

## Disability, Difference, Diversity: A Copernican Revolution in Learning

Disability or difference? This question has been among the most provocative in educational discourse lately—especially among those of us who have traditionally aligned our thinking and our institutional missions with the interests of “learning disabled” students. It is also a question, we think, that has been considered by every independent school, regardless of its historical orientation toward learning disabilities or the extraordinary achievements of its students. Despite the seriousness with which this question has been taken up recently, we want to suggest here that the question is remarkably simple to settle. In fact, from our point of view, there is no question here at all—though we will suggest a question that we think should replace this one in our collective thinking about students.

To consider the question of whether it makes sense to talk about learning disabilities or learning differences, it is important to consider the assumptions about the world upon which these concepts rest. It is sometimes fashionable to call the sum total of these assumptions a “paradigm,” and so we will consider here the paradigms of disability and difference. In reviewing these paradigms, three important considerations can guide us: Where is disability/difference located? How is it defined or identified? And once identified, what does it mean—what do we do with this information?

### Locus of Disability/Difference

Traditional thinking about learning disabilities is often described as issuing from the “medical model.” That is, as a discipline, we have taken up the terminology and metaphors used within the field of medicine to describe students’ disabilities. In fact,

mainstream thinking about learning disabilities has been so aligned with the medical perspective that many in the field now identify learning disabilities as medical conditions, and parents (and educational professionals) turn to pediatricians and neurologists for diagnosis and treatment. The picture of learning disabilities provided by federal education legislation (IDEA) guides us firmly in this direction by defining a specific learning disability as a:

disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. This term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. This term does not include children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; mental retardation; or environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.

This language—language of the learning disability paradigm—makes evident the assumption that disabilities exist within individuals. By definition, psychological processes occur within individual minds (or brains). Disorders to those psychological processes, therefore, occur within individuals, and lest there be any misunderstanding, this so-called “exclusionary” definition notes additionally that if difficulties can be traced to “environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage,” then they should not be considered evidence of a learning disability.

If at this point some of us are left unconvinced of the locus of disability within this paradigm, we need only open a newspaper or turn on the evening news to see that the most highly regarded and publicized research in this arena is neuro-imaging research that seeks to understand learning as a neurobiological phenomenon—almost devoid of any social component.

The learning difference paradigm has a briefer history in the spotlight of American educational thinking and perhaps because of this, a less well-defined and publicized agenda. The impetus for this perspective has come from two sources, we think. First, caring and well-intentioned teachers and parents have used the term “difference” to try to preserve the self-esteem of students identified with learning “disabilities.” Unfortunately, efforts such as this—at least in our experience with students—are usually unsuccessful. Even worse, such attempts can backfire when students feel that we are being disingenuous and euphemistic with them—and presuming that they are not sophisticated enough to realize this.

More productively, a learning difference paradigm has been suggested by educators who are seeking to promote tolerance and reject discrimination. Here, the more openly political motive is to describe students’ abilities in terms of alternatives rather than in terms of deficits, and learning disabilities are redefined as learning differences. Nevertheless, most discussions from within this framework still imply that the “differences” in question can be located within individuals and are differences from the norm. In fact, it might be argued that without the notion of a norm, “different” (as it has been used in our field) becomes an ambiguous term at best.

#### Disability and Difference Defined: The Norm Objectified

As we have just suggested, both the traditional learning disability paradigm and the learning difference paradigm depend for their identification of disability/difference on the existence of an objectified norm. Students are identified as “disabled” or “different” based on the distance between their demonstrated abilities and the expectations that we have about “normal” abilities. What is statistically “normal” (i.e., occurs with greater

frequency) becomes reified as a standard against which everything else should be compared. Both paradigms suggest that there is a point along a continuum of ability at which quantitative differences (differences in degree) become qualitative differences (differences in kind). In other words, there is a range of ability within which normal learners find themselves; beyond this (in particular, below this), one is “learning disabled” or has “learning differences.” It is here that a distinction between the learning disability and the learning differences approaches is important: you are learning disabled—you have learning differences. Though some might argue that this distinction is again only one of semantics, it seems indicative of a more important shift in our thinking as educators. The difference paradigm continues to locate difference within an individual but allows (where the disability paradigm does not) that learning differences are characteristic of an individual’s way of interacting with the world, not simply indicative of objectively defined deficiencies.

#### The Meaning of Disability/Difference: What Do We Do Now?

The question of what it means to be learning disabled or to have learning differences can take several forms. For the present, let’s look at what it might mean just in terms of educational approaches. Because both the disability and difference paradigms depend upon the notion of a norm to identify students, the goal of instruction (whatever form that takes) for identified students is typically this: to move toward the norm. It is here that distinctions between the two paradigms seem least significant in their practical implications for students. Whether we consider a student disabled and therefore deficient in some essential ability or different and therefore unable to demonstrate an essential ability as most others do, our diagnostic reference to the norm leaves us little option but

to ask students to work toward “normal” achievement. We may approach the “problem” with differing expectations or methodologies that issue from either the disability or difference paradigms, but our understanding of the situation from either perspective is similar: we see a problem.

