Tutoring the Learning Disabled Student in a University Writing Center

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Working with Sue: Profile of a Learning Disabled Student Entering College

by Sara Baumhover

At the beginning of the spring semester, 1987, I was given a routine notice that I would be working with a new student on an on-going basis. The referral in her folder said that she had extensive problems with writing and would need some extra help. I had been working in our college writing lab, the Center for Academic Achievement, for three-and-a-half years, so I wasn’t exactly intimidated by this information. I was more curious as to what kinds of help this student would need, and whether or not I could give them to her.

When Sue came to our office, she was a first semester freshman. She had been diagnosed in kindergarten as learning disabled and had attended special education classes until tenth grade. Halfway through that year the school decided that she no longer needed to take any special education classes. The only special education she received after that was speech therapy in twelfth grade. Besides the “remedial” type of education that she had been receiving, she was also in a writing class within the talented and gifted program. (It is not unusual for certain students to be both learning disabled and gifted.) Sue is a bright person and her writing shows unusual insight—even though everything may not be spelled correctly. Her teachers felt that she would benefit from the opportunity to share her work with other writers. Sue has always enjoyed being with people. Her dream after high school was to become a teacher, so that she could work with special learners like herself. She felt that she could understand what they were going through and would be able to help them learn. The school counselor and psychologist, however, felt this to be an unrealistic goal.

I did not know any of Sue’s background the first time I met with her in a tutorial. I did not find out that she was LD until after we had met a few times. I did know that Sue was referred to us by the instructor of her basic writing class (non-college credit). The instructor felt, and I agreed, that Sue would need extensive work on her writing. I feel that to learn to write a person has to write. And that’s exactly what we did. The first time we were together, we both did some freewriting. Two sessions later Sue brought in a personal narrative. She also started keeping a journal for me, besides keeping a journal and writing papers for her class.

Sue explained to me that for the type of journal she was keeping for her English class, the main requirement was the number of pages. I explained that the type of journal which I wanted her to keep for me was called a dialogue journal, and it was going to be different from other journals. Rather than have Sue writing pages for me to count, I wanted her to write about anything that she wanted to, then bring it to the tutorial, and I would respond in writing. It was an opportunity for us to hold a conversation in writing, and I responded with comments and questions, or accounts of my own experiences, just as in verbal conversation. The dialogue journal also gave Sue plenty of writing practice. She began to bring in page after page of description of what she had done over the weekend, bets that she had made with her brother, or questions that she had about school. I responded using a modeling technique. Whenever she used a word or phrase incorrectly, I would use that same word or phrase correctly, without ever pointing it out to her. I never talked about grammar when responding to her journal entries. Instead I discussed her ideas.

Besides the obvious advantage of having an opportunity to approach writing in an explorative, non-threatening way, the dialogue journal has other advantages as well. For one, it allows a student to directly experience the communicative aspect of writing. She has a concrete audience which provides direct responses to her ideas. It gives her the feeling that someone is really listening, rather than just counting pages. A second advantage is the opportunity to ask questions. Often in a class setting, a student can easily feel intimidated when it comes to asking questions. If that student can write to the teacher, and get an answer in her journal, she will be much more apt to ask questions. Also, the teacher gains an understanding of how well the students are picking up the material covered in class. If there is something being misunderstood, the teacher can see exactly where the breakdown occurs by reading what the student has written. A third advantage is that the teacher can act as a stimulus and encourage further writing. She does this by asking questions, suggesting alternate viewpoints, or occasionally playing the role of devil’s advocate. One final advantage cannot be measured by any type of test or grade scale. It pertains to the growth of the individual within the student. Within the pages of the journal the student has an opportunity to give order to her world by way of the written word. Having to define one’s experiences and trying to make sense of them through putting them down in words forces one to categorize, analyze, and generally figure out what is going on. It is a way of thinking critically that helps an individual with many aspects of life.

As I mentioned at the beginning, dialogue journals provide a chance to experience the fun, explorative side of writing. Sue really took off with
this activity. She had fun telling me about everything that was going on in the life of Sue. She once gave me 15 pages of writing to respond to. I felt as though I had created a writing Frankensteinian monster.

To illustrate Sue's willingness to write, I have included the following example, which is one of her first journal entries. I have underlined the phrases which I used in my response to her, although I never underlined any of her writing or any part of my responses when working with her.

**Friday**

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**March 31, 1987**

**What a weekend! Friday night Sue surprised me with a phone call. She said that I didn't have to babysit! So, I just stayed home that night. Then about 8:30 Saturday morning, another lady called and wanted me to babysit from 9:30 until 4:30. I said yes, even if her children had the chicken pox! I made about 10 dollars that day and about $300 today. I just did my history a little bit ago. It's really funny reading about the past. I'm all up to date on my notes and want to know more. I will do after school tomorrow. I will have about 1/2 days to study for my history test. That will be fun, but I'm doing things a lot more different this time. I'm doing my work and it was so easy to do, like the last time.

**Sara Baumhover**

The next excerpt is my response to Sue. In this reply I have underlined the words and phrases that correspond to the words that I have underlined and used from Sue's entry. It wasn't always easy to use the same words that Sue had used. At first I responded without using anything she had written. Gradually I learned how to use a modeling technique to change her words into questions, or use them when relating to my own experiences. I also tried using the modeling technique when we talked. That proved to be extremely difficult, as well as unnatural. I didn't try it for long. However, I did stick with the journals, and after a few months I saw quite an improvement in Sue's writing.

