

# Learning Disabilities Training: A New Approach

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



## Learning objectives

- Understand the assessment process
- Explain the difference between formal and informal assessments
- Understand when a diagnostic formal assessment is appropriate and understand the process
- Assess for the impacts of auditory, visual and/or organizational learning disabilities
- Use various informal assessment techniques (i.e. observation, work samples, dynamic assessment)
- Effectively involve learners in the assessment process
- Assess adults' learning disability strengths and struggles in the areas of reading, writing, spelling, speaking, listening and mathematics
- Understand individuals' memory, visual-spatial and attention strengths and struggles
- Increase knowledge of two informal assessment models for learning disabilities
- Use effective assessment practices
- Utilize evaluation criteria when selecting assessment tools

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# **T**he assessment process

## **Definition**

In Module 1, signs and characteristics that adults may exhibit or discuss that can indicate a potential learning disability were identified. How the various processing breakdowns in auditory, visual and/or organizational functions can impact on adults' literacy skills was also discussed. The use of screening tools was described in the first module and how the tools can identify potential learning disabilities that may be impacting adults' abilities to learn. This module will address the screening tool findings and how to understand the impact the potential learning disabilities may have on adults' literacy skills.

The term assessment will refer to a process, not a specific type and/or method. It is a process to determine individual strengths and struggles to help practitioners to develop teaching strategies and accommodations and help learners to understand what is required to reach their goals. The process is constant and flowing and may include a mix of formal and informal assessment techniques. It may involve a number of persons and/or tools. For example, practitioners who are specialized in learning disabilities may be asked to help with the process and/or referrals to psychologists may be made for diagnostic assessments. The assessment tools involved throughout the process may include checklists, work samples (informal assessments) and/or standardized tests (formal assessment).

### **Difference between the screening and the assessment process:**

“Screening tests do not provide a prescription of how to intervene for a problem but may yield details about areas such as reading, writing, attention, social or math skills which warrant a closer look.”<sup>1</sup>

The screening process is an indicator that a potential learning disability is evident – the assessment looks at the person's strengths and struggles in more depth, in order to develop a plan of action. Strengths can be reinforced and

used to overcome weaknesses. Questionnaires, rating scales and interviews are examples of screening tools. They provide an indication of learners' performance and explain the impact of their personal circumstances and past learning experiences. The results of the screening provide an estimate of learners' performance and/or an indication of challenge areas.

## **The Process**

“Assessment is defined as a problem-solving process in which a problem is identified, information is gathered to better understand the difficulties, intervention strategies are generated and implemented and the effectiveness of the intervention is evaluated.”<sup>2</sup>

When a problem has been identified through the screening process, information is needed to better understand the difficulties, strengths and interventions. By gathering more pertinent information, together the practitioner and learner can develop an effective training plan. Assessment does not stop here. As the plan is implemented, ongoing evaluation is needed. Both learners and practitioners need to note progress and struggles and they need to gather more information as needed. This process is ongoing until learners exit programs.

The movement from identification to understanding is important not only for practitioners but also for learners. It is critical that learners be active partners in the process and fully understand the information that is gained. Janet Johnston states that the development of personal control is the key to paving the way to success for learners with learning disabilities. Adults need to reframe or reinterpret their identity in a positive and productive way.

She identifies the following four stages:

1. The need to recognize the disability – at a minimum the learner needs to recognize that they do things differently.
2. A degree of acceptance must be attained – which involves accepting both the negative and positive aspects of the potential disability.

3. A need to understand strengths and weaknesses and build on strengths.
4. Commitment to action; the conscious decision to take some specific action towards goals.<sup>3</sup>

## **Primary Purposes of the Assessment Process**

- To provide an explanation for the difficulties that learners may experience
- To provide information that will help in overcoming, getting around or coping with these difficulties<sup>4</sup>
- To gather information to facilitate decision-making
- To allow learners to demonstrate what they can do<sup>5</sup>
- To change instructional methods, to add and modify strategies and accommodations
- To set the stage for practitioners to help learners with suspected learning disabilities, to understand learners' strengths and weaknesses and the reasons behind their struggles and difficulties
- To help practitioners identify special materials and strategies for setting up individualized learning plans for adults<sup>6</sup>

## **Assessment covers three broad areas:**

### **Vision/hearing and auditory/visual processing problems**

- Rule out any physical cause first. Sometimes medical conditions may manifest themselves as a learning disability. Obtaining a detailed medical history helps to eliminate possible reasons for the challenges such as medication side effects, seizures, strokes, mental health disorders, or compulsive disorders.

### **Academic performance**

- Practitioners need to look for error patterns. The presence of consistent error patterns helps to distinguish between a learner who may just be at a low level of achievement due to a lack of education

exposure or opportunity, versus a learner who has a suspected learning disability. The pattern of errors should be evident under a number of circumstances.

### **Behaviour/psychological manifestations**

- Look for difficulties with attention span, organizational skills, inappropriate social interactions, and variable or unpredictable performance.<sup>7</sup> Practitioners should observe indicators over a period of time and under various circumstances before any conclusions can be made about potential challenges.

## **Types of assessment tools**

**The assessment process can involve two types of assessment techniques:**

1. **Informal Assessments** - Use flexible tools that provide a wide coverage of learner performance and behaviours. Informal assessments are subjective and must be used with caution.
  - **Observation:** a direct measure of learner behaviour. It helps to determine the present level of the learner's performance.
  - **Informal tests:** a direct measure of learner performance in a specific area. It provides direction for planning and/or modifying instruction. Examples could include: a reading comprehension passage with questions, spelling dictation, word recognition or a quiz on fractions.
  - **Dynamic assessment:** a person is asked to answer questions or solve problems, but instead of the assessment ending once the criterion has been met (i.e. the number of errors) the person is given various types of cues to help improve performance. The types of cues used are recorded. It uses a "test – teach - retest" approach. The way the learner problem

solves and the types of cues used are helpful for planning instruction and strategies that would best meet the learner's needs.

- **Work samples:** an evaluation of learner performance to locate patterns of errors and correct responses. Work samples provide an overall picture of the learner's work. Through the identification of errors, skills that require further instruction are identified.<sup>8</sup> Examples could include: writing samples such as journals, math activity sheets and work-related projects or assignments.
2. **Formal assessments:** have stringent guidelines for administering the test and evaluating the results. They provide information about the skills of the learner as compared to a group of similar learners.
- **Norm referenced tests:** “compares a learner's results against a group of similar learners. It provides direction for further assessment. Often when working with adults, it is difficult to find tests that have been standardized on the adult population.”<sup>9</sup> Most norm referenced tests are multiple-choice tests. Some also include open-ended, short-answer questions (i.e. CAAT, "IQ," "cognitive ability," "school readiness," and developmental screening tests).
  - **Criterion referenced tests (CRT):** “the results are measured against a standard set of criteria. It indicates what a learner can or cannot do, and the degree to which a skill or material has been mastered.”<sup>10</sup> On a standardized CRT, the passing or cut-off score is usually set by a committee of experts, while in a classroom the instructor may set the passing score (i.e. school programs use this to measure a student's knowledge and skills against the core curriculum criteria). In both cases, deciding the passing score is subjective, not objective. Note that some criterion referenced test may have been normed as well.



Given that most programs are unable to afford formal testing conducted by trained professionals, the information gathered by practitioners is very valuable in understanding learners' strategies, their ways of learning and their strengths and limitations. Regardless of the tools used, the process should be goal-driven. Areas to assess and understand in more depth should be related to an end goal. If a learner's goal is to read to his/her grandchild, there is no need to assess math skills. Or if a learner wants to prepare to enter a cook apprenticeship program, then only the specific skills required for successful entry to the program should be addressed. Assessment results are used to make decisions regarding learners' needs and the development of individualized plans to help meet their goals successfully. Through this process, new information is shared with learners to assist in making meaningful choices to promote opportunities for success.<sup>11</sup> The assessment procedure used should address the presenting problems. It needs to be comprehensive and involve input from a number of sources.

## **U**nderstanding diagnostic assessments

### **“To test or not to test - that is the question”**

Even if no financial barriers existed in accessing diagnostic assessments for adults, there still would be a great debate as to the merits of formal assessment and whether it is beneficial for adult learners. It is not the practitioners' role to enter the debate, but instead, to recognize the pros and cons of both sides. Practitioners should ensure that learners understand all points of view and the decision to pursue formal testing should be left to the learners. However, there are times when accessing an official diagnosis should be encouraged:

- If learners want to obtain their GED or require an official diagnosis to obtain certain compensations within the workplace
- If a learning disability is suspected and, after an informal assessment is conducted, both the practitioner and the learner have no clear understanding of the learners' challenges
- If learner financial supports may be impacted

When formal diagnoses are pursued, it is important that both learners and practitioners understand what is involved in the process. This knowledge helps to increase the benefits gained from the experience. Learners can prepare questions, and both practitioners and learners will be in better positions to understand the results.

**In order to make a learning disability diagnosis the following must be established:**

- The learner's learning difficulties significantly interfere with his/her academic and daily living activities that require reading, math and writing skills
- There is a discrepancy between intelligence and academic achievement
- There are no other apparent reasons that could account for the level of learning difficulties the learner is experiencing<sup>2</sup>

A comprehensive assessment by a member of the College of Psychologists is required to diagnose a learning disability. In general the process involves an interview and a series of tests.

**Advantages:**

- When adults are diagnosed with a learning disability they have access to accommodations within the work, academic and testing environments
- When adults are diagnosed with a learning disability they are protected by human rights legislation from discrimination and from being denied access to accommodations
- The results help adults to understand their strengths and weaknesses and may ease feelings of inadequacy
- It helps adults watch for signs of potential learning disabilities with their children

**Disadvantages:**

- There are limited government funds available to help cover the costs of the assessment
- There may be limited access to qualified and suitable psychologists in the area
- Not all licensed psychologists have experience with adults and since the results are open to subjective evaluation, how they are interpreted could be detrimental to the adult.<sup>13</sup> Adults who are bombarded with a report that only highlights their weaknesses may be inclined to become overwhelmed or completely give up. In addition, if the report is written in complex language, this could lead to the adult not understanding the report and possibly misinterpreting the information.

