

Learning Disabilities Training: A New Approach

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



Learning objectives:

- Define learning disabilities
- Describe the types of learning disabilities and related characteristics
- Understand the signs of learning disabilities for specific skill areas
- Understand how learning disabilities impact adults' lives
- Carry out an effective learner-centred screening process
- Understand learning styles, their limitations, and how they relate to persons with learning disabilities

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Introduction to learning disabilities

“I understand my weaknesses and can easily describe them, because I dealt with them for 21 years. Growing up, I knew who I was as a student with weaknesses; I just didn't know who I was as a student with strengths.”¹

Although this quote is a personal insight, Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) practitioners often speak of learners expressing similar experiences and feelings. Many adults may not realize they have a learning disability but feel they are somehow “different” from others. Research shows that the impact of this unknown “difference” can be negative when adults have few emotional and financial supports. Most adults with a learning disability have average, if not above average, intelligence. It is ironic and unfortunate that when asked to describe their abilities, adults with learning disabilities often view themselves as dumb or stupid.

Several studies have examined the impact of learning disabilities on the individual and society in general. Here are a few highlights:

- The 1970 Commission on Emotional Learning Disorders in Children stated that 1 in 10 Canadians have learning disabilities or 3 million Canadians.²
- 35% of students identified with learning disabilities drop out of high school. This does not include students who are not identified and drop out.³
- Adults with learning disabilities, who have not received appropriate education and/or training, typically hold a job for only three months.⁴
- 30% of adults with severe literacy problems were found to have undetected or untreated learning disabilities.⁵

It is suspected that a large majority of adult learners who participate in LBS programs have some form of learning disability, although no study has officially confirmed this. Practitioners frequently observe adult learners displaying characteristics indicative of learning disabilities. Often adults report negative experiences in previous schooling and feelings of inadequacy about their academic skills. Few adults enter LBS programs with official

documents stating a learning disability. Those who suspect they have learning disabilities rarely pursue formal assessments from a licensed psychologist because of costs and the lack of accessibility. In addition, it can be difficult to find psychologists with experience testing adults and the test results may not be relevant to adult learning needs.

Practitioners frequently find that learners really only want to understand why they are having difficulties learning and do not want to have an official diagnosis. The goal, often shared by both adult learners and practitioners, is to understand learners' strengths and weaknesses and to develop learning strategies to help learners succeed.

“I believe one key idea is to find one's own definition of the dual identity within oneself as a learner and as a student. The learner is the one who makes an effort to be curious, involved and motivated. The student is the one who determines how you cope in school. Not all knowledge is taught in school. It is the student identity which gets labeled as disabled. The "learning disability" should not be allowed to overwhelm one's desire to attain knowledge. The learner in you must prevent it.”⁶

Latest definition

Through research review and consultation with a broad range of academics and professionals in the field, The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario has arrived at a definition of learning disabilities. “Learning Disabilities” refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information. This definition is supported by a background document entitled *Operationalizing the New Definition of Learning Disabilities for Utilization within Ontario's Educational System*, LDAO, 2001, available on the LDAO website: www.ldao.on.ca.

These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning, in combination with otherwise average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning. Learning disabilities are specific, not global impairments, and are distinct from intellectual disabilities.

Learning disabilities range in severity and invariably interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following important skills:

- Oral language (e.g. listening, speaking, understanding)
- Reading (e.g. decoding, comprehension)
- Written language (e.g. spelling, written expression)
- Mathematics (e.g. computation, problem solving)

Learning disabilities may also cause difficulties with organizational skills, social perception, and social interaction.

The impairments are generally life-long. However, their effects may be expressed differently over time, depending on the match between the demands of the environment and the individual's characteristics. Some impairments may be noted during the pre-school years, while others may not become evident until much later. During the school years, learning disabilities are suggested by unexpectedly low academic achievement or achievement that is sustainable only through extremely high levels of effort and support.

Learning disabilities are a result of genetic, congenital and/or acquired neurobiological factors. They are not caused by cultural or language differences, inadequate or inappropriate instruction, socio-economic status, or lack of motivation, although any one of these and other factors may compound the impact of learning disabilities. Frequently learning disabilities co-exist with other conditions including: attentional, behavioural, and emotional disorders; sensory impairments; and other medical conditions.

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) working description of learning disabilities:

- Learning disabilities can affect the way in which a person takes in, remembers, understands, and expresses information
- People with learning disabilities are intelligent and have abilities to learn despite difficulties in processing information

- Living with a learning disability can have an ongoing impact on friendships, school, work, self-esteem, and daily life
- People with learning disabilities can succeed when solid coping skills and strategies are developed⁷

How learning disabilities can impact the information processing cycle

There are three stages to learning:

1. Inputting information
2. Processing information
3. Outputting information

There is a breakdown at one or all three of the stages for adults with learning disabilities.

Signs at the input stage:

- Limited amount of information taken in at once
- Distraction or short attention span which can result in a loss of all or some of the information
- One or more of the five senses of learning hinder the ability to take in information

Signs at the processing stage:

- Difficulty organizing and putting information in order
- Difficulty integrating new information with old information
- Limited short or long-term memory, resulting in information being forgotten or lost
- Difficulty transferring information learned visually with information learned auditorily or visa versa
- Difficulty encoding and decoding information

Signs at the output stage:

- Difficulty writing information even though it is understood or can be expressed verbally
- Difficulty completing tasks even though the knowledge is present
- Difficulty expressing verbal knowledge⁸

Cautions to be exercised by learners and practitioners

"It was hard not knowing what I could do, not knowing what I was good at. I was never let in to any of the discussion about anything that was going on with me. In school, I always heard "She has problems with this, she can't do this, she doesn't know how to do that." I never, ever heard anything good about me. The only thing I heard was that I was a very quiet and polite young lady. I never heard, "She's a good student, she does well in that. These are her strengths." At home, it was "You don't want to do anything, I don't know what's wrong with you."⁹

Practitioners and learners should note the following cautions:

- Don't define adults by their difficulties
- Learning problems experienced by adults should not become the characteristics that overpower other more positive features of their identities
- It is far more important to emphasize people's strengths during the learning process than their weaknesses
- Learning disabilities should not be used as an excuse for lack of success¹⁰

How can adults with learning disabilities experience success?

People with learning disabilities need individualized accommodations and strategies in their home, school, community and workplace settings, which are suitable to their strengths and needs, including:

- Specific skill instruction
- The development of compensatory strategies
- The development of self-advocacy skills
- Appropriate accommodations¹¹

Researchers in California conducted a longitudinal study that followed former students with learning disabilities to identify reasons that led to success. The results showed that decision-making, empowerment, perseverance, goal-setting, effective support, and emotional stability were more accurate predictors of success than background variables such as IQ and academic achievement. Although not every successful student showed all of the variables, this research illustrates that when working with adults with learning disabilities, literacy skills alone cannot be the sole focus.¹²

This study, among others, highlights that a holistic approach when working with all adult learners is key, regardless of disabilities. Over the past few years the LBS agencies have moved towards flexible programs by adopting a learner-centred approach and developing individualized training plans. Given this movement, agencies are in a good position to practice a holistic approach to learning with learners.

A literature review on low literacy and reading disabilities found that both fields highlighted the need to provide strategies to help build the skill shortfalls, regardless of whether or not adults have disabilities. The literature review found:

“If a person is a poor reader in adulthood, then it matters little whether the reading problem stemmed initially from a localized intrinsic limit, a general learning problem, or inadequate educational opportunity. They recommend not distinguishing people from other poor readers unless it will (a) aid psychological well-being (b) result in a call for different instruction, or (c) gain access to special privileges or considerations that would be denied. They feel the most effective approach to working with adults’ reading instruction is one that is tailored to the learners’ current skill levels.”¹³

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses and preferred ways of learning. Janet Johnston states that people who do not have learning disabilities experience small differences between their strengths and weaknesses. Usually several skills are needed to complete a task. When there are large differences in one’s strengths and weaknesses related to the skills required, it could be difficult to perform the task. Some parts of the task may be easy and others difficult. Often these weaknesses are what get in the way of completing the task. Too

often, peoples' strengths can become masked by their weaknesses, resulting in increased frustration.

Janet Johnston states that a learning disability increases or lessens depending on the context or specific task demands. This has significant implications for career planning for adults. It highlights how important it is for adults to look at their strengths when pursuing employment.¹⁴

"I could always only talk about my weaknesses, never about my strengths, because I never knew I had any. If someone asked me about my strengths, I wouldn't know. Growing up, I thought there must have been something wrong that I did. I was too lazy or stupid. It was me."¹⁵

Signs and characteristics of potential learning disabilities

Points to consider when looking at the characteristics

- There are great diversities within the learning disability population because learning disabilities can affect each individual differently.
- Learning disabilities can vary from mild to severe. They can show in many different ways.
- Characteristics that people experience may be more predominant for some than for others.
- The experience or impact of learning disabilities can vary from person to person as they progress through developmental stages.
- Social, emotional, and economical variables can impact how people deal with their learning disabilities.¹⁶

General signs of learning disabilities

Learners may have trouble with:

- Remembering newly learned information because of either visual or auditory problems.
- Staying organized (thinking in a logical and orderly manner).
- Understanding what they read.
- Getting along with peers or co-workers (usually stems from a lack of skill to interpret non-verbal cues such as body language, personal space, taking turns in the conversation or an inability to recognize implicit messages in “tone of voice”).
- Finding or keeping a job.
- Understanding jokes that are subtle or sarcastic.
- Making fitting remarks.
- Expressing thoughts orally or in writing.
- Learning basic skills (such as reading, writing, spelling and mathematics.) Skills are below expectations in some areas but not in others, e.g. poor writing skills but excellent comprehensive skills.
- Exhibiting strong self-esteem resulting from poor sense of self from years of failure in academic, social and employment situations - they may give up easily and put themselves down.
- Using proper grammar in spoken or written communication.
- Remembering and sticking to deadlines. They may have difficulty with awareness of time because they don't have an internal sense of time and can't predict how long a task may take, or because they have difficulty telling time.¹⁷
- Following directions, creating mental images, dealing with size, physical, geographic features and dimensions of space.¹⁸
- Generalizing skills from one situation to another.
- Changing their approach to a task even when the initial approach has proven unsuccessful.¹⁹

Keep in mind that even when individuals show several characteristics, this does not infer that their potential disability is severe. Likewise, if individuals only show a few of the characteristics, it is unwise to assume that their potential disabilities are mild.²⁰

Specific characteristics

Regardless of the disability being explored, the characteristics can be categorized as **critical or secondary**.

