

Our Voice

Focus on Learning Disabilities

By Sheila Marshall, Timmins Learning Centre

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Several months ago I was given the opportunity to attend (on behalf of [Community Literacy of Ontario](#)) a series of three weekend workshops on Learning Disabilities (LD) facilitated by Pat Hatt. Many of you are already familiar with Pat and probably have her book, Target Literacy, on your bookshelf. Pat is a wonderful resource person and is also very passionate about trying to ensure that learners with learning disabilities receive the help they need to achieve their potential.

Those of us working in literacy also want to see all of our learners achieve and reach their goals. Unfortunately, many of us feel inadequate when teaching adults whom we suspect have learning disabilities. How do we know they have LD? What kind of LD do they have? What strategies work best with different LD? I cannot answer all of these questions in the depth you might like, but I will try to share with you some of the insights I have gained from this training.

Learning Disabilities is a huge topic, and three weekends could not possibly give anyone all the information they require. The workshops covered a number of topics: definitions, assessment, screening, teaching strategies, accommodations, resources, and assistive devices. At the end of this training I came back to my program with two large binders packed with information and resources and the huge task of organizing it into a meaningful package of use to others.



The Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario received funding from MTCU to support the “Practitioner Training for the Successful Acquisition of Literacy Skills for Adults with Learning Disabilities” project. All regional and sectoral networks were asked to find a representative to participate in this project.

Sheila Marshall from the Timmins Learning Centre served as CLO’s representative. Thank you Sheila for volunteering your time and talents to this important cause!

What is a Learning Disability?

“A learning disability is a disorder that affects people’s ability to either interpret what they see and hear or to link information from different parts of the brain. Although the individual with a learning disability has an average or above average IQ, the disability becomes evident in both academic and social situations. Learning disabilities may be divided in five categories:

1. **Visual problems:** *poor visual memory, reversals in writing*
2. **Auditory problems:** *poor auditory memory, speech problems*
3. **Motor problems:** *poor hand-eye coordination*
4. **Organizational problems:** *poor ability in organizing time and space*
5. **Conceptual problems:** *poor social skills and peer relations, difficulty correctly interpreting non-verbal language.” (1)*



Learning disabilities are not due to physical impairment, developmental delays, emotional disturbances, or environmental factors although learning disabilities may occur in conjunction with these. (2)

In essence, an individual with a learning disability has difficulty processing information—organizing it, storing it, retrieving it. The three most common learning disabilities are: visual, auditory and organizational.

Visual Processing Learning Disability

WHAT IS IT?

“I can see okay. I just can’t see to read.” (3)

A visual processing disorder hinders an individual’s ability to make sense of information taken in through the eyes. Difficulties with visual processing will affect how visual information is interpreted or processed by the brain.

AREAS OF DIFFICULTY FOR LEARNERS

- ⇒ Difficulty identifying symbols and words that they know (for example, confusing *n* and *m* when the only distinguishing feature is the number of humps in the letter)

- ⇒ Difficulty reading words with irregular sounds (for example, gh, ph)
- ⇒ Difficulty gaining information from pictures, charts, or graphs
- ⇒ Inability to **consistently** recognize letters, numbers, symbols, words or pictures. What is learned on one day may not be there on the next, or it may be remembered on the next day after that.
- ⇒ May recognize complicated words but have difficulty naming the letters within it **or** can sound out the individual letters but may have difficulty integrating them to make the whole word (4)
- ⇒ Learner may be very verbal and will chat
- ⇒ May need to use their finger to keep their spot
- ⇒ Spelling is based on sounds
- ⇒ Can work with word families/rhyming words (5)

HOW CAN I HELP MY LEARNERS?

The following suggestions are taken from Pat Hatt's workshop and the website "LD Online" (www.ldonline.org). Other useful strategies can be found in Destination Literacy.

READING STRATEGIES

- ⇒ Enlarge the print for readings
- ⇒ Cut a rectangle out of an index card to make a window which reveals a line of print at a time
- ⇒ This can then be replaced with a ruler and finally by having the learner use their finger to point to the word they are reading
- ⇒ Use a phonics-based reading program
- ⇒ Teach skimming and scanning skills
- ⇒ Teach pre-reading skills which show them what to look for when reading (for example, use prior knowledge, prediction, observation of illustrations and lay-out of text)
- ⇒ Teach thinking processes, which help the learner to interact with the text (for example, compare and contrast, sequencing, cause and effect, etc.)
- ⇒ Turn off bright overhead lights, especially fluorescent lights, and use low light from lamps and windows
- ⇒ Place softly coloured transparencies over text

WRITING STRATEGIES

- ⇒ Use paper with darker or more distinct lines
- ⇒ Use paper with raised lines
- ⇒ Simplify worksheets as to the amount of material on each sheet
- ⇒ Use paper that is divided into large and distinct sections for math problems



Auditory Processing Learning Disability

WHAT IS IT?

"I hear you, but I don't know what you're saying" (6)

An auditory processing learning disability interferes with an individual's ability to analyze or make sense of information taken in through the ears. An auditory processing deficit can interfere with speech and language acquisition and can affect all areas of learning, particularly reading and spelling.



