

Learning Principles

Supporting learners with learning difficulties



Legislation

In the UK, the Disability Discrimination Act became law in 1995 and was extended to include all aspects of education in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001).

While legislation has sought to increase the participation of disabled people in mainstream activities of society, it is claimed by many disabled activists and disabled people's groups that inclusiveness and full citizenship for disabled people have not yet been achieved. This is particularly true for people with learning difficulties.

Until recently, many adults with learning difficulties were institutionalised. Large numbers of people spent their lives in long stay hospitals such as Lennox Castle. Most children with learning difficulties continue to be educated in segregated facilities. In colleges, "special needs" students are also segregated. As a result of the hospital closure programme, people are now living in the community. However, in most areas of life, meaningful integration is proving to be a challenge.

People with learning difficulties have multiple barriers to accessing inclusive, engaging and positive learning experiences

Barriers to be overcome

People with learning difficulties have multiple barriers to accessing inclusive, engaging and positive learning experiences. Less than four per cent of people with learning difficulties are in work. Many people, including those who are supported by services, say that they experience social isolation.

People with learning difficulties are also under-represented in all types of learning environments and this cannot be explained away by lack of interest or an inability to learn.

Their top priorities are to make friends and find jobs. They are also looking for enjoyable and engaging learning that can help them to achieve their ambitions.

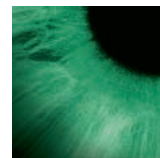
People with learning difficulties have often had life experiences that mean that they may lack:

- confidence and self esteem
- social skills
- previous experiences of learning
- previous positive experiences of learning
- concentration
- memory and recall
- sensory impairments
- literacy and numeracy skills.

Learning centres can help people with learning difficulties to overcome barriers to learning.

Overcoming the barriers

There are some very basic things that learning centres might want to think about that can help to improve the learning experience for people with learning difficulties.



People with learning difficulties need to feel safe and secure so that they feel relaxed enough to learn

The environment

People with learning difficulties often find themselves in environments that have a great deal in common with the institutions that they may have left behind. Some people have moved from one institution to another, while others spend their time in day services. People often think that they are not welcome in a learning environment, because they have no role models and their past experiences of learning has made them wary of failure and certain of not being able to learn. Consider the following:

- can you do anything to make your environment feel welcoming?
- could you involve people in the task of creating a welcoming environment?
- do your marketing materials reflect the diversity of your learning community?
- could you provide clear directions, preferably in written and graphic formats?
- can you offer continuity by avoiding changing staff members and the location of classes?

Personal and community safety

People with learning difficulties need to feel safe and secure so that they feel relaxed enough to learn. Bullying and harassment is often a feature of life for people with a learning difficulty. They experience bullying and harassment in their own homes, in services, on public transport and on the street. This can cause a great deal of distress and often those affected do not know how to deal with it. Learning centre staff can help by:

- checking if this is an issue for people
- being aware of the experience learners have when they are in the centre
- involving people in helping to tackle problems should they arise, for example, by getting them involved in developing and implementing a bullying and harassment policy.

It might be useful to involve the community police if you become aware of any issues of bullying and harassment within the community or on public transport. In our experience, people with learning difficulties are unlikely to be supported to solve their own problems. They are often told to ignore bullying and harassment and rarely get help to tackle the problem directly.

Transport

This is a major issue for people with learning difficulties. Travelling to and from a learning environment can be one of the biggest hurdles to accessing learning. It is worth considering:

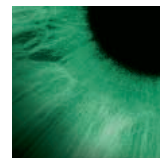
- is financial support available to help with travel?
- could you check with learners to make sure they feel safe and secure travelling to and from the centre?
- could you involve the community police to improve the situation if learners do not feel safe?

Building confidence and self-esteem

Some learners may have had difficulties in their former education, leading to low expectations. Just exposing themselves to a new learning situation may be challenging. Low confidence and self-esteem may make it difficult for learners to believe that they can be successful, and problems to do with learning may seem insurmountable.

Exploring talents and interests can be helpful. Find out what learners are interested in and look for online materials that support and develop their interests. Learning whilst exploring a topic of your choice that interests you is much more engaging than trying to master a skill while doing something you are not interested in. Be sure to recognise successes – these should be nurtured and developed. Learning centres can help by:

Supporting learners with learning difficulties



- asking for a portfolio of pictures on a subject rather than a written report
- asking a learner to interview someone on the subject using mp3 technology
- providing certificates, rewards for each achievement
- using support methods for enhancing time management and organisational skills by providing timetables and giving reminders about hand-in times in a user friendly way.

Accessible information

People with learning difficulties struggle to understand information and this can often be forgotten or overshadowed by physical access issues.

Both of these are essential for social inclusion and information provision is an area that we are all responsible for in some way. When people consider accessibility, they usually think of installing ramps, toilet facilities, induction loop systems and braille signage. While physical access is crucial for the effective inclusion of disabled people, it is not the only thing that services need to consider. If clear, well-produced, up-to-date and accurate information is not available, people with learning difficulties could be excluded from using your centre.