Critical characteristics are conditions that cause problems for adults in their daily living. They have an impact on employment opportunities, family, and social relationships. Academic skills remain difficult and impact reading, writing, math, and/or spelling. Difficulties result because “psychological processes bear on the areas of challenge. These include awareness, perception, language, attention, motoric abilities and social skills.”²¹ For example, adults’ attention is challenged when they have difficulty understanding what is heard due to the surrounding noise in a classroom. Similarly, their auditory processing is challenged when their writing is plagued with spelling errors.

Secondary characteristics are viewed as the “next layer”. Secondary features refer to the emotional coping of adults with learning disabilities. It is difficult to say with certainty that learning disabilities have a direct impact on the secondary characteristics, since adults’ life experiences and different upbringings can also impact this area. The emotional coping characteristics are displayed either in positive or negative ways. “Examples of negative reactions are low self-esteem, shortfalls in social skills and/or demoralization. On the flip side, the frequent challenges people face can cause them to be resilient. Each hurdle they overcome builds their determination. Often adults have developed strong coping skills to accommodate their learning disabilities.”²²

Adults with learning disabilities can be successful when their disabilities are recognized and understood. When agencies understand the characteristics of learning disabilities, they can use this as an opportunity to change opinions and actions to contribute to learners’ successes.²³ Although practitioners cannot claim their learners have learning disabilities, they can help explain why learners are having challenges. Practitioners need to work together with learners to develop strategies to address weaknesses and highlight strengths.

“With hindsight, I know all my pain could have been prevented. To know the cause of my problem would have enabled me to cope with it. It was the not knowing that left me in the dark. I am not sure when I discovered I had a learning disability. I think I always knew, but could not put a label to it. One day I found myself at a learning disability association. Here I read some of the literature on the topic and here I found a revelation. As I filled out a learning disabilities checklist, I was amazed to find how much of the list applied to me. I was also amazed to learn that many of the symptoms had to do with social skills.”²⁴

The three most common learning disabilities

Visual processing disability

It hinders learners’ abilities to make sense of information taken in through their eyes. It can affect their reading, mathematics and writing. People with this disability usually present with difficulty:

- Recognizing or remembering visual information such as words, letters, or numbers.
- Reading since the words sometimes jump around on the page.
- Tracking information and following text. They may reverse letters in writing.²⁵
- Seeing symbols (letters and numbers) both as separate units and in relationship to others.
- Recognizing an object when the entire object is not visible.
- Integrating the relationship between the sum and the parts of an object. Some learners may only see pieces while others may only see the whole (can see the letters but not the word that it makes or visa versa).²⁶

Auditory processing disability

Auditory processing disabilities do not affect what is heard, but how it is interpreted or processed by the brain. This can interfere with speech and language acquisition and can affect all areas of learning, especially reading and spelling.²⁷ People with this disability usually present with difficulty:

- Remembering and making sense of auditory information such as words, letters, and sounds.
- Understanding nuances of speech.
- Recognizing differences in tone of speech.
- Processing a series of oral instructions.²⁸
- Putting sounds together to form words.²⁹

Organizational and information storage and retrieval disability

Individuals have difficulty managing time and space and ordering their day-to-day activities. They also show difficulties with receiving, integrating, remembering and expressing information.³⁰ People with this disability usually present with difficulty:

- Processing information quickly.
- Putting meaning to what is heard by linking it with known information that is similar.
- Retrieving or finding previously stored information.
- Making sense of a new task or skill.
- Performing under stress.
- Organizing.
- Making sense of time. They may be early or late and often can't meet a deadline.³¹

Memorization problems are also prevalent in learners, regardless of the types of learning disabilities. They can show up in various ways. For example, the inability to:

- Memorize the alphabet
- Learn numbers by heart
- Recognize sight words
- Remember the names of people they meet or to recall common facts from conversation³²

“Memory is affected in many ways. This includes immediate memory, long-term memory, recall of rote arbitrary material as opposed to meaningful material, memory for facts, the ability to revisualize words, as well as the capacity for new learning.”³³

Where does dyslexia fit in?

“Dyslexia is a disability involving different forms of language. It includes difficulties with reading, writing and speaking. Many people with learning disabilities have some degree of dyslexia. However, most have additional disabilities as well, such as challenges estimating time, organizing their belongings and coordinating their muscles.”³⁴

Dyslexia is a common form of learning disability and a commonly misunderstood term. Dyslexia usually does not involve seeing or reading words backwards. Rather, it refers to problems in learning to read, write, and spell.³⁵ People with dyslexia may have spelling difficulties only and their reading comprehension is not affected by the disability. However in most cases where dyslexia affects reading comprehension, spelling is also affected.³⁶

Children who are diagnosed with dyslexia exhibit phonetical problems. “They have difficulty with the ability to notice, think about, and manipulate the individual sounds in a word.”³⁷ Without a phonetic base, reading and spelling can continue to be a challenge into adulthood.

It is important to remember that many individuals with dyslexia can learn to read and write, given suitable supports. Individuals with dyslexia are not alike; each individual may have different strengths, weaknesses and instructional needs.³⁸

Where does Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) fit in?

Adults with learning disabilities often have problems concentrating on a task. It is important to note that **ADD is not a learning disability** but an “an associated disorder that can interfere with the individual's availability for learning.” The percentage of persons who have a learning disability and ADD is unclear due to inconsistent study methodologies.³⁹

“ADD and learning disabilities are two discrete disorders with distinct symptom clusters. However, some symptoms may be common to both disorders, including: disorganization, weak executive functioning, and inefficient use of strategies. Without careful assessment, distinguishing between ADHD and learning disabilities can be difficult because of overlapping symptoms and because some behaviours that may result from learning disabilities can look like ADHD symptoms. For example, individuals with central auditory processing deficits can appear inattentive, and students who have become discouraged due to learning problems may not stay on task or may appear distractible.”⁴⁰

There are three types of attention deficits:

- The inability to block out distractions (white noise or background noise such as street traffic and/or visual distractions such as patterned wallpaper)
- The inability to see or hear instructions or interjections because learners completely block external stimuli
- The inability to sustain attention – learners may become bored or tired easily⁴¹

Overall, persons with ADD may:

- Fail to pay close attention
- Make careless mistakes
- Not listen when spoken to
- Lose or forget things
- Have difficulty following instructions
- Talk excessively
- Have difficulty taking turns⁴²

The core symptoms of ADD change, as a person grows older. Research suggests that hyperactivity declines with age; attention problems remain constant; and organizational management problems increase in adulthood. Poor time-management, chronic lateness, and difficulties completing paperwork and meeting deadlines are common work-related problems of adults with ADD.⁴³

Specific skill characteristics of adults with learning disabilities

Aspects of speaking, listening, reading, writing and mathematics overlap and build on the same brain capabilities. Therefore, it is understandable that an individual can have more than one disability. One gap in processing can affect many types of activities. (Information contained in the following charts.)⁴⁴

READING CHARACTERISTICS	WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN AN ADULT
Does not read for pleasure.	Engages in leisure activities other than reading; prefers more active pursuits. Doesn't read stories to his/her children.
Does not use reading to gather information.	Cannot easily use materials like newspapers and classified ads to obtain information.
Has problems identifying individual sounds in spoken words.	Does not attempt to sound out words in reading or does so incorrectly. May read words with syllables backwards (<i>was</i> for <i>saw</i> ; <i>net</i> for <i>ten</i>)
Often needs many repetitions to learn to recognize a new or unused word.	May encounter a newly learned word in a text and not recognize it when it appears later in that text.
Oral reading contains many errors, repetitions and pauses.	Reads slowly and labouriously, if at all. Words may be skipped, endings can be left off and there are frequent repetitions. May refuse to read orally.
Efforts in reading are so focused on word recognition that it detracts from reading comprehension.	Loses the meaning of text, but understands the same material when it is read aloud.
Has problem with comprehension that goes beyond word recognition. May have limited language skills that affect comprehension.	Does not understand the text when it is read to him/her.
Has limited use of reading strategies. Is an inactive reader; not previewing text, monitoring comprehension, or summarizing what is read.	When prompted to do so, does not describe strategies used to assist with decoding and comprehension of text.
Rarely practices reading, which may compound reading problems. Lacks complex word knowledge.	Recognizes and uses fewer words, expressions, and sentence structures than peers.