**The formal assessment should include:**

- 1) An initial interview.
- 2) Tests of cognitive functioning and information processing including specific measures of:
  - Short and long term memory
  - Receptive and expressive language
  - Verbal and non-verbal abstract reasoning or logic
  - Attention span
  - Visual perceptual abilities including various spatial tasks
  - Sequencing, right-left orientation and fine motor dexterity
  - Organizational and planning skills
- 3) Tests of academic achievement levels (reading, spelling, written expression and mathematics).
- 4) Social and emotional evaluations (use formal tests to explore anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem and attention deficit disorder).

- 5) A feedback interview to share results and discuss suggestions for remediation to improve weaknesses or compensatory strategies and accommodations to cope with problem areas. In addition, strengths should be explored and a written report should be provided.<sup>14</sup>

If an adult learner decides to access the formal assessment process, he/she may want to consider asking the following questions:

- Have you tested many adults with learning disabilities?
- How long will the assessment take?
- What will the assessment cover?
- Will there be a written and an oral report of the assessment?
- Will our discussion give me more information regarding why I am having trouble with my job or job training, school, or daily life?
- Will you also give me ideas on how to improve my skills and how to compensate for my disability?
- Will the report make recommendations about where to go for immediate help?
- What is the cost? What does the cost cover?
- What are possibilities and costs for additional consultation?
- Can insurance cover the costs? Are there other funding sources? Can a payment plan be worked out?<sup>15</sup>

## **U**nderstanding the impact of processing **breakdown**

When assessing, practitioners need to understand **the impact** of the processing breakdown on learners' academic, social and organizational skills. When a person has a learning disability, there is a breakdown in the processing of the information that is gathered. Visual: does your brain understand what you see? Auditory: does your brain understand what you hear? What is heard or what is seen is not processed properly. This processing

breakdown can also impact how one stores and retrieves the information and/or how one organizes the information taken in.

Controversy still remains over the value of actually assessing perceptual abilities. There has been little evidence to show that training directed to perceptual abilities will improve academic performance and there are concerns with the validity and reliability of the actual tests.<sup>16</sup> To test visual perceptual abilities, an individual may be asked to find a smaller image contained in a larger image. To test for auditory perceptual abilities, an individual could be asked to discriminate changes in volume or to discern between consonant and vowel sounds. If such tests are conducted, it must be recognized that the key is to understand what perceptual inabilities are impacting the adult's learning. The rationale for gathering this information is not to attempt to improve the perceptual weakness, but to develop learning strategies or accommodations that help the adults deal with their perceptual inabilities.

Research has found that evaluating communication issues such as reading and writing, rather than perceptual issues, more often explains deficits.

“Language provides the foundation upon which communication, problem solving, and expanding, integrating, analyzing, and synthesizing knowledge take place. Deficits in language, therefore, can have a profound impact on the ability of an individual to learn and function competently and confidently as he or she interacts in the world.”<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, many learners within the LBS programs have felt similar impacts as highlighted in the above quote. In most cases, learners have little understanding of why they struggle with their communication skills. Often they blame themselves and feel “dumb”. This crystallizes the importance of helping learners discover their strengths and struggles in both the language process and outcome.

It is important to assess adult learners' abilities in each of the language areas in order to identify what they already know, as well as what they need to work on during their training. One emerging theme derived from the adult basic education research suggests that assessing each component of reading in order to develop a picture of learners' reading ability gives practitioners much

more relevant information than any test of a single component can.<sup>18</sup> As a result, practitioners should be encouraged to assess all language areas that impact learners reaching their goals.

Adults with suspected learning disabilities may be unable to demonstrate their knowledge with tests that have heavy text and writing expectations. Any type of assessment tool or model should be flexible enough to allow learners to demonstrate their knowledge and ways of learning.

## **Visual processing difficulties**

This form of learning disability hinders the ability to make sense of information taken in through the eyes due to a breakdown in how the brain interprets what it sees. It can affect spatial relation, which is the position of objects in space and in relation to other objects. This disability interferes with reading and mathematics, which are both symbol-based. Learners may have difficulty perceiving words or numbers as separate units, experience directionality problems, and get confused over similar shapes. Visual processing difficulties can also impact whole and part relationships. Learners may have difficulty perceiving or integrating relationships between the whole and parts of the object. For example, they may have difficulty breaking down a word or seeing parts of words such as endings and prefixes.

### **Learners may struggle with:**

- Recognizing known words
- Reading orally
- Keeping their place on the page (uses finger)
- Spelling from sounds
- Recognizing irregular sounds (*ight, tion*)

## **Auditory processing difficulties**

This type of learning disability affects the ability to make sense of the information taken in by the ears. It affects not what is heard but how the information is processed. Auditory processing disabilities affect phonological awareness, which is the ability to understand that individual sounds are put together to make words. This is fundamental to reading. The difficulties result in the inability to recognize or isolate individual sounds in words, recognize similarities between words, or identify the number of sounds in words, which can all affect reading, writing and language. The disability impacts a learner's auditory memory. He/she may have difficulty storing and recalling information that is heard (i.e. verbal instructions and/or taking phone messages). Learners experiencing the inability to list the order of sounds in a word (auditory sequencing) have challenges with spelling. These challenges also weaken their ability to put sounds together to make words. Learners can also mix up sounds when saying them and substitute letters in words.

### **Learners may struggle with:**

- Long words
- Pronunciation
- Rhyming
- Spelling based on known words
- Speaking

## **Organizational processing difficulties**

This form of learning disability causes learners to struggle with their ability to think logically and organize their thoughts. They have trouble with comprehension-related activities like understanding the meaning of questions. Learners with an organizational disability have trouble constructing answers to questions quickly. When they are given extra time to understand the question and frame an answer, they can succeed.

**Learners may struggle with:**

- Giving clear, concise answers to simple questions
- Focusing
- Following-through and being on time<sup>19</sup>

The above section on Visual, Auditory and Organizational difficulties was taken from the article “Special Needs Assessment Procedures” found at the learning disabilities page at <http://www.torque.net/~bpd/dev/snap/learning.htm>. Written by Pat Hatt.

## **I**nformal assessment methods

When working with learners who may have learning disabilities, the two major objectives for assessment are:

- To help explain why learners are experiencing difficulties
- To provide information that will help learners to overcome, get around or cope with their challenges

“Providing a process whereby students can become aware of the manifestations of the difficulty and strengths is crucial to accessing future academic adjustments, aids, modifications and interventions in all education, training and employment environments.”<sup>20</sup>

Understanding individuals’ strengths and weaknesses is central to building training and lesson plans. Assessment begins as adults enter programs (initial), becomes more comprehensive as learners participate in the program services (ongoing) and ends when they leave the programs (exit). When practitioners suspect learners have learning disabilities, there is more reason to emphasize ongoing assessment. Consistent evaluation of adaptations, strategies and learners’ motivation is critical in helping learners reach their goals.

“Assessment is something done with the learner, not something done to a learner.”<sup>21</sup>



## **Four elements of informal assessment**

### **Observation**

Observing learner characteristics and manifestations in the learning environment can be a valuable resource for practitioners to gain a better understanding of their learners. As practitioners use this technique, it will help them to fine tune the process and recognize learning disability struggles efficiently.

### **Checklists**

The checklist is one of the most frequently used tools in the screening process. The checklist is more of an indication of a potential learning disability; further assessment is required to understand the type and impact of the learning disability. Checklists are easy and quick tools. They provide a number of symptoms or behaviours, which adults with learning disabilities might exhibit. If learners exhibit a number of the characteristics, they may have potential learning disabilities.

### **Authentic skill or task demonstration and analysis**

Practitioners frequently practice this type of informal assessment and are quite comfortable with it. When practitioners assess learner's task demonstrations and work samples, a number of samples should be assessed to find consistent error patterns and variances in performance under different circumstances.

### **Intensive interview or self-report questionnaire**

Learner self-assessments should be used throughout the process. This form of assessment is very valuable during the screening process and helps to set the stage for developing trusting relationships with learners. Learners will begin to view their role as active not passive in the assessment process. Valuable insights can be gained by understanding learners' past experiences and learning histories. If adults experienced similar learning challenges when they were younger as they do now, then their literacy challenges may be a result of a learning disability and not that they simply just need more exposure and practice through literacy instruction.<sup>22</sup>

## **A** **in-depth look at observation and task analysis**

The Tennessee Literacy Resource Centre with a grant from the US Department of Education reviewed a number of assessment tools. Based on the research they recommended that **informal observations and work samples were two of the best ways to determine individuals' strengths and weaknesses.**

“They found that careful observation was so valuable to the assessment process that it recommended training to sharpen the practitioner’s observation skills.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Observations**

#### **Effective observation tips :**

- Monitor individual patterns, look for recurrent themes and look for where the breakdown occurs within the learning process
- Observe learners’ interactions with their work, with other students and with practitioners
- Look at how learners interact with the content and how they handle the tasks (organization, rate, volume, memory)

#### **Understanding learners’ strengths and struggles and identifying breakdowns in the learning process come from ongoing observation of:**

- Patterns of errors and successes from multiple sources and samples
- How learners perform tasks
- When, and in what context, successes and difficulties occur
- With what consistency the behaviours occur
- The ease, fluency, and capacity in assimilating and expressing new knowledge
- Affective reactions and coping strategies<sup>24</sup>

**Things to consider when observing:**

- Who or what will be observed
- Where the observation will take place (observing a range of situations where the student operates is recommended)
- When the observation will take place (a number of observations at different times is also important)
- How the observations will be recorded<sup>25</sup>

**Different ways to observe**

**Anecdotal:** recording general notes from observations seen throughout the day or over the week. The observations can be noted by one practitioner or by a number of practitioners. They are subjective and recorded any time as seen applicable by practitioners.

