

The Work Around: How teaching with andragogical practices can normalize learning disabilities in education

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Abstract:

This chapter provides the author's own learning disabilities (LD) experiences as faculty director. It examines andragogy as the framework that helps the author to better ensure all of his students have opportunities to learn, regardless of who they are as learners. The chapter then presents an exploration of how and why the author applies the basic assumptions of andragogy to teaching his students to become peer educators at the oral communication center. It also addresses the role of disabilities in the interplay between the author and his students. The lens of Speaking Center (SC) citizenship became increasingly important for the author as the director in 2007, when the center moved from a space that had already outgrown into a smaller space in a newly constructed building. Andragogy's roots are in Germany and other European countries. In 1927 it was first introduced in the United States by Martha Anderson and Eduard Linderman (Davenport & Davenport, 1985).

Keywords: learning disabilities | andragogy | higher education | adult learning | pedagogy

Book Chapter:

Despite my success in academia, for most of my own education, learning was difficult. Until my early twenties, I most often felt like I did not belong as a learner. I got through the difficulties because I established habits of working hard, doing my best, finishing what I started, and never giving up. While “doing my best” became my mantra, it led to the development of what my family identifies as my genius: the work around. When this work around mentality is at play, I am essentially a creative, unstoppable force.

When my own learning was controlled by my educators, teaching and learning made little sense to me. I was part of a broken system; it simply did not work. I could not control my learning in ways they expected because of my learning disabilities (LDs). As my learning experiences became more hands-on and practical, learning became fun. This led to my having more control over my learning. Whenever I was given more responsibility for my own learning, I took advantage of it. By repositioning my LDs as assets, learning made sense to me, and I finally felt like I belonged.

As an engaged teacher, I believe that the learning is richer, and the student more willing to take chances, when taught in a supportive and caring way. I find learners are more satisfied when they experience an atmosphere of mutual purpose, mutual respect, and high levels of physiological ownership (engagement). The increased satisfaction leads learners to more willingly take on assignments/tasks and make a stronger commitment to learning. My students engage in the classroom and beyond because I provide them with opportunities to feel trusted and free, or safe, to speak out.

I want my students, and the students who come to the communication center where I work, to be productive and to feel like they belong. Andragogy, the art and science of helping adults learn, is the framework from which I design learning opportunities that honor who my students are as learners. Andragogy allows me to achieve the atmosphere of mutual purpose, mutual respect, and higher engagement that I seek in teaching and learning. As I see it, andragogy levels the field by providing everyone with opportunities to succeed and belong.

In this chapter, I first provide my own LD experiences as faculty director. Then I examine andragogy as the framework that helps me to better ensure all of my students have opportunities to learn, regardless of who they are as learners. I provide an exploration of how and why I apply the basic assumptions of andragogy to teaching my students to become peer educators at the oral communication center. I set myself in the heart of this exploration as I address the role of disabilities in the interplay between me and my students. I believe that self-reflection and personal narrative together are powerful forces in my own normalizing of disability in the classrooms. In a larger sense, I want to be a part of helping non-LD and LD teachers to normalize disabilities in all classrooms.

14.1 Leveraging the safety of a peer-learning space to disclose my own disabilities

At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's (UNCG) Speaking Center (SC), I work shoulder-to-shoulder with 45 undergraduate students, 3–4 graduate students, and 2 faculty peers. The mission of the SC is to support speakers in their ongoing process of becoming more confident and competent communicators through instruction, collaborative consultation, and feedback. When I first took on the role of faculty director in the SC's second year of operation, I recognized that I was charged with much responsibility, not the least of which was establishing a strong ethos for the center. It would be years before I realized that my center work, as the teacher, was actually about building and maintaining relationships with and the professional development of our graduate and undergraduate student employees. This allows the work not only to enhance student empowerment (Pensoneau-Conway & Romerhausen, 2012) of the

speakers we work with, but also the empowerment of our student staff. To that end, we can provide premium support to the whole student body, both speakers and peer-consultants.

