

LDCOMMUNITY.COM: HELPING EDUCATE STUDENTS  
AND POSTSECONDARY INSTRUCTORS  
ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

by

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A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communication  
Boise State University

May 2010

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE COLLEGE

**DEFENSE COMMITTEE AND FINAL READING APPROVALS**

of the thesis submitted by

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Thesis Title: ldcommunity.com: Helping educate students and postsecondary  
instructors about learning disabilities

Date of Final Oral Examination: 08 October 2009

The following individuals read and discussed the thesis submitted by student Ryan Stauffer Scott, and they evaluated his presentation and response to questions during the final oral examination. They found that the student passed the final oral examination.

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the increase in the number of learning disabled (LD) students attending postsecondary institutions, few of these students decide to disclose their learning disability to postsecondary faculty and staff. Consequently, these students are less likely to receive the necessary support or learning accommodations available to them. This thesis explains how the social constructs of the K-12 educational and familial environments affect the ability of LD students to disclose their learning disability to postsecondary instructors. This thesis proposes that the comfort level between the student and the instructor plays an important role in disclosure. Based on this proposal, this thesis explains the manner in which the Web site [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) can be employed as an academic reference tool for postsecondary instructors, faculty members, and students as a means of allowing them to communicate about the subject of learning disabilities with a high level of comfort.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis has a singular purpose: To aid postsecondary students in disclosing their learning disabilities to faculty and staff members using the educational Web site [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com), designed by the author of this thesis. No disability should take precedence over another in the postsecondary setting; in fact, every college or university should incorporate a space within which all individuals with every form of disability can discuss their needs. This thesis discusses the manner in which postsecondary faculty, staff, and students can gain knowledge and understanding of learning disabled (LD) students through their use of the Web site [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com).

The LD population is growing at steady pace. According to a national study conducted in the 1987 academic year only 1.1% of LD students attended a 4-year college after graduating from high school (Newman, 2006). This figure increased 9.9% during the 2003 academic year, during which 11% of LD high school graduates attended a 4-year college (Newman, 2006). The growth of learning disabled students attending postsecondary institutions can be attributed to the introduction of innovative educational practices and updated technologies at the K-12 level, such as digital books and computer programs that help students with writing skills (Newman, 2006). However, this positive statistic is accompanied by an alarming one: only “0.7% of enrolled students had identified themselves to institutional staff as having an LD” (Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002, p. 264). If LD students do not disclose their disabilities to disability support



services at the postsecondary level, they are less likely to receive the necessary accommodations that can be essential to help with academic barriers.

One of the reasons that LD students choose not to disclose their learning disabilities is that a history of low academic achievement has affected their level of confidence and how they are perceived within the academic and familial environment (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). Consequently, as LD students commence their postsecondary education, they might not want to present themselves as learning disabled to avoid any level of discomfort while confronting faculty and staff (Denhart, 2008).

Moreover, researchers have found that instructors experience a level of discomfort toward students with learning disabilities. Fitchen and Goodrick (1990) found that the “majority (64%) of professors preferred that students initiate dialogue, [and] furthermore, professors were significantly more comfortable when students approached them” (p. 4). Burgstahler and Doe (2002) found that instructors felt that the level of discomfort was due to “the lack of understanding of learning disabilities” (p. 15). Despite their discomfort, many instructors “had especially positive stories to tell about students who were open about their disabilities” (p.15).

### **Overview**

Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical aspects of self-efficacy theory, an approach that illustrates “how much effort people will expend, how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and adverse experiences” (Bandura, 1977a, p. 194). Additionally, this

chapter discusses the dimensions of self-efficacy and how they relate to students with learning disabilities. Chapter 3 identifies and discusses the factors that affect LD students' decision to self-disclose to postsecondary faculty and staff. After this discussion, the chapter explains how the Web site [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) can assist learning disabled students while increasing faculty and staff knowledge and understanding of learning disabilities.

## CHAPTER 2: SELF-EFFICACY THEORY AND LEARNING DISABILITIES

As learning disabled students enter the postsecondary setting, they attempt to adapt to a new social framework within novel living, economic, scholastic, and spiritual environments. These students must not only adjust to their new settings but also decide how they will present their disability (or disabilities) in specific situations within the postsecondary community. For many LD students, problems with family members, society and academia cause “failure and poor performance [which] lead[s] to doubts about [their] general intellectual abilities” (Klassen & Lynch, 2007, p. 495). Researchers in the fields of LD students, who attend postsecondary institutions, “may experience difficulties in their social and emotional adjustments to university life” (Saracoglu, Minden & Wilchesky, 1989, p. 590). As a result, the latter experiences may lead to LD students avoiding situations of disclosing their learning disability to the postsecondary faculty and or staff which, therefore, causes a cognitive state of anxiety and defensive behavior (Denhart, 2008).

To consider the impact of familial, societal and poor academic performances, which may affect LD students’ decisions to self-disclose their disability within the postsecondary institution, this thesis will apply Bandura’s self-efficacy theory.

### Self-Efficacy Defined

According to Lane, Jones and Stevens (2002), “self-efficacy is defined as the level of confidence individuals have in their ability to execute course of action or attain specific performance outcomes” (p. 332). Self-efficacy expectations influence behavior and how much effort is applied to “specific and situational judgments of capabilities” (Lackaye & Margalit, 2008, p. 2). As such, self-efficacy judgments stem from four concepts: *performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion* and *emotional reactions* (Bandura, 1977b). Individuals who perform well will have a perceived high level of self-efficacy belief. And it is these people who will be more engaged and exert more effort toward accomplishing a goal, whereas individuals who are subjected to poor performances are apt to have a perceived low level of self-efficacy and “will retain their self-debilitating expectations and fears for a long-time” (Bandura, 1977a, p. 194).

One of several variables that influence self-efficacy is self-esteem. According to Lane et al. (2002), “previous research has found that self-esteem plays an important role in the formation of the psychological states such as self-efficacy” (p. 322). However, for this thesis, self-esteem and self-efficacy will be separated. Self-esteem, according to Murphy and Murphy (2006), “results from a reflective evaluation or appraisal an individual makes of themselves and is often seen as a personal resource that moderates the effect of threatening events or conditions” (p. 291). However, self-efficacy is a belief or judgment that the individual “provides an answer to the self-questioning that everybody experiences from time to time (e.g., “can I do this task?”)” (Lackaye & Margalit, 2008, p. 3).

To separate self-efficacy from self-esteem, this thesis concentrates on how Bandura's four major concepts (stated above) can help individuals with LD to judge whether they should or should not disclose their own learning disability.

Other theories such as *labeling theory* concentrate on determinants of behavior based on the concept that "behavior results from the interaction of persons and situations, rather than from either factor alone" (Bandura, 1977b, p. 9). Labeling theory explores individual or group behavior as it departs from the norm, an approach that has been applied to the study of learning disabilities "given all the confusion and controversy surrounding definitions of and conditions related to learning disabilities" (Smith, Osbourne, Crim, & Rhu, 1986, p. 195). The goal of labeling theory within the field of learning disabilities is to examine the perceptions of parents and professionals and, based on these perceptions, develop formal and informal criteria that might affect current definitions toward individuals with learning disabilities.

### **Self-Efficacy and Learning Disabilities**

Researchers measure the level of self-efficacy by the number of past accomplishments and difficulties, as well as other aspects of personal history (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). Lackaye and Margalit reported, "Negative school-related attitudes develop early in the lives of those children with LD who experience school failure and these attitudes remain consistently negative through high school" (p. 434). When students transition from elementary to middle to high school, each new environment requires that they re-establish themselves within a new network of peers and teachers while facing

increased demands for academic achievement and effort (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). Klassen and Lynch have suggested that both teachers and students discuss how self-efficacy contributes to academic performance.

### Academic Performance

When LD students transition from elementary to middle to high school, they might achieve mastery in one skill (e.g., word recognition) but fall behind in another skill (e.g., spelling), thereby experiencing overall academic difficulty (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). Some of the learning skills that they had mastered in middle school may not be sufficient to address the increased academic demands of high school. Newman (2006) found that within the secondary setting, “virtually all students with learning disabilities (99 percent) in general education academic classes are expected to keep up with others in their class; however, only approximately three-fourths (78 percent) are reported by their teachers to do so” (p. 5).

Researchers have suggested that there are sizable discrepancies between tested and actual grade levels in the subject areas of reading and mathematics (National Center for Special Education Research [NSCER], 2007). Only 10% of LD students are above, at, or behind one grade level whereas 45.1% are 3 to 4.9 grades behind in reading performance. In mathematics, 13.6% of LD students are above, at, or behind one grade level whereas 43.9% are 3 to 4.9 grades behind. Researchers have also identified discrepancies in standardized testing scores. In its 25<sup>th</sup> *Annual Report to Congress*, the U.S. Department of Education (2003) reported that 70% of elementary and middle school

students between the ages of 6 and 13 with learning disabilities perform similarly to the bottom 20% of non-LD students in the general population on standardized tests in letter-word identification. Secondary students with learning disabilities are far more likely to score 70% or below on standardized tests than are non-LD students (Wagner, Newman, Cameto & Lavine, 2006).

Klassen and Lynch (2007) suggested that low academic achievement among LD students can be attributed to “external sources, especially poor teaching or poor relationships with teachers” (p. 501). Students with learning disabilities often feel misunderstood by teachers because they have a difficult time communicating (Goodman, 2004). However, low academic achievement can also be explained by level of effort.

#### Academic Performance and Effort

According to Lackaye and Margalit (2006), “teachers and parents often attribute success and failure to effort investment” (p. 433). However, in their study of elementary children (Grades 3 to 5), the researchers found that students who are diagnosed as LD, regardless of academic performance, consider themselves hardworking and invest much time in their studies. In another study of 571 middle school students, 124 of whom were identified as LD and 447 as non-LD, the researchers examined three groups: LD students, non-LD high academic achievers, and non-LD low academic achievers. Lackaye and Margalit found that the LD students viewed themselves as putting forth less effort toward schoolwork than did their high-achieving non-LD peers. However, Lackaye and Margalit also found that the LD students invested more time and effort than did their low-achieving non-LD cohorts.

