**Accommodating Students with Learning Disabilities**

**in the Classroom**

**Accommodations**

* Students who are underachieving academically as a result of a learning disability will require both differentiated teaching and differentiated assessment.
* Students with an identified learning disability are likely to require accommodations throughout their schooling and beyond.

**What are accommodations?**

Accommodations include:

* Adaptations and modifications of classroom practices (teaching style, materials used, assistive technology).
* Strategies that do not reduce educational standards and requirements.
* The use of alternate assessment procedures which incorporate students’ requirements.
* Strategies which reflect the concept of Universal Design.

**Without accommodations**

* Students will not be able to access the curriculum and will consequently learn less and less than their peers.
* Students will not be able to demonstrate their skills and understandings.
* Students are likely to experience a high level of frustration and anxiety; reducing their chances of learning even further!

**With accommodations**

* Students are more likely to access the curriculum and will consequently learn along with their peers.
* Students will have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and understandings.
* Students are less likely to experience frustration, anxiety and tension; improving their chances of learning and making some progress.



**Differentiated Teaching Strategies**

There is a range of inclusive teaching strategies that can assist all students to learn including some specific strategies that suit students with learning disabilities:

* Encourage the use of notebooks (paper or electronic) or provide memory prompts/picture cues for younger children.
* Teach mnemonics and rhymes to aid memory.
* Use bizarre/amusing incidents/stories to consolidate concepts and skills.
* Always allow enough time for students to process a question/problem.
* Give younger students prior warning of changes/activities.
* Offer books/texts electronically.
* Provide reading lists in advance.
* Consider tailoring reading lists and provide guidance to key texts.
* Allow work to be completed on an in-depth study of a few texts rather than a broad study of many.
* Ensure students with LDs get additional opportunity to practise writing letters/numbers (or later – symbols/notations).
* Provide templates for letters etc.
* Assist students to develop their own strategies for remembering left/right.
* Continually remind students how much time they have left.
* Highlight key words/information.
* When procedures, processes or directions are introduced (eg. in a science or computing exercise) ensure that stages or sequences are taught explicitly (stage by stage) and are explained in both verbal and written form.
* Students may benefit from using assistive technology.
* Use as many verbal descriptions as possible to supplement material presented on blackboard or overhead.
* Present information in a range of formats – handouts, worksheets, overheads, videos – to meet a diversity of learning styles.
* Where possible, present material diagrammatically - in lists, flow charts, concept maps etc.
* Ensure students do not have to rely too heavily on reading in order to acquire information.
* Keep diagrams uncluttered and use colour to distinguish and highlight.
* Ensure that lists of technical / professional jargon are available early in the year.
* Teach subject vocabulary explicitly and regularly (e.g. Word of the day / week).
* Students with a learning disability find it difficult to listen and write at the same time. Avoid asking them to do this.
* If possible, record teaching presentations for those students who have:
  + Handwriting or coordination problems.
  + Impaired / very slow handwriting.
  + A tendency to mishear or misquote.
* Students will be more likely to follow correctly the sequence of material in a class presentation if they are able to listen to the material more than once.
* Encourage older students to visit the web-site [www.adcet.edu.au](http://www.adcet.edu.au/) and review the student section for strategies relating to memory, spelling, reading, mathematics and written expression. There are also tips on preparation before term, during term and before exams.

**Need for Repetition**

* Repetition is important for students with a learning disability. Wherever possible, ensure that key statements and instructions are repeated or highlighted in some way.
* Students with a learning disability are generally not efficient users of time and so will benefit from discussion on time management and organisation issues. Such discussions can be built in to class activities.
* Extra tutoring in subjects where processes and sequences are important may be required / desirable.
* Students with a learning disability may benefit from having both oral and written feedback on their written assignments.

**Handwriting/Written Expression**

* Proper pencil grip – tripod grip with open web space is ideal
* Awkward pencil grip is more tiring and may affect letter formation and slant
* STOP – PINCH – LIFT or Froggy legs.
* Skillbuilders.com.au have a good range of resources to assist with handwriting difficulties.

NOTE:

* While children write, they receive feedback in the form of pressure and the pull of the pencil against the paper.
* Use a pencil with a soft lead to reduce fatigue.
* No eraser.
* Use specially designed paper, raised lines etc.

**Spelling**

* Many students with reading and writing disabilities also have a difficult learning to spell.
* WA research found:
* Students with Dysgraphia tend to over-rely on visual and inadequate phonological strategies
* Poor phoneme awareness and inefficient reading despite appearance of average reading in context.

**Assistive Technologies to Support Spelling Difficulties**

* Hand-held spellcheckers, e.g. Collins Franklin Spellchecker with phonetic spell correction.
* Software with inbuilt spellchecker, e.g. TextHELP.
* Homophone Support.

**Working Memory**

* Children with dysgraphia may have reduced storage or processing capacity.
* Weaknesses in working memory influence written expression.

**Composition (Written Expression)**

* Transcription and composition instruction should be taught in tandem to integrate the various writing components in resource-limited working memory.
* Explicit instruction should be used for the high-level cognitive processes of composing.