Critical intervention is at the heart of the work we do at the SC. Peer educators have a dialogue with student-speakers about oral communication. This dialogue is free of both judgment and value statements. Throughout their time at this center, the peer educators learn much about themselves as communicators. My teaching does not end when the required 3-credit SC Theory and Practice course is over. Teachable moments lead to this space of radical pedagogy, where the intersection of knowledge and education challenge each of us to find new ways to best support both the learner and the [peer] educator. A colleague once encouraged me to embrace that “nothing is static in this environment” (W. Huddy, personal communication, 2003). I relish the opportunities to step into the fast-paced, sometimes-muddy situations presented in the SC. We find ways to thrive in the chaotic moments where paraprofessionals (who are students themselves) are charged with helping their peers.

This SC, however, is not just a site for critical intervention for our student speakers, but also for our student staff. It has a historical focus on social justice and positive social change. Our student staff is implored to educate themselves and other student staff on how to be better SC citizens toward each other, including how to be open and receptive to people who are different from them. This is done by asking students to utilize the tools they learn from the class, remaining judgment free while expanding their education and knowledge of the issues going on in the world. The SC shakes up student expectations for educational environments, where real-world skills meet real-world professional and interpersonal problems, with a charge to learn about others to better ensure the creation of a safe space for everyone.

The lens of SC citizenship became increasingly important for me as the director in 2007, when our center moved from a space that we had already outgrown into a smaller space in a newly constructed building. While space planning was completed before I stepped into this faculty-director role, I oversaw the move. The new space was exciting, but the move into a smaller space brought many challenges. One challenge that I did not anticipate was how my working with our student staff in such tight quarters would affect my health. In this smaller space, voices were amplified and proximity tightened. I was struggling to keep focus, get projects completed and stay calm, and at times, I would shut down in my office.

In one moment, near the end of that first year in the new space, I connected it all. One day we had a big problem with our digital recording technology. As we often use dialogue as a means of exploring problems, three of my students were working with me to figure out the source and solution. Eventually, the four of us were standing in front of a mid-size media cabinet in the corner of a small consultation room. It was a physically tight space, vocally loud, and I was feeling trapped. I sensed that I was on the verge of an angry outburst. Anger was certainly not how I wanted to react. Thankfully, I remembered it was the end of the work week, so I quickly dismissed the students early and promised to continue to work on the problem. After some time passed, I returned to the cabinet armed with the student’s observations and solved the problem.

After reflecting on the realization that the new space was unhealthy for me, coupled with a concern over my working relationship with a supervisor who regularly yelled at us, I sought

professional help in the form of talk therapy. Fortunately, I found a local psychotherapist whose work was rooted in Jung's ideas of individuals moving toward achieving a state of selfhood with a more humanist orientation. Her work combined traditional and cutting-edge techniques in aiding clients to achieve desired changes. This approach spoke to me, as my teaching philosophy affirms that everyone can learn. In the SC, my teaching was focused on meeting individuals where they are, helping them to set their own goals, and working to support their attainment of those goals. One goal was to carve out a safe space for me within my workplace.

A SC is to be a safe place where students working on an interpersonal, group, or public communication projects can get support. My therapist helped me to see that the SC can also be a safe place for me to be open and frank about my difficulties. In August, at our first staff training event, I publicly thanked the three students who helped me realize that I was having a difficult time, then I told my story; I told my students and staff that I have ADHD. After I shared, some students also shared their own experiences with LDs. In the following weeks and months, student staff started to feel more comfortable sharing their own stories of difference. Moreover, the culture of the SC started shifting toward a more honest and safe space for students to be themselves.

Through the shared experience of my being overwhelmed and my disclosing to the bigger group, my SC student staff and I learned the value of sharing in both an educational and interpersonal setting. I have seen a dramatic shift in the way the SC operates, how my student staff interact with each other, and also how I interact with them. The SC is the only place on campus where I have disclosed my disability and where my disabilities are fully known. Since I started being open to my students about my disabilities, I have found that I am free to be my authentic self, and they are more freely exploring the intersection of disabilities and communication within their own lives. Moreover, I am free to explore how my LDs impact my teaching style while seeing first-hand how they impact my students on a daily basis.

