

## THINKING ABOUT HOW TO HELP THE ESOL STUDENT WITH LD

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Helping the ESOL student who may have (or is known to have) LD can be a challenge for all involved in his or her education. Lack of progress in a "mainstream" or regular classroom clearly has not been sufficient, so changes must be made in the educational approach. Before teaching decisions are made, several larger factors need to be considered.

It is essential to remember that no two learning disabilities are alike and no two people with learning disabilities are alike. One student may have a type of dyslexia that makes decoding very difficult, another may have dysgraphia and be unable to compose logical sentences, while a third has problems understanding relationships between ideas and struggles with reading comprehension at an intermediate reading level. Therefore, strategies or methods for working with one person may be totally inappropriate for another. In addition, little information is available about how persons from different cultures deal with learning challenges or respond to help.

The strong probability that ESOL students are unaware of LD and the American view of them is another factor to bear in mind. Different learners are not given help in many other cultures; instead, they are humiliated and forced to leave school. Thus ESOL students may be very leery of any suggestion that they learn differently. More certainly, they will not understand the term "learning disabilities," which usually translates in an extremely negative way into other languages.

A third factor known is that adults in general, and adults with LD especially, need to be deeply involved in their own learning. Recent research on adults with LD showed that self-knowledge and self-advocacy were the factors that mattered the most in the long-term ability of these adults to

succeed in life. Great tutoring, appropriate accommodations, or other external help had little effect in the long run on these adults being able to cope with having LD.

What do these three things tell us about working with ESOL students with LD? First, they tell us that help for the learner must be geared entirely to the individual needs of that student and that extreme care must be taken to find out as much as possible about those challenges and needs so that instruction is as appropriate as possible. It also means that ESOL students cannot be simply told that someone suspects they may have a learning disability; rather, care must be taken to help them find out about themselves and to make sure that they participate in all decisions concerning the classroom or the program.

Powerful evidence of the benefits of this involvement was seen in the results of an action research project done in an adult program in the Boston area. An ABE teacher concerned about plummeting attendance and waning involvement of her students decided to have her students do evaluations of the class every month instead of only at the end of the year. After each evaluation, she discussed the results with students and worked with them to incorporate their ideas into the class. Attendance, which had previously dropped to 2 students on many nights, stayed at 85-90% for the whole academic year. Not only did the students feel they had a lot of control over their learning, but they were also present in class to benefit from instruction they wanted.

Once the commitment is made to involve the learner in designing a personalized approach to his or her learning challenges, *without using the term LD*, teachers and programs can consider other factors that will make a difference. Techniques known to help English speakers with LD are generally effective with ESOL students as long as techniques match the needs. These include presenting new material in a carefully measured way, allowing plenty of opportunity for review and re-teaching, providing structure both for the individual student and classroom; and incorporating multi-sensory instruction.

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Teachers need to have a deep understanding of the concept of *multisensory instruction*. Persons with LD usually have trouble learning in the ways that school counts on most heavily: looking and listening. Therefore, the whole body must be included in learning. This is a goal that may seem impossible to achieve with adult students, but in truth, with figures of students with learning disabilities in the range of 50-80%, many students other than ESOL students will profit from increased body learning. Body learning includes tactile, or touch, and kinesthetic, or big muscle, learning. Having students physically involved in activities where they must move around the room or school, as in role plays or other dramatizations, scavenger hunts or surveys, or having them directly manipulate materials, as in making three-dimensional maps or family trees of felt are ways to help them retain information and help their bodies begin to impose organization on things they need to understand.

Above all, teachers can help students with learning challenges by guiding them to develop *metacognitive skills*—that is, an ability to understand and reflect on how they learn and why they do the things they do. Very often, teachers assign homework without checking to see if students really know *why* they are doing the homework. Or, students will persist in errors or ineffective ways of doing things without realizing. In fact, a common problem among persons with LD is that they have a very narrow range of strategies for approaching a task and do not think of new ones if their strategies are not working. If they are explicitly helped to see that and then they are taught other ways to do something, students can begin to understand how personal learning needs to take place.

Though everyone would prefer to have a simple way to "fix" the students who have or may have LD, in fact "fixing" is not the real goal. Rather having the students understand that they need to learn in a specific way, acknowledge that some things will always be hard and develop different approaches to learning, and life will serve them better than any intervention a teacher can try.