According to a study conducted by Klassen and Lynch (2007) of 28 early adolescents diagnosed as LD (20 boys and 8 girls) in grades 8 and 9, LD students initially overestimated their self-efficacy. For example, one participant testified, “If I’ve studied for a test and I’ve studied, like, for four hours or something, I’ll be really confident. And if I am confident, then I’ll do pretty well” (p. 497). However, when the same student was interviewed again later in the semester, he stated, “I studied, like, three hours or something for a test, and I thought I’d do really well, but then I got like a C minus or something” (p. 499).

Klassen and Lynch (2007) suggested that five out of seven special education teachers attribute academic success towards “uncontrollable deficits, rather than lack of effort” (p. 501). Instructors who work with LD students on a consistent basis have noted that students with learning disabilities have different styles of learning mastery skills and need to work just as hard as, and be more persistent than, their non-LD peers. As the participants in their study explained, “You have to work harder than everyone else and you lose confidence,” yet “no matter how much effort I put in, I’m still getting burned” (p. 501).

### **Modeling**

According to Bandura (1977b), “Modeling influences learning principally through its informative function. During exposure, observers acquire mainly symbolic representations of the modeled activities, which serve as guides for appropriate performances” (pp. 22–24). In its conceptualization, this thesis employs two models that assess the confidence levels of LD students.



### Discrepancy Modeling

According to Brackett and McPherson (1996),

Typically, students with learning disabilities present an uneven performance profile. These students demonstrate pronounced difficulties with some tasks (e.g., tasks that place demands on an affected ability) while demonstrating average to above average success with others (e.g., tasks accessed by intact abilities). (p. 70)

Assessment of learning disabilities involves administering a battery of tests that may measure performance levels, intellectual ability, and achievement of tasks. Brackett and McPherson (1996) found that “researchers confirm that most state learning disabled eligibility guidelines rely on underachievement as the primary criterion for learning disabled identification in the public schools” (p. 70). However, within the K-12 public school system, the results of such tests “fail to differentiate students with learning disabilities from students who are underachievers, slow learners or average achievers” (p. 70).

The results of using a discrepancy model that only focuses on test scores is a failure to differentiate between learning disabled students who are adequate learners and non-LD students considered underachievers.

### Live Modeling: Vicarious Experience

According to Bandura (1977a), “People do not rely on experienced mastery as the sole source of information” (p. 197). Knowledge can be derived from observing and experiencing others perform tasks that can either benefit our well-being or create an unpleasant experience that can impact behavior. The concept of *live modeling* is based on the notion that people observe others and learn from the direct experience of doing so.

Similarly, the concept of *vicarious experience* posits that “events become evocative through the association with emotions aroused in observers by the expressions of others. Displays of emotion conveyed through vocal, facial and postural cues of models are emotionally arousing to observers” (Bandura, 1977b, p. 65).

Observing others can increase or lower one’s level of confidence. In one study, Klassen and Lynch (2007) reported that 13 of 18 participants claimed that observing others success lowered their confidence rather than raised it. Klassen and Lynch explained:

They [students with LD] see the kids around them being able to do the work, and they feel they should be on the same level. . . . There’s this little piece inside them going, “I understand this better than Johnny who’s sitting next to me, but he gets an ‘A’ and I certainly don’t. (p. 498)

#### Impact of Teachers on LD Students

According to Kamens, Loprete, and Frances (2000), Regular classroom teachers feel overwhelmed and “frustrated about the lack of support and preparation for teaching children with [learning] disabilities” (p. 148). Due to their uncertainty regarding the best manner of helping children deal with their frustrations and increase their level of academic performance, some K-12 teachers have stereotyped LD students as disruptive, unruly, and difficult. Such stereotyping can be contributed to student self-protection of areas of weakness (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). This leads to a belief that “children with special needs are often difficult to control” (Kamens et al., 2000, p. 148).

Learning disabled students must also face their teachers' lack of flexibility due to larger classes and caseloads (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). Describing how increased pressure to complete the curriculum has worked against students, one teacher explained, "I haven't got the same time to follow 50 kids that I used to have for 15 kids, and the kids get a bit lost at times" (p. 501). This lack of flexibility has two negative effects on students. First, students notice that their teachers have less time to help them in class. Second, Goodman (2004) suggested that LD students feel discredited when teachers do not understand their learning disability, even if the instructors "meant well, but in essence they shamed them because they did not really understand. It was not that the child was not trying, but that they really needed special help to solve problems" (p. 128). The result is that the instructor's approach toward students with learning disabilities decreases LD students' level of confidence.

#### Impact of Parents on LD Students

Goodman (2004) found that parents may contribute to their LD child's self-esteem difficulties, as

it is not uncommon to have one parent more convinced about the presence of a learning disability, while the other parent thinks that "*the child is just lazy.*" It is a very difficult situation in which the LD youngster may find himself. (p. 128)

Parents feel pressure that their child must earn good grades and pass examinations

"because if he [or she] doesn't, [my child] will not get into college" (p. 132). However,

Cortiella (2003) found that only 14% of parents of LD children expect their child to

graduate from a 2-year college and only 10% expect their child to graduate from a 4-year college. Goodman (2004) suggested,

We all want our children to succeed in this world. We are afraid for our children and, as parents of LD children, you must decide to what degree do you push them and to what degree do you accept their deficit. (p. 128)

### **Verbal Persuasion**

Verbal persuasion can be used as a tool to influence confidence. Self-efficacy theory posits that verbal persuasion can be used to persuade people that they possess the capabilities to master skills in order to cope with difficult situations (Bandura, 1977b). Although positive verbal persuasion from a trusted source can increase confidence and self-efficacy, negative verbal persuasion can lead to the opposite results. Regarding the results of their study, Klassen and Lynch (2007) reported, teachers' negative verbal comments were noted in two of the groups as harming confidence levels: "I actually tried hard on one huge project, and everybody thought I'd get 100% on it. My teacher gave me 50%, and he said I was lucky to pass. Then my confidence kind of disappeared" (p. 498).

Kamens et al. (2000) observed teachers using verbal expressions such as "disruptive," "unruly," and "difficult" (p. 152) when referring to LD students. This type of verbal communication is an active process termed *discouraging messaging*, which "conveys a negative intention or attitude held by the source toward the receiver" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 16). Reynolds proposed that negative language can reflect *discrimination, character, or competence*. Expressions such as "acted like I was dumb because of my race" (p. 25) reflect discrimination, expressions such as "I was good for

nothing” (p. 25) reflect character, and expressions such as “you’re not even trying” (p. 26) reflect competence. Such messages can lead to feelings of resignation and hopelessness, therefore lowering a learning disabled students level of self-efficacy or experiencing the sense of being devalued (Denhart, 2008).

### **Emotional Arousal**

Self-efficacy theory contends that “emotional arousal is another constituent source of information value concerning personal competency” (Bandura, 1977a, p. 198). LD students worry about their academic success to the extent that they become nervous and prone to anxiety (Klassen & Lynch, 2007). Two students in Klassen and Lynch’s study described,

When I’m nervous it lowers my confidence, because I tend to exaggerate—my mind will exaggerate things—and then I have no idea what’s going on, it’s just like, “Oh no, I bet this is going to be really hard” (G13). . . . You start worrying, and you’re all frantic, and then you do a worse job, because you’re, like, so nervous of doing really, really, bad, ‘cause you know it’s hard, so then you do bad anyway (G14). (p. 498)

According to Bandura (1977b), anxiety drives defensive behaviors, such as avoidance. Although the goal of defensive behavior is to avoid painful outcomes, it can be difficult to relinquish the behavior when the threat no longer exists. Learning disabled students may avoid disclosing their learning disability in the postsecondary environment due to the fear of academic failure, negative attitudes towards learning disabilities, and a history of low self-confidence.

### **Self-Efficacy and Self-Disclosure**

Proponents of self-efficacy theory contend that individuals with low self-efficacy may be apprehensive about forming personal relationships and may have trouble with motivation or disclosing a disability. According to Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, and Pastorelli (2003),

If fear automatically triggered immobility or avoidance behavior, personal development and accomplishments would be severely constrained because most significant pursuits involve some risks and evaluative consequences that are fear arousing. (p. 770)

Lev and Owens (2000) suggested that when an individual observes a positive model of a desired behavior, the model may increase the individual's self-confidence, which contributes to the individual's ability to achieve the same behavior, in contrast to the discordant effects of defensive behaviors. Bandura et al. (2003) reported that evidence indicates that "in coping with threats, individuals of high perceived self-efficacy perform intimidating activities successfully despite anxiety arousal" (pp. 770-771).

Lev and Owens (2000) conducted research on how to enhance self-efficacy in women with breast cancer. These researchers, drawing upon Bandura's components of self-efficacy, sought to encourage 24 women to meet the challenges of their sickness. Lev and Owens presented a videotape to "provide participants with vicarious experience by showing three survivors of breast cancer who successfully used self-care to prevent side effects" (p. 133). The second method they used to encourage participants was a booklet that educated women on how to accomplish positive behavioral strategies such as self-encouragement. The third strategy entailed the implementation of verbal persuasion by encouraging and commenting on performance accomplishments (Lev & Owens, 2000).

Results of the study suggested that the researchers' methods increased the participants' level of self-efficacy (Lev & Owens, 2000). First, a patient wanted to disclose to family members and other cancer patients her feelings regarding her lumpectomy. By disclosing, the patient felt as though she was maintaining supportive interactions (Lev & Owens, 2000). Second, patients sought out information on the success of other survivors. One patient stated, "I've been reading books about cancer, which is something I probably wouldn't do [if not diagnosed with cancer]. Reading had helped me know what to expect" (p. 135). Third, some women sought out support groups to talk "to other cancer survivors and support . . . others" (p. 135). Supporting others gave these patients a sense of encouragement (Lev & Owens, 2000).

