

Chapter One

Differentiating Learning Disabilities from Intellectual Disabilities

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to provide literacy practitioners with more in-depth and targeted information about working with adults with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. We already know that there is a significant difference between the learning needs of these individuals. This tool hopes to educate practitioners further about learning needs of individuals with learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. We hope to provide practitioners with the tools to effectively screen, identify and provide learning strategies for both of these groups.

Literacy Bill of Rights

As an introduction to this topic, we felt it was important to include the following Bill of Rights: “All persons, regardless of the extent or severity of their disabilities, have a basic right to use print.” Beyond this general right, there are certain literacy rights that should be assured for all persons. These basic rights are:

1. The right to an opportunity to learn to read and write. Opportunity involves engagement and active participation in tasks performed with high success.
2. The right to have accessible, clear, meaningful, culturally and linguistically appropriate texts at all times. Texts, broadly defined, range from picture books to newspapers to novels, cereal boxes, and electronic documents.

3. The right to interact with others while reading, writing, or listening to a text. Interaction involves questions, comments, discussions, and other communications about or related to the text.
4. The right to life choices made available through reading and writing competencies. Life choices include, but are not limited to, employment and employment changes, independence, community participation, and self-advocacy.
5. The right to lifelong educational opportunities incorporating literacy instruction and use. Literacy educational opportunities, regardless of when they are provided, have potential to provide power that cannot be taken away.
6. The right to have teachers and other service providers who are knowledgeable about literacy instruction methods and principles. Methods include, but are not limited to, instruction, assessment, and the technologies required to make literacy accessible to individuals with disabilities. Principles include, but are not limited to, the beliefs that literacy is learned across places and time, and no person is too disabled to benefit from literacy learning opportunities.
7. The right to live and learn in environments that provide varied models of print use. Models are demonstrations of purposeful print use such as reading a recipe, paying bills, sharing a joke, or writing a letter.
8. The right to live and learn in environments that maintain the expectations and attitudes that all individuals are literacy learners.¹

This Bill of Rights can be accessed at <http://www.gac.edu/~dkoppenh/rights.html>

Many Kinds of Learners

For many individuals who work in education, it is challenging to distinguish between the learning barriers of an individual with a learning disability and the learning barriers of an individual with an intellectual disability. This is particularly true in the field of literacy where practitioners work with so many different types of people who may have been out of education for a long time. In this chapter, we will try to provide more clarity to the differences between a learning disability and an intellectual disability so that practitioners can better help the individuals that use services in their organizations.

¹ Yoder, D. E., Erickson, K.A., & Koppenhaver, D.A. (1996). Center for Literacy and Disability Studies

One of the main reasons that it is very important to distinguish between these two groups is because learning is such a unique process. What might work for one learner does not always work for another. There is no one size that fits all when it comes to learning. Many professionals who work in the field of learning disabilities stress how vital it is for a learning disability to be looked at as a specific disability and not be grouped with other disabilities. Some would go as far to say that individuals with learning disabilities should be treated with complete autonomy from other individuals with disabilities.

Terminology

In fact, the definitions of “learning disabilities” and “intellectual disabilities” may be very different for many people. For the purpose of clarity, we would like to use the term intellectual disability where many literacy practitioners may use the term developmental disability. The two terms are often used interchangeably but we believe that intellectual disability describes the population that we wanted to refer to in this tool because we are focusing on comparing cognitive abilities.

In this next section, we would like to make clear the definitions of learning disability and intellectual disability as referred to by well-known organizations in their respective fields, particularly as they are defined here in Canada.

Defining Learning Disabilities

In this section we are going to spend some time talking about the prevailing definitions of Learning Disabilities and Intellectual Disabilities. This is to help practitioners potentially **identify** learners in LBS programs and provide appropriate teaching strategies for them. This workshop is **not** designed to diagnose LBS learners with intellectual disabilities or learning disabilities. In fact, we caution participants about using these terms while interacting with learners. It is probably sufficient to talk to learners about their strengths and weaknesses and not about whether they are learning disabled or intellectually disabled.

The following are two formal definitions of learning disabilities:

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, “Learning Disabilities refers to a number of disorders, which may affect acquisition, organization, retention, understanding and use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning

in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global deficiency.”²

“Learning disabilities refers to a variety of disorders that affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization or use of verbal and/or non-verbal information. These disorders result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning, in combination with otherwise average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning. Learning disabilities are **specific, not global** impairments and as such are distinct from intellectual disabilities.”³

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

- oral language (eg. listening, speaking, understanding)
- reading (eg. decoding, comprehension)
- written language (eg. spelling, written expression)
- mathematics (eg. computation, problem solving)

In more informal terms, learning disabilities are lifelong and, depending upon their severity, can greatly impact individuals throughout their lives potentially including friendships, school, work, self-esteem and daily life.

Learning disabilities affect the way an individual takes in, understands and expresses information and impacts people with average to above average intelligence. This means that these individuals do not have global impairments like individuals with intellectual disability. Global impairments are those that impact an individual in every aspect of their life, specifically with cognitive functioning. Adults with learning disabilities have impairments that are very specific. An individual with a learning disability might struggle with spelling and reading but function well in a job that does not rely strongly on these skills for success.

Two excellent websites that give valuable information on learning disabilities are the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/> and the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario <http://www.ldao.on.ca>

² *Official Definition of Learning Disability*, Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, January, 2002.

³ *Learning Disabilities: A New Definition*, Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2001.

Common Learning Disabilities

The three most common learning disabilities are:

- visual processing deficits
- auditory processing deficits
- organizational processing deficits

The following describes each of these learning disabilities and specific areas of difficulty.

Visual Processing Deficits

The National Center for Learning Disabilities identifies a visual processing deficit as a hindered ability to make sense of information taken in through the eyes. This is different from problems involving sight or sharpness of vision. Difficulties with visual processing affect how visual information is interpreted or processed by the brain.

Individuals with visual processing deficits have difficulty following text when reading. Sometimes words or letters appear to be moving on the page and tracking information is a challenge.

There are some common areas of difficulty for individuals with visual processing problems:

i) **Spatial relations:**

This refers to the ability to accurately perceive objects in space and objects in relation to other objects. Reading and math both rely on symbols. In order to be successful in these areas, learners need to be able to see symbols (letters or numbers) both as separate units and in relation to others.

ii) **Visual discrimination:**

This refers to the ability to differentiate objects based on individual characteristics. This is again critical for success in reading and math.

iii) Visual closure:

This refers to the ability to recognize an object or a symbol when the entire object or symbol is not visible.

iv) Object recognition:

Some individuals have difficulty recognizing objects that are familiar to them.

v) Whole/part relationships:

Some people have difficulty integrating the relationship between an object in its entirety and the different parts that make it up. Some learners see only the pieces while others see only the whole (can see all the letters but not the word or see the word but not the letters).⁴

Auditory Processing Deficits

The National Center for Learning Disabilities describes an auditory processing deficit as something that interferes with an individual's ability to analyze or make sense of information taken in through the ears. This is different from problems involving hearing such as deafness or being hard of hearing. Difficulties with auditory processing do not affect what is heard by the ear, but do affect how this information is interpreted, or processed by the brain.

An auditory processing deficit can interfere directly with speech and language, but can affect all areas of learning, especially reading and spelling. When instruction in school relies primarily on spoken language, the individual with an auditory processing deficit may have serious difficulty understanding the lesson or the directions.

Some of the common areas of difficulty for learners with auditory problems are:

i) Phonological awareness:

Individuals will often be unable to recognize and/or isolate individual sounds in a word, recognize rhyming words, or identify the syllables in a word.

