

# Making Universal Design a Reality

*Practitioners in Washington state found perseverance pays off when it comes to systemic change*

by Deborah Reck

**W**hat is a learning-friendly environment for students with learning disabilities? Renton Technical College in Washington State believes it has found an answer. When students enter many of the vocational or adult basic education (ABE) programs at Renton Technical College, they enter classrooms staffed by instructors who have had extensive training in multi-modal or multi-sensory teaching, assistive technologies, strategies to help students with learning disabilities (LD), and brain research. It is common to see electronic interactive white boards, computer screen recorders for student demonstrations, tablet laptops that capture handwritten notes and turns them into text, liquid-crystal display (LCD) projectors that project documents or pictures on a large screen for all the class to see, and digital document display magnifiers which connect to an LCD projector to show objects or documents and capture the display onto the hard drive. Specialists

*move in and out of these classrooms and trained peer tutors help any student experiencing difficulties. When students go to one of the many learning labs available to all students, they can readily access assistive technology such as Wynn Reader, a program that reads scanned text aloud, colorizes, and easily changes the text display; Test Talker, which converts any test into a spoken format; Inspiration, a writing tool and graphic organizer; and Dragon Naturally Speaking, a program that types as the speaker talks. Nothing designates an area for the learning disabled because these interventions are available to all students at Renton Technical College. Teachers and staff encourage everyone to take advantage of these tools.*

When students take classes at Renton Tech, they are likely to begin by taking a Web-based assessment called the Learning Assessment System (LAS) Webtool. Via the LAS, students assess their learning strengths and barriers and receive a report that suggests customized resources and strategies to help them be successful learners. The LAS includes a validated

learning styles assessment from the Center for Innovative Teaching Experiences (CITE). One of the features of the LAS is an assessment of learning barriers done through a series of questions written by Renton Tech instructors. These questions draw on instructors' knowledge of learning issues in combination with other screening tools such as the 13 Question Learning Needs Screening Tool, an instrument that is used in many programs across the United States. Instructors can view each student's LAS report as well as a summary report that profiles individual classes and relevant teaching strategies. Any of these reports can be viewed by the Learning Disabilities Specialist or the Disabled Student Services counselors as well when students are referred to or come to these offices for help. To see a brief demonstration of the LAS Webtool, go to the UDL Project Web site at [webs.rtc.edu/ii/dsdp.html](http://webs.rtc.edu/ii/dsdp.html) and look at "Learning Styles". Hard copies of the Webtool assessment and action plan forms are available on the site for downloading.

The Renton Tech model of service delivery is based on a simple three-tiered process (see the diagram on page 13). In the traditional community college model, most of the resources go towards accommodations for a few students and few resources are allocated to the classroom for the whole class. In the Renton model, the pyramid is tipped upside down so that the bulk of resources is delivered in the classroom through UDL.

Tier 1 ensures that effective teaching strategies and assistive technologies are used in all classrooms. Many of these strategies and technologies are commonly considered accommodations for students with disabilities but are suitable for all learners. "Normalizing" their use helps all students while reducing the stigma that some students with learning disabilities report having felt in the K-12 system.

Tier 2 provides students with more intensive help if they are

experiencing learning challenges in their classes. A project team meets weekly to determine how best to help students who are referred or who independently seek help. Students are usually provided with individualized recommendations of strategies to practice with their teachers. For example, an instructor puts handouts on a CD and shows a struggling student how use a scanner and text reader to make reading the assignment easier.

Tier 3 provides low cost assessment and diagnosis for learning disabilities. In addition, students can receive technical support for assistive technology. The Assistive Technology Lending Bank, a library of software programs such as screen magnifiers and hardware such as ergonomic keyboards, allows students to try out technologies with no financial risk before a purchase is made. The Lending Bank is available to all Renton students. The 40-year-old student, for example, who hasn't been able to learn the multiplication tables may try out something as simple as a

calculator as a compensatory strategy or may check out a screen reader to see if having the numbers read aloud is a better support for his needs.

## A Long Time Coming

The three-tiered service model took Renton Tech about five years and two generous grants from the federal Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education to develop. But it took more than a decade for teachers in Washington to see progress in helping students with learning disabilities. Without documentation, students were unable to get accommodations within the Community and Technical College system, where most of Washington's ABE programs are housed. Even if students had documentation, ABE teachers had little or no knowledge of learning disabilities and minimal access to training or information to provide the accommodations or instructional approaches students needed.

