LEARNING DISABILITIES

"A learning disability is a real thing. It exists like any other disability, and until we can find a true cure, we must work around it. It is real and to dent that is to ignore the realities of those who day-to-day must live with its effects."

BEST PRACTICES AND INNOVATIONS

A series of bulletins for literacy programs

Issue 3 of 3, Spring 2001

OLC Ontario Literacy Coalition

Best Practice and Innovations

A series of bulletins for literacy programs

The goal of this series is to provide important information on three topics of high priority to literacy community and to highlight new, innovative, and successful practice relevant to LBS funded agencies across Ontario. Through 'key informant' interviews with practitioners, administrators, and consultants in Ontario's literacy field, OLC identified *Numeracy, Transitions (from LBS onward)*, and *Learning Disabilities* as three areas of interest for literacy programs. Three highly experienced literacy consultants were hired to research and write each bulletin the guidance of a project committee. We sincerely hope that programs find these bulletins useful and that they spark an interest for further exploration into these three areas.

Susan Toews
Field Development Coordinator, OLC

Acknowledgements

Research and Writing
Lisa Hagedorn, *Numeracy*
Judith Bond, Workplace Training and Services Inc., *Transitions*
Pat Hatt, *Learning Disabilities*

Editing and Project Management
Susan Toews

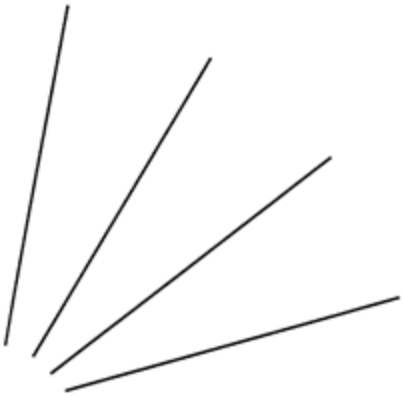
Design
Tina Kablau, *Riel Designs*
Lisa Hagedorn (Numeracy bulletin)
Judith Bond (Transitions bulletin)

Project Committee:
Tom Ciancone, *Toronto District School Board*
Linda Conley, *Prince Edward Learning Centre, Picton*
Diane Coombs, *Laubach Literacy Ontario/Upper Canada District School Board*
Guy Ewing, *Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy*
Barb Glass, *Canadore College, North Bay*
Christine Lamarra, *Peel Adult Learning Centre, Mississauga*
Louise Leduchowski, *Reading Plus, Atitokan*
Trudy Lothian, *Ottawa-Carleton Catholic School Board*
Lily Martin, *YMCA, Hamilton*

Special thanks to...
Dalia Taylor, Centre for Language Training and Assessment, Peel Board of Education
Patricia Brady, Ontario Literacy Coalition
Doug Rankin, formerly of OLC, for initiating this project

Best Practice and Innovations is a publication of the Ontario Literacy Coalition. Funding for project has been generously provided by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities, Literacy and Basic Skills Section and by the National Literacy Secretariat.

BEST PRACTICES AND INNOVATIONS



[What are Learning Disabilities?]

[Why Should Literacy Practitioners Know About Learning Disabilities?]

[Most Common Learning Disabilities]

[What is a Good Screening Tool?]

[Dealing with a Learning Disability]

[Strategies for Working with Learning Disabilities]

[Accomodating Learning Disabilities]

[Working with Technology]

[Disclosure]

[Examples of Successful Practice]

[Further Reading]

[Contacts]

Learning Disabilities

A Note From Pat Hatt, Learning Disabilities Specialist with over 30 years' experience in adult education...

Dear Reader,

Before you begin reading, I think it is important to think about the issue of disability and what it means to you.

For many practitioners to even think that their learner has a disability is difficult. To them, a disability says that someone is broken. They feel their learners should not be labelled with a disability because it means society will give up. They feel that learning disabilities is used as a reason for people to say that the learner can never learn.

This is, of course, not true. People with disabilities are not "broken",' they are individuals who must do things differently.

As an individual with a disability, I understand the limitations that my learning disability puts on the way I do things. I know that I will never be a ballerina, a fashion model or a nuclear physicist due to a lack of talent, body type and intellectual ability,' however, I do not accept that my learning disability prevents me from being what I would have been if I did not have it. My learning disability interferes with my ability to do several things, among them reading, but I can work around that. I can still reach my potential.

Pat

What are Learning Disabilities?

Learning disabilities is a term used to describe a large group of neurological disorders that interfere with a person's ability to store, process, or produce information. Learning disabilities are separate from and not caused by limited intellectual functioning (low 10), or sensory, psychiatric, or mobility disabilities.

Learning disabilities can affect one or more areas of development. Individuals with learning disabilities can have marked difficulties on certain types of tasks while excelling at others.

Since learners who have sensory, psychiatric, or mobility disabilities may also have learning disabilities it is essential to understand that a learning disability is a disability in itself and can be detected apart from any other problem an individual may have. A developmental or Intellectual disability is separate from a learning disability, but some information processing problems may be common to both.

Some people think that if an individual has trouble learning, it means he has a learning disability. This is not true. Everyone, from time to time, has difficulty learning due to many problems, such as fatigue, stress, illness, drug or alcohol problems, or a lack of proper nutrition. As well, some other disabilities may make learning difficult such as a developmental disability or a head injury that results in damage to cognitive functioning.

