late the other day, and the professor said, "Nick, you want to take that test at seven o'clock, you know, your normal time outside of class?"—in front of the *whole* class! And you know, I can handle that because, like, I know what he's doing, and I'm just like, "Whatever," but most students would crumble. They would die. They would be like, "Ahhhh," and start crying and be like all emotional.

P: Oh, yeah.

N: And he's done that several times. So I think understanding is a big thing, understanding that you're not—just because you have your Ph.D., you don't—you aren't necessarily right.

Nick's last statement here could double as a subtitle for this book: "Just because you have your Ph.D., you're not necessarily right." As we have seen, those who have studied the most about learning disabilities are those who disagree most vehemently with their equally knowledgeable colleagues. So much disagreement among experts seems to indicate that we should expand our search for answers. This one interview with Nick reveals several areas where we might begin.

First, it is obvious from the transcript that Nick's speech is vivid, detailed, and syntactically sophisticated—traits valued in any kind of communication, but not often measured orally, as Nick himself points out. To assess what students know almost exclusively through one medium—writing—privileges those who are talented in that area and is blatantly unfair to people like Nick, whose oral skills are far superior to those of many of his peers who today receive higher grades and status.

Second, reading and writing are, as Nick observes, vital to education and should continue to be stressed, but not to the exclusion of other opportunities for participation and assessment. People should not have to sneak off to a "special" (read "remedial") place in order to have access to textbooks on tape or the opportunity to take an exam orally. Such things should be designed into mainstream practice, not "to accommodate the disabled," but to value normal human beings whose natural talents respond more to oral texts than to written ones, who listen better than they read, who speak better than they write. The classroom climate would not be compromised by providing multi-modal learning; it would be enhanced for all involved. Nick's argument concerning requirements for "real world" success should be heeded: oral skills *are* necessary for almost every profession, and practice developing them is currently being compromised in mainstream classes in favor of reading and writing development. At the same time that "normal" (linguistically talented) students are allowed, like Nick's "book-smart" sister, to remain unreasonably frightened of speaking in front of a group and almost incapable of giving the most basic presentation, students like Nick are forced to endlessly and quite counterproductively edit a written report or paper that they could have presented orally.

What I am suggesting here is a broadening of imagination on the part of all teachers, on every level and in every field. We need to see

reading as only one way in which people learn. For many English professors, including myself, curling up with a favorite novel and reading for hours on the back porch or at the beach is a luxurious activity, and one we cherish. We need to remember that for many of our students, deciphering meaning from pages and pages of sentences, words, and letters is not pleasurable, but often painful. Reading a chapter in a textbook may not be simply annoying, but torturous.

Although writing, even for writing instructors, may occasionally be unsatisfying or even frustrating, we often compose easily, filling several computer screens in twenty minutes or so, producing a text which, if not inspiring, has few technical flaws except for some hasty typographical errors. For many of us, writing is our creative outlet, our medium of choice. A blank page or computer screen is an invitation, an opportunity for artistic expression, and the resulting text something of which we are proud. For many of our students, however, the blank page or computer screen is not an invitation but a threat, and the finished text often a humiliating display of their written language difficulties.

While Nick is quite right to say that reading and writing are, and always will be, important in our society and should continue to be stressed, he is also right to say that the "real world" demands far better oral skills than some of our most academically successful students are today prepared to deliver. To even the odds for everyone, it makes sense to provide more opportunities in school and college for all students to learn and to be assessed using a variety of instruments. Textbooks and written exams, the workhorses of academia, should become more of a part, and not the almost exclusive whole, of school work. To maintain the status quo, with its overemphasis on the written word, is not only discriminatory, but an unrealistic representation of the world beyond graduation. In addition, it absolutely wastes the talents of those who might excel at speaking, drawing, or using technology, while denying "normal" students who may have a "disability" in those other areas the opportunity to "overcome" it.

Finally, it is time to stop being polite about slurs regarding people's skills. Just as stereotypical or derogatory racial and gender comments are no longer tolerated, remarks about people's intelligence based on their difficulties with reading and writing should not be acceptable. Since their main learning abilities may lie elsewhere, we should not judge them unless we are prepared to be similarly judged on our ease in the mathematical, artistic, or technological arenas.

The most helpful thing about resource rooms, Nick said, was the special education teacher's understanding of his situation. The most irritating aspect of the regular classes was some mainstream instructors' insensitive, or downright rude, insinuations about Nick's intellectual abilities. The insular nature of academic disciplines allows this kind of ignorance to flourish. What LD professionals know about these students' areas of expertise needs to be acknowledged and utilized by instructors across the disciplines. And if those mainstream instructors cannot or will not take the time to become informed about this, they should stop pontificating about that which they do not understand. Nick's anger at the professor who embarrassed him in front of an entire class is justified, as is his frustration with this same person who implied that Nick's disability was imagined, or something that could easily be overcome with a bit of self-discipline and moral fiber—traits of which this man no doubt imagined himself the model.

While Nick may be at a point in his life where he can now hear these comments in perspective, there are undoubtedly many younger or less confident students for whom such insults are devastating. Those in authority over young people must realize the power they have to influence students' confidence and self-esteem. A casual, careless remark made during class or even in the hallway on the way to get a cup of coffee can damage students' self-perception and motivation for the rest of their lives. It may also be time for others in authority, when overhearing such remarks, to grab the perpetrator by the collar (metaphorically speaking) and say (perhaps not in these exact words), "Listen, you ignoramus, stop spouting your arrogant, misinformed advice. If you don't know what you're talking about, keep your mouth shut! Students might actually believe what you say to them!" Teachers do influence what path these students take. In Nick's words, "We're all walking down a path. All together. And then, one by one, they all just, like, step off the path in different directions. And it's not in better directions, either."

Positive statements can be just as powerful, as was illustrated when Nick's chemistry teacher complimented his intelligence but advised him to seek help and then attend college. In just a few moments after class one day, one individual telling Nick he was smart may have counteracted the influence of an entire system telling him he was not. By analyzing his situation in a complimentary way, she convinced him to stay on an academic path, forging his own alternate literacy through his aptitude for speaking and listening.

As educators, we must stop insisting that all people educate themselves almost exclusively by the means that we find most

convenient: reading and writing. Students like Nick, with his intuition, his listening and speaking skills, and his creativity, can help those of us locked into traditional ways of knowing and learning to imagine a different way to teach, to consider multi-modal classrooms and flexible assessments. In short, Nick's insights can help us invite his "reject room" colleagues back onto the path, to allow the "disabled," with their alternate intellectual capacities, to *re-able* their learning and development.

## Monica

The second student I spoke with was Monica, an occupational therapy major who, like Nick, had managed a C average in high school, but unlike him, was not labeled as LD until she encountered substantial obstacles during her first year in college. Like Nick, she has reading problems that seem to stem partially from social pressure and partially from a difficulty with sounding out unfamiliar words. First of all, the more nervous she is when reading in public, the worse her reading becomes, and understandably so. But as with Nick, simple reading apprehension does not fully explain the extent of her difficulties. According to the testing that was eventually done on her during her first year in college, Monica's ability to decode new words remains at a third-grade level. While her vocabulary and oral word comprehension is appropriate to her age and grade, her overall reading ability is not quite at seventh-grade level, brought down by the weakness in decoding. Although she was tested in high school because she often confused word endings, her test performance at the time was high enough to keep her out of the LD category. In a paper she wrote for an occupational therapy course, Monica expresses anger that she was never diagnosed as LD in her elementary school years. The more she researched this topic, the more she saw her own history echoed in the typical problems LD children have. Not learning about LD until college, she said, confused and frustrated her.

In her writing samples, some of the errors she makes are the same kinds of errors most college students occasionally make: *to* for *too*; *were* for *wear*; *there* for *their*; *who's* for *whose*, and confusions over possessives (*Joseph younger brother*, instead of *Joseph's younger brother*). Like Nick, however, Monica makes many more of these, in my judgment, than do most college students. She also has many fused sentences, comma splices, and other punctuation errors of the type that many first-year students make. It is difficult to determine when the number of these kinds of errors crosses some threshold of

normalcy. I do know, however, that she took a composition course from the faculty member at my institution most committed to having students eradicate such surface errors, so the fact that such mistakes stubbornly appear in her writing today is not due to ignorance. In fact, in describing her writing during the interview, she said she knew she was still making comma splices.

In addition to these common errors, however, Monica also makes errors less typical of other writers. In her research paper she wrote the phrase, *In Brad cause*, instead of *In Brad's case*. One of her sentences reads, "Brad has trouble writing *want* he wants to say." Later, she writes, "The same thing happens *went* he asked a question" (emphasis mine). The text from which these examples were taken was not a first draft, but a final, word-processed copy of a research paper handed in for a grade. They do not appear to be the result of simple carelessness, and they may be related to Monica's use of *slack*, when she probably means *flak*, in the following interview. From Monica's other writings come many spelling errors: *comennants* for *commandments*; *phrophet* for *prophet*; *scrad* for *sacred*; *vengens* for *vengeance*; and *teched* for either *teach* or *detected*. Many people, of course, make spelling errors, but these seem to reflect a difficulty envisioning the correct word. Therefore, she apparently makes do with phonetic spelling, except in the case of *phrophet*, where she realizes there is a *ph* in the word somewhere, but cannot produce the proper configuration of letters. In the interview, Monica says that her difficulties with written English are the result of her mind racing faster than her hands on the keys. That, too, may explain things, and I can attest to the speed at which she speaks. Since the purpose of this chapter is not to overanalyze bits of students' writing, but to hear their experiences, I mention these errors because they remind me so much of my former student Barbara's attempt to spell *specifically*. Early in the interview, I asked Monica about her academic history, and later about what she thought about labeling in general.