**Event recording:** practitioners look for specific behaviours or skill challenges. These events are recorded as they are observed or over a specified time period (i.e. over two weeks in a classroom environment or over six one-to-one tutoring sessions).

**Timed observation:** recording an event over a specified time period and noting the frequency. For example, a tutor may note how many times a learner loses focus over a ten minute period while working on an oral reading task. Or an instructor may note how many times a learner gets out of his/her chair over a ½ hour period in a small group environment. This form of observation is generally used when trying to observe behaviours that may be interfering with adults' abilities to learn.

**Duration:** the length of time or the number of attempts it takes for an adult to complete a task. If a learner is utilizing strategies to work on increasing his/her reading comprehension speed in preparation for the GED, then observations of the number of times the learner needs to reread the passage before he/she is able to answer the questions could prove useful. This observation may be tracked over a period of time to see if the strategies are helping the learner's comprehensive speed.

**Checklist:** practitioners may use a number of questions or a scale to check off each time a characteristic or behaviour is noted. This observation technique could be used if a learner is pursuing a job as a customer service representative and wants to improve his/her listening by decreasing the amount of times he/she may interrupt a person's conversation. During class discussion the practitioner could record the frequency of interruptions made by the learner to see if he/she is improving over a period of time.

Regardless of the observation technique used, a few cautions should be exercised when making conclusions. First, the observations should be done during a number of circumstances and in different surroundings to ensure a pattern is noted. Second, a practitioner may want to have other practitioners observe at the same time or on their own to confirm observations.

Making a quick assumption about an adult's behaviour could not only prove to be harmful to the learner if the practitioner's assumption is incorrect, but it could also lead to the development of inappropriate learning/teaching strategies. Many of our learners have numerous life circumstances that could interfere with their ability to learn, so by observing any interference in learning over time and by confirming them with the learner you can feel confident that your assumptions are correct.

### **Questions practitioners may consider asking:**

To help understand the impact of the potential learning disability, practitioners can ask the following questions which are designed to seek information about the problem. These questions will help practitioners understand what is keeping the learner from being able to achieve.

- In what physical environment do they learn best?
- What is useful, debilitating, or neutral about the way they approach the task?
- Can the learner hold multiple pieces of information in memory and then act upon them?
- How does increasing or slowing the speed of instruction impact upon the student's accuracy?
- What processing mechanisms are being taxed in any given task (visual, auditory, organizational, memory)?

- How does the learner respond to a certain teaching style?
- With whom has the learner been successful? What about the person seems to have contributed to their success?
- What is encouraging to the learner? What is discouraging?
- How does manipulating the mode of teaching (e.g. visual or auditory presentation) affect a learner's performance?<sup>26</sup>

## **Observing learners' strengths and struggles**

**Auditory or receptive abilities** (the way students respond to directions):

- Do they interrupt or respond inappropriately?
- Do they continually ask for information to be repeated?
- Can they track and follow the conversation?
- Do they hesitate frequently before responding?

**Oral expressive language abilities** (the level of expressive language used):

- Watch for the tone, quality and comfort level.
- Observe the level of quality; is it higher or lower than presented by the learners' general academic functioning?

**Visual abilities:**

- How do learners track print in books, forms and tests?
- Compare their ability to process print versus verbal expression.
- When they read out loud do they skip partial or full lines of print?
- Are they frequently on the wrong number or column?

**Memory abilities:**

- Can they recall information, either personal or educational and in a logical and clear manner?
- Do they have difficulty remembering the names of their fellow learners, numbers, and/or math equations?

**Sequencing abilities:**

- Is information presented in a natural and logical order?
- Do they approach directions and instructions in a logical order?
- Can they identify the beginning and end of events?
- Do they wander when expressing themselves?
- Does their written work follow an order?

**Organizing abilities** (best noted when observing study or work habits):

- Do they have trouble with abstract reasoning?
- Can they prioritize?
- Do they have difficulty organizing material?
- Do they have difficulty with knowing where to start?

**Visual-Motor abilities** (eye hand coordination):

- Do they show inconsistent writing patterns?
- Do they have difficulty doing math calculations on paper?
- Do they have difficulty copying information to print either from a book or the chalkboard?

**Temporal and spatial relations abilities** (ability to orient or manage themselves in space and time):

- Do they forget their appointment times?
- Do they have difficulty comprehending length or time or managing their time?
- Do they have difficulty finding places?
- Can they tell time and understand the concept?

**Attention abilities:**

- Can they sustain their attention throughout an activity?
- Is the span of attention short or irregular?
- Are they distracted by auditory or visual stimuli?
- Are they easily pulled off task?

- Is there a high level of impulsive behaviour demonstrated socially?  
Verbally?<sup>27</sup>

Use these questions when observing an individual over time and under various circumstances. If the answers indicate that the individual has consistent difficulties in one or more of these areas, then it is likely that he or she has a learning disability related to his or her difficulties.

The above section on observing learner's strengths and struggles was adapted by permission from Payne, N.A. (1998). The rationale, components, and usefulness of informal assessment of adults with learning disabilities. In S.A. Vogel & S. Reder (Eds.), *Learning disabilities, literacy, and adult education* (pp. 107-131). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

## **Analysis of demonstrations and tasks**

There are two types of assessment processes that can be used when reviewing learners' work samples and reading practices. They are "diagnostic-prescriptive teaching" and "dynamic assessment". Although the terms may be unfamiliar to LBS practitioners, most likely practitioners have used both or a combination of these two kinds of approaches.

**Diagnostic-prescriptive teaching:** refers to the practice of constant evaluation. Practitioners and learners continually participate in observation and evaluation. During this process, the role of the learner is to provide feedback and input on instruction methods and/or learning strategies that may or may not be working. As practitioners continually assess demonstrations or tasks, they look for concrete signs of learning disabilities.

**Dynamic Assessment:** involves the process of assessing, directing and reassessing. Instead of stopping once the assessment is done, practitioners provide guidance or cues in the areas that the learner is experiencing difficulty. As learners use the guidance, their work is reassessed to see how the additional support impacted on their performance. The interaction between learners and the practitioners could include: modeling the task for the learners; giving learners prompts as they try to solve a problem; and asking what learners are thinking as they work on problems. Practitioners

may want to share experiences with learners which help to give relevancy to the task and provide constant praise, regardless of the task performance.<sup>28</sup>

The interaction in both kinds of assessment helps practitioners draw conclusions about learners' thinking processes (i.e. why they answer a question in a particular way), their response to a learning situation (i.e. whether, with prompting, feedback, or modeling, the learners can produce a correct response), and what specific means of instruction produce and maintain positive change in learners' cognitive functioning.<sup>29</sup>

Practitioners should informally discuss with the learners their attitude towards the particular task (writing, reading, math, organization) they plan to assess. Find out learners' views on the task, how people learn to do the task, what has been most helpful for them in doing the task, what has been least helpful, what they think will help them to improve their skills with the task and what strategies do they use when they run into a difficulty with the task.<sup>30</sup>

## Self-assessment and learner involvement

“If a student has an educational need that prompts him to enroll in a class, I'll bet he can explain what that need is. If a student can tell an instructor specifically what part of her life could run a little more smoothly with just a little help, I'll bet that instructor can provide some materials, lessons, and practice to address that need. If a student can recognize a change, then that student will be performing self-assessment.”<sup>31</sup>

Involvement of learners helps them understand themselves, reduces frustration, builds self-esteem and facilitates the building of independence and ownership for their ongoing and future learning and coping strategies. Part of the initial self-assessment is to help learners identify how they think, process and store information. The practitioner's role is to provide learners with tools and the forum to help them to identify and express themselves. The focus of the initial discussions with the learner should be spent talking about the learner's potential learning disability and how it may affect his/her learning and everyday activities. This is also the time to build **trust**.



## **Helpful strategies when sharing information with learners:**

- Share results ASAP – ease their fear of the unknown – in fact, involve learners throughout the process.
- Explain that the process is intended to help them build a plan and effective strategies - not to label them.
- Feedback should be handled sensitively and results should be interpreted in relation to an individual's life circumstances.
- Provide objective evidence of their strengths and weaknesses, which can be empowering for most adults.
- Listen to what is important for the learners. What areas of learning do they want to focus on?
- Take away any mystery; this helps learners to become part of the process.
- Keep them informed and involved.
- Encourage learners to identify and respond to their areas of difficulty.
- Be honest.
- Encourage learners to be open about the findings and accept them so that they can use them to benefit themselves in future situations.<sup>32</sup>

Ongoing self-assessment works when learners have been active participants in the goal setting process. To ensure that learners own their goals, they need to feel responsible for their own success. They need to buy into the process. Learners need to understand and accept their strengths and struggles. The practitioner's role is to help facilitate the process by providing learners with guidance to the process not content. Learners need to not only feel but also to see that they are in control of the process.

The information gathered is key to building instructional strategies and techniques. By setting the stage, learners will understand their role in the ongoing assessment process. This helps to build their ownership of the process and responsibility for learning.

Successful adults with learning disabilities stated that the key to their success was self-determination and persistence. The first step towards self-determination is actively involving learners in the assessment process. When

learners understand their strengths and weaknesses, they become more alert to specific situations and tasks that are most difficult and/or frustrating for them. By involving learners in the development of alternative strategies and ongoing evaluation of their effectiveness, they are able to assume a greater sense of control.

## **P** primary factors to consider when assessing for learning disabilities

### **How to distinguish between literacy challenges and potential learning disabilities**

When working with adults at the basic literacy level, it is difficult to decide when the observation of some behaviours represents a normal stage of learning a new skill and when it suggests the presence of a learning disability. Janet Johnston states that people who do not have a learning disability 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 can be difficult to perform the task. Some parts may be easy and others difficult. Adults who face these difficulties most likely have some form of a learning disability. Often these weaknesses are what get in the way of completing the task. Too often peoples' strengths can become masked by their weakness(es) and increased frustrations are the result.

