

Kent A. Eaton, Bethel Seminary San Diego



Kent A. Eaton is associate dean at Bethel Seminary San Diego. His publications, which focus on interfaith and interconfessional dialogue and conflict in Spain and Latin America, include the forthcoming article in Fides et Historia, "A Voice of Reason amidst Christian and Islamic Jihad: Ramón Llull (1232–1316)." He is a member of the Religion and Disabilities Task Force.

My journey into disability concerns has been ongoing during most of my life as I worked in adaptive physical education and aquatics, later struggled in my attempts to grasp the implications of the disability issues faced within my own family, and consistently experienced rewarding friendships along the way with those who shared their lives and disabilities with me. Now as a seminary educator and administrator, it is ironic that my most personal and negative experience involving disability and religious studies should have taken place during my own seminary pilgrimage some twenty-five years ago. Having completed my first year of seminary, a longstanding battle with a deteriorating spinal injury finally required surgery. Six weeks after a double lumbar laminectomy and a spinal fusion, medical corset now firmly in place, I resumed my studies in the fall with this "temporary disability," which not only impeded mobility but also made sitting for long hours most painful. After my first class, I agonizingly became aware that supporting myself for two hours in the wooden chair was going to be more unbearable than the hour-long commute to school.

The logical solution to my dilemma was to approach the professor after that first class and ask to be reassigned to a seat on the back row so that I could stand and stretch as needed. Etched in my mind is his negative, bordering on degrading, response: standing to stretch during the study of Greek was a disruption to *his* class and not to be permitted. If I could not sit through class, I should not be in seminary and no accommodation would be forthcoming. There I stood, expecting to be included and embraced, perhaps even applauded for the extra effort to even be in class, but now excluded from the world of *regular* students.

Thankfully, the administrative structures of most universities and colleges now incorporate some form of student disability services so that situations as temporal as mine or as permanent as most can be addressed with reasonable accommodations, allowing for all students to experience success. In fact, the most important first step that can be taken in working with disabled students is to find out what services are available on one's campus. Depending on the size and resources of the institution, levels of service may differ greatly. The Office of Disability Services works with the student and the instructor to find ways in which the learning requirements for the class and degree program can be met by disabled students. Those services extend to students with learning disabilities, which are normally defined as a disorder that affects speaking, listening, reading, writing, spelling, or mathematical calculations. Some examples of these kinds of disabilities include dyslexia (problems in expressive or receptive, oral or written language), dyscalculia (barriers in doing arithmetic and grasping mathematical concepts), dysgraphia (difficulty in the formation of letters or writing within a defined space), and dyspraxia (troubles in a person's ability to make a controlled or coordinated physical response), as well as auditory, memory, and processing disabilities, which result in an impediment to understanding or remembering words or sounds because of the brain's failure to comprehend language correctly.

Learning disabilities are quite common. In the general population the estimate of those affected by learning disabilities ranges from 5 to 20 percent. These types of disabilities persist throughout life and present unique academic challenges. As noted by Eastwick Covington, "Educators must realize that a learning disability is not a disease, but a category that is useful to identify those who struggle to learn with traditional classroom techniques." (2004, 100). Understanding that a learning disability is not something to overcome through greater effort, the wise adult educator learns to follow the students, and to discuss with them a learning plan that will give them the strategies and skills needed to be successful in our class and beyond. After all, no one is better prepared to identify the accommodations necessary to perform the tasks required for an educational program than the disabled person himself. The end result is not unlike the intent of the Individualized Educational Program used in public education, which lists specific accommodations, communication needs, and the use of assistive technology devices, if any (IEP—Public Law 94–142, 1975).

The increasing number of disabled students accessing postsecondary education underscores the need for instructors to develop competencies in working with this population. While in 1978 only 2.6 percent of disabled students entered postsecondary programs, by 1996 that percentage had climbed to 19. Given trends in research, education, and public policy, one can safely conclude that the number of disabled postsecondary students will continue to rise and begin to approximate the 56 percent of students without disabilities who attend postsecondary institutions within the first two year of graduating from high school ("Research Finding Brief" 2000). The continuing trend of inclusion of learning disabled students may be due to a more

level playing field than in the past. Factors contributing to the improved situation include: 1) civil rights protection from disability discrimination in training, testing, and employment; 2) research documenting the continuation of learning disabilities throughout adulthood; 3) continued development of technology, especially assistive technology, that has empowered disabled learners; and 4) the emerging population of successful learning-disabled adults who have opened the door for others to follow (Gerber 2003).