14.2 Andragogy

Andragogy's roots are in Germany and other European countries. In 1927 it was first introduced in the United States by Martha Anderson and Eduard Linderman (Davenport & Davenport, 1985). In the 1980s, Malcolm Knowles popularized the concept of andragogy. For readers looking to understand a bit more of how andragogy relates to higher education, Chan (2010) provides an inventory of 10 European countries that adopted andragogy and a detailed account of how the disciplines of education, medicine, criminal justice, and management have utilized it. Most adult education theorists embrace the pedagogical theory of adult learning (Lawson, 2006) that is founded on five main assumptions: self-concept, motivation to learn, experience, readiness to learn, and orientation to learning and need to know.

I have molded my own teaching style around this framework because it best aligns with my own learning preferences. Due to my educational experience with LDs, I learned that I work best when presented with hands-on, practical, and creative learning opportunities. Similarly, andragogy allows students to work toward their solutions, rather than solely teacher-focused expectations. The andragogical framework allows students to learn without rigid guidelines and

expectations. Student success is not solely measured quantitatively, but also qualitatively through problem-solving, real-world experience, immediate application, and reflection.

The literature does not provide an agreed-upon definition as to what constitutes an adult learner, and andragogy has been the subject of considerable debate. Still, I see merit in using andragogy as a framework for all of my teaching because it offers a way for students to create their own solutions, no matter who they are as learners. I have seen first-hand how the five assumptions positively impact student learning, both students with and without LDs. The exploration of these major assumptions, first through my own learning journey and then through the applications I use with my students, will illuminate the direct impacts andragogy can have on student learning.

14.2.1 Andragogy's five major assumptions

14.2.1.1 Self-concept

As a college student with LDs, I initially found school work to be especially challenging. I started to thrive as more of my coursework gave me room to be autonomous, self-directed, and independent. As an adult learner, my increased maturity, over that of my high school self, allowed a shift from being totally dependent upon a teacher to increasing self-directedness. I am convinced that all college students benefit when faculty members find ways to leverage this increased maturity and give students opportunities to develop the capacity for self-direction. My own educational experiences showcase how an allowance for self-direction positively impacts student learning.

After high school graduation, I set my sights on the community college where I especially worried about developing math and reading competencies. As a first-generation college student, one with undiagnosed LDs no less, I was not prepared academically, but I did my best and succeeded. Although my exam scores were never great in college, I took advantage of on-campus opportunities to learn better test-taking strategies. I did the same for reading and improved, but my rate is still very slow today. I did well in my composition and audio production courses because I could pick my topics and tell stories. I have difficulty indexing between what I am supposed to do and what I have already done. The work around I learned on my own was to make lists and post reminders everywhere—dry-erase marker comments on the bathroom mirror, sticky notes on the car dashboard and exit door of the house, etc. With these learning strategies and coping devices, I was succeeding.

As a result of my learning difficulties, I was without college preparatory classes when I arrived at college. I was on my own to find and take advantage of the support that was offered to students. As the resources propelled me to be a stronger student, I became more self-directed in my education. That self-direction coupled with increased maturity allowed me to earn both associate's and bachelor's degrees three years after high school.

In my own teaching, I am constantly looking for opportunities to let my students determine how they will complete units in the course by giving them options and remaining flexible as they come to me with problems, solutions, exceptions, and alternative ideas. For example, when graduate students enrolled in my oral communication course were charged with researching an

issue with local application in Greensboro, they would instead often come to class having researched an issue local to their own town or the town they plan to move to after they complete the degree. Another example is when I challenge the students in my undergraduate internship course with the creation of their own course calendar.

I recognize that students frequently come to our campus having not yet learned what they need to know to succeed. I am quick to refer them to support offices around campus and tell them stories of my past students who have utilized these services successfully in the past. I also follow up after a referral because being self-directed is something they are likely still learning to do.

