

Learning Disability Training: A New Approach



Project background:

In the years that Literacy Link South Central has been in the business of coordinating regional training, learning disabilities is a topic that has been addressed a number of times. Usually, the only training available is a one-day, surface exploration of the topic that allows those who attend to understand that learning disabilities exist, that they affect many of our adult learners and that they do so in various ways. Recently, the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) coordinated a project that allowed approximately 25 individuals within Ontario to receive more intensive exposure to information on learning disabilities. To date, this information has not percolated down to all front line practitioners for many valid reasons, such as lack of time and resources. The LBS field in Ontario has an information need that has not yet been completely filled.

This project proposes to take advantage of recent developments in online training (specifically the Centra system) to research and deliver advanced training modules in learning disabilities. Various efforts have been made to increase the field's awareness of the impact of learning disabilities on literacy learners and to share strategies with practitioners to assist learners with literacy acquisition. This project, coupled with MTCU's foresight to provide programs with access to quality computer hardware and software, will enable practitioners in Ontario (from all sectors) to access training to fill in gaps in knowledge. It will also allow them to access training at times that are more convenient to them.

This project proposes to research the topic of learning disabilities in a way that complements the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) program and provides practitioners and administrators with advance level information on learning disabilities. The Centra system for online training is a potential solution to barriers that many experience when trying to access training.

Project objectives:

- To conduct high quality, advanced research on learning disabilities as they relate to LBS learners.
- To develop five modules of training on learning disabilities.
- To produce five online training sessions for adult literacy practitioners, using Centra.
- To make information on learning disabilities accessible to a wide variety of individuals and organizations.
- To explore sharing information and training modules from this project with adult education course deliverers.

Module development:

Content:

The organization of information and content for delivery was developed from:

- Findings from the “LBS Practitioner Learning Disability Training Needs Survey” (over 100 surveys received representing all three sectors).
- The five LBS service delivery functions.

- An extensive Internet search including relevant adult education databases.
- A comprehensive review of materials obtained from AlphaPlus, OISE and the Texas Center for Adult Literacy and Learning.
- A review of existing training modules/manuals:
 - Bridges to Practice: National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, United States
 - Screening for Success: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
 - Literacy and the LD Adult written by Janet Johnston
 - The Suzy Harris Upgrading Workshop Manual, Laubach Literacy Ontario
 - Asking the Right Questions: The Learning Centre Calgary
 - Exploring all Options: Australia Learning Disabilities

Assumptions upon which modules are based...

Each type of learning disability should not be treated in isolation by dedicating a module for each one.

- ...”more recently there have been attempts to specify types of learning disabilities in order to establish various subtypes. While this initiative has been helpful, particularly with respect to providing subject selection guidelines for research purposes, it has not managed to overcome the difficulties associated with the individualistic nature of learning disabilities. In other words, many learning disabled individuals do not fit neatly into particular subtypes, but may span aspects of one and aspects of another depending on their specific learning profile of strengths and weaknesses.” (Johnston, Janet. *Literacy and the LD Adults: Workshop. Learning Potentials.1994*)

- “There is such a large amount of individual variation among different learning disabled adults that it is difficult to come to any consensus in terms of characteristics.” (Johnston, Janet. *Literacy and the LD Adults. Workshop. Learning Potentials. 1994*)
- “Learning disabilities are lifelong. The way in which they are expressed may vary over an individual’s lifetime, depending on the interaction between the demands of the environment and the individual’s strengths and needs. (*Screening for Success. Learning Disabilities Association of Canada. 2001. Section II*)

Practitioners should not be trained to conduct formal learning disability assessments but instead, should be trained to identify the specific strengths and challenges of each adult learner.

- If a practitioner thinks a learner may have a learning disability, then further assessment may help to understand the characteristics of the learner’s potential learning disability. Teaching and learning strategies, accommodations and the use of assistive technology can be incorporated based on assessment results.
- If the assessment has not helped the practitioner to: identify the specific nature of the learning disability; identify appropriate teaching strategies; or if the learner continues to experience difficulty, then it is recommended that a specialist in learning disabilities be consulted. (*Screening for Success. Learning Disabilities Association of Canada. 2001*)

Utilize and incorporate materials from existing training modules/manuals where appropriate.