⁴ *Visual and Auditory Processing Disorders* The National Center for Learning Disabilities

ii) Auditory discrimination:

Auditory discrimination is the ability to recognize differences in phonemes (sounds). This includes the ability to identify words and sounds that are similar and those that are different. For example, individuals may have difficulty distinguishing between words like “single” and “signal”.

iii) Auditory memory:

Auditory memory is the ability to store and recall information that was given verbally. For example, individuals may have trouble recalling information that has been read aloud.

iv) Auditory sequencing:

Auditory sequencing is the ability to remember and reconstruct the order of items in a list or the order of sounds in a word or syllable. Individuals may say “ephelant” instead of “elephant”.

v) Auditory blending:

Auditory blending is the process of putting together phonemes to form words. For example, the individual phonemes “c”, “a”, and “t” are blended to form the word, “cat.”⁵

Organizational Processing Deficits

The National Center for Learning Disabilities indicates that learners with organizational processing deficits have difficulty managing time and space and generally ordering the day-to-day tasks of daily living. Individuals may have difficulty receiving, integrating, remembering and expressing information.

⁵ *Visual and Auditory Processing Disorders*. The National Center for Learning Disabilities

Some of the common areas of difficulty for learners with organizational problems include:

- Takes longer to understand and respond to questions, but the quality of the answer is good
- Has difficulty giving clear, concise answers to simple questions
- Complains of having trouble focusing
- Needs rewording of questions
- Has trouble with attendance and follow through
- Difficulty completing assignments
- Difficulty organizing notebook
- Difficulty meeting deadlines
- Poor sense of elapsed time
- Either late or very early for appointments
- Difficulty knowing how much time is needed for tasks
- Difficulty organizing tasks – understanding the sequence of steps required to complete a task – may have difficulty cooking a meal, planning a party etc.
- Difficulty organizing space – closet, desk, cupboards
- Difficulty organizing, planning and managing in daily life and in the workplace. ⁶

Defining Intellectual Disability

Now that we have defined learning disability, here are two definitions of an intellectual disability:

Definition #1:

“An intellectual disability (also known as a developmental disability) is a life-long condition, manifested at birth or shortly thereafter, where people grow and develop more slowly than others because of limitations in intellectual functioning. Individuals may have difficulty understanding abstract concepts or adapting to some of the demands of daily life. This disability varies greatly between individuals and may or may not be accompanied by other physical conditions.”⁷

⁶ *Visual and Auditory Processing Disorders* The National Center for Learning Disabilities

⁷ *What are Developmental Disabilities?* JusticeForAll.ca

Definition #2:

“Individuals with intellectual disabilities have limited intellectual potential that results in significantly reduced ability to transfer information, resulting in problems with problem solving. However, they also have strengths and interests that can be used to achieve goals that are important to them.”⁸

As practitioners who work directly with individuals with intellectual disabilities, we know how many challenges they face on the path to acquiring literacy skills. Some of these challenges include; short attention span, lack of retention, generally poorer language skills, and even transportation to the learning site.

Attention Span and Interest

Most learners with intellectual disabilities have an attention span of about 15 – 30 minutes, which is why we often see learners becoming easily bored and anticipating a change in activity. Also, many learners can have difficulty retaining information particularly if the information does not pertain to their personal goals. For example, when you teach an individual with an intellectual disability how to use computer software, it sometimes takes a lot of repetition of the steps needed to access the software before the learner can do it independently. If it is not a piece of software that they want to use for some personal goal, it is even more difficult for the learner to retain the instructions. Individuals with intellectual disabilities display challenges with language skills because they are not able to articulate their needs as well as other learners. And finally, transportation can be a key issue where learners may not have bus passes, family to rely on or other supports to drive them to and from literacy programs.

Practitioners who have worked with individuals with intellectual disabilities know how important it is to provide concrete material and material that is of high interest to the learner. In fact, it is essential that information be meaningful to the learners and link with their personal experiences. This is why it is vital that these learners plan their own learning goals. “As much as possible, adult literacy learners with intellectual disabilities should generate their own learning goals, based on their own interests and needs. Being in control of their own learning builds self-esteem and helps retain interest. Volunteer literacy tutors

⁸ Hatt, P. *Supporting and Sharing: Best Practices in Learning Disabilities Training*, March 2002

and learners' own networks play important roles in helping individuals overcome these barriers.”⁹

Global vs. “Peaks and Valleys”

The most significant difference between learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities is that intellectual disabilities are more global in nature. Individuals with intellectual disabilities seem to be impacted across the board, in many areas of their lives and when they undergo psycho-educational testing, their test results show that their ability is almost the same in all areas. This is different from individuals with learning disabilities who seem to show peaks and valleys in their profiles. For example, individuals with learning disabilities may really struggle with spelling and reading skills, but have an aptitude for math.

The Learning Disability Association of Ontario believes that “it is very important to differentiate specific learning disabilities from more global intellectual or developmental disabilities. The primary purpose of such differentiation is to ensure that individuals are provided with services, supports, and accommodations that are appropriate for them and that meet their specific needs. Mild to moderate intellectual disabilities is sometimes designated “general learning disabilities” within the education system, which results in confusion and the delivery of inappropriate special education services.”¹⁰ This is why we probably see so many individuals in literacy programs who have not been effectively accommodated in the education system.

Some great information about intellectual disabilities can be found at the following websites:

Canadian Association for Community Living <http://www.cacl.ca>

Community Living Ontario <http://www.acl.on.ca/>

The Roeher Institute <http://www.roeher.ca/default.htm>

⁹ Coombe, J. & Lockert, R. *Keys to Success: Literacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities* Rehabilitation Review Vol. 11, No. 10, Oct. 2000.

¹⁰ *Learning Disabilities: A New Definition*, Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, 2001.

Characteristics of Learning Disabilities

People who utilize the services of literacy organizations may have certain characteristics that lead a practitioner to suspect a learning disability. Sometimes that information is disclosed during the intake process but, more frequently, learners may not have been officially diagnosed. Some may recollect being in special education classes and having various assessments and tests done in school, but were unaware of the reasons why or the outcomes of those testing procedures.

Through the years, individuals with learning disabilities may have developed various coping strategies, which have allowed them to function fairly well in society. According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Kitchener-Waterloo, adults with learning disabilities may demonstrate one or more of the following:

- The adult may learn well when shown, but cannot follow written directions and/or remember several verbal directions.
- He/she may express thoughts verbally, but cannot put them on paper.
- He/she may be good with mechanical things, but has difficulty with reading, writing and spelling. He/she may be unable to complete a job application form.
- He/she may feel anxious, depressed, or have a low self-esteem.

During the intake process, literacy organizations often see similar characteristics to the ones mentioned above in their clients. Although certified psychologists are the only individuals who can diagnose a learning disability, there are screening tools available to literacy practitioners that they can use in their intake process, if desired.

Some other characteristics of learning disabilities include:

- The learner reports that letters and words appear out of sequence or reversed.
- The learner appears to be able to hear but has difficulty discriminating similar sounding words or saying words correctly.
- The learner's hearing appears normal, but the learner frequently misunderstands questions -a language processing problem.

- The learner frequently asks to have questions repeated which may indicate a learning disability related to attention and/or auditory processing.¹¹

As described by the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, learning disabilities are demonstrated by:

- Impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning, in combination with otherwise average abilities essential for thinking and reasoning, as well as;
- Unexpectedly low academic achievement, or
- Average or above average achievement attained only at the expense of unrealistically high levels of effort and/or educational support.

“Learning disabilities are not a unitary construct. An individual can have one specific problem or constellation of problems. Moreover, learning disabilities do not manifest themselves in individuals in exactly the same way. Some learning disabilities can be mild, while others can be quite severe.”¹²

It is difficult to provide specific characteristics of learning disabilities because of the diverse ways they manifest in each individual. However, there are some general characteristics that may reside in learners who are enrolled in literacy programs. Some of the individuals practitioners work with may show some of the characteristics listed, however individuals must have a significant number of these characteristics in order for a learning disability to be present. At this point, practitioners may decide to refer the learner to a professional psychologist for assessment.

A person with learning disabilities may...