Through pushing students toward self-directed educational pursuits, I have watched other students succeed similarly to how I did in my earlier education. This is especially important for students with LDs, as allowing them to mold the course work toward their individual needs creates a space where they can participate and learn both autonomously and simultaneously with the rest of the students around them.

14.2.1.2 Motivation to learn

As I matured into a thriving college student, my motivation to learn shifted from external to internal. My internal factors included finding ways to make the educational system, which is not set up for people with LDs, work for me, developing on the desire to succeed, finishing what I started, and most of all, doing my best. These factors pushed me into graduate school. Now I want for my students to recognize their own internal motivations as they seek to better understand themselves as communicators, peer educators, and lifelong learners.

One pivotal moment in graduate school was when a professor, who had taught me in a communication studies undergraduate course, recognized the discrepancy between a difference in my performance in her grad class versus my test taking. She recommended that I talk with the people in the disabilities support office on campus, who referred me for testing. I wanted to make this system work, and so I willingly underwent the testing. The most helpful test finding to me was a significant discrepancy between verbal and performance IQ scores. The test results determined I had learning disabilities in math and written language, making me eligible for reasonable accommodations and helping me begin to have a better understanding of myself as a learner.

I immediately confronted discrimination from a person who had power over me in my student role. I was told that LDs do not exist and that they were instead a crutch to lean on. All people with LDs were lumped into a single negative category and removed of their identity. Kordoutis, Kolaitis, Perakis, Papanikolopoulou, and Tsiantis (1995) call this a categorization attitude in which a person with LD is not seen as an individual. To escape the discrimination and the related stress, I determined to finish the program fast and completed my Master's in 12 months.

My motivation to learn and finish was stronger than my motivation to have the help I deserved. Due to the discrimination, I never requested any reasonable accommodations that would have benefitted me greatly; that is, until it was time for the comprehensive examination. I requested my rightful and reasonable accommodations knowing that most of the comps would measure my

learning only by memory-based testing. For example, the comps required that I memorize 200 definitions to prepare for a vocabulary test on just 12 of them. I knew I had to leverage all of my resources and push back—a lot!—to receive approval to use a computer for three essays and extended time for the vocabulary. I would not have completed the comprehensive exam without the accommodations.

After comps, the person who previously told me that LDs do not exist stated that I passed; however, she noted that I was not processing what I was learning at the same level as my peers. Although she had previously rejected the term LD, she had now acknowledged my LD in describing me. She would never know that the Office of Disability Support was on the verge of contacting the Office of Equal Rights (OER) in Washington, DC, on my behalf. My health had suffered, but I did my best, finished what I started, avoided an OER complaint, and entered the job market.

My own internal motivators gave me courage to go back to school. I returned because I wanted to teach college students to be more confident and competent oral communicators. While I did not expect the barriers I faced, I surely knew it would not be easy to obtain the degree. Even in the face of discrimination, I worked my hardest to succeed, tried to get the system that did not work for me to be more forgiving, and most of all, I did my best. My own students know me to be a teacher who works hard, does her best, and believes that everyone can learn. As a person with disabilities who has been discriminated against, I must do my best at trying to make learning work for everyone. Overall, I will fight for my students like no other faculty member they know. This is especially true should they be discriminated against.

For learners across the spectrum, finding internalized motivation to learn is incredibly powerful. For me, it allowed me to not only fast-track my degree, but also emboldened me to reach out and take hold of the accommodations that I deserved. In the face of discrimination, and now all of these years later, it is my internal motivation for knowledge that has kept me engaged in academia, and I strive to assist my students in finding, chasing, and holding on to their own motivations, rather than attach themselves to the external motivation of a grade or final in my course.

14.2.1.3 Experience

My own LDs have provided me with profound respect for the wealth of experiences that students bring with them into a learning situation and how these experiences provide a reservoir of resources for knowledge development and sharing with others. As a faculty member, I seek to tap into the lived contexts of my students as we explore speaking center studies. In doing so, I find it necessary to be over-prepared for course activities and discussion, and completely accepting of any possible outcome. I have learned to listen and engage with any and all connections that my students can make.