The important thing to always remember is that learning disabilities are real disabilities. Having learning disabilities has nothing to do with being lazy or not trying. It is not the result of poor teaching, poor curriculum or lack of educational funding. It is not an 'excuse' for an individual who has limited intellectual ability.

A learning disability is a real thing. It exists like any other disability and, until we can find a true cure, we must work around it. It is real and to deny that is to ignore the realities of those who day-to-day must live with its effects.

What Causes Learning Disabilities?

Research as to what causes learning disabilities has been carried out over the past century. It was research of veterans who had suffered loss of cognitive functioning as a result of battle during World War I that first suggested that the problems some children suffer trying to learn might be similar to mild brain damage rather than a lack of intellectual ability.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a cluster of symptoms related to difficulty learning was identified. This 'condition' was first called 'minimal brain dysfunction' until 1963 when researcher and educator Samuel Kirk established the term, "learning disability".

Research primarily focussed on children and learning until the late 1980s and early 1990s, when researchers began to look at issues related to adolescents and then adults with learning disabilities.

Considering the prevalence of learning disabilities in the general population (commonly believed to be up to 10%), research is still relatively sparse. What we do know is that learning disabilities may be hereditary. There is ongoing research in this area, including family genetics studies, examining specific genes and looking for genetic "markers". Research using functional brain imaging (MRI's) is being used to identify particular brain areas that function differently in certain types of learning disabilities.

READ...

"I Always Hated School." Making Sense of the Frustration. By Janet Johnston. St. Catherines Ontario: Sureen Publishing 1996.

Learning About Literacy and Disability by Shelley Butler. *St. Christopher House Adult Literacy Program.* Toronto, 1992.

Taking the Mystique Out of Learning Disabilities. A Practical Guide for Literacy Tutors by Ricky Goldstein. Saint John: Laubach Literacy of Canada, 1989.

WATCH:

About Us: Adults With Learning Disabilities - 33 min. Four adults with learning disabilities from different backgrounds speak about the difficulties, challenges, and achievements they have experienced.

Available from the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, Toronto (LDAO)

We also know that learning disabilities can develop if there is trauma before, during, or after birth. For example, there is a high incidence of learning disabilities in individuals born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Experts do not know precisely what causes learning disabilities. Because of a lack of common knowledge of this area, many adults only learn they have learning disabilities when their children are diagnosed.

What we know for sure is that there is empirically sound research to indicate that learning disabilities do exist.

Does This Sound Familiar?

When reviewing the past few weeks of progress as part of the training plan, Mario started to see a pattern in the problems that Stephen, a learner in his group, was having. Stephen's answers were hit and miss. He got hard ones right and easy ones wrong. Mario knew Stephen was trying hard and that his mistakes were not due to carelessness. In discussion Stephen said that he just couldn't get organized. Information got mixed up. Mario suggested that perhaps he had some organizational problems and described what that meant. Stephen's face brightened. "That's me," he said, "You're explaining it perfectly." Mario asked if Stephen wanted to learn more.

True Stories from Literacy Programs!

Does This Sound Familiar?

During their initial assessment period Harry mentioned that he had missed a lot of school because his family moved three or four times a year. His tutor said that was why he couldn't read, because he was never around long enough to be taught "the basics" (his training plan centered on the basics). But Harry knew it was something else. His younger, and in his opinion, less intelligent, brother, had the same experience but he was a good reader. It didn't. add up.

True Stories from Literacy Programs!

Why Should Literacy Practitioners Know About Learning Disabilities?

Individuals come to a literacy program because they have trouble reading, writing, or doing math. The fact that they may have great difficulty in these areas despite previous instruction does not mean that they have a learning disability, However, it is a possibility and it should be addressed in any screening or assessment tool used.

Some people may have great trouble reading or writing because of a developmental or intellectual disability. Others may have missed a lot of school due to frequent moves, behavioural difficulties, or undiagnosed vision or hearing problems. For others, it may have been the social devaluation of literacy in their lives.

Some learners in literacy programs may have problems such as those described in the previous paragraph and/or they may have learning disabilities. It is commonly believed that learning disabilities are present in up to 10% of the general population but up to 30% in literacy classes. This is not surprising as individuals who had much trouble learning as children may have had undiagnosed learning disabilities and would, of course, have literacy or numeracy problems as adults.

READ:

Train the Trainer: Literacy and Learning Disabilities, A Training Package for Literacy Personnel by Lisa Decease. Sudbury: Sudbury Literacy Community, 1998.

Dyslexia: How Do We Learn? By John 0'Shea and Jenny Dalton. Australia: Hill of Content Publishing Company Ltd. 1994.

For a long time literacy practitioners have identified learners who did not benefit from common literacy teaching methods. In some cases, practitioners use learning disabilities screening tools or have access to formal testing. In other cases, practitioners seem to 'just know' what the problems are. The most important thing is that practitioners find methods that work for each learner's individual difficulties.

On the following page you will find a list of just some of the learning disabilities that are commonly diagnosed. However, knowing someone has dyslexia, dysgraphia, or dyscalculia is just a starting point. Developing and applying methods to help work with these disabilities is what's important.

Dyslexia: a learning disability dealing with reading

Dysgraphia: a learning disability dealing with writing

Dyscalculia: a learning disability dealing with using numbers

Does This Sound Familiar?

