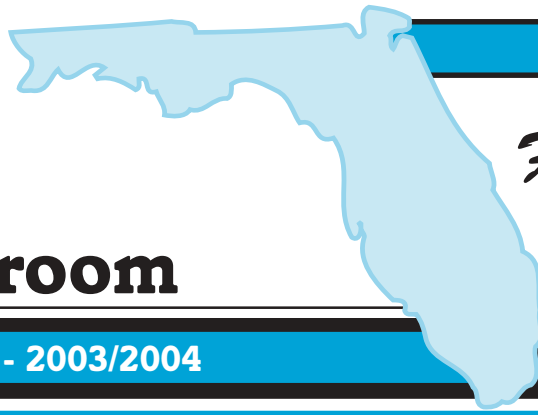


The

Adult Basic Classroom



*For Florida Adult Basic
Education Practitioners*

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If I am not trained in learning disabilities, how can I teach my students who have them? And how will I know if a student has a learning disability?

RECOGNIZING A LEARNING DISABILITY

There is much to manage in an adult education classroom. Each classroom has students working at different levels, on different subjects, with varying language skills and a multiplicity of life experiences. Adding the likely presence of learning disabilities can make even the most experienced teacher's head swim. The first step to working with an adult learner is to recognize if she has a learning disability. A classroom teacher can't do this alone, but he can begin the process.

The actual diagnosis of a particular learning disability can only come from a licensed professional. If you suspect that your student has a learning disability, it is very important to encourage him to be tested. Your student will not have access to all of the support services offered learning disabled students without documentation of the learning disability from a licensed professional. That said, what exactly is it that a teacher can do? It is the teacher who will first notice the problem and find cause to direct the student to testing. For example, the National Center for Learning Disabilities recommends testing for a student who repeatedly shows some of the characteristics below:

- Often spells the same word differently in a single document
- Usually shows reluctance to take on reading or writing tasks
- Regularly has trouble with open-ended questions on tests

- Struggles with weak memory skills
- Frequently has difficulty in adapting skills from one setting to another
- Usually works at a slow pace, slower than most of the other students
- Regularly demonstrates a poor grasp of abstract concepts
- Shows consistent inattention to detail
- Shows excessive focus on detail
- Frequently misreads information
- Has trouble filling out applications or forms
- Is often easily confused by instructions
- Struggles with poor organizational skills

Remember that we all struggle with these things sometimes; it is the pattern of difficulty that is an indicator of a learning disability.

ACCOMMODATING A LEARNING DISABILITY

Once a learning disability has been diagnosed by a licensed professional, your student is guaranteed by law accommodations to enable learning. These accommodations are not difficult or expensive and are, more than likely, things you have already done to fairly enable this student. For example, if one of your students suffers from dysgraphia, a severe difficulty with writing, an accommodation could be allowing that student to do all writing at a word processor. You can accommodate a student with dyscalculia, a severe difficulty with mathematics by allowing her to use a calculator. More time completing tests or writing assignments; allowing breaks during testing; allowing

oral exams; providing a variety of methods for assessment of each skill; and allowing the use of aids such as dictionaries, calculators and spell checkers during assessments are all ways that learning disabilities can easily and cheaply be accommodated in your classroom.

SOME ACCOMMODATIONS BENEFIT ALL LEARNERS

It is important that each student's academic accommodations be determined individually, but there are things you can do as you organize your classroom that will help all learning disabled students, regardless of diagnosis, and will be beneficial to more traditional learners as well. Emphasizing organizational tools and providing repetition will help learners get focused and stay focused. Florida Technet recommends you begin each class with an outline of materials to be covered. Now this does not have to be a whole class plan. It may be that you need to schedule your day so that the first twenty minutes or so are used meeting individually with students and getting them started on their day's agenda. Florida Technet also recommends that you reinforce all new concepts with writing on the board or paper handouts; being sure to give new information to the class or to individual learners in more than one format. Teach note-taking, reading for information, planning an essay, and study skills. Announce reading assignments well in advance so that slower readers may get started early. Make sure that any handouts for the

reading are available early, too, as many readers will need guidance through the text. Allow students to tape record explanations of skills, instructions, class brainstorming sessions, etc. Consider rotating the role of note-taker so that students who have difficulty taking notes and listening at the same time may still be provided with notes. Provide study questions. Finally, close your day as you began it, talking individually with students or with small groups to highlight what was learned and to plan what should come next. Certainly many of these things sound familiar to you because you are already doing some version of them in your classroom. And if that is true, you have already begun the process of accommodating your learning disabled students.

STRENGTHS OF LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

It is important, too, to remember that learning disabled students have many strengths. Often because of having to survive with a learning disability, diagnosed or not, these students can show superior problem-solving skills. Since these adults often can't gain information or complete tasks in the standard way, they learn to seek imaginative solutions "outside the box." They are imaginative and determined. This ability to overcome continues by creating strong compensatory skills in learning disabled adults. If they don't read well, they learn to listen well, memorize well, or interpret visual cues well to compensate and perhaps cover up the skill they lack. They also often develop an outgoing personality. They have learned that asking questions and making friends can take them a long way in compensating for their disability. Adults with learning disabilities can show strong empathy. Having had to struggle, they can empathize with others' struggles. Most importantly, if an adult with a disability has returned to school, you can be sure he is persistent. Such adults show great ability to stick with a task and to work through problems. This doesn't mean they won't have doubts or setbacks, but it does mean that they are better

equipped to survive them.

Adult learners need to know about disabilities just as they need to know about any other strengths and weaknesses they have. History proves that adult learners with disabilities have greater success once the disability has been recognized, and they are aware of how it affects them and are given ways to work around it. It is helpful to know why you are struggling and that there are resources to help you; it is helpful to know that you are not "stupid."

So teaching an adult learner with a learning disability is much like teaching any other adult learner. You have to pay attention to where they are struggling, and recommend testing if it has not already been done. You have to create individualized learning goals, plans and accommodations. You have to encourage and reward and you have to expect to learn from them. There is nothing like a new set of eyes to help us think "outside the box" ourselves!

Sources:

Florida Technet offers web-based training on learning disabilities at <http://floridatechnet.org/>.

National Center for Learning Disabilities online at http://www.ld.org/livingwithld/doihaveid_home.cfm

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We hope you enjoy this newsletter. If you have any comments or questions, please contact Lynn Cunill, Leon County Schools Adult & Community Education, (850) 922-5343, cunilll@ACE-Leon.org.

The *Bridges to Practice* website is a gem of a source for adult educators. Devoted to educating adult education practitioners about learning disabilities, *Bridges to Practice* is thorough, user friendly and up-to-date. It offers training, a bulletin board to which practitioners contribute, and a free newsletter called *Practitioners' Points*. Three years worth of *Practitioners' Points* are currently available online at the website. There is special training on dealing with dyslexia, learning disabilities and corrections, and marketing. Adult learners are helped directly by a list of resources aimed to help adult learners with disabilities.

Bridges to Practice is hosted on the *Florida Technet* website and may be found at <http://www.floridatechnet.org/bridges/>

To sign up for the free newsletter or schedule grant-funded training in your area, contact Rochel Kenyan at RKenyon721@aol.com. You may also phone or write her at

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