- Perform similar tasks differently from day to day
- Read well but not write well, or write well but not read well
- Be able to learn information presented in one way but not in another
- Have a short attention span, be impulsive, and/or be easily distracted
- Have difficulty telling or understanding jokes

¹¹ *Screening Adults At Risk for Learning Disabilities: The Delta Screener*, Conestoga College Disability Services. 2002.

¹² Gerber, Paul J. *Characteristics of Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities*, 1998.

- Misinterpret language, have poor comprehension of what is said
- Have difficulty with social skills, may misinterpret social cues
- Find it difficult to memorize information
- Have difficulty following a schedule, being on time, or meeting deadlines
- Get lost easily, either driving and/or in large buildings
- Have trouble reading maps
- Often misread or miscopy
- Confuse similar letters or numbers, reverse them, or confuse their order
- Have difficulty reading the newspaper, following small print and/or following columns
- Be able to explain things orally, but not in writing
- Have difficulty writing ideas on paper
- Reverse or omit letters, words, or phrases when writing
- Have difficulty completing job applications correctly
- Have persistent problems with sentence structure, writing mechanics, and organizing written work
- Experience continuous problems with spelling the same word differently in one document
- Have trouble dialing phone numbers and reading addresses
- Have difficulty with math, math language, and math concepts
- Reverse numbers in a cheque-book and have difficulty balancing a cheque-book
- Confuse right and left, up and down
- Have difficulty following directions, especially multiple directions
- Be poorly coordinated
- Be unable to tell you what has just been said
- Hear sounds, words, or sentences imperfectly or incorrectly¹³

The Georgia Assistive Technology (Tools for Life) Project outlines some general characteristics of a learning disability. These include:

- Auditory and Visual Deficits
- Oral/Verbal Expressive Language
- Memory/Recall
- Reasoning/Processing
- Organization

¹³ *A Learning Disabilities Checklist* adapted from the National Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center Checklist, LD Adults of Georgia, <http://www.ldag.org/ldadults/ldinfo/chcklist.htm>

Auditory and Visual Deficits affect one's ability to develop and use language effectively; the effects are most apparent in reading, math, writing, and spelling skills. In both instances, the central nervous system is not processing symbols correctly. Depending upon the severity and nature of the learning disability, the individual:

- Demonstrates variable or unpredictable performance;
- Has difficulty staying on task or using a procedure past the point of its being appropriate;
- Is able to learn information presented in one way, but not in another;
- Experiences severe underachievement in one or more of the basic academic areas (reading, writing, spelling, math);
- Has generally poor work and organizational habits;
- Seems to lack resourcefulness.

Oral/Verbal Expressive Language

The individual:

- Omits or uses words inappropriately;
- Has problems explaining things logically;
- Has trouble expressing thoughts concisely (forgetting, confusing, or having difficulty articulating words);
- Has trouble with telephone conversations;
- Frequently misunderstands verbal communications (because of auditory discrimination problems, the person may process the sounds in words out of sequence, e.g., hears "aminal" instead of "animal");
- Has difficulty expressing herself in group settings;
- Substitutes words incorrectly;
- Has trouble retrieving known words;
- Has problems making generalizations;
- Is hesitant to speak out in class or at work;
- Has difficulty listening;
- Manifests slow verbal information processing;
- Has trouble understanding words or concepts;
- Has difficulty selecting relevant information;
- Has auditory sequencing problems;
- Has problems organizing ideas and expressing ideas in words;

- Misinterprets language subtleties (e.g., tone of voice, sarcasm);
- Has difficulty following complex directions.

Memory/Recall

The individual:

- Has difficulty with short-term memory (e.g., following simple and/or multi-step instructions, remembering material read and/or information presented orally);
- Cannot remember personal history or data (long-term memory);
- Has problems repeating information (says the same thing over and over without realizing);
- Has difficulty synthesizing discussion (time, place, events);
- Has difficulty retaining information without excessive rehearsal, practice, or other memory techniques;
- Has trouble remembering information read;
- Has trouble with multiple directions;
- Experiences difficulty retaining learned material;
- Has problems recalling simple instructions (e.g., how to deposit money in the bank).

Reasoning/Processing

The individual:

- Has difficulty absorbing major ideas from oral presentations (instructions, lectures, discussions);
- Makes frequent errors, both verbal and written;
- Demonstrates poor decision-making skills;
- Has poor abstract reasoning skills;
- Shows poor cause/effect reasoning;
- Has trouble recognizing and learning from mistakes;
- Cannot recognize mistakes;
- Has trouble moving from one idea to the next;
- Delays verbal responses;
- Takes longer on reasoning tasks;
- Has difficulty with abstractions; needs concrete demonstration;

- Has trouble following oral information;
- Has difficulty solving problems;
- Is unable to transfer or generalize skills and integrate information;
- Has difficulty drawing conclusions, making inferences, dealing with abstractions, seeing the whole.

Organization

The individual:

- Has problems managing the details of daily life; has trouble organizing;
- Experiences difficulty with prioritizing;
- Has problems identifying the next step;
- Manifests inconsistent performance;
- Jumps from topic/idea to topic/idea;
- Shows poor organization of concepts and tasks (including sequencing, prioritizing, grouping or categorizing, generalizing, grasping similarities between items, relating parts to the whole);
- Has difficulty with maps, graphs, and charts;
- Has trouble following multiple directions, especially in a prescribed sequence;
- Complains of getting lost or disoriented easily;
- Arrives very early or very late;
- Has difficulty spacing assignment on a page (e.g., crowds math problems on a page);
- Has difficulty telling time;
- Has problems adjusting to change.¹⁴

The Georgia Assistive Technology Project website has some excellent information and can be accessed at <http://www.gatfl.org/ldguide/default.htm>

Characteristics of Intellectual Disabilities

The Literacy and Basic Skills Section of the Ministry of Education and Training (now called the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities or MTCU) has worked toward providing opportunities for literacy practitioners to become more knowledgeable about

¹⁴ Georgia Assistive Technology Project (Tools for Life) , Increasing Access to Assistive Technology, LD Guide, <http://www.gatfl.org/ldguide/default.htm>

serving individuals with intellectual disabilities. In a report on “Best Practices in Literacy for Adults with Developmental Disabilities”, the following mandate helps to outline exactly how individuals with intellectual disabilities can be served in literacy programs.

“Through its adult literacy programs, Ontario has demonstrated its commitment to making literacy agencies and services accessible to learners with disabilities. Though barriers to progressive programming still exist, the government of Ontario has attempted to ensure that people with developmental disabilities have access to literacy services. The Literacy and Basic Skills Section has worked closely with the School Board Access Work Group to develop basic principles of access. These include:

- Measurable progress based on learner-centred assessment and goals;
- The ability to use expressive and receptive communication utilizing symbols;
- Literacy programs as a bridge to participating in the broader community;
- Literacy programs working in cooperation with other service providers and funders.

MTCU has established criteria for participation in LBS programs. Learners must be:

- i) without the literacy skills necessary to find and keep a job to meet everyday needs
- ii) at least 19 years old
- iii) out of school
- iv) able to progress

Agencies are allowed to make exceptions, not exceeding ten percent of learners enrolled in a fiscal year. Learners with intellectual disabilities may fall into this category of exception if they do not meet the above criteria.

There are some common traits that may be present in individuals with intellectual disabilities that may help practitioners differentiate them from other adults with disabilities in literacy programs. The following characteristics were taken from an article entitled, “What are Developmental Disabilities?” found at the website JusticeForAll.ca:

Communication:

- Difficulty answering questions or following commands
- Short attention span, easily distracted

- Difficulty describing facts or details
- Limited memory or impaired recall
- Limited vocabulary
- Use of mimicry and imitation in communication
- Says what he or she thinks others want to hear

History:

- Special education experience
- Support agency or person involved in their daily life
- Work history: employment in a supported work setting

Observations and Task Performance:

- Inappropriately dressed for weather
- Speech is difficult to understand
- Difficulty with reading and writing
- Appears to be eager to please
- Appears to be easily led
- Avoids answering questions about their disability¹⁵

The Famous “Grey Area”

There are some individuals that we may come across in literacy programs who seem to show characteristics of learning disabilities as well as intellectual disabilities. This is often referred to as “the grey area” mainly because most practitioners do not know the most effective teaching strategies for these individuals and they tend to be the most difficult population when it comes to writing training plans.

