



Just Like Me

Learning About People with Disabilities

Learning
Disabilities

Suzanne
Tiberii

PLEASE RETURN ME TO THE UNIT LEADER AT THE END OF THE CLASSROOM PRESENTATION--it is very costly to keep replacing me. Even if you discover me a long time after the program, we still appreciate the return. Just bring me to the school office. THANK YOU !

Dear Teachers and Parent Volunteers,

Welcome to the Learning Disabilities Unit of **Just Like Me – Understanding Our Differences**. This unit is the fifth in our series of six units which are presented to the third and fourth grade students in the Wayland Public Schools. We have found it to be an understandable ‘next step,’ distinguishing learning disabilities from the developmental disabilities of the preceding unit in which problems stem from intellectual deficits, and from the autism spectrum disorders of the following unit in which the challenges faced are primarily in the areas of communication and social interaction.

I begin my classroom presentation with a brief overview of three medical disabilities – asthma, diabetes and seizure disorders – in part because we don’t offer a separate Medical Conditions Unit and as an introduction to the concept of a ‘hidden disability’. We then discuss the computer as an analogy for understanding how the human brain works – and how difficulties may occur in any of the areas of input, processing, memory, and output. Finally we do a whole class activity followed by three small group activities, all of which are designed to give students a greater understanding of how people may be challenged with learning in areas of visual perception, word finding, and memory. We wrap up by discussing strategies that worked in tackling the various small group tasks. Later in the day/week, our speaker puts a real face on the ongoing challenges of having a learning disability, discussing his/her difficulties and the strategies he/she uses in learning and living.

The main messages of this unit are that everyone has strengths and challenges, that everyone learns differently, and that people with a learning disability may be very smart, but often don’t learn in traditional ways.

The unit is best led with four adult volunteers, in addition to the unit leader, – one for the Memory Game, one for the Visual Perceptual task, and two for the Circle Story. It is certainly helpful for students in the classroom who have learning disabilities to have an adult nearby who is aware that some of the tasks may be challenging for them – although, indeed, the tasks are intended to be challenging for everyone!

I welcome your phone calls or emails if you have any questions about the unit prior to its presentation in the fourth grade classrooms.

Suzanne Tiberii
508-655-8261
stiberii@jbcc.harvard.edu (work)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR PRESENTERS

This introduction provides volunteer presenters with background information about learning disabilities. Presentation to students should not include this information. Mainly, this material is provided to help you avoid misconceptions and feel more comfortable answering questions that may arise during class discussion.

Many people in the general public equate learning disabilities with dyslexia, or difficulty reading. In truth, learning disabilities (LD) is a broad term encompassing a range of neurologically based conditions that affect one's ability to acquire, retain, or broadly use specific skills or information. They are identified when there is a distinct gap between the level of ability (for instance as determined by IQ testing) and what has actually been learned in school (as determined by achievement / educational testing). It is this unevenness between ability and achievement that often characterizes a learning disability. Learning disabilities occur in people across the range of intelligence from those who have the highest of IQ's to those with developmental delay. For a long time, learning disabilities were defined as primarily affecting understanding or use of language, either spoken, written or expressive language capabilities. There are also a large range of learning disabilities that affect non-verbal skills, social skills and various other areas of learning. (For instance dyscalculia refers to a math learning disability).

There are many causes of learning disabilities. In some cases, learning disabilities are inherited, and often individuals with LD have family members who share similar issues. Learning disabilities are sometimes caused by problems during pregnancy and birth such as: low birth weight; lack of oxygen at birth; prematurity; prolonged labor; illness; or drug and alcohol use during pregnancy. Learning disabilities can also be caused by head injury, poor nutrition and exposure to toxic substances. In many cases, there is no identifiable cause. Learning disabilities ARE NOT caused by cultural or economic disadvantage.

Learning disabilities are apparent as early as preschool. Others are diagnosed in later grades. Typical time-points of diagnosing a learning disability come with a jump in expectations in the curriculum. For instance, a reading-writing learning disability might be identified as early on as kindergarten or first grade if a child struggles with identifying letter-sound combinations. Another child might progress until 3rd grade but then become overwhelmed with the shift from learning to read to reading to learn (i.e. using reading to understand content). Other common times for identification of learning disabilities are when learning a foreign language and at beginning middle school when changing classes and diverse expectations of teachers can present challenges.