According to Bandura (1977b), the consequence of increasing self-efficacy by changing a defensive behavior, such as avoidance, is the benefit of the reward. When "students are prompted to alter avoidant study habits when failures in completing assignments make academic life sufficiently distressing" (p. 147), the reward of passing grades provides an incentive to "improve their skills in activities they aspire to master and to enhance their competencies in dealing with the demands of everyday life" (p. 147).

CHAPTER 3: SELF-DISCLOSURE AND CONSTRUCTING A WEB SITE  
TO EDUCATE POSTSECONDARY INSTRUCTORS  
ABOUT LEARNING DISABILITIES

**Why LD Students Do Not Self-Disclose**

Rocco (2001) defined the *self-disclosure* of a disability as the process whereby an individual reveals “information about a disability to another person for accommodation, for relationship development, and to reduce anxiety” (p. 11). There are several reasons why students may decide not to disclose their learning disabilities. First, individuals with a disability must determine “the value of the disclosure to the relationship, reducing uncertainty and tension and the value of accommodation against the risk of negative or non-responsive reaction” (p.11). Rocco suggested that the disclosure experience varies among individuals and types of disabilities:

For those with visible disabilities (e.g., a wheelchair user) the right to self-identify may not realistically be a choice, but for those with invisible disabilities (e.g., a traumatic brain injury or learning disability) that can pass as nondisabled, the choice between not disclosing and requesting accommodations is a real consideration. (p. 11)

Second, as discussed in the previous chapter, students with learning disabilities often have a history of substandard grades and have often experienced misunderstandings regarding their social and classroom behaviors. This history often results in them feeling a sense of rejection that extends into the postsecondary setting. More specifically



Cornett-Devito and Worley (2005) explained,

Repeatedly negative experiences seeking accommodations may inculcate a “victim” mentality among some SWLDs [students with learning disabilities] that negatively affects many aspects of their educational pursuits . . . [leading them to become] reluctant to request accommodation, since they fear negative reactions. (p. 6)

Henderson (2000) affirmed, “For some students a stigma may be attached to using services, or some students may perceive use of services as indicating a lack of ability” (p. 272).

Third, LD students who choose to self-disclose may face public scrutiny, and thereby increase their probability of being subjected to subtle forms of stereotyping, such as a “change in attitude, when the instructor views the person as lazy, stupid or trying to manipulate the system” (Rocco, 2001, p. 11). In one study, Denhart (2008) found that students faced “discrimination and even harassment after revealing [an] LD to get accommodations” (p. 485). Denhart reported that faculty members wanted to remove an engineering student from the department, labeling her “a dangerous engineer” because of her learning disability. Due to the difficulties involved in opening up to a stranger, coupled with the risk of being stereotyped, Hartman-Hall and Haaga (2002) found that only “0.7% of enrolled students had identified themselves to institutional staff as having an LD” (p. 264).

In many cases, a LD student does not need to approach an instructor to discuss the accommodation process. Postsecondary disability support services often send a letter of accommodation (LOA) to the student’s professors explaining the types of accommodation that are needed, such as audio books, assistive technology for writing assignments, and in-class note takers. However, there are several circumstances where

LD students must disclose their disability, such as when requesting extra time for assignments and exams, a reader for exams due to dyslexia, flexibility in attendance, or other issues regarding academic adjustment.

Self-disclosure is a two-way communication process. In a teacher-student relationship, several dimensions, such as “comfort level, respect, openness, communication, mentor’s expert knowledge, encouragement and support, level of commitment and time availability” (Heung-Ling, 2003, p. 36) can positively or negatively affect the relationship. In a 1990 study regarding student comfort level and self-disclosure, Fitchen and Goodrick (1990) found that LD students “talked to professors only when they felt they must” (p. 6). Specifically, they found that only 23% of LD students approached professors before the class started for the term. One student explained his reluctance to approach professors in the following statement:

I don't like to ask for things. I really value my independence. And I worry a lot about how professors will react—if they will be understanding. It's like a catch-22. I want to ask for help and tell them about my situation, but I don't want them to feel that I'm asking for special help. I don't want them to feel that I'm imposing on them. I worry that professors won't be willing to adapt the course for me and that I may not be getting everything out of the course that others were getting. (p. 6)

Fitchen and Goodrick (1990) explained that when the LD students could not handle classroom problems themselves, they “believed it necessary to talk to professors about difficulties with course requirements; however, [students] frequently felt inadequate and different from other students. They wondered whether they belonged in the course” (p. 6). When the LD students did decide to approach the instructor, only 46% did so after the class had started. Regarding the professors’ comfort level

Fitchen and Goodrick (1990) found that “64% of professors preferred that students initiate dialogue . . . [and] were significantly more comfortable when students approached them” (p. 4).

Among the variety of LD students, faculty members “report an easier time working with students who had ‘obvious’ disabilities (e.g., sensory and mobility impairments) with straightforward accommodations. Students with learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, health problems and other invisible disabilities posed the most challenges to instructors” (Burgstahler & Doe, 2002, p. 15). The primary reason why faculty members were uncomfortable was “the lack of understanding of learning disabilities” (p. 15).

### **A Socially Constructed Web Site**

The goal of [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) is to increase instructors’ knowledge and understanding of LD students and the self-efficacy of LD students by increasing the public exposure of learning disabilities at a postsecondary institution via a media source. Such a goal is in accordance with Bandura (1977b), who argued,

Another influential source of social learning is the abundant and varied symbolic modeling provided by television, films, and other visual media. It has been shown that both children and adults acquire attitudes, emotional responses and new styles of conduct through filmed and televised modeling. (p. 39)

Public exposure to visual mass media such as television, film, and the Internet can play an influential role in increasing self-efficacy by shaping behavior and social attitudes.

Specifically, “developments in communication technology will enable people to observe on request almost any desired activity on computer-linked television consoles” (Bandura, 1977b, p. 39). For example, a phobic may be able to overcome their fears and increase their self-confidence by observing a model that demonstrates determined effort and the ability to overcome deficits (Bandura, 1977b).

### Increasing Self-Efficacy and Knowledge About Learning Disabilities

In a study of LD students in postsecondary school, Denhart (2008) reported that 10 of 11 informants suggested that a key strategy was to connect with other LD students to overcome feelings of isolation. Denhart found that when postsecondary students gained valuable knowledge of learning disabilities, their self-esteem increased because they no longer viewed themselves as being disabled but rather as having a different learning style. Doing so placed “them back on the continuum of normal human variation regarding their intelligence—something that they gained in the empowerment of community” (p. 494).

Burgstahler and Doe (2002) recommended that postsecondary faculty members are more likely to gain knowledge of learning disabilities if they are provided with specific resources, as “almost all faculty members still want print and on-line reference materials to consult as needed” (p. 28). The authors also found that “students report a desire for improved communication with instructors about disability- and accommodation-related issues” (p. 7). Outside the postsecondary arena, Kamens et al. (2000) found that 34% of elementary school teachers “suggested that an understanding of

the characteristics of such classifications [of disabilities] would help them comprehend how to more effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities” (p. 152).

### **Web Site Description**

The concept of [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) derives from my previous experience collaborating with other learning disabled students, as well as from my understanding of the difficulty of explaining the nature of a learning disability to instructors and faculty members within the postsecondary setting. A learning disability or any other disability is more than a label. One should recognize that

every disability—as is true of gender, race and class—must be considered within the complex and intertwined framework of relations of the biological and social world: ‘Disability . . . is not simply located in the bodies of individuals. It is a socially and culturally constructed identity. (Verstraete, 2007, p. 57)

The agenda of [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) is to educate visitors by creating discussions about modern situations that affect the learning disabled. Much of the Web site reflects Bandura’s notion of using modeling techniques such as vicarious experience to increase self-disclosure for LD students.

The Web site ([www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com)) employs a symbolic model of media to increase viewers’ exposure to LD concepts through the presentation of 11 subsections that inform the public—primarily teachers and students—about learning disabilities. The sources provided include scholarly journals, books authored and edited by LD professionals, statistics distributed by federal and state education departments, and Web sites constructed by nationally accredited LD institutions that cater to people with learning disabilities.

Currently, [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com)'s content is minimal compared to that of other sites such as LD on Line ([www.ldonline.org](http://www.ldonline.org)) and Learning Disabilities of America ([www.lidaamerica.org](http://www.lidaamerica.org)). However, due to the author's professional position working with and researching new types of academic accommodations, such as assistive technologies for LD students at North Idaho College, the author has the resources and ability to add current data and new research regarding learning disabilities.

### Web Site Composition

[www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) is accessible to people with disabilities according to the Web accessibility guidelines of DO-IT, the Northwest's leading resource for education and advocacy for individuals with disabilities. As [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) caters to LD individuals, the Web site is constructed to be accessible through two types of screen readers: Kurzweil and WYNN. Due to the nature of these screen readers, each hyperlink is spaced at a certain distance to enable users to pause on or have enough time to refer back to the previous hyperlink.

A second area of the Web site that relates to accessibility is graphics.

[www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) is compatible with a screen magnification system called *Zoom Text*. *Zoom Text* magnifies an entire document or Web page up to 10 times its original size. For a Web site to be congruent with the screen magnification system, its background, text, and images must be low resolution.

The last accessibility feature of [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) is the consistency of the design of the Web pages. Some LD students have processing disorders that affect their memory and organizational skills (Goodman, 2004). To accommodate these students, the

Web pages are consistent with one another in terms of graphics and background design, and the hyperlinks are organized for easy navigation and referencing.

### Home Page

The title on the home page (LD Community: Connecting Learning Disabilities and the Community Together) underscores the idea that instructors and students are integrated in an academic and social community. Throughout the subpages of the Web site, the title is placed in the top-left corner to represent a uniform goal of connecting these two populations.

The introduction establishes the population the Web site targets. It also explains to postsecondary instructors and faculty members that a learning disability is more than an academic barrier, as there are several facets associated with LD. The goal is to create trust between the postsecondary institution and the LD student to increase self-disclosure. At the conclusion to the introduction, there are instructions on the use of the student and instructor surveys and discussion forums (Figure A.1).