WRITING CHARACTERISTICS	WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN AN ADULT
Has difficulty communicating through writing.	Rarely writes letters or notes. Needs help completing forms such as job applications.
Written output is severely limited.	Struggles to produce a written product. Produces short sentences and text with limited vocabulary. Spelling errors may consist of confusing letter order; missing middle syllables; spelling exclusively by sound; and/or some words may be completely unrecognizable.
Writing is disorganized.	Omits critical parts or puts information in the wrong place. Writing lacks transition words.
Lacks a clear purpose for writing.	Does not communicate a clear message. Expresses thoughts that don't contribute to the main idea.
Does not use the appropriate text structures.	Uses sentences that contain errors in syntax or word choice. Fails to clearly indicate the referent of a pronoun. Unable to determine which noun they are referring to, i.e. She glanced at him while looking through the window.
Shows persistent problems in spelling.	Spells only phonetically. Leaves out letters. Writes numbers or letters backwards or upside down. Refrains from writing words that are difficult to spell.
Has difficulty with mechanics of written expression.	Omits or misuses sentence markers such as capitals and end punctuation, making it difficult for the reader to understand the text.
Handwriting is sloppy and difficult to read.	Has awkward writing grip or position. Letters, words, and lines are misaligned or not spaced appropriately. Makes frequent punctuation errors and mixes capital and lower-case letters inappropriately.
Demonstrates difficulties in revising.	Is reluctant to proofread or does not catch errors. May spell the same word differently in the same writing sample. Focuses primarily on the mechanics of writing, not on style and content.

LISTENING CHARACTERISTICS	WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN AN ADULT
Has problems perceiving slight distinctions in words.	Misunderstands a message with a word mistaken for a similar word. Might say, "Pick up the grass," instead of, "Pick up the glass."
Has a limited vocabulary.	Recognizes and uses fewer words than peers when engaged in conversation or when gathering information by listening.
Finds abstract words or concepts difficult to understand.	Requests repetitions or more concrete explanations of ideas. Frequently asks for examples.
Has difficulty with non-literal or figurative language such as metaphors, idioms, and sarcasm.	Does not understand jokes or comic strips.
Confuses the message in complex sentences.	Will eat lunch first if given the direction, "Eat lunch after you take this to the mail room."
Has difficulty with verbal memory.	Doesn't remember directions, phone numbers, jokes, stories, etc.
Has difficulty processing large amounts of spoken language.	Gets lost listening in classroom or to large group presentations, complaining that people talk too fast. Becomes inattentive during the presentation.

SPEAKING CHARACTERISTICS	WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN AN ADULT
Mispronounces words and sounds.	Adds, substitutes, or rearranges sounds in words, as in <i>phemomenon</i> for <i>phenomenon</i> or <i>Pacific</i> for <i>specific</i> .
Uses wrong word, usually with similar sounds.	Uses a similar-sounding word, like <i>generic</i> instead of <i>genetic</i> .
Confuses the morphology (structure) of words.	Uses the wrong form of a word, such as calling the <i>Declaration of Independence</i> the <i>Declaring of Independence</i> .
Has a limited vocabulary.	Uses the same words over and over in giving information and explaining ideas. Has difficulty in conveying ideas.
Makes grammatical errors.	Omits or uses grammatical markers incorrectly, such as tense, number, possession, and negation.
Speaks with a limited repertoire of phrase and sentence structure.	Uses mostly simple sentence construction. Overuses <i>and</i> to connect thoughts and make statements.
Has difficulty organizing what to say.	Has problems giving directions or explaining a recipe; talks around the topic, but doesn't get to the point.
Has trouble maintaining a topic.	Interjects irrelevant information into a story. Starts out discussing one thing and then goes off in another direction without making the connection.
Has difficulty with word retrieval.	Can't call forth a known word when it is needed and may use fillers, such as " <i>ummm</i> ," and " <i>You know</i> ." May substitute a word related in meaning or sound, as in <i>boat</i> for <i>submarine</i> or <i>selfish</i> for <i>bashful</i> .
Has trouble with the pragmatic or social use of language.	Does not follow rules of conversation like taking turns. Does not switch styles of speaking when addressing different people.

MATHEMATICS CHARACTERISTICS	WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN AN ADULT
Doesn't remember and/or retrieve math facts.	Uses a calculator or counts on fingers for answers to simple problems; e.g. 2×5 .
Doesn't use visual imagery effectively.	Can't do math in his/her head and writes down even simple problems. Has difficulty making change.
Has a visual spatial deficit.	Confuses math symbols. Misreads numbers. Doesn't interpret graphs or tables accurately. May make careless mistakes in written work. Has trouble maintaining a chequebook.
Becomes confused with math operations, especially multi-step processes.	Leaves out steps in math problem-solving and does them in the wrong order. Can't do long division except with a calculator. Has trouble budgeting.
Has difficulty in language processing that affects the ability to do math problem-solving.	Doesn't translate real-life problems into the appropriate mathematical processes. Avoids employment situations that involve this set of skills.

THINKING CHARACTERISTICS	WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN AN ADULT
Problems with abstract reasoning.	Asks to see ideas on paper. Prefers hands-on ways of learning new ideas.
Shows marked rigidity in thinking.	Resists new ideas or ways of doing things and may have difficulty adjusting to changes on the job.
Displays random, rather than orderly thoughts, in logical or chronological thinking.	May have good ideas that seem disjointed, unrelated, or out of sequence.
Has difficulty synthesizing ideas.	Pays too much attention to detail and misses the big picture or idea when encountering specific situations at home or at work.
Makes impulsive decisions and judgments.	“Shoots from the hip” when arriving at decisions. Doesn’t use a structured approach to weigh options.
Has difficulty generating strategies to use information and solve problems.	Approaches situations without a game plan, acting without a guiding set of principles.

CHARACTERISTICS OF “OTHER DIFFICULTIES”	WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE IN AN ADULT
Has problems with attention, which may be accompanied by hyperactivity, distractibility, or passivity.	Doesn't focus on a task for an appropriate length of time. Can't seem to get things done. Does better with short tasks.
Displays poor organization skills.	Doesn't know where to begin tasks or how to proceed. Doesn't work within time limits, failing to meet deadlines. Has difficulty prioritizing tasks. Workspace and personal space are messy.
Has a problem with eye-hand coordination.	Omits or substitutes elements when copying information from one place to another, as in invoices or schedules. Often confuses left from right and up from down.
Demonstrates poor fine motor control, usually accompanied by poor handwriting.	Avoids jobs requiring manipulation of small items. Becomes frustrated when putting together toys for children.
Lacks social perception.	Stands too close to people when conversing. Doesn't perceive situations accurately. May laugh when something serious is happening or slap an unreceptive boss on the back in an attempt to be friendly.
Has problems establishing social relationships. Problems may be related to spoken language disorders.	Does not seem to know how to act and what to say to people in specific social situations and may withdraw from socializing.
Lacks “executive functions” including self-motivation, self-reliance, self-advocacy, and goal setting.	Demonstrates over reliance on others for assistance or fails to ask for help when appropriate. Blames external factors on lack of success. Doesn't set personal goals and deliberately doesn't work to achieve them. Expresses helplessness.

Not all learners show all of these characteristics. In addition, just because they display some of the characteristics does not mean they have a learning disability. Any of these characteristics should be observed over time and under various circumstances.

“In adulthood, the effects of learning disabilities can affect a wide array of areas associated with learning and adaptive behaviour. No longer can the focus of learning disabilities exclusively be on the basic remedial skills because there are many challenges associated with all the tasks and activities of adult life and adult responsibilities.”⁴⁵

At best, basic skills upgrading must share equal focus with other important areas of functioning such as employment, family relations, emotional issues, community, and personal adjustment.

Understanding the effects of learning disabilities on adults

“My disability is not a tool, nor a badge of honour. It gives me a perspective on life, a sense of reality, a way of understanding. I see the world through a different lens. I accept my disability, not as a crutch but as a token of reality. I continue to try harder. Not because some teacher thinks that I need to, nor because some supervisor says I haven't tried. It is because trying is all I can control.”⁴⁶

Possible impacts

Literature on learning disabilities often highlights the social skill inadequacies that adults face. However practitioners need to be cautious of generalizations. Adults with learning disabilities are diverse. Practitioners should view each individual as unique. The impacts of learning disabilities will be both positive and negative. Consequently, it is difficult to predict how individual adult learners will experience the impact of their learning disabilities. Adults' life

experiences, resources, supports, and personality traits will affect whether the impacts are positive or negative.

Often adults have only heard about their so-called inadequacies and thus have difficulty recognizing that they even have strengths. For adults with learning disabilities, the effects, whether they are positive or negative, often compound with age. The challenges may either overshadow their intellectual abilities or may help them develop other skill areas and accommodations to help compensate for their weak areas. However, too many adults grow up misunderstanding their problems, thus failing to get the help and support they need.⁴⁷

Potential positive outcomes

Problem-solving skills

Adults with learning disabilities often seek creative solutions that are “outside the box” and they can come up with imaginative answers to difficult problems.⁴⁸ Some adults have developed various coping mechanisms to help overcome or adjust to (or compensate for) their challenges. They may build support systems that assist them with their weaknesses and/or access tools to help manage these areas.

Outgoing personality

“Because of their histories of failure, many adults with learning disabilities can develop gregarious personalities to help hide their learning problems.”⁴⁹ This is especially true for people with visual processing challenges. They are able to express themselves clearly but have difficulty with written expression. Adults who have good social and emotional support networks can tend to the development of outgoing personalities. Many adults not only have adequate social skills: a good many consider their social skills to be a significant compensation and a key to success.⁵⁰

Strong compensatory skills

“Individuals with learning disabilities often compensate for literacy shortfalls by developing strong skills in other areas. These skills may include proficiency in the use of computers or other focused abilities in limited areas.”⁵¹ Often compensatory skills are not taught; adults have had to learn through trial and error. This creative learning is an individualized way to accomplish tasks and compensate for weaknesses. For example, a person with an auditory processing disability may find recording information from a phone call to be quite challenging. Instead of having to continually ask the caller to repeat information, the person may find saying “I know this message is important, so I want to make sure I get the information correct” will result in the caller being patient when repeating the information.