Learning disabilities were once thought to be a school-based problem that did not affect life skills out of school. However, it is now recognized that learning disabilities are pervasive throughout all areas of daily life. **They do not go away.** With appropriately targeted interventions, individuals with learning disabilities can make progress at school in areas they find difficult by developing strategies to manage

their challenges while capitalizing on their strengths. Ultimately, the goal for students with learning disabilities is to choose career paths that will allow them to utilize their areas of strength.

Learning disabilities affect 6-10% of the population. It is estimated that 40-50% of all children receiving special education services in school have learning disabilities.

Teaching the Understanding Our Differences Learning Disabilities Unit

Of all the disabilities addressed by Understanding Our Differences, learning disabilities are among the most prevalent and are likely to be encountered in every classroom. It is therefore particularly important for volunteers to be acutely sensitive to the language he or she uses when presenting this unit. There may be students in the classroom, with diagnosed LD or whose LD has not yet been diagnosed. The goal is for students to recognize and empathize with the struggles of their peers, while feeling supported if they do have a learning disability. The intent of this program is not to "out" anyone or make anyone uncomfortable.

We use the term "learning disability". There is currently a lot of debate in the education community about nomenclature and the use of the term "learning disability". Some people prefer the term "learning challenges" or "learning differences". We use the term "learning disability" to avoid confusing students. The curriculum teaches that everyone has strengths and areas of relative challenge. That is what makes people unique. The point we try to make in the unit is that at some time, for some individuals, differences cross a line and become major hurdles (or, in other words, disabilities). This is not meant to be demeaning but to acknowledge that the difficulties some people face in certain areas go beyond ordinary challenges to become "disabling" until accommodations are worked out to enable the person to function more fully. In addition, the term disability is widely accepted among the community of people with disabilities and has come to be a source of pride rather than embarrassment. We point out that having an LD does not mean they are not smart, but that the intake, processing, remembering or output of information can make doing some things particularly difficult.

Learning disabilities are a hidden disability. Usually, someone with LD looks just like everyone else. Peers and unknowing adults can often misinterpret an area of deficit as laziness, messiness or lack of caring, when often just the opposite is true.

A goal of this program is to empower individuals with LD so that they feel safe to share their struggles. We go beyond LD as a label and empower children to "own" their particular issues while finding strategies that utilize their areas of strength. Under IDEA and ADA one needs to be willing to have a diagnosis to get accommodations. Often students must become strong self-advocates to receive all the services necessary to maximize their potential. We want students to see their learning disability as only one aspect of their identity and for their peers to accept and understand this reality.

We purposely do not use diagnostic labels in this curriculum, though definitions of some of the more common learning disabilities are included in the glossary for your information.

We also do not talk about Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in this curriculum. Many people think ADD is a learning disability. Individuals with LD have an elevated possibility of also having ADD (approximately 1/3 of individuals with LD also have ADD). However, ADD is not a learning disability. A learning disability cannot be ameliorated with medication and ADD often can. We do not want students to think there is a medication that can cure a learning disability.

The activities in this curriculum are meant to be challenging. It is important to reassure students who have difficulty with an activity that it does not necessarily mean they have a learning disability.

FIGURE GROUND AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION

ACTIVITY: CONNECT THE DOTS

Purpose:

- To show students how background noise can be distracting and make it difficult to complete a task that requires concentration

Materials:

- Connect the Dots instruction sheet (script of the CD)
 - CD
 - CD player *
 - Pencils
 - Worksheets
- * Must be provided by school.

Setup:

- Students should be seated at a table so they can write.
- Make sure there is an electric outlet nearby, if you are using an electric CD player. If using a battery run machine, make sure there are new batteries.
- Place worksheet and pencil for each child on the table.