In spite of the improving prospects for educational success, the typical instructor can still feel overwhelmed in her attempts to understand the nature of learning disabilities. However, as Eastwick Covington points out, educators need not feel guilty when encountering a sharp learning curve: "Learning disabilities is a concept that has evolved into a complex web of ideas, the strands of which are constantly rewoven within the changing social and political contexts of our country. Because of these changes, as well as their heterogeneous nature, devising a framework for adult educators to use in the classroom has been difficult" (2004, 99). At the same time, and even taking into consideration their own possible lack of experience, instructors need to accept their share of the responsibility for the success of the disabled student. This is due in part to the fact that educational institutions are not obligated to provide accommodations unless the person with disability discloses his condition and provides documentation to verify that declaration. Otherwise, he may choose not to request accommodations. Identification involves the risk of self-identifying and being willing to face a wide range of uncertainties given the lack of understanding by the general public, which the learning-disabled student has faced all his life. "For many individuals with learning disabilities, the identification issue becomes a life-long concern and debate. The debate focuses on whether it is worthwhile to identify oneself as a person with a learning disability or to try to do the best one can without accommodations" (Young 1996). Any postsecondary class may include the adult learner who has successfully compensated for her disability in the workplace and has now returned to pursue a first or second degree. Perhaps this student is not sure whether or not to identify her disability, even though services are available to increase the likelihood of her success. As noted by Carpenter and Morgan (2003), the classroom can be a place of risk and an environment that "can generate confusion and personal trauma if the teaching and learning strategies are not explicit." As I experienced in seminary, if the instructor's first response to the student's request for accommodation focuses on the personal needs of the instructor herself or those of the nondisabled members of the class, the end result is increased confusion and personal pain for the disabled student.

Two suggestions can accomplish much towards reducing the "confusion and personal trauma." The first involves being willing to vary methodology to enhance the experience of the student. Although this might be as simple as allowing for alternative methods of feedback on assignments, the discussion of varied methodology exceeds the scope of this article. However, one important recommendation can be addressed: that of communicating goodwill and flexibility. In contrast to my opening story, the instructor needs to ask whether or not she is doing all that is possible to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment. Does the

student know that I am interested in his special needs and that I am willing to do everything possible to encourage the success of the learning experience? Do I communicate that I am on her side and am not just one more obstacle to overcome in the pursuit of the degree? All students, and especially those with a learning disability, “respond to those who care about them and who take a genuine interest in them....Educators must realize that no matter what new research produces, there is one classroom truth that has withstood the test of time for adults and children alike: teaching and learning include emotional practices, as well as cognitive ones. While this truth is fundamental to all classroom situations, it is central to those involving learning disabilities” (Eastwick Covington 2004). One basic yet important first step towards communicating inclusion can be a simple statement in the course syllabus, such as this one used by my colleagues and me: “Disabilities – Any student who because of a disability may require some special arrangements to meet course requirements should contact the instructor or the Access Coordinator for the Office of Disability Services by the second class period to discuss reasonable accommodations.” When accompanied by an attitude of sincerity, such a statement opens the door for substantive dialogue regarding strategies for success.

References

Carpenter, Barry, and Hazel Morgan. “Count Us In: The Role of Schools and Colleges in Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Young People with Learning Disabilities.” *British Journal of Special Education* 30, no. 4 (2003): 202–206.

Eastwick Covington, Linda. “Moving beyond the Limits of Learning: Implications of Learning Disabilities for Adult Education.” *Adult Basic Education* 14, no. 2 (2004): 90–103.

Gerber, Paul J. P. “Adults with Learning Disabilities Redux.” *Remedial and Special Education* 24, no. 6 (2003): 324–327.

Mellard, Daryl F., Donald D. Deshler, and Amy Barth. “LD Identification: It’s Not Simply a Matter of Building a Better Mousetrap.” *Learning Disability Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (2004): 229–43.

National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education. “Research Finding Brief.” *National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Supports*, study area 4a, vol. 5. University of Hawai’i at Manoa, April 2000.

Young, Glenn. "[To Tell or Not to Tell: Self-identification, Self-advocacy, and Civil Rights in Employment and Postsecondary Education](#) ." *LDA Newsbriefs* (July–August 1996).