It is true for many literacy organizations that some learners may fall into a category that is often referred to as “the grey area.” Several of these adults have never been through formal assessment procedures so it is often difficult for practitioners to find ways to instruct these learners. The best way to interpret the literacy needs of these individuals would be through formal assessment; however, this might not be possible for financial reasons.

¹⁵ *What are Developmental Disabilities*, Justice For All, www.justiceforall.ca

The challenge with this group of individuals is that they show similar learning problems to individuals with learning disabilities. However, if you were to give these individuals the strategies that you might provide individuals with learning disabilities, you might be setting them up for failure. As literacy practitioners, we know that intellectual inability is not a barrier to reading. Individuals with intellectual disabilities can learn to read and we could probably teach them how to decode anything, however we would eventually see a breakdown in reading comprehension. Individuals who have characteristics that most resemble an individual with an intellectual impairment have difficulty comprehending abstract ideas, which is why reading comprehension and other higher level thinking skills can be difficult to attain.

It is important to keep in mind that we need to work with what we think the main disability is and use teaching strategies that would be effective for that individual. For instance, sometimes we encounter individuals who may show characteristics that are predominantly associated with intellectual impairments but at the same time show a few signs of having a potential learning disability. In this case, it would be better to focus on providing teaching strategies that are beneficial for adults with intellectual disabilities. It is essential to focus on what the main disability is in order to effectively help an individual in this situation. The reason this is important is because practitioners might be tempted to use strategies that work with individuals with learning disabilities. This could be very discouraging for learners whose main disability is an intellectual disability. It could set the learner up for failure.

The IQ Factor

And so dyslexia represents a paradox, particularly in our society where reading ability is often taken as a proxy for intelligence and it is assumed that if you are a good reader, you are also highly intelligent and if you struggle to read, you must not be so smart.¹⁶

The question of whether an individual with a learning disability is average to above average intelligence is one that has been disputed in the literacy field for many years. According to many professionals in the field of learning disabilities and many learning disability associations, individuals with learning disabilities are average to above average intelligence. The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada says “adults with learning disabilities have average, above-average, or even exceptional intelligence. They may be highly artistic, musical, or gifted in a specific academic area. Their general intellectual

¹⁶ Shaywitz, S. Schwab Learning <<http://www.schwablearning.org>>

functioning is not impaired and they are able to reason and make judgements at least within the average range. In other words, people with learning disabilities are not slow learners. They just learn in a different way. They learn inefficiently, due to inefficiencies in the functioning of the brain.”¹⁷

The term intellectual impairment often describes individuals who have significant sub-average general intellectual functioning as well as an IQ at or below 70. According to the Roeher Institute “People with an intellectual disability have an intellectual or perceptual impairment that means they master basic and social skills more slowly. Individuals with this impairment may require particular supports and resources in order to be included and participate fully in literacy programs.”¹⁸

This is where we see the key difference between these two groups of individuals; Individuals with intellectual disabilities have limited intellectual potential, whereas learners with learning disabilities have the ability to learn in spite of the difficulties they have processing information. When we work with individuals who have learning disabilities, it is important to consider the academic potential of the individual (there seems to be a significant gap between what would be expected, given the individual’s ability, and what is actually accomplished).¹⁹

It is well documented in many articles that learning disabilities are characterized by a significant discrepancy between cognitive functioning and academic achievement. As an example, T. H. Miles explains that “a person is dyslexic provided that there is a discrepancy between his intellectual level (potential) and his performance at reading and spelling (achievement) and this discrepancy is accompanied by some other supporting “signs,” like problems with left and right, poor sense of time, putting letters and figures the wrong way around, unusual difficulty in remembering mathematical tables, putting letters in the wrong order, et cetera.”²⁰

Pat Hatt once explained an important point about how to distinguish a learning disability from an intellectual disability: individuals tend to gravitate towards their potential. For instance, if you look at people with learning disabilities’ previous experiences in life, they

¹⁷ Destination Literacy, Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, pg. 13

¹⁸ The Roeher Institute *Speaking of Equality: Making Literacy Programs Accessible to People with an Intellectual Disability – A Guide for Program Managers and Coordinators*. North York, ON., 1995, pp. 5 –7.

¹⁹ *Characteristics of Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities* by Dr. Paul J. Gerber excerpted from *Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities: Implications for Effective Practice*

²⁰ Miles, T. R., *Understanding Dyslexia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978).

have held regular jobs and been responsible for families and somehow seemed to make it through, whereas a majority of individuals with intellectual disabilities tend to live and work in a supportive environment.²¹

It is important to remember that when working with either of these two groups, we must focus on what they “can do” as opposed to what they “cannot do”. We know that the limited intellectual potential of individuals with intellectual impairments makes it difficult for them to transfer information. This is why it is important to provide learners with appropriate teaching instruction and avoid setting individuals up for failure by giving them strategies they can’t use.

Causes of Learning Disabilities

“It is obvious that anything which affects the brain will affect learning. It is now well substantiated that factors within the brain itself, genetic influences as well as influences in the environment can all have an impact on learning and consequently on learning disabilities. In the area of reading disabilities, for example, careful research has estimated that about half of the individual differences in these conditions are related to genetic factors.”²²

Research tells us that learning disabilities can be caused by genetics, congenital factors (originating prior to birth) and acquired neurobiological factors (an illness or injury that affects the brain early in life). Studies that suggest learning disabilities are caused by genetic factors are greatly substantiated by the number of individuals in families who are identified with similar learning disabilities. These similarities can be seen particularly among siblings from the same family.

Congenital factors (originating prior to birth) are linked to being causes of learning disabilities. During pregnancy, it is well established that both prescription and non-prescription drugs (especially alcohol and nicotine) can contribute to disorders which may include learning disabilities. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Fetal Alcohol Effects are the best-known syndromes in this group. Infections of the mother during pregnancy (such as rubella or measles) can also negatively affect the fetal brain, leading to different types of

²¹ Hatt, P. Workshop on *Supporting and Sharing Best Practices in Learning Disabilities Practitioner Training*, 2002.

²² *Congenital Versus Acquired Causes of Learning Disabilities*, Learning Disabilities Association Ontario Promoting Early Intervention Project. 1999

learning difficulties, depending on the nature of the infection and the gestational period during which it occurs.

There are also acquired neurobiological factors (an illness or injury that affects the brain early in life) that cause learning disabilities. This could include traumatic conditions during the birth process, particularly those resulting in lack of oxygen during birth (eg. cerebral palsy resulting from anoxia). This can cause brain damage and result in learning disabilities. At birth, both low birth weight (which is significantly more common for women who smoke during pregnancy) and prematurity (especially in combination with Respiratory Distress Syndrome) are associated with a variety of negative outcomes, which sometimes can include learning disabilities. Following birth, any source of acquired brain injury may result in a range of effects including learning disabilities. These include:

- traumatic events (“shaken baby syndrome”, falls, accidents);
- exposure to toxic chemicals (eg., to heavy metals such as mercury or lead from contaminated soil, through solvent inhalation or “gas sniffing”);
- hypoxia (loss of oxygen to the brain as a result of suffocation or choking);
- infections (especially meningitis and encephalitis);
- and inflammation of the brain (eg. Reyes Syndrome).²³

Causes of Intellectual Disability

There are many causes of intellectual disability with some being more predominant than others. Some of these causes include:

Before Birth

1. Inheritance

Intellectual disability may occur through heredity (i.e. genetic transmission of traits from parents to offspring).