Bill, a literacy practitioner, knows that field identified training needs are important so he keeps trying to get his supervisor, Pam, to arrange for professional development on learning disabilities. Pam jokes and says Bill sees learning disabilities in all of his students. Bill, embarrassed, stops asking. It's hard for practitioners when their peers can't see how common learning disabilities are in the learners they work with.

True Stories from Literacy Programs!

What Are The Most Common Learning Disabilities in Literacy and Numeracy?

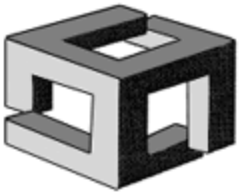
The three most common learning disabilities are the ones dealing with visual processing of information, auditory processing of information, and the ability to organize, store and retrieve information. These are also the ones that can most effectively be dealt with in literacy programs. For numeracy, the issue of rote recall of facts, problems with sequencing and the difficulty seeing relationships and understanding three-dimensional objects are the most common problems.

Three Common learning Disabilities

- **Visual Processing Disability:**
  A learner may have trouble recognizing or remembering visual information such as words or letters. The words on the page may appear to 'jump around'. The learner may have difficulty tracking information and following text, and may reverse letters in writing.

- **Auditory Processing Disability:**
  An auditory processing disability means that a learner has trouble recognizing, making sense of, and remembering auditory information such as spoken words, letters or sounds. The learner may not understand the nuances of speech. He may not recognize differences in tone when someone is speaking and may have difficulty processing a series of instructions.

- **Organizational or Information Storage and Retrieval Disability:**
  An organizational or information storage and retrieval disability means that the learner has difficulty processing information quickly. He needs time to figure out what is meant, then where to "link it up" to other similar or meaningful information he already knows. When he retrieves the information, he has trouble finding where he put it. The cues he uses are greatly reduced. When attacking a new task or skill he has difficulty "making sense" of it and feels that unless, he truly understands, he can't do the task. These individuals often think of themselves and are thought of by others as slow learners. In fact, they learn as well as others but they process information more slowly and easily "freeze up" under stress.



Possible Signs

Possible Signs of a Disability Related to Writing:

- Problems with grammar and syntax
- Writes numbers or letters backwards or upside down (*b* for *d*; *p* for *q*; *u* for *n*; *m* for *w*)
- Spells the same word differently in the same writing sample
- Weak visual memory for spelling patterns
- Writing reveals poor organization
- Inconsistent memory for sentence mechanics
- Reverses letters in spelling (*Friday* becomes *Firday*; *girl* becomes *gril*)
- Mixes capital and lower case letters inappropriately (SunDay)
- Poor handwriting; letter formation inconsistent
- Frequent punctuation errors
- Continuously whispers to self while writing
- Seems to have difficulty getting words from brain to hand

Possible Signs of a Disability Related to Reading:

- Oral reading is choppy; words skipped, endings left off, frequent repetitions
- Cannot use phonics to sound out words
- Reads words or syllables backwards (*was* for *saw*; *net* for *ten*)
- Reads with overdependence on guessing and, as such, comprehension is compromised
- Loses place on page when reading
- When reading silently, appears to be re-reading or reading very slowly

READ:

Target Literacy: A Learning Disabilities Resource Guide by Pat Hatt and Eva Nichols. Toronto: 1992.

The Learning Profile Self Assessment Tool by Janet Johnston. St. Catherines, Ontario: Sureen Publishing 1995

Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities. Ottawa: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

What is a Good Screening Tool?

What About a Formal Assessment?

Good Screening Tools

A good screening tool can help practitioners help learners with suspected learning disabilities to understand their strengths and weaknesses and the reasons behind their struggles and difficulties. The informal nature of the information gathering process enables the practitioner to include the learner in determining appropriate instruction.

There is no one screening too or test that is always appropriate or useful. There are many options to choose from. The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada has a screening tool in its book Destination Literacy that many feel is effective. Another useful tool can be found in the book, Target Literacy. Some practitioners prefer shortened versions and have developed their own assessment tools. Practitioners need to explore their options and adapt tools to meet the needs of their learners and their programs.

In searching for or creating a good screening tool, keep in mind the following critical elements. The screening tool should be able to do the following:

- discriminate between learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities
- identify strengths and weaknesses in the learner's skills and abilities
- specifically identify the areas affected by the disability
- recognize that learning disabilities go beyond literacy and affect the learner's personal life and work (a good screening tool should ask questions about processing difficulties outside of a literacy program setting)

CLICK!

Learning Disabilities On Line: Research, Information & Tips
www.ldonline.org

Formal Assessments

Some learners want a formal assessment to help them obtain accommodation in the workplace or special needs services in college. The results of a formal assessment can also help learners to understand their own strengths and weaknesses.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (LDAO) makes a clear distinction between a screening tool and a formal assessment done by a trained psychologist. Under the Regulated Health Professions Act, only a psychologist or designated psychological associate can officially diagnose a learning disability. However, formal assessments can be very expensive, from $800 to $1500. Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario is working on a pilot project to create greater access to affordable assessments. At present, it is very difficult to find one at a reduced rate or free of charge. Also difficult is finding a psychologist who understands adult literacy and learning disabilities and whose recommendations reflect the learner's literacy needs and the ability of the literacy community to meet those needs.

Until public health insurance covers learning disabilities assessments or the Learning Disabilities Association is successful in securing funding for such assessments, and until there are sufficient numbers of psychologists who are competent in the dual fields of adult literacy and learning disabilities, it is important for literacy programs to continue to develop and refine literacy appropriate diagnostic tools. Interested practitioners should consult their local chapter of Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario for further information.