Empathy

Although adults’ experiences with learning disabilities are unique, many can share a common feeling of frustration and sense of failure at one time or another. As a result, they can relate to other adults’ difficulties and are able to offer support.⁵²

Persistence

Self-determination is often cited as the key to success for persons with learning disabilities. By understanding and accepting their disabilities, they can make a conscious decision to take charge of their lives and make individualized adaptations to succeed. “Persistence is a hallmark of many adults with learning disabilities, who have refused to give up despite their difficulties and frustrations. If channeled appropriately, this experience can contribute to an active sense of dedication and purpose.”⁵³ Often this persistence is preserved through a good support network. Unfortunately many adults that take part in LBS programs have not developed or had access to a good support network and thus their lack of persistence is often the first difficulty to interfere with their learning.

Potential negative outcomes

Self-esteem

Negative experiences with school, social, and employment settings can lead to low self-esteem. As a result, individuals are not willing to take risks, strive to reach their potential or speak for themselves. When adults don't understand their disabilities, they may experience low self-esteem and be less willing to advocate for themselves.

Employment

Limited organizational skills, lack of attention, spelling and reading difficulties, and poor comprehension are some of the challenges that may prevent adults from keeping steady employment. An employer's limited understanding of learning disabilities could compound these challenges. Employers sometimes believe myths that accommodations for persons with learning disabilities are extremely expensive and that adults with learning disabilities can't learn.

Social interactions

Relationships with family members, spouses, peers and colleagues are affected by the challenges that learning disabilities present. Adults with learning disabilities may display poor judgment of others' moods and attitudes and be less sensitive to others' thoughts and feelings. They may say inappropriate things and have problems understanding humour. Most want acceptance but often are so eager that they try too hard, causing them to act inappropriately. These challenges often lead to limited peer support, isolation, marriage difficulties and weak relationships with children.⁵⁴

Daily living

Daily routines that people without learning disabilities take for granted such as writing a cheque, filling out applications, and taking phone messages can be challenging for adults with learning disabilities. The stress and fear of ridicule can lead to avoidance of these basic tasks. A stressful situation compounded with negative experiences can interfere with the ability to

complete a task that is usually accomplished independently. People with learning disabilities may have difficulty doing banking at an ATM when there is a large lineup and an impatient person standing directly behind.

Ineffective learning strategies

Opportunities for learning occur in many environments such as school, the workplace, and with peers. It is common when faced with problems and learning challenges to develop strategies for attacking problems and tasks. However, without the suitable skills and supports for attacking problems, ineffective and inefficient strategies may develop.⁵⁵

Many adults with learning disabilities don't know how to approach tasks. They may develop strategies that are only partially successful or are not effective for every situation. Because the strategies have become habits and have led to some success, adults with learning disabilities may be reluctant to change or abandon their strategies. Their fear of failure may make them reluctant to take risks or try new strategies that may help them be more successful.⁵⁶ It is critical to take time to help individuals understand their strengths and weaknesses. With this understanding, learners can develop individualized strategies to meet their unique package of strengths and weaknesses.

“When a person is identified with a learning disability, they should understand their strengths and weaknesses. Discovering yourself as an individual with learning disabilities has certain benefits. Understanding and accepting yourself allows you a voice and sets an example for others around you. Every person is different but once you understand how you learn best and what you do well, you can capitalize on this knowledge and use it to your advantage. The strengths of a person with Learning Disabilities are areas in which one can see wonderful success.”⁵⁷

The screening process

What is screening?

There are many different terms to describe screening instruments such as inventories, checklists, measures, and assessments. Regardless of the term, they all aim to achieve the same objective: to identify whether or not an **adult displays indicators of learning disabilities**.⁵⁸

Screening is the starting point of the assessment process. It helps to determine the need for further assessment, either formally or informally. It does not identify or label people with disabilities, but provides a general indication of their **potential** learning disabilities. The screening tool identifies areas that need further exploration. When adult learners and practitioners explore these areas together, they can identify effective strategies and accommodations that best meet learners' needs.

Overall, the tools look at areas that adults may experience difficulty with and/or what they are good at. Areas that are covered include reading, writing, speaking, and daily life skills. In addition, general interests such as music, sports, computers, and hobbies should be identified to gain a full understanding of adults' strengths. Each tool should have guidelines for interpreting the results.

To gain better insight into potential learning disabilities, practitioners could consider asking specific questions, observing learners, listening for self-identification, discussing previous school experiences, reviewing medical records, and discussing employment history.

Remember, the screening will only give an indication of possible learning disabilities. Conduct additional assessments to gain specific insight into adults' strengths and challenges. Depending on the results of the screening and the needs of adult learners, it may be necessary to consider professional evaluation. Adults need to weigh the value of getting a formal assessment completed against the cost and effort required.

When should screening tools be used?

The answer to this question is not really clear. The following variables impact affect when or if a screening process should take place:

- **Available resources:** i.e. number of staff and experience of staff, access to professional diagnostic assessments and agency finances
- **Intake process:** i.e. formal or informal, whether or not screening can be integrated, whether or not screening is a common process for all adults entering the program
- **Learning environment:** i.e. learners' goals (GED preparation, employment, college/apprenticeship or independence), the impact of an official diagnosis
- **Learners themselves:** i.e. levels of self-esteem, motivation and their individual needs

Individual LBS agencies have their own unique makeup and need to examine the fore mentioned variables to determine how the screening process best services learner and program needs. One of the most valuable sources for information about learners' potential learning disabilities is the practitioner's direct observation of learners during instruction. Using screening tools in combination with practitioners' observations is very effective. However, some agencies may prefer to do a learning disability screening test during their intake process for every adult who enters the program. One advantage of this is that practitioners don't need to get permission from the learners since everyone will be going through the screening. In addition, if the practitioner suspects a disability, immediate focus can begin before there is a risk of the learner dropping out of the program. Obviously one distinct disadvantage is that practitioners don't have any observations of adult learning to help interpret the screening results. Regardless of what process a program follows, set policies and procedures should be developed to ensure fair and equitable practice with the learners.⁵⁹

Gather information about the learner

If it is suspected that a learner has a learning disability, as much information as possible should be gathered. Try to build specific questions into an informal conversation. Any screening tools used must be suitable for adults. Agencies should be honest with learners and talk about the impact of the potential disabilities and the commitment needed by both the adult learners and the agencies in order to achieve progress. Overall, this process should be positive for the adults.⁶⁰

Do not rush the time spent collecting information. The more information that is gathered, the better the chances are of determining the possibility of learning disabilities. As the information is collected and examined, practitioners should give themselves and the learners the benefit of the doubt. Look for disabilities, but be sensitive to information that would lead to a different conclusion such as:

- Vision or hearing problems
- A general lack of educational instruction in certain areas such as grammar, spelling rules, and/or reading
- Health problems (diabetes, medication issues, fatigue)
- Physical or emotional issues (finances, accommodations, personal issues, stress, mental health status)⁶¹

Integrating the screening process into the intake procedure is ideal. However for learners who are already participating in the program, practitioners should look for characteristics of potential learning disabilities and integrate the screening tool into the ongoing evaluation process.

Indicators of learning disabilities may appear when observing:

- Learners' work habits
- Learners' work samples
- Informal conversations with learners
- Learners' and parents' educational experiences⁶²

Incorporate specific questions designed to elicit information concerning adults' learning histories during intake interviews.

Some of the more pertinent questions to ask include:

- Did you ever repeat any grades in school?
- Why did you leave school (if appropriate)?
- Were you ever given any special education assistance in the past? If so, what kind?
- How would you describe your reading abilities?
 - Are you able to sound out words that you don't know?
 - If you can read the words, are you able to understand and remember what you read?
 - Are you a fast reader?
- Can you usually understand verbal directions, or what other people say?
 - Are you able to explain yourself when speaking so that other people understand you?
- How would you describe your writing abilities?
 - Can you organize your ideas to write?
 - Do you usually put periods and commas, etc. in the right place?
 - How would you describe your spelling?
- How would you describe your ability to do math or science?
- How would you describe your social skills? Do you have difficulty making and/or keeping friends?
- Have you ever been formally assessed (one-on-one) before for any learning difficulties?
- What do you feel gives you the most difficulty when doing school or work tasks?
 - What do you find easiest to do?

This information will help determine where adults' learning strengths and weaknesses might lie. Their responses are the foundation on which strategies can be built.⁶³

Most adult learners in a literacy program will have at least one of these characteristics. Therefore, practitioners should not suspect the presence of learning disabilities if adults display only one or two of these characteristics. Instead, practitioners need to seek information in several different ways: consulting with other staff, observing characteristics under a number of circumstances and assessing further their learners' skill areas, not only to confirm their suspicions, but to help in planning the next steps.

Screening tools can serve many purposes

- The informal nature of the information gathering process in screening enables practitioners to include learners in determining suitable instruction
- Informal screening opens the doors for discussion between practitioners and learners regarding which strategies and/or interventions, if any, have been tried in the past
- Screening can help establish the foundation for discussions between practitioners and learners to develop short-term objectives and long-range goals⁶⁴

Effectively involving adults in the screening process

The first step in effectively involving adults in the screening process is to gain adult learners' confidence and make sure they realize that the screening process is a team process. Learners should understand that practitioners don't know everything about how they (learners) learn and the more information learners can share, the more likely it is that practitioners can improve the opportunities for learning. If learners are continuously showing several of the characteristics of learning disabilities, it is advisable for practitioners to use a screening tool or checklist to reinforce their observations. This helps both

practitioners and learners to gain more insight into possible challenge areas and recognize potential learning disabilities.