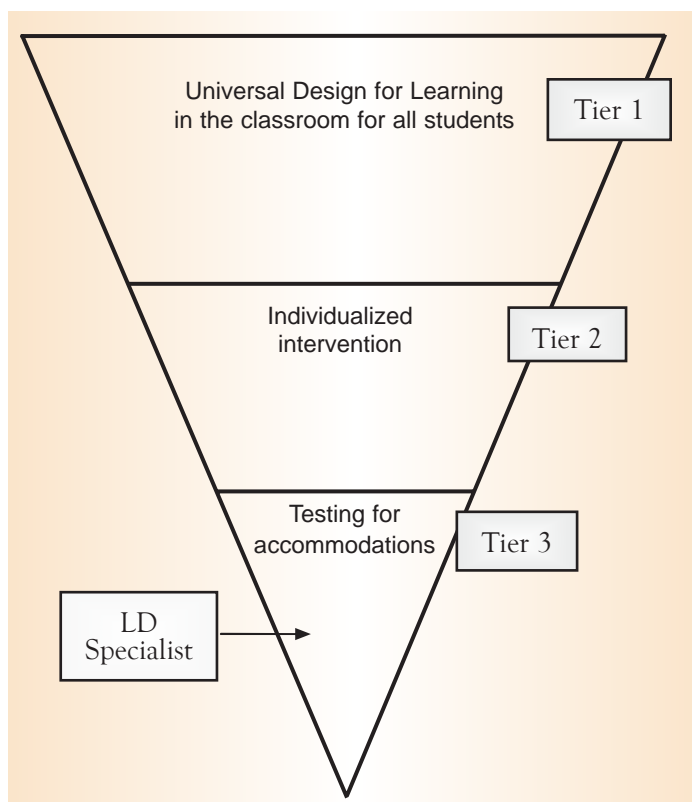
This article traces the journey

ABE teachers took, persistently calling upon the state and their institutional leaders to make changes that would benefit students with learning disabilities. No one who began this journey thought that problems would be solved overnight, or that institutional change would occur just because it is good for students. With each small advance, such as implementing a

simple screening process within the ABE department, a string of other needs or problems was discovered. The progress that has been made by Washington's Adult Basic Education LD services is a testament to the teachers who began this journey and continue to persevere to bring about change in the system.

## Individuals Trained

In 1996, teachers in ABE programs across Washington started the first of many appeals to the state for help in dealing with students with learning disabilities. The state agency responsible for funding and oversight of adult basic education in Washington, the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, listened and responded by launching a state-wide training initiative. From 1997 to 1999 the Office of Adult Literacy sponsored an intensive training open to all ABE programs, encompassing 34 community and technical colleges and 12 community-based organizations. The purpose of this three-year initiative was to improve instruction and services for students with learning disabilities. In the three-year project a total of 119 ABE teachers and 17 disabled student services staff participated in at least one of the 13-day training cycles conducted by Nanci Payne and Neil Sturomski. This was the first time any of the college staff had participated in training on learning disabilities. The impact of these trainings was evident in the increased number of accommodations requested for those taking the tests of General Educational Development (GED), from 79 in 1996 to more than 300 in 1999. Further, an awareness of the need for better instruction and more services for students for learning disabilities had been laid. But, once funding ended for the project, little changed at the colleges or in the ABE programs that had invested so much time and money. Teachers' increased knowledge and experience in helping students with LD also increased their



awareness that much more needed to be done. Although teachers had the power to change what happened in their classrooms, making systemic changes at their institutions seemed impossible.

In 1999 a small group of teachers in Pierce County, all of whom had been trained through the initiative, asked, and to their surprise,

received funding from the Office of Adult Literacy for two individuals from Washington to go to California and become LD Specialists. This would qualify them to administer the diagnostic evaluations needed to determine learning disabilities.

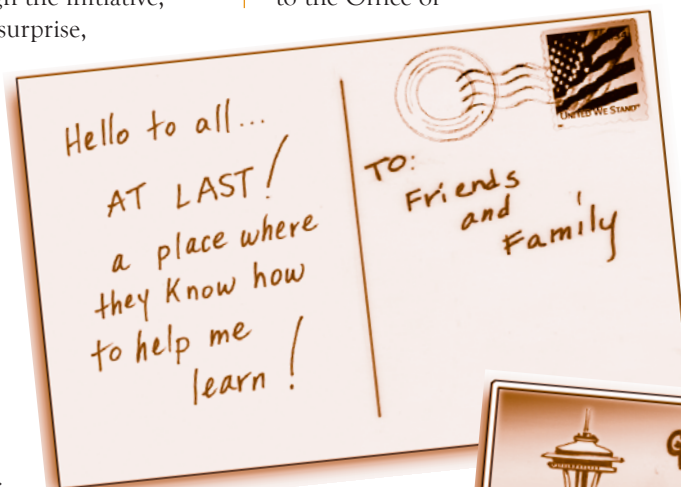
In California's community college system, LD Specialists administer cognitive and achievement tests, such as the WAIS III and Woodcock Johnson III, and work with qualified psychologists to determine whether a college-level student has a learning disability. Pierce County wanted the ability to provide evaluations, which normally cost between \$1,200 and \$1,500 per person, so that low-income ABE students could get accommodations for the GED exam.

