

A Practical Guide for the Teaching of Literacy to Adults With Learning Difficulties

Part II

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A Practical Guide for the Teaching of Literacy to Adults With Learning Difficulties

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Learning Problems Among Adults: Difficulties or Disabilities

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1. CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

At the outset, it is essential to stress that to our knowledge no research has been done in the area of learning problems among francophone adults enrolled in literacy training. As unbelievable as this may seem, not a single study has been conducted in the French education sector in Québec, the rest of North America or Europe. At least, this was our unfortunate conclusion based on a reading of current literature (specialized and non-specialized periodicals, education research abstracts). We were unable to consult any reference corpus and had to turn to other possible sources of information.

A general review of the literature in the English sector, in the areas of education, psychology and related sciences, confirmed once again that no study has been undertaken on this topic. Some research has, however, been conducted among adults with learning problems, but it has not been carried out specifically or exclusively on the population that interests us here. While these initiatives constitute a valuable contribution to understanding adults with learning problems, a number of grey areas remain, particularly with respect to the professional fields in which these experiments were conducted, variables affecting the sample, research hypotheses and recommendation.

1.1. Professional fields

Specialists who have worked among adults with learning problems belong to various schools of thought in the field of psychology (psychoanalysis, behaviourism, cognitivism and neuropsychology). While their intentions may be noble and their contributions appreciated, it is unfortunate that none of the specialists worked in collaboration with representatives from the education community. As a result, the conception and analysis of learning problems among adults are derived exclusively from the field of psychology.

1.2. Variables affecting the sample

It is disappointing that the subjects' level of schooling and age were not considered important variables in the sample chosen. Furthermore, in most of the experiments, adult subjects with learning problems come from only two main groups.

The first group consists of adults who received vocational counselling services. The level of schooling, not always precisely reported, is very heterogenous, ranging from elementary school through to university. It is, therefore, impossible to distinguish illiterate adults from adults who have received university education. For the purposes of the experiments, all subjects were categorized as adults with learning problems,

regardless of level of schooling. The failure to take this variable into account in any serious way has deprived the education community of substantial analytical clues. This data could have contributed to a better understanding of learning problems among adults, in relation to their training, and how they affect general functioning. From simple observation, it is clear that the greater the severity of the learning problem the lower the adult's level of literacy or schooling. The same observation applies to an adult's level of functional autonomy.

The second group is exclusively composed of students enrolled in American colleges or universities. It goes without saying that this group is not of great interest here, as it is already literate.

1.3. Research hypotheses

Another facet of current research concerns intent. The current literature we consulted revealed that the proposed tools used to test hypotheses focus on two components.

The first component focuses on determining the behaviour of adults who experience learning problems in everyday activities. Probable links are never raised between deficiencies and "educational" knowledge. A lack of basic knowledge is never cited as a possible cause of a deficiency in educational knowledge. If the person being consulted (teacher, psychologist, etc.) is not made aware of this profile, he or she all too often concludes that the adult suffers from a "permanent" incapacity or mental impairment.

The second component focuses on attempting to diagnose learning problems, from a strictly psychological viewpoint, while completely disregarding the entire educational dimension. Most of the analysis concerns "deviant behaviour," that is, what adults cannot do or have failed to do. No attempt is ever made to establish a relation of cause and effect, that is, to demonstrate that learning problems on the educational level can lead to difficulties in carrying out daily tasks.

If a study focuses on cognitive abilities or functions, it will prove, for example, based on the tests used, that the adult has problems related to memory. No explanation is given of the possible relation between this type of deficiency and learning problems which may, in turn, have led to problems in carrying out daily activities.

This may, therefore, be an ineffective approach in that it addresses learning problems among adults from only one angle. Furthermore, given that the tools employed are exclusively from the field of psychology, they can almost never be used in concrete ways by instructors engaged in literacy activities.

1.4. Recommendations

Despite the results of these experiments, no recommendations are put forward regarding methods or techniques to compensate, correct or re-educate in order to address the diagnosed deficiencies—recommendations which could be used by players in the education field. Consequently, their conclusions are somewhat sterile.

Current knowledge on this topic is very limited. What we do know is not drawn from scientific data, but rather is empirical in nature. It is based on observations made “in the field” following educational initiatives implemented among members of this population, and on the fruitful exchange of ideas with instructors directly involved in this area.

Given the absence of literature on this topic, the purpose of this document is to begin to define learning problems among adults. It is designed to help instructors better identify and understand learning problems overall, and to distinguish between learning difficulties and learning disabilities.

2. POSSIBLE LEARNING PROBLEMS: DIFFICULTIES OR DISABILITIES

2.1. Theoretical framework: remedial teaching and neurocognition

The framework for a theoretical understanding of learning problems is based, in part, on documentation from the fields of remedial teaching and neurocognition. In fact, analysis of reading, writing and arithmetic from the perspective of remedial teaching sheds light on the types of production among individuals in terms of acquisition and errors. Neurocognition tells us about normal and abnormal brain functioning, and about the brain’s modes of organization in terms of learning. Based on these two fields, and their potential complementarity, it becomes possible to illustrate an individual’s strengths and weaknesses and thus define learning problems.

