

Appendix 5 - Tutor reflections on how the project impacted their practice

Please note AB is the learner; JC is the in-house neuroscientist.

I basically found it really useful and I felt like it was “breathing new air” into the sessions. I have only been working with AB since September as he had been working with a colleague last year. I felt like we were doing the same things over and over and it wasn’t moving AB on because I hadn’t taken into account how he was actually processing information. The input from our neuroscientist (JC) about his strengths and weaknesses was really useful. I approached both reading and writing differently. The writing was particularly useful because it meant that I moved away from what I thought was helpful for someone with a short-term memory deficit to something that was actually really helpful to someone who was organised but processes very slowly. JC used an analogy about “AB having to have his ducks lined up” and this stayed with me and helped me to really think about what was useful to him when I was working with AB. I feel the input from JC generally made the work with AB more purposeful.

JC’s input somehow helped me to see the sessions as an adventure with AB and that we were exploring how he learns rather than just going through the motions. It changed my teaching because it gave me a nudge into going back into thinking about using metacognition in the sessions and making small changes to make the learning really work for AB. Even when a task didn’t quite work or make sense to AB we were able to talk about why this didn’t work for him and how we could make it work. Although, the project has stopped, I am still holding onto the feedback and trying to keep exploring what is the best way of working with AB with the new insights I have into him.

The effects it had on AB

I have always experienced AB as very willing to try new tasks and enjoying a challenge but getting overwhelmed quickly and lacking in confidence. He is very humble and plays down his many talents and skills. I noticed a change in AB when I started implementing the feedback from JC; he began smiling and also seemed to view the tasks as an adventure. The real turning point came when he was able to write a complete letter in about 15 minutes. He was clearly pleased and was able to acknowledge that he had done well. He then asked me to dictate challenging words like ‘judiciary’, which he spelled successfully using the computer. I feel that by having the experience of doing something well, it began to change the old story in his head that he isn’t good at writing. I feel that his confidence is beginning to increase and he seems more relaxed.

Final thoughts

The project emphasised for me the importance of understanding exactly how someone learns so that as their tutor I can adapt tasks to their learning strengths and not their deficit, in order for them to not only change the old stories in their heads about not being successful, but also by actually producing work that they recognise is successful and are proud of. Through the traditional education system, they are so used to focussing on what they feel they need to improve and do better on, that I am now aware that I have to ensure that I am not reinforcing this mind-set by giving them tasks that they are going to struggle with.

It was really useful to be able to run ideas past JC and have that support.

I feel that the ETF OTLA neurodiversity project is something that would be really useful to be pursuing and maybe get more support tutors involved to really help the students to move on and learn as effectively and efficiently as possible.