**P:** How did you come to be labeled?

**M:** When I was a freshman, I was an occupational therapy major, and I was taking all these classes like Intro to OT, Human Development, Anatomy and Physiology. Out of five classes, I got four deficiencies. I called home crying to my mother, "I studied. I really did study! I don't understand what happened." This, that, and the other thing. And my mother kept saying, "Well, if you'd stop socializing and study." And I'm like, "Mom, I do study." I kept telling her, "I study. It's not like I socialize. I study." And she kept telling me, you know, that I just fool around and I don't study. I got pissed at her. Well, I took Professor Twiss's reflex test. I took it five times. She allows you to take it until you pass. Five times my highest grade was a 52.

**P:** What's a reflex test?

**M:** In infancy, zero to four months, there's one reflex. Then four months to six months there's another reflex. She gives you—she gives you the reflex, and then on the test, she kind of explains a little bit about it, and you have to give the reflex and the age it integrates, the age it comes into play. And I took that test five times and couldn't pass. So I went to [Professor] Twiss and I was crying, and I said, "I studied this. After five times you'd think I'd get better than a 52." And I'm crying. This is the end of my frustration, the end of my rope. She just said, "Well, let's go over it." So I calmed down and we went over it. And I knew everything. And she says, "Come in on Friday. You're taking it orally." I got a 92 on that exam.

**P:** You took it orally?

**M:** Orally. I got a 92. So that's when she encouraged me to go down to Academic Support and get tested.

**P:** What was the written test like?

**M:** It was fill in. It was a sentence, and you put in the words. I had to recall what the reflex is and what age it integrated, and I couldn't recall any of that. I kept mixing them up—putting one word—like, there's two words to the reflex. I put—I'd mix the words up. I couldn't do it.

**P:** But you could do it—

**M:** Orally. 'Cause she had a dummy out on the table, and she says, "What would this reflex be?" I'd show her exactly what it is. She'd say, "When does it integrate?" I told her exactly. And it was really—it was—I was shocked. I cried after that, too. [laughs] It was a very emotional freshman year.

**P:** Wow. So it was oral, but there was also the dummy there. Do you think that made any difference?

**M:** It was all hands on. It wasn't that. It was just that I couldn't interpret the text. The problem was interpreting the text. It was like that for all my classes. And I talked to [Professor] Walton 'cause I had failed the Bio lab practical, and I told him, I said, "If you just give it to me orally, I swear I will do a lot better." He goes, "If I do it for you, I have to do it for every single other person that passed—that failed." And I'm like, "I'm sorry, but I am being tested for an LD." He said, "Well, are you LD?" I said, "I don't know. I'm being tested for it." He said, "Well, what you get is what you get. I can't do anything about it." I ended up getting a straight *F* in the class.

**P:** Ew.

**M:** I know. [laughs] I can give you another example. When I took Bio 102, I took a night class with Garrahan. And I took the midterm, and he allowed me to take it in another classroom because I was considered LD. I take it by myself so I can talk to myself? And I went into the other room, and I just broke down and cried because I knew every single one of those, and I couldn't do it. It was matching. And I couldn't do it. And he comes in. Professor Garrahan comes in and looks at me, and he says, "Monica, are you okay?" And I just broke down crying, saying, "I *know* these. I studied. It's

the same thing as 101! I'm gonna fail!" I'm hysterical. So he just looked at me and says, "What is *oxitocin*? Where does it come from?" And I told him.

P: What is what?

M: *Oxitocin*. It's a hormone. I told him exactly what it is. Then he said, "Look down at the paper. What do you think it is?" And I'm like, "*B*". He's like, "Okay." And then, "What does this one word do?" I told him. "Where does it come from?" I told him. "What do you think it would be?" I got the entire first page right.

P: Wow.

M: Just because he said, "What is it? Where does it come from? What do you think it does?" Then I'd look down at the paper. "What do you think it is?" And I got the entire first page right. I got a C+. I mean, it's not great, but it's good.

P: Yeah! But you couldn't do it on the paper?

M: No. And I don't understand why.

P: But you could recognize it after you said it out loud?

M: Um-hum. Which is why I try to push for my exams being [given] orally, or taken by themselves or on the computer.

Sometimes Monica's speech is so fast that she leaves out words. As I had done with Nick, I must have been automatically supplying the words in my head because her sentences seemed complete to me at the time. I was never confused about what events happened when. If her mind races ahead of her speech, which it seems to be doing above, then that supports her explanation below of why she omits words in her writing.

M: Part of [being] an LD student is frustration, and when you sit down and write a paper, and you have to actually write it out, and it takes longer. A lot of people like myself think faster than I write, so then I'd be writing down one thing and thinking another, so everything's all jumbled together. And then when you go back and read the paper in your mind out loud how you think you thought you wrote it, but actually you're not reading the words on the paper. And when you hand it in, it comes back with a horrible grade, and you can't understand why. One of the reasons I use a computer is because I think faster than I write. That's why I can type faster and get everything organized, and I can't spell, too. That's why—I would tell them, if someone's having a problem, to use a computer.

P: Can you explain more about how you read what you thought you wrote, but not what you *did* write?

M: Instead of *the*, I'll say *them*, or instead of *then*, I'll say *them*. If it's right, I'll say *left*. I can't read the words because one, I can't read out loud because I'm concentrating on the words on the paper because of the fact if you mess up, people laugh at you type thing. If you say *them*, they'll be yelling at you, "It's then!" I've never been good at reading out loud, so when I read



the paper, I read it so quickly that I can't read the words right. It's not that I can't read. It's not that I don't know the words. It's just the fact that I get them mixed up. If it's *say*, I say *said*.

**P:** Why do you think you'll read a word that's not on the page?

**M:** I don't know. All I know is when I read—like say, a professor asks me to read in class, I don't want to say, "No. I'm not going to," 'cause then they'll say, like "Why?" And I don't want to say, "I can't read." So what I've done before in the past, is take a piece of paper and held it [*sic*] on top of the line below it, and then I can concentrate more on just that line. 'Cause I end up skipping lines and stuttering.

**P:** And that works for you?

**M:** People look at you funny, but at least it's better than missing words. I mean, I'm not classified as hyperactive, but I think I am. I can't sit down for long periods of time. I get frustrated, and the anxiety level increases. And then the professor, after you've read the whole thing will say, "Now what does that mean?" I'll have no clue what it means! I'm busy concentrating on what I'm reading, too busy making sure I get the words right, making sure that I pronounce them right. I don't know what it means! And then I'll get, "Well, you just read it." And it's like, "Yeah, I understand I just read it." And that's when I get really quiet and I just don't say anything. I'm not a quiet person, but sometimes in class, I do get quiet.

It's important, therefore, that instructors not leap to conclusions about a student's lack of participation in class. There may be a myriad of reasons why people dislike reading or speaking in class. While some of Monica's problems with reading and taking exams in class are influenced heavily by anxiety—no doubt the result of years of bad experiences in similar situations—anxiety alone does not account for the severity of her difficulties. In her next comment, Monica describes the frustration of having to deal with a person in authority who does not believe in the existence of learning disabilities.

**M:** And then you've got these professors who don't help you. Like I'm having trouble with [Professor] Olson right now because he doesn't believe in LD. He doesn't believe that people have LD's. He wanted me to take my test on a portable Macintosh in the class, in front of everyone, on the professor's desk. I told him I wouldn't do it. I said, "One, it's going to take me longer. This is an essay test. Two, there's going to be everyone looking at me, wondering why I have a computer. Three, everyone's going to be quiet, concentrating. I'm going to be typing on the keys." I said, "It's not fair to them. It's not fair to me, and I refuse to do it." He looked at me, and he said, "Well, that's the only way it's going to be." So I went down to Academic Support and I said, "I want to take this on a computer. He will not allow me to take it except in a class." So they fought for me. And they fought it to the point where I can take it at the same time in Academic Support. So the secretary had to stay later, just so I can take it 'cause he didn't want me to take it during the day.

**P:** Hmmm.

**M:** I mean, I think that's a little ridiculous.

What happened to Monica here has a similar precedent in case law. In 1989, a University of California, Berkeley math professor refused to allow a labeled LD student more time on an exam, claiming that learning disabilities did not exist. Although the university instructed the professor to provide the accommodation, he refused, whereupon the student sued. The university ultimately settled out of court, but the professor himself had to pay monetary damages sought by the student for having to make the case public (Brinkerhoff et al. 1992, 423).

**P:** Are there things that college professors could do, or not do, that would make your life a lot easier?

**M:** A lot of students are intimidated by professors. I've gotten, "I'm not going to deal with—I'm a Ph.D. I can take off as many points as I want. I'm a Ph.D. I've worked for this. I'm a Ph.D. I can do this how I felt it needs to be done." I was flabbergasted. I mean, what can you say after that comment? It's like, you know, they're not going to do anything. "I'm a Ph.D. I can do what I want. I can take off as many points as I want to take off." I was so angry at her.

We talked a bit then about her trouble with tests and with taking notes during class. When I suggested that she tape record lectures, she pointed out that many teachers speak too fast or too low, and that sometimes other talking or noise in the classroom makes it impossible to hear much of the lecture. At this point she showed me notes from one of her classes, as well as the same notes she said it took her three hours at home to "translate" into something of which she could make sense. All her hard work, however, did little good. She said, "I studied two weeks straight. Got a 65 on the exam. I was so angry."

In the next segment, as Monica relates more of her experiences, her anger continues to dominate. After a time, however, her tone modifies and she gives some clear, simple advice.

**P:** If you had a chance to speak for one half hour to writing teachers—all college professors—what would you say, in terms of dos and don'ts?