For more articles written by Robin Schwarz, go to: <http://www.floridatechnet.org/bridges/esol.html>



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CROSSING BRIDGES: FL'S FOCUS ON LD & LOW VISION

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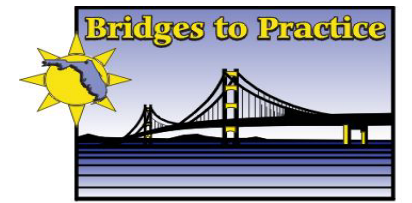
Visit our Bridges website: [www.floridatechnet.org/bridges](http://www.floridatechnet.org/bridges) for previous issues of Practitioners' Points and new web-based training.

"Improving the quality of how our society responds to adults with learning disabilities is a global issue which needs to be addressed by society in general. The field must acknowledge that it has a significant history of inaction and that there has been an absence of information about effective services for adults with learning disabilities. With this acknowledgment comes a commitment to take the first step in radically changing current practices in literacy programs."  
(Bridges to Practice, Guidebook 3)

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# Practitioners' Points

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Florida's Focus on Adults with Learning Disabilities

### BRIDGES TO PRACTICE: MOVING TO ACCOMMODATIONS, TECHNOLOGIES, AND STRATEGIES

By  
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Ten years ago, when the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) was established by the U.S. Congress, one of the major issues that Congress wanted the Institute to address was the incidence of learning disabilities (LD) in the adult population, particularly in those adults enrolled in adult education programs or volunteer literacy programs. The theme of this issue of *Practitioners Points* addresses the fourth stage of this work and NIFL is proud to be involved in the Florida project. To understand the NIFL investment in LD in adults, and why we plan to invest in the future, a bit of history is necessary.

The *first stage* of the work for the charge from Congress was fulfilled in 1999 through the development and publication of *Bridges to Practice: A Research-based Guide for Literacy Practitioners Serving the Needs of Adults with Learning Disabilities*. The materials were produced through a grant that NIFL provided and they represent the research base that was available in the early 1990s about LD and an adult population. NIFL spent over \$5 million on this part of the work.

The *second stage* required that NIFL arrange for the dissemination of the books and the training of trainers to carry out the work across the country.

Four grant programs were funded, three of them by NIFL: the New England Partnership/Massachusetts DOE; the Arkansas Adult Literacy Resource Center, and Laubach Literacy/Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. The fourth, the Seattle Workforce Development Council, was funded with financial assistance from the Office of Vocational and Adult Education at the U.S. Department of Education, and the Department of Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families. Social services programs have been added to the initial training teams and this has assisted in building collaborative efforts in many states. By the end of this fiscal year, NIFL and its partners in the federal government will have provided *nearly three million dollars* to support training and dissemination of information about LD and adults.

Money spent in materials development and training efforts is not well spent, however, unless there is evidence that this is having a positive impact on the adults with learning disabilities for whom this project was designed. In *the third stage* of the project, NIFL is sponsoring a small evaluation project about TANF services, with the cooperation of HHS, in states where we've had multiple programs working together. Other information that is being gathered includes changes in how the programs operated and what materials they used as a result of the training, the

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The use of assistive technology as a means to compensate for, or bypass, specific impairments is an additional supplemental approach to meeting the literacy needs of adults with LD. This approach has proved effective in enabling individuals with LD to circumvent their difficulties while accentuating their strengths and special abilities, an approach that has the potential to help people with LD reach their full potential and live satisfying and rewarding lives, now and in the years to come." (Raskind, Marshall H. *Literacy for Adults with Learning Disabilities Through Assistive Technology*, 1998)

**BRIDGES TO PRACTICE:  
MOVING TO ACCOMMODATIONS,  
TECHNOLOGIES, AND STRATEGIES**  
(continued from page 1)

number of adults receiving accommodations on the GED Tests because of Bridges training, the impact of an audio version of the TABE test for adults with low literacy skills, the impact of the training on the reading program used by adult education and volunteer literacy programs, and finally, the use of assistive technology and accommodations for adults.

