

The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

Variations in Student Learning: Hints for Faculty & TAs

Faculty & graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) are often encounter student learning problems through the grading of exams and papers, as well as in discussion sections and labs. In the interests of making the educational process at Brown as rewarding as possible for undergraduate students, we offer some suggestions below.

At present there are approximately 5,500 undergraduate students enrolled at Brown University. Of these, almost two percent are diagnosed dyslexics. Some 10 percent also experience a variety of other learning difficulties without already being diagnosed dyslexic or ADD. Both groups of students, diagnosed and undiagnosed, need to have informed TAs working with them. They present a responsibility that all teachers should feel for all students, the obligation to ensure that students learn the material in whatever way is most efficacious for *them*.

These notes are designed to help faculty and TAs recognize the common signals of a diverse learning styles and to implement classroom strategies which will improve student learning. If you feel a student's deficits are jeopardizing his/her ability to learn, it is important to notify Associate Dean of the College Robert Shaw (863-2315).

A. Indicators of a diverse learning style may be:

- Spelling errors, especially reversal of the letters d and b, g and p, m and w.
- More than average difficulty in organizing material.
- Short attention span
- Auditory or visual memory problems: appear primarily in note-taking or recall of abstract symbols (for example, algebraic formulae, statistical data and graphs).
- Exceeding difficulty with the physical act of writing.
- Students who exhibit a clear understanding of the course concepts during discussion sections, but whose written work seems disjointed and poorly organized.

B. Things that the faculty & TA can do to help are:

- Be aware of the problem and give the student the support he/she needs to achieve the desired result, without rejecting the student out of hand as slow or stupid.
- Encourage students to use whatever aids can be mustered to help them learn: a tape-recorder for lectures, use of maps and charts, color-coded notes to reinforce the learning process. **Nothing** should be dismissed as childish or unsuitable for university level work.
- In a lecture course, use handouts, the blackboard, and oral "sign-posts" to indicate key topics of each day's lecture. Be as organized as possible in your lecture. All students will benefit if they understand what you are trying to say. Monitor student's understanding of the material by asking questions and by inviting students to ask questions at certain points in the class period.
- In the discussion section, use of multi-sensory material may be valuable in eliciting a profitable discussion. This approach may be helpful to shy students as well as those with learning deficits. Multi-sensory material will vary according to subject, e.g.: use of slides, diagrams to hand out as well as put on the board, objects related to the material. For example, a discussion of the Industrial Revolution may not only be enlivened, but secured, by the presence of objects made before and after their manufacture became mechanized.
- In grading exams where a time limit has been imposed, the validity of the information rendered should be given greater weight than errors in spelling or punctuation. A diagnosed dyslexic student may be allowed to take the exams untimed.

- On papers, TAs should indicate their willingness to help students get a head start, for example by looking over a preliminary outline. It is essential for dyslexic students to be encouraged to give themselves sufficient time to organize and produce a paper they will be **proud** of.

R. S. More