Teaching Strategies that Help Learners with Different Needs

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Adult learners with many different special needs are part of all areas of adult education, including GED/ABE programs, higher education, workplace training, ESL programs, and community education programs. Adult education has a long tradition of respect for the diversity of learners and the uniqueness of each learner. Recognizing the amazing range of differences among learners includes understanding the particular needs of individuals with disabilities and is a growing imperative for adult educators (Du Bois, 1998). This article considers what strategies and approaches can be used to help these individuals as well as all adult learners learn effectively in classroom settings, in one-on-one situations and online learning programs. Adult educators are challenged to experiment with the learners as partners and co-learners and to “teach responsively” (Brookfield, 1990).

Learners with disabilities include persons with both visible and invisible disabilities, including orthopedic, health-related, hearing, sight, learning, and speech disabilities (Henderson, 1995). Persons with mental and emotional disabilities also may have a number of conditions within a range of severity. Although there is not an agreed upon definition of learning disabilities (LD), persons with LD have some difficulty in the way they receive, process, store and/or retrieve information (Ross-Gordon, 1989). Jordan (1996, 2000) provides excellent suggestions for teaching adults with learning disabilities.

Because individuals may have multiple disabilities, their learning needs also may be varied and complex. Persons with the same condition may have different learning needs and require zero, limited or very substantial accommodations (Gadbow and Du Bois, 1998). To further complicate learning situations, all the other factors that make adult learners a diverse group affect persons with disabilities: differences in age, gender, ethnicity, language, culture, socioeconomic factors, geography, education, learning styles, and past experience.

How can teachers or trainers meet the needs of diverse groups of adult learners with such a range of learning needs? An underlying premise is a belief that applies to all areas of adult education, and to all learners: there are many ways to learn and to demonstrate that learning has occurred. Whether in a class-
room, working one-to-one with a learner or in an online learning situation, a teacher or facilitator can use strategies and approaches that may increase the learning for all. Students can become co-learners in discovering what works best for them individually and as a group.

The following principles can apply to working with adult learners with disabilities, and indeed all adult learners, in classes, in one-on-one settings and in online courses:

- **Do not assume that you know what is needed to accommodate a learner with a particular disability:** ask. Generally, the learner can provide the best information on what types of accommodations, if any, are needed. As Vella (1994) suggests, let the learner become the teacher.

- **Some learners do not know what they do not know.** Particularly in the area of assistive technologies, they often do not know there are many recently developed and improved technologies that can aid and support learning: voice recognition programs, screen readers and other computer-related technologies that permit learners with different disabilities to be able to access information and "write" papers.

- **However, appropriate training and support services are critical if the individual is to be able to use these new technologies successfully.**

- **Knowing a few key resources in the community or region or the contact person for your organization or institution who has such information is very useful when working with students who may not have contacted the appropriate service providers.** Teachers and trainers do not have to become experts on these resources or strategies. However, in addition to access to the needed technology, knowing a key contact person or having a brochure with such resources listed can be a great help. In most areas there is a Center for Independent Living that can be a place to start for an individual to find appropriate accommodations for a particular disability.

- **Be creative! Ideas learned from a learner with one type of disability sometimes can be useful to persons with very different conditions.** Recently, I met with a student who has severe back pain from an accident. As we were meeting for an appointment I realized that reading and writing papers both were a struggle for him. He needs to lie down frequently to relieve the pain. I suggested he consider books on tape or a computer screen reader, as well as recording some of this work and submitting the audiotapes, rather than papers. He was eager to try these suggestions, which a blind student I was working with had been using successfully.

### Strategies for Use in Group Learning Situations

In a college classroom or corporate training room, the challenge is to meet diverse needs of the learners in such a group setting. Teaching or facilitating groups can be done so that the mix of strategies used will meet the learning needs of most of the learners. The foundation of such teaching is setting a climate for learning that encourages participants to be co-learners and actively to join in the ongoing refinement in the learning program. A focus on the processes of learning must be considered along with the content to be learned.

A fear that many educators still have is that flexibility and alternative approaches to teaching and learning will "water down" the curriculum and lower the standards. However, repeated research studies have shown that teacher-centered instructional methods have been found to be inferior to approaches that involve active and cooperative learning (Felder, 2001).

According to Felder and Brent (2001), cooperative learning techniques can be developed and introduced slowly and methodically. The use of well-developed approaches to cooperation has shown to be very effective for learners. Learners with differing learning styles, abilities and special needs can work together in cooperative learning settings with positive results for all. Richard Felder, Professor Emeritus at North Carolina State University and long time researcher and advocate of active and cooperative learning has developed a Web site that has an excellent review of active and cooperative learning, as well as links to useful articles and Web sites related to these approaches: www2.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Cooperative_Learning.html.

Use of cooperative and other group learning approaches with a wide range of learners, including those with a range of disabilities, may entail consideration of additional factors, such as use of various assistive technologies and other accommodations. John, who is visually impaired, would need to tape record group discussions and activities and be able to scan visual materials used into his computer, so that he could listen to them. Martha has dyslexia and also needs to tape record the group and other class activities. By working with different students in group settings, other learners may discover new strategies that will help them as well.

In all types of groups, learners can be encouraged to offer suggestions to enhance the learning for themselves and others. Periodically asking the group if they see a need for other approaches to enhance the learning can set the tone that it is all right to suggest other activities. Applying the learning in practice situations, small group discussions, and working on computers or other equipment in pairs all are approaches that can be added as either the teacher or the learners discover a need.
One-on-One Learning

I have been a faculty member at SUNY Empire State College for a number of years where guided independent study is the primary approach to working with students. In one-on-one sessions with students, faculty mentors have the opportunity to learn about special needs and other conditions that may affect their learning. We have increased the use of e-mail and phone appointments to accommodate learners with special needs who may not find it convenient to meet in person regularly. Tom, who is blind, must arrange for someone to drive him to the meetings. We recently alternated phone appointments with in-person meetings, which have proven to be very successful.

Another recent technology that is proving to be an asset for students with disabilities, as well as many other students who have busy schedules and time constraints, is the web camera. It can be attached to a computer and allows the teacher or mentor to see and talk with a student who can schedule an appointment while at home, at work, or even on vacation.

Online Learning

In addition to the use of Internet resources available on the World Wide Web, an explosion of Web-based courses and other distance learning options is evident in higher education and corporate training. Accessible Web pages have been designed for persons with disabilities, so that the information can be obtained through the use of technology by persons with a wide range of disabilities (Du Bois, 1998).

Conclusions

The implications of increasing the success of learners with special needs is critical to reducing the number of individuals who want to work and who currently do not (Gadbow & Du Bois, 1998). The use of effective learning approaches and assistive technologies that help learners with disabilities meet their educational goals also provide a basis for opportunities to use these strategies in the workplace. Further, the building of self-directed learning and self-advocacy skills can greatly add to their success, not only in the workplace, but also in all areas of their lives. Helping adults “learn how to learn” remains the most important role we have as adult educators (Smith, 1982). ▲

References