Procedure:

- Tell the students they are going to do an activity that will demonstrate that people without a hearing disability can have difficulty concentrating when there are background noises.
- Give the students directions for the activity for the top of the page and play the CD. (You may not need to complete the whole progression of numbers and letters, as many students will be unable to follow the directions. In fact, we do not want or expect the students to be able to complete this top picture)
- After the CD, ask the students to use the bottom of their paper so that they can connect the dots a second time. This time, read the directions slowly from the "connect the dot" instruction sheet.
- When the text asks "is everybody following" be sure to check around the room to see if anyone needs help. Encourage students to raise their hand if they need an extra moment. Have the adult who is not reading the text help any child having difficulty to stay on track. The goal is for all the students to be able to complete this picture.

Hot Tips!

- While the CD is playing, leaders can talk to each other or make noises for added distractions
- Watch for frustration.

CONNECT THE DOTS

Sample Discussion

Before doing the first part of the activity

We are going to connect the dots on the top half of this paper while following the directions on the CD. This is how a classroom might sound to someone who is distracted by background noises.

Before doing the second part of the activity

Now connect the dots at the bottom of the page while listening to the same exact words that I will read aloud. If you need me to slow down please raise your hand.

After the Activity

- Was one part of the worksheet more difficult to complete than the other?
- Which one? (*The first one*)
- Why do you think that was the case? (*The first CD was so noisy; it made it difficult to concentrate.*)

Do you remember earlier today we said that if there is too much noise, the brain might have trouble focusing on the most important sounds? We said that for some people, even a quiet noise, like a humming fan, could be a distraction.

The CD was an example of how background noises may make it harder for a person to complete a task. Many of us found that we had trouble concentrating on the dots because we were listening to the noises on the CD.

- How did you feel when you weren't able to keep up with the CD? (*I felt like not trying anymore, I felt angry that I could not understand the words the teacher was saying.*)
- Were you frustrated?
- Did you feel yourself working extra hard to concentrate?
- Did you find yourself peeking at other people's papers?
- Did you figure out something to do that made it easier to do the task the first time? These are called strategies.

People with this type of learning disability are not any less intelligent than their friends. They may get frustrated when there is noise, even quiet noise, when they are doing a task or assignment. Some people really do need quiet in order to concentrate.

What strategies could someone with this type of issue use? (*Limit distracting noises; tape record directions in order to listen to them more than once; work in a quiet place; ask clarifying questions; ask for written directions; repeat the instructions aloud.*)

How could you help a classmate? (*try not to distract them, do not make fun or tease someone who has difficulty concentrating*)

FIGURE GROUND VISUAL DISCRIMINATION

ACTIVITY: MYSTERY PICTURE

Station 2B

1 leader for every 6 - 8 students

7 minutes

Purpose:

- To understand that some people with learning disabilities have a challenging time selecting the most important visual information.
- To understand that it is sometimes hard to separate the foreground from the background (i.e. Where's Waldo).
- To understand that this is not an issue with a person's vision.
- To show how difficult learning would be if one had to struggle to find and focus on the most important information.

Materials:

- Figure-ground picture
- Answer sheet

Setup:

- Students should be seated at a table.
- This activity needs to be done in a visually separate space from the other groups because there is a surprise picture.

Procedure:

- Hold the picture so that the side labeled "top" is indeed on the top and the photo is in close range.
- Tell the students: "Look at this picture. **Without saying anything out loud**, try to figure out what is in the picture. If you know what it is, don't say it out loud just raise your hand."
- After each student looks at the picture close up, ask the group "What is this"?
- Show them the answer sheet that has a cow outlined. Tell them it's a cow.
- Show the original sheet and ask if they can now see the cow without the outline.

Hot Tip!

- The pictures are not to leave the group. They must be shown to the students close up (in front or put them on the table) because the picture is more obvious from a distance.
- Tell the students in each group not to give away the secret in the picture to the students in the next group.

MYSTERY PICTURE

Sample Discussion

Before Doing the Activity

In another unit we have talked about blindness and visual disabilities. Today we are going to think about how the brain understands the information it receives from the eyes.

(Hold the picture so that the side labeled "top" is indeed on the top and the photo is in close range.)