**M:** I'd start off by saying that an LD is not something we'd choose to have. We don't choose to have to feel frustrated. We don't choose to slack off on our work or not have work up to par. We work harder than a lot of regular students. We stay up late nights studying, and other people study twenty minutes before the exam. I'd tell them that people learn at different rates, different ways. I'd say, professors can make it a lot easier for LD students just by giving them the attention they need, either by computer, by oral

exam, by tutoring. I'd explain the frustration—like the class clown. I mean, they might feel really uncomfortable in class, so they're frustrated, so they lash out, by either being very verbal with the professor or being—try to make jokes about things. Like if you asked them to read, they might say, "No, I'm not going to," or joke about things. Frustration level is great for them. A lot of people who feel frustrated don't want to come to class because they don't want to deal with trying to get the notes down and then taking the exam and not knowing any of the answers.

**P:** How could they test you on what you know? I mean, how would they do it differently?

**M:** This is only my experience, 'cause LD students are all different. A problem comes in when keywords aren't given, and if you don't have a keyword, you can't figure out the answer.

**P:** Can you explain that?

**M:** On an objective test, you can only go by those words on the test to find out the answer. Well, if you don't have one word in there to trigger a memory, to trigger something in your mind, then you can't find the answer. And by giving it orally, you can discuss more about the topic and get that keyword, and that's what triggers the memory, and then you can just—like that 102 exam that I took in Garrahan's [class]—[he] spoke to me orally, "What does it do? Where is it from? So what's the answer?"

**P:** So how did the keyword come up?

**M:** Because part of LD is word retrieval, and if you don't have that keyword, you can't find that word. So you have a problem of retrieving a word, retrieving information that you've learned, processing it, and turning it around—which is probably—that's why I have a lot of trouble in physics. I don't know if you remember Lawrence Santone [a student who has since graduated]. He helped me a lot. We sat in that physics room, and we did everything, every homework problem, every question in the book. We did it. I knew *all* of them. I took the exam. I ended up failing because of the fact that keywords aren't there, or he wants us to do it one way, and I'll do it another way, just the way that I've learned it.

**P:** You couldn't take that exam orally?

**M:** He wouldn't give it to me orally. He did not want to take the extra time to do it. I told him I'd come to his office hours. That's what he's there for. He said he was busy. He wouldn't do it. I mean, the keyword is what the most important thing is.

**P:** Can you give an example of a keyword?

**M:** I don't know. I can't think of one.

**P:** Well, you were talking earlier about Professor Garrahan, how he said, "What does it do? Where does it come from?" Do you remember what that triggered?

**M:** It just—it just like opened that folder in your mind. It just opened that folder and talked about the oxytocin, and once he said, you know, "What's

the oxitocin?" I told him, "It's a hormone." He said, "So what does the hormone do?" So I told him, "It's the hormone for the mammary glands for milk." "Where does it come from?" [he asked]. And I'm like, "From the breasts," and he's like, "Okay, so where's the answer?" So then you look down, and you see the answer. I mean, he's not giving me the answer. He's just leading me in the right direction.

**P:** Right.

**M:** And if you go from that right to the next one, I'm still thinking about the oxitocin. I go to the next hormone, and I've got to sit back and I've got to think again, "What does this hormone do? Where does it come from? So what's the answer?" He went through the entire page like that. It wasn't like he was giving me the answer. He was just asking me questions. And that's what I have trouble doing: retrieving the information and switching it around and translating it to what the question is asking. But it's hard, you know. You get an objective test, and there's all these answers, like multiple choice. And the professor asks them orally and they just look at it, and they read it, and they read the answers, and I'm like, "Okay, I think I'd just rather take it myself, thank you." It's uncomfortable. It really is. I'd rather just sit there and discuss the information. Like Professor Hart's class. He gave me the test orally. It was on aquatics? He just sat in his office with the test in front of him. It was an essay test. He just looked at me and he says, "What do you think the qualifications of a pool should have?" So I told him, "The door should be wide enough that the wheelchair *and* the caretaker can walk through at the same time. There has to be either a chair lift or stairs getting in. There has to be a unisex dressing room for caretakers to change their clients" and this, that, and the other thing. He was like, "Fine," and went on to the others. If I had to sit there and write it, I'd be there forever.

**P:** How do you deal with reading textbooks?

**M:** I've had a lot of my books on tape. I listen to the tape and read along with it. The best way to learn is to get as many senses involved as possible. You hear it. You see it. Now after that, you do something with the information.

Of the three students I spoke with, Monica was the only one to have used taped textbooks, which she finds useful. This is consistent with what Christopher Lee says in his book, *Faking It*, about taped books being "a key to unlocking a world of words" (Lee and Jackson 1992, 53–54). In the next section, I asked Monica for her opinion on labeling. Like Nick, she has mixed feelings about it.

**P:** Do you think being labeled has helped you or hurt you?

**M:** I think it helped me in that I understand where my frustration is coming from. I understand it's not just me. That is, um, it's not me not being prepared. It's me not being able to process and translate information. It's given me a channel to go through to be successful in school.

**P:** What do you mean?

**M:** I can go to Academic Support. I can fight, with them, professors to get tests orally, professors' notes, all those things. I have someone to back me up and say, "No, she's not socializing all the time. She *is* doing work. She's just not being tested in the right way."

**P:** Have people said that to you? That you're not studying enough?

**M:** No one has said that to me. But I've gotten those computerized deficiency slips [that say] "Work is needed." And that's frustrating, too.

**P:** What do you think of labeling in general? Good? Bad?

**M:** I can go both ways on that. In elementary school if you're labeled LD, you go down to the resource room, and you get a lot of slack [she may have meant *flak*] from students laughing at you, teasing you. And I don't think that's right. I don't think labeling them is appropriate. I think LD students do need more help in the beginning because of learning gaps, but I think that mainstreaming is the best thing for them because they have the support of other students. They're just like other students, so they don't get the attitude that they're different—people laughing at them or anything like that.

**P:** But what if the mainstream requires lots of tests and written exams and taking notes and all the kinds of things you've been talking about?

**M:** I think they need to go through class just like everyone else do [*sic*], but you know, one period a day have a tutor who'd say, "What did you do today?" Discuss everything they'd done. Help them with their homework and also take tests during that period. So they skip class during a test. That's all students have to know. Then when you get older in high school . . . Kids are mean. They are cruel. I think that's where if you want to go to college, that's where preparation should take place. That's where you should learn how to study. That's where you should learn how to take notes, communicate with your professors in order to get your remediation. By then it doesn't really matter 'cause kids aren't as cruel in high school as they are in elementary school. They could be a little bit more mature to handle things. And then in college—um—I know a few kids who think they're special because they get teachers' notes and that's what causes teachers to get this stigma, and that's what causes them not to help with remediation for other students. So in college I think it [the label] would hurt the reputation of LD students. I mean, it explains frustration and why you are not as successful as others on exams. At the same time, it's not supposed to give them an attitude or give them [so that they claim?], "Well, I'm LD, you have to do this."

Monica, like Nick, has crystallized the ambiguity of the LD label. On the one hand, she says it partially explains her difficulties and enables her to more effectively fight for teaching and assessment practices that work for her. On the other hand, it singles her out, a painful effect, especially in elementary school, where "kids are cruel." She also recognizes that if some students use the LD label as an excuse for not doing work, it causes lasting damage among students and professors alike, trivializing requests for legitimate accom-

modations. As Monica continues, she describes the social ostracizing that occurred because of her failing grades in biology.

**M:** I was not asked to join study groups my freshman year because people thought, you know, “She’s failing the class. Why bother asking her?” ‘Cause they used to have Bio 101 study sessions, and my roommate would go to those, and one day I got so frustrated, and I said, “Why don’t you ever ask me to go?” And there were a few people standing in the room, and they’re like, “We didn’t think you wanted to come.” And I’m like, “Well, I’m a student too.” And they’re like, “Well, do you want to come?” And I’m like, “No. I don’t really feel like coming.” I mean, it’s like, they’re leaving me out.

**P:** And you could have probably helped them.

**M:** And they would have really helped me. That was a frustrating freshman year. I cried so much my freshman year.

**P:** That’s a shame. Do you think that study groups would be a partial answer to LD students?

**M:** Yeah. Big time. ‘Cause you’re discussing the information, so you’re reinforcing information. You can’t just learn it; you have to do something with it. And even a good thing for a professor to do is before an exam, to say, “I’m holding a study session at this time. You’re all welcome.” It’s not just for LD students. It could help everyone.

**P:** Do you think it would make any difference to change the name from *learning disability* to *learning difference*?

**M:** I don’t think it would make a difference.

**P:** Why not?

**M:** *Learning difference/Learning disability*. It means the same thing. It really does. And both words are so close together people would mix them up anyway. That’s a good example: *difference* and *disability*. I’d get those two words mixed up. [laughs] I would, definitely. Because you’re thinking about one thing and you say another—because the words are so close together.

**P:** What about the idea of different learning *styles*? That’s a term that’s been bandied about, that some people learn better orally, that some people learn better if they see it. What do you think of that?

**M:** It’s true, and I think we should change the name to learning *styles*.

**P:** If we’re talking about different learning styles, where do you think your best talent lies? How would you capitalize on what you do best?

**M:** I do best in classes that involve discussion. It’s fine if you lecture, as long as you dwell on important points. I do good on like study groups. Anything that’s orally, I can do better on . . . [sic]. Professors who do oral discussions, essay tests—things like that would help me a lot.

At this point, Monica talked again about why she had so much difficulty with complicated essay questions or multiple-choice exams.

**M:** It's like fancy writing. They try to make it look real elegant [eloquent?]-like he's really intelligent. If you just give me a straight out question, I'll tell you what it is.

**P:** You could write it too?

**M:** Um-hum. I could write it—type it on the computer, I should say.

Monica said that her essay writing was fairly good, as long as she understood whatever question was being asked. Near the end of the two hours, I wanted to know what she thought was the most important thing for college professors to know or to do about LD students.

**P:** For purposes of emphasis, let's say you no longer have a half hour to talk to college teachers. You've got five minutes. You've got them in a room for five minutes, and you can say something to them, or give them advice—people who are interested in helping students with different learning styles. What's the most important thing for them to do or not do?

