

## Inside this Issue

- 1 How to Effectively Implement Instruction for Adults with Special Learning Needs in the "Imperfect" Adult Ed. Setting
- 2 How to Effectively Implement Instruction (Cont'd from pg 1)
- 2 Literacy Council of Sarasota Receives Able Trust Award to Improve Volunteer Tutoring Services to Adults with Learning Disabilities
- 3 Moving Towards Success
- 4 Moving Towards Success (Cont'd from page 3)
- 4 Volunteer Tutors: A Way to Give Teachers Time to Teach the Neediest Learners

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"One challenge for literacy programs and practitioners is to change their views about learning disabilities and the impact of learning disabilities on the provision of services to learners. Literacy programs cannot overlook the fact that their learners' real-life responsibilities and obligations, combined with a real history of failure, embarrassment, and fear, shape a set of conditions that require a significant amount of staff planning and creativity."

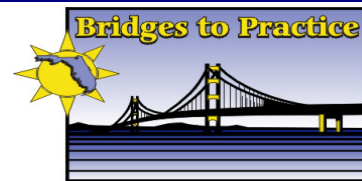
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# Practitioners' Points

## Volume 3, Issue 1

### HOW TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT INSTRUCTION FOR ADULTS WITH SPECIAL LEARNING NEEDS IN THE "IMPERFECT" ADULT EDUCATION SETTING

By  
**Neil Sturomski**  
Sturomski & Associates



Florida's Focus on  
Adults with Learning Disabilities

Let's be honest, most adults who enter adult education programs have some type of special learning need. They may have a learning disability, a mental disorder, difficulty reading, or had a poor education. Needless to say, most adult education students have difficulty in learning, which equates to difficulty in obtaining life's goals and dreams.

Having enough time to fully screen and intensively interview all adults that enter adult education and literacy programs would be ideal. A number of screening instruments can help to determine the likelihood of learning disabilities. Other tools, called inventories or questionnaires, often provide excellent insights and help plan instruction. However, screening instruments, inventories, and questionnaires may take more time to administer than adult educators or literacy providers have available when students enter their programs. After initial placement tests, it is therefore vital to **ask a brief set of key questions** that will allow the best possible instruction to be initiated. **Following up with additional questions** as instruction proceeds, watching how students attempt to learn new information, **observing, scrutinizing, and analyzing student efforts and errors**, and **modifying instruction** to better meet the individual student's needs are all **key components** of what has been termed—*diagnostic-prescriptive teaching*.

An **information-gathering** and **diagnostic-prescriptive approach** can improve instruction for all students in adult education and

literacy programs. Adult education and literacy providers can make a great impact on student learning and student success by systematically determining students' needs, setting and evaluating individual goals and objectives, flexibly determining instructional techniques and strategies, continually monitoring the adult student's performance, and providing immediate feedback.

If learning is at a standstill after an initial diagnostic-prescriptive approach, adult educators and literacy instructors should meet with individual students to discuss options. Screening for the likelihood of a learning disability may be one such option. Screening can lead to a diagnostic evaluation of a learning disability, which can prove important when requesting accommodations on the GED Tests, in other testing situations, in employment settings, and in post-secondary environments.

However, screening is not the only option. Another is to use a more extensive inventory or questionnaire leading to further improvements in instruction and greater use of effective instructional practices. An inventory continues the diagnostic-prescriptive process. And while it may help specifically zero in on learning needs, it does

(Continued on page 2)

"In order to work successfully with adults who have not made it in our education system, one must think out of the box and put in extra time, and above all individualize instruction. It doesn't have to cost lots of money to make teaching a "hands-on" experience. Make teaching aids from items found around your house or free things you've gathered and use them in your daily lessons. It's all doable, and part of what teaching in adult education is all about." (Neil Sturomski)

(continued from page 1)

not lead to labeling an individual as learning disabled. However, it can lead to a referral for a diagnostic evaluation.

When students enroll in adult education or literacy programs, they often complete a placement test that provides program administrators and instructors with information on the student's basic skill levels in reading, math and writing. These scores serve as a guide for placing students in specific classrooms as well as provide instructors with a starting point for instruction.

The next step in designing an appropriate educational program is to gather and interpret as much other information as possible about the individual's learning abilities and learning needs. This information gathering can be accomplished through a review of school, medical, or employment records and, if available, previous testing. Because this information may not be readily available within a reasonable time frame, additional, crucial information can be obtained by asking key questions, and by observing the student during instruction. Adult education or literacy instructors should ask questions related to student health, basic academic skills, learning modalities or learning channels, spatial relationships, attention, time orientation, sequencing, and/or memory.

