

### **Making the online learning experience accessible**

To make the online learning experience equitable and accessible:

- Ensure that the learning environment is both accessible and usable for **all** learners,
- Ask the learners about their disabilities in the course application forms,
- Assess the needs of the learner and find solutions,
- If they are using a support worker, brief them as well,
- Give them information on adapting the environment or their browser settings or both in course guidance materials,
- Use accessible online techniques (for example, cut and paste text into emails rather than sending attachments; use accessible bulletin boards or if not possible, use email lists instead of bulletin boards; provide a transcript with recorded web casts),
- Tell learners about cutting and pasting text using word and spell checkers,
- Use acceptable policies which encourage learners to be inclusive. For instance, no one should be allowed to judge another for bad spelling or grammar, which means that dyslexic learners should not be criticised by their peers for poor spelling,
- In course introductions, don't force learners to post photographs of themselves online unless they want to.

'Accessibility and usability go hand in hand - if you ensure that your courses are accessible all your learners will have fewer problems in using them. This will save them frustration, and the tutor will be saved time because they are not messing around trying to solve technological problems or finding workarounds. This makes good commercial sense too. The more people who can access your courses, the bigger your target group. I know that online courses have been a lifeline for learners with mental health problems who may want to learn and gain qualifications, but cannot manage a regular commitment to a face-to-face class' (Julia Duggleby, Senior Lecturer, Learning and Development, LETTOL, The Sheffield College).

## Inclusive Learning and Teaching: ILT for Disabled Learners

These leaflets were written by: Dr. Simon Ball, TechDis; Chris Barber, RSC Yorkshire and Humber; Louise Buckel, RSC South East; Sal Cooke, Ferl; Eddie Gulc, RSC Eastern; Judith Mole, Direct Learn Services Ltd.; Allan Sutherland, TechDis.

To receive this leaflet in alternative formats, contact <[helpdesk@techdis.ac.uk](mailto:helpdesk@techdis.ac.uk)>. An electronic version can be found at <<http://ferl.becta.org.uk/publications/techdisferl>>.



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## The Learning Experience

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA: Part 4 of the Disability Discrimination Act) places an obligation on all education institutions to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled learners are able to participate equally in all aspects of the educational environment. This obligation extends to online learning, the use of Information Learning Technology (ILT) and distance learning. Education institutions should anticipate the needs of potential learners and should not inadvertently 'build in' barriers in the use of ILT, curriculum design and delivery. More information on SENDA can be found in the **Introduction to SENDA** leaflet in this series.

A report produced by the National Disability Team examined the impact of the Disability Discrimination Act (1993) in Australia. There, disabled learners have similar rights to those now guaranteed in the UK by the SENDA legislation. The authors found the main complaint and cause of litigation to be access to teaching and learning rather than physical access.

'The majority of case law has related to teaching and learning issues, either through direct discrimination regarding access to a course (or modules) or the inability to provide materials in alternative format in a timely manner which invariably has led to learners having to defer their studies.'

'Anecdotal evidence indicates that the majority of cases that reached court (and where the judgement went against the institution) were directly related to teaching, learning and assessment. Such cases involved either:

- direct discrimination (for example, refusing entry to a course without reasonable grounds where the decision was based on the individual's disability rather than educational achievement), or
- not going far enough in making reasonable adjustments in teaching and learning practice to enable participation - providing access to materials in alternative formats in a timely manner.'

(Adams, M., and Brown, P. (2001) **Disability And Higher Education: The Australian Experience**, NDT Newsletter, Issue 3, November 2001. <[http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk/Newsletter\\_3/news3\\_page34.htm](http://www.natdisteam.ac.uk/Newsletter_3/news3_page34.htm)>.)

SENDA stresses the need to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure that disabled learners are not at a 'substantial disadvantage' in comparison with their non-disabled peers. These reasonable adjustments should not adversely affect other learners or lessen academic standards.

The Common Inspection Framework, used by Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate, states that colleges will be monitored on 'the extent to which provision is educationally and socially inclusive, and promotes equality of access to education and training, including provision for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities'.

### Equality of Learning and Teaching

The learning experience can be more equitable if course materials and learning environments are designed with accessibility in mind. If learning materials are not designed in this way, it can act as a barrier to access for learners with disabilities or learning difficulties. Accessibility and inclusivity are closely linked. It is good practice to ensure that all learning materials are designed to be accessible to all learners.

### Differentiation

Learners with and without disabilities fall along a continuum of learner difference. Adjustments for learner differences, also known as differentiation, should be made for all learners, not just those with disabilities. Rather than learners following an unvarying delivery style, whenever possible the learning experience should be made flexible to accommodate learner differences and preferences. Where feasible, curriculum materials should be varied and

diverse, and ILT with assistive technologies has the potential to open up new digital and online resources to disabled learners.

Learners learn in a variety of ways and using differentiation techniques can help tailor the learning experience to all members of a group. Differentiation can be planned to allow learners to achieve their full potential. This means that learners may:

- Utilise a variety of learning styles,
- Have varied listening and learning skills,
- Need a more flexible environment,
- Need different time scales to absorb different learning,
- Not be confident about their ability to learn,
- Require different teaching approaches depending on the subject matter,
- Have varying levels of motivation.

Practitioners should:

- Vary their delivery method to maintain learners' interest and participation,
- Change their delivery style to adapt to different groups of learners,
- Consider introducing learners to new ways of learning, possibly supported by ILT with assistive technologies.

Disabled learners will have the same varied learning needs as other learners, but many practitioners may need to consider additional learning and delivery needs as well.