The impact of adults' learning disabilities may increase or lessen depending on the context or specific task they are required to perform. For example, an adult with visual processing disabilities, who is required to read a passage him/herself, will more likely feel the impact of his/her disability on his/her reading comprehension versus having the opportunity to listen to the reading passage and then respond to comprehension questions. Or an adult who has organizational learning disabilities may be quite capable of writing sentences independently, but when required to do a written report will be unable to proceed and his/her writing skills may decline.

When reviewing the signs to look for in the areas of communication, practitioners may find that a lot of their learners show some of the characteristics and question – “does this mean that every one of my learners has a potential learning disability?” To help distinguish between learners who need to work on their literacy skills because of limited exposure to learning versus learners who struggle with their literacy due to potential learning disabilities, practitioners need to look at:

- Patterns of errors
- Large differences between strengths and weaknesses
- Information about the adults’ earlier educational experiences gathered through the screening process

Overall, adults with learning disabilities show little progress in one or more particular areas and that seems out of place given their overall intellectual capability. Practitioners’ suspicions of learning disabilities will be confirmed through ongoing assessment with the learners as they both notice consistent patterns of errors and definite strengths and weaknesses in key areas.

## **Product and process**

### **Assessment, whether it is initial or ongoing, should look at:**

- How learners input and output information
- The rate and amount of information they can produce or handle
- How the information they provide is organized and presented

When practitioners gain an understanding of these areas, strategies such as the way to instruct, the time needed for completion of a task and the amount of information learners can handle, can all be adjusted based on the adults’ strengths and limitations.<sup>33</sup>

### **Any form of evaluation and monitoring of progress should examine two key areas:**

- **Product** - the knowledge and skills the learner can demonstrate or has gained (i.e. a book report)
- **Process** - how the learners produce the outcome (i.e. the steps they followed to develop the book report)

The following table uses Mickelson's (1987) evaluation model to illustrate what types of assessment tools help to examine the process the learner uses to complete the task and the product that evaluates the end outcome.

<b>Tools to assess the process (steps taken to complete the task)</b>	<b>Tools to assess the product (the final outcome)</b>
Anecdotal comments	Reading logs
Interviews	Writing journals or folders
Conferences	Notebooks
Focused observations	Learner audiotapes
Checklists: skills, strategies, process being used and self-assessment to describe the process they think they use	Learner self-assessment
Informal tests: cloze, predictive tests "how to" tests	Demonstrations
Dynamic assessment (assess, assist and reassess)	Formal assessments such as norm referenced and standardized tests

Source for above chart see endnote<sup>34</sup>

## **I**mpact of learning disabilities on literacy skills

### **Assessing oral communication (speaking and listening)**

Auditory and organizational type disabilities are often expressed when assessing an individual's oral communication. Interviewing should help elicit specific problems such as vocabulary and organizational difficulties. Learners may have difficulty discriminating sounds, retrieving information (names), repeating words that have a number of syllables and they may have difficulty with organizing their thoughts and expressing their ideas. Practitioners should ask learners if they recognize these struggles and, if so, if they have any strategies they use when they run into such problems.

## Oral communication struggles to assess

Learners may:

- Add, substitute, or rearrange sounds in words, as in *phemomenon* for *phenomenon* or *Pacific* for *specific*
- Have difficulty pronouncing multisyllabic words, such as statistics or anonymity
- Exhibit articulations problems, use a similar-sounding word, like *generic* instead of *genetic*
- Have difficulty speaking in sentences
- Have difficulty conveying ideas and expressing ideas coherently, as if the words needed are on the tip of the tongue but won't come out (i.e. using unspecific vocabulary, such as "thing" or "stuff" to replace words that cannot be remembered)
- Have limited vocabulary - they use the same words over and over in giving information and explaining ideas and use mostly simple sentence construction
- Tend to overuse *and* to connect thoughts
- Have difficulty maintaining a topic and may interject irrelevant information into a story; they may start out discussing one thing and then goes off in another direction without making the connection
- Omit or use grammar incorrectly, such as tense, number, and possession
- Confuse the meaning of words that sound the same
- Have difficulty listening to the information in a room with other activity
- Struggle to remember information that is given – they will ask you to repeat it several times (i.e. telephone number, address, or the spelling of a person's name)
- Confuse a message or instructions in a complex sentence (i.e. Get your credit card after you pump the gas – they may get the card first).<sup>35</sup>

Practitioners need to be alert to these kinds of errors in learners' oral communication because such challenges will be exhibited in written language, particularly spelling.

However, before drawing any conclusions, practitioners need to monitor their observations of the oral communication throughout the assessment process to identify common areas of difficulty and consistent patterns of errors.

## **Assessing expressive writing**

The steps learners go through before they write such as the planning and organizing of ideas should be assessed, along with the actual product. Practitioners should watch for any obstacles that learners may face when trying to get things down on paper: how the learners attempt to spell things they don't know, do they read what they wrote, do they talk about or share their work, what changes or editing do they do? Most adults with learning disabilities are reluctant to proof read. They often do not see the errors and if they do, they don't correct them consistently.

One way to assess the process that learners go through is by using the POWER model– **p**lan, **o**rganize, **w**rite, **e**dit and **r**evise. This involves asking learners questions on how they go through each of the five steps. Learners' self-assessment of writing is helpful because it helps them observe and reflect on their own approach, drawing attention to steps they may have overlooked, and helps them internalize a strategy and mentally rehearse the strategy steps. This process can help learners take ownership of their writing and begin to internalize strategies. (See Appendix B for more details on the POWER model.)

Many adults with learning disabilities that impact their reading also have difficulty with writing, since both areas are language-based (receptive and expressive). Difficulties with writing affect learners' achievements in virtually every content area.

### **The product can be evaluated on five factors:**

- Fluency
- Content
- Conventions (phonetics, spelling, morphology)
- Syntax
- Vocabulary<sup>36</sup>

**Definition of Terms**

- Phonetics: the ability to understand sounds and blending of sounds
- Morphology: the stringing together of sounds to make meaningful units of language i.e. prefixes, suffixes, word endings that describe numbers (dog versus dogs) and tense
- Syntax: the rules used to form a sentence ranging from simple to complex

**Fluency**

Can learners read their own writing fluently or do they have trouble due to a number of syntax and morphology errors?

**Content** (structure, cohesion)

Learners' writings may reveal poor organization and lack a clear purpose for writing. For example, they may not communicate a clear message, they may express thoughts that don't contribute to the main idea and omit critical parts or put information in the wrong place. Overall the writing is disorganized.

**Conventions** (readability: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar and legible handwriting)

Both visual and auditory disabilities can impact the conventions in learners' expressive writing. Practitioners need to review a number of writing samples to help reveal consistent patterns in convention errors. Quite often learners may struggle with rewriting and editing because they may not see their errors.

**Writing sample difficulties:**

- Writes letters or numbers backwards or upside down (reverse of *b* and *d*, *p* for *q*, *u* for *n*, *m* for *w*)
- Uses a mix of writing and printing
- Exhibits poor handwriting; letter formation is inconsistent and letters are poorly formed
- Uses incorrect homonyms
- Uses a mix of capital and small letters or omits letters (SunDay, MoNey)
- Uses a fair amount of cross outs and write overs to correct errors
- Punctuation errors are common<sup>37</sup>

**Spelling errors can be classified into two general categories:**

- **Phonetic or auditory errors**
  - Omission of letters or syllables
  - Substitution of letters that sound alike (b and p)
  - Improper sequencing of letters within a word (fram for farm)
  - Fusing of words (toget)<sup>38</sup>
  
- **Visual errors**
  - Substitution of letters that look alike (b for d)
  - Strange spelling of common sight words (nite for night)
  - Letter sequence is phonetically correct but graphically wrong (kitchn for kitchen)<sup>39</sup>

Practitioners will want to determine if errors result from the omission of a letter or syllable, an insertion of a letter or syllable, or a phonetic substitution.<sup>40</sup>

**Spelling struggles**

- Spells words differently in the same document
- Demonstrates a weak visual memory for spelling
- Spells phonetically only and cannot remember spelling patterns, e.g. Munday, Toosday, Winsday, Thirsday
- Reverses letters in spelling, e.g. Friday becomes Firday, girl becomes gril
- Exhibits errors that vary from not even resembling the sounds of the words to smaller errors in everyday words
- Omits endings
- Uses logical phonetics to spell words – i.e. meat but spells met
- Adds parts to words, sounds are missing and/or scrambled

**From a written sample, practitioners can ask learners to read the written work to observe the following:**

- Do they read the passage exactly as written?
- Do they correct their spelling errors?
- Do they pronounce words the way they have spelled them?



- Are the errors at the beginning, middle or end of the words?
- Do they omit, add or substitute words or letters when reading their own writing?

Observing how they read their own work helps to analyze the spelling errors. Make note of the words that are misspelled. Have the learner make a list of the misspelled words and together look at the challenges.

**Syntax:**

This refers to the rules used to form sentences (complexity of the sentence and variation from subject, verb and subject, verb, object to more complex). Syntax alone may result in a sentence being grammatically correct but not having meaning. For example: I saw the car flying over the factory. The relationship between form (syntax) and content (semantics) is important because both word order and meaning are essential to effective communication.

**Difficulties forming sentences:**

- Inconsistent memory for sentence mechanics
- Problems understanding and using grammar in sentences
- Difficulty with sentence structure (e.g. incomplete sentences, run-ons, poor use of grammar, and missing inflectional endings such as “ed”)

Adults with learning disabilities often experience difficulties despite adequate conversational abilities. Several researchers (Johnson, 1987, 1993, and Gregg, 1992) found that difficulties in syntax, such as subject/verb agreement, active/passive voice, and embedded clauses were responsible for adults' expressive writing struggles.<sup>41</sup>

**Vocabulary:**

Learners may have strong verbal vocabularies, but limited writing due to poor spelling; or if they have visual perceptual disability their vocabulary may be limited in all forms of language. Learners, who have difficulties with part-whole relationships may not see the parts of the word or may confuse synonyms. They may produce short sentences and text with limited vocabulary. Both the range (use of a variety of words that mean the same thing or similar meaning) and level (concrete versus abstract) of vocabulary should be explored.

