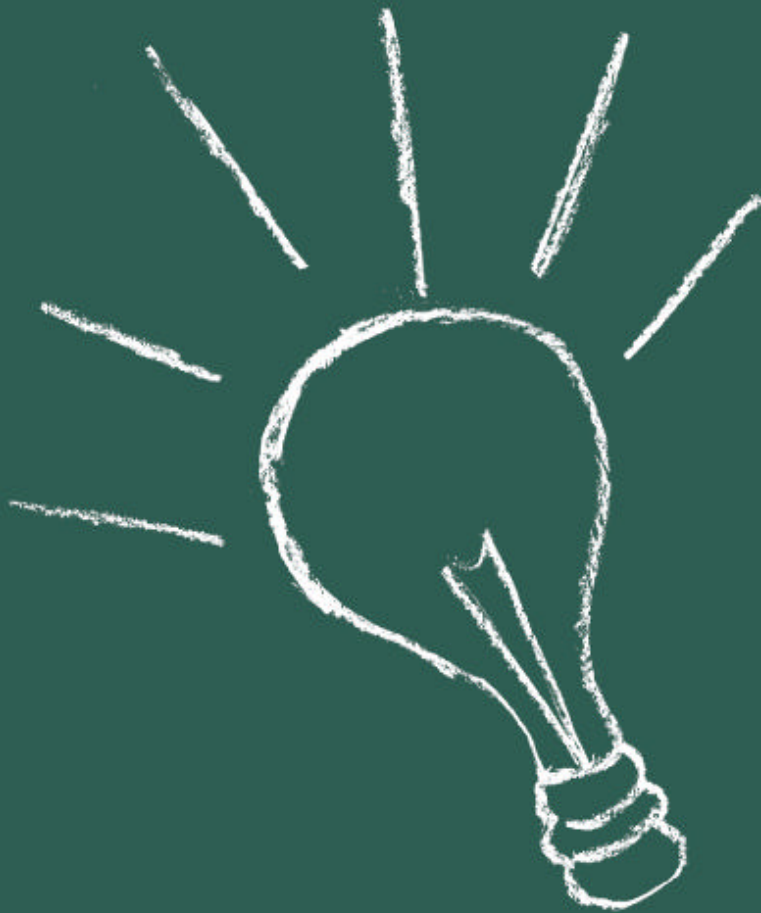


# PARTNERS

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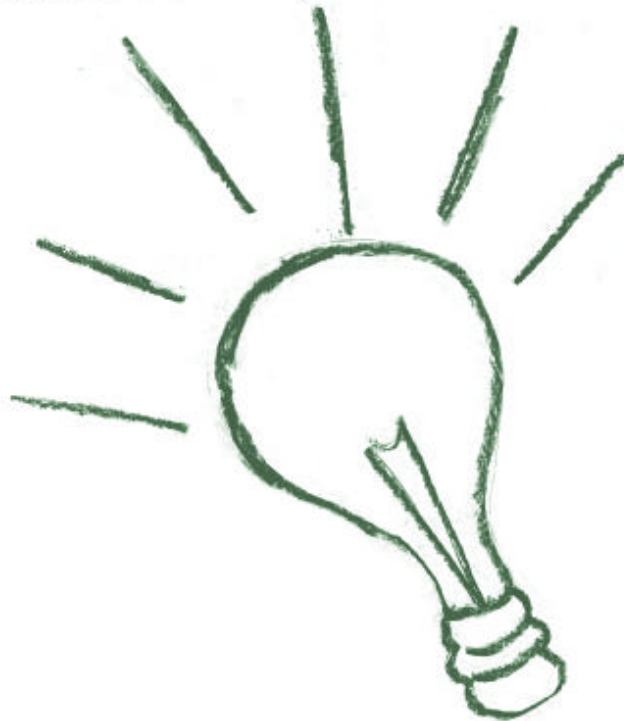
STUDENTS AND TUTORS WRITE ABOUT  
LEARNING TOGETHER. SEPT. 2000



# PARTNERS

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**VIRGINIA ADULT LEARNING**  
RESOURCE CENTER

This publication was developed as part of the Virginia Learning Disabilities Training and Dissemination (LDTD) project. The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center is the state partner of the national LDTD project, which is a collaborative effort of Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America Inc., funded by the National Institute for Literacy. The developers would like to thank Virginia's local LDTD pilot program staff and the tutors and adult learners who contributed to this work. The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center is funded by the Virginia Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Education. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect or represent the position or policy of the United States Department of Education and/or the Virginia Department of Education, and no official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education should be inferred.

## I. Introduction

### Background Information

The individuals whose words you will read in this publication were participants in the 1999-2000 Learning Disabilities Training and Dissemination (LDTD) project. The writers were/are adult learners and volunteer tutors from six community-based literacy programs across the state of Virginia.

The Virginia LDTD project was funded through a National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) grant to the national offices of Laubach Literacy Action (LLA) and Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and a sub-grant to the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center. The six programs applied to be part of the LDTD project to receive special training and assistance for a little over one year, so they could improve their services to adults with learning disabilities (or the characteristics of learning disabilities).

The learners and tutors volunteered to share their experiences as they participated in the pilot-testing of changes in intake processes, learner assessment, tutor training, and instructional practices, made as a result of the LDTD project. The learners participating in the LDTD pilots were those who had learning problems that suggested a possible disability. Most did not have a formal diagnosis at the beginning of the project. At least one was diagnosed during the project, as a result of new community connections and collaborations developed by program leaders.

Because program leaders made their own plans for improvement based on their particular needs and resources, the learners and tutors did not all have the same "LDTD experience." However, staff from all the programs had identical training based on the *Bridges to Practice* materials (also developed with NIFL funding), and the overall focus of program improvement was guided by *Bridges to Practice* (*Bridges*) principles.

### How Partners Developed

Each of the six LDTD pilot programs agreed to participate in the writing project. Two student-tutor pairs volunteered from each program, and the project began with twelve pairs, a total of 12 adult learners and 11 tutors. By the end of the six-month writing assignment, seven pairs and two other students were still participating in the writing project. Overall, participation was good: a total of 100 writings were submitted, and samples of most of them are included in this publication.

Each student and tutor was asked to submit one piece per month in response to questions or prompts. They received all six questions when they agreed to participate, so they could think ahead about what they wanted to share and plan appropriate responses. Tutors were asked to write at least a two-paragraph

response each month, and learners were asked to submit at least one paragraph, either independently written or dictated to their tutors.

