

The Teacher and Assisting Unique Learners

Key Verse

“Therefore, go, and make disciples of all...” (Matthew 28:19).

Objectives

After this lesson, the student should be able to:

1. Understand that all students are unique and have the right to be taught and developed
2. Identify the common signs of learning disabilities
3. Facilitate learning for those with learning difficulties
4. Know how to design a Distance Learning platform with a ‘universal design’ for all students
5. Be an effective mentor for students with learning disabilities
6. Understand the ethics involved in providing adequate learning environments for all learners.

Introduction

Each student is unique, equipped with talents, experiences, potential and even difficulties or problems. In God’s sight all need to be nurtured, developed, and discipled for fruitful and maximum service in His kingdom. One of the world’s largest multicultural minorities crossing all barriers of age, sex, race, and religion may very well be people with disabilities.

The kingdom of God is like a man who prepares a great banquet, and when the usual list of guests cannot attend the summons is issued: go find those who are made to reside outside the gate; the blind, the lame, those with disabilities...So that the kingdom of God may be made manifest. (Luke 14:16-24, paraphrased, as used by Robert C. Anderson)

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If Jesus has room for those with disabilities in His kingdom and they are a target group of the Great Commission, we certainly have room for them in our Bible school classrooms and programs. An understanding of our focus group is needed. As we learn to deal with unique learners, we gain fresh insight in dealing with all learners.

Facilitating and Mentoring Unique Learners in a Bible College Setting

As you digest the information in the lesson, quickly notice the correlation between unique learners with learning disabilities and learners that may not be conversant or familiar with the language of instruction in the Bible school. There are many similarities. Common signs of learning problems may include: (a) incorrect spelling, (b) word blindness, (c) misreading, (d) dilemma summarizing, (e) weak memory skills, (f) working slowly, (g) avoiding reading and writing assignments, (h) trouble with reading and/or language skills, (i) letter reversal, (j) trouble remembering printed words, (k) confusing vowel sounds, (l) difficulty writing, (m) trouble listening or paying attention, (n) trouble with numeric or math skills, (o) difficulty operating in a typical instructional setting, (p) inattentiveness, and (q) hyperactivity.

The paramount first step is “not figuring out what to call the problem, rather, the important thing is to start thinking of strategies that you might share or techniques students might learn in order to improve functioning” (Gacka 2004, 1). Assume there are students with invisible disabilities in the classroom and teach accordingly. “Every student with a learning problem has a way they can learn” (Gacka , 1). Discover the best way. Keep trying until it is found. Understanding the learning style is imperative since it gives much insight to help students learn.

Facilitating learners with learning difficulties calls for a variety of teaching strategies or accommodations including: (a) reducing reading level of text by adjusting grammatical complexity and length of sentences; (b) providing large print texts; (c) using simple language; (d) clarifying or highlight central points; (e) eliminating pointless material; (f) allowing the use of a small notebook for homework; (g) hands-on-learning assignments; (h) teaching in small, logical chunks; (i) intermingling cooperative learning exercises throughout the lecture; (j) relating material in a practical way; (k) supplying clear direction for assignments; repeat and rephrase questions to increase comprehension; (l) verifying understanding by having student repeat question before answering; (m) employing computer software developments to assist in learning; (n) reduce distractions; (o) providing a quiet room for testing; (p) allocate extended time for tests and written assignments; (q) using visual, auditory, kinesthetic multi-sensory teaching strategies; (r) providing alternate testing arrangements if necessary; (s) offering the LD student a note-taker or scribe to assist in writing notes; (t) considering lowering the course load; (u) promoting listening to taped notes as the student visually reads material; (v) encouraging students with tracking difficulty in reading to use a line guide (index card or folded sheet of