**Vocabulary struggles to assess for:**

- Difficulty with spatial words (*beneath, next to, left/right*)
- Difficulty with relational words, such as prepositions (*with, except*)
- Improper use of conjunctions (*since, if, but, or, because, although*)
- Difficulty with interrogative pronouns (*who, what, where, when, why*)
- Inability to solve verbal problems such as analogies
- Limited understanding of synonyms, antonyms, and function words<sup>42</sup>

**Assessing reading**

Practitioners need to understand if a visual or auditory learning disability is interfering with adults' learning. Practitioners should look at learners' abilities to decode or recognize words (i.e. letter/sound omissions, insertions, substitutions, reversals) and comprehension (i.e. recalling or discerning basic facts, main ideas, sequences, or themes). Through the assessment, practitioners need to determine how learners comprehend and recognize words both by sight and by hearing. When learners read, the types of cueing system they use should be observed, i.e. anticipate the next word, semantic (understand the meaning), and decode words.<sup>43</sup> Often adults with learning disabilities struggle with the process of reading, and minimal attempts if any are made to use any type of cueing system. Often they may focus more on attempting to read each word and lose the meaning of the sentence and complete passage. Before any attempts are made to begin developing different reading strategies, first discuss with the learner their understanding of the reading process.

For beginner readers, practitioners should assess phonological awareness, letter identification, listening comprehension and accuracy of decoding single words. Practitioners may want to look at the more advanced readers' speed and fluency of reading, and their use of comprehension strategies.<sup>44</sup> Overall practitioners need to look at learners' reading fluency, oral and silent listening and reading comprehension.

Through observation and dialogue with learners, practitioners need to determine whether learners can comprehend better when they read or listen to a passage. In addition, an attempt should be made through observation and discussion to gain an understanding of whether learners use any form of comprehension strategies. Practitioners could ask learners about their use of strategies during reading (i.e. when comprehension fails, do they make use of strategies such as rereading?).

**When assessing learners' comprehension (oral, silent or listening), look for their ability to:**

- Understand the main idea
- Make inferences and build on prior knowledge
- Recall or find factual information
- Organize events in sequential order

**Reading struggles to assess:**

- Mispronouncing, repeating, skipping, substituting and transposing the letters in words
- Unable to associate sounds with letters (consonant, vowel and vowel with "r" combinations)
- Unable to sound out words in units – endings or beginnings, plurals, silent letter rules, words with several syllables, nonsense words
- Cannot hear the sounds in the words and the number of syllables
- Difficulty with reading common words including function words: a, in, the, is
- Unable to recognize a word from a list of similar words both by visual and by auditory means
- Difficulty understanding what is read to them independent from their reading skills<sup>45</sup>

**Fluency:**

Examine the accuracy and rate of reading, the time it takes learners to read the text out loud (the number of minutes divided by the number of words read correctly will give the percentage of words read correctly). The major elements in fluent reading are accuracy, effective decoding and reading text with rhythm and appropriate expression.

**Fluency struggles to assess:**

- Appearing to re-read or reading very slowly, when reading silently - this can be attributed to poor visual processing
- Reads with an overdependence on guessing and, as such, comprehension is compromised, evidenced in errors in answering questions related to the text
- Reading style is halting and jerky
- Continuously whispers to self while writing<sup>46</sup>

**Assessing mathematics**

Math learning disabilities formally known as Dyscalculia often do not occur in isolation. Adults may also experience difficulties with language processing problems, visual spatial confusion, and memory and sequence difficulties. Learning disabilities affect math in two general areas: calculation and problem-solving. These two areas affect learners' abilities to handle daily math functions such as counting money to make change, writing numbers on cheques, reading information from a chart or graph and problem-solving (i.e. determining how much paint to buy to cover a wall). Adults with learning disabilities most often show extremes in math. They may understand some areas but really struggle with others even after a review is given.

When assessing math skills, practitioners should move from the familiar (day-to-day transactions) to the more complex (use of math functions +, -, x, etc.). Start with tasks that use mental calculation and move to tasks that may require figuring out with a pencil and paper (but always make the paper and pencil available). Observe when learners move from mental calculations to paper and note the organization of the calculations on the paper. Practitioners should observe the process and any consistency of errors.

Next, move from single-digit calculations to double-digits and then to double-digit calculations where carrying is involved. Practitioners should examine the level and type of errors made by the learners and note when the math performance breaks down. Once the above analysis has been completed, move on to more complex calculations, such as percentages, decimals and fractions.<sup>47</sup>

A one-to-one interview is the best format for noting details. Practitioners should focus both on the process and the product. How does the adult attempt the math and what are the results? Are there consistent errors in certain areas of their math? Working as a team, practitioners and learners should look at what works and what doesn't.

An open dialogue with learners will help them to understand how they derived the answer and what areas they struggle with. Rephrase math problems orally to see if learners can answer them. Have learners complete a math problem and ask them to explain the steps they took. When looking at the process, practitioners need to determine if learners use strategies or rely on memory – do they finger count? Also look at learners' abilities to solve equations and their reasoning skills (how they access the answers).

Reading difficulties may occur due to problems with visual perception. Learners may have difficulty seeing the numbers and operations as distinct units. Therefore they may be unable to recognize numbers, words, or pictures and differentiate objects such as variables on a graph. Learners may also have difficulties perceiving or integrating relationships between the whole and parts of the object.<sup>48</sup>

**Math struggles to assess:**

- Recognition and identification of numbers, and mathematical signs as expressed in words: (read aloud 10, 25, + = etc)
- Understanding of math vocabulary (i.e. for the sign +: can they supply at least, 'add', 'more' and 'plus')
- Understanding of the rules and procedures to solve a problem
- Comprehension of word problems and ability to do the mathematical calculations if taken out of the word problem format
- Memory for rules and procedures (multiplication tables, and order for procedure)
- Written and oral output of answers
- Calculation speed - no improvement shown even after review and practice
- Inconsistent mastery of mathematical skills (addition/subtraction, multiplication/division) due to problems with long-term memory

- Careless mistakes in written work, such as: reversal of numbers; mixing up lines of the work or copying information incorrectly; confusing similar numbers or transposing numbers e.g., 18 for 81, 21 for 12, even when the concept is understood
- Trouble following sequential procedures and directions with multiple steps
- Recall from memory is slow or not available. Learners may count on their fingers or they may have difficulty recalling multiplication table facts, other than  $2x$ ,  $5x$ , and  $10x$ . If they are asked to answer  $7x2$  they may start at  $2x2$  and count up to  $7x2$
- Difficulty counting backwards and counting from a different starting point: i.e. counting backwards from 30 by 2 or 3's, or what number is 5 places from 18, or finding it difficult to count by 10's starting at 14
- Difficulty understanding place value, especially when there is 0 in the number, i.e. 20,040. As well, they may take longer understanding the patterns of multiplying by 10, 100, 1000, etc.
- Difficulty copying numbers and working with numbers in columns – they may show a preference for doing several small sums rather than adding up the whole column – they may lose track of the addition and keep re-starting
- Trouble with left, right orientation – they will continually mix them up without realizing it or say go left when they mean go right<sup>49</sup>

## Helpful tips to use when assessing literacy skills

- Practitioners should give several spelling dictations to find consistency of patterns to the errors. They need to determine if the errors are a result of processing problems or a lack of knowledge of spelling rules.<sup>50</sup>
- Practitioners may want to use: 1) informal auditory discrimination tests to determine if learners hear likenesses and differences in sounds; or 2) visual discrimination tests to determine if learners see likenesses and differences in symbols, words and letters.
- Practitioners can provide a list of synonyms or selected words to help assess learners' vocabularies. Word comprehension and usage

are difficult for adults with learning disabilities. Learners' vocabularies may be limited because they have not read widely.<sup>51</sup>

- Practitioners should compare learners' reading comprehension by giving them opportunities to read orally, silently and to listen to a reading passage. If differences occur between their levels of reading comprehension, then most likely a learning disability is present.

## **Recognizing memory challenges**

All information first enters the brain through at least one of our senses, and then goes on to the cognitive processing areas for understanding and storage. This is where the processing breakdown can affect memory. Most memory disabilities affect short-term memory only; learners with these disabilities may need more repetitions than usual to retain information. Assessment of memory should be done over a period of time and under different circumstances, in order to understand the learners' difficulties.

### **Memory struggles to assess:**

- Poor recall of information on comprehension questions
- Difficulty recalling what is read even when they reading is fluent
- Difficulty following multiple directions
- Difficulty remembering what is heard
- Difficulty remembering sequences in a task
- Knowing words one day but not the next
- Difficulty recalling events or retrieving words
- Poor recall of visual patterns
- Difficulty memorizing information, (i.e. phone numbers, days of the week, or months of the year)<sup>52</sup>

## **Recognizing visual-spatial challenges**

This form of learning disability is often referred to as a non-verbal disability. Spatial and coordination problems make printing and writing, learning math, telling time, reading and and keeping one's place on the page difficult. More

complex verbal language is based on nonverbal processes - logical ordering and sequencing (both skills necessary for writing essays.) This can cause problems in subject areas other than math. For example, learners often experience difficulties with their sense of time, arranging written material on a page, making change, and sewing and typing, all of which demand good spatial awareness.<sup>53</sup>

**Challenges to watch for:**

- Difficulty focusing on a page
- Skipping lines when reading
- Using finger to follow along when reading
- Difficulty telling time and/or a lack of sense of time (knowing how long it will take to complete a task or arrive at a destination)
- Holding material close
- Poor letter formation, letter spacing and word spacing problems with sense of direction, estimation of size, shape, and distance
- Problems reading facial expressions, gestures, social cues, and tones of voice, which can lead to difficulties with social interactions<sup>54</sup>

## **C**ase Studies to illustrate assessment application

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 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 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 is the “company’s” fault that he is in this situation.