A list of LDAO local chapters can be found at the end of this bulletin.

What Can You Expect From a Formal Assessment?

A comprehensive assessment by a member of the College of Psychologists is required to diagnose a learning disability. This process should involve an interview and a series of different types of tests, which may take several hours and require more than one appointment.

The formal assessment should consist of:

- **An initial interview:** a thorough review of personal, medical, academic, and work history
- **Tests of cognitive functioning and information processing:** the psychologist will test the client's short and long-term memory, receptive and expressive language; verbal and non-verbal abstract reasoning or logic; attention span; visual perceptual abilities, including spatial tasks; sequencing, right-left orientation and fine motor dexterity; and organizational and planning skills
- **Tests of academic achievement:** the psychologist will administer various tests that assess basic skill areas of reading (vocabulary, word recognition, comprehension, phonemic awareness), spelling, written expression (mechanical and creative aspects) and mathematics (computation and problem-solving). Study skills, organizational and workplace skills (e.g. time management) may also be assessed.
- **Social and emotional evaluations:** the psychologist will use formal instruments to determine whether social/emotional problems occur concurrently with or are secondary to learning disabilities. Anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem and attention deficit disorder are important areas to examine.
- **Feedback interview and written report:** the results of the testing, along with suggestions for remediation to improve weaknesses, or compensatory strategies and accommodations to cope more effectively with problem areas are shared with the client. The report should provide a clear statement about whether or not there are learning disabilities; the types, extent, and severity of the learning disabilities; an outline of strengths and weaknesses, guidelines for remediation and compensatory strategies; and recommended accommodations in academic or employment settings.

Adapted from "Adults with Learning Disabilities and Assessment", LDAO

Sometimes local organizations will conduct L.D. assessments at a subsidized rate. Contact the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario for further information on locations for testing near you.

Preparing a Learner for a Formal Assessment

When a learner has decided to seek a formal assessment and is exploring options related to this, he should be prepared to ask a potential assessor certain questions. Here are some questions that the learner should ask the psychologist prior to having an assessment:

1. What are your qualifications?
2. Do you have special experience testing adults with learning disabilities? What can you tell me about this area?
3. What kinds of tests do you use and what information do you get from them?
4. How will you share these test results with me?
5. What are the benefits of having a formal assessment done?

Supporting a Learner After a Formal Assessment

When a learner returns to the literacy program after undergoing a formal assessment, he will probably need follow-up counselling to help him understand his assessment results.

The learner will likely need support in the following areas:

- *Understanding the results in a positive way.* The report may summarize results and present an overall average assessment of the learner's skills that is not meaningful to him.
- *Understanding specific terms used in the report and what they mean for him.*
- *Highlighting his strengths that may be mentioned in the report but which he may overlook.*
- *Connecting to other supports in the community such as groups for adults with learning disabilities or centres that offer support and counselling.*

WATCH:

How Difficult Can This Be?
Understanding Learning Disabilities - 70 min.

Dr. Richard Lavoie, director of Eagle Hill School Outreach, conducts a workshop with parents, teachers, and professionals designed to show them how it feels to have a learning disability. These adults struggle to answer questions, read aloud, and do challenging exercises In an atmosphere that produces frustration, anxiety, and tension. This is a very effective video for anyone working with persons with learning disabilities.

Available from L.D.A.O.

Dealing with a Learning Disability

Talking to Learners About Learning Disabilities

Most literacy programs do not have ready and free access to learning disabilities testing. As well many programs may feel that testing for many learners, is not necessary or desired. With a lack of Information from a formal diagnosis by a trained professional, a practitioner should avoid telling a learner that he has a learning disability.

Instead, the practitioner should focus on what she has discovered by working with the learner. A practitioner can tell a learner that he seems to have problems similar to or the same as those of people with learning disabilities. Rather than focusing on 'labelling' the learner, the idea is to focus on the specific habits and practices of the learner and to work on techniques to deal with those difficulties.

The practitioner should explain in as many ways and as often as possible that having special difficulties DOES NOT MEAN that the learner is not intelligent or cannot learn. The practitioner should encourage the learner to believe that she

- can learn
- can be successful
- can work with her teacher or tutor to find the best methods to help her learn in the program and to continue to learn after she leaves the program

Without these reassurances, the learner with learning disabilities may leave the program and may never try to get help again.

WATCH:

A Different Way of Learning *- 10 min.*

Four successful adults with learning disabilities discuss how they compensate for their difficulties.

Available from LDAO

READ:

Links in Learning*, A manual linking second language learning, literacy, and learning disabilities.* By Pat Hatt and Eva Nichols, MESE Consulting Ltd, West Hill: Ontario 1995.

Bringing Literacy Within Reach*: Identifying and Teaching Adults With Learning Disabilities.* Ottawa: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

Finding The Right Method Or Strategy

Although literacy practitioners are usually not officially qualified to diagnose learning disabilities, they are knowledgeable and can use their teaching experience to recognize difficulties and explain them to the learner. If they are aware of common signs of learning disabilities, they will be able to notice patterns in the reading and writing skills of their learners that may signify information processing problems. Even without a formal assessment, they can gather enough information through working with the learner and through observation to talk to the learner about what 'channels to learning' are open and what aren't functioning well.