### About the Author

The author's goal is to create a positive model that encourages other people to self-disclose. According to Bandura (1977b), members of a group are responsive to the opinions of and are influenced by individuals within that group who have made achievements. The author, publicly disclosing his learning disability, provides a brief autobiography describing his accomplishments and his professional status. His main reasons for doing so are to create trust within the public, to demonstrate to others with

learning disabilities that they are not alone and can also accomplish their goals, and to prove to those without learning disabilities that an LD individual can achieve success (Figure A.2).

### Fast Facts

The purpose of this section is to give brief qualitative and quantitative descriptions about learning disabilities that help to dispel myths or stereotypes about learning disabilities. The advantage of placing this link at the top of the main page is that this placement allows individuals to make quick references if needed. Future plans include subdividing this page into multiple sections when there is enough current information available (Figure A.3).

### Learning Disability Definitions

According to Gregg and Ferri (1996), learning disabilities are associated with multiple definitions and theories. Because of the numerous understandings of *learning disability*, the author decided to illustrate three common definitions. Within this page, there is a link to LD Online for additional definitions (Figure A.4). In the future, the author intends to include past and current theories relating to LD in this section



### Development of LD

A learning disability is considered a biological disorder. LD researchers such as Westman (1990) contend that learning disabilities may develop through brain injuries resulting from birth trauma, premature birth, and malnutrition during gestation (Figure A.5). However, future research needs to be implemented on other neurobiological and genetic findings concerning LD.

### Assessing Learning Disabilities

As a professional, the author has encountered incoming students at the postsecondary level who have not been tested for a learning disability. A working description of how children and adolescents are assessed helps these students understand the process of these tests in order to receive documentation related to their LD (Figure A.6).

### Characteristics of the Learning Disabled Individual

The author describes the social dynamics of the LD individual from childhood to adulthood, providing three examples of how LD individuals react in social situations (Figure A.7). Each subcategory needs further expansion, because one of the major goals of the Web site is to educate users not only on the biological aspects of LD, but also on the sociocultural dimension of LD.

### Examples of Learning Disabilities

The Web site incorporates descriptions of the three major types of learning disabilities: dyslexia, dyscalculia (arithmetic), and dyspraxia (motor skills) (Figure A.8). The site includes an explanation of each LD type and how it affects the individual. At the end of each description, there is a link to more in-depth research on the topic. Future plans for this section include adding other types of learning disabilities.

### Learning Disabilities and Education

The author highlights the distinctiveness of the LD individual from kindergarten to the postsecondary setting, offering a description of how LD students often feel within the classroom and providing examples of their positive qualities (Figure A.9). Future plans for this Web page include adding more information on disability-related law relevant to postsecondary education, types of accommodations for LD students, and how to self-advocate.

### Success Stories

The concept of incorporating video links of success stories about LD comes from Bandura's (1977b) notion that individuals have an emotional response to visual media. Lev and Owens (2000) tested this concept on women with breast cancer and found that using videos as models contributed to an increase in self-confidence in women battling their sickness. Therefore, one goal of the Web site author is to incorporate a library of success videos (Figure A.10).

### Additional Links

This Web page organizes the Internet links associated with LD that have been implemented into [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com). Because the author is affiliated with Idaho Professionals in Higher Education for Disabilities (IPHED), the Web page has links to all of the postsecondary institutions' disability support services that are members of IPHED (Figure A.11).

### Publicizing the Web Site

The author mainly publicizes [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) at North Idaho College and at disability related conferences. First, North Idaho College's Center for Educational Access maintains a link to [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) on its Web site under the section "Learning Disabilities." Second, since the author of the Web site is a learning disability and assistive technology support specialist at North Idaho College, the main job description is to coach faculty and staff on accommodations for students with learning disabilities. The author employs the [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) as a source for information during diversity training. Third, as an instructor, the author encourages his students to gain knowledge of their learning disabilities by using resources such as [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com). Fourth, the author promotes the Web site at conferences, such as high-school-to-college transition fairs (e.g., Tools for Life) and roundtable meetings with other state of Idaho disability support specialists within higher education. Fifth, participants also have the option to print off business cards to hand out to other individuals to promote [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com). For future publicity, the author is currently researching the feasibility of purchasing an advertisement publicizing

www.ldcommunity.com in *Logan Magazine*, a northwest regional publication that educates all types of disabilities.

### Web Site Surveys

The purpose of creating a Web survey is to collect information from the target population of postsecondary instructors, faculty, staff and students who attend postsecondary institutions.

Two surveys have been incorporated into the Web site. The goal of these two evaluation forms will be to ascertain whether the Web site performs a valuable function by increasing instructors' knowledge regarding learning disabilities, and whether the Web site helps students disclose their learning disabilities. For this thesis, a self-administered questionnaire was constructed using open-ended and Likert-type scale questions in both surveys. The advantage of using closed questions within a Likert model provides the ability to capture participants' attitudes and perceptions (Keyton, 2001). According to Keyton, open-ended questions allow respondents to express their individual viewpoint.

The first survey targets postsecondary instructors or professionals who work with, or have been associated with, learning disabled individuals (Figure B.12). The main goal of the questionnaire is to determine whether www.ldcommunity.com is informative; to gain knowledge about instructors' attitudes toward the learning ability of disabled students before and after viewing the Web site; and to identify any additional information that the Web site can provide.

A second questionnaire is designed to analyze disabled students in the postsecondary setting. The intent is to obtain demographic data on student type, to

determine whether the Web site is informative, to elicit attitudes toward instructors, and to identify students' comfort level regarding self-disclosing, both before and after viewing ldcommunity.com (Figure B.13).

### Collecting Data

These two surveys were constructed using Survey Monkey templates and are incorporated into www.ldcommunity.com. Survey Monkey collects data in real-time and the researcher has the option to filter and cross tabulate; therefore, allowing the researcher to identify patterns in the data. A second tool is available, which has the ability to download a summary of the results onto a spreadsheet. According to Saxon, Garratt, Gilroy and Cairns (2003) "benefits offered by Web-based methods in terms of handling and processing data enable the collection of large amounts of data that would otherwise be impossible using traditional survey methods" (p. 54).

Another important aspect of data collection is the response or return rate. The latter is defined by Keyton (2001) as "the number of people who respond after they have been contacted as part of the sample and asked to participate" (p. 186). Web-based response rates, according to Saxon et al. (2003), are "similar or slightly lower than rates obtained from other methods" (p. 55). Non-response rate, "or failure to obtain data from individuals in the sample" (Keyton, 2001, p. 186), are found to be lower in Web surveys. Saxon et al. (2003) also reports that "higher levels of self-disclosure" on open ended questions can contribute to the Web as a format of anonymity (p.56).

In addition, Keyton (2001) believes that many "researchers wish for a high response rate, there is no standard, and response rates vary by survey technique" (p. 186).

The goal for the total number of responses that ldcommunity.com will start collecting for its data will be one hundred. To ensure that an individual or individuals are not submitting multiple surveys, Survey Monkey has the capability to record the Internet Protocol address of the user, as well as the date, time and responses.

### Modifying ldcommunity.com

The Web site ldcommunity.com is committed to being an up-to-date resource. The author intends to analyze the survey at one hundred respondents, with the major data points to be examined as follows.

For the instructor survey:

- Does the Web site increase instructors' knowledge?
- Does the Web site help LD students self-disclose their disability to instructors?
- Will the Web site be used as a classroom resource?
- Is the additional information on learning disabilities helpful?
- Are there improvements to the Web site that should be made?
- What is the overall satisfaction of the Web site?

Evaluation of student survey:

- Will ldcommunity.com have a positive impact on instructors?
- Was the additional information on learning disabilities helpful.
- Are there any improvements to the Web site that should be made?
- Is there any information that should be added in the future to the Web site?

### Reporting Survey Data

According to Keyton (2001), results of the data surveyed should be reported to the individuals who responded. Therefore, once the results of each data collection are available, a link on the survey page will direct visitors to view the analyses.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Students with learning disabilities often have a history of poor academic achievement. In some cases, LD students have self-reported that they feel that they should invest more effort into their schoolwork and that a lack of effort has led to their poor academic outcomes. However, instructors who work with these students often consider these students hard workers and persistent learners; they simply learn differently and at a slower pace than do their non-LD cohorts.

In terms of self-efficacy, LD students tend to have lower self-efficacy than do their non-LD cohorts because they often achieve only substandard academic performance. At the same time, learning disabled students observe their non LD peers achieving positive academic performance. Students with learning disabilities hear others, particularly parents and instructors, describe them as “lazy” or “stupid” which can negatively affect their transition to the postsecondary setting.

In order to receive academic accommodations in college, students must initiate the process of self-disclosure with both the institution and their instructors. However, doing so might be challenging because of their history of low academic achievement and negative stereotypes. The [www.ldcommunity.com](http://www.ldcommunity.com) Web site provides a visual stimulus for initiating a trustful relationship between the LD student and the postsecondary instructor. Trust is developed when students become aware that the community surrounding them recognizes their differences, leading them to become sufficiently comfortable to set aside past.



negative experiences and initiate the process of self-disclosure. At the same time, those who lack an understanding of learning disabilities become more knowledgeable and understanding of LD students. Thus, when the opportunity arises to interact with an LD individual, they will demonstrate sensitivity toward the individual and his or her current situation, leaving behind any preconceived stereotypes that they may have once maintained.