2. Chromosomal Abnormality

There are 23 pairs of chromosomes in each human cell. Chromosomes are structures which contain the genetic material for the transmission of human traits. Certain syndromes (which encompass intellectual disability) arise when the chromosomes of an

²³ *Congenital versus acquired causes of learning disabilities*. Promoting Early Intervention Project, 1999.

individual have an abnormal arrangement or structure. Affected persons will have intellectual disability and characteristic physical features (i.e. Down's Syndrome).

3. Infections and Intoxication

Certain infections during pregnancy, such as rubella or syphilis, can lead to intellectual disability in the offspring. Exposure to toxins such as alcohol, drugs or tobacco by a pregnant mother can also affect the child.

4. Trauma

Physical trauma to the mother may result in brain injury to the fetus and can subsequently cause intellectual disability.

5. Malnutrition

Under-nourishment in the pregnant mother can affect the development of the fetus and lead to intellectual disability in the child.

6. Radiation

Intellectual disability in the child can be caused by the mother's exposure to nuclear or X-ray radiation.

7. Metabolic Disorders

Persons with PKU (Phenylketonuria) have a faulty metabolism of the protein phenylalanine resulting in the release of incomplete metabolites that harm the brain. Galactosemia is a defect in the body's ability to break down galactose (a milk by-product), the effects of which are detrimental to the brain.

During Birth

1. Asphyxia

Prolonged labour can result in a lack of oxygen supply to the baby's brain leading to intellectual disability.

2. Trauma

Physical injury to the brain during birth can also cause intellectual disability.

After Birth

1. Infections

Certain infections during infancy and childhood can cause diseases such as meningitis and encephalitis that can affect the brain and result in intellectual disability.

2. Injury

Physical injury such as blow to the head or a severe fall that results in brain damage may lead to intellectual disability.

3. Hormonal Deficiency

A deficiency in the thyroid hormone can result in intellectual disability.

4. Jaundice

Jaundice is a yellow tinge to the skin and sclera of the eyes caused by excess bilirubin (a substance produced by the breakdown of red blood cells) in the bloodstream that can cause brain damage and intellectual disability.

5. Malnutrition

Inadequate nutrition during early childhood resulting in under-development of the brain can lead to intellectual disability.

6. Cultural-Familial Factors

A lack of stimulation or a deprived environment during childhood may lead to intellectual disability.

7. No Known Causes

Apart from the above known causes, there are many cases of intellectual disability that have no known causes. This is a very important point!²⁴

²⁴ Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore

Assessment

The question of assessment is always one that arises for adults with learning disabilities. As many practitioners know, there are many pros and cons to assessment. First and foremost is whether or not the learner can deal with the results of the assessment if the results do not come out the way they expect. For some individuals, the results may not indicate that they have a learning disability and may point to an intellectual disability or some other limit to their cognitive ability. There are some learners who do not want to find this out and this information may significantly impact their self-worth.

The more pertinent questions that should be asked before a learner considers assessment are:

- Is the assessment even necessary?
- Why does the person want the piece of documentation that details the results of the assessment?

For some learners, an assessment might be necessary in order for them to seek further education and accommodations like tutors or adaptive technology through the special needs departments at post-secondary institutions. For other learners, it might be for reasons of employment equity. For example, to help them do their jobs better they could be provided with accommodations at work. Whatever the reason, it is important to consider both of these questions before an assessment is pursued to avoid disappointing news.

Skill Characteristics – Learning Disabilities

When we work with individuals who have learning disabilities, it is easy to focus on what they can't do as opposed to what they can do. For many years, educators have been interested in helping to remediate learners. It would be more beneficial for learners if we stopped focussing on remediation and started focussing on a learner's strengths. As Dr. Richard Lavoie points out: "it is important to emphasize and celebrate an individual's "islands of competence."²⁵ This means pushing aside the weaknesses and focusing on the strengths.

Dr. Paul Gerber used an excellent analogy of this "islands of competence" idea at a recent conference on learning disabilities. He talked about students with learning disabilities as

²⁵ Richard Lavoie *20 Tips to Promote Positive Self-Esteem* www.ricklavoie.com

never becoming the class valedictorian because they do not do well academically across the board. However, he pointed out that many students with learning disabilities have “islands of competence” in certain subject areas. For example, a very well known person by the name of Albert Einstein had a learning disability. He might not have been his class valedictorian but his strength was in science and he was able to focus on this “island of competence” to change the world in very meaningful ways.

Gerber also quoted a student that he had previously worked with who said the following about his learning disability: “It is celebrating strengths and knowing full well what your weaknesses are.” Dr. Paul Gerber has done a significant amount of research in the area of adults with learning disabilities. In an article on *Characteristics of Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities*, Gerber points out that “In many cases, the lives of individuals with LD are punctuated with successes and failures. Those who have been able to move forward undeterred by failure (and sometimes strengthened by it) have a greater sense of inner strength and self-confidence. In essence, in tough times, they know that there are good times ahead, if they are able to stick with it.”²⁶

Resilience is one of the key characteristics that help adults with learning disabilities reach their desired goals. “Resilience is a set of dynamics that affects different segments of the population of adults with LD in different ways. Whereas all individuals with LD have the capacity to be resilient in some cases (eg. those who typically attend literacy centres), resilience may be more of an exception than a rule.”²⁷ Which is why as literacy practitioners we find it so difficult to help this population of learners.

“Another positive characteristic is the unconventional way in which some adults with LD devise learning strategies or adaptive methods to master a task or learn a new routine. They have unique ways in which they approach tasks, and when given the time and opportunity, they are able to problem solve in their own style. This process has been termed “learned creativity” and is credited with adaptive techniques used in employment, daily living tasks and social situations.”²⁸

²⁶ *Characteristics of Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities* by Dr. Paul J. Gerber excerpted from *Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities: Implications for Effective Practice*

²⁷ *Characteristics of Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities* by Dr. Paul J. Gerber excerpted from *Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities: Implications for Effective Practice*

²⁸ *Characteristics of Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities* by Dr. Paul J. Gerber excerpted from *Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities: Implications for Effective Practice*

The ability to transfer skills is one of the key things that separate individuals with learning disabilities from individuals with intellectual disabilities. It is easier to teach learning strategies to people with learning disabilities because when you teach them a new strategy that they find effective, they are able to reuse it in order to help them solve another problem or deal with a new situation. This ability to take information and transpose it somewhere else shows that academic achievement can match potential when the learner is provided with effective strategies.

Skill Characteristics – Intellectual Disabilities

“Literacy is more than learning to read, write and spell proficiently. It is learning to enjoy words and stories when someone else is reading them. It is learning to love books and all the worlds that can be opened by books. It is a way of achieving social closeness through sharing literacy experiences with friends or classmates. It is finding out about the way things are in places we have never visited or in places that have never existed. If we understand that literacy is all of these things and more, we can also understand that everyone can achieve some degree of literacy if given opportunities and exposure... The notions that children (and adults) are too physically, too cognitively or too communicatively disabled to benefit from experiences with written language are not supported by current emergent literacy research!”²⁹

According to SARC (Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres), there are significant benefits to learners with intellectual disabilities when they are enrolled in literacy programs:

- Learners see the positive impact improving their literacy skills has made to their lives. They feel extremely positive about being in literacy programs.
- People with intellectual/developmental disabilities are more readily accepted by their peers when they are literate.
- Increased competency in literacy is linked with increased expectations and opportunities for people with intellectual/developmental disabilities.

²⁹ Pat Miranda, Ph.D. Quoted in: Peggy A. Locke and Roxanne Butterfield, *Promoting Literacy for Individuals with Severe to Moderate Disabilities* (CSUN 1999 Conference Proceedings)

- Critical thinking skills can be improved through building literacy skills. Adults with developmental disabilities are better able to become effective self-advocates and active citizens.
- Employment possibilities increase with improved literacy skills. However, obtaining employment may not be possible or easy for all with intellectual/developmental disabilities. Boosting literacy skills and self-esteem do make community living easier and potentially more successful.³⁰

As was mentioned when defining intellectual disability, this group tends to have more of what would be referred to as global impairments meaning that their disability affects them in all parts of their lives and in all academic areas in the same way. This is very different from the peaks and valleys that are observed when working with individuals with learning disabilities who might have difficulty reading and decoding text but have very strong skills in math. Individuals with intellectual disabilities have the same skills across the board. They would have the same difficulties with reading that they would with math.