When learners' challenges consistently follow learning disability patterns, one of the first steps for practitioners is to meet with the learners to discuss practitioner observations. Literacy practitioners are not qualified to provide formal diagnoses, but can point out that they have observed people with learning disabilities exhibit similar characteristics.⁶⁵ Practitioners need to explain they are not experts in learning disabilities, but that they want everyone to be successful.⁶⁶

This meeting should encourage open dialogue with learners and should try to elicit responses to the practitioner's observations. Learners should feel comfortable sharing any frustrations they are experiencing with the learning process. Practitioners could ask one or all of the following questions to help encourage responses from learners:

- Do you think this information is accurate?
- What do you think this information means?
- Why do you think (e.g. spelling) is difficult for you?⁶⁷

“The goal of the discussion is not to label the adult but to focus on habits and practices of the learners and to work on techniques to deal with those difficulties.”⁶⁸

Actively involving learners as equals helps them to take ownership of the issue and to begin to understand their strengths and weaknesses. It is critical for practitioners to emphasize to learners that having potential learning disabilities does not mean that the learners are not intelligent or that they cannot learn.⁶⁹ Practitioners who have taken this approach have found that learners often express relief as they gain a better understanding of their learning challenges.⁷⁰

Self-assessments

The use of self-reported inventories or questionnaires is very effective. Practitioners need to examine adults' processing styles and learning characteristics as well as their specific strengths and weaknesses. Self-

assessments help gather information about learners' families, educational experiences, work and medical histories, study habits, literacy skills and value orientations. This is the first step towards actively involving learners and helps them build their capacity to take ownership for their learning. In addition, the process allows practitioners to develop comfortable relationships with the learners.

Practitioners need to reinforce that learners can:

- Learn
- Be successful
- Work with their instructors/tutors to develop the best strategies and programs that will work for them
- Continue to learn after they leave their program⁷¹

The screening tool helps to identify if learners' challenges are related to potential learning disabilities. If referrals are warranted, then practitioners can help learners with this process. Referrals could involve accessing hearing tests, visions tests, counseling and/or formal diagnostic testing. If no referrals are needed, then further assessments should be conducted. Based on the assessment results, it is possible that changes to learners' goals, curriculum and learning environments may be required.

Practitioners need to help adult learners recognize the full extent of their suspected learning disabilities and how they impact on social and academic functioning. When working with learners, practitioners need to help them to accept the full range of strengths and challenges associated with their learning disabilities. Together, practitioners and learners need to develop plans consistent with learners' strengths and challenges to help them reach their goals.⁷²

“Literacy programs should be designed with a positive view toward the success of adults with learning disabilities. To do this, program leaders must ensure that disabilities and their impact are widely recognized and positively accepted by practitioners and clients. They also should strive to create a program that forges a partnership with adults with learning disabilities to promote their success.”⁷³

What to consider when looking at the results of the screening tool

- Keep in mind that several of the characteristics can be true for all of us at some time or another. Thus the characteristics need to be seen over time.
- When working with adults at the basic level, it is difficult to decide when the observation of some of these behaviours represents a normal stage of learning a new skill and when it suggests the presence of a learning disability.
- To help distinguish between the two, look at both patterns of errors and gather as much information about adults' earlier educational experiences as possible.
- In addition, "if learners appear intellectually capable in other respects, but show little progress in one particular area that seems out of place with what you might expect, practitioners' suspicions of learning disabilities are most likely accurate."⁷⁴

Screening only identifies the possibility of a learning disability. It does not offer a diagnosis nor does it provide a comprehensive picture of learners' academic, cognitive and life-management strengths and weaknesses. It is only the foundation or the beginning of the assessment process. This is a process of growing dialogue and discovery involving **both** the practitioner and learner.

Introduction to learning styles

What is a learning style?

It is a set of strategies that adults prefer to use when participating in learning.

The strategies relate to:

- Cognitive styles - how one organizes, stores and retrieves information that is learned
- Affective styles - how one deals with feelings associated with the learning
- Interpersonal styles - how one interacts and deals with others involved in the learning
- Physiological styles - how one deals with the physical surroundings in the learning environment⁷⁵



To access information on models that fit each of the above above styles, go to: <http://web.indstate.edu/ctl/styles/model.html>

Several learning style models have been developed. Instead of providing a description of each one, Curry (1987) developed a framework to understand each of the models and what areas they impact. This framework is referred as the “onion model”. It consists of four layers:

The first layer refers to personality dimensions and includes models that attempt to measure the influence of one’s personality on the approaches to integrating information.

- Witkins (1954)
- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (1978)

The second layer refers to information processing and includes models related to a person’s preferred intellectual approach to assimilating information.

- Schmeck (1983)
- Kolb (1984)

The third layer refers to social interaction dimensions and includes models that look at how a person interacts in the learning environment.

- Reichmann's and Grasha (1974)

The fourth layer refers to instructional preference and includes models that look at a person's preferred learning environment.

- Keefe (1998)
- Dunn and Dunn (1978)

This list of learning styles is by no means inclusive of all the learning models, but it is a good framework to understand the different dimensions of learning. The key difference in all the models is that some advocate the need to accommodate a person's learning style versus stressing a flexible and adaptive learning environment that exposes learners to all styles of learning.⁷⁶



To access a summary of the history of the theories go to:
<http://jwilson.coe.uga.edu/EMT705/EMT705.Hood.html>

How do learning styles relate to learning disabilities?

Learning disabilities and learning styles share common beliefs:

- Learners are unique and have different ways of learning
- For learners to experience success, they must be aware of their strengths and weakness and be active members in the learning process
- A learning environment should offer a variety of strategies and instruction methods, with learners being active in the planning, participating and evaluating process

“The backbone of learning styles theories is the idea that no one style is better than another.”⁷⁷ There are many different learning theories, yet there is no universal test or evaluation system for learning styles.

Three common goals seemed to be shared by all learning style models:

1. To promote learners' skills and intelligences that are not recognized through traditional test scores.
2. To increase practitioners' knowledge of the various learning opportunities.
3. To encourage practitioners to be creative and use a variety of teaching venues.

The following strategies incorporate the ideas behind learning styles:

- Build on strengths rather than repeating weaknesses
- Teach new concepts by relating them to practical applications
- Be creative and try to vary teaching styles
- Use multisensory strategies to present material - many learners must see, say, hear, and touch before they can develop full mental images that stick and make sense
- Vary lessons - reteach and review in a variety of ways
- Change an activity when it's not working
- Encourage the use of learning aids and tools (for example, calculators, highlighter pens, extra worksheets, computerized learning programs, tape recorders, film, demonstrations, maps, charts, rulers)
- Talk with learners about their learning process and ask them what does and does not work for them⁷⁸

Something to think about when using learning style models

Most practitioners are aware of the various learning style indicators and probably have used them with their students. A common belief held by many practitioners is that everyone has a preferred way of learning (auditory, visual or kinesthetic).

Although there are questions about the reliability and validity of learning styles theory and inventories, it has been positive for both practitioners and

learners to be open to the various ways that learning is accomplished. The key is not to stick to one type of learning but to offer various preferences to help increase memory retention and enjoyment of learning.⁷⁹

Practitioners need to recognize that everyone learns differently. Therefore, they need to practice offering various strategies for learning to students. As learners try out different strategies, they will find what works best for them.

“To assume that one must teach to a particular learning style misses the fact that a given student may be best taught by one method early in learning and by another after the student has gained some competence.”⁸⁰

The practitioner’s role is to educate learners on the choices and to continually discuss how strategies are working. This will help adults with their future learning as they will be able to determine when they are being taught material in a way that may not meet their learning preferences.

“Good teaching involves more than communicating the content of one’s discipline; a good teacher also needs both to motivate students to continue learning and to teach them the skills and strategies needed for continued learning.”⁸¹

Multiple Intelligences

Multiple Intelligences (MI) is a theory that addresses what the brain does with information. It builds on the practice of looking at students’ strengths and weaknesses in learning.

Dr. Howard Gardner, the founder of the theory, proposes that there are at least eight intelligences. Each person’s intelligences work in several combinations that are unique for each individual. That is, we all have eight types of intelligence, but generally one or more of these intelligences tend to predominate and this creates a particular style of learning for each individual. There is no specific application method or instructional approach. The application of MI is becoming widely practiced both in the K-12 schools and more recently in adult literacy and ESL programs.⁸²

“Gardner’s theory of MI offers a more holistic accounting of individual potential and talents.”⁸³

MI theory allows educators, family members and society to see adult learners for the intelligences (cognitive strengths) they have, instead of focusing on what they can’t do well. Increasing learners’ understanding of their unique makeup will help them to manage their own learning and to value their individual strengths.⁸⁴

The eight intelligences

Linguistic intelligence

Is the ability to use language to communicate and understand other people (hearing, speaking, reading, and writing languages).

Logical-mathematical intelligence

Is the ability to think logically, utilize deductive reasoning, recognize abstract patterns, and work with numbers. People who demonstrate this MI are usually curious about the world around them. They ask many questions and like to do experiments.

Musical intelligence

Is the ability to think in music, to be able to hear patterns, recognize them, remember them, and perhaps manipulate them.

Spatial intelligence

Is the ability to see, imagine and create mental images and pictures. These learners think in pictures and need to create vivid mental images to retain information. They enjoy looking at maps, charts, pictures, and videos.

Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence

Is the ability to use your body or parts to solve a problem. Individuals with this ability have a good sense of balance and eye-hand co-ordination (for example, playing ball or using a balance beam). Through interacting with the space around them, they are able to remember and process information.

Interpersonal intelligence

Is the ability to communicate effectively with others through one-to-one relationships.

Intrapersonal intelligence

Is the ability to understand yourself, clearly understanding and accepting your strengths and weaknesses.