Following are the questions and prompts:

**#1** Write an answer to this question: *Since beginning this project, what have you learned about learning disabilities that has helped in your tutoring or your life?*

(or)

Begin by finishing this sentence:

*A learning disability is* (or)

*My learning problem is*

**#2** *Since beginning this project, what new teaching or learning approaches or ideas have you tried? Explain and give examples.*

**#3** *Describe your successful learning experiences or progress toward goals in the last six months of tutoring.*

**#4** *Describe your challenges or frustrations as tutor or learner in the last six months.*

**#5** *What strategies, tools, or materials have you used that you would recommend to others?*

**#6** *What advice would you give to other tutors or students?*

In order to preserve the context of responses, excerpts from the writings are first presented in the order in which they were written in response to the monthly prompts. Common themes emerged over the six-month writing project, and these are discussed in the second section. The editor's inferences are presented in section three, and finally, several particularly eloquent writings were included in entirety. These pieces provide an account of tutors and learners' experiences and the learning that occurred. They also offer a sense of the individuals' motivations and emotional responses.

In the body of this publication, individuals are identified by initials, or where anonymity was requested, by the designation "student". In the Appendix, writers' names are provided if they chose to be identified.

### **LDTD Pilot-Site Programs Represented in *Partners***

Literacy Volunteers of America-Campbell County  
Literacy Volunteers of America-Charlottesville/Albemarle  
Literacy Volunteers of America-Louisa County  
Literacy Volunteers of America-Roanoke Valley  
Peninsula READS  
Rita Welsh Adult Skills Academy (College of William and Mary)

### **The Writers**

I would like to thank all the writers for their efforts, their honesty, and their willingness to share. The following individuals agreed to reveal their names. Both learners and tutors are included in this list.

Tony Bieda  
Linda Bennett  
Margaret Edwards  
Milo Gilliam  
Robert Harper  
Will Heaton  
Marilyn Holloway  
Teddy Jackson  
Ronald Johnson  
Andy Keen  
Rita Knauf  
Annette Loschert  
Terry McElhone  
Alfred Nelms  
Rebecca Olsen  
Karen Roberts  
Paula Sorenson  
Curtis Wysel

## II: The Responses

**Question 1: *Since beginning this project, what have you learned about learning disabilities that has helped in your tutoring or your life?***

**OR begin by finishing this sentence:            *A learning disability is (or)  
My learning problem is***

Most of the students responded by describing their problems matter-of-factly.

*My learning problem is understanding what I read. When I am given assignments it is hard to understand and complete them. Also when I am writing it is hard for me to find the correct word to use in the sentence. I also find myself skipping words when I read or add another word in that doesn't belong there at all.*

*My learning problem is catching the sounds of the words. I have trouble with longer words. I have a hard time breaking longer words down so that I can be able to sound them out.*

A learning disability is when a person has difficulty in different areas of reading. My main problem is with the sounds and blends. I know that once I learn my sounds and blends most of my problem will be solved. (MG)

Here are some of the problems I have to deal with because of my learning disability. I have a hard time understanding written material. As a result I have to reread material five or six times to get what is being said or have someone explain it to me. I am reading the words but it seems like my mind is wandering off somewhere else not absorbing the information. Also when I am reading I run into words that I know but I have to hesitate giving my brain time to bring it to memory. Somehow I seem to take something that may be so simple and look at it from the most difficult point of view and make it so hard. (AN)

My learning disability is a learning problem for me because it is a hard problem to say my speech words in the right order with words to pronounce so other people could understand what I am talking about. (TJ)

*Well, my difficulty kept me from learning when I injured myself playing basketball. I was a slow learner and I could not read well. Without basketball I had no desire for school. (RJ)*

One of the students acquired the comforting knowledge, "I am not alone."

What has helped me a lot is that I am not the only one that has this problem. Another thing, [MH] my tutor has been patient with me.

In answering this question, one of the learners demonstrated an understanding of learning disabilities by writing objectively and impersonally.

*A learning disability to me is someone who has a lot of trouble in understanding what is being told to them or taught to them, or someone who has a block in their mind that nothing can get through to the inside, or someone who has a lot of trouble focusing on things, or not paying attention to what's going on. (AK)*

Some included poignant descriptions of how it feels to have a learning problem, and several were careful to also describe their strengths. It is not clear whether they would have been capable of this analysis or comfortable discussing it prior to their tutoring experience or their participation in the LDTD project.

A learning disability can cause a person to feel as though they are living in two different worlds. . . . In my own world I feel comfortable, because it doesn't matter that I have a learning disability. I have a feeling of safety--one without pressure. My confidence lays in my strong areas, such as painting, woodwork, plumbing, wallpapering, etc. In my world I'm in peace.

*My major problem now is the sound of two consonants together. I have very good reading comprehension when I am able to read a story or have it read to me.*

. . . my family all thought I was a slow learner. That made me angry—I was capable of writing checks if someone helped me with spelling—I was capable of a whole lot. I ran my own cleaning business for ten years. (LB)

**Note:** Linda Bennett writes passionately about living with a learning disability. Read her story, printed in entirety, in Appendix A.

The tutors were equally frank in explaining what they had learned. Several described the interaction between formal learning in workshops and experiential learning while teaching.

*While the things I learned were not really new, my awareness was certainly heightened. Suddenly the difficulties and frustrations I experienced in my own tutoring and in my efforts to help other tutors*

*found a reason. My current student, who has a memory deficit, has sent me back to the materials Bridges recommended many times. (TM)*

*Most importantly, the information received [in workshops on learning disabilities] has confirmed some of the things I have experienced in tutoring. For example, I have found that we must constantly review new material; what seems to have been "mastered" during a session often is "lost" by the next session. This introduction of new material is more successful if we can relate it to something already learned. I have also been reminded that our best results come when we are working on something that is pertinent to the learner's life at the moment. (RK)*

Throughout the project, I've been amazed at how the learning process occurs with different people. Since [CW] works in construction, I assumed that he was primarily a tactile and verbal learner since he only read when necessary. But later I found out that his style is really a combination of the verbal, visual, and tactile. Before we started the program I relied mostly on the verbal way of teaching; I had him read stories and talk about words. The program has caused me to reflect on my teaching methods.... I've started to see that I can combine different learning styles and make an impact on [CW's] learning. (TB)

Several spoke of the "human" side of the experience.