Another main difference between the two is that individuals with intellectual disabilities have difficulty with transferring information. For instance, if you teach them some new information like using a computer program, you may teach them numerous times how to independently start up the program etc. However, in some cases, they may never be able to do it on their own. Also, you might find that once they do learn how to use the program, they can follow the steps that you have taught them to use that particular program but cannot transfer this skill to using a different piece of software. The key difference is that individuals with intellectual disabilities cannot take information and transpose it somewhere else. For example, you may be successful in teaching individuals with an intellectual disability how to decode text for reading but they will have difficulty with comprehension.

³⁰ Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres, Supplementary Tutor Handbook, Adapted from *Literacy Ontario, Best Practices in Literacy for Adults with Developmental Disabilities*

Learning Strategies for Learning Disabilities

Individuals with learning disabilities have skills that make it possible for them to learn how to use strategies and accommodations to help them pursue their goals. However, when teaching learners with learning disabilities, it is important to build on their strengths. It takes time to get to know what learners' strengths are and learners may or may not be able to articulate what their strengths are. The following are strategies that can be used based on what you do know about the learner, and has been taken from Pat Hatt's "Supporting and Sharing: Best Practices in Learning Disabilities Practitioner Training."

If the learner:

- Can remember words they know
- Guesses words that look like the word eg. attraction or attractive
- Has trouble with big words
- Has trouble with pronunciation
- Can't blend sounds well
- May know sounds but mixes them up when sounding out
- Doesn't respond to rhyming clues
- Spells based on known words ³¹

Use these strategies to help build on strengths:

- Use visual cues – pictures, diagrams, graphs to reinforce concepts
- Provide written instruction to look back on
- Talk at a slower pace
- Give one task at a time
- Repeat the instruction if needed

If the learner:

- Can sound out words
- Can blend sounds
- Can substitute letters
- Can work with word families/rhyming words

³¹ Hatt, P. *Supporting and Sharing Best Practices in Learning Disabilities Practitioner Training*

- Is very verbal and chatty
- Can't recognize words that he/she "knows"
- Has trouble with oral reading, stumbles, hesitates
- Gets lost and uses finger to find spot
- Spells based on the sounds
- Has problems with irregular sounds (ough, eigh)

Use these strategies to help build on strengths:

- Read directions aloud and provide oral instruction
- Use colour coding and colour transparencies
- Enlarge text
- Allow learner to use tape recorder to listen to text on tape
- Provide the learner with speech synthesis software like Kurzweil reader so he/she can scan and listen to text

If the learner:

- Takes longer to understand and respond to your questions, but the quality of the answer is good
- Has trouble giving clear, concise answers to simple questions
- Complains of trouble focussing
- Needs rewording of questions, but answers are good
- Has trouble with attendance and follow through

Use these strategies to help build on strengths:

- Provide more time for the learner to finish work
- Provide calendar with weekly plan
- Provide written detailed explanation for projects
- Help the learner develop task management skills – make expectations clear, break the task down into component parts
- Help the learner develop skills for organizing space – physically show them (model) how to organize their notes, binder, workspace etc.

For some excellent strategies for adults with learning disabilities, please refer to Mel Levine's website www.allkindsofminds.org This website has a section entitled "Learning Base" where you can find strategies in specific areas such as numeracy, expressive writing, time management, etc. To access the strategies you must first enter the Clinician's section, then go to the Library and on to the Learning Base.

Learning strategies for Intellectual Disabilities

"Building literacy skills can be a meaningful experience for any adult, but doing so can be even more significant for adults with intellectual disabilities. With improved reading ability comes higher expectations, improved self-esteem and more opportunities including employment possibilities. In many cases, community living becomes easier and more successful, and literacy allows adults with intellectual disabilities to become active citizens and more effective self-advocates."³²

Adult literacy learners with intellectual disabilities may be challenged by lack of retention, slow learning pace, short attention span, and generally poorer language skills than other learners attending literacy programs.³³ To assist these learners in achieving their goals, it is important to keep the information that is presented to them very **concrete** in nature so that they can relate it to their own experiences. Many individuals with intellectual disabilities are very self-aware and have particular goals in mind that might not be what would be considered a regular learning goal. It is essential that we support these learners because their goals towards entertainment or recreation are ones that are extremely important to them. It is very important that we help enhance the learners' lives in areas they want. When working with individuals with intellectual disabilities, the information provided during instruction must meet their needs and be something that they want to do.

From an article on the Keys to Success: Literacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities, Rehabilitation Review, it is recommended when communicating with a person with an intellectual disability to:

- Make sure that you have the person's attention.
- Speak directly to the person (even when a support person is present).
- Speak slowly and clearly.

³² *Keys to Success: Literacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities*, Rehabilitation Review, Volume 11, No. 10, October 2000

³³ *Keys to Success: Literacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities*, Rehabilitation Review, Volume 1, No. 10 October 2000

- Use plain language.
- Take time in asking a question and waiting for an answer.
- Keep instructions simple and allow ample time for the person to comply.

In asking questions:

- Break down complex questions into several simple questions and ask them one at a time.
- Ask open-ended and free recall questions instead of "yes/no" questions (e.g. "What did you see?" instead of "Did you see the man break the window pane?")
- Ask the person if he/she wants the question to be repeated if no reply is forthcoming.
- Repeat the question or phrase it in a different way if you suspect that the person may not have understood it (asking the question repeatedly is better than interpreting the response inaccurately).
- Use points of reference when asking for information regarding time and sequence of events, and use landmarks when asking about locations.
- When in doubt, try asking the same question in a different way to confirm earlier responses (or seek validation from a different source).
- Use words of encouragement and, if the interview is not progressing very well, ask if the person needs a break.
- Bear in mind that it is possible that a person with intellectual disabilities may agree with something even if it's not the truth because he/she:
 - (1) feels that is what the interviewer wants to hear
 - (2) wants to hide his/her inability to read/understand/recall
 - (3) feels that such an answer would not require further elaboration
 - (4) believes that the interviewer can be trusted and knows best
 - (5) doesn't want to appear "stupid"
- Some persons may require the help of a support person or advocate when communicating, while others may require different communication aids like communication boards or pictures.³⁴

³⁴ *Keys to Success: Literacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities*, Rehabilitation Review, Volume 11, No. 10 October 2000

Accommodations: How They Help Individuals with Learning Disabilities

Adults with learning disabilities face many obstacles in the learning environment. Most of all they face their pasts where they have achieved, in most cases, nothing but failure. As literacy practitioners, we must be aware of ways to bridge the gap and provide opportunities where an adult learner with learning disabilities can achieve success. The following has been taken from the website for the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario. It addresses why it is so important to provide accommodations to individuals with learning disabilities and, in this case, demonstrates how accommodations for the Ontario Grade 10 Literacy Test help students who might normally be held back from achieving success.