**Build Component Skills**

* Develop
* Sentence structure
* Paragraph structure
* Essay/Report structure
* Explicitly teach structure of different writing tasks.
* Demystify the writing process.

**Assistive Technologies to Support Written Expression Difficulties**

* Word prediction software, e.g. TextHELP, Co:Writer, Kurzweil 3000, WordQ.
* Written composition software, e.g. Draft:Builder, SOLO Writing Coach.
* Speech to text/dictation with digital recorder.
* If possible, record teaching presentations for those students:
* who have handwriting or coordination problems;
* who have impaired/very slow handwriting;
* who have a tendency to mishear or misquote.
* Students will be more likely to follow correctly the sequence of material in a class presentation if they are able to listen to the material more than once.

**Keyboarding vs. Handwriting?**

* Comprehensive assessment of severity of handwriting difficulty is needed.
* Explicit instruction in keyboarding should be provided.
* Typically developing children write more, write faster, write more complex syntax and express more ideas when writing by pen.

**Assistive Technologies to Support Handwriting Difficulties**

* Getting the words down differently
* Keyboarding skills – develop touch typing
* *Nessy Fingers* is a touch-typing program that uses games to build up typing speed and accuracy. Other programs include *Easi Keysi* and *UltraKey*.
* However, many students who have difficulty with the production of letters in a paper-and-pencil format also have difficulty with keyboarding
* Voice to text software, e.g. *Dragon NaturallySpeaking*
* Almost all students (including those with LD) produce more material if they can dictate rather than write.
* Supporting note-taking skills
* Voice recording allows students to revise information they may not have written down
* Digital recorder or device with a recording function (e.g. iPod, mobile phone)
* *Pulse SmartPen* records and links audio to what you write, which can then be played back or uploaded onto your computer

**Reducing Anxiety**

* Students with learning disabilities often become over-anxious about making mistakes, asking questions, getting through the work or meeting learning goals.
* It may be helpful for students with a learning disability to have an individual orientation to lengthy assignments, laboratory equipment or computers to minimise anxiety.



**Differentiated Assessment**

There is a range of inclusive assessment practices which will enhance the learning of **all** students in the class but students with learning disabilities may need particular adjustments to assessment tasks.

Ideally, the functional impact on learning should be assessed, then alternative assessment strategies can be considered.

**Alternate Forms of Assessment**

It is important to consider the following points:

* The aim is to achieve equal opportunity not a guaranteed outcome.
* Outcomes should not be reduced to accommodate students with a disability.
* The assessment process should provide a reasonable opportunity for students to demonstrate what they have learned.
* At times allow extensions to assignment deadlines if extensive reading has been set.
* Extra time may be required to organise thoughts and sequence material.
* Some students will write, read / speak on to tape / PC, listen and then correct. This all takes time.
* Students will benefit from discussing their outlines with particular attention being paid to appropriate relationships and connections between points.
* Encourage the student to submit an early draft of assignments to allow the opportunity for feedback.
* Students with a learning disability will often need extra time in an examination for reading and analysing questions and for planning their answers.
* Some students will request that examination questions be read to them.
* Some students may prefer to dictate their answers to a scribe.
* Keep written examination instructions and sentences within examination questions short.
* Questions using bullet points or distinct parts are more likely to be correctly interpreted.
* Students with LDs often find it difficult to appreciate the subtle arrangement and use of words in multiple choice questions. Consequently, short answer questions will often be a better test of their knowledge.

**Remediation**

* Students with both learning difficulties and learning disabilities require structured, explicit and systematic intervention in response to the identified areas of weakness.
* Students with a learning disability linked to a particular area of weakness (eg. phonological processing) may fail to make adequate progress in the area of weakness despite prolonged, targeted intervention. This increases the need for specific accommodations for these students.

**In Relation to Intervention**

The National Research Council on Reading (NICHD) has established that interventions are most effective when they:

* Provide systematic and explicit instruction on whichever component skills are deficit.
* Provide a significant increase in the intensity of instruction (eg. one on one or small groups of three or four students).
* Provide opportunities for guided practise of new skills.
* Provide appropriate levels of scaffolding to assist students as they develop new skills.
* Provide good curriculum based assessment at frequent intervals (students should develop self-evaluation and checking strategies).
* Ensure that teachers have received expert professional development relating to - knowledge of reading psychology, formal and informal assessment and screening strategies, and skills in monitoring and reporting progress.

**Remediation approaches:**

What approach is most effective?

* Explicit teaching (direct instruction).
* Emphasis on PA and phonics.
* Structured and progressing sequentially.
* Lots of practice, revising and assessing.
* Clear evidence of progress.
* Multi-sensory or meta-cognitive strategies.

**Useful website …**

http://www.adcet.edu.au/oao/

The *Opening All Options II website* was developed by DEST and a number of Australian universities to provide information and suggested strategies (in relation to learning disabilities) to both staff and students in tertiary institutions. Much of the information is applicable to upper-primary and secondary school staff and students.

**Focus on what is done well…**

* Students with Learning Disabilities generally have average to above average intelligence – at times superior ability
* Look for strengths
* Most important factor in future success is “resilience” or “self-esteem”