My own experiences as a student with LDs made experiential education very appealing to me and drew me to become an engaged educator. I want my students to have even more experiential teaching and learning opportunities. The SC staff's increasing comfort in discussing, engaging with, and learning from communication about disabilities and with people who have disabilities

inspired me to form a partnership with Peacehaven Community Farm. Since August of 2015, I have traveled 25 minutes east of campus on Friday afternoons with a small and changing group of my SC students to the 89-acre farm focused on growing more than just vegetables. The farm connects people with special needs to their community. We facilitate weekly oral communication learning modules rooted in SC pedagogy. Our participants are Peacehaven's four core members, who are adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

As my students work to develop and facilitate weekly modules, they draw from their own experiences. For many, this is the first time they have had the experience of communicating with a person who has intellectual or developmental disabilities. When a new student staff member joins us, those who are seasoned at this work lead amazing conversations to introduce the new person to each of the core member's needs as communicators and reassure them by entertaining questions and sharing personal stories from the farm.

This work is always led by one of our graduate assistants. The first graduate student working on the project had no teaching experience or training. What she did have was much SC experience, as well as familiarity living and communicating with people who have disabilities. It took a long time for this student to understand the process of developing a lesson with behavioral learning objectives and measurements that matched the objectives. I watched as she led our undergraduate team through weeks of messy lessons void of reflection and appropriate measurement. She drew on her experiences from the SC with mixed results. I saw her try out games from her childhood, activities from her experiences with UNCG's orientation program, and even some of what she learned in the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). After two years of working with us in the SC, she was recruited to be a teaching assistant in the communication studies department where she utilizes what she learned at the farm daily. She turned her time at Peacehaven into two course papers, both of which have been presented at academic conferences.

I formed this partnership with Peacehaven because I see value in providing my students with opportunities, outside of the work spaces in which they are familiar, to test their SC theory and practice while also developing themselves as individuals. I also ensure that everyone has a role to play during the sessions at Peacehaven. Doing so adds value to their lived experiences and gives them ownership of this work. That first graduate student who led activities at the farm often designed brilliant plans, yet it took some time for her to understand why she had the successes she had. She got there; she did it her way with my guidance alongside her. Her experiences at the farm, life experiences, and advancing in her graduate studies led her to great success.

Newton and Ender (2010) state that the best way to tap into experiential learning experiences is to "reflect on these moments directly and to share similar experiences with a group that you may be training with" (p. 11). Students engage in an intentional reflection in the car on the drive back to campus from the farm. I know that they are learning from these experiences and that they are drawing from past experiences along the way.

Thanks to these positive experiences and all we learned through them, and a diversity grant from the College of Arts and Sciences at UNCG, my teaching will soon include an SC program designed to support UNCG Spectrum (a new student group on campus comprised of students with autism) as well as other students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. We are

generally in alignment with the goal of Brockmann and Jeffress (2017) to “foster awareness of the dominant structure of ableism and how we function in it and often unknowingly reproduce it” (p. 203), as we seek to create understandings of how both visible and invisible disabilities challenge what our communication textbooks tell us is effective. At the same time, we help students conform to communication behavior “norms” when that is their goal. My student staff will be facilitating these sessions. Student leaders going forward will be those who were at the farm with me the previous semester. After fostering a safe place to dialogue about communicating and disabilities and many years of practice, we are now ready to leverage our experiences for this new opportunity.

By listening, accepting, and engaging with all student experiences, we are able to teach students things that we might not be able to in a non-reflective educational environment. Through tapping into the knowledge students have and experiences they are already invested in, they will be more engaged and interested. This is a helpful way to engage student with LDs, as it allows them to further grow and express their understanding of the world around them in meaningful and engaging ways.

