

## **Making all lessons ‘learning-friendly’?**

In any group of learners there will be significant differences in the way that they best work. Teachers will want to reflect learning styles that take account of dyslexia, dyscalculia, and so on across the spectrum of learning differences. It is important to look positively on how the opportunities created by these ways of thinking relate to learning; but at the same time to also help minimise any difficulties that can get in the way of effective learning.

Learners will process information in different ways and have different levels of awareness of sequencing of words and letters, and links between sounds and words. Others may have little sense of number relationships. In particular cases this should lead to an in-depth assessment of specific learning needs. In general, however, there are practices that can be followed with all groups of learners that will give underpinning support to those with any level of difficulty. There is no one specific set of activities that will meet the needs of everyone, given how different people’s needs are. There may, however, be relatively simple things that can be built into all learning situations and which will make it easier for all learners. These include the following:

### **1. Some general approaches, such as:**

- avoiding labelling; comparison with others.
- avoiding undue pressure; discuss things that are found difficult;
- recognising skills and abilities that exist, not simply focusing on difficulties and errors.
- trying to identify those factors that seem to have biggest impact on learning. Use errors made as clues to how the learner is dealing with information presented. Look for patterns of errors.
- asking learners about any issues they have identified for themselves; they are often the expert in their own patterns of learning

- having high but realistic, expectations of success
- acknowledging the effort put in by the learner
- recognising that some people need to do things in a different way (because of ways brain work) i.e. not a matter of simply 'working harder'.
- understanding that (for some learners) daydreaming, visualisation, fidgeting and fiddling about with things etc all have their place in an individualised approach to learning. Providing tactile resources and "toys" such as stress balls may aid concentration.
- helping some learners to benefit from self-organisation strategies such as colour coding; timelines; 'to-do' reminders.
- not expecting everything to be remembered in the same detail.

## **2. Handouts and other text materials** that:

- break up large sections of text using line breaks, bullet points, sub-headings
- use large, clear type (e.g. 12 to 14 point); sans serif (or a learner's preferred clear font). Usual preferred fonts are Arial, Comic Sans, Tahoma, Verdana i.e. rounded, simple fonts.
- are printed on creamy, off-white or pastel matt paper. Avoid patterned backgrounds. The learner could try out text printed on a range of coloured paper to see which works best for that person. This could lead to a fuller assessment of colour preferences, which is a more specialist task (usually for an optometrist).
- are left justified; well spaced lines (e.g. 1.5 spacing)
- avoid italics; whole word capitalisation
- avoid underlining (which changes the visual shape of letters)
- avoid abbreviations and acronyms
- are written in clear, succinct style
- have space lines between paragraphs to separate ideas into different blocks of text

- use headings, bullet points, lists, numbers, indents to give structure to the document
- have some text within borders (but avoiding text-boxes) could help
- accompany text with simple pictures or line diagrams if this helps with clarification. Using charts and diagrams to outline the bigger picture
- use colours to highlight different key aspects
- short lines; sentences don't begin at end of a line
- avoid starting new page mid-sentence

Even better may be to have text in digital format. This allows the learner to select their own preferred font, size, spacing, colour of text and background; and to be able (with text reader software) to isolate difficult words, to select key passages, to highlight to help reinforce word recognition; to link to an electronic dictionary.

3. **If a learner needs to see the whole picture first**, why things are being learnt, how new knowledge relates to what they already know, and how any parts relate together, then it will be beneficial to:

- discuss the subject; whole topic; whole text before looking at any detail
- explain the purpose of the overall task and how it is relevant to the learners own situation, before getting into specific instructions
- use mind maps or spider diagrams
- use story boards or flow diagrams for learners who still like to see a sequence in what they plan
- go from particular concrete examples to more abstract generalisations when trying to draw general conclusions

Overall: Provide a context for learning; make it relevant; involve learners in process; let learners know how they are doing.

4. As far as is practicable, **teaching and learning should use a range of techniques** (and avoid persistent repetition of methods that have failed with that learner in the past). The 'menu' could include:

**(a) Support for learning**

- 1:1 support; recognising that learners are not all the same and that some may need additional specific input
- access to highlighters; tape recorders; lined coloured paper; pre-drawn blank mind maps
- access to text-to-speech software; voice recognition software; pocket electronic dictionaries
- use of computers to enable planning and redrafting
- use of colour coding for resources; using different colours for different tasks
- adding mime and gesture to words

**(b) General approaches to learning**

- Keeping instructions short and well sequenced
- only small amounts of new information introduced at any one time
- making the most of a learner's high interest or passion in a topic as a vehicle for learning
- multi-sensory (auditory, visual, kinaesthetic) methods. Using both a varied range with the group and some work differentiated or personalised to preferred styles
- supporting use of humour, colour, stories, images
- opportunities to learn by trying as well as being told
- use of role play; use of games (e.g. to consolidate vocabulary)
- use of pictures and diagrams to give clues; use of games
- same content organised and presented in several different ways

- no disconnected rote learning but linking to things already known. This is not the same as maintaining routine and repetition in learning, which may still be important
- not having to copy from a book or screen; little use of worksheets
- key words selected from text and taught, within the overall context; building a bank of key words related to the topic
- pointing out patterns where these exist. Stressing any patterns or visual features to the words; stress also any interesting auditory patterns
- grouping information and linking to a visual image, use of mind maps, flow diagrams, story boards
- opportunities for rehearsing, repeating, practising; opportunity to check back on facts and instructions
- opportunities to try out strategies to boost memorising, for example mnemonics, jokes, story-telling, and active visualisation
- learning tasks that are given immediate practical application

### **(c) Giving feedback**

- prompts and specific feedback given, as soon as possible
- feedback on some meta-processes, about how an individual best learns, e.g. "You usually confuse 'b' and 'd'; so check back for these"
- not overloading feedback with corrections

### **(d) Internal/external conversations**

- frequent opportunities for learners to verbalise their understandings and rationales for the strategies they use to solve problems.
- Opportunities for each learner to talk to another learner about what they are doing.
- Encouraging learners to talk before and after tasks to reinforce understandings

### **(e) Practising writing and reading**

There are many things that can be suggested re improving reading and writing. Some commonly recurring ones include:

- reading and writing linked to meaningful contexts (rather than approached as an 'abstract' exercise)
- taking time to find out what strategies for reading and writing work best
- providing some structured teaching of how sounds and letters are linked, where this is appropriate; deliberate teaching of literacy skills
- use of regular practice times
- practising sentence jigsaws, where ends or beginnings of cut up sentences are colour coded
- using writing frames; use of diaries as support
- consistent use of continuous cursive writing, in a 'flow' to improve speed, on lined paper
- reconstructing cut up text by matching to clear pictures already in sequence
- 'look, say, cover, write, check' method to learn spellings (alongside other methods) to ensure a routine for consolidating learning into long-term memory
- practising sequencing; segmentation; categorisation; identifying patterns; rhymes and alliterations; exploring words and the differences between them
- re-reading of familiar texts to consolidate reading strengths
- reading collaboratively, in pairs or small groups
- providing lots of opportunities for daily practice, reading daily, reading together or alongside a tape

**Summary**

This overview has been drawn from a range of sources and sets out the commonly-recurring pieces of advice about what every teacher can be doing with every group of learners in order to open up learning more. It is a set of prompts to be reflected upon. It is a thinking tool rather than a checklist.

Most learners need a range of approaches. In trying to cover generalised approaches, it does not remove the need for some learners to have access to more specific assessment and support.