

## ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES WITH THE LEARNING DISABLED STUDENT

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**ABSTRACT:** Providing reliable and valid assessment data for special populations requires a number of alternative approaches to assure that individual vocational needs are addressed appropriately; this is particularly relevant for learning disabled students. Techniques employed with other populations are ineffective or even detrimental with learning disabled students. This article presents pragmatic techniques to facilitate the total assessment process with this population. Questions concerning commercial assessment system design and established strategies are raised for consideration.

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) in 1975, resulted in vocational assessment services for the special needs population. Under this regulation, the Federal government identified categories of handicapping conditions, including the learning disabled (LD), and mandated the implementation of special education and related services.

Determining effective assessment service delivery for LD students requires that the evaluation specialist carefully examine established assessment models. Traditionally the ultimate goal of the rehabilitation model has been job placement. However, the emphasis for providing assessment services in the school setting has been on career development and placement in vocational programs. Furthermore, the relative importance of determining task-related abilities is diminished by the need to identify learning styles and effective modes of instruction.

There has been an ever-increasing amount of literature concerning various teaching strategies, remedial approaches, and theories of learning styles with LD students (Lerner, 1981; Hresko & Read, 1981). However, there is little research available germane to specific vocational assessment techniques necessary with this population. Strategies and methodologies that produce positive results in the classroom may have questionable bearing on a student's work performance. Therefore, a unique technique-oriented approach must be implemented in vocational assessment that is specific to the LD student. According to McCray (1982), typically the comprehensive vocational evaluation center has a distinct eight-step systematic approach. For the purposes of this paper, three steps require special considerations when assessing a LD student. These steps are orientation, initial interview and formal testing/feedback.

A majority of the literature has supported the position that a thorough explanation of assessment

procedures contributes to evaluate participation, reduces confusion over poor performances, and provides greater awareness for the benefits of the assessment process (McCray, 1982; Hursh, 1984). However, different methods of explanation promote a greater degree of comprehension with LD students. Depending on the specific learning disability, certain methods will not facilitate the student's comprehension of the assessment process.

Consider this example. It is the first day of the assessment process and all of the referred students are present. They are all male, fourteen years old, ninth graders, and diagnosed as LD. The referral information indicates that three of the students have auditory perceptual problems. Two other students experience shortened attention spans with visual perceptual problems. In addition, all eight students are dysgraphic. With the myriad of known and possibly unknown learning disabilities present within this group, is it feasible to expect that a single method of explanation for the assessment process will promote participation, reduce confusion, or provide a learning experience.

The most effective approach to providing all the students with a conceptualization of the assessment process requires an eclectic method. This method must incorporate a brief narration for students having visual perceptual problems, visual cues for students having auditory perceptual problems and a variety in delivery to increase attention span. Specific techniques which address individual needs include (a) a brief explanation with introduction and inquiry as to perception of the (assessment) process, (b) a slide show (approximately ten minutes), and (c) an abbreviated tour of the assessment center.

The rationale for the brief explanation of vocational assessment is to orient the students to the situation. Brevity in delivery is of prime import-

ance. Students having short attention spans, in addition to auditory and perceptual difficulties, are not able to process all the information the evaluation specialist needs to impart to them. Seeking their perceptions of the assessment process promotes student involvement and dispels any misinformation that may have occurred during the initial phase of the orientation or from previously evaluated students.

The need for a slide show permits variety in presenting an overall picture of the assessment process. It also allows the students time to adjust to the environment without having any immediate demands being placed upon them. Furthermore, the slide show is a rather concrete portrayal of the expectations of the assessment process. It should not be a commercially marketed product. Students are not interested in slides showing examples of vocational assessment to job placement, or slides showing adults being evaluated. A slide show developed in-house is a more effective means for relaying the purpose of assessment. The slides should show examples of work samples which the students will be required to perform on with subsequent slides showing a "real-world" situation. For example, a slide showing a student performing on the Valpar Whole Body Range of Motion work sample should be followed by a slide showing a student working overhead on an automobile. This decreases the student's perception of assessment as being abstract and useless.

Providing a brief tour of the center permits the students to recognize the work samples from the slide show and to formulate how they will interact with them during the actual process. It also allows the student to become oriented to the physical plant and ask questions.

A short fact sheet with the rules and regulations governing the operation of the center reinforces any previous comments. To assure that there are no misunderstandings concerning behavioral

expectations, it is best to review the fact sheet in a group setting.