- Existing manuals/modules have been well researched.
- It is more efficient to focus energy on identified areas of need that have not yet been addressed in existing training manuals.
- Let’s not duplicate efforts and “reinvent the wheel!”

It is not our role to dictate nor reinforce one particular screening and/or assessment tool. We should provide criteria and pre-existing evaluative information on the various screening tools and informal assessments that are presently available.

- Agencies may already have learning disability screening and/or assessment tools that they use. It may be more beneficial to the programs to give them evaluative criteria to rate their existing practices and a list of possible tools to access.
- This approach follows the Ministry’s “Common Assessment” directive. The tool is not common, but the features are.
- This approach respects the different program and learner needs that exist among the sectors (community-based, school board and college).

Outline of training modules

Throughout the modules a case study format was used to help link theory to the application. There are three case studies that attempt to capture the realities of the LBS programs in all three sectors. These case studies were developed to help practitioners understand how learning disabilities can impact adult learners.

Module 1

Characteristics of Adults with Learning Disabilities and Understanding the Initial Screening Process

- Introduction to learning disabilities
 - Latest definition
 - Example of how learning disabilities can impact the information processing cycle
 - How can a person with learning disabilities experience success?
- Signs and characteristics of potential learning disabilities
 - Where does dyslexia fit in?
 - Where does ADD fit in?
 - Specific skill characteristics of adults with learning disabilities
- Understanding the effects of learning disabilities on adults
- The screening process:
 - When should screening tools be used?
 - Gathering information about the learner
 - Effectively involving the adult in the screening process
 - What to consider when looking at the screening tool results
- Introduction to learning styles
 - What is a learning style?
 - How do learning styles relate to learning disabilities?

Module 2

Assessing Individual Strengths and Struggles: The Foundation for an Effective Training Plan

- The assessment process
- Understanding diagnostic assessments
- Understanding the impact of processing breakdown
 - Visual processing difficulties
 - Auditory processing difficulties
 - Organizational processing difficulties
- Informal assessment methods
 - Four elements of informal assessment
- In-depth look at observation and task analysis
- Self-assessment and learner involvement
- Impact of learning disabilities on literacy skills
 - Assessing oral communication
 - Assessing expressive writing
 - Assessing reading
 - Assessing math
 - Helpful tips when assessing literacy skills
 - Recognizing memory challenges
 - Recognizing visual-spatial challenges
- Informal assessment models
 - Holistic Education Literacy Process (HELP) model
 - Destination Literacy: information assessment model
- Criteria to consider when selecting assessment tools

Module 3

Building an Effective Training Plan: Incorporating Learner-Centred Strategies

- Principles of an effective training plan
- Types of strategies and related functions
- Factors that can impact the effectiveness of learning strategies
- Features of effective learning strategies
- How to teach learning strategies
 - Steps to successful acquisition of a strategy
- Learn various skill building strategies for:
 - Reading
 - Writing
 - Math
 - Listening and speaking
 - Memory
- Strategies to deal with behavioral challenges

Module 4

Accommodations, Self-Management and Transition Planning: Keys for success

- Psychosocial strategies
 - Social skills
 - Practitioner tips for helping learners to improve their social skills
 - Studying and organizational skills
 - Examples of organizational and studying strategies
 - How to deal with behavior challenges in the classroom

- Self-determination a key part of the transition process

- Understanding motivation strategies

- Identifying accommodations
 - Process to select accommodations
 - Criteria to rate accommodations

- Learning disability characteristics, related strategies and potential accommodations

- Assistive technology
 - Why use assistive technology?
 - A holistic approach to using assistive technology
 - The SETT model
 - Examples of assistive technology

- Developing fair demonstrations using accommodations

Module 5

Effective Instructional Methods

- Characteristics of effective approaches to instruction
 - Practitioner efficacy
- Practitioner based strategies: Content enhancement routines
- Instructional models
 - Strategic Instructional Model (SIM)
 - Direct instruction
- Reading, writing and math instructional approaches
- Collaborative approach to learning
- Standards for selecting instructional materials
- Learn to apply learning styles/multiple intelligences to training
 - Incorporating theory into instruction
 - Incorporating theory into reflection
- Ongoing assessment
 - Ongoing assessment of learning strategies
 - Ongoing assessment of accommodations