Naturalist intelligence

Is the ability to understand and express an interest in living things and other features of the natural world. Historically, this was a strong feature for hunters and farmers.⁸⁵

Learners feel more confident with their ability to learn and are motivated to engage in the learning process when they:

- Understand the different ways of learning and their unique combination of MI
- Are taught new subjects through various activities and projects
- Are able to show what they know through information gained through assessments

It is important that practitioners understand learners' particular learning preferences and/or MI, but not label them with it. Through this understanding, practitioners can provide opportunities for learners that foster their learning and strengthen their intelligences.⁸⁶

Summary of key points

“We may not have the answers for the people we serve, but we can listen and listen and listen until we understand. We can examine possibilities and resources and share them. We can care deeply. We can move into new ways of doing things. **We can connect with them and give them hope.** And we may be the only people that ever have.”⁸⁷

- Learning disabilities are a breakdown in adults’ auditory, visual and/or organizational processing
- Learning disabilities can range from mild to severe
- Individual life experiences and emotional and economic supports can influence the impact of a learning disability
- Adults with learning disabilities can experience success when they understand their disabilities and when they are active partners in the goal setting and learning process
- Diagnosing adults with learning disabilities is not the role of practitioners, but helping learners to understand their strengths and weaknesses is appropriate
- Focus equally on learners’ academic, self-management, and emotional needs
- Practitioners need to understand that everyone learns differently and various strategies will work for some and not for others

Appendix A

Websites related to learning disabilities



Adults with Learning Disabilities (updated April 2000). The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC EC)

Go to: <http://ericec.org/faq/ld-adult.html>

Overview

This site provides a good summary of available information on learning disabilities. The following can be accessed:

- ERIC mini-bibliographies
- ERIC digests
- Frequently asked questions (FAQ)
- Internet resources
- Internet discussion groups



The Learning Disabilities Resource Centre

Go to: <http://www.ldrc.ca/>

Overview

The Learning Disabilities Resource Community (LDRC) has been developed to provide information, resources, and tools for individuals and groups working with persons with learning disabilities and to support research and development in associated fields.

Partners include:

- The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)
- The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO)
- The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)

- The Hospital for Sick Children's Learning Disabilities Research Program (LDRP)
- The Office of Learning Technology - Community Learning Networks Initiative (OLT/HRDC)
- The University of Toronto's Adaptive Technology Resource Centre (ATRC)

**National resources for adults with learning disabilities**

Go to: <http://novel.nifl.gov/nifl/ld/archive/resource.htm>

Overview

A list of contacts is provided for:

- National Resource Centers
- General education
- Learning disability organizations
- ADD organizations
- Employment
- Technology
- Life management
- Publications
- Toll free numbers

**LD Online**

Go to: <http://ldonline.org/sitemap.html>

Overview

This site is U.S. based and provides both general and comprehensive information on learning disabilities. Articles, resources, bulletin boards, and expert advice can be accessed. It is geared for teachers, individuals, and parents. A listing of Canadian resources and organizations is available at http://www.ldonline.org/finding_help/canada.html



Guidelines for documentation of a learning disability in adolescents and adults

Go to:

http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/postsecondary/ahead_guidelines.html

Overview

Find recommendations for consumers and lists of tests for adults.



VARK Questionnaire (visual, aural, read/write & kinesthetic)

Go to:

<http://www.hcc.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/vark.htm>

Overview

The questionnaire aims to find out something about the preferences or the way learners like to work with information. An online and printable version of the questionnaire along with instructions on how to use the questionnaire with learners and steps to administering the test is available.



“What are my Learning Strengths?” – An MI Inventory

Go to: <http://snow.utoronto.ca/courses/mitest.html>

Overview

This activity helps learners find out about their strengths by using the 8 MI. By gaining an understanding, learners can work on strengthening the other intelligences that they don't use as often.



Literacy Works: “What is MI?”

Go to: <http://literacyworks.org/mi/home.html>

Overview

The site is divided into four main sections:

- **Introduction** - Multiple Intelligence (MI) theory and how it can be applied to adult literacy and education.
- **Assessment** - How to identify learners' preferred intelligences and take inventory of learners' skills. The assessment activities are designed to help practitioners tailor their teaching methods to their learners' strengths.
- **Practice** - This section contains dozens of suggestions for approaching subjects in different ways to take advantage of different intelligences. To make the most out of this section, it is helpful to have the free Macromedia Flash player installed on the computer, although any of the activities can be viewed, even if the Flash player is not installed.
- **Resources** - Explore links to other adult literacy and education sites.



Tapping into Multiple Intelligences workshops

Go to:

<http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/month1/index.htm>

I

Overview

It is suggested that practitioners start with the Explanation section, which is about the concept of MI. Move from the concept of MI to classroom applications by going to the Demonstrations section.

Topics include:

- What is the theory of multiple intelligences (MI)?
- How does this theory differ from the traditional definition of intelligence?
- What does MI have to do with my classroom?
- How has MI developed since it was introduced in 1983?
- Who are the critics of this theory and what do they say?
- What are some benefits of using MI approach?
- How can I find out more about MI theory?

Appendix B

Words/definitions commonly associated with learning disabilities

Dyslexia, perhaps the most commonly known word, is primarily used to describe difficulty with language processing and its impact on reading, writing, and spelling – “is the most common of the LD and the one that causes most difficulties.”⁸⁸

The following definitions have been taken from the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

<http://www.ld.org/info/index.cfm#Common%20LD%20words>

Dysgraphia involves difficulty with writing. Problems might be seen in the actual motor patterns used in writing. Also characteristic are difficulties with spelling and the formulation of written composition.

Dyscalculia involves difficulty with mathematical skills and impacts math computation. Memory of mathematical facts, concepts of time, money, and musical concepts can also be impacted.

Dyspraxia (Apraxia) is difficulty with motor planning and impacts upon a person's ability to coordinate appropriate body movements.

Auditory discrimination is a key component of efficient language use and is necessary to "break the code" for reading. It involves being able to perceive the differences between speech sounds and to sequence these sounds into meaningful words.

Visual perception is critical to reading and writing processes as it addresses the ability to notice important details and assign meaning to what is seen.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD/AHDD) may co-occur with learning disabilities (incidence estimates vary). Features can include marked over-activity (physical restlessness), distractibility (poor attention to tasks), and/or impulsivity (impaired impulse control) which in turn can interfere with an individual's job, family and social life. ⁸⁹

Learning strategy approaches are instructional approaches that focus on efficient ways to learn, rather than on curriculum. Includes specific techniques for organizing, actively interacting with material, memorizing, and monitoring any content or subject.

Multi-sensory learning is an instructional approach that combines auditory, visual, and tactile elements into a learning task. Tracing sandpaper numbers while saying a number fact aloud would be a multi-sensory learning activity.

Transition is commonly used to refer to the change from secondary school to post-secondary programs, work, and independent living typical of young adults. It is also used to describe other periods of major change such as from early childhood to school or from more specialized to mainstreamed settings. ⁹⁰

Above terms taken from: Lokerson, Jean. LD: Glossary of Some Important Terms. *ERIC Digest 517*. Reston, V.A.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children. 1992.

< http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed352780.html >.

Full glossary of learning disabilities terms

Over 100 learning disability related terms and definitions:
http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/glossaries/ld_glossary.html

Appendix C

S

creening tool samples and references

Overview:

A checklist is a guide. It is a list of characteristics. If the adult states, "that's me" for most of the items, and the difficulties they experience appear to cause problems in employment, education, and/or daily living, it might be useful to explore further through a more thorough assessment process.

A learning disability checklist



Go to:

<http://novel.nifl.gov/nifl/ld/archive/resource.htm#checklist>

The following checklist was adapted from lists of learning disability characteristics developed by the following organizations: Learning Disabilities Association of America, For Employers... A Look at Learning Disabilities, 1990; ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Examples of Learning Disability Characteristics, 1991; The Orton Dyslexia Society's Annals of Dyslexia, Volume XLIII, 1993; and the Council for Learning Disabilities, Infosheet, October 1993.

While individuals with learning disabilities have average or above average intelligence, they do not excel in employment, education, and/or life situations at the same level as their peers. Identified characteristics are as follows:

- May perform similar tasks differently from day to day
- May read well but not write well, or write well but not read well
- May be able to learn information presented in one way, but not in another

- May have a short attention span, be impulsive, and/or be easily distracted
- May have difficulty telling or understanding jokes
- May misinterpret language and have poor comprehension of what is said
- May have difficulty with social skills, may misinterpret social cues
- May find it difficult to memorize information
- May have difficulty following a schedule, being on time, or meeting deadlines
- May get lost easily, either driving or when in large buildings
- May have trouble reading maps
- May often misread or miscopy
- May confuse similar letters or numbers, reverse them, or confuse their order
- May have difficulty reading the newspaper, following small print, and/or following columns
- May be able to explain things orally, but not in writing
- May have difficulty writing ideas on paper
- May reverse or omit letters, words, or phrases when writing
- May have difficulty completing job applications correctly
- May have persistent problems with sentence structure, writing mechanics, and organizing written work
- May experience continuous problems with spelling the same word differently in one document
- May have trouble dialing phone numbers and reading addresses
- May have difficulty with mathematics, mathematical language, and mathematical concepts
- May reverse numbers in chequebooks and have difficulty balancing a chequebook
- May confuse right and left, up and down
- May have difficulty following directions, especially multiple directions
- May be poorly coordinated
- May be unable to tell you what has just been said
- May hear sounds, words, or sentences imperfectly or incorrectly



Checklists and learner self-assessment tools

The following resources can be accessed:

- The National Center for Learning Disabilities' checklist of common warning signs of learning disabilities from childhood through to adulthood
- The American Council on Education and the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center's sample checklist
- Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities – “Analyzing my Strengths and Struggles” self-assessment tools

Go to: <http://ldlink.coe.utk.edu/screening.htm>

Select the Screening Process and scroll down to find the resources listed under Observation Checklists and Information Checklists for teachers and learners.