*What have I as a tutor learned about dealing with learning disabilities? Patience and understanding are imperative. Don't become discouraged, but take each step with a sense of achievement. And share the pleasure of achievement with your student. (MH)*

*Helping [LB] to value herself has been the most important part of the "learning disabilities" experience so far. She came to me with most of a lifetime of family and friends teaching her to feel bad about herself. (RO)*

*Since beginning this project I have learned that adults can and do have many different kinds of learning disabilities. But if properly diagnosed then they can achieve success in spite of their problems. I also learned that a little encouragement goes a long way . . . and little steps of success lead to large leaps of success. (ME)*

It was important to me to realize that people do not fit neatly into my little learning boxes. They may have one, two, or six learning difficulties. We must just offer the best that we have to give. As a tutor I have

learned to let go of my preconceived ideas about learners and take them as they are...brand new to me. (PS)

*I have learned how to help [student] and others with learning disabilities, but more importantly, [student] has taught me to recognize that all of us have limitations and all of us can overcome them.*

*Believing that you can overcome your learning disability is the most important step of the learning process. I have come to understand as a tutor that instilling confidence in the students and showing them that they have the ability to master their limitations should be the first priority. Everyone has to believe that they can work through their problems before they can actually make any progress. (WH)*

**Note:** Will Heaton tells a moving story of how he has learned from his student, and Paula Sorenson writes in a lighter vein about her developing awareness. Their complete writings are included in Appendix A on pages 27-28.

In a few cases, tutors were reluctant to identify their students as learning disabled. They were probably aware that without a formal diagnosis, one cannot jump to conclusions. Seeing other factors involved, they were perhaps unwilling to ascribe the learners' difficulties to a learning disability.

*My student has significant difficulty in recognizing consonant sounds, especially those that are paired, such as "ch" or "pr." . . . He is very intelligent, but he lacks the skill of reading. I am working under the assumption of no disability. [RH]*

*A learning disability may be any one of a group of disorders that cause difficulty in reading, writing, mathematics, communicating (speaking and listening). From my conversations and work with [AK], I do not believe his deficiencies in reading and writing were caused by what is described as a learning disability, but rather, were caused by lack of motivation for learning at an earlier age. Because of his outgoing nature, he always found it easy to get friends to help him get by. As time went on, he found himself in certain situations where he was "on-the-spot" to understand or perform certain tasks (e.g. reading instructions, filling out job applications, writing out checks, etc.)*

*As a literacy student, I have found [AK] to be extremely motivated with a great desire to improve his reading and writing abilities. In fact, he has made great strides in reading, writing, grammar, and spelling. [AL]*

**Question 2: Since beginning this project what new teaching or learning approaches have you tried?**

The learners spoke of specific materials and strategies.

I used a ruler as a guide when I read to help me read one sentence at a time. (TJ)

*I have been reading and writing and using my computer. . . . One year ago I did not know how to use a computer. Now I am a little better at this. (CW)*

I tried the Wilson Reading System. I like the tapping out of words. That helps me to remember the words better. It forces me to spend more time on the individual sounds.

My tutor has been working with me to improve my spelling. I have been working on sounding out words . . . My tutor has been teaching me to use a dictionary.

*Since the project started, my tutor and I have been working on guided practice. We use this to do worksheets about using the dictionary. We also read out loud and try to put it in my own words.*

*I try reading every day and that has helped me a lot since I have started this program. I practice writing each day. I write short stories and write sentences each day about my day. This helps me a lot because when I come to a word that I can't spell I have to look it up in the dictionary. (AK)*

The tutors offered more detail about strategies, including various approaches to phonics skills and an emphasis on structure, repetition, and routine.

*We have begun the use of an audiocassette recorder. [Student] can hear the word, break down the word into its components and then listen to himself repeating the exercise. (TM)*

*Since I began tutoring, [student] and I have tried several different approaches to improve his vocabulary and reading ability. Within the past year however, I think we have found a couple of approaches that have addressed [student's] weaknesses and focus on building the skills to overcome these disabilities. First [student] and I have begun to practice using a dictionary . . . Secondly, we now use the Laubach series and several phonics exercises to concentrate on vowels and consonants and their associated sounds.*

*. . . These two approaches have greatly helped [student] over the past year and although the lessons are often more difficult and tedious [student] attacks the problems with determination. Furthermore, his improvement has become extremely noticeable and he has become more comfortable in every day situations. (WH)*

Spelling has been a major roadblock to his writing: he has a lot to say, but can't use many of the words he would in ordinary speech due to the difficulty in spelling the words. As a result, every session we work on phonics. I have some word cards that not only have the word, but also have pictures and word endings. I've found this very helpful, and have seen an improvement for him in being able to spell short words. In addition to spelling the word, [CW] writes a sentence using the word. . . . we work with words that sound the same, but have different meanings (right vs. write). . . . Third we are working on the steps to successful paragraphs. (TB)

*I have [AK] focus on reading and writing daily. He writes three sentences each day about his day, in addition to a short essay each week. This has challenged him to use more words and check the spelling in the dictionary. . . . We regularly add word cards to his collection to increase vocabulary and prepare for spelling tests. [AL]*

Two tutors described using graphic organizers to improve reading comprehension.

*We have tried two new approaches to our reading and understanding. The first has been to outline what the learner has read. This includes questioning himself as to what the writer wants us to know:*

- 1. What is the topic sentence?*
- 2. What ideas support this subject?*

*These items are then incorporated into a basic outline formula in as few words as possible. This reinforcement in another sensory area has helped the learner think of his subject matter in slightly different ways. It also makes for a good study tool as it makes for good notes on the subject.*

*He has recently started a word reference book. . . . He is regularly using his dictionary in this project. (KR)*

One of the greatest helps to me since this project began is what I learned about mapping. I now use mapping to help teach comprehension if a student has a problem in that area. I show this technique to all of them just in case they like it better than using an outline. I simply draw a box with four columns in it. The first column is for what happened in the

beginning of the story. The second is what happened next. The third what happened next. The fourth is for how the story ended. There are places on the page for the main characters, main idea, and moral of the story, etc. . . . This simple little technique has been a tremendous help. . . . The other new thing I have used recently is the tapping out of sounds that the Wilson Reading System uses. I use this program a lot because it works. (PS)

One tutor described the use of guided practice (a strategy introduced in *Bridges* as part of "Direct Instruction"). Her student also mentioned guided practice, indicating that this pair is planning and evaluating strategies collaboratively.

*Since this project started, my learner and I have been spending much more time on guided practice and, in conjunction with that, talking through the thought processes involved in completing a task. (RK)*

**Note:** Rita Knauf describes the use of guided practice (in the direct instruction format) and provides an excellent example of how tutor and learner, through explicit teaching and thinking aloud, came to understand the source of a particular learning problem and thus to work around it. Her entire piece is in Appendix A, on page 29.

**||| Question # 3: Describe your successful learning experiences or progress toward goals in the last six months of tutoring.**

A few learners wrote about developing specific skills.