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APPENDIX A

**Screenshots of Web Site (ldcommunity.com)**

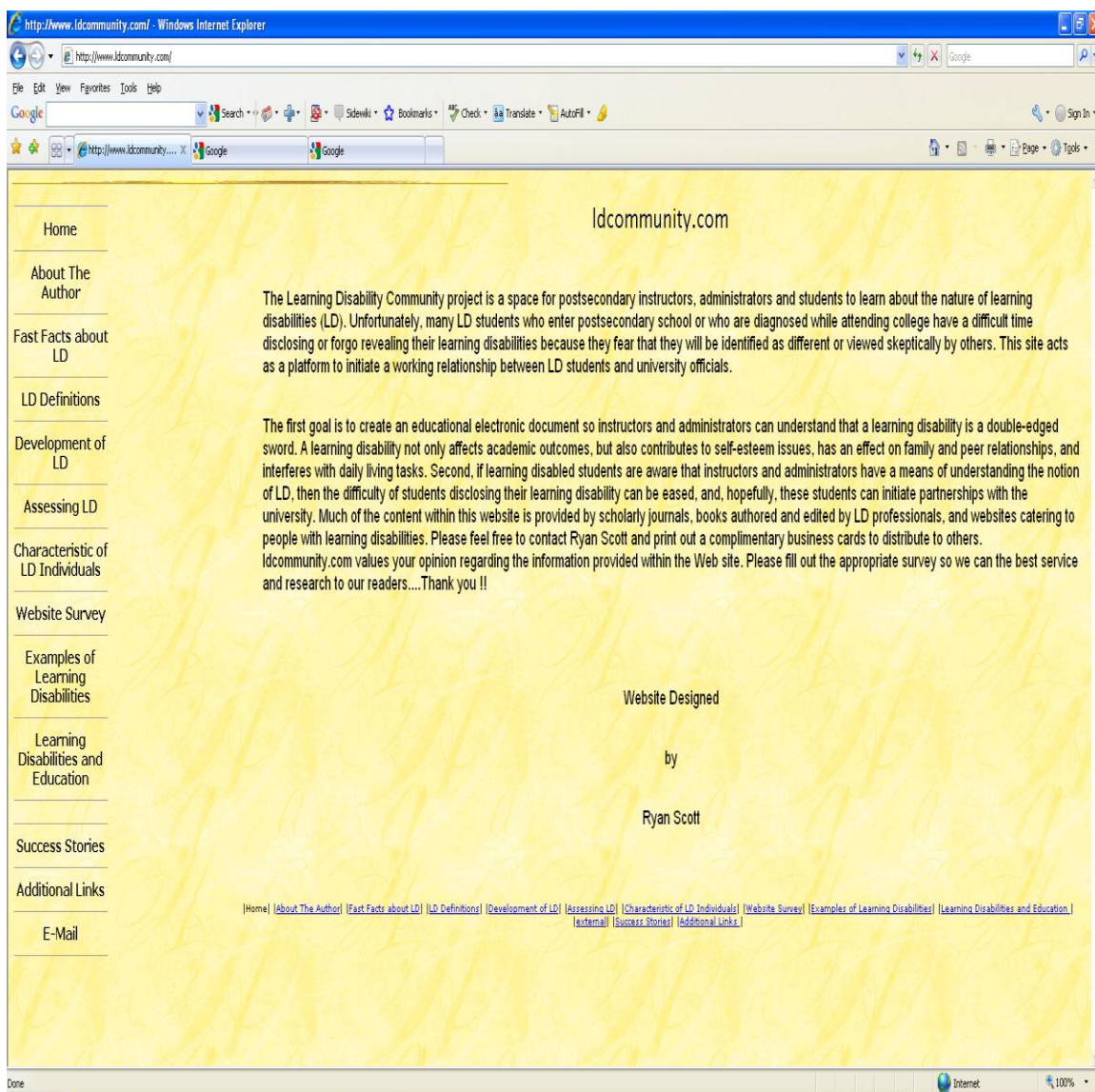


Figure A.1: Screenshot of Home Page. The author explains to instructors and faculty members that a learning disability is more than an academic barrier (image by author).

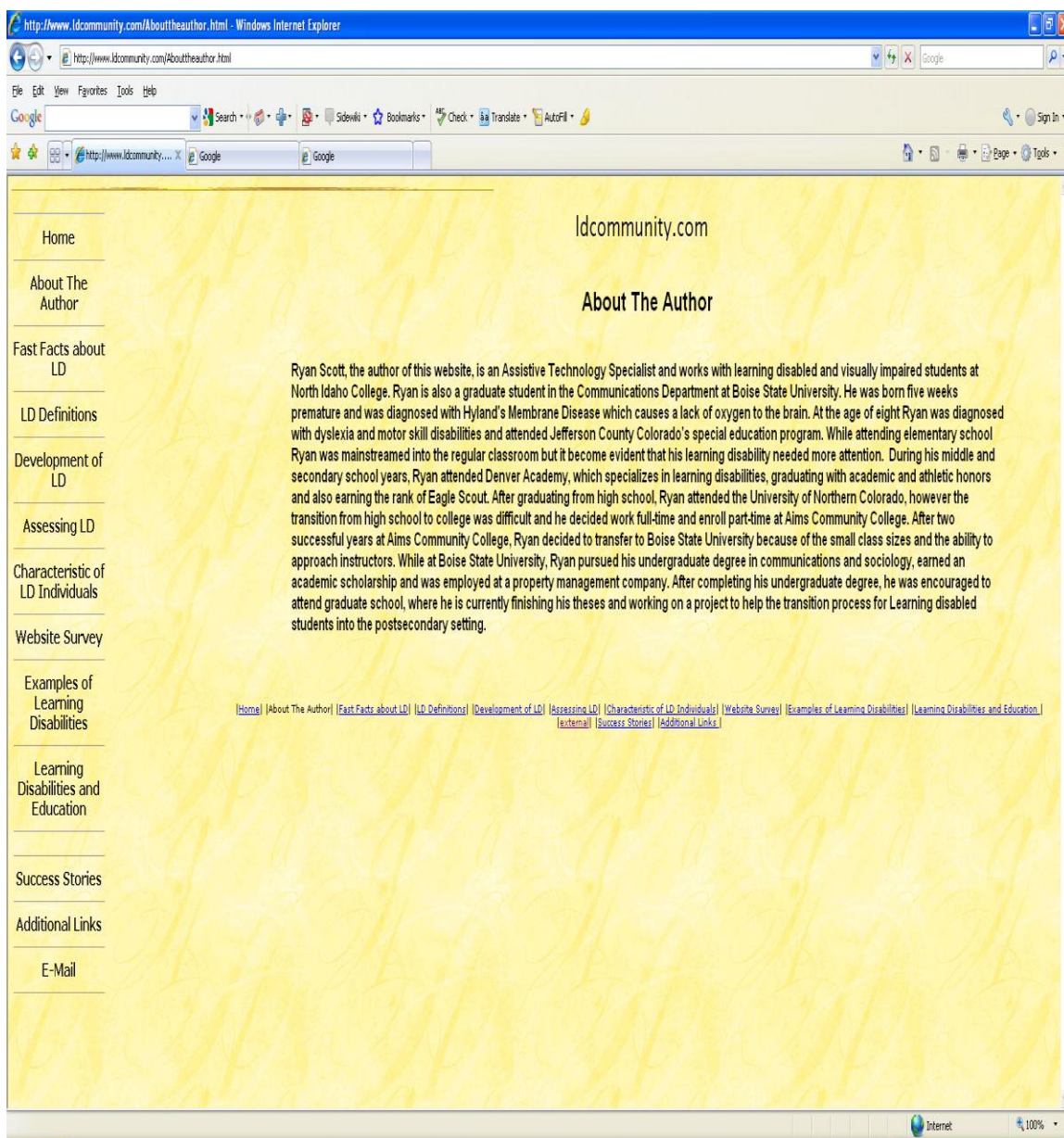


Figure A.2: Screenshot of About the Author Page. The author's goal is to create a positive model that encourages other people to self-disclose (image by author).

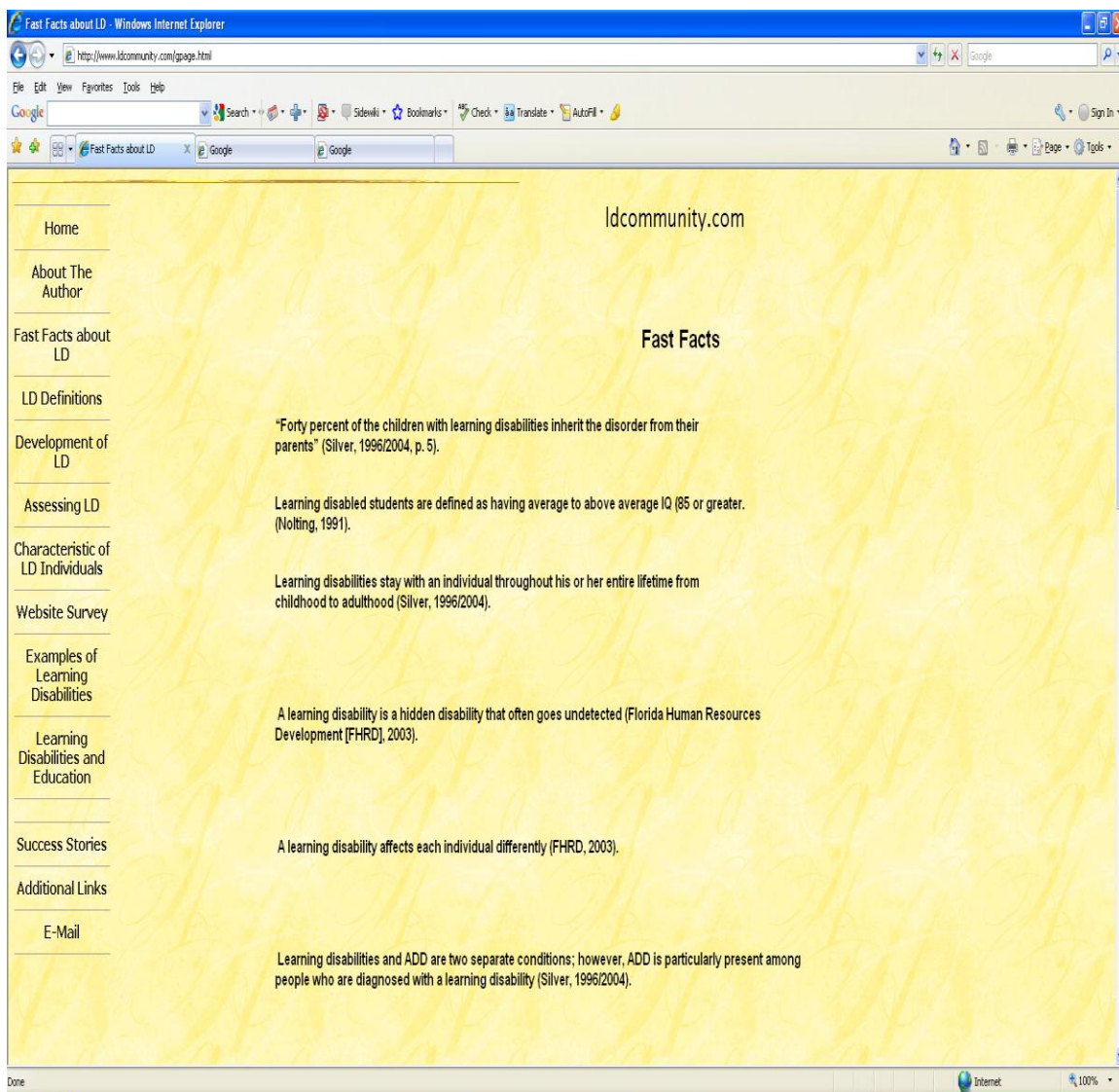


Figure A.3: Screenshot of Fast Facts Page. The purpose of this section is to give brief qualitative and quantitative descriptions about learning disabilities that help to dispel myths or stereotypes about learning disabilities (image by author).