Adult students must understand that they are partners in their education. Therefore, the first step in working with adults is gaining their confidence and making sure they realize that you're a team. The more information they can share about themselves, the greater the likelihood is that you can help in improving their reading, writing, and/or math skills.



In a 5-10 minute structured interview, instructors can find out a lot of information about a student. In a one-to-one tutoring session, this interview can be longer and doesn't take time away from other students. In a classroom setting, individual student/teacher time is valuable; structuring interviews and interview questions keeps students on task and provides teachers with important infor-

mation. Classroom teachers should first organize the interviews by letting all students know why you'll be meeting with them individually, what you'll be asking and why, and how long each meeting will take. While conducting individual interviews, other students can provide additional information through diagnostic seatwork. Having a volunteer in an adult education program can be extremely helpful to the classroom teacher. This volunteer can assist students who are working on diagnostic seatwork while interviews are taking place.

Placement test information, interview questions, observations, and diagnostic-prescriptive information should serve one main purpose—to provide the basis for determining appropriate and effective instruction, remediation, and, if a disability is documented, appropriate accommodations. Following placement testing, and an initial student/teacher interview, an adult educator or literacy provider should have enough information to begin an individual student-centered instructional program. By helping students set individual, realistic goals and by determining specific, realistic instructional objectives, instructors should be able to plan a program that meets the needs of each student.

Continual monitoring of student progress provides valuable information on how a student individually inputs and outputs information, the rate and amount of input that's appropriate, and how information is organized and presented. These observations can be used to adjust learning tasks for each student. **First**, an instructor must determine the best ways in which an adult student takes in information (**INPUT**) and is able to demonstrate mastery (**OUTPUT**). **Second**, determining the rate of input for each task and each learner is essential - some learners can acquire knowledge and skills faster than others. By going too fast, instructors can produce anxiety and frustration in learners. Instructors must adjust the rate of input in order to maximize a student's potential. Repeating and reviewing information frequently is important. **Third**, instructors must control, and adjust as needed, the amount of information provided. When too much information is provided, adult students can

feel overloaded and overwhelmed. If this occurs, they will retain little, if any, new material. **Fourth**, by initially presenting information through a student's strongest learning channel, then through other processing channels, adult students may both use their strengths and strengthen weaker areas. For example, if an individual has auditory processing problems, an instructor might first present new information visually and then combine auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic learning to associatively relate instruction. **Finally**, teaching information that adults can understand, generalize, and use in many different settings will also play to the students' strengths. **These steps are discussed in the scenario that follows:**

You are working with a student on reading. Through placement testing, you have noted that he is reading at a fourth grade level. In a brief interview you've learned that the student has had difficulty with sight words and feels that he learns best when he hears information. In addition, he feels that he often guesses at words. He has shared that he does not like to read. However, he needs to improve reading in his present job in order to keep it. Finally, he enjoys sports, especially baseball.



### WHAT IS YOUR PLAN?

Start him out on a third grade level to gain his confidence. Use baseball stories, books, or magazine articles—which you might need to rewrite at his appropriate level. Simultaneously, begin to build on phonological awareness using an auditory approach and pairing it with visual cues. In addition, add tactile input whenever possible. Then work on individual letter sounds and combine those sounds into words. Create word cards and have the student draw a picture on the back to assist with recall, number each card and record them on audiotape. Begin with baseball or work-related words. Eventually, the student will be reading work-related material and/or baseball stories at his level.



In order to work successfully with adults who have not made it in our education system, one must think "out of the box," put in extra time, and above all, individualize instruction. It's all doable what teaching in adult education is all about.

**LITERACY COUNCIL OF SARASOTA RECEIVES  
THE ABLE TRUST AWARD TO IMPROVE VOL-  
UNTEER TUTORING SERVICES TO ADULTS  
WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

By

**Maria Spelleri, Project Coordinator**

The Literacy Council of Sarasota was the lucky recipient of \$11,749 from The Able Trust of Tallahassee, Florida. The Council serves between 45 and 66 learning disabled adults per year in its Basic Literacy program with more than 50% of them at or below a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level. The Council's new policy is to treat all prospective clients as LD until screened otherwise and train all volunteers to work with these special learners. Traditionally, this group of learners has been hard to teach, retain, and motivate, and are a source of frustration for the Literacy Council's volunteer tutors. The Able Trust funds are being used to better serve the program's clients with learning disabilities, as well as better prepare and support those volunteers who tutor them.

The "Tutoring Services for the Learning Disabled" program has three main components. [The first component focuses on the learner intake process.](#) The intake interview will be expanded to include a "Learning Plan Appointment" or LPA. The off-site interviewer will use several techniques to explain and demonstrate the location of the Council, including landmarks, a simple map, and phone number to call for instant help.