I have been very successful in my reading skills, and also I have learned the meaning of different words. . . . and how to use more than one word together. Examples: superman, fire wagon, and supermarket. [TJ]

I have learned all the letters of the alphabet and their sounds. I know the difference between the vowels and the consonants now and never forget them. I'm getting better at running the individual sounds together to make the words come out.

Others wrote about strategies, much as they had in responding to question #2.

I have been working on sounding out words. I also have been finding how many syllables are in a word. Also [listening] for each syllable sound and blending them together. I have also worked on putting stresses after syllables that are stressed. These skills have helped me with my spelling a little. I also been working with a spelling list that has helped me to recognize words in a book or newspaper.

I am reading a story to my tutor and underlining the words that I don't know; on the other hand, I try to use context clues to figure it out. If that don't work I'll look them up in the dictionary and write the definition down and we'll go over them the next meeting. . . . Here are some of the strategies that I am using: questioning myself more as I am reading, putting more thought into it, and building my vocabulary. [AN]

One described an increase in confidence.

*In the last six months my self-confidence has come a long way. I've recently had success in seeking out a new job which I feel will allow me to better myself. I could tell a big difference in myself when I had to complete the forms for my new job. I did not have to get much help at all. Before I got this job I was interviewed by four different people, and I felt real comfortable about myself. I guess the biggest successful learning experience I've had in the past six months is that I've learned I've got a whole lot more self-confidence. [AK]*

Another learner described her achievement of a very different goal. Her story is on page 30 in Appendix A; an excerpt is included here.

*My goal was to be assessed to determine what kind of learning disability I had. I knew I had one.  
The assessment was a horrible process of bringing back all the nightmares from school. Just as my tutor and I [thought], I do have a learning difficulty. Even though the assessment was a bad experience, in the long run, it is going to be one of the best things I have done. [LB]*

Tutor responses to question #3 were quite different from the learners'. One tutor explained that the learner did not seem to value an achievement she saw as significant.

*[TJ] does not recognize the great goal he has achieved this month. I thought it was a tremendous accomplishment. This month [TJ] began reading standard literature. After discussing the story, he read "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." The library gave him an illustrated children's edition and he was slightly miffed at what he may have seen as a put down. He is presently reading "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" in paperback. [TM]*

Others mentioned specific strategies that have worked.

*. . . outlining, which includes identifying topic sentences and supporting data, as well as using material about which the learner has an avid interest have been our most recent successful learning techniques. Earlier I was able to obtain some videos for a subject he was studying [at community college], and this proved to be very successful as a reinforcement of the written material. [KR]*

*Emphasis has been placed on proofreading to cut down on incorrect use of certain words and letter omissions (this has worked!). [AL]*

One tutor took encouragement from the learner's growing self-awareness.

*My learner and I have experienced successes during the course of the last six months. These successes have not been big, dramatic gains, but rather moments of insight into how she can use her learning strengths and what causes her the most trouble.*

*For example, she recently completed a Medical Terminology course at the community college. This course required her to learn a large amount of difficult vocabulary. We spent a great deal of time looking at and writing these words and identifying their parts (prefix, root, suffix). With the extra practice we did she became very good at "spotting" the various parts of the words and being able to read and understand new words. [RK]*

Several discussed the evolution of their teaching, as they analyzed learners' difficulties and tried new approaches.

*When beginning with my student I spent the majority of the time building a basic background and establishing the necessary knowledge important for an intermediate reading level. Now as my student continues to improve, I have learned to address specific problems as they arise and find their sources. For example, my student constantly struggles to recognize vowel and consonant sounds when I dictate words and sentences. Therefore he struggles constantly to spell words correctly when they are dictated or when he has to write using his own abilities*

*. . . By stressing spelling and associating letters and their sounds by using several phonics drills we have begun to overcome this problem and he continues to improve his spelling ability. [WH]*

I have a student who had a very difficult time putting sounds together to form words. He knew the sounds of the letters and would practically say

the word out loud when trying to read but would be unable to actually come up with the word. We worked and worked and didn't seem to make any progress. I was getting worried that I might lose him due to our lack of advancement. I kept looking for something that would help us. I found it in the Wilson Reading System. This system taps out the sounds on the fingers to get the word. It works like a charm. I showed it to my student and he was reading three-letter words almost immediately. This is no small feat considering that we had been working on this for nearly a year with little or no success. [PS]

One tutor whose student was diagnosed with a learning disability and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder as a result of participating in the LDTD project described next steps after the diagnosis.

*I have gotten some books to read on AADD [Adult Attention Deficit Disorder] and a good video. All of these explain the difficulty of staying on task for an individual with the disorder. We have agreed to work on structure in our class time and possibly some additional structure in her life. . . . So we have not had a successful learning experience yet, but we are right on the edge of returning to organization and systematic meetings. Early in our meetings we were able to establish a routine for our meeting day and classes; I believe we can get back to that now. [RO]*

**Note:** See Linda Bennett's writing about her diagnosis in Appendix A, page 30.

**Question #4: Describe your challenges or frustrations in your work as tutor or learner in the last six months.**

The learners' writings in response to #4 were (not surprisingly) reminiscent of their responses to the first prompt: *My learning problem is . . . .* They spoke of specific learning problems and complications arising from life in general.

One of the frustrations that I have found in my work is word problems. I have had trouble understanding what I read and how to solve the problem. . . . Also in reading I need to improve in reading one sentence and stopping at the period before going on to read the next sentence, and understanding the meaning of what I read. [TJ]

*I am currently taking a sociology class. This class consists of a lot of self-thinking and also opinion. That is very challenging because I can't ask [tutor] for help.*

Finding the time to do the work and still have time with my family after work. Finding a place that is quiet so that I can study better. [MG]

*It is frustrating to me when I can't make it to one of my classes. One of the reasons why it makes me upset is because I learn a whole lot better if I can go to class each week because everything is fresh in my mind. Another thing that is frustrating is when I don't do well on my spelling test. I still have quite a bit of trouble with spelling. [AK]*

*Starting this program I started on the wrong foot, because I started with 50,000 problems. I was going through a divorce, had a one-year-old girl and a twelve-year-old boy. I was working two jobs—more like three jobs. And my father-in-law passed away right after I started my classes. I lived with my mother for three months. I had no self-esteem, no confidence, never lived alone, and feared that my daughter would be taken away from me because I couldn't read or write. [LB]*

**Note:** Read about one learner's frustrations in Appendix A, page 30.

Tutors' responses were equally varied, sometimes echoing the learners' frustrations.