As a final item of note, there must be a distinction between the roles of the evaluation specialist and the special education teacher. The evaluation specialist's role is to simply interpret their vocational potential as it relates to learning styles, demonstrated aptitudes, instructional modes and work behaviors. It is not to teach the student new vocational skills. Many of the LD students have been in the same self-contained classroom situation for a number of years and are aware of the special attention given to them. They may attempt to manipulate their environment and the evaluation specialist by feigning that their learning disability prevents them from performing in the instructed manner (Kleinhammer-Framill, Framill, Schrepel, & Davis, 1983). To assist LD students to adjust to the work environment, they should be made aware that they will not be identified as learning disabled upon securing employment.

Perhaps the most tedious task for the LD student is the written initial interview. In the example of all eight students experiencing dysgraphia, this is a particularly difficult request. An effective manner in facilitating the student's responses to the questions is to verbally recite each item. Having an evaluation aide present to provide individual assistance is extremely useful. If the extent of a student's difficulties appear to the degree that one or more are lagging far behind the group, an oral interview is more appropriate. Having a chalkboard readily available allows the evaluation specialist to assist with spelling difficulties. Items on the chalkboard which can be of particular use are the current date, the correct spelling of the high school that the students attend, their bus number, the evaluation specialist's name, and the schedule for lunch and break.

There are few commercially available assessment tools which appropriately

address the vocational potential of the LD student. Vocational assessment within the school setting must rely on modifications and adaptive measures to provide adequate, valid assessment services. Some of these modifications include the use of tape-recorded instructions, equipment that visually matches the instructional material, a highly structured assessment environment, and use of the VITAS, TAP and COATS work sample systems. Students diagnosed as experiencing visual perceptual problems cannot be expected to perform well on work samples requiring the use of written instructions. This becomes a monumental task, particularly with the student having a lack of visual sequential memory. A practical measure to alleviate the detrimental effect of the students specific learning disability is to permit the use of tape-recorded instructions. As with all modifications to the administration of commercial work samples, the evaluation specialist should not utilize published performance criteria. Several standard psychometrics offer tape-recorded instructions with their test booklets. One such example is the Bennett Mechanical Comprehension Test (BMCT). Again, to assure that the vocational potential of the student is appropriately assessed, the development of locally gathered norming data is strongly encouraged. In furthering the objective of assessing the LD student as accurately as possible, providing equipment that visually matches the instructional material cannot be stressed too strongly.

Students having visual perceptual problems may rely on visual cues to cope with their environment. A good example is a work sample which requires hand tools, such as the COATS small engine servicing work sample. The audiovisual instructions show a red-handled screwdriver being used to remove an oil plug. If a student with visual perceptual problems is subsequently given a yellow-handled screwdriver during his assessment, he may request assistance because

he used the red handle as a visual cue.

Another problem for the LD student which is typical of most young adults is the need to socialize. LD students are generally not aware of subtle social cues and particularly, are not sensitive to appropriate work behaviors. Often a student becomes distracted by external stimuli and cannot adjust to the freedoms of the assessment center. As a result, the student requires a closely supervised environment. A compensatory method is to invest in movable sound screens or design the center with a "quiet room" to isolate and separate the students.

Finally, there is the need to examine the appropriateness of commercially available work sample systems. Most of these systems do not have performance criteria for the LD student. However, the extent of modification required for the VITAS, TAP, and COATS systems is minimal.

The VITAS system provides a one-time practice before independent performance. The assessment specialist should develop parallel practices and gather norming data. Further, the student's conceptualization of the task may be extended with an explanation from another student.

The TAP system's appropriateness can be enhanced with practice and re-administration of the work samples. In this manner, the assessment specialist can extrapolate information as to some degree of separation of learning from performance. Although the COATS system utilizes an audiovisual format, it provides the student with an array of occupational information. An audiovisual format may pose certain problems for the LD student. Nonetheless, providing a replay unit and a manual with individual frame instruction can minimize most problems. This combination of work sample systems should allow the evaluation specialist greater confidence in interpreting the vocational potential of the LD student. It by no means implies that these modifications need only be imple-

mented and adequate systems of measure are readily available.

At the present there are no assessment systems developed specifically for the LD student. As the impact of Federal regulations defining learning disabilities as a handicapping condition permeates the fields of rehabilitation and education, assessment tools will have to be developed accordingly.

The intent of this paper was two fold. First, it was to alert the evaluation specialist to techniques which are currently applied in vocational assessment of LD students. Second, to show the deficit in the designs of commercially available systems when used with the LD population. The evaluation specialist must seek out, develop, and validate in-house methodologies until adequate systems become available.

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