AREAS OF DIFFICULTY FOR LEARNERS

The following are taken from the LD Online website (www.ldonline.org), Pat Hatt's training package, and Dale Jordan:

- ⇒ Identifying differences between similar sound patterns (for example, thermos may sound like furnace)
- ⇒ Difficulty recognizing rhyming words
- ⇒ Difficulty identifying the number of sounds in a word
- ⇒ Difficulty hearing differences between soft vowels and consonants
- ⇒ Difficulty blending sounds to form a word
- ⇒ Trouble with big words
- ⇒ Trouble with pronunciation
- ⇒ Difficulty remembering how to spell
- ⇒ May misinterpret lectures, phone messages, and oral instructions
- ⇒ May have difficulty recalling information from a story read aloud
- ⇒ Difficulty remembering the order of items in a list or the order of sounds in a word (for example, writing "ephelant" for "elephant").
- ⇒ May often interrupt with "What? Huh? What do you mean?"

HOW CAN I HELP MY LEARNERS?

- ⇒ Establish eye contact before starting to speak
- ⇒ Call his or her name before speaking
- ⇒ Show important information in writing along with verbally communicating it
- ⇒ Use outlines and notes to remind the learner later
- ⇒ Show the listener vowels, syllables, and words in print instead of forcing him or her to "hear what the vowel says"
- ⇒ Allow the learner to write on a word processor with a spell checker
- ⇒ Use sight word approach
- ⇒ Use flash cards with "personal" vocabulary
- ⇒ Teach structure rules for prefix, suffix, root words, etc.
- ⇒ Use language experience stories to begin rather than prepared text

- ⇒ Write out words and stories to help them reinforce learning
- ⇒ Use cloze exercises to help their prediction skills
- ⇒ Teach new words before reading the passage
- ⇒ Provide pre-reading questions to cue them
- ⇒ Use charts for rules
- ⇒ Use charts to remember reading content

Organizational Learning Disabilities

WHAT IS IT?

"I could do it if I just had enough time."

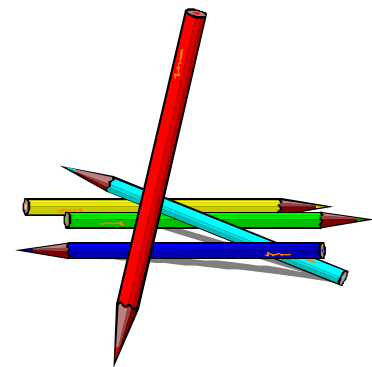
Learners with these organizational problems have difficulty receiving, integrating, remembering and expressing information.

AREAS OF DIFFICULTY FOR LEARNERS

- ⇒ Take longer to understand and respond to questions, but the quality of the answer is good
- ⇒ Has difficulty giving clear, concise answers to simple questions
- ⇒ Complain that they have trouble focusing
- ⇒ Need rewording of questions
- ⇒ Has trouble with attendance and follow through (7)
- ⇒ Difficulty completing assignments
- ⇒ Difficulty organizing notebook

HOW CAN I HELP MY LEARNERS?

- ⇒ Avoid timed tasks. Give extended time for tests and assignments
- ⇒ Allow learner to work with a study partner
- ⇒ Be patient when the learner is taking a while to respond
- ⇒ Tape record instructions so that they can be played again later (8)
- ⇒ Explain what the process of reading is—decoding using sound, sight and context
- ⇒ Provide detailed explanations
- ⇒ Have them keep a weekly plan
- ⇒ Explicitly teach reading strategies—prior knowledge, compare and contrast, categorize, sequence, the “wh” questions, cause and effect and patterns
- ⇒ Provide pre-reading questions
- ⇒ Word search for a specific word to answer



Numeracy Learning Disability

WHAT IS IT?

Learners who have difficulty performing simple math tasks are said to have a numeracy learning disability or dyscalculia.

AREAS OF DIFFICULTY FOR LEARNERS

- ⇒ Difficulty understanding math concepts
- ⇒ Difficulty recalling the sequence of a procedure in math
- ⇒ Difficulty recalling simple rote facts—timetables, etc.
- ⇒ Has problems with sequencing and the ability to see relationships
- ⇒ Appears to understand the concept but makes many careless mistakes
- ⇒ While able to do other math, cannot understand or work with problems involving 3-D objects (9)



HOW CAN I HELP MY LEARNERS?