*As with obstacles in other parts of life, overcoming the tough times gives a terrific sense of accomplishment, boosting the confidence of all those involved. . . . At times I still feel frustrated when we review certain lessons and my student has forgotten much of what we worked so hard to learn just weeks ago. However, I catch myself and remind myself that with time these challenges can be overcome; it just takes patience. [WH]*

*My frustrations would be (1) having enough time to help [MG] with what he needs in the time that we have; (2) the absence from class; and (3) the difficulty he has in preparing for lessons on a weekly basis. [ME]*

*My learner has a demanding full-time job, owns her own home, and takes an evening class at the community college. This makes for a very busy life and she often cancels our sessions. Since some of what we are trying in the LDTD project requires her to approach reading and writing activities in a slightly different way, we need to meet consistently. . . . After missing several sessions I find that she forgets some of the strategies and slips into the old familiar way of doing things. . . . Another challenge centers around the class she is currently taking. . . . This class requires quite a bit of*

*writing and reflection. It has been difficult going over her required journaling. I can help her with the basic construction and clarity of the writing, but since I don't attend the class, I can't really give her input on whether she is successfully capturing the main ideas as her instructor wishes. [RK]*

*The most challenging aspect of [TJ's] instruction remains his almost total lack of background knowledge and secondarily his poor memory. . . . He does extremely well with the biographies of the various black historical figures, and we use this facility as a hook for other persons involved in the struggle [Civil War]. The repetition necessary to make a fact stick would be made a lot easier if [TJ] were more comfortable with the computer. [TM]*

*One frustration that my student and I share is our speech patterns. We rely a lot on sounds (phonetics), which I feel are so important for sight-reading. One simplistic example is the word "get", which he pronounces "git." The differences obviously add complications to the learning process. [MH]*

**Question #5: What strategies, tools, or materials have you used that you would recommend to others?**

Several learners recommended specific texts. (See Resources Cited in Appendix B for details.)

*I would like to recommend the book All Spelled Out; it helps with vocabulary words. I also recommend Reading Comprehension in Varied Subject Matter. One of the reasons is once you read the outline of the paragraph you can focus on what to expect and what's important stands out to you. We also worked on guided practice. It gave me confidence that I could work alone.*

*The materials in the workbook [Patterns in Spelling] that we study from are really good. I really like the part where it gives you a scene to write about. This allows you to use your imagination. I also like doing the crossword puzzle. [AK]*

*I would recommend using the Laubach Way to Reading Skill Books I, II, and III. Also the adult reading series Challenger. I also recommend using books like Focus on Phonics -- 2B (Consonant Blends) and Focus on Phonics -- 3 (Long Vowel Sounds) by Gail V. Rice. I think reading News for You newspapers helps. I recommend using a spelling list. I think a list helps one to recognize words in a book or newspaper . . .*

*The tool I use is the computer. I do my lessons on the computer; we are on Level BA Lesson 10 in Reading Strategies. The computer makes the lessons more exciting and more challenging. [LB]*

Others mentioned strategies.

I have learned how to use a TV computer, which helps me with my reading and arithmetic. Also the tape player has helped me with my reading. By playing the tape player I can listen to myself, and this will help my reading skills. Also my teacher has trained me to go to the library to get different books that teach me about brave men, women, and history. [TJ]

*The strategy I use is to make myself read more. I used to just clam up and hand it to someone else to read. Now I just try and try until I figure it out. If I am stuck then I get help. [LB]*

*By writing in my journal I have greatly improved my writing ability. . . . Two of the tools that I can recommend are the dictionary and spelling cards. . . . Having these cards allows me to keep up with words that I have learned, and to work on the ones I have not learned yet. [AK]*

The first thing would be things in my everyday life, like the newspaper, stop signs, and reading books. I have used my CDL test book, GED book, workbooks, and letter writing. [MG]

Tutors responses were similar, but more often focused on strategies.

*This month I concentrated on manipulatives and “things” that I thought would lengthen [TJ’s] memory span. He really likes his “yellow ruler” and uses it in other classes . . . The tape recorder was less successful in the beginning, but he finally admitted that he had forgotten the operating instructions. Next meeting he got written directions and that was better. . . . [TJ] seems to relate to people in history, especially notable figures in black history, so we read their stories. [TM]*

*One of the big benefits of doing the different learning style inventories is that it opened my learner’s eyes more to the way she best learns. Often in the past she would focus only on the difficulty of the task. . . . I think she has enjoyed this learning about learning and that it has helped her keep a positive attitude.*

We used the Word Feature Spelling List Assessment (Neva Viise, University of Virginia). She did very well on this; not many problem areas were indicated. Still, we did go over the results together, talking about what was being tested in each group of words . . . I definitely recommend this assessment as a good way to narrow the scope when working on spelling difficulties. Suggestions for activities for each of the word features are included in the companion booklet.

For work on reading comprehension we used Reading Comprehension in Varied Subject Matter, Book 3 (Jane Ervin, Educators Publishing Service). The format of this book was very good for my learner. Before each reading there was a brief statement about the passage and the reason for reading. This helped her to slow down and think about the passage before she started reading. There are a variety of comprehension questions after each passage that are always in the same order . . . The material in this book is geared toward intermediate readers. [RK]

One strategy that I have found helpful are lessons that involve repetition. . . . (1) I have him dictate his own story to me. (2) We then read it together, noting written words that give him trouble. (3) I then dictate it in return to [student]. (4) His piece is corrected and (5) recopied with emphasis on penmanship and neatness. I have found the Laubach books, Focus on Phonics, very helpful. . . . I feel reading aloud, even when he is alone, will help him with eye-ear coordination. [MH]

The material in the Patterns in Spelling series published by New Readers Press has been excellent. (We are currently completing Book 3 Patterns with Consonant Blends and Digraphs.) I have found this is great foundation material, and we plan to complete the series.

We have also built a word list (drawing from Patterns in Spelling and from our conversations) on 3 x 5 cards to reinforce both meaning and spelling. Words are then used in sentences for homework, and spelling tests are regularly scheduled. [AL]

Rebecca Olsen (in response to question #4) mentioned specific resources and strategies. Another excerpt from her writing is included here.

I have used the two books, Murphy's Out of the Fog: Treatment Options and Coping Strategies for Adult Attention Deficit Disorder and Hallowell and Ratey's Driven to Distraction, to get information about how to work with and then further teach my student.

The authorities recommend that the individual coping with ADD learn to impose structure in life processes. Anything to relieve confusion, from organizing one's purse to getting rid of accumulated stuff. We are reviewing those strategies (and practicing reading and writing) to move on with our instruction. . . . We continue to work with the Wilson Reading System and the Reading Strategies software. Both

*of these are structured and both lend self-confidence and self-esteem.  
[RO]*

**Note:** Marilyn Holloway discusses using the newspaper in instruction. Read the details in Appendix A on page 31.

|| **Question #6: *What advice would you give to other tutors or students?***

Persistence was the theme of most of the learners' advice to other learners.