“Almost all (if not all) students with learning disabilities can acquire literacy skills, provided that they are taught appropriately and have access to accommodations when taking a test. Students with learning disabilities have average intelligence, which is an essential requirement for the comprehension component of such tests. Of course, students with learning disabilities also have specific psychological processing difficulties, which result in problems with information processing tasks such as reading or writing. That is what having a learning disability means. But with accommodations such as having the material provided on audiotape rather than just in print, being allowed to use a computer, audio taping responses or having answers scribed, most students with learning disabilities should be able to compensate for their difficulties.”³⁵

“There are many ways that learners can be accommodated to compensate for their difficulties. Accommodations can range from low to high tech. They are the strategies that individuals use that help them be independent.”³⁶

For learners who cannot read print, there is now computer software that will scan print and generate synthesized voice. For those unable to write, word processing software is available which will facilitate composing with appropriate spelling, capitalization and punctuation. Some learners might be unable to use a traditional keyboard. For them, software has been created which recognizes voice and prints a written copy of verbal text. With rapid development of computer technology, such assistive devices will become more

³⁵ Nichols, E. *On the Legislative Front: The Grade 10 Literacy Test* www.ldao.on.ca

³⁶ Hatt, P. *Workshop on Learning Disabilities and Developmental Disabilities*, October 2003

common and affordable.³⁷ Some examples of accommodations for individuals with learning disabilities include:

- reducing background noises that might be distracting
- permitting a learner extra time to complete a task
- providing tests/training materials to individuals with reading problems on audio tape, CD or video
- providing a written copy of instructions when needed
- allowing extra time for the person to process information
- providing the learner access to adaptive/assistive technology

Assistive technology is "any technology that enables an adult with learning disabilities to compensate for specific deficits."³⁸ Assistive technology ranges from low to high tech, the choice depending on the individual, the function to be performed, and the context.

Examples include the following:

- (1) for organization, memory, and time management problems - highlighters, beepers, digital watches, tape recorders, personal management software
- (2) for auditory processing - FM amplification devices, electronic notebooks, computer-aided real-time translation, voice synthesizers, videotapes with closed captioning, variable speech control tape recorders
- (3) for visual processing - software display controls, books on disk
- (4) for reading - scanners with speech synthesizers that read back text, books on tape and disk, CD-ROMs
- (5) for writing - word processing tools such as spelling and grammar checkers, abbreviation expanders, brainstorming/outlining software – for example, using Inspiration for writing.³⁹

Some adaptive technology that can be very beneficial to adults with learning disabilities include:

- Kurzweil 3000
- Wynn

³⁷ *Teaching Students with Learning and Behavioural Differences, A Resource Guide for Teachers*, BC Ministry of Education.

³⁸ Kerka, S. *Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Adapted from Gerber and Reiff 1994, p. 152 ERIC Digest No. 189, 1998.

³⁹ Kerka, S. *Adults with Learning Disabilities*. ERIC Digest No. 189, 1998.

- Word Q
- Co-Writer
- Inspiration
- Draft:Builder

Of course, the subject of using assistive/adaptive technology with individuals who have learning disabilities is so vast that we could not cover everything here. Please explore the following websites for information about assistive/adaptive technology:

The Georgia Assistive Technology Project (Tools for Life) Increasing Access to Assistive Technology, LD Guide. <http://www.gatfl.org/ldguide/default.htm>

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LD in Depth) Adult Issues, Adaptive Technology. www.ldac-taac.ca/english/indepth.htm

LDOnLine Please see a comprehensive list in their TechGuide in the Technology section of this website. http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/technology/technology.html

Community Connections: A Key for Helping Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities Achieve Their Literacy Goals

There are many ways that we, as literacy practitioners, can better support individuals with intellectual disabilities in our programs. As was mentioned earlier, individuals with intellectual impairments must be able to use literacy skills for a specific task. As stated in an article by Lockert & Coombe from *Rehabilitation Review*, it is essential that all people involved with the individual are aware of what the student is learning and how they can help in the transfer of skills to other areas of the person's life. This may include communication and co-operation between support networks and learners in the home, teaching and work environments to maximize "learning in context" opportunities.⁴⁰

Learners with intellectual disabilities may live at home and attend literacy programs daily, live independently with some support from an agency or live in a group home and attend programs with a support worker. In all of these situations, it is important to know what the learners' goals are and how they can be served best by literacy programs. The individuals

⁴⁰ *Keys to Success: Literacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities*, *Rehabilitation Review* Volume 11, No. 10, October 2000.

who are most involved in the learners' lives (parents, caregivers, spouses, support workers etc.) might be able to best help literacy practitioners learn more about the learner. This way, literacy practitioners can help individuals with intellectual disabilities to set their own literacy goals. This is why making connections and networking around the learners' needs is so helpful (literacy is important, not only for safety reasons, but being able to read or write ones own name gives the individual a tremendous sense of achievement, pride and self-esteem).⁴¹

Making connections with organizations that really influence a learner's life is a key element, whether through case conferencing with Community Living or some other organization that supports individuals with disabilities. By doing this we can start to really help these learners move towards independence. Work by Beck and Hatt (1998) indicates that such support networks can be crucial in helping learners in "early literacy stages" advance to the point where they are prepared for entry into more mainstream literacy programming.⁴²

There are many local Community Living agencies as well as other organizations that assist adults with disabilities in communities throughout Ontario. Literacy practitioners can connect with them in order to better help learners with intellectual disabilities. There is excellent information available through the following websites or by contacting the following organizations:

Association for Community Living

<http://www.acl.on.ca/>

Canadian Association for Community Living

<http://www.cacl.ca/>

The Roeher Institute

<http://www.roeher.ca/default.htm>

⁴¹ Beck, K. N., & Hatt, P. (1998). *Literacy Preparation Project for Adults with Developmental Disabilities: Training Manual*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board

⁴² Beck, K. N., & Hatt, P. (1998). *Literacy Preparation Project for Adults with Developmental Disabilities: Training Manual*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board

Conclusion

Individuals with learning disabilities are very different from those with intellectual disabilities and vice versa. It is important that literacy practitioners be aware of the differences so that they can better identify learners during the intake process and provide opportunities to support each learner's individual needs. As practitioners, we work with a very diverse group of learners and the better we know and understand their literacy goals, the more successful we will be in providing a supportive learning environment.

Websites

Learning Disabilities

National Organization - Movement for Canadian Literacy

www.literacy.ca

National Adult Literacy Database

www.nald.ca

LD Online – an excellent resource for in depth information on learning disabilities

www.ldonline.org

National Center for Learning Disabilities

www.nclld.org

National Institute For Literacy

<http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/ld/archive/definiti.htm>

Mel Levine is a well-known expert on learning disabilities in the U.S. and is the founder of this non-profit institute for the understanding of differences in learning. This site provides excellent strategies in the Learning Base section that can be accessed via the Library.

<http://www.allkindsofminds.org/>

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario

<http://www.ldao.on.ca>

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada

<http://www.ldac-taac.ca/>

Intellectual Disabilities

Canadian Association for Community Living

<http://www.cacl.ca>

Community Living Ontario

<http://www.acl.on.ca/>

The Roeher Institute

<http://www.roeher.ca>

Helpful Resources

Adults with LD. Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario. www.ldao.on.ca

Beck, K. N., & Hatt, P. (1998). *Literacy Preparation Project for Adults with Developmental Disabilities: Training Manual*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board

Destination Literacy. Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1999.

Gerber, Paul. J. *Characteristics of Adults with Specific Learning Disabilities* excerpted from *Serving Adults with Learning Disabilities: Implications for Effective Practice*, 1998.

Hatt, Pat. *Supporting and Sharing "Best Practices in Learning Disabilities Practitioner Training*, March 2002.

Hatt, Pat. Workshop on Learning Disabilities and Developmental Disabilities, October 2003.

Keys to Success: Literacy for Persons with Developmental Disabilities. Rehabilitation Review, Vol. 11, No. 10, Oct. 2000.

