

Retaining the Struggling Adult Learner

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Abstract

As a goal of higher education, faculty and staff members can aid in retention of both the struggling and non-struggling adult learners by integrating a few simple practices into their interactions with students. The approach begins with understanding that this population has identifiable characteristics. Since childhood, their learning struggles and confidence levels may have been undermined. Many are right-brained, picture thinkers that do not learn by techniques that focus on standard instructional methods. By recognizing how these students learn and incorporating some simple practices into how to interact with them, students will be free to become confident and successful learners. Application of these techniques will aid those who participate in face-to-face classes and in online formats. The recommendations suggested are designed to embolden this population of adult learners to be more confident and successful so

that they can accomplish their goals; and also have the outcome of better retention.

Overview

“As many as 15–20% of the population as a whole, have some form of dyslexia” according to the American Dyslexia Association (Bardsley, 2015, para. 1); yet it is imperative to understand that they are bright learners. According to Davis (2010), “Dyslexia is the result of a perceptual talent. In some situations, the talent becomes a liability. The individual doesn’t realize this is happening because use of the talent has become integrated into the thought process. It began very early in life and by now it seems as natural as breathing” (Davis, 2010, p. 6). Adult students already have ample challenges (family, jobs, finances, etc.) and to add the strain of a learning difference only complicates matters. Since student retention can be associated with the ability to process information and sustain attention, providing understanding support and techniques for faculty and staff to support different learners can enable students to be successful and will ultimately improve retention rates.

Review of the Literature

Currently, a large portion of the adult population struggles with processing information. Educators in higher education must understand these conditions, and then find and implement strategies so that affected students can be more successful in the classroom. Students who struggle with processing information typically have common elements. Picture-thinking speed is approximately a thousand times faster than word thinking. Where the average brain processes at thirty-two pictures/second; word thinking is at a mere one hundred to two hundred words per minute. According to the Mayo Clinic, “Dyslexia symptoms in adults are similar to those in children” (Smarter, n.d., para. 3). Since childhood, they were told they were slow, lazy, or that they did not try hard enough. Perhaps even worse, they were placed in inadequate, “slow” reading groups, adding to the stigma and providing a message that they were unlikely to be successful as adult learners. All of these elements add up to a loss of self-confidence, which

eventually leads to feelings of rejection and isolation. As adults, they often work at jobs where they can hide their difficulties from coworkers.

Although they are easily frustrated at tasks in which they have to use sequential skills, they excel when it comes to using their visual-spatial/kinesthetic abilities. Commonly, they have difficulties with spelling, correct grammar/punctuation usage, concentration, clear handwriting, reading and speaking, reading out loud, note taking, time management, et cetera (The Dyslexia Center, 2016). Contrary to popular belief, language-processing issues are far more complex than the classic letter reversal problems; however, often dyslexics find it hard to recognize words without pictures such as “and” or “the.” To some, it appears as if the alphabet is dancing, wiggling, fading in/out, or more frustrating yet, lines seem to appear and disappear. Add to all this the usual challenges that all adults face such as long working hours, family difficulties, financial struggles, and it is understandable why many adult students do not persist in college. Heavy emphasis today is placed on identifying and helping our younger student population, but what about those adults who have slipped through the cracks?

Integration into the Student Experience

When students (who learn differently) are free to learn in an open and accepting atmosphere, they are more likely to be successful. It’s not a matter of catering to them, but instead it’s a matter of encouraging them to be the most successful that they can be. When students aren’t able to keep up, the stress that occurs creates a continuous downward spiral, and before you know it, they are dropping out of classes and eventually dropping out of their programs altogether. Implementation of the following techniques will aid higher education to retain struggling adult students:

1. Most individuals who struggle with processing information tend to be visual learners. Whenever possible, the practice of making pictorial analogies to make a point will enable understanding.
2. Mind mapping (a simple graphical way to represent ideas) (Litemind.com, n.d.) has proved to be helpful.
3. Since some adult learners experience mental images as reality, instructors who can make comparisons to something tangible in life will be more effective at improving understanding.