**M:** If I had five minutes, and I was up there in front of everyone, I'd start out by saying, "Is it your fault for having brown hair? Is it your fault for being tall, for being thin, for being short? Well, it's not the LD's fault for having an LD. But it is your responsibility to teach these students. It's your responsibility to get them through classes. Therefore, it's your responsibility to learn how they learn." I'd say stuff like—I'd go right to fairness. "Is it fair to test someone on what they don't know? Is it fair to word things in a way that people don't understand? Is it fair to humiliate them in front of class and do things they don't want to do?—like reading out loud and doing problems on the board? Is it fair to tell them they're not studying hard enough, when in all reality they are?" I'd say, "The people in your class who act up may just be frustrated and lashing out. It's up to you to teach the students. It's up to you to find out how they learn. All it takes is a five-minute conversation, to say, 'Is there anything wrong? If you have any questions, come talk to me. I'd be happy to discuss things with you.' It'll help if you say, 'Are you having trouble with class? Do you want to talk about the exam? You didn't do very well on it. Is there something I can do to help you?' It's your responsibility to help them through this, and by just giving them that little bit of attention, by giving them some indication that you care. I think it's the professor's responsibility to talk to them during office hours, to ask, 'Would you prefer to be tested in another way? Do you need any special remediation? Do you need to see a guidance counselor about being tested? I don't understand what an LD is.' It's okay. It's okay not to understand, just as long as you tell the LD student: 'I don't know what it is. I'd like to help you, but I don't know what to do.' That way you're telling the student, 'I'm ignorant. I don't know what to do, but I'm willing to help.' So as long as you keep an open line of communication. Then, after that, you've done your part. Then it's up to the student to come to you. It's up to the student to tell you what they need."

Monica's anger is more palpable than Nick's, but her request, although worded differently, is similar to his: that students and

professors become more open-minded regarding accommodations, more tolerant of difference. The next interviewee eventually gives similar recommendations.

## Janine

The third student I spoke with, Janine, had been living with an LD label for much longer than either Nick or Monica had. In first grade she was already in a special education class, but as she moved through the early grades, she took an increasing number of her subjects in a “regular” classroom. By sixth grade, she was back in the mainstream, but would leave class for extra help with her reading. In the first part of the interview, she talks about how she gave up getting help in the reading lab, a place for all students who needed help with reading, and began getting a different kind of help in the resource center, a place for LD students.

**P:** What was going on with your reading?

**J:** I can remember in junior high—the teacher—it didn’t help that much? Like it was just not helping.

**P:** What?

**J:** The reading lab. It just didn’t help for some reason. It got to the point where they realized that my learning disability was my phonics, and that’s where I can’t sound out words? I memorize all my words and everything like that. And the reading teacher in junior high tried to like teach me how to read, and it was just—her techniques wasn’t [*sic*] working and everything.

**P:** So she was teaching you phonics?

**J:** Yeah. And it just wasn’t working. And so that’s when the resource center in my junior high stepped in and said, “We’ll do reading with her. We’ll do all the work with her,” and stuff like that. And so, I think I was only in reading lab seventh and eighth grade, and I did more of the work in the resource center.

**P:** So the reading lab was not a resource room type place? It was for everybody who needed reading? And the resource center was more for special ed?

**J:** Yeah. You would come in and be like, “I need help with this.” And you could do every subject in there with them, except for math.

**P:** How was your math?

**J:** It was good. It was really good.

**P:** So it was mainly the phonics, and reading?

**J:** Um-hum.

**P:** So what about today? How’s your reading?



**J:** Much better. Like the resource center, they helped me more to learn how to work with my disability, and I learned how to work with it. Like they made me—like, I became a very organized person. Like when I got to junior high, I was taught right away to always use a dictionary. I was a *very* hard-working person, so I was very lucky that I got through it. And they just disciplined me to get organized and get structured and to know what I *have* to do, to know that I have to start studying a week before the test, and everything like that. And it was more like—they taught me how to use a computer. They taught me more how to work with my disability, instead of trying to teach me at that point.

Interestingly, Janine says how hard she had to work, and in the next breath attributes her success to being “lucky.” It should be noted here that not “remediating” students but instead teaching them to work with their disability, as Janine’s resource room teachers did, is another facet of the LD controversy. For example, the philosophy of Landmark College, a college exclusively for LD students, is critical of these “bypass” methods, arguing that teaching around the disability is essentially giving in to it (Meyer 1986, 30). Janine, however, found these “bypass” strategies very useful. Keith Whinnery, in an article in *Preventing School Failure*, writes that remediation of college students is often a waste of time. He points to research that suggests “basic skill acquisition levels off during high school . . .” (1992, 32). This argument, of course, is just one more aspect of the larger LD controversy, and the “right” policy may vary from student to student.

**P:** What about your reading in college? What about the textbooks? What’s your major?

**J:** Occupational Therapy. One thing with my reading is, it’s been getting much better. And since I’m very good about time and stuff like that, I know that for me to read something that a normal person could take like maybe an hour would take me probably two hours. And I know that—that I have to sit down and go do that. And every semester is different. When I first start the semester, I have to see what I have to do in every single class, and I have to start. So it’s like a new beginning every semester. And like, some texts—like right now I have Abnormal Psych, which is very difficult for me because it’s a lot of reading, and a lot of words that are difficult. So for me to take a sentence, I have to break it down, and figure out what the word is, look it up in the dictionary, figure it out in my head, and then remember it.

**P:** Wow.

**J:** Yeah. So it’s *very* time-consuming. Very. And it’s—like to me, it’s very frustrating, but I’ve taught myself just—just to deal with it. So with other classes like, with my other reading, it’s not—as long as I read it over and over and over again, and if I don’t know what it is, I have to ask someone to say it, and then I’ll remember it. I have to connect everything to remember it.

**P:** Do you use any taped texts? Would that help if you heard them?

**J:** No, I don't. I mean, I've tried using them and stuff like that, but to me it's just more—it's better for me to do on my own, I think.

**P:** If you don't know the word, it's not like you don't—you still would not know it if you heard it?

**J:** I *would* know it if I heard it. There's some—like, just the other day, one word I didn't know what it was, and I was like studying for three hours and I was just like—I went to my friend, and I asked her what it was. I mean, she said it, and I knew what it was.

**P:** What was it, do you remember?

**J:** No.

**P:** Was it a weird, Abnormal Psych word? Was it a regular word that might be in another course?

**J:** Yeah. It would have been in another course. But like the Psych words I'll look up, too. And like, another way they taught me how to read is—probably everybody learns this—is if you don't know the word, just keep reading the sentence? So I always do that, and then go back and figure out the word is.

**P:** But the taped texts don't help you?

**J:** It probably would. It probably definitely would, but Abnormal has been my most difficult class that I've taken here so far with the text because she uses it so much, you know, and it's so time-consuming. And I probably would have been better off if I did use the taped books, definitely. But I'm a very stubborn girl. [laughs] So I tried to do it on my own, and I just got to the point where I realized that I shouldn't have done it that way.

**P:** Why don't you want to use taped texts?

**J:** Well, I wouldn't mind or anything. I just didn't think of it.

Janine and Nick both described themselves as “stubborn,” a trait Monica also has that might be described more positively as “determined.” All three students are, however, self-deprecating to some extent. As I reviewed the three interviews, I could not help but wonder if these students with their relatively high grades and hopes for the future could subtly denigrate themselves, what about LD students elsewhere in less fortunate circumstances? What were *their* self-perceptions, if terms such as “lazy,” “deceiving,” “stubborn,” and “stupid,” were terms these three successful students used when referring to themselves? And what effect does this kind of self-concept have?

In the next section, I asked Janine to discuss her writing.

**P:** Tell me about your writing.

**J:** Well, I have a great story to tell. I never had a problem with teachers or with my writing or anything. But my junior year, I was doing a paper for

my English teacher, and I was doing the same topic in another class, a social studies class. And I had all this research and everything, and I felt really strong about it, and everything like that. So I put all this time into it, wrote it over and over again, did it on the computer, and everything like that. And I handed it in. And she came down to the resource center a couple of days later and said that there was no way that somebody with an LD could write this paper. And she didn't think I wrote it. And she wanted to go through the board—the English board—and she wanted me to write it over. And I wouldn't write it over. She thought my mother wrote it for me. She thought the teachers wrote it for me. And I said, "No. There's no way I'm rewriting this paper." And so she ended up giving me a *B* on the paper and dropping the whole thing because I put up such a fit, and the resource center did and everything like that.

**P:** When she said there was no way someone with LD wrote that paper—why on earth would she say something like that?

**J:** One factor was—it was really, really good, and it really surprised her. And at the time, she was finding out that one of her kids had LD.

**P:** One of her own children?

**J:** Yes. And she did not want to face it. And she did not want to put her kid in to get help or anything like that. So, they didn't say that, but I think that had a factor with it too. [*sic*] And she just thought it was not possible that it could be my writing. She just thought it was too good and that somebody else *had* to help me do it.

**P:** When you say it was good, do you mean that it was technically perfect, or that it had a high level of sophistication, or both?

**J:** I think it was both because like the sentences were good. They were really good formed sentences [*sic*]. I used a thesaurus. I put *so* much time into it because I first wrote it for one class, and then I redid it for her. So like I put a lot of effort into it. I did it on the computer. I had the resource center—like one of my teachers read over it to like catch any mistakes or anything, so I think all around the spelling was good; everything was good about it.

**P:** How did you feel when she—

**J:** Awful. I've never felt so—'cause I've never—I guess I've never looked at my LD as being different or anything like that. And it just hit me really hard that she looked at me as being different, as not as equal. I've worked very, very hard to put as much effort into everything as everybody else—for people *not* to notice that I have an LD?—you know—and she just—it just *hit* me that I do have this disability and she thinks I'm different than everybody else. And that she would even *look* at me differently than someone else—really surprised me.

