



## Inclusive Learning and Teaching: ILT for Disabled Learners

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## Alternative Assessment

Under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA)\* 2001, disabled learners must not be placed at a disadvantage in education and it is important to ensure that learners are not unfairly treated in assessment situations. Colleges have the obligation to anticipate and consider the needs of disabled learners when planning assessments and examination.

\*More information on the legislation can be seen in the **Introduction to SENDA** leaflet in this series.

Disabled learners can encounter barriers to their progress in many 'regular' forms of assessment. When this is the case, alternative assessment mechanisms need to be explored. In many situations, technology can assist learners in undertaking assessments; however, the needs of disabled learners should also be considered when assessment is technology-based, for example, in multiple choice quizzes in a Virtual Learning Environment. For more information on this topic, see the **Technology-Based Assessment** leaflet of this series.

It is important to remember when considering assessments that it is not necessary for every learner in a class to undertake an identical assessment, as long as all learners experience an equivalent assessment procedure, with the same degree of difficulty and learning outcomes. Learners should not be excused from a particular type of assessment unless there is substantial reason for doing so. Assessments provide the opportunity to use and develop many of the skills a

learner will need in the future, for example, time management, communication skills and report writing. These are skills which all learners, including disabled learners, need to develop.

### Assessment Practice

It is good practice to use a number of different types of assessment within a course. Learners have different learning styles and therefore it can be useful to provide them with different styles of assessment.

### Advance Notice

Disabled learners will usually have their needs assessed before starting their course, and this will normally include an analysis of the learner's needs regarding course assessment and examination. One of the most important factors in ensuring all learners receive equivalent assessment is to ensure advance notice is provided. If learners know in advance what is expected of them in terms of the mode, frequency and location of course assessments, they will have the opportunity to make any adjustments necessary or to request any adjustments from the college. For example, if the college needs to provide a laptop computer with specialist software for a visually impaired learner in an examination, this may take some time to organise and the sooner the learner, technical support staff and invigilators know of these needs, the easier it is to arrange them.

### Equivalent Alternatives

There are few assessments which disabled learners cannot undertake due to the nature of their impairment. Only when all alternative adjustments have been considered should the learner be given an alternative task. For example, a Deaf learner who uses sign language can easily undertake an oral presentation using an interpreter for voice-over. However, a profoundly deaf learner without sign language may not be able to do this if their voice is not clear, if they cannot regulate the volume of their voice or if they cannot be close enough to the audience to lip-read questions. In this case it is entirely reasonable to ask them to give the presentation only in front of tutors or to submit an equivalent written presentation instead.

Therefore, if it is decided that a disabled learner cannot equitably undertake a particular mode of assessment, alternative ways of undertaking the assessment should be offered.

Deciding if an alternative should be provided can be done by answering the following questions:

■ **Has the learner had all the support they needed during the learning process in order to be able to undertake the assessment?**

For example, have they learned how to brief a support worker to undertake the tasks on their behalf, to the extent that the learner can be assessed in practical tasks? Have they been given access to the same information as their peers, for example, by loaning videos to deaf

learners to view along with note-takers or interpreters or both; have visually impaired learners been given tactile diagrams or have they been left to ask a sighted person to describe it to them privately?

■ **What learning outcomes are to be assessed?**

For example, is spelling, grammar and correct syntax a criterion for the assessment – if not, will the learner be penalised for bad grammar? Is the learner being assessed on their knowledge and skill, rather than aspects of their impairment?

■ **Can the learner do all elements of a task?**

And if not, what adjustments can be made so that the learner can demonstrate his or her skills and knowledge? For example, in an assessment where the aim is to create an advertising poster, could, for example, a blind learner submit a radio jingle instead?

■ **Are there any implications for marking?**

For example, how will a tutor assess an oral presentation given in British Sign Language, when it is important to assess the learner, not the skill of the interpreter?

■ **Will the learner be able to demonstrate their skills and knowledge equally to their non-disabled peers?**

It is also useful to ask:

■ **Have these alternatives been explored with the learner and are they confident in the validity and equanimity of the assessment process?**

■ **Does the learner have all the necessary training and skills in using assistive technology and working with support workers so that these do not present additional problems during assessment?**

It is important to evaluate exactly what is being assessed and to ensure that whatever is being assessed will not be made more difficult by the presence of an impairment. This might seem obvious, but it does have implications for assessment practices. For example, in an assessed practical, a learner with

dexterity problems should not be penalised for not being able to measure out quantities of a chemical substance, when they can instruct a support worker precisely how to do this. In this way the learner has demonstrated equivalent knowledge to his or her non-disabled peers.

In many cases learners will not need to undertake an alternative exercise, but they may:

- need additional time to undertake the task,
- use assistive technology or additional human support,
- a combination of both of the above.

Jackie is a totally blind learner studying journalism. She uses various pieces of equipment to assist her in the classroom, for example a Braille note-taker and a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) instead of a tape recorder, which she can use to take notes and transfer to her PC at home. Next year, Jackie will complete the Workplace Skills, Feature Writing II, Desk Top Publishing, Newspaper Design and Production, Public Affairs, and Freelance Skills courses. There is a unit in photography, but the Head of Programme has agreed to substitute this for something less visual. The Desktop Publishing unit has also been slightly adapted for her to make the environment less visual, and with the Braille shorthand classed as equivalent to T-Line (a form of shorthand), the Scottish Qualifications Authority have been both accommodating and pleased with her progress.

