

“Best Practices for Students with Disabilities Make for Best Teaching/Tutoring Practices”

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Using Low-Stakes Writing Assignments as Opportunities to Bridge Thinking Gaps

Very often, students with disabilities (as well as students without disabilities) struggle with writing not because of writing problems, but because of thinking problems. While their command of Standard Written English might be average or above average, they nonetheless are unable to produce coherent, reasoned essays. Students with disabilities may particularly struggle with writing essays that require them to incorporate multiple points of view or a rhetorical conversation.

Dr. Stanley Greenspan, a psychiatrist known for his work in the field of autism spectrum disorders, identifies four higher levels of abstract thinking that individuals with ASDs (and without) may struggle to develop: multicausal or triangular thinking; gray-area thinking; judging according to an internal standard; and theory of mind. Developing these skills requires frequent opportunities to practice them. Frequent, informal writing assignments can be used to provide these opportunities.

Stage 1: Multicausal and triangular thinking

Multicausal thinking simply means the ability to understand “events as having multiple reasons for happening.”¹ Closely related, triangular thinking is the ability to identify multiple means to achieve a goal. For example, if one wants to get to 34th Street, but the Midtown Tunnel is closed, one could also take the 59th Street Bridge and cut down a cross street to reach 34th Street.

Possible assignments:

Instructor begins class by presenting the class with a discipline-specific problem and asks students to list or describe at least two methods to solve.

Students are assigned informal out-of-class writing assignments in which a discipline-specific limitation is imposed. Instructors should identify a common device or assumption students are likely to use to perform a task or solve a problem, and ask them to do so without that common assumption or device. For example, composition students might be asked to write a descriptive paragraph without using adverbs.

Stage 2: Gray-area thinking

Gray-area thinking requires the ability to think in complexities, to make “comparisons, often on more than one dimension.”² In order to develop gray-area thinking, students must be given not just the opportunity to compare facts or ideas, but must be challenged to think “about things in shades of gray.”³

Possible assignments:

Reading journals are used as a tool for students to compare different points of view. When course texts lend themselves to this, a standing prompt can be “Compare and contrast opinion A with opinion B. To what extent do you agree and disagree with each viewpoint. Why?”

Students are given articles by two authors who represent opposing viewpoints on a “gray area” relevant to the discipline. They are asked to identify the features of the authors’ ideas that are in opposition. They are then asked to identify common ground between the two viewpoints (for example, shared information or values).

A class blog is used as a site of debate. The class may be divided into two large groups, several small groups, or pairs. One or more “gray area” issue forms the basis of debate. One student or group of students initiates the debate by posting a position. Another student or student group posts an opposition reply. Each side offers a rebuttal acknowledging and responding to the “opponent.”

Stage 3: Judging According to an Internal Standard

At this level of thinking, the individual moves from evaluating objects or ideas to evaluating their own thinking. “This ability to evaluate oneself, one’s behavior, and one’s ideas against an internal standard, to have a longer view of a situation than the day-to-day of peer relationships, allows a person to judge her own thoughts, feelings, and biases. Even among adults this level of logical and reflective thinking is a rare commodity, because it is not easy to acquire.”⁴ Informal writing offers a unique opportunity for self-reflection and metacognition.

Possible assignments:

Reading journals are used as a tool for students to understand their own responses to a text. Students can be asked to first record their thoughts or feelings about a text, and then consider why they might have had these responses.

Students are asked to complete a “process analysis” of a course assignment. Students are asked to describe the steps they went through to complete the assignment (researching, drafts, etc.). Students are then asked to describe the aspect(s) of the assignment they are most satisfied with and why, and the aspect(s) they are least satisfied with and why. Finally, students are asked to consider what they would change if given additional time to complete the assignment.

Stage 4: Theory of Mind

Developing a theory of mind is essential for the kind of writing that is required at the college-level. Yet, students with and without disabilities struggle to write essays that reflect a theory of mind even

after a semester or two in college. Theory of mind “is an elaboration of the ability to think from an internal standard,”⁵ and requires the individual to be aware not only of her or her own ideas and feelings, but to understand that others also have feelings and ideas that may be different from one’s own. Theory of mind is the basis of advanced academic writing; students must be able to differentiate their viewpoint from one or more other viewpoints (secondary sources), to create a coherent “conversation” about an idea.

Possible assignments:

Reading journals are used to help students understand an author’s work as an extension of self. Prompts require students to consider an author’s background, history, or setting in relation to the text itself. Prompts are some version of the question: “Why does the author think/feel this way?”

Given a gray-area issue, students select a text that expresses a viewpoint different from their own. Students must then write a one-page defense of the opposing viewpoint, focusing on the valid assumptions, ideas, or information the author incorporates.

A blog or wiki is used to facilitate collaborative writing among small groups. The instructor identifies several short texts that offer a range of perspectives on a particular issue, and assigns students a writing order. The first student posts an explanation of his/her assigned text. The second student then posts an explanation of his/her assigned text and a brief analysis of its relation to the first. The remaining students (perhaps no more than four) also post explanations of their texts and brief explanations of their relations to the other texts. After each of the explanations have been posted, each student contributes an additional post describing his/her own viewpoint and describes his/her relationship to the texts.

General Notes about Bridging Thinking Gaps and Informal Writing

Informal writing does not require a response. Instructors may wish to skim informal assignments to monitor their students’ progress or diligence, but should not hesitate to assign informal writing for fear of overwhelming themselves with paperwork. Students will benefit from doing the writing regardless of whether they receive instructor feedback.

Instructors may find it beneficial to locate all informal student writing in one place (a blog, a wiki, a reading journal), rather than asking students to hand in assignments individually. This makes it easier to assess student progress over the semester.

Whenever possible, use topics that are highly emotionally motivating for students as the basis for informal assignments. “Almost everyone rises to his or her highest level of thinking in an emotionally charged situation.”⁶ Use the logical thinking skills developed in informal writing to build the bridge to unfamiliar or less personal course material.