Look at this picture. Without saying anything out loud, try to figure out what is in the picture. If you know what it is, don't say it out loud just raise your hand.

(Allow each student to look at the picture close up.)

What is this?

- This is a picture of a real object.
- It is a photograph.
- What do you think is the important part of this picture?
- Can you separate that from the background of the picture?
- Do you know what the picture is?

(Show them the answer sheet that has a cow outlined.)

It is a cow.

(Show the original sheet without the outline)

Can you now see the cow?

After Doing the Activity

- You know your eyes see clearly or if they do not see clearly, you probably wear glasses.
- Do you think wearing glasses can help you see the cow in the first picture? (*No*)
- Why can't you tell what is in this picture? (*Foreground and background are confusing*)
- Why do you think you could see the cow after it was outlined? (*The important information was identified.*)
- Was it easier for you to see the cow when you were shown the first picture again? (*Yes*)
Your brain now understands the important information and was able to focus on that information.
- What strategies could you use to help you focus on the important information? (*When reading, use your finger to follow the words, say the words quietly to yourself*)
- Remember, when you leave the group not to tell other students what was in the picture! Keep the secret!

WORD FIND ACTIVITY: CIRCLE STORY

station 3

1 leader for every 6 - 8 students

15 minutes

Purpose:

- To appreciate the amount of effort people with word-finding issues might have in formulating words and sentences in order to get ideas across to others

Materials:

- No special materials are required.

Setup:

- The students sit in a circle.

Procedure:

- Tell the students they are going to play a game to help them understand what it might be like to have to struggle with putting their thoughts into words.
- Explain that the group will make up a story, with each person adding a sentence. The students do not repeat the preceding sentences. They only add their own ideas to the story.
- The group leader starts the story by saying, "Once upon a time there was a boy named Jack who ..." and completes the sentence in any way the leader chooses.
- Go around the circle letting each child contribute a sentence. (Students who might have a challenging time with this activity can add one word or pass).
- When everyone has had a turn, explain that the next step will make the game harder. This is the way it might feel for a person who has a difficult time finding words.
- A second story is to be composed by the group, **but this time no word can be used that has the letter N in it.** The group leader explains that her first sentence has to be changed because she cannot say "Once upon a time" because there are N's in the words "once" and "upon."
- The leader begins, "There was a boy called Jack," and goes around the circle in the opposite direction, letting each person once again contribute their ideas to the story. The story does not have to be a retelling of the first story and can be totally different. Once again, the students should only add the next sentence. They do not need to repeat the preceding sentences. Participants can pass or contribute less.

HOT TIP!

Sometimes during the activity a participant will struggle to find a word and someone else will jump in and finish their sentence. This is an opportunity to ask the first student if it made him feel relieved to be off the hook, or if he wanted a chance to express his own ideas? This is an opening to point out to students that they might want to ask their classmate if they could help by making a suggestion before blurting out the answer. Otherwise, ask the entire group how they would feel.

CIRCLE STORY

Sample Discussion

Before doing the activity:

- We are going to play a game that will help you understand what it is like to want to say something and have to really struggle to quickly come up with the words you want to use.
- Have you ever heard the expression "it was on the tip of my tongue"? Does anyone know what it means? (*That you know what you want to say but cannot find the right words*). All of us have had that happen occasionally.
- This game will give you an idea how people with word finding issues have to work harder to communicate.

During the activity:

- We are going to make up a story and each of you will add a sentence. You do not need to repeat the preceding sentences. Just add a sentence with your own ideas to the story.
- I'm going to start the story. "Once upon a time there was a boy named Jack who..."
(Go around the circle letting each child contribute a sentence. Students who might have a challenging time with this activity can add one word or pass).
- Now that everyone has had a turn, the next step will make the game harder. This is the way it might feel for a person who has a difficult time finding words to communicate. We are going to make up a second story, **but this time no word can be used that has the letter N in it.** The story does not have to be a retelling of the first story and can be totally different. Once again, only add the next sentence. You do not need to repeat the preceding sentences.
- I need to change my first sentence because "Once upon a time" contains N's in the words "once" and "upon." So I will start with, "There was a boy called Jack...."
(Go around the circle in the opposite direction, letting each person contribute his or her ideas to the story. Participants can pass or contribute less.)