If your information is produced in a clear and straightforward way, and is tailored for the needs of your audience, it is likely that you will include most of the people, most of the time.

People with learning difficulties can become more empowered by getting equal access to information. Information that can be easily understood enables them to take more responsibility for their own lives. It helps them to make decisions and choices that give them more control. Accessible, clear and well-produced information is an essential element of an inclusive approach.

Using graphics

Graphics should be used to enhance text information, whether it's a concept, an account of an event or a description.

In practice, graphics are widely used to great effect - think of the enhancements that maps, photos, graphs and charts make to text information. The key is to make sure that the graphic illustrates the key concept in the text and is relevant to the subject. Beyond that, use your imagination!

The subjective nature of using graphics makes it impossible to test using automated means. Instead, feedback from the users is highly recommended.

Information policy

It is good practice to have an accessible information policy. This is a way of establishing guidelines and procedures that help everyone in the organisation to understand and comply with legislation and good practice. It will help to ensure that an even approach is taken throughout the learning environment.

Accessible technology

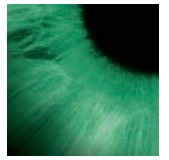
One of the most effective ways that we have found to engage learners is the use of technology to meet the real needs of learners.

In theory, new technology has the potential to:

- deliver engaging learning using multi-media
- be highly interactive
- connect learners

People with learning difficulties can become more empowered by getting equal access to information

Supporting learners with learning difficulties



- record learning
- be accessible.

Unfortunately, in practice, people with learning difficulties rarely have positive learning experiences in relation to ICT hardware or software

Hardware

We have found that the specific equipment needs of people with learning difficulties have not been addressed in the same way as the needs of other disabled people. When people with learning difficulties access computers, they are often using the oldest machines, which also tend to be the slowest. They are often using the smallest monitors, when the largest are the most appropriate, as they have to be able to see the whole browser window. This allows them to access what's on the screen without having to scroll. Scrolling causes confusion and means that people can miss some of the information. Older PCs often struggle to cope with the amount of memory and processing needed when using online material with lots of images.

Giving people access to the best and fastest PCs, with large monitors, will enhance the learning experience. People get confused and bored and lose interest if they have to wait for things to load or appear.

Here is a specification for a computer system that should meet all of the needs of people with learning difficulties:

- Intel Pentium 4 2.4GHz processor
- 1GB ram
- 80Gb hard drive
- 1GB AGP Graphics card
- PCI Soundcard
- CD/DVD drive
- 19" – 21" flat panel monitor
- Keyboard
- Mouse
- Speakers with earphones

Other pieces of access equipment may also be needed, such as rollerballs or large keyboards, and should be identified on an individual basis.

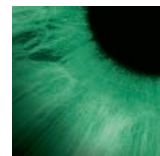
Software

People with learning difficulties often find themselves using software which is inaccessible and not age appropriate. How can you challenge this in your organisation? How can you help others to understand what people with learning difficulties need to help them to learn?

When considering software, think about the following:

- is it age appropriate?
- is it attractive and engaging?
- is it accessible to non-readers?
- does it need any support to set up?
- is it empowering people by encouraging to try as much as possible on their own?

Giving people access to the best and fastest PCs, with large monitors, will enhance the learning experience



Look for sites that are graphics-based and text light, with interactivity to sustain interest and enhance the learning experience

Web-based learning

There are lots of web-based learning packages - most are text heavy and not suitable for people with learning difficulties. Look for sites that are graphics-based and text light, with interactivity to sustain interest and enhance the learning experience.

Bookmark good websites to make them easier for people to access, as web addresses are hard to remember. If passwords are needed, take a note of the details and print them out so that learners don't have to keep re-joining or are denied access because they can't remember the password.

Plug-ins can cause great confusion. Being faced with yet another pop up prompting you to download software can make people become bored and frustrated and give up. It is essential to make sure that all available plug-ins are up-to-date and have been loaded before a learner uses a machine.

Some of the more common plug-ins are Windows Media Player, Quick Time, RealAudio, Real One and Music Match and Browsealoud.

In conclusion

People with learning difficulties have to overcome multiple barriers to have a positive learning experience. Many people who plan and manage learning services and facilities say that have not had experience of engaging learners with learning difficulties. By following the advice outlined above centres will be more likely to provide the right kind of support. This information will help to ensure that people have an enjoyable and fulfilling learning experience, which will develop their skills, build confidence, enhance self-esteem and foster a sense of achievement.

Author

Elizabeth Walsh
Common Knowledge

This paper is part of the Learning Principles series, which aims to provide accessible and practical information for staff in learndirect scotland branded learning centres.

Each document highlights best practice to help people to learn and stay learning.

The series covers a range of themes including sensory impairment, learning difficulties, brain sciences and working with deaf learners.

Learning Principles papers are available in pdf and plain text formats at:

www.lds4partners.com

For more information, contact:

learndirect scotland
Alhambra House, 45 Waterloo Street
Glasgow G2 6HS
Tel: 0141 285 6000
Fax: 0141 285 6001
Email: enquiries@learndirectscotland.com