I would say don't give up--just keep trying.

It's hard work, but keep at it. It will pay off. [MG]

My advice that I would give to other students and tutors is to stay in school. Also I would suggest that the student go to a training program and get a tutor to help him . . . [TJ]

To continue to work hard and never give up to the students. To the tutors, always use a slow approach with your students.

*No matter how much time it takes do not give up on yourself. I want students to know that a lot of times you might get down on yourself, but that's when you have got to really remember why you are there and keep on studying as hard as you can. [AK]*

Linda Bennett speaks with passion as she gives advice to other learners.

*Don't run from it! Don't waste years of your life trying to cover up something that isn't your fault. Don't feel sorry for yourself. Get angry—get tough and say you are going to do something about it. The hardest thing is to admit that something is wrong and get help. . . .*

*Take this advice about a tutor. They want to help you. They want to make a difference in the world. So go ahead and trust them. Let them help you. [LB]*

My advice to other students would be to be on time when appointments are scheduled. Give your tutor 110% at all times. Think of your tutor as being a very special friend that you can open up to . . . [AN]

**Note:** Read the complete text of Alfred Nelms' advice in Appendix A.

The tutors were almost unanimous in counseling patience.

*For students of course, patience is the first requirement, and to encourage this virtue I would advise tutors to be very vocal when recognizing their student's achievements. Sometimes we don't remember an old goal and lose it as a success when something happens weeks or months into training. We need to think "outside the box." Using manipulatives (pennies) was a really surprising and fun activity for signed numbers and algebra. [TM]*

*Do not give up. Keep trying one method or another until your student "catches on" and the light burns brightly for him/her. [ME]*

*Patience is essential, with verbal encouragement all-important. Repetition and review are ongoing. The tutor must not become discouraged for that can become infectious, but rather grasp with enthusiasm any and all progress. [MH]*

Annette Loschert writes about the importance of challenge.

***The strongest recommendation I would give to another tutor is to be bold in challenging your student -- stretch him or her, but at the same time be sensitive to how much the student can absorb without getting frustrated. (That means you must have a good relationship with the student in order to recognize his or her needs.) [AL]***

Rita Knauf and Rebecca Olsen both offered a wealth of good advice! They emphasize the importance of self-directed learning and more formal professional development for tutors. Read below how they have "gone the extra mile" to acquire the learning they felt they needed to meet the challenge of tutoring an adult with special learning needs.

*Having completed the LDTD project, I encourage tutors to take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about learning disabilities. Workshops and seminars are a great source for information about learning disabilities and suggestions for working with the learning disabled student. But merely attending these workshops is not enough. I found that I needed to go over my notes and the material I received not once, but many times during the last six months. Each time I did so I found some "new" insight or was encouraged to keep to the course we were following. There are also many books that offer everything from definitions of learning disabilities to concrete suggestions on how to work with specific difficulties.  
. . . It is very helpful to talk to other tutors. They can keep you going if you are unsure or discouraged because it is likely that they have experienced the same things you have.*

*To students, I encourage you to try to change the way you think about the way you learn. This may be difficult because you are so used to thinking in terms of what you can't do. . . .*

*Finally to tutors and students . . . Talk with one another each time you meet. I think we can become so driven by the need to accomplish a certain amount of work, or get to a certain goal that we often forget to explain why and how we are doing a task. This is a time when talking about learning styles is especially important. After awhile you will probably find that you don't have to make a conscious effort to think about learning styles; it will become automatic. And it is much less frustrating to be able to approach a new task by thinking of strengths you can use to achieve it rather than focusing solely on the things that make it difficult. [RK]*

*Go for it! Don't be afraid that [an] LD student is too difficult for you to tutor. Adults with LD are all around us all the time. They cover their difficulties so well we don't know about them. . . .*

*Take every opportunity to learn and practice new techniques. Take the student into your confidence about the techniques you try. Your student will be able to tell you if the technique is successful . . . Be sure you give a technique enough time to become comfortable before you decide if it is useful or not.*

*Learn all you can all the time about the new research in the field of LD. Yesterday I heard that fluorescent lights are particularly distracting to ADD students. That was a new idea for me.*

*You do have to be as questioning as you can be about new techniques. Be careful about how you spend your time, money, and energy. [RO]*

### III. Finding the Main Ideas

#### Respect for Learners

A strong theme throughout the tutors' writing was their respect for the learners—their struggles, their commitment, their hard work, and their accomplishments.

*This student is devoted to his studies--spending hours every day--and deserves all the help he can get. [TM]*

*He left school at about age 12 and also left home at an early age. He has been on his own since that young age, and has made a success of his life. He has worked as a painter for the same employer for 34 years and has raised two sons to be educated and productive adults.*

*His dedication to this learning project is whole-hearted, but in his own words, "It is the hardest thing I have ever tried to do." Overcoming his disability is made difficult by having spent a lifetime compensating for his inadequacy and having lived in a society that attaches a stigma to being unable to read and write. [MH]*

*She is a wonderful hardworking person with a strong value system. It has been my privilege to help her see herself in a better light. [RO]*

*[TJ] remains dedicated to his learning and has come so far that it is impossible not to continue with him at his own speed. [TM]*

*He is a quick learner who is dedicated to overcome the anxieties normally caused in "pressure" situations which prevent him from feeling confident about his reading and writing abilities. [AL]*

*As he overcomes his disability, he knows that he must work harder than others to learn, but he never uses that as an excuse. [Student] proves to those around him every day that learning disabilities can be overcome and should give no one a reason to feel ashamed. [WH]*

**Note:** Read Will Heaton's entire story on page 27.

#### Fear, Pressure, and Pain

Three of the learners described the painful feelings resulting from years of living with a learning problem and skill deficiencies.

The pressure of society can bring a lot of fear to a person with a learning disability. Fear affects my life every day. Fear has stopped me from talking to people around me and going different places where I might have to read and write.

To me shopping is like nothing has labels. I know if I could read, by now I would be a supervisor at work.