'Teaching practices which benefit learners with disabilities are likely to be those which would benefit all learners. Lecturing staff should be aware that inappropriate teaching methods may erect barriers to learning which have nothing to do with intellectual capabilities' (Hall and Tinklin, 1998, **Disabled Learners in Higher Education**, Scottish Council for Research in Education <<http://www.scre.ac.uk/spotlight/spotlight66.html>>).

Inclusion is differentiation taken to its logical conclusion, since including all learners will ensure that all different learning styles will be catered for.

'Integration has often meant disabled people having to adapt to an organisation's existing structures and arrangements. Inclusion, however, recognises and celebrates 'difference', and requires the organisation to respond and adapt to the individual's requirements. It is educational establishments (rather than disabled learners) who must facilitate inclusion, by finding ways in which they can work to fit the individual objectives and learning styles of the learners' (Fink, Thompson and Williams, 2000, **Enhancing the Course Offer**, The London Institute).

### Teaching Techniques—the role of ILT

Before considering teaching techniques, it is important to consider your learning materials and curriculum. More information on this topic can be found in the **Being Prepared, Getting Started** leaflet of this series.

Usually practitioners will use a number of delivery methods to engage learners. These may include group work activities, 'didactic' delivery, one-to-one tutorials, etc. Situations where ILT will support curriculum delivery include face-to-face teaching, online and blended learning (a mixture of face-to-face, and online learning).

### Using ILT with disabled learners in discrete sessions

Some disabled learners will be taught in discrete, separate classes. Learners with learning difficulties or multiple disabilities can benefit greatly from the use of ILT. For example:

- Learners can write on interactive whiteboards with their fingers rather than typing. Text can be converted into word processed text,

- Digital camera shots and audio commentary can be used for recipes, money handling or numeracy in life skills classes,
- Learners can watch and review processes 'virtually' before trying them for themselves.

Matthew Pugh has been using an interactive white board with a group of learners with a severe learning difficulty or disability. 'The SLDD department is looking into interactive software that allows us to experience life skills in theory before a practical session. For example, food hygiene can be visually taught prior to working in the kitchen, or being able to shop in a virtual supermarket prior to visiting a store. The possibilities are endless.'  
(<http://ferl.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?page=13&resID=1393>).

For a list of resources on using ILT with learners with learning difficulties and multiple disabilities, see the Focus on Adults with Severe Learning Difficulties

<<http://ferl.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?page=500>> and the Focus on Students with Disabilities  
<<http://ferl.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?page=226>>.

### Using ILT in face-to-face and blended learning

Using ILT to support face-to-face learning can offer great benefits to disabled learners. It means that learners are presented with a variety of presentation methods and can vary tasks - they can revise material covered previously and materials can be more easily adapted (if designed in a suitable way – see the **Learning Platforms** leaflet of this series).

Some examples where using ILT can assist learners:

- Using email discussion forums for group work can assist learners with communication barriers or problems of access to support workers. This can also assist staff in assessing the level of participation of all learners in these group work situations,
- Digital cameras can be used to demonstrate and record achievement,
- Electronic materials can be more easily adapted to learners' needs.

It is difficult to overstate the usefulness to practitioners of having their teaching materials in electronic format. This allows the materials to be adapted and made accessible far more easily. Placing these on a learning platform such as a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or intranet means learners can access them independently and in advance of the lesson. Making lesson plans and tutor notes available to disabled learners does not unfairly advantage them – indeed this is good practice with all learners.

Daniel is a dyslexic IT student. 'I would have to say that I am finding [ILT] very useful. We can get notes from the college network and study them before or after lectures, not during lessons, and rather than worrying about taking notes I can concentrate on the teacher and the work I am doing. One of the things I like about [ILT] is the step by step way things are done. I can find it very overwhelming to be confronted by a large volume of work but the structured way that [ILT] allows work to be set helps me enormously. Work is already broken down into manageable sections for me. My problems with concentration also seem to suit an IT based approach. With work set in a step-by-step way and notes accessible it is so much easier.'

#### Online distance learning

Online distance learning brings huge benefits for disabled learners as it can overcome many of the physical access barriers and can normally be undertaken in a more flexible way. However, it is not the solution for the majority of disabled learners as distance learning can lead to isolation and means missing out on the benefits of mixing with other learners away from home or workplace.

Undertaking a distance learning course will suit people with a particular learning style, who are motivated, self-disciplined and independent learners. Where learners choose to undertake online distance learning it can bring great benefits. For example:

- Access from any physical location,
- Access at any time,
- Enhances communications peer-to-peer, learner-to-practitioner,
- Differentiation of learning styles.

However, it is not without its problems.

- It may require higher literacy levels, or confidence in reading and writing,
- Peer learning needs to be well managed to ensure the same learning experience,
- Self-organisation can be a problem for some learners.

'Online learning may suit people with disabilities for a variety of reasons:

- They may have a condition with fluctuations in intensity which means they cannot commit to attending regularly at a college. Online learning will allow them to work at times of the day/week when they are most able, and at a pace that suits them best.
- They may have a disability that affects their mobility. Online learning means that they can work at home or in a place which they find easy to access.
- They may have a disability that affects their ability to use a mouse or a keyboard. Learning online means that they can work at a pace that suits them and/or use appropriate assistive technology.
- They may be blind or have impaired sight. Online content can be designed to work with screen readers so that all the appropriate words on a screen are read aloud.
- They may have low levels of literacy, or IT literacy. Online learning can provide motivational and speedy feedback, and build confidence and literacy skills'

(Julia Duggleby, Senior Lecturer, Learning and Development, LETTOL, The Sheffield College).