HOT TIP!

Sometimes during the activity a participant will struggle to find a word and someone else will jump in and finish their sentence. This is an opportunity to ask the first student if it made him feel relieved to be off the hook, or if he wanted a chance to express his own ideas? This is an opening to point out to students that they might want to ask their classmate if they could help by making a suggestion before blurting out the answer. Otherwise, ask the entire group how they would feel.

After doing the activity:

- Was the game harder the second time?
- How did it feel?
- Were you frustrated at times?
- Did you feel like your brain was slowing down when you had to think about each word you used?
- What would it feel like if you worried about getting called on in class because you knew you would have difficulty answering? (*Anxious*)
- Was there anything you did to make it easier for yourself? These are called strategies.
- What could you do if you had to struggle with this all the time? (*Write things out before you speak, volunteer for another part of a group presentation that you find easier*)
- Did anyone spend time figuring out what you were going to say instead of listening to what other people were contributing to the story? (*yes*)
If that happened in class, would you be able to pay attention to the rest of the discussion? (*no*)

A good strategy would be to let your teacher know that you will volunteer rather than have the teacher call on you. That way, you could be more relaxed and pay attention to the entire discussion once you spoke.

- How could you be a friend to a classmate who had trouble expressing their ideas (*give them time to get their words out, ask them if they want you to suggest a word, be patient so he/she is confident responding at their own pace, do not tease anyone*)
- Was our second story as interesting as the first? (*No; less complex; simpler sentences; not as rich*).

It is not because we had less imagination or were less smart the second time. People with word finding challenges are not less intelligent than their friends. Their vocabularies might be just as large, especially when they have the time to think and write their ideas on paper, but they sometimes have to work harder to express themselves verbally. Their brains are working extra hard when they talk, just like yours worked harder to make up the second story. Working this hard can make school much more tiring and stressful.

VISUAL MEMORY ACTIVITY: MEMORY GAME

station 4

1 leader for every 6 - 8 students

15 minutes

Purpose:

- To show students how they remember things visually
- To consider how difficulty with memory would affect school and social skills
- To think about strategies for compensating for this type of challenge
- To strengthen cooperative spirit in strategy formation

Materials:

- Apron
- A can with a barcode
- A tray containing 15 - 20 familiar and unfamiliar objects such as:

Wooden block	Clip
Animal	Tongue depressor
Car	Spoon
Number stamp	Penny
Clothespin	Pencil
Wooden letter	Screw and nut
Rubber band	Marker
Straw	Tape
Lego piece	

Setup:

- Students are seated at a table or in a circle on the floor.
- Spread items on a tray.
- The leader wears the apron found in the kit.

Procedure:

- Show the group the tray with contents for a short while.
- Take it out of sight and remove 6-8 objects. Put the objects in the apron pocket.
- Return with the tray and give each student a chance to name a missing item.
- Take it out of sight again and remove more objects.
- Going around the table in the opposite direction, give each student a second chance to name the missing objects.
- Discuss the process of memorizing and strategies for improving memory each time the students figure out what is missing.
- While playing the game, encourage the students to think about how they are memorizing the objects.
- Ask the students: Does it help to name objects? Categorize them? Count them?

MEMORY GAME

Sample Discussion

Before the activity

We spoke earlier about the similarities between our brains and computers. (Hold up a can with a barcode.) At the grocery store, a scanner “reads” the barcode on a can and the computer “remembers” what it is and how much it costs and prints that information on the cash register screen. It can remember millions of items. How many things are in your memory? (*Millions, if you consider language, faces, movement*)

We are going to play a game where I put a number of objects on a tray; you “scan” them with your eyes. Then I will remove a few of the objects while you are not looking and you will see if you can figure out which I removed. While we are playing this game, I want you to think about how you are memorizing what you see.

During the activity

(Show the group the tray with all of the contents for a short while.)

Look at the objects on the tray and try to remember the objects.

(Take the tray out of sight and remove 6-8 objects. Put the objects in the apron pocket. Return with the tray and show it to the group.)