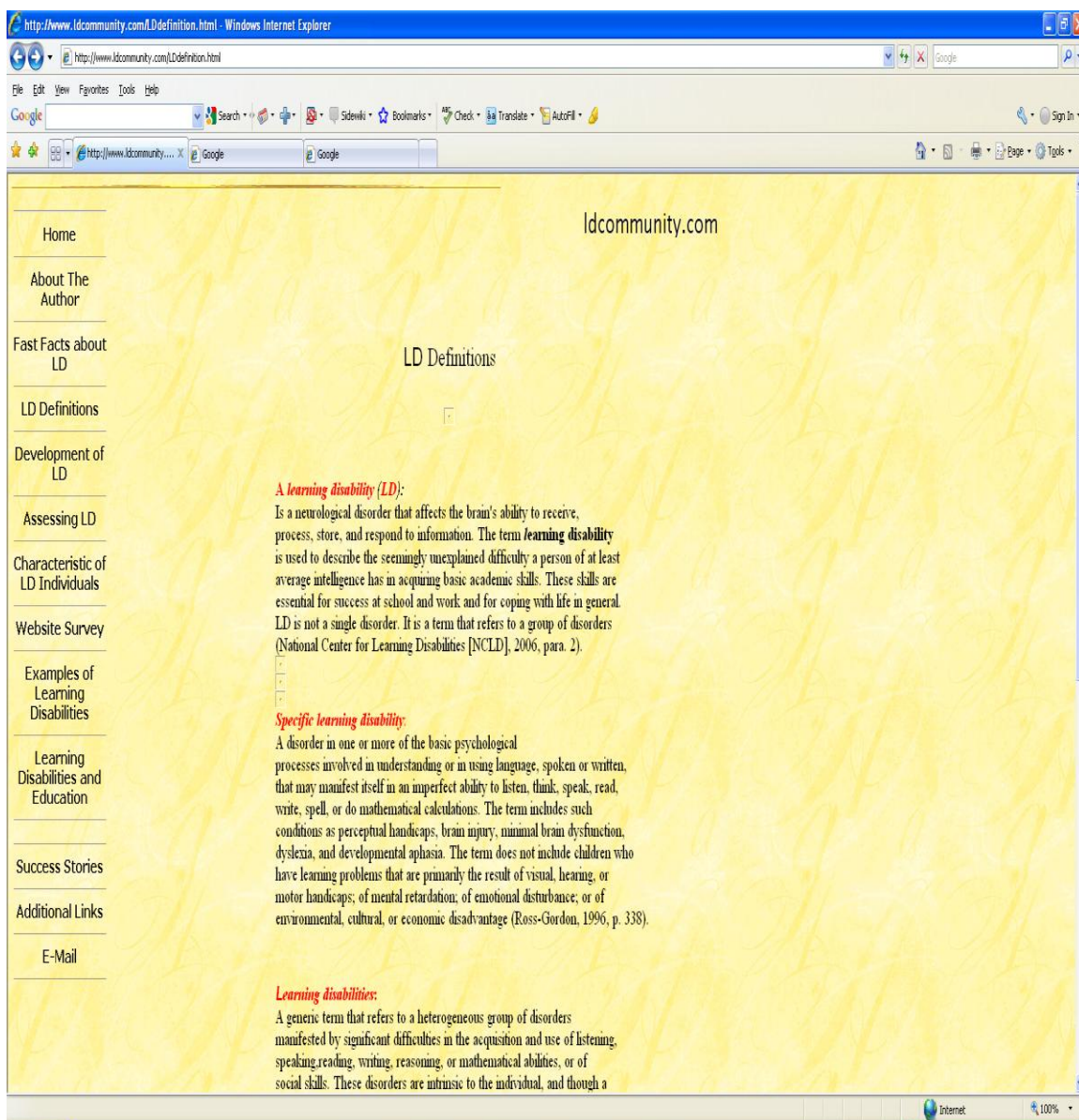


Figure A.4: Screenshot of LD Definitions Page. Because of the numerous definitions of learning disabilities, the author decided to illustrate three common definitions. Within this page, there is a link to LD Online for additional definitions (image by author).

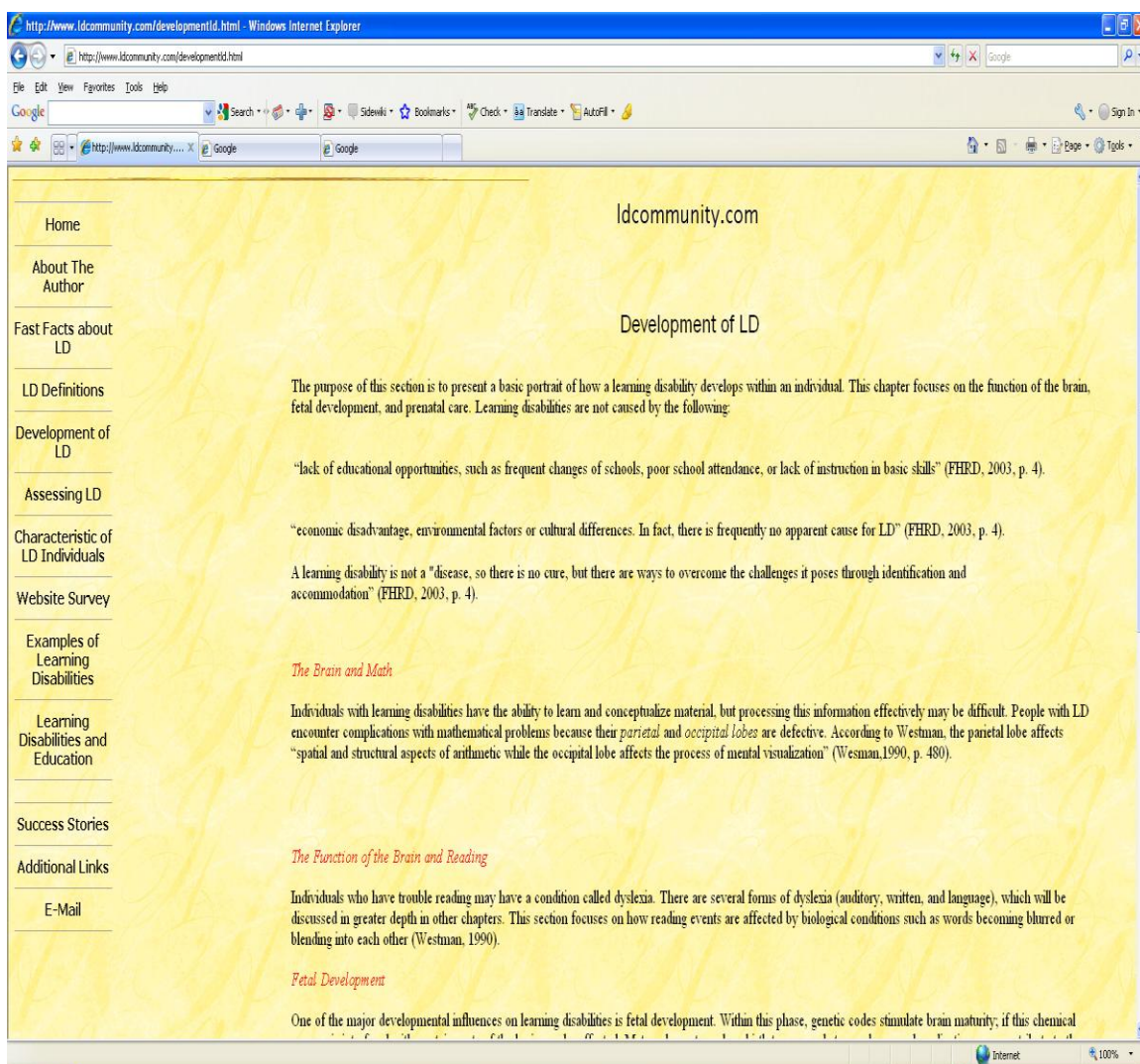


Figure A.5: Screenshot of Development of LD Page. This section explains that a learning disability is considered a biological disorder (image by author).