<<http://www.vrri.org/rhb10b00.htm>>

Kerka, S. *Adults with Learning Disabilities*, Adapted from Gerber and Reiff 1994, p. 152
ERIC Digest No. 189, 1998

Lavoie, Richard. *20 Tips to Promote Positive Self-Esteem*

< www.ricklavoie.com >

Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore

<<http://www.minds.org.sg/>>

Miranda, Pat. Ph.D. Quoted in: Peggy A. Locke and Roxanne Butterfield, *Promoting Literacy for Individuals with Severe to Moderate Disabilities* (CSUN 1999 Conference Proceedings)

Saskatchewan Association of Rehabilitation Centres, Supplementary Tutor Handbook, Adapted from Literacy Ontario, Best Practices in Literacy for Adults with Developmental Disabilities < <http://www.nald.ca/Fulltext/sarc2/page13.htm>>

Shaywitz, S. *Conversation with Sally Shaywitz, M.D., author of Overcoming Dyslexia*, SchwabLearning.org. <http://www.schwablearning.org>

Teaching Students with Learning and Behavioural Differences: A Resource Guide for Teachers. BC Ministry of Education. < <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/>>

Texas Center for Adult Literacy & Learning: *Adult Literacy Clearinghouse*. October 2003.

The Roeher Institute. *Intellectual Disability – A Guide for Program Managers and Coordinators*. North York, ON:, 1995, pp. 5 -7

Visual and Auditory Processing Disorders. The National Center for Learning Disabilities. <http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/process_deficit/visual_auditory.html>

What are Developmental Disabilities? JusticeForAll.ca
<<http://www.justiceforall.ca>>

Chapter One Appendix A

Differentiating Learning Disabilities from Intellectual Disabilities

	Learning Disabilities	Intellectual Disabilities
Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - average to above average intelligence - significant discrepancy between what would be expected, given the individual’s ability, and what is actually accomplished 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - global impairments - IQ at or below 70
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - difficulty processing information - manifest as auditory/visual deficits, memory/recall, reasoning/processing and organization problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - limited intellectual potential - may have limited memory, short attention span or be easily distracted
History	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - life and jobs are “average” - limited literacy skills are unexplained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - supported employment or none - relatively limited responsibility
Literacy Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - seeking literacy skills for further education or for career opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - want to be able to use literacy skills for a specific task
Barriers to Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - processing problems impact learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - limited cognitive ability
Teaching Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strategies and accommodations for problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - concrete and interest-related - goals must be meaningful
Accommodations/ Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adaptive/assistive technology - increased time/provision of materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - case conferencing among support networks - linking with community support organizations

Input from Online Delivery of Chapter One

Differentiating Learning Disabilities from Intellectual Disabilities



Literacy Link South Central wanted to give readers of this manual a valuable component of the online workshop: participant input. The following bullet points are compiled from participant responses, and may or may not include information or opinions in keeping with our evaluative constructs. We encourage you to filter the comments as you would in any classroom setting.

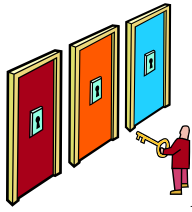


Activity 1

At the beginning of our online workshop, we talked about a “Literacy Bill of Rights” that can be found at <http://www.gac.edu/~dkoppenh/rights.html>. The key statement in this Bill of Rights is that “All persons, regardless of the extent or severity of their disabilities, have a basic right to use print.”

We asked how this Bill of Rights applies to learners with learning disabilities and/or intellectual disabilities. Here’s what online participants told us:

- Access to literacy programs should be universal, i.e. everyone has the right to attend.
- Everyone should have access to medical and other services.
- Even if a learner’s progress is slow or minimal, he/she still has a right to gain/enhance literacy skills.
- All adults are lifelong learners; learning is a continuum.
- Although the rights exist, it can be difficult for learners with LD/ID to fully access their rights.
- Gaining literacy skills can help a learner better advocate for him/herself.
- It gives learners a chance to more fully participate in life in the 21st century, e.g. e-mail.
- Programs need to be flexible to meet learners’ needs.
- Adaptive technology can help learners gain these basic rights.
- Sadly, in some areas, programs aren’t able to meet learners’ needs (for a variety of reasons) so in that case, those learners don’t have these rights.



Activity 2

We defined learning disabilities (see the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario at <http://www.ldao.ca> and the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada at <http://www.ldac-taac.ca>) and described the three main types of processing deficits, i.e. visual, auditory and organizational.

We asked you to share examples of learners you suspected had learning disabilities and the strategies you used when working with them. Here's what you told us:

- Use strategies that use as many ways of learning as possible; pay attention to what works and what doesn't.
- Break tasks into small chunks; don't overwhelm the learner.
- Computers are useful ways of introducing the concept of sequencing because you often need to do tasks in a certain order.
- Keeping journals can be helpful.
- Agendas / schedules are also helpful.
- Palm pilots are helpful (if learner can afford one).
- Any type of reminder can be helpful – verbal, written, visual.
- Encourage learners to tell you what worked and what didn't; give them control over their own learning and encourage them to self-identify.
- The Dollar Store is a great place to buy things like address books that learners can use to keep track of new words.
- Shelley Olivier recommends Zero Spelling; she says it is both effective and free! You can find it at http://www.sofotex.com/ZERO-Spelling-download_L6562.html; it works on all Windows systems.



Activity 3

We talked about intellectual disabilities, starting with a definition (see <http://justiceforall.ca>) and moving on to characteristics.

Then we asked you to describe any other characteristics of intellectual disabilities. Here's what you told us:

- Some learners have difficulties getting past a crisis – they never seem to get over it and can't move past it.
- They may have difficulty with the concept of time – what happened fifteen years ago might seem like yesterday.
- Structure, routine and habit are important; they can help provide a sense of stability and comfort.
- On the other hand, life is full of change so if we focus too much on routine, etc. we aren't supporting learners with adapting to real-life situations.
- Learners may have difficulty making decisions; it can help to provide two or three choices and let them pick.
- Learners may be unable to discriminate between their private and public lives; they may share more than is appropriate.
- Some learners with ID may “look” different, causing people to treat them differently, perhaps even like children instead of like adults.
- Life skills / social skills are often an issue. For example, some learners may speak too loudly and disrupt other learners.
- There may be physical accessibility issues.

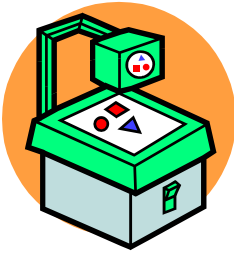


Activity 4

Sometimes, it may be difficult to distinguish between learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. Some learners may present with characteristics of both. We talked about this potential “grey area”.

We asked you how you distinguish between learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. Here is what you told us:

- Sometimes it’s hard to identify a “slow learner” vs. someone with an intellectual disability.
- Learners with ID tend to have difficulties across the spectrum; learners with LD have more defined areas of strength/weakness.
- When there is a hearing or vision impairment, it may make it difficult to assess if there is also a learning or intellectual disability.
- None of us are one thing or the other; overlaps are the norm rather than the exception.
- Check with the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada; you may be able to access their “Destination Employment” assessment.
- In general, advocate for formal assessments.
- Are we supposed to work with ID learners in literacy programs? Talk to your field consultant – there are regional differences.
- Focus on strengths, not weaknesses.



Activity 5

We talked about skills characteristics and effective strategies for working with adults with LD.

We asked you to share effective strategies for working with adults with LD. Here's what you told us:

- Coloured transparencies can help learners with visual processing deficits – apparently, blue is the best colour but sometimes you have to try a few before finding a colour that works.
- Similarly, some learners find it easier to read using coloured paper (rather than the traditional white).
- Use lots of white space.
- Use large print.
- Use symbols to help the learner with the print; you can reduce/eliminate the symbols over time.
- Work out an agenda as a group; also helps develop team-building skills.
- Colour, graphics, etc. can be helpful but can also overwhelm.
- Some learners work better listening to music; for others, you may need to reduce or eliminate distractions.
- Try to isolate words; reduce the distraction of the rest of the print on the page.
- Use a schedule/agenda.



Activity 6

We talked about characteristics and strategies related to intellectual disabilities.

We asked you to share effective strategies you have used with adults with ID. You told us:

- Get to know the learner and what works for him/her.
- Repetition helps.
- Ask the learner to repeat things back to you to make sure he/she understood what you have asked.
- Agendas are helpful.
- Let the learner see that instructors make mistakes too.
- Humour is helpful.