Practitioners should talk to learners in terms of what seems to work best for them and teach them to understand how they learn best. The practitioner may use resources such as OLC's The Level Descriptions Manual, Self-Management and Self-Direction section, to help learners see the important feature of observing their own learning habits, taking control of how they learn and managing their own learning.

Strategies for Working with Learning Disabilities

The main thing for practitioners to remember is that they will not be able to 'fix' the learning disability. The key is to deal with the learner's weaknesses by focusing on his strengths. Once a practitioner begins to work with a learner with learning disabilities and finds out what they need to "work around", the practitioner can then teach skills and information this learner may not have been exposed to. Many examples of possible strategies to use can be found in many of the manuals listed in this bulletin, such as Destination Literacy.

Learners with **problems processing visual information** will have difficulty remembering common words and word patterns. For these learners,

- Use a sounding-out or phonics-based reading program
- Teach spelling rules with easy ways to remember them (e.g. "When two vowels go out walking, the first one does the talking")
- Teach word skills to find answers quickly in a text
- Teach pre-reading skills to show the learner how to recognize familiar patterns in the layout of a text and what to look for when reading

Learners with **problems processing auditory information** will have difficulty using sound-based methods such as phonics and 'sounding out' words. For these learners,

- Help the learner to build his sight word vocabulary so that he can recognize common words without having to 'sound them out'
- Have each learner create flash cards with personalized and meaningful vocabulary to use to build sight word memory
- Start with stories the learner has written to practice reading-vocabulary will be familiar
- Teach new words before presenting them to the learner in a reading passage

Learners with **problems organizing information** will have likely missed information and skills learned 'incidentally' or indirectly in school. For these learners,

- Teach them to recognize the patterns writers use (e.g. where to look for the main idea of a paragraph)
- Explain and explore the different purposes for reading (e.g. to gather general information, for enjoyment, for specific information)
- Find out what memory patterns they use that are successful. Use spelling 'tricks' (e.g. remember how to spelling "business": you take the BUS to work to make a lot of $$--BUSine$$)

It is important to remember that the materials or strategies used with learners with learning disabilities do not need to be from a special 'learning disabilities program'. In fact, standardized programs likely won't produce the desired effects. What is important is finding out how the learner learns best and using that knowledge to select a method that works. The materials and the methods will probably be a combination of those the practitioner already knows and ones that can be easily acquired using material the practitioner would normally use for building literacy skills.

WATCH:

Adults With Learning Disabilities: The Road To Success - 58 min.

Learning Disability specialist, Janet Johnston, explains her understanding of learning disabilities and illustrates her approach to tutoring using clips from actual sessions.

Available from LDAO

WATCH:

Ready, Willing, And Able: Hidden Assets - 15 min.

A brief introduction to the issues faced by persons with learning disabilities in the workplace. The concept of providing reasonable accommodation is explored: This video will alleviate some of the concerns of employers about employing individuals with this handicap.

Available from LDAO

Accommodating Learning Disabilities in Learning Activities and Demonstrations of Skill

A literacy practitioner should first understand the difference between two common terms in learning disabilities literature: "accommodation" and "modification".

Accommodation means that you adjust the conditions of the activity or show the learner how to apply strategies when doing the activity while still maintaining the complexity of the skills. Making accommodations is a way of enabling the learner to effectively learn or demonstrate skills despite the learning disability.

Making accommodations for learning disabilities is not about making the activity 'easier'. It's about recognizing roadblocks that interfere with performance and will not go despite instruction and work.

Modification means you change what is to be learned in a learning activity or demonstrated in a skills assessment. The material or the skill is "watered down" or simplified. Many of the critical skills or elements are removed from the task so as to make learning and applying a skill easier. This approach was common in the former 'basic level' courses in high school.

Modification of learning activities and demonstrations of skills should not be done for adult learners with learning disabilities. Instead of ***modification*** of an activity, which may result in the learner not developing essential skills, the practitioner should ***accommodate*** the learning disability by having the learner do the task or acquire the skill in a different way.

Accommodation means

- **you change the conditions of the activity, or**
- **show the learner how to apply strategies when doing the activity**

while still maintaining the complexity of the activity...

...so that the learner can effectively learn or demonstrate skills despite the learning disability.

Making Accommodations for Learning Disabilities

Practitioners may find that they can help learners who have learning disabilities to build certain skills, but other skills, due to the disability, do not Improve, even over time and after applying extensive effort.

Working with an accommodation means that the practitioner gives the learner the opportunity to demonstrate what he has learned while making a realistic accommodation to deal with the disability.

An Example of Making Accommodations:
Demonstration:
Writing a Letter to the Landlady

If the learner has learned the format of a letter, the mechanics of a basic sentence, and the vocabulary to express what he wants to say in writing ,but continues to have severe spelling problems which have not improved due to a text-based disability, these problems must be 'worked around'. This may mean encouraging the learner to use a dictionary or helping the learner to use Spell Check in a word processing program. It may also mean that spelling is not 'marked' in the demonstration. The practitioner must make sure that she is accommodating the disability while still maintaining the complexity of the other skills being assessed in the demonstration and not modifying the whole activity to make it 'easier'.

It is very important that the learner understand the reasons for making the accommodation and the difference between modifying an activity to reduce the skill level required and accommodating a learning disability while still assessing skills.