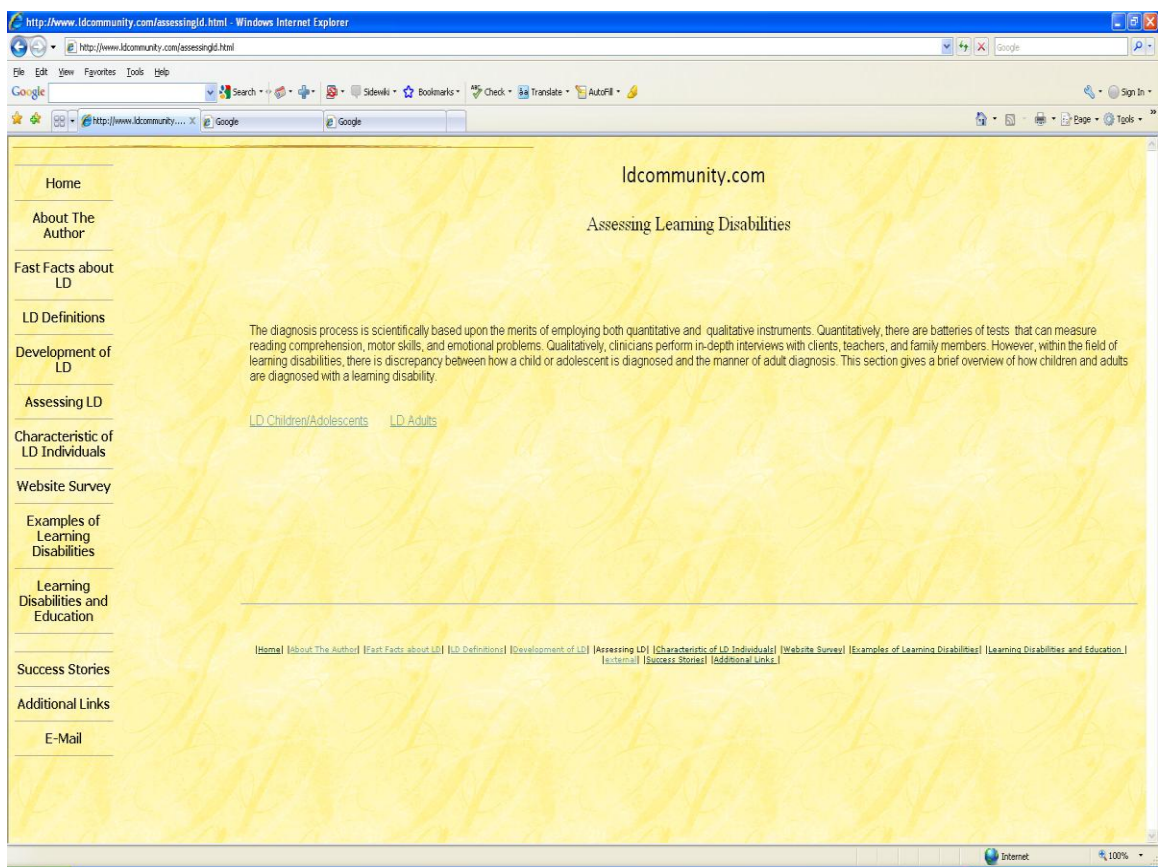


Figure A.6: Screenshot of Assessing Learning Disabilities Page. This page is a working description of how children and adolescents are tested for a LD (image by author).



Figure A.7: Screenshot of Characteristics of Learning Disabled Individual Page. This page describes the social dynamics of the LD individual from childhood to adulthood, providing three examples of how LD individuals react in social situations (image by author).

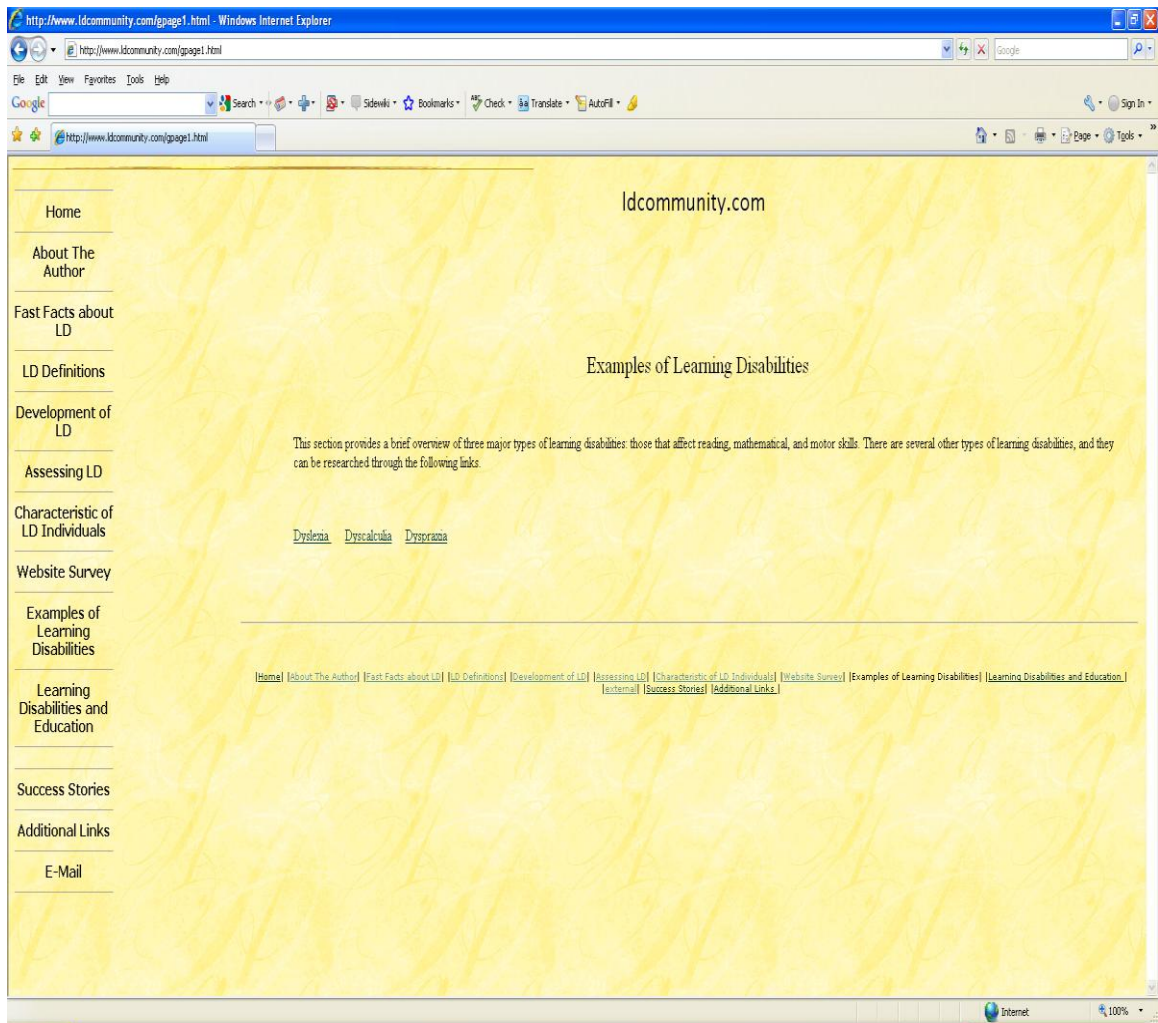


Figure A.8: Screenshot of Examples of Learning Disabilities Page. The Web page incorporates descriptions of the three major types of learning disabilities: dyslexia, dyscalculia and dyspraxia (image by author).

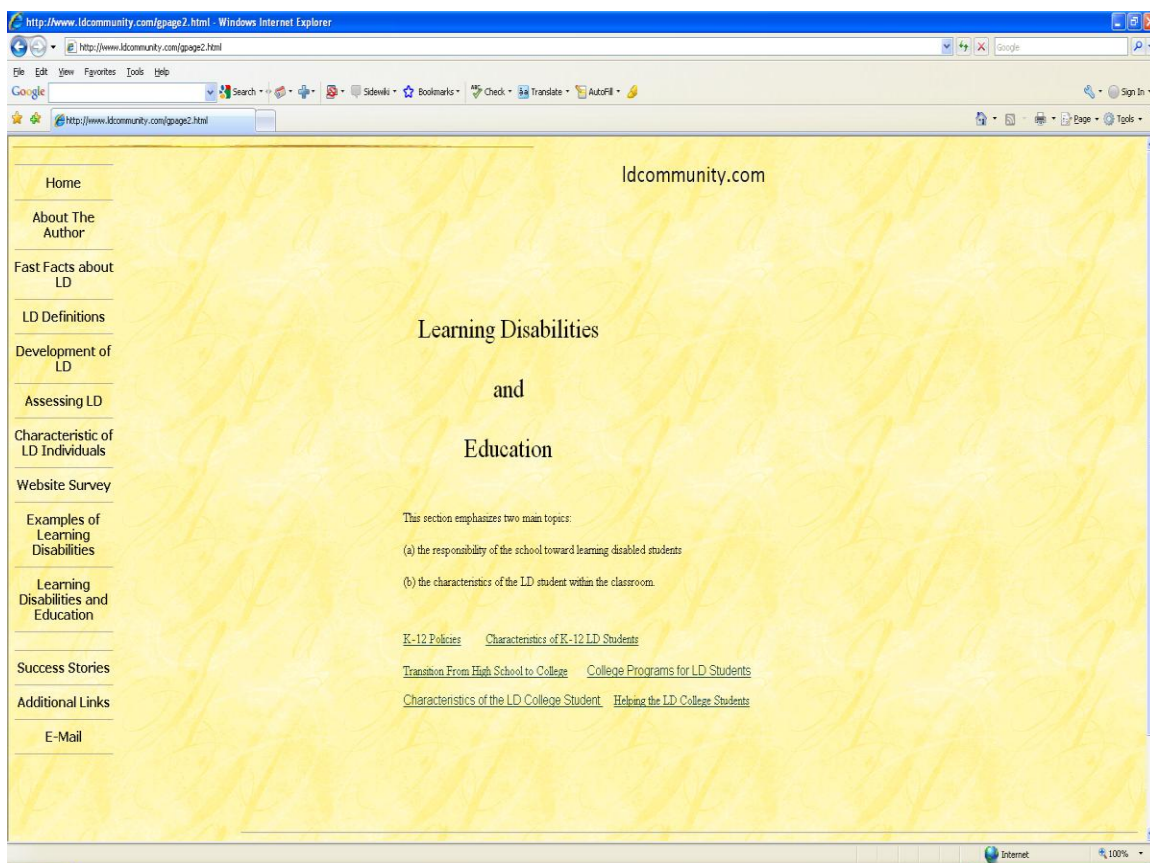


Figure A.9: Screenshot of Learning Disabilities and Education Page. The Web page highlights the different kinds of academic barriers that LD individual might endure from kindergarten to the postsecondary setting (image by author).