Years after this incident occurred, the pain of that teacher's insulting assumption about Janine is still raw. Like Nick's traumatic experience trying to read a preschool book title, this event in Janine's life marked a time she saw herself as different. I should point

out that long after I had forgotten my original question, so caught up was I in her story, Janine related her example back to my inquiry about her writing that launched this particular memory. She did this frequently, as did Nick and Monica in their interviews, and the fact that they did this challenges the assertion that LD students often go off on tangents, never to return. For what it is worth, all three interviewees used detailed, well-developed examples to illustrate their points, and then always related them to the question at hand. Here Janine returns to discussing her writing in general.

J: But I can always remember my teacher in the resource center. She'd be like, "Janine, why don't you just do it on the computer?" But I would have to sit down and write the essay, then write it again, then type it, and then redo it and then redo it. And like, if I don't redo it and redo it and redo it, the errors are like, unbelievable. And I think I've never—like I think when kids learn where to put the commas—in high school, I cannot—I mean, I can remember being taught, but I don't remember remembering it. The teacher who helped me the most was when I came here, in English 100. I can't think of his name, but he helped me the most with my commas.

P: Was it Chris?

J: Yes! Tall? Skinny?

P: Yeah. [Chris was an adjunct instructor who has since left to take a full-time teaching position.]

J: Yeah. He helped me, and [Professor] Bonesteel helped me in English 101.

P: Well, that's good to know. How did Chris help you? What exactly did he do?

J: He did like techniques, like—I think it just stuck in my head more, the way he did it, and stuff like that. He had us sit there, and we had to do it over and over again. And I can remember the kids in the class saying, "Why are we doing this?" But it stuck in my head. See, the way for me to remember things, it has to stick out in my head. I have to—and also, by working with my boyfriend and my roommate on my English on like where to put the comma. They helped me more too. I just think like in high school, they didn't do that. They thought you learned it in junior high. They just assumed you knew it. Bonesteel did the same thing. She had more of a workbook type thing. And we had to sit in class and we had to put the commas [in], and she said it out loud. She made you do it out loud. She made you write it on the board. My biggest thing is, if I do it over and over and over again, then I'll learn it.

P: When you say it has to stick out in your head—?

J: Like when he would hand me papers back, or Bonesteel did, they wrote down exactly about the commas and stuff like that. And remembering where *but* goes or *however*. Just the other day, one of my friends—he's an English major—he said he was working with a junior high kid who had no idea where to put the commas. And he said the way he taught him was, he

would say the sentence funny? He said, "Every time my voice changes, that's where the comma goes." . . . you know, where the sentence breaks? And so he read a couple of sentences to me out loud, and I could just *tell*, like I could *hear* where the comma was by the way he, by the way my friend read it to me.

P: Could you imitate the way he read it?

J: He would get higher—I don't have a good sentence. He would like change his tone of voice and stuff?

P: At the clause that needed—

J: The comma.

P: Oh! Did he think of that himself?

J: Yup. He's incredible. [laughs]

P: So it's like a multisensory—

J: Yeah. And it's like really good to do because the more—if you read the sentence, you'll be able to—instead of saying, "Okay, you can tell here at the break because there's a verb and a noun in here; that's one sentence." You know, instead of doing it that way, because one of my hard thing [*sic*] is to tell the verb, the noun, and the adjective. That's really hard for me to do. I just don't know if I just didn't pick it up, or whatever, but it's really hard for me to do that. Like, when I read a sentence for some reason now, I can tell it's too short. Another thing is I worked a lot on my essays for English 101. I worked a lot with my boyfriend reading them over. He would read them, and then I would read them, and by reading it out loud to him, I could tell that it wasn't a full sentence. I could tell that something was wrong.

P: So reading it out loud helps?

J: Yes. With my writing, probably one of my biggest things is adding my endings, my *ed*'s and my *ing*'s. Sometimes it's very hard for me to catch.

I was fascinated with Janine's student-teacher friend who, while teaching comma use, changed his voice to help his junior high students differentiate between dependent and independent clauses. It made sense that this auditorially based technique might be more useful to some students than a word-based explanation involving more terms: nouns, verbs, etc. What made me less comfortable was Janine's insistence that she liked grammar and punctuation lessons. Although other students may have been tearing their hair out with boredom, Janine praised the workbook exercises done out loud and on the board.

J: I think the thing I remember about English 100 was the workbook. Even though everybody was like, "Why are we doing this?" and everything like that, but I think I learned a lot by doing it. 'Cause if I didn't understand it, I would ask him after class. I think exercises are the best way to learn anything.

It is possible that much of Janine's learning occurred after class with the individual attention I knew Chris always gave to his students. Later, Janine will say that one of the best things an instructor can do for an LD student is to be approachable so that students are not afraid to ask questions. We cannot, however, discount what Janine says about grammar exercises, as much as we might like to. Without doubt, contextualized learning and whole language practices benefit the majority of writers, including learning disabled ones. It may be, however, that explicit, repeated instruction helps some students or at least gives them more confidence regarding their proofreading abilities. While I cannot bring myself to endorse workbook drills as a way to help students who learn differently, I remember Frank Vellutino's general advice to me about learning disabilities in general: "Never say never." (1990)

In the next part of our discussion, I asked Janine about the kinds of errors she had made in a three-hour, impromptu essay our college used to require for graduation. (It now uses portfolios.) Those students labeled LD could use a computer for the test and take as much time as they needed. In her finished essay, Janine had frequent mix-ups with possessives and plurals, and in that way her error pattern resembled many other college students'. However, her text also displayed the kind of wrong-word pattern seen in both Nick's and Monica's writing. Here was Janine's topic sentence: "It is important to have class participation a significant component of 10 percent or more of the course grade in college classes for severely reason" [several reasons]. In defining class participation, she said it involved "the constructive decision [discussion] that students do informally during each class." Later, she wrote "it shows how much effect [effort] a student is putting into a class." In fact, she was quite consistent in her use of these wrong words, saying in her conclusion, "class participation is . . . a good way to get more classroom decision." She used *effect* for *effort* four times throughout the two-page essay. I asked her about those sentences.

**P:** What about some of the kinds of errors you made in here? [We look at the essay.] What happened?

**J:** Spell check. I thought that was the right word. I probably spelled the word wrong. I probably spelled *effort* the wrong way.

**P:** So you were going for *effort*?

**J:** Um-hum. And then spell check. I picked that one. It gave me choices, and I picked the wrong one.

**P:** And what about *decision* for *discussion*? Do you remember what you originally put into the computer? Were you attempting to spell *discussion*, and it misinterpreted it?

J: Um-hum. It put a listing of words, and I picked that word. And so I read over the essay again, and I didn't catch it. But if I read it again, I probably would have caught it [*sic*].

P: If somebody read that out loud to you, "but instead the constructive decision that students do informally . . .," would you pick that up?

J: Yes.

P: Okay. So it wasn't so much that your brain gave you the wrong word, it was that the spelling was off, and then when the spell check gave you a list of words, you picked the wrong one.

J: Yeah.

A few weeks after I had this discussion with Janine, a colleague of mine from another department showed me a paper he had received from one of his students. Almost every line had a wrong word error of the *effort/effect* type described above, making the text incomprehensible even to people used to deciphering all kinds of strangled syntax, including from the texts of new speakers of English, a group to which this student did not belong. Neither one of us had ever seen anything quite like this. Because the paper appeared to have been word processed, my only guess was that a too-generous spell checker had played a part in suggesting some of the words that appeared in that student's text. Perhaps, like Janine, this student tried to spell a particular word, was much further off base than the software creator predicted, the computerized dictionary displayed a crop of utterly unrelated words, and the hapless writer took the best (and wrong) guess. LD students are perfectly capable of inventing their own "bizarre" creations, most of which are phonetic enough to be understandable. They are sometimes betrayed, ironically, by what they may view as their electronic savior. If Janine, who is careful, bright, and highly motivated, is occasionally confused by spell checkers, other students may be also. Software, of course, will become more sophisticated in time, but students should be warned about being led down a computerized garden path of correctly spelled but absurd suggestions by a piece of equipment, designed by a person whose experiences with dictionaries might be quite different from theirs.<sup>2</sup>

In the next section, Janine discusses her experiences with reading, test-taking, and note-taking. Like Monica, she has much test anxiety, but she has learned how to deal with it. She echoes some of Monica's other concerns, especially regarding complicated multiple choice questions or essay questions with many complex modifying clauses.

**P:** When did you actually get the label?

**J:** It had to be elementary school. I'm not exactly sure what grade, but it was definitely elementary school.

**P:** Did they tell you anything about it?

**J:** I did not know exactly what my disability was. My mother knew, and she probably tried to explain it to me and everything, but I didn't know exactly what it was and couldn't explain it until probably seventh or eighth grade, junior high.

**P:** So how would you explain it?

**J:** I'd explain it as—my disability is with phonics, and that I memorize all my words. I'd explain that, that's why I have a problem with reading because if I hit a word I don't know, then it takes me longer to read, and the spelling, it takes me longer to do, and that's why I need more time on tests. And I've never taken a test in a classroom, except for math. I've never even tried. Like, I've taken small quizzes and stuff like that. So I've always had extended time, and it's always helped me, so I've never even tried to take it in a class because one, it would probably be a shock for me at first, and it would be very hard for me because I would look at everybody else, and I get very, very nervous, and everything like that. 'Cause my first time—'cause with occupational therapy, we take Bio and Extremis [Extremities], and everything like that. And like with Bio, you have like, lab practicals? And I took them all by myself, and I took them orally. Well, my Extrem teacher was like, "Janine, would you please just try it?" She's like, "You can have more time afterwards." And I was very, very nervous, and the first time I didn't do good because I was very nervous, but after that I did great. I got a *B* in the class. And with Neuro, I take them in with them, and I go back to the questions afterwards. And now, I just got to the point where I read the sentence. I can read the sentence three times in a minute and a half. And the more complex the sentence is, then I definitely have to go back to that question, but if it's a straightforward question, then I can do it right away. If they say, "What is this?" then I can do it. But if they say, "What does this have to do with this and this and this,"—and if I have to think—and if I have to figure out the sentence—because sometimes I have to figure out what the sentence is meaning, and then I have to figure out every single answer. And I have to think in my head, how I remember—all those answers. You know? So that's very time-consuming. But I know to myself now, to go back to those kinds of questions. Instead of getting frustrated, and getting nervous and upset and everything, I know I just have to go back to that question.