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paper under text) to read; (w) using serif, larger fonts, in text, without justifying margins, with headings that stand out; (x) avoiding fitting too much information onto a page; (y) allowing student(s) to audiotape lectures; and (z) encouraging dyslexic learners to visualize words. The list does not stop there, just because we ran out of the alphabet. It continues: (a) use discussion and brainstorming; (b) rotate methods when what one is doing is ineffective; (c) supply support services; (d) give lectures or book on tape; (e) okay the use of voice to text, or text to voice computer programs; (f) present an outline of the course at the beginning so learners can see the big picture; (g) print key words on blackboard instead of in cursive writing; (h) use advance organizers; (i) avoid asking a dyslexic student to read aloud; (j) provide printouts of power point slides; (k) assess written work for content rather than spelling; (l) use graphics and appropriate pictures to carve key words in memory; (m) encourage students to form study groups; (n) match an excelling student with one that is having difficulty; (o) test early in the course to help students understand testing methods and to diagnose their difficulties; (p) have LD learners sit in the front of the class; (q) give positive, creative, constructive feedback; (r) supply handout materials in advance with important points underscored or highlighted; (s) capitalize on the appropriate learning style of the LD student and use an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); (t) keep an open-minded approach to all students; (u) help students develop a plan for organizing material and acquiring needed study skills; (v) provide accommodations as appropriate to place LD students on equal ground with other learners; (w) establish routine, structure, and predictability; (x) distribute syllabus early so LD learners can get a head-start on reading and studying during break; (y) write outline on board so students can follow through what will be happening that day; and (z) allow LD learners to take an oral or taped examination.

Those whose mother tongue is not the one in which the course is taught may encounter reading difficulties similar to those experienced by students with learning disabilities. Creating, applying and utilizing universal design principles, along with many of the strategies listed above for teaching LD students actually assist those with or without learning disabilities. Many of these techniques are useful in a cross-cultural context, even without the consideration of learning problems. Simple and clear language would be beneficial for all. This point was illustrated by Farnfield (2003), "The best way to teach dyslexic learners is the best way to teach the whole class" (1).

Facilitating and Mentoring Unique Learners in Distance Education

Distance education is speedily becoming the educational trademark of the twenty-first century. It provides instruction for students outside the conventional classroom and allows a local Bible college to have a global reach; fulfilling the Great Commission. It is a timely response to globalization, the shrinking global village, and our present electronic, information age. Distance education is for anytime, anywhere, and anyone, including students with learning disabilities.

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The quality of distance education is determined by the quality of the instructional design, not merely by the delivery system used. A priority in any delivery system is not the technology or methodology used, but understanding the instructional needs, and expected outcomes for our students. A team of experts consisting of content specialists, instructional design specialists, and media consultants can produce top-notch educational content. Planning for those with learning disabilities is much easier, up-front, rather than figuring out various accommodation strategies once a LD student has enrolled. Courses should be developed with “universal design” in mind to be used by all people, to the greatest degree possible, without undue alteration. “Just as architects design buildings used by everyone, including those who use wheelchairs, distance learning designers should create learning environments that allow all potential students...to access course content and fully participate in activities” (Burgstahler 2008, 4).

In the two-thirds, developing world, computers are not readily accessible, and internet speed is slow. Bible schools can set up interactive classrooms or community centers where students come and take advantage of more advanced technology. Print and non-print resources could be used including: textbooks, workbooks, study guides, Internet research, CD/DVDs, asynchronous studies, and satellite or extension schools.

To effectively mentor or teach distance education students with learning disabilities one could:

- (a) utilize speech output or screen enlargement devices;
- (b) provide audio taped books;
- (c) supply textbooks in alternate formats;
- (d) permit accommodation requests for appropriate extension on exam times;
- (e) make oneself available for clarification of items read or heard;
- (f) cultivate open communication where students will feel comfortable disclosing learning disabilities;
- (g) set up a chat room for dyslexic students (having trouble with words) that may feel timid in expressing ideas in writing;
- (h) provide asynchronous courses more appropriate to some LD students to allow time for reflection and clarification;
- (i) incorporate closed captions on videos;
- (j) modify line lengths
- (k) give a transcript of video content;
- (l) provide course content in various media formats;
- (m) create easily accessible web pages;
- (n) permit magnification of the text;
- (o) make language simple, clear, straightforward;
- (p) use consistent, uncomplicated screen layouts;
- (q) avoid pop-ups;
- (r) provide information in sound and print;
- (s) keep colors and fonts plain;
- (t) use high contrast background;
- (u) dodge the use of distracting flashing items;
- (v) chunk information into digestible segments;
- (w) provide explanation of complex words;
- (x) avoid crowded text, hyperlinks and graphics;
- (y) give comprehensible and detailed, step-by-step instructions; and
- (z) as a last choice, assign a tutor to work with the student.