Tom came to the learning centre to get high school upgrading. After 3 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.

### **Information gathered through intake process**

#### **Academic:**

- 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.
- Tom’s teachers always said he kept messy notes and he often was 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.”
- He hated doing written reports and essays and often would just copy material from a book.
- Tom preferred to do multiple choice tests or oral reports.
- Tom didn’t miss any grades during elementary school, but he found Grade 9 really difficult – 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 the information.
- Tom left school once he was 16 years of age, with 7 credits (2 Mathematics, 1 Art, 2 Physical Education, 1 History and 2 Technology) in which he indicated he received 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 and isn’t taking any medication. He has been wearing glasses since age 14 and gets regular checkups.

**Family background:**

Tom is an only child and 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. Tom knows she got her Grade 12 diploma and worked as a secretary prior to having him.

**Work 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. While Tom worked at the beer factory, he was on the line in different areas including shipping. While he was unemployed, Tom tried a telemarketing job because he was told he could make good bucks. Tom wasn’t afraid of talking on the phone, but he didn’t stay because his employers said that 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 forgot the question that he was asked.
- Tom was not shy while 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 who came into the agency, even though the door to the office was closed – he would watch people go by and not hear what was being said to him.

**Results of self-assessment:**

- Tom found he got bored 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 - Tom would read the newspaper and would scan the headlines and brief articles.
- Tom rated his spelling and hand writing as poor.
- Tom admitted that his actual witting wasn’t great but felt 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 prefers to read printed directions, especially if they are detailed rather than hearing them orally and finds it difficult to concentrate if there is too much information given to him.
- Tom had no problem with handling money, shopping, telling time and overall basic life management.
- Tom indicated an interest in using the computer, and enjoyed sports.
- He stated his goal was to get his Grade 12 diploma so that he could get another factory job.

**General conclusions based on information gathered during the screening process:**

- Tom does not appear to have an intellectual inability. He is able to express himself. He has been able to maintain employment and obtained some high school credits with average marks. Tom most likely has been taught basic skills through his elementary school experience.
- An auditory processing disability and short term memory problems may be present based on the following:
  - His tendency to interrupt without realizing
  - His difficulty verbalizing some words
  - He forgets the initial question when he provides a detailed explanation
  - He reports poor spelling
  - He doesn't like to read material that contains a lot of information
  - His 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 them to get around his weaknesses, although unconsciously. He can be easily distracted and has difficulty staying focused. Tom appears to be quite upfront about what he wants.

Further informal assessment would be needed to understand the potential 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.

**Questions for practitioners to consider:**

What areas would you assess with Tom? What kinds of assessment tools would you access and why?

## **Assessment Tools Used:**

- Writing sample: Tom was asked to write about his work experience in the beer factory.
- Reading comprehension: Tom read passages orally and silently, and listened to passages. He was asked comprehension questions after each passage.
- Auditory and visual processing abilities were tested by having Tom point out the word that was said from a group of words that sounded and looked very similar (i.e. big, bed, bin). Tom did this while hearing the word with and without seeing the list of words.
- Math skills were tested as Tom was offered a number of problems to solve independently. He was asked to verbalize how he worked out the problem. Tom did some simulation money exchange problems and he read numbers.

## **Assessment results**

### **Expressive writing:**

- Tom had frequent and inconsistent spelling errors.
- He tended to add or miss parts of multi-syllabic words.
- Tom had spelling problems with suffixes and prefixes.
- Tom used poor grammar, such as mixed verbal tenses and used fragmented and run on sentences.
- He used limited vocabulary when writing, most likely due to poor spelling because his verbal vocabulary is strong.
- He had difficulty organizing his thoughts in writing. He just put down the thoughts as they occurred.
- Tom's handwriting was poor – his letters were hard to distinguish.
- Tom was unable to see most of the errors in his writing – but could spot a few spelling errors when he really struggled with the words.
- He had difficulty hearing the letters when he asked for the correct spelling of a word - the letters had to be stated very slowly in order for him to write the word.

**Reading and comprehension:**

- Tom struggled with oral reading when confronted with new words or multi-syllabic words. He had poor word attack problem skills (could not sound out words and missed parts of words).
- While reading orally, he was faced with a number of words he was unable to pronounce and his comprehension declined, as compared to when he was able to read silently.
- Tom's comprehension was much stronger when he was given time to silently read the passage versus when he heard the passage orally.
- He was able to find factual answers, predict and discuss inferences from the passage and he enjoyed making conclusions and judgments.
- His verbal expression of his understanding of the passage was stronger than his written expression.
- Tom was able to follow multi-step instructions when he read them, versus when he heard them orally.

**Oral communication:**

- Tom often interrupted before the speaker was able to finish his/her comments.
- He often picked up on one point and seemed anxious to express himself by blurting out his response, even though it wasn't the key point in the discussion.
- He often asked the practitioner to repeat what they said.
- His verbal vocabulary appeared stronger than his written vocabulary, however when he was asked to read some of his words that were misspelled, he did not notice that he mispronounced them as well (i.e. valentime, library).

**Auditory versus visual:**

- Tom's score was much higher when he was asked to circle the word that was different versus having to hear the different word.

**Math skills:**

- Overall, Tom's math skills appeared to be fairly strong.
- He tended to rush through and made careless mistakes.
- He did not see his mistakes and often it was a result of recording the numbers incorrectly (i.e. 256 he would write 265).
- His poor writing also created errors since he was unable to read his work and had difficulty keeping the column of numbers straight – this was problematic when he had to do 3 digit calculations (+, -).
- When making change he found it difficult, without the use of scrap paper, to figure out the answer.
- Although he did struggle with fractions, once he was reminded of the rules he improved.
- Tom appeared to understand calculations but once they were combined in a word problem, he could not figure out what calculation to use and which one to do first.
- Tom had difficulty verbalizing large numbers (i.e. 156,342 – he got his thousands and hundreds mixed up).

**Overall attitude and motivation:**

Tom tends to minimize the importance of spelling and writing, given that he really hasn't had to use it a lot in his job. His verbal skills have compensated for these areas. He feels that teachers are picky and don't know what you really need to survive. He is motivated to get his Grade 12 diploma but tends to want immediate action. He appears to know when he has a problem but hasn't ever thought of why and how he can fix it.

**Questions for practitioners to consider:**

Based on the initial findings, what areas would you focus on more in-depth, to gain a better understanding of Tom's struggles and why? What struggle areas do you think are impacted by his potential processing challenges and what areas are just results of a lack of exposure to skills? How would you approach Tom about the potential auditory and possible organizational learning disabilities?

## **Case Study B – Samantha**

### **Observations and information gained from 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 and attending Grade 1.
- 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 8 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 had worked as a cashier in a grocery store and currently is working at a major department store. Although her mother has average reading abilities, Samantha knows that her mother avoids reading when possible.
- Samantha has not seen her father since her parents' divorce and believes he had 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 has 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.

**Initial interpretation and additional information to ask**

- 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, ruling out any intellectual inability and her medical history reveals no interfering factors to her learning. Samantha's key strength is her determination and realistic understanding of herself. She has a good support system and is clear about her goal.
- Samantha and the practitioner went through a self-assessment tool orally to gain insight into Samantha's understanding of her strengths and weaknesses. Samantha indicated that her difficulties were related to her reading. This interfered with her understanding of bills and any forms or government documents she has to deal with. She prefers to be given oral directions. Samantha felt she was fairly organized and had a pretty good attention span. She would like to read more, especially since her son is focusing on this in school. Samantha stated that she is starting to find some of his homework hard to understand. She enjoys being with people, although she prefers to be with children. She finds them less intimidating.
- After some discussion, Samantha shared how she has dealt with her reading challenges. The practitioner had her think about how she compensated for them while raising her son. Samantha said that when she reads to her son she usually will read the story first to herself and practice or she will buy books that she is familiar with from her childhood. Now that her son can read, Samantha pretends

that it is his homework to look up the unknown word in his picture dictionary, instead of admitting that she can't read it. Overall, Samantha relies heavily on her verbal skills and her ability to remember things. When Samantha or her son require medical attention, she has the nurse or pharmacist explain the medicine or any procedure, instead of personally having to read the brochure or prescription information.

- When Samantha was asked how she felt about the CAAT and the math inventory skills tests, what areas she struggled with and what areas she found okay, she indicated that she wasn't surprised about the results. Samantha found the reading passages very difficult and ran out of time to complete the reading section. She has always found math to be difficult, especially word problems. Samantha was always able to rely on her memory to do multiplication, adding and subtracting. She was pleasantly surprised about her vocabulary. Samantha admitted that when she sees a word in isolation, instead of seeing it combined in a sentence, she is able to read it better.

### **Questions for practitioners to consider:**

What areas require further assessment and what tools would you use? At this point, do you see any potential learning disabilities? If yes, provide a rationale.

### **Further assessment**

#### **Need to assess her reading further to understand her difficulties**

- Her reading was slow and she struggled with decoding the words, which interfered with her comprehension.
- She often missed words and left off endings.
- Samantha often lost her place when reading the passage.
- She would read some of the syllables backwards (*saw* for *was*).
- Her comprehension was excellent when the passage was read to her orally along with the questions, as compared to her oral and silent reading of the passage.
- When given sight words she was able to read them, but when nonsense words were mixed in she struggled with breaking the

units down in the word to sound it out. She most likely scored higher on her vocabulary due to her good memory skills and ongoing exposure to reading materials.

- Samantha struggled with cloze paragraphs.