Learning disabilities screening tool evaluation

Go to: **Bridges to Practice, Guidebook #2 at**

http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/ld/bridges/materials/bridges_docs.html

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The following are a few tools selected from the Bridges to Practice report card process. Access an evaluative report card on the screening tools listed below.

Bringing Literacy Within Reach: Identifying and Teaching Adults with LD

Cost: \$25.00

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 323 Chapel Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1N7Z2, Phone: (613) 238-5721, Fax: (613) 235-6391

**Diagnostic Assessment of Reading with Trial Teaching Strategies
(DARTTS)**

Cost: \$190.50, Riverside Publishing Co., 425 Spring Lake Drive, Itasca, IL
60143, Phone: (800) 323-9540, Fax: (630) 467-7192

Phoenix Specific LD Quick Screen for Adults, Cost: \$3.00

William Butler, P. O. Box 32611, Phoenix, AZ 85064-2611

Adult Learning Disability Screening (ALDS)

More than eighty screening instruments reviewed by the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center were deemed inappropriate and/or unreliable. Citing this lack of a valid reliable screening instrument, researchers at the University of Kansas (in collaboration with practitioners from a variety of agencies) developed an instrument that is "89% accurate and takes less than 12 minutes for most participants."

<http://www.swadulthood.com/workshops/ld/intro-ld.html>

ALDS is an entirely empirical instrument with respectable reliability and validity. Development of the ALDS started in 1996 and was completed recently. It is very affordable and easy to administer. No training is needed and the instrument takes about 15 to 20 minutes to administer. The ALDS consists of three parts: Self-Rating Scale, Inventory, and a brief Interview. All three taken together have been shown to be a very effective tool in finding indications of LD. The ALDS items are organized into five major sections.

(1) Demographic information

- Has 15 questions
- Elicits descriptive information about client's age, gender, racial and ethnic membership

(2) Rating scales

- Is a standardized, criterion-referenced measure
- Has 25 questions
- Clients rate the degree to which the statements accurately describe them or the frequency with which they complete activities
- A score is calculated to determine if a referral for further testing should be considered
- Item content covers self-attributions, spelling, reading, organization, and social skills, one's work efficiency, and sense of direction

(3) Inventory

- Includes 19 questions
- Answered with a “yes” or “no”
- A score is calculated to determine if a referral for further testing should be considered
- Covers learning influences and problems, arithmetic skills, educational history, and mental health issues
- Can be completed independently, in a group, or can be read to the person

(4) Interview

- Is individually administered
- The interviewer selects questions based on the responses to the Inventory
- Each person might be asked different Interview questions
- Eight possible questions are in the Interview
- No score is calculated from the Interview responses; the information aids interpretation of other battery questions

(5) Validity check

- Examiner completes eleven questions
- Questions are answered after the testing is completed but before the Rating Scales and Inventory are scored
- Questions focus on one critical decision by the examiner: Does the examiner have any reason to believe that the scores from the battery should be interpreted any differently for this person than for any other person? If the answer is “yes,” then the scores are suspect and possibly invalid.

Costs:

- ALDS Directions for Administrative Scoring and Interpretation = \$5.00
- Individual ALDS Record Booklet = \$3.00 each
- Available through Kaw Valley Resources, 785-331-3659, email KVRInc@yahoo.com

Other sources for screening tools (questionnaires and observation checklists)

The following resources are available for loan at AlphaPlus, 1-800-788-1120, info@alphaplus.ca



Literacy Upgrading for Adults with Learning Disabilities. Yukon Literacy Council. 1993. Call number: 371.0475E22

- Interview format and questionnaire exploring reading, mathematics, writing/spelling, memory, learning styles, compensatory strategies and visual-spatial skills
- Learning Disability Screening Checklist that covers: language, literacy, memory/organization and social skills



Learning Together: A Handbook for Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities. British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology. 1990. Call number: 371.90715L24

- Learning Disability Identification Guide that covers: visual perception functioning, auditory perceptual functioning, memory challenges, and attention level.



Literacy and the L.D. Adult: Participants Manual. Janet Johnston. 1994. Call number: 371.92675J57.

- Checklist of Learning Disabled Student Characteristics that covers: performance inconsistency, concentration problems, communication, perceptual motor abilities, difficulty with time and space, academics, social skills and self-esteem.



Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities. The University State of New York.1990. Call number: 371.90475H58.

- LD Characteristics Checklist that covers: ADD disorder, reasoning, processing, memory, communication, interpersonal skills/emotional maturity, coordination/motor functions, reading, writing/spelling and math/calculations.



Bringing Literacy within Reach. Learning Disability Association of Canada.1991.Call number: 371.9263B67.

- Screening questionnaire, screening interview, summary checklist and guidelines for interpreting the screening questionnaire. Areas that are covered in the tools are: employment, education, language, and health.

Appendix D

Three case studies

The following three case studies are fictional but have been developed from an extensive review of learning disabilities research and collections of case studies gathered from Canadian, American, and international sources.

Case Study A – Tom

Information gathered during initial meeting

- Male, age 29, resides on his own.
- Divorced 4 four years ago and has one son, age 8, with whom he spends every third weekend.
- Attended high school until he was 16 but left due to poor attendance, lack of interest and failing grades.
- Worked in a beer manufacturing plant for 13 years and recently lost his job due to plant closure – he was making good money and is bitter about the plant closure.
- Over the past 6 six months he has tried to get a “good paying job” at the local factories but they won’t look at him since he doesn’t have his Grade 12 diploma.
- Tom often mentioned that it was is the “company’s” fault that he is in this situation.

Tom came to the learning centre to get his high school upgrading. After three months he was close to dropping out because he was continually failing his written assignments. However, Tom’s English teacher convinced him to give it another chance and referred him to the “literacy program” in the learning centre.

Observations: (from initial 10-minute introductions when English teacher brought Tom over to the program)

- Appears very confident as an individual but frustrated with his current situation.
- Had no difficulty expressing himself and was quite clear that he wanted to get his Grade 12 diploma ASAP!
- Tom often mentioned that it was the “company’s” fault that he is in this situation.

The program set up an initial intake appointment with Tom to meet for 1.5 hours. This would allow the practitioners to learn more about his situation and to give him a brief orientation to the program. He was eager to get the “show on the road.”

Questions for practitioners to consider:

What types of information and/or questions would you plan to gather from Tom? What types of screening tools would you plan to use with Tom and why?

Suggested focus areas and tools to access

Goal: To understand why Tom is having difficulty with his written assignments.

- Gain information about his academic history, employment background, and family history through an informal interview discussion. He appears to be quite confident in vocalizing his thoughts.
 - Academic history: Did he repeat grades, have special assistance, do any type of assessments, excel in any areas or struggle with any areas?
 - Health: Are there any visual or auditory problems? Did he have any trauma to his head? Is any medication that he may be taking interfering with his learning?
 - Employment background: Was it sporadic prior to his work at the beer company? What types of jobs did he do at the company? What areas did he like or dislike?

- Use a self-assessment tool to understand Tom's take on his strengths and weaknesses. Does he recognize his strengths and weaknesses and has he ever been given the opportunity for self-reflection?
 - What areas does he see weaknesses in, if any?
 - What are his strengths?
- Discuss level of commitment and what is involved – Tom may want a quick fix and needs to understand his full situation.
- Use an informal screening tool to help assess your observations and results of Tom's self-assessment (e.g. Destination Literacy, ALDS).

Information gathered through intake process

Interview

- Academic history:
 - Tom moved twice during elementary school.
 - He remembers not doing well in spelling tests when he wasn't given the opportunity to study the words.
 - Tom doesn't recall any special testing, but he remembers a Grade 4 or 5 teacher telling him that he performed at a Grade 2 level in a spelling test – the results were just brushed off.
 - His teachers always said he kept messy notes and he was often told that he was rated lower on tests due to his spelling and writing, even though he knew the facts.
 - Tom became frustrated as he moved into higher grades because he knew the facts for the tests – “why did it matter if his spelling and writing wasn't perfect, especially if it wasn't an English class?”
 - Tom hated doing written reports and essays – often he would just copy material from a book.
 - He preferred to do multiple-choice tests or oral reports.
 - Tom didn't miss any grades during elementary school, but he found Grade 9 really hard – he thought the teachers were too picky and he couldn't keep up with his written assignments. Tom also said there was a lot of reading and it was hard to remember all of the information.

- Tom left school once he was 16 year of age, with 7 credits, (2 Math, 1 Art, 2 Physical education, 1 History and 2 Technology) of which he indicated he got a low 70 average. He reported that he liked the math class, but didn't like the word problems.
- **Health:**
 - Tom reported no medical problems.
 - Tom wasn't taking any medication.
 - Tom has been wearing glasses since age 14 and gets regular checkups.
- **Family background:**
 - Tom indicated no major issues.
 - Tom is the only child. His father worked at the same beer company, which is how he got the job.
 - Tom stated his father didn't get his Grade 12 diploma, but that never affected his ability to get a job.
 - His father took an early retirement package with the beer company when it closed.
 - His mother stayed at home, but she got her Grade 12 diploma and worked as a secretary prior to having him.
- **Employment history:**
 - Tom worked at the beer company during the summer prior to landing the job full-time.
 - He held various service jobs such as fast food worker and gas attendant, prior to his full-time job at the factory.
 - Tom was on the line in different areas and was also in loading and shipping, while he worked at the beer factory.
 - He tried a telemarketing job because they said he could make good bucks while he was unemployed – he wasn't afraid of talking on the phone, but he didn't stay because they said he made too many mistakes recording the information from the potential buyer.