### **Assistive technology**

Assistive technology can greatly help learners to undertake assessments and examinations. This means that they can complete assessments independently which, in turn, will give them skills needed later in the workplace. Many learners will use assistive technology in various learning situations and will know the most effective way of employing this technology during assessment.

However, some learners will be unfamiliar with the breadth of technology that can be made available and how it can be used to support them. These learners need to be able to use assistive technology effectively in advance of the assessment, or they will be doubly disadvantaged. Assistive technology should only be used in assessments by proficient, confident users. For example, suggesting to a learner with dyslexia that they should use a computer with a voice dictation package two weeks before an exam will be ineffective, as this may not give them enough time to train the software and to become confident in using the commands. Trying to learn this in readiness for an assessment can create additional stress.

### **Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and Human Aids to Communication (HACs)**

In many cases Learning Support Assistants and Human Aids to Communication (Sign Language interpreters, Communication Support Workers, Readers, Scribes, etc.) can be used to assist learners to complete assessments. However, it is essential that responsibilities, roles and boundaries are clarified in advance between the LSA/HAC, the learner and the practitioner setting the assignment. Learners should be allowed to meet with the support worker in advance to ensure good working practices which can save time and reduce stress during the assessment. Similarly, the practitioner may want to consult with the support worker on best working practices.

Within each institution there should be a policy on the role of learning support assistants in assessment. Each college should formulate this in conjunction with the appropriate awarding bodies, so that teaching staff are aware of the degree to which LSAs can provide input to a learner's assessment.

### Marking

It is worth considering how different types of assessment will be marked. For example, when thirty hand-written scripts and one audio cassette response are submitted, it may be harder to make the marking procedure consistent, and ways around this need to be considered. Good practice is always to mark the minority-mode (in this example the audio cassette) approximately half-way through the majority-mode submissions (in this example the hand-written scripts).

The scoring system also needs to be determined prior to the assessment taking place. For example, it should be stipulated to what degree spelling and the correct use of language are being assessed. A policy needs to be drawn up defining what technical terms a learner is expected to include in their response and the level of acceptability of language a dyslexic or prelingually deaf learner, for example, may use as a result of their disability.

If the person marking the assignment is confident that the learner has received all the support they need during learning and assessment, no concessions should be made for their disability, and their work should be marked in a manner consistent with their peers' work.

### Policy and Awarding Bodies

It is important to check both the institutional policy on assessment and verification, and also any guidelines from the relevant awarding bodies, in order to know how much discretion is permitted in setting and marking assessments. This applies equally to internal validation and non-external assessments, as it does to externally validated assessments.

The Joint Council for General Qualifications (JCGQ), which comprises the AQA, Edexcel, OCR, CCEA and WJEC, gives two principal guidelines. They say 'Special Arrangements' can be made - 'procedures to be approved by the awarding body prior to an examination or assessment, for candidates with long term needs or considerations'. However, if sufficient forewarning does not occur, for example if a learner has a temporary illness, injury or indisposition (these may or may not be related directly to a disability) then 'Special Consideration' may apply - 'given to a candidate following an examination or assessment to ensure that a previously unforeseen circumstance is compensated for'. Several awarding bodies have produced documents on this topic, further details of which can be found in the Useful Links below.

### Useful Links

Publications by Awarding Bodies on Procedures Regarding Candidates with Special Needs

- City and Guilds 'Access to Assessment: Candidates with particular requirements'
- <[http://www.city-and-guilds.co.uk/pls/cg2/docs/FOLDER/CG\\_CA\\_INFORM\\_PAGE/CG\\_INFORM\\_NEWS\\_LINKS/NEWS9/ACCESS02.pdf](http://www.city-and-guilds.co.uk/pls/cg2/docs/FOLDER/CG_CA_INFORM_PAGE/CG_INFORM_NEWS_LINKS/NEWS9/ACCESS02.pdf)>
- JCGQ (Joint Council for General Qualifications) 'GCE, VCE, GCSE and GNVQ: Regulations and Guidance Relating to Candidates with Particular Requirements' <[http://www.jcgq.org.uk/Publications\\_and\\_Common\\_Docs/JCGQ\\_Regs\\_and\\_Guid\\_Cands\\_w\\_Part\\_Regs\\_2001-2.pdf](http://www.jcgq.org.uk/Publications_and_Common_Docs/JCGQ_Regs_and_Guid_Cands_w_Part_Regs_2001-2.pdf)>
- EMTA (National Training Organisation for Engineering Manufacture) 'Procedures for Conducting the External Assessment of 2000 Key Skills in EAL Centres' can be ordered from <<http://www.emta.org.uk/ntowsite.nsf?opendatabase>>
- NCFE 'National Qualifications Framework: Guidance for Centres: Procedures and Policies' <<http://www.ncfe.org.uk/graphics/downloads/policiesandProcNotes.pdf>>