14.2.1.4 Readiness to learn

My students do better when I take the time to explain to them *why* they need to learn something. As a person with disabilities, I have found that asking and answering that question can be a game changer. The answer to questions of why allow me to devise a work around. Students who are mature enough to be ready to learn are so because they perceive a need to know or learn something as it relates to a role they play (or desire to play in the future) in their lives. Adults are ready to learn what they think they need to know. My students are convinced that they need to know only after we have completely explored why and understand the value in the learning.

A work around often helps me brings students to the awareness of their need to learn something. For example, a few years back I was struggling with getting our student employees to stop the use of value statements both in written and spoken form during their consultations with patrons of the SC. This is a problem for communication center work because the goal of the work is to remain a place where student speakers can find judgment and value-statement-free support. Somehow my students had gotten the idea that the word “effective” was without value. I found myself faced with having to retrain simultaneously our staff while also teaching the students currently enrolled in my theory and practice course about what constitutes a value statement. In the classroom, I was addressing the why with success, but back in the center, I was facing resistance to change.

In the classroom, students wanted to know what alternatives they had to value statements. They were ready to learn because they were essentially in training to become consultants. The student employees at the SC, however, were not ready to learn, partly because they saw no reason. They wanted to continue to do what they had been doing. With leadership from a graduate assistant with an MA in rhetoric and experience working at a writing center, an online module designed to teach the use of descriptive language was launched, and the student employees were compensated to participate in this retraining. What followed was an undergraduate student-led movement to make regular use of descriptive language more attainable by the whole staff. This

happened because a few of our student employees saw value in this shift, and they were willing to help the rest to become ready to learn as well.

As a person with LDs, I regularly ask myself, “What can I do differently in this situation?” That question is the motivation behind my work around. In the case of getting the students to shift from value to descriptive language, I came to realize that I should utilize a resource, the graduate student, as the expert. She was willing to do this work because she saw value for her own professional development, which included a future manuscript for publication. She was ready to learn. For the undergraduates, we got the right students on board, then coached and supported them in their efforts to get others to become ready to learn. Students who still did not get the reason why the shift was important were referred to an ally concurrently working in both the SC and the writing center. Once he got them to understand the why, he naturally shifted the conversations to descriptive language. He was mature enough to see the merit in helping to get others ready to learn. We never even had to ask him to do this; it came naturally. In this instance, I was able to utilize student educators to instill and inspire a readiness to learn in the rest of our students. When everyone was able to identify their own personal “why,” the transition to descriptive language was attainable because everyone was able to see the value of the change.

My own position toward learning has always related to solving problems, being task-oriented, and focused on real-life right-now issues. Future use has never been much of a reason to learn. As a result, I privilege giving my SC students immediate application. My entire Speaking Center Theory and Practice course was developed around this notion.

I had a student in my class who presented me with many growth opportunities. I went into the semester knowing that he would be challenged but believing that he would make it with the full support of our student staff. He got every bit of that support. We gave him every opportunity. He had the same hands-on training and coursework as everyone else. He was invited to pick up extra hours in the SC to benefit from additional learning opportunities. When he took us up on that offer, I assigned him to work the extra hours with our graduate assistants and faculty coordinator. In the end, he just was not able to complete all of the tasks. He could do some things really well but not others.

He finished all but one aspect of the coursework, that being the competency to do all types of consultations alone. The course design includes multiple opportunities to demonstrate communication consultant competencies and the capacity to complete tasks. The tasks are real hands-on exercises and applications set in the SC. Although he passed the course, he was not approved to do solo consultations by the end of the semester. One thing is for sure, he was eager to grow and motivated to become a communication consultant, but he was also filled with self-doubt; he asked far more questions than any other students I have had in the class.

It was looking like this would be my first true failure at teaching a student with LDs. I simply cannot hire a student who cannot do the work. Instead of sending him away, I offered him the opportunity to participate in our summer internship program. This would involve an additional for-credit professional development opportunity. He was not guaranteed a position at the close of the summer program. He was assured that he would be given every opportunity to develop, and if he was able to do every type of consultation alone by the end of the program, I would be in a

position to hire him for the fall. If he could not, he would be leaving us in good standing having successfully completed our internship program.