The learner should be able to explain any accommodations he requires so that he can communicate his needs in situations outside of the LBS program. Understanding when accommodation for the learning disability is needed and that receiving accommodations is not 'cheating', is a critical success factor for learners with learning disabilities.

Working with Technology

In many literacy programs, learners use computers for surfing the Internet, sending e-mail, or typing their own writing using a word processing program. As well, they may use fax machines, photocopiers and voice mail systems.

Using new technology can be difficult, especially for someone with a learning disability. Difficulties dealing with new technology, such as leaving voice mail messages or sending e-mail may make the learner with a learning disability feel that this is yet another way to be viewed as incompetent. It is important to be aware of persistent difficulties that a learner may be having dealing with technology, especially after being given appropriate instruction and guidance.

Individuals with learning disabilities may have particular trouble with the following:

- reading text on a computer screen
- using a keyboard or mouse
- keeping up with the fast speed of a computer program
- recognizing patterns, seeing relationships and following paths required when using a computer
- Keeping track of different computer programs-knowing what each one can do
- Keeping up with constant changes to technology

As well, the learner may be missing some 'insider knowledge' that others learn incidentally and remember, such as common computer terms "cut and paste", "download" or "search engine".

CLICK!

Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario
www.ldao.on.ca

The National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center
http://www.nifl.gov/

The practitioner and the learner need to find ways of making the technology work for the learner. When they are successful in doing this, the learner can benefit from new technology. Computer software that makes accommodations for certain learning disabilities is available. Although quite expensive, software that translates voice to text and text to voice as well as software that 'reads' text can be found at most large computer stores. Also available is software that responds to the voice commands of the user. Even something as common as Spell Check and Grammar Check in word processing programs can be very useful to a learner with specific visual difficulties.

Rather than avoiding using new technology which can enhance their access to information and their ability to communicate, learners should try to find out how their disabilities affect their ability to use and benefit from the technology they have access to.

Does This Sound Familiar?

One of Gerry's identified goals was to use a computer. He had been told that if he learned how to use a computer his learning disability would not be an issue. He tried, but the icons were hard to find and he forgot what they meant. He couldn't learn to type even though he had taken lessons several times with several methods. He felt like even more of a failure. He and his tutor revised his computer goals to see how he could accommodate this problem in a different way.

True stories from literacy programs.

Disclosure: *Helping Learners Decide When To Tell Others About Their Learning Disabilities*

Before telling others about their learning disabilities, learners must decide whether or not it is in their best interest to do so.

The following list of points to keep in mind should help learners decide whether or not to tell potential employers, friends, or even family members about their learning disabilities.

When is telling others about your learning disabilities in your best interest?

- **To get services**, such as help to fill out forms correctly to get benefits or tax refunds
- **To get accommodations**, such as extended time to write an entrance exam or a grade 12 equivalency test (GED)
- **To get fair understanding of your situation**, such as in a job interview when explaining past work and school experience
- **To share ways for you to be more productive and successful**, such as with a new teacher or co-workers
- **To qualify for subsidies**, such as a bursary for students with learning disabilities to pay for a course

When is telling others about your learning disabilities NOT in your best interest?

- When you believe that the person or organization will use that information prevent your success or make you feel incompetent
- When you believe that it will NOT help in getting the services or resources that you need

Adapted from Destination Literacy

Does This Sound Familiar?

By doing role playing with his literacy teacher, George practiced telling his employer that he had a learning disability' and what help he needed, George said, "Harry, in my literacy class I discovered I am really good when I get written instructions. Maybe if you could jot down what you wanted me to do I could make sure I do exactly what you want." Using these strategies, George was able to convince his boss that he had the ability to get that promotion, thus achieving his goal.

True stories from literacy programs.

Leaving The Literacy Program: What Do Learners with Learning Disabilities Need to Know?

In some ways, the factors for a successful transition for learners with learning disabilities are the same as for everyone else. All learners need to know their strengths and weaknesses and how they learn best. All learners need the confidence to leave the program and to continue to work toward their long-term goals. Learners with learning disabilities, however, have additional concerns.

These learners should know what strategies help them to learn. They need to know what accommodations they need when attempting to demonstrate the skills they have developed. They also need information on services that they may be able to access. Various supports are offered through these bodies:

- Ontario Works
- Ontario Disability Support Program (Employment Supports)
- Canadian Pension Plan Disability
- Human Resources Development Canada (Employment Insurance)

Individuals with learning disabilities need to know that their disabilities are recognized under the Human Rights Code. They need to know when and how to tell someone about their learning disabilities. They need to be able to describe their disabilities and request help without feeling stupid or that they are "begging". They need to be in control of their learning disabilities and not feel controlled by them.

Practitioners should feel comfortable that everything they have done in the literacy program to help the learner understand and work with their learning disabilities will help them when they continue to work toward their goals.

READ:

***Demystifying Dyslexia**: Raising Awareness and Developing Support for Dyslexic Young People and Adults*, by Cynthia Klein and Marysia Krupska. London: Language and literacy Unit 1991.

***A Brutal Way of Learning**: Does It Have To Be?* By Dan Haley and Jane Davidson. Davidson Communications 2000

Can a Practitioner ALWAYS Help Someone with a Learning Disability?

No, other community partners also need to help - researchers, government, employers, social agencies, and psychologists, just to name a few. There are individuals and organizations out there trying to level the playing field for learners with learning disabilities.