Until now, a learner might never come to the Literacy Council offices during the course of his tutoring. By bringing the learner to the center, the agency hopes to make him/her feel a more integral part of the Council's community of learners, as well as give staff the opportunity to introduce him/her to the computer lab and lending library, both of which have been sorely underused by the LD population.

The Learning Plan Appointment (LPA) will be a time to screen for Learning Disabilities, and to discuss expectations of the learner and the services that can be provided to him/her. Using visual worksheets, the learner and advisor will work out the best times for tutoring, computer lab work and quiet study time. They will list possible obstacles to suc-

cess, as varied as childcare problems, memory problems and difficulty getting in and out of the house on time in the morning, and brainstorm ways that the learner can overcome or work around them. During the LPA, the learner and advisor together will work through an interactive learning style inventory. The client will learn some general strategies for success, like keeping organized, using a calendar, and managing his/her time.

Perhaps the most important part of the LPA is devoted to goal setting. A series of interactive "worksheets" have been developed to help the learner think about goals, a specific goal statement, as well as short-term goals of interest. It uses mental imagery and positive thinking to both end the LPA in an energized and positive manner, and begin the tutoring with a "can-do" attitude. All papers generated in the LPA are placed in the learner file and passed on to the tutor who then will be more equipped to deal with the LD learner.

[Materials comprise the second component of the project.](#) Books will include low-level, high-interest readers to increase the potential for reading for pleasure. Computer programs include low-level multi-sensory and narrated reading programs. Instructional tools include magnet boards, letters and words, hand-writing kits, colored overlays, and highlighters, portable cassette recorders/players, phonics "games", and books with tapes.

[The final component of the program is aimed at the tutors who serve the clients.](#) All Basic Literacy tutors will receive training on working with adults with LD in both pre and in-service training sessions. A guide is currently being prepared for tutors that will help them select materials and activities that complement an individual learning styles, and reinforce tutoring strategies for working with special needs. Tutors play an important role in learner retention, so tutors will also learn motivational strategies to use with their learners.

**CONGRATULATIONS TO THE LITERACY COUNCIL OF SARASOTA, A LAUBACH LITERACY AFFILIATE OFFERING ADULT BASIC LITERACY AND ESL TUTORING THROUGH AN ALL-VOLUNTEER PROGRAM.**

*The Able Trust provides grant funds to Florida's not-for-profit agencies and citizens with disabilities. Go to <http://www.abletrust.org>*



**Moving Towards Success**  
**By Tania Arocha,**  
**ABE/GED Instructor,**  
**Broward County Public**  
**Schools**

As teachers, we find students who come to register in our programs with different backgrounds, levels of performance, personalities, ideologies, but with a common goal: to obtain their GED. The question is: If they all have the same goal, how come our students, being adults, have not yet obtained that diploma? We know that this can be for many reasons.

When I first began teaching adults, I found that many had very low performance scores on their reading, writing, and/or math entrance exams, and I was unsure of the best way to teach them. I knew that one of most important ways of reaching them was time—Time to get to know our students, since each has their own unique needs. Many learners come to our programs feeling uncertain and confused, some with a sense of feeling different, unaccepted, with past experiences of rejection, frustration, high levels of anxiety, as well as personal and health issues. Although I knew that the TABE or similar type of test was/is the instrument used for placement, my commitment to help my students, along with their cooperation, meant that the TABE was not going to provide enough information to enable us to reach our goals.

In the past two years, I have had the opportunity to attend Year 1 & 2 of Florida's "Bridges to Practice," Broward County's LVA training, GED 2002 Symposium, and other related trainings. From attending "Florida's 2002 Disabilities Symposium, I learned about screenings, teaching strategies, accommodations and assistive technology that has given me both the resources and confidence to help my students reach their goals.

I was particularly concerned about a student who came to our program to obtain his GED. He attended classes in high school up to 11<sup>th</sup> grade and his scores were below the 1<sup>st</sup> grade level. We set up realistic short and long term goals and it's been incredible to see how he has become confident about his work! Now, he catches his own mistakes and corrects them, reads and completes applications

(continued on page 4)

(continued from page 3)

with a little assistance and shares a clear vision of what he wants in life.

I began working one-on-one with this student on a daily basis, on the half-hour. He required constant feedback, almost every 15 seconds. As time went on, he took more ownership for his work. Nowadays, he suggests what he wants to work on - addition and subtraction of fractions, balancing a checking account, and developing a portfolio. He's also thinking about moving out on his own. He persists with learning to read and write because he wants to become a model. I have found interactive software, LVA techniques/word games, flashcards, phonics and money kits helpful in "moving students to success."

