

## Demystifying the Learning Barriers for Unconventional Learners™

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Statistics tell us that a significant number of students are struggling to be successful in school. This is no different than in days past, but we now have the capabilities to identify and help students who may process information differently. The difficulties that these students face are often manifested in ways that may cause them to be completely overlooked or to be perceived as behavior problems. These students, and often their parents, know that something is not quite right, but they do not understand the cognitive implications. They may not understand, or may choose not to deal with, the situation, not wanting to be stigmatized by the label of learning disabilities, nor is it appropriate to label these students as such. These students may have different approaches to learning, i.e., processing *differences*, rather than learning disabilities. Granted, if a student exhibits difficulty in learning that involves understanding or interpreting intricate spoken or written language, then making a distinction between a learning *difference* or a learning *disability* is nuanced. You might say "tomato/tomahto;" there is no definitive difference if a strict interpretation of the traditional definition of learning disabilities is used. It could just be a matter of degree.

However, when educators and the educational system step back from the traditional view and look at these students with a multidimensional lens (e.g., academic, social, emotional, cultural), it becomes apparent that there are dissimilarities between learning *disabled* students and unconventional learners with learning *differences*. Essentially, unconventional learners' processing differences can be addressed via *conventional* teaching strategies and techniques, in conjunction with new brain-based strategies tailored to support their individual processing styles.

The term *unconventional learner* describes students who may find that they tend to avoid the academic and/or social spotlight, either by working twice as hard to get acceptable grades or simply doing as little as possible to stay under the radar of their teachers and peers. In some cases, the frustration caused by the tension between their inner and outer worlds may manifest itself as with further withdrawal or inappropriate classroom behaviors, such as being disruptive or acting silly (another way to stay under the *academic radar*). If their behavior becomes a major barrier to learning, then these students are identified by the educational system, but the barriers are not 'major' but still impact learning, they may not be identify for the *actual* reason. As time passes, unconventional learners may exhibit inappropriate behavior that may spill over into their social world, causing them to have socialization difficulties. Unconventional learners across the educational system need a way to understand why these inconsistencies occur in their lives and how they can take control of their performances in both school and in social situations.

What these students, their families, and their teachers may not recognize is that unconventional learners often have difficulty in academic situations because they are expected to:

- 1.) Interpret and process complex visual or auditory information (sensory processing) presented to them in a traditional/standardized manner.
- 2.) Complete the assignment in a defined time period.

These two expectations place unconventional learners in a difficult situation that pressures them to either create a 'work-around' (that may or may not work) or more commonly, just give up trying. Either way, unconventional learners use precious time and effort to try to complete an assignment ...when if they simply understood they processing style...they could constructively complete the assignment to the best of their ability.

Educators and parents who learn to recognize students who underperform due to the effect of cognitive processing differences are better positioned to:

- a) Tactically identify these students for closer observation

- b) Monitor their performances in academic environments with a focus on unconventional teaching and learning approaches, and
- c) Fine-tune their classroom diagnostic procedures to meet the needs of these students

If learning differences are recognized and an unconventional learning style is identified, these students can be coached to:

- a) Understand how their cognitive processing operates differently from the norm,
- b) Develop personalized targeted strategies to deal with their unique styles
- c) Use appropriate tools to take advantage of their individual strengths and to offset weaknesses.

Insight into the *less-than-obvious* learning differences or unconventional processing methods by some students can be examined through the lenses of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept of learning. The ZPD addresses the differences between what a student can do independently (the actual) and that which he/she can do with help (the potential). The essence of this concept is that students who are supported through interactions with adults, higher functioning peers, learning tools, and the positive feedback based on their performance, will be more able to achieve their full potential. Chaiklin, S. states that, "...it can be (will) possible to greatly accelerate or facilitate a child's learning, if the zone can be identified properly." A key factor of this view is being able to effectively target unconventional learners who may need to understand their learning processes, provide these students with performance learning supports, and just as importantly...allow them the freedom and confidence to be themselves in an academic environment.

Modification of classroom practices by teachers (without formal intervention protocols) to help unconventional learners understand and take charge of improving their own learning processes is a win-win outcome. Without such informal intervention, students with learning/processing differences run the risk of being lost in the educational shuffle or of having their learning/social issues exacerbated until they reach a point where they are classified as having learning disabilities.

Not unreasonably, educators in the past have thought about these students using the paradigm of learning disabilities. It has been only in the last 10 to 15 years that brain research on learning and cognitive processing has started filtering into the classroom. As educators integrate cognitive processing models into their toolboxes, all students will benefit. Educators have long sensed that a learning gap may exist for some of their students, but they were not equipped to identify specific problems, much less provide assistance. With the support of brain-based learning research, educators are now finding methods to fine-tune the diagnostic processes for a greater range of students. One method gaining broad acceptance by educators is a common sense approach to meeting the needs of learners (including unconventional learners) through a process called Response to Intervention (RTI). Response to Intervention is a tiered method of academic intervention designed to provide and measure early and effective assistance to children who have difficulty learning.

As a new mindset emerges about the unconventional learner who does not need a formal IEP intervention but is underperforming relative to their intellectual capacity, the educational system must continue to develop and validate new learning approaches. A critical component to this mindset, however, is the understanding that if an individual possesses unconventional learning characteristics, it does not imply that their intelligence is in question. In fact, the implication is to the contrary; they may have more intellectual ability than they had been credited with, but processing issues interfere with their performance. In many cases, these individuals could have above average intelligence.

When this way of thinking about the unconventional learner is understood and accepted in the educational arena, students and parents (and, no doubt, many educators) who would not have

admitted to having difficulties in cognitive processing (due to the stigma attached to such admissions) might feel more comfortable in coming forward for help. Unique or different learning processes should not have a stigma attached to them. If the unconventional learner's intellect is not the question, the issue is how people process information. Successfully navigating a learning curve in any subject area is greatly dependent on the ability to first be able to clearly think and process information, in order to second be able to learn effectively. Processing differences may produce a variety of methods of interpreting and putting information to use (e.g., Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Bill Gates, Stephen Hawking, etc., had or have unique ways of processing information and solving problems). At the very least, unconventional learners must be recognized and be addressed in creative ways so that students (and teachers) can understand and positively adjust to their own unique learning approaches.

Unconventional learners are not rarities in our school systems; they exist at every intellectual capability level in virtually every classroom. These students are not disabled, they are unconventional learners hidden under the mass of conventional curriculum, the rush to complete material on a schedule for the entire class, and of unbending application of standardized assessment rules in our schools. These students are hidden because their performance levels are not low enough to qualify for an individualized education plan (IEP); they do enough to get by or they figure out work-arounds so the system does not even notice, let alone adjust to, their unconventional learning process.

## **References:**

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