*. . . I learned that what I had was a learning difficulty. It might be hereditary and I was scared to death, terrified that [daughter] might have it. . . . I prayed about that a lot. I wouldn't want anyone to go through what I went through for thirty-eight years. [LB]*

*It is hard to find someone you can trust to reveal that you do not read. People are cruel. A lot of adults who don't have a reading problem take it for granted. When they hear that someone cannot read the question is, "What's the matter with them? Are they stupid? What did they do for twelve years?" I successfully hid my problem. [LB]*

**Note:** Read Linda Bennett's entire response to question #1 on page 26.

### Using a computer

The most frequently mentioned learning tool was the computer. Both tutors and students described positive experiences. Most appear to be referring to skills-instruction programs, but at least one student was using his home computer's word processor and e-mail to practice writing.

*We started out working with a computer program, Reading Strategies, which gave her success in the reading and vocabulary drill. Though use of a computer program was not one of the techniques recommended in Bridges, it was most effective for her to have a good supply of successes. Fortunately, that program is structured and repetitive in the structure. I was pleased to learn that those were two desirable components of instruction for someone who has learning difficulties. [RO]*

*Since starting this program I have learned to use the computer. It has given me confidence that I can learn. . . . The software program Reading Strategies on the computer has helped me with reading out loud, I know my way around the keyboard, and I know I won't break it. [LB]*

In our session at LVA, he writes using a pen that he is comfortable with. At home, he primarily writes on his computer and uses electronic mail to communicate what he has read. [TB]

I like working on the computer. If I work on the computer first, it is easier for me to understand the lessons in the workbook.

**Note:** Two learners are quoted elsewhere on this subject: see Curtis Wysel on page 8 and Teddy Jackson on page 16.

### **Not Enough Time!**

The most common lament was the lack of time for teaching and studying. Despite their dedication, both learners and tutors often have difficulty fitting tutoring and learning into what little discretionary time they have.

*We have had lots of scheduling problems in the last four months. I was out for surgery, we had the holidays, and she has had some problems with her husband and son that have distracted her from regular class. She moved and her daughter was ill; it has seemed that we could never have an hour of just working on learning to read. [RO]*

I have been working so much I have no time to work on my GED or the books in [the program]. I need more time to study and better myself. [MG]

*During the past six months (and particularly the last three months) Andy and I have had a number of scheduling challenges due to personal commitments on both our parts. [AL]*

*My learner has a demanding full-time job, owns her own home, and takes an evening class at the community college. This makes for a very busy life and she often cancels our sessions. [RK]*

"Finding the time to do the work and still have time with my family after work [is challenging]. [MG]

*My frustrations would be (1) having enough time to help [MG] with what he needs in the time that we have; (2) the absence from class; and (3) the difficulty he has in preparing for lessons on a weekly basis. [ME]*

## IV. Reading Between the Lines

This informal collection of writings was not intended to yield even tentative conclusions about the nature and quality of teaching and learning that took place during Virginia's LDTD project. However these 100 selections, when considered as a whole, offer an impression of the partnerships between these 23 tutors and learners. The reader may reasonably make the following inferences:

- **These tutors and students have good personal and working relationships.**
- **They show evidence of collaborative planning and tutoring.** Tutors and students often use similar language in describing their lessons and seem to have a common understanding of what they are doing and why.
- **Both tutors and learners are able to articulate specific difficulties** and, in most cases, also identify learning strengths.
- **Most tutors and some students are able to define “learning disabilities”** in language that reflects current understanding in the field.
- **They understand that teaching and learning—that is, achieving goals—will take time.**
- **They are often frustrated, but still hopeful.**
- **Many of the tutors appear to understand that a measure of creativity is required** in planning instruction for these learners, as well as a bit of detective work to identify the root of specific difficulties.
- **A variety of strategies, tools, and materials are being used:** basic skills workbooks, literature, newspapers, dictionaries, real-life materials, college class materials, language experience stories, videotapes, audio-tape recorders, and computer-assisted instruction. Several tutors refer specifically to what they learned from the *Bridges* materials, and one describes the successful use of teaching strategies from *Bridges*. Another has adopted the Wilson Method.
- **Progress is being made;** both tutors and learners recognize at least small achievements.

Finally, it should be noted that their writings show them to be interesting and admirable people. One could hardly imagine a better group of folks!

# Appendix A

***Question #1: Since beginning this project, what have you learned about learning disabilities that has helped in your tutoring or your life?***

It's not my fault! I have a learning difficulty—it has affected my whole life. I felt cheated because of this problem until I got help. Now it has made me understand that it's not my fault and with the right kind of help it can be remedied.

I didn't finish the last year of high school because I couldn't read or write well. I did enough to get by. But that wasn't enough so I continued to fight and struggle and my family all thought I was a slow learner. That made me angry—I was capable of writing checks if someone helped me with spelling—I was capable of a whole lot. I ran my own cleaning business for ten years.

I have two children, James and Blair. From the time I found I was pregnant with James I read books (that I could read). I didn't want him to be like me so everything I could read to him, I read. I taught him to count to a hundred, his ABCs. I told him everything that I knew and when he got about eight years old he realized that his Mom couldn't read or write good and he asked why? I told him I didn't know. I went all the way through school and they didn't know what was wrong. They put me in special classes but I always knew all that, so I wasn't a slow learner. So then I made it to the twelfth grade—I didn't graduate so here I am—just like I told you. My son, James helped me to spell things; he would say, "I will help you. I won't tell anyone." That made me cry.

Eleven years after James I had Blair. By then I learned that what I had was a learning difficulty. It might be hereditary and I was scared to death, terrified that Blair might have it. So I started teaching her everything I know. She is two. She says her ABCs all the way through and can count to ten and knows most of her colors. Maybe I got lucky and she doesn't have it. I prayed about that a lot. I wouldn't want anyone to go through what I went through for thirty-eight years. But now I am getting help. I feel much better about myself and my problem.

Linda Bennett

***Question # 1: Since beginning this project, what have you learned about learning disabilities that has helped in your tutoring or your life?***

Tutoring [student] has taught me a new way to approach life and together we have shown each other how to work through the problems that we confront every day. Working with [student] and his learning disability challenges both of us to find new ways to help him overcome his limitations. I have learned to determine problems from all different angles and find the most effective way of solving them. Tutoring [student] has taught me to look at words, and the world in general, from his perspective. More than ever, I realize that every person has their own way of finding an answer and each of us must be patient and try to understand each other. More importantly though, the determination and amount of effort [student] displays while learning makes me want to work even harder to help him.

I realize that for years [student], having only a limited reading ability, found other ways to work around his limitations. As he overcomes his disability, he knows that he must work harder than others to learn, but he never uses that as an excuse. [Student] proves to those around him every day that learning disabilities can be overcome and should give no one a reason to feel ashamed. I have learned how to help [student] and others with learning disabilities, but more importantly, [student] has taught me to recognize that all of us have limitations and all of us can overcome them.