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**Sunday**

**March 31, 1987**

So, you had another interesting weekend. You were supposed to watch the kids of the lady at the end of the street, (are you hurt anybody in the middle of the street? What kidding?) but you didn't have to babysit after all. I just got another phone call Wednesday morning, another lady called and wanted me to babysit from 9:30 until 4:30. I was a little dumbfounded because they gave me chicken pox! I didn't go. I was feeling sick, so I was able to go out to eat with my mom, and even go to the radio station in town. Sue was on the air for some type of interview. In any case, I remember best about it is that my younger sisters told me at work that I should go back to work. So, I was also on the radio.

Anyway, it's good that you were able to make some money. I hope you don't spend it all in one place. Please for one of our sessions together we could order a pizza or something. (I must be hungry, if I'm talking about pizza.)
Sue kept up all the individual work for about one month, writing pages and pages of journal entries and writing, proofreading, and rewriting drafts for each paper that she turned in for class and brought in to me. I felt privileged to see all the work Sue was doing. Teachers seldom have the opportunity to see how much or how little work students put into assignments outside of the classroom. For that reason they are forced to judge a student's work entirely on what gets handed in. Sue's teacher, who judged Sue's writing ability on the two or three papers that she had seen, felt that Sue was not a hard worker and told Sue that she would probably not pass the course. Sue was not ready to give up trying, however. About this time I suggested to Sue the idea of writing a letter to the editor. The subject that we had been discussing was the need for a learning specialist on our campus. Sue had strong feelings about this issue and was excited about writing the letter. She began by writing about it in her journal. I thought she could write about the letter, do a little brainstorming, and then be able to write an outline and a rough draft. I was wrong. Once we discussed the project, Sue was ready to approach it in her own way. She first wanted to collect more information, so she started talking to other special learners. She wrote to different colleges to see what kind of special programs they had. She went to a few libraries and researched articles. She started writing summaries of the articles. She wrote first, second, third, and fourth drafts of the summaries. She wrote five drafts of a set of questions for an interview and did a great job of interviewing a Student Services administrator at our university. Then, after six-and-a-half weeks of research, Sue wrote a first draft. After that it was only a week-and-a-half before she had a polished draft. The letter was printed in the school paper, and we were all incredibly proud. Sue had worked through her own personalized curriculum, one that was meaningful to her, and ended it all by being published. It was indeed quite an accomplishment.

I feel that one of the major reasons for Sue's success was that she did have a personalized curriculum. The subject of the letter was something in which she was personally involved. Also, she helped to generate the sources for her research.

The road to victory, however, was not paved for us. We laid the bricks one by one along the way. I'd like to share some of the strategies that we used as Sue built on the foundations of her reading/writing curriculum.

The dialogue journal was a place where Sue explored her thoughts, and where we didn't talk about grammar. It was with the narratives that we worked extensively on developing her proofreading skills. Each time Sue brought in a draft, I would have her read it aloud, and stop whenever she felt something was awkward or incorrect. With most students this works. With Sue there were a few problems. She would either read what wasn't on the page, or not read what was on the page. She would say walked, when she had written walk. So we began to go through and look for one item at a time. Each item we looked for she would write down, so that she could develop a proofreading list. It was sometimes tedious, and we often had to go over the same section again and again and again. But it was also rewarding as we both noticed Sue's improved ability to recognize errors. Each time she changed something I asked her to explain why. "Because I said so" was not a good enough reason. And I began to say so less and less, because if I didn't point something out, she would.

One approach I learned from Sue was her practice of using complicated words and phrases, even if she didn't know how they were spelled or punctuated. Her thoughts were not all in simple sentence structures or easy-to-spell words, so it was only appropriate that she practice using the words that best expressed her thoughts. Later she could go back and figure out what they were supposed to look like.

One positive side effect that I hadn't previously considered was the improvement in Sue's communication skills. She felt her ability to maintain eye contact was better since she had had someone to talk to one-on-one. Also, several people had told her that her speech was much improved from before she started coming to our office.

One other positive side effect I could not have foreseen was what I learned from Sue. It was easy to look at the surface of her writing and feel that Sue was immature, and to want to patronize or talk down to her. However, each time I talked to Sue I was reminded of how intelligent she is. It was a matter of helping her writing grow up to the level of her thoughts.

As an example of the maturation of Sue's writing, I include one final excerpt from her journal. This she wrote almost at the end of the semester. Although in the haste of composition, she leaves out a word or two, it shows that she can now write as well in the first draft as she used to write in the fourth and fifth drafts at the beginning of the semester. Her writing could easily be mistaken for that of a typical college student.

Sara Baumhover
After Sue's incredible improvement in the three months we worked together, I was very optimistic about her chances for success in college. However, at the end of the semester she had to go through a series of tests to determine her eligibility to obtain funding through the Vocational Rehabilitation Center. The results were not as optimistic as I had been. Although they found her to be friendly and outgoing, and a hard worker as far as academics, there were similarities between my observations and theirs. They felt, as had her high school counselors and psychologist, that college was a completely unrealistic goal for her. Their idea of a career for Sue was working at K-Mart the rest of her life. She was very discouraged about the whole situation, as was I. We went through several months of wondering what was going to happen. I was afraid that all the progress she had made, and all the skills she had developed, would not have the chance to develop any further. Then a short time ago I received some wonderful news. With the financial support from Vocational Rehabilitation, Sue will be starting back to school for the spring semester. Although I don't know if Sue will make it all the way to her goal of being a teacher, I at least know that she now has a chance to be challenged, to grow, and to pursue her dreams.