### **Expressive writing and spelling**

- Samantha was asked to write why she was interested in getting her ECE certification. She did take time to think about what she wanted to say.
- Although her grammar and spelling were weak, there were some signs of process (she used an opening and concluding sentence).
- Some common errors found in the written passage were:
  - Samantha omitted letters and words and sometimes substituted vowels and consonants.
  - She would leave out silent letters (i.e. instead of “ous” endings, she would write “us”).
  - If she wasn’t able to recall a word from her memory she relied only on her phonetics for spelling (wrote payn for pain and laf for laugh).
  - She left out punctuation and often didn’t capitalize her sentences.
  - Her writing included a number of run on sentences.
  - She left little space between her words.
  - There were letter reversals and she only caught them when she read over her work, not when she looked over her work (she said this weakness has been drilled into her head so she is very aware of it).

### **Math skills:**

- Samantha had difficulty with multi-step calculations.
- She found it very difficult to find information on a graph or a chart.
- She struggled with operations when they involved more than 2 digits that required columns (long division and multiplication).
- Samantha was able to make change and deal with simple math involving single digits.
- She was able to recite her multiplication tables based on her strong memory skills.

**Overall conclusions:**

Samantha appears to have some visual learning disabilities that affect her reading, writing, spelling and math. Her strong verbal skills and good memory have helped her cope with her weaknesses and have allowed her to develop good comprehension skills when information is given to her orally.

**Case study C – Frank****Information gathered during initial meeting:**

- 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****Academic background:**

- Frank obtained his Grade 9 credits, but left school to seek work.
- Frank found it difficult to pay attention in school and often got into trouble.
- Frank did enjoy math and spelling, but disliked English, and History.
- He remembers always handing in his assignments late or avoiding them completely by skipping school, as he got older.
- Frank struggled in the adult learning program – he found it hard to complete his writing and reading homework and assignments. Frank also indicated that he found it difficult 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 he 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 small group programming, 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 2 adult sons who are living independently. His wife is a school secretary and is the “organizer”, as he states it. Frank says that his wife deals with most of the daily planning and household organizing - his role is to keep the house in good repair.

**Self-assessment**

Frank indicated that he has difficulty sometimes with his reading and writing. He 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 other distractions are around. He can't sit still for long and indicated that he doesn't enjoy doing tasks that require a lot of attention to detail, such as paying the bills and banking. Frank says he is good at building and repairing things when he works on one thing at a time.

**General observations from the interview:**

- Frank has a good vocabulary and appears to understand what is spoken to him.
- He 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.
- He was quite fidgety and he was given 4 breaks during the 1.5 hour interview.

- He had no problem reading the self-assessment tool and completed it independently.
- His writing was sloppy when he added information on the self-assessment form and his sentences, although brief, were coherent.

**Overall conclusions**

- Although no informal assessment has been completed, the CAAT results indicate that Frank is not struggling with his basic communication and math skills. However, he is struggling with completing his homework and assignments based on the report from the credit program.
- 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.

**Questions for practitioners to consider:**

What areas would you assess with Frank? What kinds of assessment tools would you access and why?

**Assessment Areas**

Frank needs to focus on the process and not just the product. How does he go about completing a task?

**Writing Sample:**

Frank was asked to prepare 3 to 4 paragraphs on why he wants to start his own business and what skills he has to offer. The topic was written on the top of the paper that was given to him. After minutes he had nothing completed and was quite frustrated. He had no idea where to begin. As a result, dynamic assessment technique was used. Frank was given the steps for composing a small report, one step at a time. He was able to complete the task only when each step was given to him. Most of the errors found in his writing were minor and any spelling errors were a result of a lack of understanding of basic spelling rules.

During this process it was observed that Frank was easily distracted and needed several breaks before he could move onto the next step.

**Reading:**

- Overall Frank's decoding and comprehension was good with short passages.
- As the length of the passage was increased, his attention span, decoding skills and comprehension deteriorated even though the reading level was the same as the short passages.

**Questions for practitioners to consider:**

Based on the assessment results, what conclusions can you make about Frank's challenge areas?

**Overall conclusions:**

Frank appears to have organizational learning disabilities and a short attention span. He struggles with how and where to begin with any writing assignments. His short attention span interferes with his reading and ability to comprehend meaning when the text is detailed. Further observation of Frank's attention span would be valuable to develop appropriate strategies. Some suggested ways to assess this area further are by self-monitoring, self-assessment, practitioner observations, and learner participation. All of these approaches emphasize the importance of the learner/practitioner relationship.

## **I**nformal assessment models

Deciding what assessment tools and techniques to use is impacted by a number of factors: practitioners' knowledge and experience with learning disabilities; existing assessment tools utilized; program resources - both financial and human; and last but not least, the needs of the learners. In recognition and support of the "common assessment" strategy, the goal of this module is not to promote one method or assessment tool, but to provide practitioners with a solid understanding of the assessment process and how to assess learners' strengths and struggles related to their suspected learning disability. The following informal assessment models are included, not to endorse them but to inform practitioners of various options that are available. The following models were developed for literacy practitioners and promote a learner-centred approach. (For more information on other types of formal and informal assessment tools, go to Appendix C.)

### **Holistic Education Literacy Process (HELP) model**

A whole language approach is used to get a complete picture of the skills and processes that adults use. It takes a multidimensional approach by using speaking, listening, reading and writing tasks. The model involves learners' input. This model was developed by Sandra Crux to meet the needs of literacy programs where formal assessment is not feasible or practical.

#### **Each of the steps in HELP model include:**

- A description of the assessment process
- The purpose for each step in the model – which explains why this area is being assessed
- A list of potential assessment results that could indicate learning disability problems
- Examples of possible formal tests that could be used in conjunction with the assessment process



**The learner completes the following 8 steps in the HELP assessment process:**

Step 1: Ask the learner to read a passage aloud into a tape recorder (learner selects a passage of interest that he/she has not seen before).

Step 2: Have the learner listen to his/her oral reading passage with earphones (so he/she doesn't feel imitated if he/she is uncomfortable with his/her oral reading).

Step 3: Ask the learner to listen again, but this time to take notes about the passage.

Step 4: Have the learner highlight the main points from his/her notes.

Step 5: Ask the learner to develop the notes by using an organizing structure (pull together information that belongs under each main point).

Step 6: Ask the learner to write a short summary based on the information he/she has gathered.

Step 7: Have the learner review and revise the short summary.

Step 8: Through an oral discussion with the learner, have him/her reflect on the summary he/she wrote and discuss conclusions.

The skills and strategies needed to do each of the steps are highlighted under the categories of thinking, oral communication, reading and written language. The HELP assessment model cannot formally diagnose a learning disability, but it can help discover areas of difficulty for the learner so that appropriate strategies can be targeted. This model can be simplified to reflect the reading level of the learner.

To access a copy of *Compensations for Learning Disabilities* by Sandra C. Crux go to <http://www.wallbooks.com/source/crux.htm>. It can be purchased for \$16.95. Orders can be placed by fax or mail.

## **Destination Literacy – Informal assessment model**

The informal assessment is a series of activities that practitioners can use with learners to determine learner strengths and struggles. The results give a better understanding of the learners, help the practitioners to determine the possibility of a learning disability and help to develop an effective program. The assessment will help to indicate strengths/areas of need in learners' processing skills: attention, language/auditory, memory and visual-spatial abilities.

Areas of assessment include: reading, written expression, spelling and mathematics. An attention/self-esteem observation checklist is included to help guide the practitioner's observations while conducting the informal assessment.

### **At the end of each task section there are two checklists:**

- A summary of learner responses that can be used to record answers
- A summary of observations that can be completed after the tasks in each section are finished

The manual also provides comprehensive teaching skill strategies information based on the assessment results. *Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities* (1999) is available in French and English and can be purchased for \$50 directly by telephoning the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada at : 613-238-5721, [www.ldac-taac.ca](http://www.ldac-taac.ca) or Grass Roots Press at 1-888-303-3213, [www.literacyservices.com](http://www.literacyservices.com)

## **E**ffective assessment practices

The following practices should be used to encourage a learner-centered and self-directed environment. These practices are based on the cognitive learning theory. This learning theory views learning as an active mental process of acquiring, remembering, and using knowledge. Learning is evidenced by a change in knowledge, which makes a change in behaviour possible.

- Encourage divergent thinking and multiple correct responses
- Encourage various ways of self-expression
- Engage learners in problem solving and critical thinking
- Provide choices in tasks
- Provide choices in how to show mastery
- Provide opportunities to reflect, revise, and rethink
- Include concrete experiences
- Engage learners in defining goals
- Provide a range of models for learners
- Provide learners with opportunities for self-evaluation and peer review, with input on criteria
- Provide real world opportunities<sup>55</sup>

## **C**riteria to consider when selecting assessment

### **tools**

Use the following criteria when determining what type of assessment tool(s) to select. Many of the tools that practitioners use may not meet all of the criteria, therefore practitioners will need to think about what criteria are most important based on learners' needs, personal assessment skills and the programs' resources.

- Does the assessment tool answer the questions you are asking? For example, if you were asking how does a learner's achievement in

his/her comprehension compare with others of the same age – you would use a norm referenced test. If you want to know what writing errors a learner is struggling with you may choose to use a work sample analysis.