This new information will lead to the *fourth stage* where we will be able to connect back to literacy skills and reading for adults and produce new research questions that can be asked in the context of what we have learned about disabilities and literacy in the context of this project. It is an exciting time to be in this field. The re-authorization of IDEA has produced many questions about the identification of learning disabilities, and about the most appropriate methods for teaching people with LD. Accommodations and assistive technology are important for children, but are even more important for adults with low literacy skills. Bridges to Practice has provided a beginning for adult educators and NIFL is proud of this project and the people who are involved around the nation.

**BRIDGES:  
A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**  
By  
**Audra Leverton**  
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The Passport Program\*  
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My first experience with a student who had learning disabilities happened a few months after I entered the Adult Education classroom. I knew very little about LD, much less how to help a student with learning disabilities. My supervisor, Lisa, offered some advice rather casually, which set the wheels in motion for me. As I began to work more and more with this student, I saw his determination and wanted to help him succeed. So, I went to work. I started with the college library and read every book we had on learning disabilities.

I learned a lot, but it still wasn't enough. I requested books from libraries all over the state in my attempt to learn more about different disabilities: characteristics, symptoms, causes, medications to treat, and the strategies that had been successfully used with each disability.

Since my supervisor had worked in Special Education, she had much to offer in the way of books and teaching suggestions, and when she heard about the Bridges training, she scheduled the first year of it for our entire team. She made sure we all read *Practitioners' Points* and encouraged us to practice some of the suggestions that appeared in the newsletter.



By the time Dr. Kenyon arrived at GCCC for our "Bridges" training, I was prepared. I knew technical definitions; symptoms, history, theories, and a few learning strategies, and I had a million questions. In that 8-hour session on a traditionally treasured day off, I learned more than from all of the books and websites I had read in the last year. Back in the classroom, I began to notice some of the characteristics in a few of my students and tried various learning strategies with them. Much to my surprise, many of those students began to improve. They showed signs of being interested in learning; coming to school was no longer a dreaded chore.

"Bridges" raised awareness among our team about learning disabilities, which allowed us to recognize characteristics and pinpoint potential candidates for learning disabilities testing. We then conducted screenings with the Learning Needs Screening tool provided by 'Bridges' for that specific purpose. In conjunction with the Disabilities counselor on campus, we referred students to a professional diagnostician who conducted formal testing and provided a diagnosis. These students, once diagnosed, progressed quickly and many of them succeeded in passing their GED Tests and earning their diploma!



I've spent the last year practicing what Dr. Kenyon preached-

*"Simply recognize the symptoms and offer help."* I've watched 116 students pass their GED Tests this year, many who had a learning disability. Some students knew it, others didn't; some were diagnosed, some weren't; some needed accommodations, others had learned to compensate. I learned a little bit from each student. One of the most important things I learned is that each student is different, each disability is different, and each situation is different. We can have all of the strategies and advice that are available, but until one instructor sits down and talks with that student and discovers his strengths and weaknesses and finds out what has been attempted and what has worked, none of us are capable of declaring what will definitely work with any individual.

Our team just completed year 2 of the "Bridges" training, and once again, I'm so excited I can hardly wait to find my first challenge! Much of what I learned this year, both at the 2002 Disabilities Symposium and through Bridges training, has been about assisting students: through the screening and documentation process, finding agencies to support them, communicating with employers, and in many other ways. But each step has brought our team of instructors to a level of knowledge that few have attained in adult education. I'm proud to say that there are probably more GED instructors in Florida who have this knowledge than in any other state, but there still aren't enough.

As Adult Education practitioners, we have a responsibility to our students. We can help students change their lives, simply by knowing more and caring a little more. "Bridges" training has helped our staff in having the knowledge and the tools to support students with LD. If every teacher, kindergarten through college, were more informed about LD, maybe I wouldn't have a job. And while I love what I do, I would love even more to erase the need for what I do.

\*The Passport Program, located at Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, FL, provides instruction in GED preparation, College Placement, and Workforce TABE. This computer lab enables students to develop their own schedules, work at their own pace, and attend classes at their convenience.

**ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY FAIR:  
FLORIDA'S 2002 DISABILITIES  
SYMPOSIUM**  
*"Meeting Today's Challenges-  
Finding Solutions"*  
By **Meryl Eisenberg, Editor**  
PRACTITIONERS' POINTS

At one time, people with disabilities had few employment options to consider beyond working in a factory. Now, through assistive technology we can identify equipment that can be used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities to help them realize their potential. Such was the theme of our final session of Florida's 2002 Disabilities Symposium held in St. Augustine, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2002. Experts in the field of assistive technology were invited to present devices for low vision and hearing impaired, communication impaired, learning disabled, and those with physical disabilities.

**Phyllis Neal Wilson**, Administrator of the **ATEN** Coordinating Unit in Sanford, Florida presided over the session. Her responsibilities include conducting training and providing technical assistance, awareness, and information through the **Assistive Technology Educational Network** to five Regional FDLRS/ATEN Centers located in Tallahassee, Tampa, Palatka, Sanford, and Fort.



Lauderdale, FL. Even though services are for students from ages 3-22, the resource center provides opportunities for teachers and consumers to receive training and hands-on demonstration of the latest assistive technology.

**Melissa Govan**, the Lab Manager and Assistive Technology Specialist for the Region II FDLRS/ATEN Center in Palatka demonstrated low technology devices that increase the independent and functional living skills of adults with disabilities.



Her "Lottie Tools" kit included such items as the Coin-ulator, highlighter tapes, Speaking Homework Wiz (Franklin), letter writing guide, Talking Alarm Clock, raised line paper, and Talking Calculator. A variety of useful switches to control household devices and computers were also shown.

**Lesla Kretschmer**, President of Florida Reading and Vision Technology, displayed JAWS Screen Reading Software, Majic Screen Magnification Software, Liberty Color Portable Video Magnifier, BrailleNote and Braille Embosser, and Kurzweil 100 Scan and Read Software. Research has shown that screen reading software and reading machines have also helped people who are poor readers because of dyslexia or other learning disabilities. For more information on low vision technology, contact Lesla at (800) 981-5119 or email at [LBK25@aol.com](mailto:LBK25@aol.com).



**Steven Heller** is the Director of Sales for Wizcom Technologies, Inc., and came to demonstrate the Reading Pen II. This device is a pen-shaped scanner that contains The American Heritage College Dictionary and also displays definitions aloud. It is a fully portable assistive reading device designed for people who have difficulty recognizing or understanding words while reading. For more information call (888) 777-0552 or email at [usa.info@wizcomtech.com](mailto:usa.info@wizcomtech.com).

**Jonnie Wells** is the Director of Speech and Audiology at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine. Some of the assistive devices she discussed included text or amplified phones, pagers, notification systems, and assistive listening devices. Vendor catalogs from LS & S and Maxi-Aids were available for distribution.



**Kevin Shelton** is an Adults with Disabilities instructor in Polk County and also the distributor of *WORDS+* Products. This assistive and augmentative communication device enables people with physical and cognitive disabilities to access computers and communicate more fully. Email: [info@words-plus.com](mailto:info@words-plus.com) or call (800) 869-8521.



**"CROSSING BRIDGES:"  
FLORIDA'S FOCUS ON LOW VISION  
AND LEARNING DISABILITIES**

Blindness accounts for less than 1/2 of 1% of the general population, however an adult with low vision may come to a literacy class to improve their literacy skills, obtain adaptive living skills, or computer literacy. The teacher needs to recognize that the loss of vision may not be the major factor in why the person may be experiencing reading problems. Rather, there may be an unidentified learning disability that is contributing to their reading problem.

**CROSSING BRIDGES** is the outcome of a project developed by the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) called "Bridging the Gap." Their goal was to invite rehabilitation specialists and adult literacy providers to take part in an intensive 3-day training to promote an awareness of how visually impaired people learn and how to adapt the classroom learning environment to accommodate their needs. Plans are underway to present a hands-on interactive training at the ACE of Florida Conference this September in Tampa, Florida to enable professionals to 1) understand the characteristics associated with low vision and learning disabilities, 2) assess learner needs, 3) learn how to modify the environment and 4) actively engage the learner in the learning process using technology. Essential components from Florida's *Bridges to Practice* initiative combined with the AFB's *Bridging the Gap* project will better prepare adult educators and other literacy providers, as well as staff and volunteers at rehabilitative centers, to meet the needs of this underserved population. We look forward to having some of our readers attend this training.