Two years later, Pierce County had the first LD Specialists in Washington. Even without a reduction in their full-time teaching schedules and responsibilities at their community college, these individuals screened and tested students, advised their teachers, and trained individuals in the six other institutions in the county to conduct LD screening. During the first year the LD Specialists, working with a local psychologist, were able to get accommodations for 15 ABE students, which was 15 more than the previous year. The following year the Office of Adult Literacy provided a small amount of funding to enable the LD

Specialists to continue to provide testing for the region's institutions.

The initiative in Pierce County was so successful that in 2001 another small group of teachers and administrators, including the LD Specialists from Pierce County, were emboldened to make another proposal to the Office of

and program administrators of the pilot institutions. Together they developed a simple five-step process that would be implemented in each pilot site: flagging, screening, interventions, LD assessment, and follow up. A point of contact (POC) was designated at each site and trained by Tacoma Community House to administer screening, provide interventions, and follow up with students and teachers. For the POC to carry out these activities, programs had to change how they did business. Time had to be set aside for the POC to work with students, intake procedures had to be changed to include screening, and teachers had to be trained to provide strategies. The POC had to learn about available resources in the community, such as



Adult Literacy. Would they fund a pilot program to develop and implement an intake, screening, and referral process in ABE programs in different regions of the state in order to identify and serve students with learning disabilities? The state agreed to fund a pilot for one year. The small group, representing three regions, chose a leader, agreed on operating procedures, and set an ambitious timeline to complete its task. The Learning Disabilities Quality Initiative (LDQI) was launched.

## Institutional Change

Seven institutions were chosen to participate; each received \$7,000 from the state. Tacoma Community House, a community based organization and ABE provider, was selected by the group to lead the pilot along with an advisory team made up of the teachers



vision and hearing services, how to obtain school records, and how to request accommodations for the GED testing. When a student needed a full LD evaluation, there were no funds to pay and in many cases no testing services available to the student. POCs requested more training to keep up with the needs they were identifying.

Planners soon recognized that this was more than a one-year project, so they appealed to the Office of Adult Literacy to continue the LDQI. They received more support to expand to other regions and institutions. Over the next four years, the state funded the addition of seven more institutions to the pilot, Renton Technical College obtained grants from the federal



Department of Education, and as a result of the work at Renton, LDQI institutions embraced Universal Design for Learning principles in their trainings. UDL principles include the following: flexible goals, methods, materials, and assessments that accommodate learner differences; multiple approaches to meet needs of diverse learners; multiple means of

designed a certification process that mirrored California's model. In 2003-04, the first LD Specialist training was conducted utilizing trainers from California. Four individuals – all POCs from four institutions in the pilot program – completed the process a year and a half later. In 2007, all four of those trained continue to provide services to students in their

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representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge; multiple means of expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know; and multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn. These are from CAST, Center for Applied Special Technology.

As the number of ABE students screened for LD grew from about 100 the first year to more than 600 by year five within the pilot programs, POCs were continually looking for resources and avenues for qualifying individuals for accommodations. Only one LD Specialist was left in the community and technical college system by 2003. The state had no mechanism to train and certify additional LD specialists. With leadership from Tacoma Community House, a group comprised of Washington's remaining LD Specialist, Student Services senior staff at the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, and trainers from California's community college system

institutions. Eventually 11 LD Specialists were trained and certified to administer evaluations and qualify students for accommodations in conjunction with local psychologists.


## Systemic Change

The pieces of an LD service system were beginning to come together: better trained teachers utilizing Universal Design for Learning principles, a process for identifying students with learning disabilities and providing them with more assistance, and LD Specialists able to provide low cost evaluations. These changes seem logical and simple 10 years later, but making the system respond to the needs of students with learning difficulties has not been easy and has required perseverance and sacrifice from those who believed they could make a difference for students.

Renton Technical College's wonderful array of services for students with learning disabilities has its roots in the teachers and their administrators who shared a vision of helping

students with learning disabilities. The training and experience Renton Tech staff initially received through the LDQI project, including LD Specialist training, encouraged them to apply to the Department of Education with the ambitious goal of transforming their entire campus to an environment that benefits all students.

During the school year 2007-2008, the Office of Adult Literacy continues to support ABE programs through the LD Project. Teachers and Points of Contact are taught about learning disabilities, strategies, and UDL in order to expand services to students with learning difficulties. In collaboration with these activities, Renton Tech, along with partners at Bates Technical College and the IEL, Community Colleges of Spokane, is mentoring seven other institutions across the state in the best practices of the LD Project to reach both ABE and vocational and academic classrooms.

What is a learning-friendly environment for students with learning disabilities? The Washington State LD Project, through its passion, grassroots collaborations, and determined leaders, teachers and counselors, is figuring that out! 

## Reference

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## About the Author

**Deborah Reck** has been the Education Director at Tacoma Community House for the past 25 years. She started her education career teaching English as a foreign language in Afghanistan and Iran. Deborah is currently coordinating the LD Project in Washington State. ♦