- ⇒ Use calculators
- ⇒ Use a multiplication cheat sheet
- ⇒ Teach tricks—using your fingers to do the 9 x tables, digits add up to nine
- ⇒ BEDMAS for sequencing—brackets, exponents, division, multiplication, addition, subtraction
- ⇒ Teach formulas
- ⇒ Help them find key words in word problems

ENDNOTES:

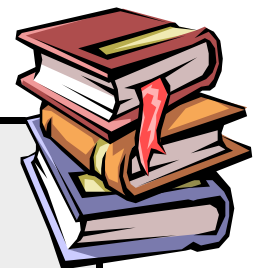
1. Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, distributed by Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario
2. Destination Literacy, Learning Disabilities Association of Canada
3. Genetic Learning Disability Patterns in Family Literacy, Dale Jordan, in National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Centre, Spring 1996, Volume 3, number 1
4. Taken from website "LD Online" (www.ldonline.org)
5. Pat Hatt, Tutor Training on Learning Disabilities
6. Dale Jordan
7. Pat Hatt, Training package, 2001
8. Dale Jordan
9. Pat Hatt, Training package, 2001

Websites:

- ⇒ "LD Online" (www.ldonline.org)
- ⇒ "Learning Disabilities Association of America" (www.ldanatl.org)
- ⇒ "National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center" (<http://novel.nifl.gov/nalldtop.htm>)
- ⇒ "Canadian Dyslexia Association" (www.dyslexiaassociation.ca)
- ⇒ Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (www.ldao.on.ca)
- ⇒ Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (www.ldac-taac.ca/)

Resources:

- ⇒ *Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities*. This resource includes practical teaching strategies, materials on accommodations, adaptive technology, and self-advocacy. It is 288 pages long and is available through the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (www.ldac-taac.ca/) for \$50.
- ⇒ *Target Literacy*, by Pat Hatt. This excellent resource is a screening tool and resource guide for adult literacy tutors. It is available for \$13 from the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario (www.ldao.on.ca).
- ⇒ Sheila Marshall will be compiling, researching and writing CLO's 2001 "paid members-only" resource on the topic of learning disabilities. Using membership fees, CLO will print and distribute this small resource guide on learning disabilities to all CLO paid members in November 2001!
- ⇒ The 13th National Conference on Learning Disabilities will be held on September 27-29, 2001 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Please contact the Learning Disabilities Association of Nova Scotia at 902-423-2850 or www.nsnat.org/ldans.



In conclusion...

A lot of the techniques for assisting learners with learning disabilities are also just good teaching practice. Many of us are already doing many of the suggestions outlined in this newsletter. They are strategies which are successful with all learners regardless of whether or not they have a learning disability. Goal directed assessment and planning, effective instruction, and effective teaching results in a successful learning environment and increased self-esteem for the learner.

Instructions for the learner should be clear and provided in various ways. A variety of techniques and methods need to be used in order for teaching to be effective. As instructors, we need to keep in mind that it is easier for us to modify our methods than it is for a student with learning disabilities to change the way in which they learn. Teach to the learner's strength, not our own.

When good instruction and effective teaching take place, the learner is more likely to feel good about their learning and will hopefully be able to achieve their goals.

Success & Innovation...Community-based Style!

By Johanna Pax-Milic, Lakeshore Adult Literacy

Lakeshore Adult Literacy in South Etobicoke, Toronto has recently offered a unique "Lunch & Learn" program. Because we are housed in a multi-service community agency (LAMP) whose focus is holistic health, our program considers the full-picture of our learners' lives. This means that when a learner comes to see me, our assessment includes a discussion about what is happening in their own life at the moment, and what experiences the person had in the past—things that may help us to understand that learner's obstacles—and their strengths so that we could facilitate increasing their potential—learning and healthwise.

One initiative that LAMP Health Centre supported us in was to provide funding over 12 weeks to pilot a "Lunch & Learn" program for level one learners who are currently on social assistance. The goal of this project was to increase learning time for a group of 5 adults, and to address issues around hunger, living on a tight budget, and learning about healthy eating choices.

Over the course of 12 weeks, learners spent the morning with a paid instructor doing basic math, and relating it to money and shopping. Then came the simple and delicious lunch, to nourish the mind, body and soul—usually a hot soup or salad and a sandwich. The afternoon learning session with a staff nutritionist included reading and writing, with a focus on planning the next week's lunch.

The results? Learners reported increased attention span, higher awareness of their own eating choices, and the willingness to include new, affordable healthy alternatives to their meal planning outside of the learning session. And their math and literacy skills showed marked gains!

The cost of the program including lunch was \$4,000. Well-spent, much appreciated by the learners and clearly impactful on the learning process.

Although we did not receive MTCU funding to continue the "Lunch & Learn" as a core service, we hope that innovative and smart projects like this will one day simply become integrated into the literacy field's practice. We also hope that this project will help to further demonstrate the important connection between health and literacy.

CLO gratefully acknowledges its funder: the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities

Another creative idea...

By Johanna Pax-Milic

Another way we are aiming to increase contact hours for learners, is via a partnership with one of the classroom programs in our community. Lakeshore Adult Literacy came up with the idea, as we heard that learners were coming back to us wanting extra help with homework in their classroom program.

Initially, we set up a homework drop-in at night, once a week, where learners could get help from a tutor. We felt that we could really meet the need for extra help by having a planned approach with the cooperation of the learners' home program. Discussions will happen at the community planning level, and I anticipate that in the fall, with co-operative outreach and referrals, learners from a school program will be sent to us, with their assessments and training plans, so that they can receive supportive homework tutoring from a community based program.