Making Gains in Productivity

Individual tutoring often takes the form of academic support that focuses on a specific skill or skills (reading, writing, spelling, or math), or tutoring may give priority to content support (history, foreign language, science, etc.). Very often, though, our **clients seek tutorial support for what they perceive as a general or specific lack of productivity froma student.** The degree of concern varies from outright panic about what is not getting done to a more positive, proactive agenda to support or boost what might be already good output in a competitive academic culture. Reasons for this "productivity gap" are extremely varied, and thus the menu of potentially effective responses to the need must be broad.

Students may be perceived as having low productivity by their parents, their teachers, their peers, or themselves—sometimes accurately and other times not. In the especially fast-paced and demanding educational climate surrounding many of our students, it makes perfect sense that some students should be struggling to meet productivity goals. Their strain is not necessarily a reflection of their problem but may be instead a natural response to high, and sometimes unreasonable, expectations. This is often the case for students who have a deficit of attention control, either diagnosed as ADHD or manifested in behaviors that are typical of people with ADHD. A hallmark of attention deficit is inconsistency in performance, and it is not uncommon for parents and teachers who do not fully understand the nature of this trait to assume that a student should be able to maintain the same level of output that they have observed in them at a different time. The fact is that many of these students simply cannot keep up the same level of efficiency in every circumstance. When we insist that they should, we tend to shower the student with blame, causing frustration that only compounds the problem.

Dr. Mel Levine provides good understanding of where breakdowns can occur in productivity in his book *A Mind at a Time.* He describes what he calls "output controls" and points out different channels that may or may not work effectively in a given person. Some students have difficulty previewing a task; they aren't good at figuring out in advance just what all of the steps are going to be or at estimating the demands of each step. They may not really have a clear picture of the finished "product." Other students' breakdown may come in selecting alternatives for how they might best respond to a task; many are on the impulsive side and pick what comes to mind first or what initially seems "easiest," only to experience frustration later with their chosen course. Some students tackle a task with tremendous enthusiasm and energy only to find that they cannot maintain that level of energy, and their effort peters out to everyone's disappointment. Better assessment of the scope of the task and other competing priorities can help these students understand this potential pitfall, and they can become more efficient.

Dr. Edward Hallowell, a leading authority on ADHD, recently wrote an insightful book called *Crazy Busy* in which he **discusses some behaviors that are typical of ADHD and that hinder productivity among many non-ADHD people, students and adults alike.** He emphasizes the changing role of technology and how our newfound and growing abilities to do so much so fast both helps and hurts us. It is easy, for example, to relate to the maladies of an overflowing email inbox, the proliferation of unsolicited web links and videos sent to us by family and friends, the sense that you *should* have responded to something just because you could have, etc. He offers a number of suggestions about how to regain some control over this epidemic of opportunity that takes us away from what we might otherwise prefer or need to do.

Hallowell makes a distinction between the time we use technology for a specific intention versus the time we spend with that technology because we simply fall into it. He calls it "screensucking" when we find ourselves looking at a computer, mobile phone, television, game console, etc. long after we had intended to be done. It's a useful term because rather than casting judgment on the technology itself, we focus instead on our choices. For example, you went to the computer to look up a recipe and soon found yourself shopping for pans. There was nothing wrong with looking up the recipe; it was your goal, but pan shopping was not. You are productively responding to work demands when you check your email, but watching the You-Tube video of your niece's audition that you found forwarded to your inbox was not your goal and maybe should have been saved for the weekend. You may have chosen to watch a favorite TV show to relax, but you are "screensucking" when you don't turn it off promptly when the show is over and end up watching another. Recognizing the difference between using technology by choice and simply spending time with it because it is there can really help with your own productivity. By making discussion of the problem of "screensucking" a family matter, **parents can help their children understand that time management is not just their own shortcoming but an increasingly growing need among anyone who wants to successfully employ technology rather than be used by it.**