- **General observations during the interview:**
 - Tom would often go into great detail when answering the questions and sometimes forget the question that was asked.
 - He was not shy when talking - in fact he would sometimes begin to answer a question before the practitioner had time to complete it.
 - Tom would sometimes draw a blank on a word he was wanting to use and say “you know, um” and would attempt to describe the word he was trying to get at.
 - Tom liked to control the conversation and would respond quickly without gathering his thoughts.
 - Tom was easily distracted by people coming into the agency, even though the door was closed to the office – he would watch people go by and not hear what was being said to him.

Results of self-assessment:

- Tom found he got bored of reading information or books that had too much detail and technical “mumbo jumbo”. He didn’t dislike to read, but said it wasn’t of great interest to him - he would read the newspaper and scan the headlines and brief articles.
- Tom rated his spelling and handwriting as poor.
- Tom admitted that his actual writing wasn’t great but he was able to get by. He said he sometimes found it difficult to put his thoughts on paper.
- Tom often lost track of things at home, although he never really thought much about it because he had never done any type of self-reflection.
- Tom preferred to read printed directions especially if they were detailed, rather than hearing them orally and he said he finds it difficult to concentrate if there is too much information given to him.
- He had no problem with handling money, shopping, telling time, and overall basic life management.
- Tom indicated an interest in using the computer and enjoys sports.
- He stated his goal was to get his Grade 12 so that he could get another factory job.

Questions for practitioners to consider:

Based on the information presented, what are your impressions for potential learning disabilities? Do you need to gather more information before you can make the decision? What is your rationale for your observations?

Interpretation of the information gathered through the screening process**Regardless of the screening tool used, the following three key questions should be answered to gain insight to learners' situations:**

- Why do they not achieve as expected? Do they lack intellectual ability?
- Have they been taught the basic skills necessary for progress?
- Are there affective or motivational issues that are hindering the learning?

The following was noted, using guidelines to interpret observations and gathered information:

- Tom does not appear to have an intellectual inability. He is able to express himself; he has been able to maintain employment; and he was able to obtain some high school credits with average marks. He has most likely been taught basic skills through his elementary school experience.
- An auditory processing disability and short-term memory problem may be present based on some of Tom's characteristics such as:
 - Tendency to interrupt without realizing it
 - Difficulty verbalizing some words
 - Forgetting initial question when he provides detailed explanation
 - Poor spelling
 - Doesn't like to read material that contains a lot of information
 - Possible difficulty hearing and recording information based on his experiences with the telemarketing job.

- Tom appears motivated but wants a quick fix. He doesn't seem to understand why he has problems with his spelling and writing and really doesn't see it as a big deal. This may be a bit of avoidance on his part. Tom does have fairly strong verbal skills and he has used this skill to get around his weaknesses, although unconsciously. He can be easily distracted and has difficulty staying focused. He appears to be quite upfront with what he wants.

General conclusions:

Further informal assessment would be needed to determine the possibility of an auditory learning disability and the level of spelling and writing challenges. If Tom wants to obtain his Grade 12 diploma, both reading and math skills should be assessed. It is recommended that this assessment be done with Tom before entering into any discussion about potential learning disabilities.

Case Study B – Samantha

Observations and information gained from the general intake

- A 24- year old female who just enrolled in the LBS program at a local college to work towards her ECE certification.
- She left school at 16 due to pregnancy – her son is now 7 seven and attending first grade.
- Samantha is highly motivated and is ready to make this step, although she is nervous since her previous school experience was not positive.
- She has a good support system – her grandmother provides daycare when needed.
- Samantha indicates she struggled throughout elementary and high school with her reading skills and often disrupted the class during quiet time when they were required to read.

- She took basic courses during her short time at high school and remembers being sent to a small group for extra help in reading during elementary school.
- Her rebellious behaviour began to interfere with her academics in grade 7. Samantha's parents went through a difficult divorce at that time and limited attention was focused on her.
- She reports no medical history that would interfere with her learning and has had her eyes checked in the past eight months.
- During her upbringing, Samantha recalls her mother always reinforced the need for her to do well in school and get a college degree, so that Samantha would not wind up like her mother.
- Samantha's mother has always worked as a cashier in a grocery store and most recently is working at a major department store. Although her mother has average reading abilities, Samantha knows that her mother avoids reading when possible.
- Samantha hasn't seen her father since her parents' divorce and believes he did get his Grade 12 diploma. He was a mechanic.

Initial test results: (CAAT – Canadian Adult Achievement Test and Math Skills Inventory)

- Vocabulary 10.3, reading comprehension 6.5 and spelling 7.7.
- Math results indicate that she can add, subtract and multiply single-digit numbers but had difficulty with double-digits and division. As a result, she struggled with her percentages and fractions. Although her adding and subtracting were strong, when they were put into a word problem format she was unable to solve them.

Questions for practitioners to consider:

Samantha has entered your college program and you have the above information. What initial observations can you make from the information? Do you need to ask additional questions or gather further information before you have her begin her program? Explain your approach, including any tools you may use.

Initial interpretation and further inquiry

Based on the information gleaned from the intake interview and the CATT results, it appears that Samantha has difficulty with reading comprehension and spelling, which may indicate some type of visual processing disability. Her vocabulary and verbal skills are excellent which rules out any intellectual ability and her medical history reveals no interfering factors to impact her learning. Her key strength is her determination and realistic understanding of herself. She has a good support system and is clear on her goal.

- Utilize a self-assessment tool, but provide oral direction if she is having difficulty reading it. This will help to gain insight into Samantha's understanding of her strengths and weaknesses and may also give insight into her oral comprehension versus her reading comprehension.
- Discuss how Samantha has dealt with her reading challenges (i.e. when dealing with her son and taking care of his needs) – she may identify strategies that she has used without realizing they are strategies.
- Ask Samantha how she felt about the CAAT and the math inventory skills tests: what areas did she struggle with and what areas did she find okay?
- Share with Samantha her role in the whole learning process and the importance for both Samantha and the practitioner to be open to ensure the best learning opportunity for her.
- Further assessment is required to understand Samantha's strengths and weaknesses. It will be important to point out her strengths given her past educational experiences and frustrations with her reading abilities. Build on any existing strategies if they have been identified.

Case Study C – Frank

General Description:

- Frank is 52 years old and has been unemployed for the past 2 years, since his company shut down.
- He is currently receiving Ontario Works benefits.
- He has learned about the “new way” to search for a job, but recognizes that he needs to upgrade his skills.
- He is quite handy, has done renovation projects and is interested in starting his own business.
- He was referred to the community-based literacy program from the school board credit program because he was having difficulty in the classroom environment and with submitting assignments on time.

Information gathered from initial intake

Interview:

- **Academic background -**
 - Frank obtained his Grade 9 credits, but left to seek work.
 - Frank found it hard to pay attention in school and often got into trouble.
 - He did enjoy math and spelling, but disliked English and History.
 - Frank remembers always handing his assignments in late or avoiding them completely by skipping school, as he got older.
 - Frank struggled in the adult learning program – he found it difficult to complete his writing and reading homework and assignments – he also indicated that he found it hard to sit in the classroom for a long period of time.
 - His initial CAAT tests revealed that Frank had Grade 8 to 9 level functioning in all areas, yet he still struggled in the adult upgrading program.

- While Frank was at the learning centre he was enrolled in a Mathematics, History, and English program.
- Frank was referred to the community-based program to access one-to-one tutoring or a small group program, as a result of his difficulties in the credit program.

- **Medical history:**
 - Frank is not on any medication that would interfere with his learning.
 - Frank does wear glasses and shows no indication of a hearing problem.

- **Family situation:**
 - Frank is married with two sons who are adults and living independently.
 - His wife is a school secretary and is the “organizer”, as he states it.
 - Frank states that his wife deals with most of the daily planning and household organizing.
 - Frank’s role is to keep the house in good repair.

- **Self assessment:**
 - Frank indicated that he has difficulty sometimes with his reading and writing.
 - Frank stated that he often has difficulty organizing and planning things. He often loses his tools when doing his renovation projects and gets bogged down when he has more than one project on the go.
 - Frank finds it difficult to pay attention and concentrate when there are other distractions around.
 - Frank can’t sit still for long and indicated that he doesn’t enjoy doing tasks that require a lot of attention, such as paying the bills and banking.
 - Frank is good at building and repairing things when he works at one thing at a time.

General observations from the interview:

- Frank has a good vocabulary and appears to understand what is spoken to him.
- Frank did seem a bit disorganized at the beginning of the interview – he had to look through his wallet several times before he could find the report the school had sent with him.
- Frank was quite fidgety and he was given 4 breaks during the 1.5 hour interview.
- Frank did not have any problem reading the self-assessment tool and he completed it independently.
- Frank’s writing was sloppy when he added information on the self-assessment form but his sentences, although brief, were coherent.

Questions for practitioners to consider:

What areas does Frank appear to be having difficulty with and what type of learning disability, if any, may be impacting his learning?

Overall conclusions

- Although an informal assessment has not been completed, the CAAT results indicate that Frank is not struggling with his basic communication and math skills. However, based on the report from the credit program he struggled with completing his homework and assignments.
- Based on Frank’s description of his academic background, his self-assessment and his most recent upgrading experiences, it appears that he may have some type of organizing or cognitive processing breakdown and may have attention problems that interfere with his learning.
- Any informal assessment should focus on the process and not just the product. Get input from Frank on how he attempts to do his writing and reading tasks. Further observations are needed to understand how his short attention span and limited organizational skills may be impacting his ability to learn.

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