4. To reach the curious, intuitive, insightful, “out of the box” thinkers, voice modulation and expressive body language when speaking are useful for the struggling learners.
5. Because verbal dialogue can be confusing, explaining what you plan to convey to them would be a worthy goal at the beginning and at the end of a discussion.
6. Keep messages short and to the point. Break things down into chunks.
7. As much as possible, for handouts, e-mails and tests, usage of larger font sizes, bullet points, and colors will enable struggling students to receive clearer messages.
8. Summarize as often as possible.
9. For advisors, when it’s obvious that a student isn’t understanding a communication via e-mail, pick up the phone and call. Better yet, have them stop by so that you can talk in person.
10. Coach instructors and staff about how to identify the signs of a struggling student so that the practice of more effective communication skills with their students can occur. Some identifiers are (LoGiudice, 2008, para. 1–4):
 - a. Has problems passing tests (SAT, ACT, WEST-B, NES, etc.), which can immobilize them from continuing on with their dream careers
 - b. Will often state that they learn best by doing
 - c. Often avoid reading out loud
 - d. Might talk about struggling in school while growing up
 - e. Loud noises can pull them off the tasks at hand
 - f. Are embarrassed about previous poor grades
 - g. Know what they want to say but often have problems verbalizing it clearly for others
 - h. May appear to be understanding verbal communication, but later it is revealed that they did not understand
 - i. Can often appear confused in stressful situations
 - j. Often unable to show steps of math problems on paper, but can come up with correct answers
 - k. Sometimes totally dependent on calculators or counting on fingers
 - l. Can be consistently late or obsessively early and struggle with estimating the passing of time
 - m. Often dependent on spouses/parents/friends to write papers for them
11. If a student has revealed that he/she has any type of learning disability, ask them if they have checked into receiving accommodations provided by the university.
12. Dyslexia tests—“these days most schools and colleges have made it mandatory for every student to take a dyslexia test. This helps the management to identify those with dyslexia and provide them with proper support and encouragement” (The Dyslexia Center, 2016, para. 11). A quick unofficial test for dyslexia can be found at the following link (www.testdyslexia.com). An official diagnosis can be obtained by finding an educational psychologist, neuropsychologist, or other learning disability specialist.
13. Encourage these individuals to learn relaxation techniques—such as those used in the Davis method (Davis, 2010).
14. Seeking outside help for dyslexia or other learning disabilities should be encouraged.

The strategies outlined above can best be used in a face-to-face classroom setting, but awareness of these techniques can help students taking classes online as well. Specifically this would be when dealing with discussion boards, e-mails to students, phone calls, et cetera.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

In the quest to determine how to help adult students be successful, it is imperative to understand that they are all learning-abled people. Studies have shown that brain scans of the left and right hemispheres of the brain in a “normal” reader show activation in the left hemisphere (often referred to as the *reading pathway* in the brain). In comparison, the brain scans of students who struggle with processing information (such as those who deal with dyslexia) have greater activation in the right side of the brain during reading. This is the part of the brain that they use to read. Many methods created to assist right-brain readers aim to activate or strengthen the left side, but the best method for working with them is an approach that harnesses the already active pathway in the right side of the brain

(Marshall, 2003). Instead of using rote memorization and drills, these students need to use their unique picture-thinking abilities to get at the root cause of the learning difficulty and correct it by using the natural strengths and talents of their personal learning style.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

It's exciting to see how attitudes and proven practices are beginning to shift with regards to those who struggle with serious learning disabilities, including dyslexia. Advisors have been learning how to craft e-mails so that learning disabled students and non-LD students can have better understanding. Implementing the usage of bullet points, larger font sizes, and recrafting of e-mails by some of the advisors has enhanced student comprehension. By incorporating such practices as making student communications more succinct, a better understanding is created for the students.

"As many as one in five students may have dyslexia, but not all of these students receive adequate help" (Bardsley, 2015, para. 11). As discussed earlier, those with dyslexia are gifted. According to Davis (2010), "Dyslexics don't all develop the same gifts, but they do have certain mental functions in common. Here are the basic abilities all dyslexics share" (p. 4):

1. They can utilize the brain's ability to alter and create perceptions (the primary ability).
2. They are highly aware of the environment.
3. They are more curious than average.
4. They think mainly in pictures instead of words.
5. They think and perceive multi-dimensionally (using all the senses).
6. They can experience thought as reality.
7. They have vivid imaginations.

If higher education faculty and staff can learn how struggling learners think, then all will begin to serve them more effectively. By incorporating just a few of the techniques discussed, it could change how institutions work with these adults with the goal of maintaining student retention of a significant portion of the attending adult student population.

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