Look at the tray now. Let’s each take a turn. Can you tell me which items are missing?

(Take the tray out of sight again and remove more objects. Go around the table in the opposite direction)

Let’s each take a turn. Can you tell me which items are missing now?

- How did you figure out what was missing?
- How did you remember what was there?
- Did you simply “take a picture” of the tray with your eyes and brain?
- Does it help to name objects?
- Does it help to categorize them based on their color, shape or size?
- Does it help to count the objects?

After the activity

If people have issues with visual memory, their brain can’t “take a picture” of what they see. This game involves a number of skills that help us remember things that we have seen. These are the same skills we use to learn to read, to play a game, to set the table and many other daily activities.

If remembering things that you have seen but not heard is challenging for you, what can you do? (*Put things into categories such as color, size, shape, use; name objects out loud; write them down*)

Remember to be patient with yourself and others if you see them having a hard time remembering things.

Hot Tip!

Encourage a cooperative rather than competitive atmosphere so that students solve the problem as a group. Remind the children that none of us is as smart as all of us!

OPTIONAL DISCUSSION STRATEGIES: THE WAY WE LEARN

Purpose:

- To help students learn the strategies they can use to accommodate for areas of challenge using areas of strength

Materials:

- Colored markers
- Computer generated chart (one for every classroom)

Setup:

- Display chart

Procedure:

- The students are brought back together as an entire group and seated facing the chart.
- A discussion is held in which a list of strategies is generated - a leader records the students' and leaders' ideas.
- Additional volunteers should also fill out the other charts so each classroom can post one at the end of the unit.

NOTE: Some strategies can be used in more than one column.

STRATEGIES: THE WAY WE LEARN

Sample Discussion

I hope doing the activities today has helped you think about the things you do well and the things that are challenges for you. You should now realize that all people have things that are easy for them to do and other things that are hard for them to do. People with learning disabilities have unique challenges that make doing some things harder. That doesn't mean they are not smart and cannot get around their challenges. Now, we are going to create a list of strategies we can all use to make it easier to take in information, to process information, to remember important things and to be able to tell others what we know. These strategies work well for everyone but can be particularly important when a person has learning disabilities.

Strategies for Taking In Information / Input

Let's think about techniques and strategies you might want to use if you had a challenging time with taking in information you hear or see. Can you name some?

- *Use a tape recorder*
- *Take notes or ask that instructions be written down*
- *Repeat back instructions so the person who gave them can make sure the student heard them correctly*
- *Ask questions when you don't understand*
- *Have a learning buddy*

Strategies for Using and Understanding Information / Processing

Let's think about techniques and strategies you might want to use if you had to struggle with reading. Can you name some?

- *Listen to books on tape*
- *Have someone read to you*
- *Read aloud*
- *Check to see if what you read makes sense*

Let's think about techniques and strategies you might want to use if you had math difficulties. Can you name some?

- *Use a calculator, computer*
- *Check work carefully*
- *Use graph paper to line up numbers*

What are some general strategies you might want to use?

- *Break tasks down into small steps*
- *Work in a quiet place*
- *Limit the number of things you try to do at one time*
- *Say to yourself or out loud the things that you will need to do*

Strategies for Remembering Information / Memory

Let's think about techniques and strategies you might want to use if you had a memory issue. Possible techniques:

- *Write things down, especially directions*
- *Keep a calendar for appointments and assignments*
- *Have a watch with an alarm to remind you of appointments*
- *Listen to a recording with step-by-step instructions on doing complex things*
- *Keep lists*
- *Use spell checkers*
- *Use visualization - picture the steps*

Strategies for Sharing and Communicating Information / Output

Let's think about techniques and strategies you might want to use if you had a challenging time finding the words you want when you want to tell someone something. Possible techniques are:

- *Have good notes when having to speak out loud*
- *Practice what you are going to say*
- *Role play a situation before you do it*
- *Visualize or try to see the word or object in your head*
- *Think of associations such as salt and pepper*

We have come up with some very good ideas! Everyone here does at least some of these things. Finding the right strategies is important for someone with a learning disability.