After having developed confidence from doing well on these exams, Janine has learned to take complex questions in stride, going back to them at the end. In her comments on note-taking, she critiques conventional classroom practice.



J: I think another technique that professors should do is—They think you know, that when you come to college you should be able to take notes. Every student should be able to take notes. If I read something out loud, you should just be able to take it. So I have to remember thinking that the whole time like, “Oh my God, I’m gonna have to take these notes. Nobody’s going to write on the board. I’m dead.” My first class is Bio, and he would lecture, and he wrote all the big words on the board, which I was so excited about because I would just write them all down and then go back and rewrite my notes. And that’s what most of my professors do is write on the board, and I never had a note taker until I took Ortho and Neuro, and that’s because she stood there for an hour and fifteen minutes and just lectures. And it’s very dah, da dah, da dah, and it’s very hard to write a sentence. And I’ll get to a word I don’t know, and I’ll just sit there and try to figure it out, but she’ll be onto another topic by the time I figure out what that word is, you know, so I just try my best to write what I think it is then just keep going. So it was just very hard for me to rewrite notes for her lectures and then rewrite my notes for the other classes. That’s why I got a note taker. I think— .

P: You rewrite all your notes?

J: Yeah. All except for Ortho/Neuro, I get the notes for and I just read them over and study for them.

P: You get the notes?

J: I have a note taker and I get—they take the notes and I photocopy them.

P: Now the note taker—How does that happen?

J: She’s in the class. She takes the class. So she takes the class, and then I just photocopy them afterwards. But I think that—she [the professor] doesn’t *teach* the class; she just stands there and lectures. And I think a big thing is that, nobody—if she taught the class more, kids would remember it more, and it would be easier to remember. ‘Cause I know one of my good friends is having a real hard time with the class, too, because the notes are just so much, and then you have to reread the notes and everything to study for the test. And like, in Dr. Peterson’s class [another professor], I *learn* something, so I don’t have to *relearn* myself when I get out of the class. But after her class, I have to *relearn* everything. You see what I mean?

P: Mmm.

J: Also, when LD students read something, they will struggle to read it, and then they have to go back and learn it, and other students can read it and learn it at the same time. That’s why I have to go over things. That’s why I have to rewrite my notes.

P: That must take you awhile.

J: Um-hmm.

For Janine, using the notes of a student who is also taking the class seems to work out fine. Some colleges have found, however, that students were somewhat unreliable as note takers, and that paid professional note takers were a better choice. (See Chapter One

for further discussion of note takers.) In the next exchange, Janine talks more about testing. Like Monica, she excels at oral exams, but Janine still prefers written ones.

**P:** Do you think that writing, taking written tests, is the best measure of what you know? What about oral tests?

**J:** I think either/or. Like for some kids, oral tests are the best. Like when I took a lab practical for Bio, I can remember after taking the test, the oral test, she was like, "Janine, I think you're one of the brightest people I know. I know you know everything, and I know it's all in your head, and it's just a matter to get it out." Which is true. I know it. I just sometimes can't get it out the right way.

**P:** Orally or on paper?

**J:** On paper. I can't get it down on paper because my spelling, or something like that. Because like, for huge words, like for Neuro and all of my science classes and stuff like that, I have to memorize all the material, and let alone, and then if I have to write it, I have to memorize how to spell it too. And some of the words are just—you know how some people can get *close* to the words? [in attempting to spell them] I mean, for me it's just impossible to even get *close* to the words. Sometimes I can, and sometimes I can't. So that's like when I take my Neuro test, I have a TA in there, and I'll ask her how to spell a word when I don't know it.

Janine explained the arrangements for taking her Neurology tests. A teaching assistant would sit with her in the Academic Support office and help her both read difficult words off the exam and spell words she wished to write in her essay answers. Of course, the TA was not allowed to define words or supply answers in any way.

**P:** And then if you say, "I want to write—" you name the word, they can spell it?

**J:** Yeah. And they'll spell it. 'Cause if I were taking it on my own, I would just, like have to look it up. I'd take a dictionary out, and I'd find a way to do it. I would do it on my own. But when you're given a certain time period, you don't have the time to pick up the dictionary, pick up the text, and figure out what it is.

**P:** So this enables you to take it faster?

**J:** Yeah. Than if I did it by myself. And to do a better job on it, too. But to answer your question, like, I think writing essays is a good way to show you how to do it, as long as you're not by yourself. Like it might be really hard for somebody, like this girl Pam that's coming into the program who's LD. Her biggest problem is writing essays, and she cannot write. She can *not*. That's her LD, and it's awful, and I mean, she's just had *such* an awful time. She went to [names another college] for OT, and they did not work with her at all. So she left, and that's why she's coming here. But I mean, she has a computer that talks to her—

**P:** Yes! I've heard about those things!

J: Yes! It talks to her! It has a thesaurus on it. It has a spell check and everything. And she's like really nervous about the English and if people will be willing to help her and everything. And I told her yes and everything like that, but it's got to be her doing. Like, she's has to go to the teachers and everything. So every test I think is going to be different. Like multiple choice are good, and stuff like that, but essays definitely show if you know it. Like it's really easy to do multiple choice questions, but then again you might have somebody that's really hard to do it for [*sic*].

While Monica despises multiple choice questions, Janine finds them easy, recognizing that not everyone else does. Unlike Nick and Monica, Janine is convinced that the label saved her academic life. She does recognize, however, that junior high school students' judgment can be difficult to endure.

P: Do you think that the label, overall, was helpful?

J: Yes. If I ever had to confront somebody, and they fought their LD label or everything—to me—I feel that I am a very lucky person. And I feel like I'm lucky that I got caught. Because there's some people that haven't even found out, and they find out when they're in college. And your first reaction is, you fight it, and you deny it, and you can't handle it or anything. But I'm to the point where I know my limits. I know what I have to do, that I have to structure, and if I don't do it, then it's going to affect *me*. And it's not worth it.

P: A lot of people argue about the stigma—about going to the resource room. But you said you circumvented that. You managed to avoid—being different.

J: Just like—if somebody asked me now, if they asked me what it was, I would come out and tell them. But like in junior high and everything like that, it was very hard, because everybody went through these stages of finding out who you were, and finding out who was different and who fits where and who does what. So it was very hard. I mean, if I went back to junior high right now, I wouldn't be afraid of it at all because now I don't care what people think of me. But that was just a time when everybody cared what you thought about and everything like that. And I just reached a point in ninth grade where I just said, "I have this. I have to deal with this, and if people don't like it, then that's too bad. This is what I am, and this is how it has to be done," and everything like that. And I think if I didn't have that piece of paper that says I'm LD, then I would struggle even more. And I would blame myself more. If I didn't get extended time, if I didn't get what I needed, then it would affect me more. And I would put more on my shoulders, like it's all my fault. What am I doing wrong? Why can't I do this like everybody else? But I know when I see—even though every semester it's very hard. It takes my roommate a half an hour to do something, and it takes me like two hours to do it. But I just have to sit down, and I have to say, "Janine, you have to do this. You have no choice. Do you want to make it?" Every semester, I call my mom, at the beginning

of the year, and I'm like, "Mom, I can't take this!" And she gives me that little speech: "Janine, you can do this; you know you can do this. Don't let them break you. You can handle this. You have proven—" So I think somebody with an LD, you always have to remind yourself about it and how you can make it and everything like that. I definitely think—I'm very happy. Like I went to a seminar yesterday, and the guy had an ADD [attention deficit disorder], and he described how he's on medication and people will look at it like, "You're dependent on this drug; you couldn't live—," and everything like that. And he—I can't think of the word how he said it, but like, "It's another way for me to function normally, to be able to function." So if I didn't know about my LD, I wouldn't be able to function.

It has been said that the LD label in effect blames students for what is really a flawed educational system. In many ways, that is true—remember that Janine referred to her labeling process as being "caught." Another way to view the label, however, as Janine explains, is that it helped motivate her to work around the system. Without it, she may have mistakenly attributed her linguistic difficulties to below-average intelligence.

**P:** Some people argue that LD doesn't exist—that it's just a matter of bad teaching, of motivating students. There are also a lot of arguments about how many people have this, has it been overdiagnosed, what causes it, and so on. Have you heard any of those arguments, and how would you answer them?

**J:** How I would answer is, like I said, my stepmother—she works with LD. She works in reading [in a middle school]. And I went to go visit her, and I went to school with her, and I sat in her classes. And what they're starting to do, and which I think is a very big thing, is that, instead of saying, these are the very high kids, and these are the normal kinds—you know how they used to have the high achievers and everything?

**P:** Oh yeah.

**J:** Now they have the three classrooms, the high achievers, the ones that are regular and everything, and the kids below; they have them all in one room. And everything they do is going to be slower. And I sat in the classroom with her, and just looking at them, I thought of different things they could do. And I think it's more like—with a kid with LD, you have to teach it to them differently. Elementary school and junior high is the most important time for a kid to learn something. And if they don't learn it then, then they're not going to be able to get it. And I was sitting there watching her teach science to these two kids? And I could just tell by the look on one kid's face, one of the girls, that she did not get it. And she did not connect. And my stepmother was about to move on, and I looked at her, and I shook her [my?] head, and she's like, "What?" And I'm like, "Ask her to write it on the board." And it was a problem or something, and my stepmother had already gone through it on the board. And one of the girls like stopped and

struggled. And I said out loud, I'm like, "Picture her voice. Hear her voice in your head." And she got it. And she put in on the board.