Remember, whenever a study was done to identify success factors for individuals with learning disabilities, highest on the list and deemed by all participants to be the critical factor was contact with someone who believed in them and knew they could be successful. Isn't that what committed practitioners bring to the learners they work with? A belief they will succeed and a faith in them.

Examples of Successful Practice Across Ontario

- ***Suzan Gerber*** teaches a literacy program for the Toronto District School Board in partnership with Seneca College. In a small group setting, this special focus program has successfully provided learners with an opportunity to learn and talk about issues related to their learning disabilities, while developing strategies to make them more effective in literacy and numeracy.

- ***The Niagara District School Board*** partnered with Janet Johnston's company, Learning Potentials, to provide assessments, training plans, and programming to learners with learning disabilities. This successful program assists learners to move through the literacy program and into the workplace in sixteen weeks.

- ***Donna Smith***, a literacy provider in London, has had excellent success with learners with learning disabilities using old "tried and true" teaching techniques such as developing personal word bingo games that is played by the whole family and small, pocket-sized word dictionaries. Sometimes simpler is better if it meets the needs of learners with learning disabilities.

- ***An instructor*** in a community-based program in eastern Ontario identified that using a computer to write seemed to free her learner from a fear of writing. The learner was able to develop strategies and use computer programs such as spell-check, grammar-check, and cut and paste to minimize the effect of her learning disabilities. This allowed her to achieve her goal of expressing her thoughts through writing.

- ***Pat Powell***, in Peterborough, realized that learning disabilities was one of many barriers that a learner might face. Her agency secured partnership funding to hire an individual who understood learning disabilities but was also able to deal with the other "stuff' that learners had to face. This allowed the LBS staff to focus on helping the learner develop effective strategies to work around their learning disabilities and acquire the needed literacy and numeracy skills.

- ***Denise Tremblay***, in Cochrane, expressed the value of getting to know her learner and how they learn. It was with a little surprise and a lot of pride that by doing what seemed right, i.e. finding out how her learners learn best, that she learned she was already effectively serving her learners with learning disabilities.

- ***Elva Lickers***, a literacy program coordinator, combines reality therapy/choice theory to enable her learners to deal with the problems in their lives. This then allows them to deal with and find ways to work around the barriers created by their learning disabilities and to acquire useful literacy and numeracy skills.

Further Reading...

Brandt, Ronald, Maria D'Arcangelo & John Robbins. 1992. *Learning About Learning*. Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Gonter-Guastad, Martha & Trinka Messenheimer - Young. 1991. "Dialogue Journals for Students with Learning Disabilities." *Teaching Exceptional Children*. (Journal)

Hatt, Pat. 2000. *Special Needs Assessment Procedures*. Toronto: Toronto District School Board.

Johnston, Janet. M. Ed. 1996. *Adults with Learning Disabilities: The Road to Success Program Manual*. St. Catharines, Ontario: Sureen Publishing and Productions/Learning Potentials.

Karassik, June W. 1989. *Literacy and Learning Disabilities: A Handbook for Literacy Workers*. Ottawa: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

Klein, Cynthia & Robin R. Millar. 1990. *Unscrambling Spelling*. London: The Educational Publishing Division of Hodder and Stoughton Ltd.

Miniely, Donna. 1992. *Seek, Gather and Process: A Research Manual for Literacy Programs*. Toronto: Program-based Research Special Interest Group of the Ontario Literacy Coalition.

Purton, Debbie. 1990. *Instructional Strategies for Adults with Learning Disabilities: Tutor's Handbook*. Yorkton, Saskatchewan: Parkland Regional College.

Rappapport-Morris, Lisa & Linda Schultz. 1989. *Creative Play Activities for Children with Disabilities: A Resource Book for Teachers and Parents*. Champaign, Illinois: Developed by The Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation. Human Kinetics Books.

Shapiro, Joan & Rebecca Rich. 1999. *Facing Learning Disabilities in the Adult Years*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Cathy. M.A. 1991. *For You: Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Ottawa: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

Sutcliff, Jeannie. 1990. *Adults with Learning Disabilities: Education for Choice and Empowerment*. Leicester: The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

Webber, Marlene. 1983. *The Right to Read: Organizer's Guide to the Frontier College Student-Centred Individualized Learning Program*. Toronto: Frontier College.

_____1999. *Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities*. Ottawa: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

_____1991. *Bringing Literacy Within Reach: Identifying and Teaching Adults*

with Learning Disabilities. Ottawa: Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

_____1984. *Learning Again: A Guide to Helping Dysphasic Adults with Basic Communication*. London: The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit.

_____1989. *Lifeline to Literacy: People with Disabilities Speak Out*. Ontario: TV Ontario & The Ontario Education Communications Authority.

_____1991. *The Literacy Book: Options for Teaching Literacy to People with Disabilities*. Toronto: Centre for Independent Living in Toronto.

_____1994. *Training Manual for Tutors of Special Needs Students*. Niagara: Literacy Council of Lincoln. Ontario Training and Adjustment Board & United Way.