Believing that you can overcome your learning disability is the most important step of the learning process. I have come to understand as a tutor that instilling confidence in the students and showing them that they have the ability to master their limitations should be the first priority. Everyone has to believe that they can work through their problems before they can actually make any progress. [Student], no matter how frustrated he gets, never gives up, and that determination is the basis for his success.

Will Heaton

***Question # 1: Since beginning this project, what have you learned about learning disabilities that has helped in your tutoring or your life?***

I have learned so much about learning disabilities since I started this project that I hesitate to tell all lest the world should know how dense I was on the whole subject. I was aware of different learning difficulties before I began this project, but I had them quite neatly compartmentalized in my brain. I knew that I might run into a student that couldn't keep his attention on the lesson at hand. I understood that some people saw letters or words backwards. I knew of people who could read every word but need to work on comprehension. I knew that there would be people with memory problems. I was however, surprised to find that I might be working with someone who doesn't pay attention to the words he just read backwards, and can't tell me what they said, who will never be bored with doing the same lesson over because he can't remember doing it last week anyway.

Although this work is serious and very important I have learned to keep a sense of humor and enjoy it.

It was important to me to realize that people do not fit neatly into my little learning boxes. They may have one, two, or six learning difficulties. We must just offer the best that we have to give. As a tutor I have learned to let go of my preconceived ideas about learners and take them as they are...brand new to me.

Paula Sorenson

***Question # 1: Since beginning this project, what have you learned about learning disabilities that has helped in your tutoring or your life?***

Since this project started, my learner and I have been spending much more time on guided practice and, in conjunction with that, talking through the thought processes involved in completing a task.

In the past, when we worked on some type of writing assignment (cloze worksheets, matching activities, etc.), we would go over the first few examples together and then move on to independent practice. Quite often my learner would seem to lose focus by the time she finished the worksheet. This was especially true in the case of a worksheet having multi-step directions; by the time she finished she was no longer following all of the directions.

During a recent class we worked on a worksheet about using a dictionary. The directions involved reading a sentence, looking at the dictionary entry of the word in bold type, and then writing the number of the definition that pertains to the word in bold type. I modeled the first two to three examples, talking through each step as I did it. Then we move to guided practice. In the course of doing this it became obvious that my learner wasn't always understanding that there was more than one definition for a given word. So we made it a point to read the sentence, look at definition #1 of the given word, go back and read the sentence, read definition #2 of the given word, and so on. This worked well and after a few successes I pointed out that she was now starting to see the differences in the definitions of a word instead of seeing definitions 1-4 as all the same definition. In choosing the correct definition we worked on talking through her thought processes (thinking aloud). After modeling and then going to guided practice for most of the worksheet, talking through the thought processes involved, my learner then completed the last example or two independently. We followed this procedure with the same type of exercise during our next few classes.

Rita Knauf

***Question # 3: Describe your successful learning experiences or progress toward goals in the last six months of tutoring.***

My goal was to be assessed to determine what kind of learning disability I had. I knew I had one.

The assessment was a horrible process of bringing back all the nightmares from school. Just as my tutor and I [thought], I do have a learning difficulty. Even though the assessment was a bad experience, in the long run, it is going to be one of the best things I have done.

It opened doors so now my tutor can help me better. She has done research to teach me better. I am talking with a doctor. The tests indicated adult attention deficit disorder along with a reading disorder. Medication is believed to help a person with ADD learn better.

My tutor has asked me to do a self-test to determine if caffeine affected the way I feel. And I am trying to cut out junk food.

My personal life is affecting the way I feel right now, [and] this may have affected the caffeine and junk food results. My tutor is dying to work with me on stress management, diet, and life structure.

Linda Bennett

***Question # 4: Describe your challenges or frustrations in your work as tutor or learner in the last six months.***

My frustration comes when I can't hear the sounds in each syllable and blend the sounds together. Also when I know a word but cannot spell it and know that I know how to but my mind seems to go blank. I also get very frustrated when one week I go over my work and the next week I cannot remember. The words just [will] not stay with me for long. I get very frustrated because sometimes I think that I have gone as far as I can go in my learning, but I know that's not enough. My reading has improved but not my spelling.

Anonymous (student)

***Question # 4: Describe your challenges or frustrations in your work as tutor or learner in the last six months.***

One of the challenges in teaching the older adult to read is to provide materials that are relevant to a student's particular interests and needs. The daily newspaper is often a good source, especially if the tutor is familiar with the student's interests. For example, [student] enjoys fishing, and reading the weekly fishing column can provide him with useful information. I select a pertinent paragraph in advance, read it to him, having him follow word by word. He then reads it back to me with help.

Photographs in the newspaper are eye catchers meant to attract a reader's attention as well as to pique his interest. The recent photos of the little Cuban boy caught in a political struggle has led us to a healthy discussion and a desire to read more about him. Again, we read together, having [student] underline in advance the words he knows. I emphasize that this is shared reading, for the written material may be quite difficult for a beginning reader. I encourage him to sound words out and guess unknown words that seem to fit the thrust of the story. New words may be taken out of context, put on a list, and reviewed several times.

One of the most useful sections of the newspaper is the shopping supplement from local food stores. Coordinating the illustrations with printed words is a very satisfactory learning device, such as having [student] find and read the word "bananas." Next, a shopping list can be made listing items from the ad, i.e. crackers, Coke, coffee, eggs, chicken, potatoes, etc. These and more are all useful additions to the reader's written vocabulary, and soon can be read without the accompanying illustrations.

I feel that the newspaper is a strong motivational tool, for local news items are of interest to the reader and often not covered by television. The student has to feel a real need to learn, and the tutor must accept that challenge.

Marilyn Holloway

***Question #6: What advice would you give to other tutors or students?***

My advice to other students would be to be on time when appointments are scheduled. Give your tutor 110% at all times. Think of your tutor as being a very special friend that you can open up to, because this will help your tutor learn more about you and things they can do to help you.

Tutors are very special people because they don't get paid for all the hard work or hours they put in helping you. They enjoy seeing you accomplish the goals you set for yourself. When I was working with my first tutor she made a statement that I'll never forget. Sometimes things weren't going so smoothly and I started to get discouraged. She would say look how far you have come and that would remind me that I have accomplished a lot. Those magic words helped me attain all the goals that I had set for myself.

Alfred Nelms

## Appendix B Resources Cited

### Instructional Tools

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- Viise, N. (1994). Word feature spelling list assessment. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia

### Other Resources

- Bridges to practice: A research-based guide for literacy practitioners serving adults with learning disabilities. (1999). Washington, DC: The National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center
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