He took full advantage of this offer when he enrolled in my 10-week hands-on academic study internship program. We gave him many new learning experiences, including designing part of a lesson for Peacehaven Farm and regular opportunities to facilitate activities when we were at Peacehaven. We arranged for active shooter training for our summer staff specifically to help him with his self-doubt, and we gave him a project to complete on his own. We saw professional development through the summer program. He took on tasks, and his satisfaction in himself increased. He believed in himself more at the end of the summer than at the start. However, he was still not able to perform all of the tasks necessary of a consultant.

I grow from the experiences I have with every student. I believe the biggest gifts that I have gained from my own experiences as a person with LDs are increased empathy for and tolerance of others. I further believe that these gifts translate into increased student satisfaction in my classrooms and the speaking center. I find that increased student satisfaction, in turn, leads to more willingly taking on assignments/tasks and stronger commitment to the process of learning itself. My students engage in the classroom and beyond because they know I trust them and they feel empowered to speak out.

In teaching that student who successfully completed our summer internship program, his LDs taught me about some flaws in how I designed my theory and practice course. I thought his learning style and needs would be supported through my course design, but I discovered some opportunities for course redevelopment and re-evaluated my definition of testing in some of the task areas. I also found opportunities to be even more empathetic and accepting. In the end, he was not completing the “going solo” checklist at the same rate as his peers. While the students in the course move through that list at their own pace, some must be completed in sequence with associated deadlines. When the student came to speak with me, I came to realize that this checklist was in essence a test, and I came to believe that since the student is entitled to extended in-class test time, he should be given additional time for completion of the checklist. Even with the additional time, in this case, unfortunately, he was unable to finish the checklist as the semester ended.

Without my personal experience as a learner with LDs, I may have had a more difficult time fully understanding this student and his experiences. By utilizing an andragogical philosophy, educators with and without LDs are able to become more reflective practitioners to create and allow learners of all kinds to find paths to success.

14.3 Lessons learned

One lesson I have learned from my experiences of teaching with LDs is that students are more open to address their own differences and to accept others when teachers express and share differences themselves. My niece recently found this to be true on her first day as a seventh grade science teacher. She wrote in her blog:

I told my students that reading and writing is difficult for me, but that I loved school. I then advanced to the next slide revealing the text that read I have dyslexia. I heard a few gasps but before I could even begin to explain one of my students stood up in front of her class with a big smile on her face and proudly said “me too” to the whole class. (Schaffer, 2017)

This example flows throughout all academia, as I have seen students with a spectrum of differences feel included and engaged when they realize other learners, their peers, and educators are also like them.

A second lesson comes as a result of my choice to be open with my students about my LDs; I have seen that once some differences are accepted, all differences are accepted. This has played out in every imaginable way at the SC. Difference is simply not an obstacle to my students, because differences are shared and celebrated by everyone in my classroom and at the SC.

Finally, I have come to understand that teachers with LDs on college campuses are a hidden minority. More support for faculty with LDs is needed. We would benefit from the same support that students with LDs are eligible for on campus. It would be wise for campuses to invest in the successes of their LD faculty by providing more support or more open communication about support already available to faculty. I personally would benefit from access to adaptive technologies.

14.4 Conclusion

Through writing this chapter, I have realized that teaching with disabilities offers unique ways for me to be my authentic self. I hope the insights I have shared through the lenses of a learner and educator with LD and ADHD promote understanding and a motivation to continue examining the challenges and opportunities for both students and teachers in higher education.

As it relates to my academic discipline, I agree with Jeffress (2017) that “because disability is an integral part of identity and intersects with theories, principles and practices of communication on many levels, the possibilities abound to make interdisciplinary connections between disability studies and communication studies” (p. xv). This chapter is an effort to add one such connection.

As I stated at the start of this chapter, I believe that self-reflection and personal narrative together are powerful forces in my own normalizing of disability in the classroom. I hope that this chapter helps teachers with and without LDs to see that they can normalize disabilities in all classrooms by sharing their own stories of differences and creating a space where students can know and be known.

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