_____*Strategies Instructional Model*. Kansas City: Centre for Research on Learning, University of Kansas.

Learning Disabilities of Ontario: Local Chapters

Chatham-Kent
Contact: Dawn Babkirk
Tel: (519) 352-2024
ldack@netrover.com

Durham Region (Ajax-Pickering)
Contact: Mrs. Marlene Avery
Tel: (905) 509-4182
platers@pathcom.com

Elgin Co. Committee
Tel: (519) 438-6213

Halton County (Oakville- Burlington)
Contact: Heather Holden
Tel: (905) 844-6905

Hamilton-Wentworth
Contact: Mary Margaret Rooke
Tel: (905) 523-1332
lda@hwcn.org

Kingston
Contact: Lana Greenwood
Tel/Fax: (613) 545-0373
lda@kingston.jkl.net

Kitchener-Waterloo
Contact: Charlotte Buchan
Tel: (519) 743-9091
ldakw@golden.net
www.ldakw.on.ca

Lambton County
Contact: Theresa Perfrement
Tel: (519) 344-7745
www.sarnia.com/groups/lda-lc

London-Middlesex
Contact: Carl Sinclair
Tel: (519) 438-6213
lda@linkd.net
www.ldalr.on.ca/

Huron Co. Committee
Tel: (519) 527-2541

Oxford Co. Committee
Tel: (519) 539-3730

Mississauga
Contact: Liz Brillinger
Tel: (905) 272-4100
ldamiss@idirect.com

Muskoka Satellite (Huntsville)
Tel: (705) 788-7097

Newmarket-Aurora and District
Contact: Terri Hamilton
Tel: (905) 853-6542
ldanad@email.com

Niagara
Contact: Kay MacDonald
Fonthill Office: (905) 892-0479 St.
Catharines Office: (905) 641-1021
ldaniag@becon.org

North Bay & District Satellite
Contact: Kathy Honeysett
Tel: (705) 752-3024
air.repair@svmpatico.ca

North Peel (Brampton)
Contact: Louise Hynds
Tel: (905) 791-4100
lda@idirect.com
www.ldapeel.com/

North York
Contact: Dena Tenenhouse
Tel: (416) 229-1680
skye@ldany.on.ca
[website no longer available online]

Ottawa-Carlton
Contact: Kim Crocker
Tel: (613) 567-5864
LDAO-C@freenet.carleton.ca
www.ncf.ca/ldao-c

Owen Sound Satellite
Contact: Deidrie Gardner
Tel: (519) 599-530
didimom@hotmail.com

Parry Sound Satellite
Contact: Becky Smalldon
Tel: (705) 389-3320

Peterborough
Contact: Mary-Ann Meagher
Tel: (705) 748-9455
ldaptbo@pipcom.com

Quinte (Belleville)
Contact: Sue Dilts
Tel: (613) 969-7426

Sault Ste. Marie
Contact: Ginette Immonen
Tel: (705) 942-4310
lda.ssm@on.aihn.com
www.geocities.com/ldassm/

Simcoe County
Tel: (705) 726-5553

South Simcoe (Alliston)
Contact: Melanie Remonde
Tel: (705) 435-376
ldoffice@ldass.org
www.ldass.org

Thunder Bay
Contact: Linda Van Es
Tel: (807) 768-8786

Toronto
Tel: (416) 229-9046
ldat@ldany.on.ca
[website no longer available online]

Victoria County Satellite (Lindsay)
Contact: Barb Overwijk
Tel: (705) 324-5119
overwijk@attcanada.ca

Wellington County (Guelph)
Contact: Margaret Burnett
Tel: (519) 837-2050

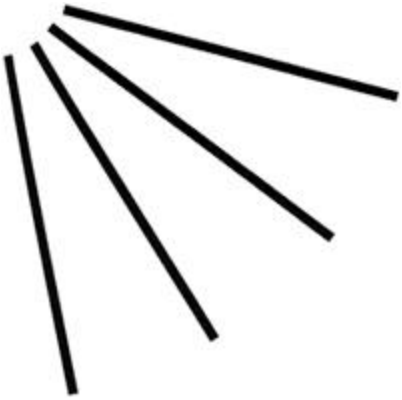
Windsor-Essex County Satellite
Tel: (519) 971-5128
ggignac@wincom.net

York Region (Richmond Hill)
Contact: Lynn Zirald
Tel: (905) 884-7933/471-1620
ldavr@idirect.com
http://webhome.idirect.com/~ldayr/

Windsor-Essex County
Satellite Tel: (519) 971-5128
ggignac@wincom.net

"An adult with learning disabilities will report that they have experienced problems from a very young age. They will display a pattern of strength and areas of need; good in some things and not in others. They may also reveal a pattern of discrepancies between expected outcomes and achievements."

Destination literacy, Chapter 1: Screening Adults of Risk for learning Disabilities

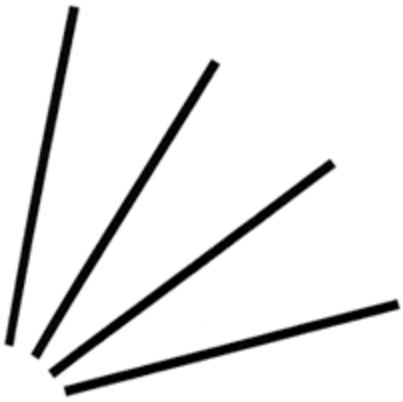


NOTES

To obtain additional copies of Best Practice and Innovations contact:

Ontario Literacy Coalition
365 Bloor St. E. Suite 1003
Toronto Ontario
M4W 3L3

Phone: 416.963.5787
Fax: 416.963.8102
olc@on.literacy.ca



Ontario Literacy Coalition