P: No kidding!

J: Yeah. 'Cause that's what I do. If I remember something, and I remember exactly on the sheet, I can close my eyes and picture that sheet and remember it. That's how I remember it. And the other girl, the reason I said to stop is because, if she went on, she would have never got the rest —'cause the first—it had to do with photosyn—it had to do with plants. And she was talking about plants. And if she didn't get the first thing, and my stepmother went on, she would have been lost for the rest of it—the whole conversation because she was going to be thinking about that first thing that she did not get. And she'd be thinking about it the whole time, and she wouldn't be able to grasp the other concepts.

As mentioned before, Janine frequently supports her opinions with vivid personal examples, always relating them back to the discussion ("But to answer your question . . ."). Overall, her narrative voice is passionate, detailed, and clear. Occasionally, however, she reaches for a word that eludes her, so she settles for another. In a passage not transcribed here, Janine described how noisy computer labs can be. She said, "... I get very frustrated. I get very, like—disorient—like, I pay attention to other things." It may be that she wanted *disoriented*, or it may be that she wanted *distracted*, but settled for the description rather than the term. In the above story of her stepmother's middle school science class, Janine begins to say the lesson is on "photosyn—" and then finishes, "—it had to do with plants."

As is the case with the sporadic verb tense slips ("I probably would have caught it"), these wrong-word or half-word occurrences are more noticeable because they have been transcribed. In speech the words were quickly swallowed and the sentence continued smoothly. These oral slips, however, may be somewhat related to the written slips in Janine's essay, which may be explained only partially by the confusing list of alternatives on the spell checker. If what Janine says is true, that sometimes she "isn't even close" to correct spelling, this factor, in conjunction with the occasionally misfired term she produces, may account for some of her word-level difficulties in reading and writing.

Near the end of the interview, I asked Janine to comment on learning in general.

P: What about other courses? For writing, reading, learning, in general.

J: The one class that I *love* right now is my Neuro class. Like when he mentions something, he'll go over and over it. Instead of just mentioning it once. 'Cause it's not going to stick in somebody's head if they just heard it

once. And he explains it many different ways. The more ways you can explain it, the more the kid is going to make a connection. And he's very patient with me, and I'm not afraid to address a question to him at all. He does not intimidate me or anything. I'm very comfortable with him. He will always spend the extra time with me. Another big thing is that he will not schedule a test when we have other tests. He knows what classes we have, and he won't do that. And like we had a paper due? And he made it due way before finals started, so we wouldn't have to worry about it. He thinks about how we have other classes.

These three students' stories of when they did or did not learn are focused almost entirely on a transmission model of learning: much talk of lectures, of multiple-choice tests, and of obtaining "the information." This may be due to the nature of these students' majors, occupational therapy and physical therapy (Nick's former major), which cover in the introductory courses much memorization of muscle groups, technical vocabulary, and other material more conducive to "objective" testing. The theoretical positioning in these fields occurs later in the program, when students are required to critically examine what they read in professional journals and what they observe in clinical situations.

Another point Janine made in the comment above regarding her Neurology professor's awareness of his students' workload is worth considering. If we writing instructors consider the writing in our English or Textual Studies course to be the most vital work students will undertake in a particular semester and assume they will happily devote much thought and time to a topic of inquiry project for our class, we will be sadly misled. LD students spending an inordinate amount of time each week rereading textbooks from their other courses and rewriting chaotic lecture notes may not have much time remaining to explore ideas from our class, revise drafts, and respond thoughtfully to their peers' work—the time-consuming, intellectual tasks involved in many writing-intensive courses. In addition to all of this, LD students especially must carefully edit not only the writing they do for us but also that required in other classes. At the very least, we need to know that this is the reality of most LD students' lives. As we have seen, Janine was deeply grateful that one professor was considerate enough to stagger his major requirements with those of his colleagues.

**P:** Any other dos [for college professors]?

**J:** I think—be prepared to expect anything from someone. That they're going to have a kid that might not be able to handle this, and they should be able to handle every situation. They should be able to handle it if an LD student comes up to them—be able to handle it and be able to say, "I will

work with you,” instead of looking at it like, “This is just another problem for me.” They should just be more supportive because we’re just trying to get through this. . . . Like when a student comes up to them and tells them about their LD, if the teacher is very nice about it, that’s going to make the student very comfortable in class. But if they’re very awkward, then the kid’s going to be very nervous, all the time, through the class. It’s just going to affect the class.

P: Can you give me an example of being nice about it? I mean, is it any one thing they say? Is it their attitude?

J: Yeah. Like, I can remember addressing a teacher, and I told her about my LD, and she goes, “What is your problem?” And just right there, my stomach just dropped, and I had to take a deep breath and say, “All right, this is it.”

P: Was it the way she said it?

J: Yes. It was her tone. It was the way she looked at me. And how it made it look like—just the word *problem*—I just think is an awful word. I don’t think it’s a problem. It’s just something that’s part of me. This is me. This is my package. This is something I have to do. This is not a problem. To me, it is not a problem.

P: What would be a better thing to say? Tone?

J: Um. Say, “All right, what can I do for you? How can I help you with this? Exactly what are the different things that you need?”

P: Anything else? If you had five or ten minutes to talk to a roomful of college teachers? What would you stress?

J: Like I said before, they should be willing to show the kid that they’re willing to help them and willing to work with them and everything like that. And that they’re *not* a problem and that they *are* here to help them and everything like that. And to be very open-minded with every situation because every situation is going to be different and to learn different techniques and to pick up little different things. And like me going to watch my stepmother teach a class, I thought of things that I remembered and taught *her* different things that she could do with the students. And I think a good thing to do is to go and sit and observe a class while another teacher is teaching it and look at the reactions of the kids, and you can tell what they’re picking up and what they’re not picking up and everything like that. And I also think that it’s important—I think a teacher should be *required* to take a class about LD students because a lot of teachers don’t know about it and—

P: College professors, too?

J: Um-hum. Definitely. Because the more they educate themselves about it, the better it’s going to be. The more they find different techniques. And I think professors should talk to professors. I know, with me, I know professors have talked to other professors about me and found out what my abilities are, and I think if you’re not clear what their LD is, to go talk to

other professors and see how they were in the class and see what they can learn and pick up from and everything. I just think that they should put the effort into it.

## Summary and Conclusion

What compounds this already complex issue is that there is no typical LD student. In spite of their similarity in age, race, class, and academic acumen, even these three did not always agree on what works best in helping LD students learn in a text-based environment. Monica relies heavily on taped texts, while Janine, although she said taped texts might be a good idea for her, has for now decided to continue her practice of setting aside large blocks of time to read and reread assigned chapters. Nick, on the other hand, primarily depends on listening intently in the classroom and uses texts selectively, reading only that which he feels is absolutely necessary. Monica finds multiple-choice tests horrific, while Janine views them as easy. Nick and Monica would like to take all of their exams orally, but Janine prefers written tests, even though she excels at oral ones.

Like many other experts on learning disabilities, these three students not only disagree about the usefulness of the LD label, but have somewhat conflicting views about it. Although they all mention the cruelty of elementary school children and those children's apparent inability to deal with any kind of difference, these three students, who have much experience with the label, have somewhat different views about its role in higher education. While Janine believes the label is absolutely essential in helping students secure the support they need to negotiate difficult college programs, Nick seems to change his mind about the label even as he describes its effects. As we saw in the transcript, he began by describing the label as a necessity, but then ultimately railed against its long-term effects, especially on students he saw languishing in his high school "reject room." Monica, who takes most advantage of the academic support services offered to LD students, and who views that office's professionals as absolutely essential advocates for the accommodations to which she is legally entitled, also sees the LD label as a potential tool of abuse by some students looking for privileged treatment, which in turn breeds resentment on the part of other students and skepticism on the part of instructors. To some extent, all three see the label as instrumental in helping them better understand why some types of learning are so difficult for them. They all see it also



as a problem in itself. If there is a consensus here, it may be that the label, at least for now, is an evil necessary for obtaining access to ways of learning not yet available in the mainstream.

There are, however, similarities in these students' situations and many clear areas of agreement. All three have a metacognitive awareness of what they need to do as they revise their written work, at least regarding surface errors. They can identify what mistakes they typically make, and they each have developed successful strategies for minimizing them. They all have learned to allow much time to write and revise extensively, relying to some extent on trusted friends for proofreading. They all take advantage of computer technology, word processing, and whatever spelling or grammar checking capabilities are available, recommending it without hesitation for all LD students.

This issue of editing, however, and who should be doing the bulk of it, needs to be debated more broadly in higher education. While none of these students questions the necessity of surface correctness on final drafts, and each one plans for time-consuming editing sessions, there is an obvious question here regarding priorities. At what point does the writer's concentration on the minutia of verb endings and apostrophe use become a counterproductive use of time that might be better spent on more intellectually stimulating pursuits? Again, this question has no either/or answer. Of course, all students should be encouraged to learn how to locate and fix those surface errors they routinely make. As these students well know, poorly edited academic papers, business reports, or important correspondence documents will result in severe penalties for their authors. However, endless and frustrating editing sessions may quickly reach a point of diminishing returns if students associate this often fruitless exercise with "writing." Is it possible that LD students could be encouraged to feel less guilty about using editors, either computerized or human? This question should not be reduced to a debate about "lowering" the proverbial "standards." It is a complex and serious question about the best use of time that challenges faculty, students, and the public to reconsider priorities.

