Strategies for Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities
(that are also beneficial for all students)

Connect with students: Relationships matter for learning. Students are being coached to be proactive and reach out to instructors. You can help by privately asking students to talk about their accommodations and how you can help them to be successful in class. Get to know them a bit and develop a relationship, which will ease their anxiety. This also communicates respect, that their needs matter to you, and that they are a valued member of the class. Encourage office visits. We like the term "student hours," which better communicates the intent of these opportunities.

Focus attention: Attention, to the correct things, at the right time, is critical for learning. Students need to know what to attend to. Often, we add extraneous details when teaching to increase interest and participation. These can also distract from the most important concepts. Be clear with students. What is the point? What is to be learned? What is this experience illustrating? Use cues to focus attention on important points and questions that ask and answer why they are important and connected to previous learning.

Ice breakers/Do now: Students with disabilities are often anxious and on high alert. This is not a helpful mental state for learning. Be observant as students arrive. Begin class with activities that release tension, facilitate interaction, and reduce anxiety. These can be ice breakers, that are more social in nature, or "do now" activities that facilitate retrieval practice in an interactive, engaging, and low stakes manner.

Chunk content: Cognitive overload is a problem for everyone, but is particularly challenging for students with learning disabilities who often need more time to access memories or make connections between concepts. Too much at once becomes difficult to process. Break concepts into more manageable sections that are accompanied by explanations and focus questions. Help students identify cues that will facilitate recall.

Retrieval practice: Retrieval, or bringing concepts to mind, is one of the most impactful learning strategies. Help students understand its power by incorporating it into your teaching. Use low or no stakes quizzes, ask students to recall concepts from earlier and have students work together to recall concepts. Connect the dots with and for them. Be specific about what they need to know. The power of retrieval practice comes when we have to work at it. Be sure not to "rescue" students too soon with the correct answer, but be supportive as they persist.

Specific feedback: Whether it is retrieval practice, elaboration, or brand-new material, learning is enhanced by receiving specific feedback that corrects errors and refocuses attention. Specific feedback identifies and corrects errors in thinking and/or the completion of procedures. It is helpful to accompany that feedback with an emphasis on the value of student effort as they persist to arrive at the desired outcome.

Strategies for Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities
(that are also beneficial for all students)

Dual-coding and scaffolding: We learn more comprehensively if instruction includes multiple cues for retrieving information from long term memory. Dual-coding is about helping students create those cues. Combine text with visuals that are clear and connected. Use graphic organizers, concept maps, and pictures with labels. Allow students to develop their own cues, which will have personal meaning.

Peak learning happens when we are challenged, just short of frustration. However, this is a difficult place to find and remain. Students need our help: model thinking out loud, provide organizers, do part of the problem or task, provide hints and cues, encourage goal setting and identifying small steps toward goals, help students connect experiences, use graphic organizers, make sure directions are clear, simplify the task when necessary, teach and use critical vocabulary, and include many examples.

Concrete examples: Abstract ideas can be challenging at first for students with learning disabilities. Students need explicit connections to make these concepts meaningful and durable in memory. Use concrete examples when discussing abstract ideas. Create explicit connections between concrete examples, larger concepts, and abstract ideas, explaining their relationship. Connect abstract ideas to personal experiences and/or support students as they make this personal connection.

Multiple forms of participation: Students with disabilities often have had less than desirable educational experiences, and carry tremendous anxiety about how instructors and peers will interact with them, therefore they may be reluctant to volunteer during class. Talk to them privately to gauge comfort. Provide multiple ways to participate, such as answering a pre-planned question, providing access to key points before class, leading a less formal ice breaker activity, or incorporating group interactions into your classes.

Elaboration: Once concepts have been taught and are becoming familiar, learning is enhanced as we add detail or elaborate on our understanding. Ask how and why questions about topics that have been learned. Support students as they persist to answer. Use activities that identify similarities and differences between concepts. Look for multiple ways to add detail to learning. Ask students to share thinking out loud through group projects.

If you would like to discuss these issues further, or have specific questions we have not addressed feel free to contact:

Kate Austin
Academic Accessibility Specialist
Center for Academic Achievement
215-951-5186
kilmeraustin@lasalle.edu

Frank Mosca
Director, De La Salle Institute for Teaching and Learning
215-951-1195
mosca@lasalle.edu