- If you are planning to use a formal assessment tool, you will want check that the norm is appropriate for your learner. If the norm that the results are measured against is related to a group of elementary primary level students and you are working with adults, then you need to assess the impact this would have on the results.
- Is the tool economical in terms of money and/or time? How long will it take practitioners to learn how to use the tool? How much time will it take for learners to complete the assessment? How much time is required to interpret the results?
- The time needed for the learner to engage in the process should be reasonable. If a time is not provided then common sense prevails. Two factors to examine when deciding a suitable length of time are the learners the program serves and the staff availability.
- The assessment material should be consistent with what is currently known about learning disabilities. Theories and definitions of learning disabilities have changed over time, so you need to ensure the basis for the screening tool is reflective of the most recent research. Copyright dates are not the best guide because the tool may have been based on an earlier theory about learning disabilities, but may have been revised every few years.
- Research supports the links between screening procedures and instructional materials. If there are recommendations for learning strategies based on the results of the screening, then you need to feel confident that they reflect the predicted learning disabilities. “The validity information should show the screening test results can accurately predict which intervention, material, or procedure is better. Without that information, treat the recommendations with extreme caution.”<sup>56</sup>

## Summary of Key Points

- The assessment process, regardless of the tools used, **is not designed to diagnose an adult with learning disabilities but to help them understand the impact that the potential learning disability may have on their learning.** The assessment is a process to determine adult learners' strengths and struggles to help practitioners' to develop teaching strategies and accommodations and help learners to understand what is required to reach their goal.
- Adults with learning disabilities state that the key to their success was their decision to take ownership of their disability and fully understand the impact it had on their learning and day-to-day functions. This highlights the importance of the learner being an active partner in the assessment process. The practitioners' role is to help facilitate the assessment process by providing guidance to the process.
- The assessment process is constant and flowing. Learners and practitioners need to note progress and struggles and gather more information as needed. This helps learners to understand themselves, reduces frustration, builds self-esteem, and facilitates the building of independence and ownership of their ongoing and future learning and coping strategies.
- There should be a focus on understanding the impact of the processing breakdown on academic, social and organizational skills. The processing breakdown can impact how one stores and retrieves information and/or how they organize the information that is taken in.
- Of the four kinds of informal assessment techniques (checklists, self-assessment, task demonstrations and observations), **observations and task demonstrations** were two of the best ways to determine learners' strengths and weaknesses.
- Assessment, whether it is initial or ongoing, should look at both the:
  - **Process** - how learners input and output the information
  - **Product** - how the information provided is organized and presented

## Appendix A

### Websites that support information in Module 2

#### **Some Thoughts on Learning ABILITIES and Learning Disabilities: Beginning to Explore the Broader Implications of Learning Disabilities in Adults**



<http://novel.nifl.gov/newsletters/nspr96.htm>

##### **Overview**

You will find the fore mentioned articles in the National Institute for Literacy Newsletter. Just scroll down until you find the article title.

#### **Assessing Learning and Evaluating Progress The Grade's Not the Thing** by Anne M. Bauer



[http://www.ldonline.com/ld\\_indepth/assessment/adolescents\\_and\\_inclusion.html](http://www.ldonline.com/ld_indepth/assessment/adolescents_and_inclusion.html)

##### **Overview**

The chapter explores issues related to assessing learning and evaluating progress in inclusive high schools. Although it is geared to a high school setting, it provides a good overview of authentic ways to evaluate learners' progress. The following are just a few of the topics covered in the chapter:

- Recognize issues of fairness in evaluation
- Describe ways to integrate instruction and assessment
- Identify ways to measure student progress and learning
- Identify accommodations and modifications useful in testing situations

**Information-Gathering and Diagnostic-Prescriptive Teaching: The keys to Effective Adult Education.** Sturomski & Associates

[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/adult/information\\_gathering.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/adult/information_gathering.html)

**Overview**

The author in the article recognizes the limited time practitioners have in a classroom setting and provides an alternative method for assessing. Diagnostic-prescriptive teaching involves: following up with additional questions as instruction proceeds; watching how students attempt to learn new information; observing, scrutinizing, and analyzing student efforts and errors; and modifying instruction to better meet the individual student's needs.

**The Uses and Misuses of Processing Tests.** Louise Spear-Swerling, Ph.D.

[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/assessment/swerling\\_assessment.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/assessment/swerling_assessment.html)

**Overview**

The author discusses the pros and cons to using processing tests. Although it is written about elementary students, it gives a good overview of how cognitive processing tests are used and what they measure. The article includes a chart that highlights measures of important reading-related cognitive processes.

**ERIC Clearinghouse for Assessment, Evaluation and Research**

<http://ericae.net/>

**Overview**

The Clearinghouse provides balanced information concerning educational assessment, evaluation and research methodology. The resources encourage the responsible use of educational data. You can access a full text Internet library on assessment related topics.

## Appendix B

### Self-assessment tools and resources



**Learning Profile and Analyzing my Learning: Strengths and Struggles** developed by Janet Johnston.

#### Overview

This is a tool with 142 individual statements that are associated with a specific learning, training or underlying skill. The individual responds to whether a statement is true or not true for them, based on a 5 point Likert scale. The tool is based on the recognition that most adults know themselves best.

The tool could be used for greater self-recognition and reflection, as a means to validate other assessment results or as a beginning point for the strengths and struggles information gathering process.

To access a copy of the self-assessment tool you can contact Janet Johnston at Learning Potentials (905) 684-4994 and her e-mail is [learningpotentials@on.aibn.com](mailto:learningpotentials@on.aibn.com).



**The POWER Model** (learner self-assessment tool to evaluate the writing process in the areas of **p**lanning, **o**rganizing, **w**riting, **e**ditng and **r**eview)

#### Plan

I chose a good topic	Yes	No	
I read about my topic	Yes	No	
I thought about what the readers will want to know	Yes	No	
I wrote down all of my ideas on a "think sheet"	Yes	No	



<b>Organize</b>			
I put similar ideas together	Yes	No	
I chose the best ideas for my composition	Yes	No	
I numbered my ideas in logical order	Yes	No	
<b>Write</b>			
I wrote down my ideas in sentences	Yes	No	
When I needed help I... ____ did the best I could ____ looked in a book ____ asked my partner ____ asked the teacher			
<b>Edit</b>			
I read my first draft to myself	Yes	No	
I marked the parts I like	Yes	No	
I marked the parts I might want to change	Yes	No	
I read my first draft to my partner	Yes	No	
I listened to my partner's suggestions	Yes	No	
<b>Rewrite</b>			
I made changes to my composition	Yes	No	
I edited for correctness	Yes	No	
I wrote the final draft in my best writing	Yes	No	

**Available at**

[http://www.ldonline.org/ld\\_indepth/writing/isaacson\\_assessment.html](http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/writing/isaacson_assessment.html)



**Analyzing My Learning: Strengths & Struggles** at <http://ldlink.coe.utk.edu/screening.html> (Scroll to information checklists for teachers and learners.)

### Overview

This is an 'adapted-for-learner-use' version of the Adult Learning Disability Screening (ALDS) document. Its primary purpose is to build self-understanding and advocacy on the learner's part. There are self-assessment checklists for reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, organization, attention, and general strengths and abilities.



**The Cognitive Processing Inventory (CPI)** at <http://www.ldinfo.com/cpi1.htm#top>

### Overview

The CPI is a non-biased, standardized behaviour rating scale, which can be completed by parents, teachers and students to evaluate information processing characteristics as part of formal or informal learning style and/or learning disability assessment. The CPI provides scores in the processing areas of:

- Auditory Processing
- Visual Processing
- Sequential/Rational Processing
- Conceptual/Holistic Processing
- Processing Speed
- Attention

**CPI for adults to rate themselves (sample only) go to:**

<http://www.ldinfo.com/cpi-aform1.htm#top>

**Uncovering the mysteries of your learning disability – self-advocacy manual** online - Easy to read and clear description of learning disabilities and how they impact on individuals

**Practitioners may choose to refer to chapters one through four**

[http://www.ldinfo.com/self\\_advocacy\\_manual.htm#top](http://www.ldinfo.com/self_advocacy_manual.htm#top)

## Appendix C

### Sources for additional assessment tools

#### The British Dyslexia Association Website



<http://www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk/main/information/index.asp>

and click on Teacher assessment of dyslexia adults.

#### You can access the following information:

Dyslexia Checklists

Dyslexia Screening

Full Assessments

    Cognitive abilities

    Literacy skills

    Further dyslexia characteristics

    Writing skills

    The effects of the difficulties

    Recommendations

**Seeds of Innovation - If I could only read, write and spell.** Tennessee Literacy Resource Center.



<http://slincs.coe.utk.edu/pdf/Read-Write-Spell.pdf>

The first chapter on assessment provides detailed information on specific tools. The tools are illustrated by actual experiences with students in classes. The names have been changed but the people are real.

## Intelligence tests



### **Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale:**

The test provides an overall, composite measure of intelligence, an estimate of verbal comprehension and expression, and an estimate of visual-spatial reasoning. For ages 16 to 89. More information go to the Psychology Corporation at

<http://www.tpc-international.com/resources/title.cfm?id=953>

### **Kaufman Adolescent and Adult Intelligence:**

Ages 11 to 85. For more information go to the American Guidance Services at

<http://www.agsnet.com/index.asp>

**Woodcock Johnson III Tests for Cognitive Ability:** Ages 2 to 90. It provides information on important cognitive processing abilities, which is important in the diagnosis of learning disabilities. For more information go to Riverside Publishing Company at

<http://www.riverpub.com/products/clinical/wj3/home.html>

## Other



### **Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT 3)**

For ages 5 to 75 years. It is a 15-minute numeracy test. There are no word problems, so reading is not an issue. For more information, go to the Dyslexia Institute at [www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk](http://www.dyslexia-inst.org.uk) and click on the resource shop.

### **Woodcock Johnson III Tests of Achievement**

For ages 2 to 90. It provides multiple measures of reading, mathematics, written expression and language. The test takes about one hour to complete. For more information go to Riverside Publishing Company at

<http://www.riverpub.com/products/clinical/wj3/home.html>

## **Cognitive Processing**



### **SCAN – Central Auditory Processing:**

It takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. This test can identify a central auditory processing disorder and obtain information about an individual's ability to process auditory stimuli. For more information go to

[http://www.med.uc.edu/admin/tartan/scan\\_a.cfm](http://www.med.uc.edu/admin/tartan/scan_a.cfm)

### **Lindamood Auditory Conceptualization Test (LAC)**

This test is an individually administered, criterion-referenced assessment that measures the ability to discriminate one speech sound or phoneme from another and segments a spoken word into its constituent phonemic units. It examines phonological awareness. For more information go to

<http://www.agsnet.com/group.asp?nGroupInfoID=a11395>

## End Notes

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