*Piper Community School is an adult/community school located in Sunrise, FL that provides ABE/GED Preparation, ESOL, Family Literacy, HSCT preparation, pre-college courses, computer instruction, Life-Long Learning and children's programs.*

**VOLUNTEER  
TUTORS: A WAY TO GIVE  
TEACHERS TIME TO TEACH  
THE NEEDIEST LEARNERS**

By

**Robin L. Schwarz, MspEd:  
LD**

**The Learning Lab @ Lesley University**

Well-known inspirational speaker Richard LaVoie asks in one of his videotapes on LD awareness why so often it is the students who learn readily who get the expert teacher while the students with the greatest needs are given to the persons in the classroom with the least training, the volunteer tutor. It would probably be hard to find a teacher who has not sighed a great sigh of relief when assigned a volunteer, thinking, "Now so-and so (the challenged learner) will finally have someone to give him the one-on-one attention he needs." But as Mr. LaVoie warns us, this is usually not a good solution to a very pressing need. It is even less desirable as a solution for the ESOL student diagnosed or suspected of having LD. However, the volunteer tutors can still be a great asset to the teacher of learners with LD in other ways

The first reason to avoid having un-

trained volunteers work with the ESL learners with LD is the one which Mr. LaVoie's comments point to: These are the learners who need expert help to overcome whatever challenge is in the way of learning. This challenge is not the equivalent of uneven pavement or even a detour; rather it is the equivalent of a missing bridge needed to cross a wide, wild river with no alternative bridge at any distance. The learner needs someone who is skilled enough to help him or her figure out whether to build a new, different kind of bridge, or to find a viable alternative way to cross that river. This means, for example, that the tutor should have well-enough developed skills in remediation of reading to help the learner determine which reading method will work or enough experience with LD to be alert to when it is necessary to dig deeper to find the underlying cause of the person's difficulty in retaining information.

In addition to having finely honed tutoring skills, the persons working with learners with LD must have not just awareness but acceptance of LD. The unconvinced teacher or tutor may unwittingly convey disbelief in a tone of voice, sighs of frustration or irritation, body language or the way activities are approached and presented. Inevitably such a teacher will say that if the learner would just try harder, look more carefully, sound it out again or practice longer, s/he would make progress. In nearly 30 years' experience working with persons with LD, this writer has seen many instances where untrained instructors have inflicted unintended damage on the self-esteem of adult learners already embarrassed by their low literacy or inability to learn easily.

Working with ESOL learners with LD requires even more sensitivity since these learners bring cultural beliefs and language barriers that complicate the picture in other ways. Because in many cultures, slow or different learners are dealt with harshly and the notion of LD is mostly unknown, the ESOL learner may be very reluctant to be singled out in any way that implies s/he is not learning normally or that s/he is a burden to the teacher. Moreover, because the term LD translates so negatively into most other

languages, it is difficult to talk about learning issues positively with ESOL learners. Once their lack of progress is mentioned, the ESOL learner is likely to blame him or herself for lack of effort or disorganization and will be embarrassed that the teacher has noticed. Therefore, helping the ESOL learner may require careful and realistic conversations over many months about a learning challenge and ways the learner can overcome it or compensate for it.

One technique for dealing with multiple levels and needs that volunteers can assist in implementing is assignment folders. Every student in the class has a folder which contains an assignment sheet plus work that is being returned, work to correct and work to do—either alone, with a partner or in groups. Students of a similar reading level can be assigned to do an exercise together once they have done the reading. Others can compose sentences about a picture by working with a partner. This way, students can be given work that is exactly appropriate to their needs and those who work faster or slower are not pressured to wait or to hurry. The volunteer can monitor the faster students, sit in on groups, provide demonstrations where possible and facilitate discussions of readings or homework while the teacher spends time with those students who need more intense instruction. Though labor intensive in the beginning, once the folder system is established, a great deal of independence in learning can be encouraged. The folders of the more independent and more able students can contain many grammar exercises vocabulary activities, directions to do other activities at stations around the classroom and so on. These students soon come to enjoy the sense of control such a system allows them. Meanwhile, the folders of the learners with more challenges can have activities that permit them the repetition and review they require without the learner's being noticed as very different from the rest of the group.



Though the temptation is great to assign ESL learners with LD to the extra hands of the volunteer tutors, teachers should instead think of ways for the volunteers to take some of the teacher's load. Then the teacher can apply his or her greater knowledge and experience to the needs of these very special learners.