From within the medical model—or disability paradigm—we might be likely to decide that some “problems” are insoluble or at least not worth the effort to solve. In other words, our diagnosis of learning disability might lead us to conclude that some individuals will simply never develop certain abilities. This prognosis will likely then lead us to discussions of accommodations and modifications that will be necessary for individuals to experience success. Inevitably, we would suggest, these discussions leave individuals identified as learning disabled in a disadvantageous position. From this perspective, they are less able and more needy—and ultimately, defined by their “deficiencies.”

From within the difference paradigm, the expectation is that given the correct, “different” instructional approach, a student will succeed. The assumption here—that every student can learn (and perhaps learn *anything*) is clearly different than the assumption from within the disability paradigm. However, the goal of instruction (albeit modified instruction) remains the same: to approximate the achievement of a “normal” student. Again, despite the more hopeful agenda of the difference paradigm, students identified with “learning differences” are left in a disadvantageous position. Whether disabled or different, students identified within either model are *not normal*; and because both models objectify normalcy, making it simply another categorical marker (like animal, vegetable, or mineral), identified students become another class of people

altogether. Put another way, a quantitative difference in performance becomes a qualitative difference: learning disabled people or people with learning differences come to be considered a different sort of person than everybody else.

### Learning Diversity

We began this essay noting that the question of “disability” versus “difference” has gained considerable currency lately. Given what we have described as important parallels between the learning disability and learning difference paradigms, we think that choosing sides in this debate almost doesn’t matter when we consider outcomes for students. Because we prefer to be hopeful and given no other choice, we would opt for the learning difference paradigm. However, we do have another option: we can develop a new paradigm, one that might appropriately be called “learning diversity.”

Taking up the reasoning and language of multiculturalism, we think we have the opportunity to redefine learning in a way that avoids some of the unfortunate and limiting assumptions that the learning disability and learning difference paradigms have perpetuated. The assumption around which we might structure such a new paradigm is deceptively simple: all students, all learners, are individuals. Reasoning forward from this, we must refuse to reference “norms” and look instead to individual students’ skills, talents, interests, and predilections. The sequelae of such a shift in assumptions are many and complicated and are likely responsible for our reluctance to move forward in this direction.

Nearly every aspect of traditional education is made problematic when we begin with the notion that every individual is unique. Considerations as basic as elements of the curriculum and requirements for a diploma are called into question; it is no longer

sufficient to ask the question “What is it important for high school graduates to do and know?” Instead, we must ask the question for each student, repeatedly. Many of you are probably now asking yourselves: “Do they really mean that we should have no standards?” The answer is yes—we really believe that we should have no standards. We should have expectations, hopes, and dreams with and for our students instead.

What is required is a Copernican revolution in our thinking about learning. The obstacles to such a revolution are many, and we can already hear the common refrain, “But who is going to pay for this?” as we write the final pages of this essay. We are not Pollyannas; we do realize that the sort of changes that this point of view entails will be costly, not only monetarily but in other, perhaps more important ways as well. In fact, the risks in moving toward this new paradigm are legion. Chief among these risks is the possibility that we will lose what ground has been gained by the development of the learning disability paradigm—and this is some considerable ground. Because of the efforts of organizations like the Learning Disabilities Association of America and the many students, parents, and professionals that have taken up this cause, students have more rights and opportunities within our educational system now than ever before. For this reason, we do not suggest that tonight we destroy our educational systems, laws, and practices—expecting that tomorrow a bright new phoenix will rise from the ashes. Instead, we suggest that we move, leaping when we can but more often steadfastly lumbering, toward the vision of an educational paradigm that truly values individuals. One quiet but powerful way in which we can all do this is to begin to use critically the means available to us in the present system. In practical terms, we think this means beginning to think and speak in terms of learning (dis)abilities, emphasizing what

students can do rather than what they cannot do. In taking this approach, we will be winking to each other and our students as we stare into the face of IDEA and educational reforms that take the form of high stakes testing. In effect, we will need two languages: one for the courtroom and one for the classroom. Continuing to use what we have—for the good of students—while we work toward what we think is ideal seems to us both possible and positive. Allowing our fear of losing what we have to keep us from what we might make for ourselves in the future seems pessimistic.

We have suggested that what we need is a “revolution” in our thinking about learning—and each other. We hope and believe that we are on the brink of such a revolution—and one that has historical precedents in this country. We would argue (as others have) that the thinking about learning disabilities has followed a path very similar to thinking about race, gender, and civil rights in this country. In each of these cases, the development in American thinking has followed a roughly analogous path. Members of the disenfranchised groups in each situation progress in status from unequal to “separate but equal” to fully equal. We are not suggesting here that we have reached an enlightened state with respect to race and gender equality *in practice*—there is clearly a long way to go in these areas as well. What we have accomplished in race and gender relations that we have yet to accomplish within education is the presumption that we *ought* to be moving toward the practice of equality. In our thinking about learning as a nation, we are still at the point where we have yet to envision or expect equality.

The learning disability paradigm creates another class of people—deficient in some way—much as the Constitution designated some men equivalent to only 3/5ths of other men and left women altogether unconsidered. In moving through a learning

difference paradigm—one that suggests that difference does not have to be deficiency—we think we parallel the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> amendments, but we cannot stop there—to do so would be to continue to accept “separate but equal” education for many of our students. We must look energetically forward to a (learning) diversity paradigm that demands that we consider each student not in terms of an idealized, objectified norm but in terms of his or her own abilities, hopes, and dreams.

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