In addition to developing systematic revising processes and maximizing electronic editing tools, these students have other intersecting problems and solutions to them. Both Monica and Janine have a difficult time taking notes in class, especially if technical terms are not written on the board. They both spend many hours laboriously rewriting their notes, something that may surprise non-LD students and professors. Monica relies heavily on paid student note takers, while Janine uses them only for a class that is primarily

lecture-based. In a lecture class where the professor explains concepts in several ways and stops frequently to answer questions, Janine can not only take notes successfully but says she learns much of the course material during the classroom session itself. Nick, too, depends on in-class learning, having succeeded in high school primarily through listening.

Both Monica and Janine were exasperated by exam questions they felt were unduly complicated. They preferred “focused” or straightforward essay questions, as opposed to those they viewed as being unnecessarily “elegant” (Monica’s term) or “fancy.” All three enthusiastically endorsed collaboration and oral discussion as the preferred mode of learning, with Monica calling study groups a “big time” answer to many LD students’ problems with conventional teaching.

One of their biggest frustrations (a word all three students used, and one that peppered Monica’s narrative) was the stated or implied judgment on the part of parents, teachers, or peers that these students were floundering in school because they were not working hard enough. What impressed me again and again as I heard the experiences of Nick, Monica, and Janine was the sheer number of hours they routinely invested in their schoolwork, only to have someone whose opinion they valued advise them that if they would only socialize less and study more, their grades would improve. Granted, these students are highly motivated, determined, and hard-working, and they may or may not be typical of all students, LD or otherwise, but I know I will try never again to deliver the familiar bromide about “working harder” to students about whose real work habits I know very little.

Other harmful exchanges ought to be avoided. Both Nick and Janine had painful recollections of being told that their best piece of writing could not possibly have been produced by them. The assumptions behind such remarks, that people with LD are incapable of writing well, are infinitely destructive. We heard Nick begin to doubt his own talent, to wonder if his good writing was somehow “an accident.” For Janine, the moment when her teacher doubted her authorship became the moment Janine saw herself as different: “it just *hit* me that I do have this disability and she thinks I’m different than everybody else. And that she would even *look* at me differently than someone else—really surprised me.” That teachers or students would make such casual appraisals is simply inexcusable, and if this is the result of labeling—that *difference* is doomed to mean *inferior*—then it may be time to eliminate the label, no matter what legal accommodations it permits.

When asked specifically for dos and don'ts regarding teaching methodology, when asked what they would advise if they had only five minutes to talk to a group of college professors, all three students emphasized the same thing, and it had little to do with classroom practice per se, or even with type of assignment. It had to do, rather, with professors' attitudes. What Nick resented most was the professor who singled him out in front of his classmates, drawing attention to the fact that Nick took exams outside of class time. This same professor implied that Nick's difficulty was either imagined or something which, had he the righteousness or self-discipline of the professor himself in his younger days, he could overcome. What infuriated Monica was the professor who refused to budge one iota from his established testing procedures, claiming that "it would not be fair to other students." While I heard, of course, only Monica's side to this incident, her obvious bitterness suggests that professors who will not change, perhaps for legitimate reasons, their evaluation tools, should at least do a more tactful job communicating to students their reasons why.

Another common belief held by these students, and articulated with varying degrees of tolerance, was that a Ph.D. should not be a blank check to do what one pleases. Monica's resentful imitation of her professor was painful to hear: "I'm a Ph.D. I've worked for this. I'm a Ph.D. I can do this how I felt it needs to be done.' I mean, what can you say after that comment? I was *so* angry at her." And Nick, although a bit gentler in his criticism, is also wary of a terminal degree as a trophy of knowledge. "Understanding is a big thing," said Nick, "understanding that you're not—just because you have your Ph.D., you don't—you aren't necessarily right." He adds later, "Society's been wrong before."

As has been emphasized elsewhere in this book, respected professionals often disagree, and never with more ridicule and venom than when discussing learning disabilities. The consequences of these disagreements, however, have little effect on those disagreeing, compared to how they impact students, whether labeled or not. A professor who has recently read several articles about the quite real difficulties involved in diagnosing learning disabilities should nevertheless think twice before professorially declaring to a labeled LD student (as one professor did to Monica), that learning disabilities do not exist.

In addition to indicating what professors could *avoid* doing, these students had positive ideas about what professors could *do* to make LD students' academic lives easier. These recommendations do not involve complicated multisensory assignments or gimmicks designed for left-brained learners. Rather, they are simple things, atti-

tudes really, that could be nourished. If there is one quality these students would like all their professors to possess, it is open-mindedness, a willingness to learn more about the students in their class, and thus learn more about teaching. Monica's advice to a hypothetical audience of college professors would be for them to simply ask students if they needed extra help or a different kind of teaching. While time is, of course, something most good instructors have precious little of to spare, they might consider using what time they *do* invest in student contact more thoughtfully. In the same time that they take advising students to study harder or revise more carefully, for instance, they might instead ask one or two of the questions Monica suggests: "Are you having trouble with class? Do you want to talk about the exam? Is there something I can do to help you?"

Finally, professors might do more of what none of these students mentioned directly but which obviously affected them more profoundly than they might consciously realize: recognize and praise what these students do well. Nick's decision to attend college was partially influenced by one high school teacher who took him aside and told him he had the ability to do so. That woman was one of the first people he mentioned in his interview. Monica wept with joy when she passed an oral exam her college occupational therapy professor insisted she take because, said this professor, she knew Monica would be able to succeed. After Janine took an oral exam, one of her professors told her that she [Janine] was one of the brightest people she knew. That comment, along with a periodic pep talk from her mother, undoubtedly gets Janine through many a difficult textbook chapter or grueling study session.

All three students are quite modest in their requests of professors. Although Monica and Janine stress that it is the professor's responsibility to learn more about students' learning preferences, all these students are really requesting is fewer negative remarks spawned from unenlightened assumptions. It is somewhat understandable that overworked professors attempting to teach, publish, hold office hours, and serve on committees might be wary of students who ask for different accommodations, for even more of their already nonexistent free time. However, much of the negative reception LD students often get may result from a knee-jerk reaction to change, or a defensiveness to a perceived criticism of the way these professors have always taught. It may stem from a panicky insecurity about their lack of knowledge concerning learning disabilities or an overeagerness to believe they do not exist—a convenience that would mean these teachers need not change anything.

For the most part, the fear of not knowing how to help an LD student in one's class is unnecessary. All three interviewees seem to

want their professors simply to relax and be just a bit more supportive, even honestly curious. Said Monica, professors need only give LD students "some indication that you care." According to Janine, professors "should be willing to show the kid that they're willing to help them. If the teacher is very nice about it, that's going to make the student very comfortable in class." Not one of these students expects instructors to have a vast collection of multisensory strategies at their fingertips for use in every course with every LD student. "It's okay," said Monica, "not to understand what an LD is. So long as you keep an open line of communication. Then, after that, you've done your part. Then it's up to the student. . . ."

Nick, Monica, Janine, and no doubt many other LD college students, are accustomed to working doubly hard for their education. They are acutely aware that the academic and professional worlds are based on written language, and they are preparing themselves as best they can to deal with that. As simple as this may sound, their main request, as Nick said, is for "understanding," so that they can continue to do what they need to do. As is obvious from all three interviews, these young people have developed a sophisticated, metacognitive awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. All they want is a bit less aggravation in putting this knowledge about themselves into practice.

There are, alas, no magical solutions to be gleaned from these three interviews. While there may be some useful techniques or unusual approaches that do help some students, the main change that must occur is attitudinal. What needs to be challenged are the harmful, negative assumptions about learning disabilities made by misguided faculty, "normal" students, and perhaps most especially, by LD students themselves. I asked the Director of Academic Support Services at Utica College, Steve Pattarini, what he would say about LD students if he had five minutes to speak to the entire faculty. He said that "people must learn to believe that the manner in which someone learns is not a reflection of that person's intelligence." If students and faculty truly believe that students can learn, they will work together to figure out how (Pattarini 1994). If there is an unconscious assumption, however, that these students cannot do college-level work, they may be written off with lowered expectations, probably the most harmful, insidious form of prejudice.

All theoretical positions are, of course, molded by material circumstances, and in no academic controversy is that more true than when regarding learning disabilities. The lenses through which we all view different learning is heavily colored by our own education, experience, and self-interest. If "learning disability" as a neurological difference does not exist as such, it puts LD professionals out of

business, or at the very least calls into question much of their academic preparation and professional research. On the other hand, if “learning disability” involves more than economic and sociological factors, then psycho-socialists have much homework to do if they wish to be more effective facilitators of learning for *all* their students.

Theoretical disputes about causes and cures are almost beside the point if students’ written language difficulties mean that they will ultimately be judged as having inferior intellectual capabilities, and that is the reality of Nick’s, Monica’s, and Janine’s experiences. Until there is a major re-conceptualization of intelligence, until linguistic-processing talents are not the exclusive measure of academic worth, those people with other strengths will continue to be discriminated against. As educators, we must become more skeptical of the theoretical assumptions that inform our classroom practice and assessment tools, especially perhaps if we believe in them so thoroughly because we know them to be valid for the way we ourselves learned. We must broaden our view of knowledge, teaching, and learning, being less quick to discard completely those theories and research methods engendered outside our field of expertise and which may have distasteful flaws. An either/or view of this controversy is inappropriate. We need to read more widely in unfamiliar academic territory, listen better to our colleagues and to our students, and research more thoroughly. Fear of being dismissed as “eclectic” should not prevent us from tolerating more patiently apparent theoretical contradictions, especially since no one theory today can account for the linguistic adventures of a small, but diverse group of students.

## Notes

1. See also Kate Ronald’s essay, “Personal and Public Authority in Discourse” in *Farther Along*, 25–39.
2. See Catherine Smith’s (1991) essay on the perspectives of software creators, a topic that is further discussed in Chapter Five.