Being a good mentor requires character, capabilities, confidence, competence, and commitment. Mentoring is an intentional investment in the next generation. This includes, but is not limited to, students with learning disabilities, disorders, differences or difficulties. Mentoring LD students in distance education is pivotal. They certainly qualify for the term; “non-traditional” students. Their success is predicated on suitable counsel and mentoring. It is important to create

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an environment where the LD student feels comfortable disclosing his disabilities. We frequently cannot see the learning barriers a LD student has. So, such students need to feel a sense of safety and self-confidence to ask for help and to explain one's disability and the resultant characteristics, strengths, learning styles, and accommodations required.

Mentors should be: (a) patient; (b) generous in praise; (c) understanding; (d) non-judgmental; (e) observant; (f) careful listeners; (g) helping students determine strengths and weaknesses; (h) uncovering roadblocks in goal achievement; (i) motivating; (j) encouraging moral growth; (k) instilling values; (l) building on student's strengths; (m) promoting exchange of ideas; (n) using one's abilities to help others succeed; (o) getting to know their students; (p) communicating in a timely manner; (q) providing feedback, evaluation and grading within twenty-four hours if possible, or sending an acknowledging note; (r) positive, proactive, and professional in communication; (s) caring; (t) specific about feedback; (u) pointing students to supplemental, growth-oriented materials; (v) providing a profile of oneself so the protégé will understand the mentor better; and (w) knowing a student's success defines a mentor's success.

Facilitating and Mentoring Unique Learners in Response to Ethics

Ensuring that LD students participate in distance education (or in a traditional classroom setting) can be argued on ethical grounds. It is the right thing to do. "People with disabilities desire to celebrate the rights and obligations of their faith just like everyone else" (Anderson 2003, 7).

Teachers have the ethical concern of how to balance the rights of LD students with the academic integrity and standard of the course. Fair and equal services; and an adequate learning environment must be provided for all. Educators ensure equal educational opportunities without compromising the academic integrity or standard of their class or college. The potential of each and every student must be nurtured. The mentor of LD students should inform other teachers and administration of the unique needs of each individual learner and the best practices available for dealing with the disorder or difficulty. Documentation of past history of the learning disorder should be provided. One must carefully comply with the school's policies to ensure that accommodations given are authorized (Mott 2004, 1-7).

The question beckons to be asked: What are appropriate accommodations in this learning setting? Other questions—not necessarily restricted to LD students—that need asking are: (a) Am I basing my decision on sound biblical principles? (b) Are my practices congruent with institutional and personal values? (c) What is my motivation or intention with the decision reached or about to be reached in this ethical dilemma? (d) How well can I separate a relationship with a student from the evaluation of the same student? (e) What is the ethical

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problem and which value or element of code of conduct can assist me in making a professional judgment?

Conculsion

Unique learners have the ethical right to equal educational opportunities. They should equally be welcome to take their seat in our Bible school classrooms, or to access and be involved in our distance education programs. It is the appropriate, expected response to the Great Commission, "Therefore go and make disciples of all..." (Matthew 28:19).

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Lesson in Review

Name: _____

Nation: _____ Date: _____

1. What may be one of the world's largest multicultural minorities?

2. What may be some common signs of learning problems?

3. What is the 'paramount first step' in helping students with learning difficulties?

4. From the list of teaching strategies a teacher can use when dealing with students with learning disabilities, what are a few of them that you could easily implement?

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5. What is the quality of distance education determined by?

6. To effectively mentor or teach distance education students, what are some of the techniques that you can visualize yourself using? (refer to the list in your notes)

7. What does being a good 'mentor' require?

8. What are some of the qualities of a good mentor that you see as strengths in your teaching ministry? (refer to the list in your notes)

What are some areas of weakness that you can improve in?

9. What is the ethical concern in teaching students with disabilities?

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