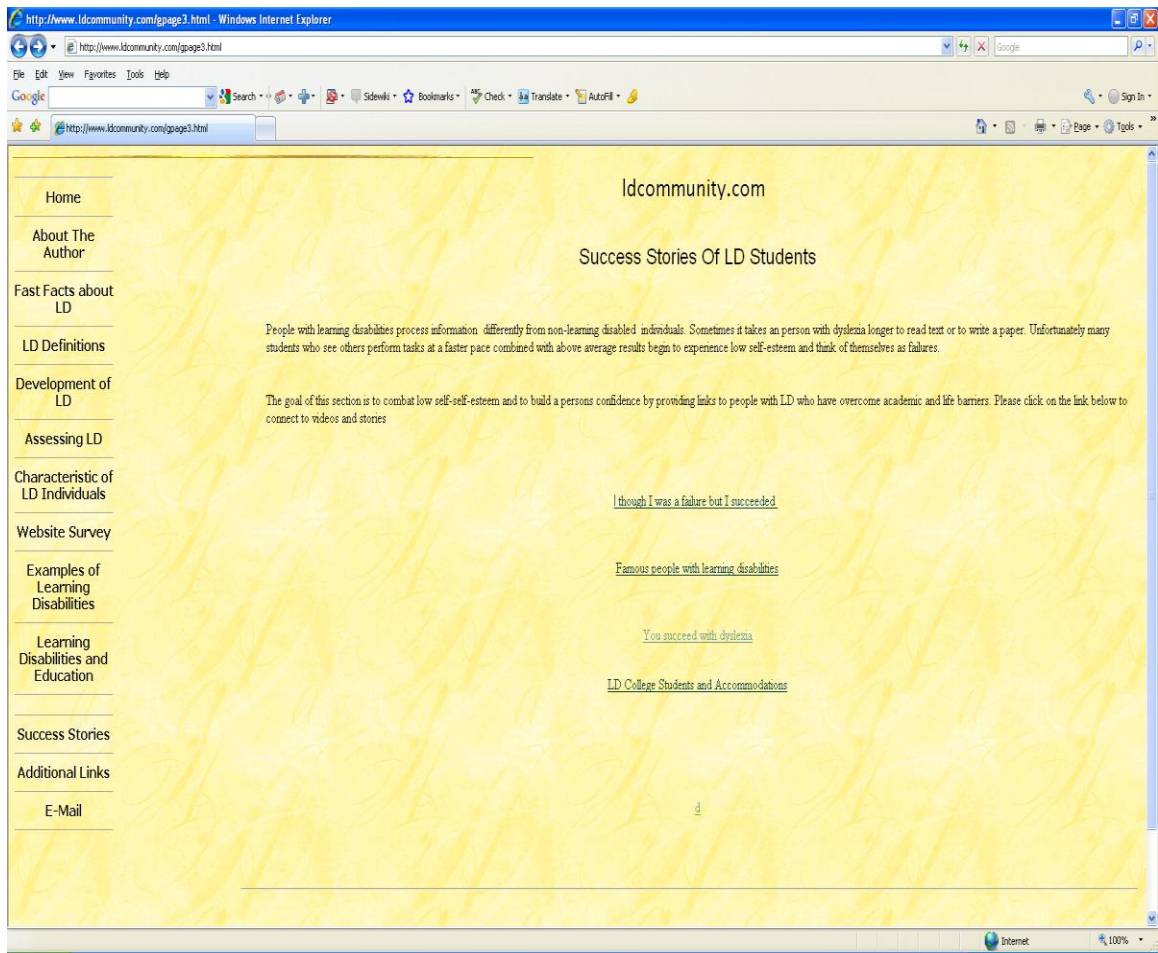


Figure A.10: Screenshot of Success Stories Page. This Web site links visual media into the Web site to promote education and promoting student's to self-disclosure their disability (image by author).

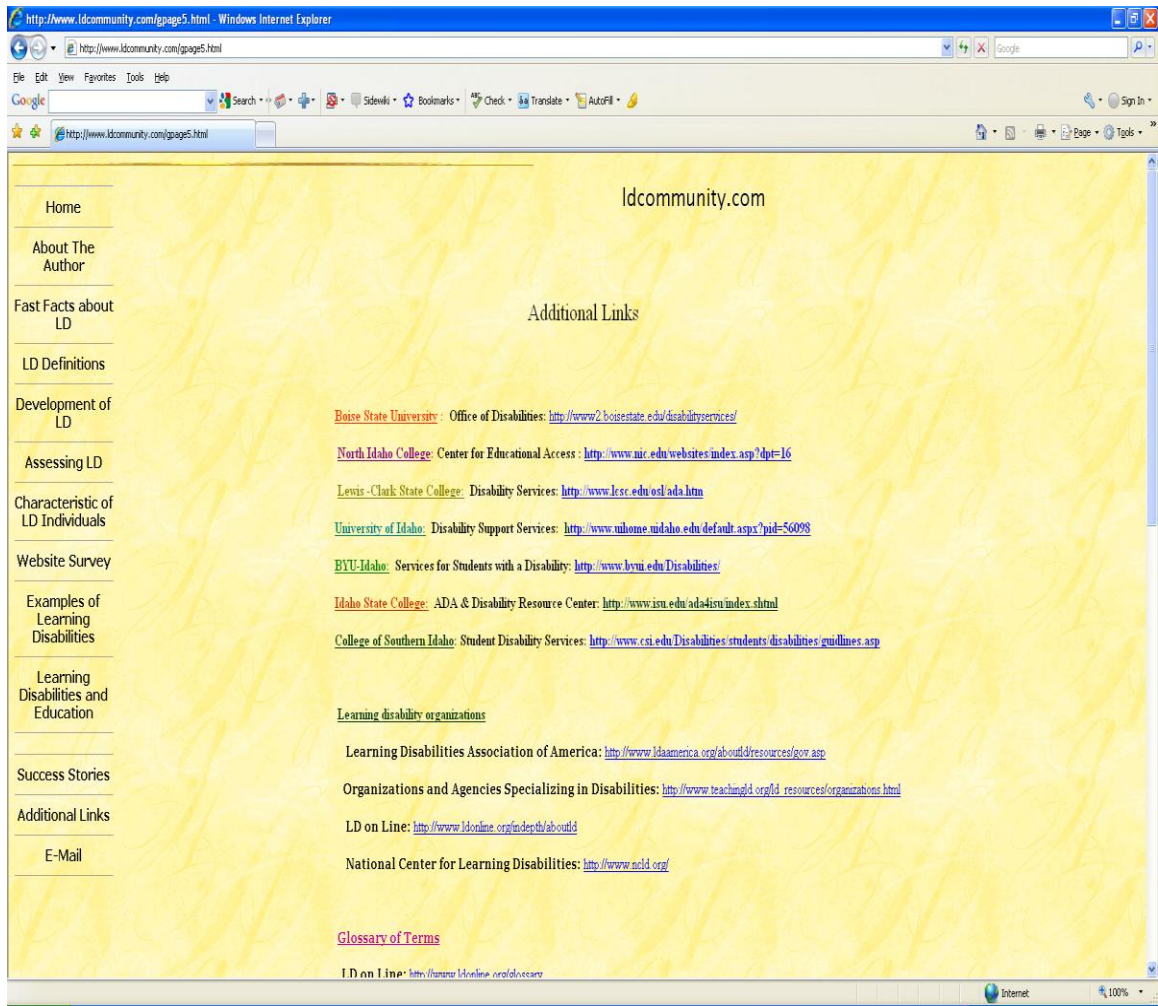


Figure A.11: Screenshot of Additional Links Page. Visitors are able to explore other Web sites affiliated with learning disabilities (image by author).



## APPENDIX B

### **Surveys**

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the following content:

- Page Title:** Website evaluation on increasing instructors knowledge toward learning disabilities
- URL:** [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=2eHJfmGZf8oqy#B41sp2Q\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=2eHJfmGZf8oqy#B41sp2Q_3d_3d)
- Question 1:** Please fill in the appropriate box.
  - Male
  - Female
- Question 2:** What is your Age?
  - Under 25
  - 25-30
  - 31-36
  - 37-42
  - 43-48
  - 49-54
  - 55-60
  - 61 or older
- Question 3:** What is your Ethnicity or Race? You may select more than one.
  - African American
  - Hispanic or Latino
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
  - Caucasian
  - Other

If other (please specify)
- Question 4:** What is your occupation?
  - Special education
  - Regular classroom teacher
  - Disability support services
  - Private school
  - Alternative school
  - Trade and industries
  - Two year college
  - Four year college

Figure B.12: Screenshot of the Instructor Survey. The goal is to target instructors or professionals who work with or have been associated with learning disabled individuals. To view entire survey, please visit <http://www.ldcommunity.com/links.html> (image by author).

Website evaluation on helping students self-disclose Survey - Windows Internet Explorer

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?m=LevYK0W8E2jPcEmpIWOig\_34\_34

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Google Search Sidewiki Bookmarks Check Translate Autofill Sign In

Website evaluation on helping students self-disclose ...

Website evaluation on helping students self-disclose [Exit this survey >>](#)

1. Please check the items that apply to you.

I am a male.

I am a female.

I am between the ages of 15-18.

I am between the ages of 19-22.

I am between the ages of 23-30.

I am between the ages of 31-40.

I am over 40 years old.

I had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in high school and/or received services through the special education department.

I am a college student and have accessed services through my college's disabilities support office.

I am a college student and have NOT accessed services through the disabilities support office.

Other

If other (please specify)

2. What is your Ethnicity or Race? You can select more than one.

African American

Hispanic or Latino

American Indian or Alaska Native

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Caucasian

Other

If other (please specify)

3. Where are you located?

City/Town:

State/province:

Done Internet 100%

Figure B.13: Screenshot of the Student Survey. The intent is to obtain demographic data on student type, to determine whether the Web site is informative, to elicit attitudes toward instructors, and to identify students' comfort level regarding self-disclosing before and after viewing the Web site. To view entire survey, please visit <http://www.ldcommunity.com/links.html> (image by author).