It should also be pointed out that at the remedial level, learning problems are manifested in the same way among adults, children and adolescents. In the area of neurocognition, however, an adult’s functioning (profile of strengths and weaknesses) may appear similar in some ways to that of children or adolescents, but is distinct in how it affects daily life.

2.2. Learning difficulties or learning disabilities

Learning problems can be divided into two categories: learning difficulties and learning disabilities. One can then see that the reasons for taking various types of corrective action and the results differ, but that the identification of indicators and corrective actions are similar.

Learning difficulties are considered extrinsic or exogenous to the individual. They result from interferences related, among other things, to affective, emotional, cultural, psychosocial and socio-economic factors. These factors are not isolated or independent of each other, but rather interactive and interdependent. This is why adults with learning difficulties sometimes appear to be victims of a web of circumstances beyond their control. They seem to be victims of the system, people who are prone to misfortune.

In terms of learning, these difficulties directly hinder an individual's normal cognitive process for a given period of time. The length of time is relative and proportional to the individual's "degree of discomfort." This type of situation prevents the adult from using his or her full learning capacity to produce meaningful, financially viable work over the long term.

It must also be noted that learning difficulties can be "temporary," provided that support measures are effective. This is not always possible, however, due to factors beyond the control of all concerned. Take, for instance, a young man on welfare, who does not always have enough to eat. In a learning situation, his mind will surely wander and he will find it difficult to concentrate in class. Or consider a woman whose husband is about to die of cancer. She will be anxiety-ridden and not mentally disposed to learning.

Learning disabilities are considered intrinsic or endogenous to the individual, and take two forms: acquired and innate. Acquired learning disabilities are the result of injury to the nervous system (active neurological disease, head trauma, stroke, etc.). Learning disabilities are innate if, biologically, the brain is abnormally formed and functions improperly. These acquired or innate disabilities are permanent.

It must be noted, however, that there are differences between these two groups. Adults with acquired disabilities have a much more limited capacity to relearn or acquire new knowledge than those with innate disabilities. In the former case, the brain has usually been seriously damaged, and its capacity has been significantly altered in every way. A number of factors interfere with the normal learning process, such as greater physical and mental fatigability, greater stress related to carrying out tasks, and irreversible disability in fine motor skills.

Individuals with innate disabilities still have a good capacity to learn if they have access to individualized education approaches. The brain has not been as traumatically affected and learning skills are much better preserved, all of which point to a brighter future. It must be emphasized, however, that learning disabilities are much more resistant to educational and corrective intervention than learning difficulties, and that the pace of work among these adults is slow.

It should be added that adults will not find a panacea to their learning problems by participating in literacy workshops. That said, if instructors are aware of the learning problems, they will be better prepared to act quickly to find suitable approaches or compensatory methods to help these adults in their educational path and to respond to their specific needs.

3. LEARNING PROBLEMS AND SPECIFIC NEEDS

Among children, the most evident learning problems can be detected in their school work. Sometimes, these problems are also revealed in a child's conduct or behaviour in relation to adults or classmates.

This is not the case for adults with learning problems. Since their learning problems have been "cultivated" since childhood or adolescence, they have been unable to adequately develop certain cognitive and academic skills. As a result, these adults have great difficulty functioning independently in society, as they are unable to use knowledge they never acquired. They are unable to fulfil adult responsibilities, not out of laziness or disinterest, but because their learning problems have prevented them from acquiring the necessary skills. These adults are "passive" although they would like to be "active."

Learning problems therefore create deficiencies and lead to specific needs among adult learners. These problems can have consequences on four levels:

- educational, including cognitive operations
- social
- personal
- professional

3.1. Educational consequences

On the educational level, it goes without saying that reading, writing and arithmetic are the most important needs to address in promoting a better integration in the workforce.

It is essential to acknowledge that observed deficiencies are very often caused by poor functioning of cognitive operations. Weaknesses of the memory, language and thought processes used to resolve problems are widely recognized as the main factors responsible for learning problems at the educational level.

Of course, the adult's level of cognitive development must always be taken into account. It should never be assumed that the adult possesses all educational skills and abilities or that he or she has developed all of the cognitive operations necessary to accomplish a task. To the contrary, adults in literacy training often exhibit, among other things, metacognitive disturbances. In that case, the "learning to learn" function does not work properly or is absent.

It is also important to verify the adult's ability to reproduce "educational" behaviour, or conduct appropriate to school culture. An individual who never learned how to be a student will not know today how to be an adult in a learning situation. It is important to show adult learners how to develop their own resources and strategies or to suggest methods that will contribute to their success, rather than catapult them, once more, into a situation of failure. **It is more productive to cultivate a belief in real individual potential than to maintain a sense of ongoing failure.**

3.2. Social consequences

At the social level, adults with learning problems are uncomfortable or unable to build interpersonal relations. To meet people, make or keep friends, or even sustain a conversation is often an insurmountable challenge. They also maintain that they have problems with impulsiveness, often speaking or acting before thinking. Furthermore, going out on a date or sustaining a stable relationship is considered out of reach, while filling in spare time or organizing a relaxing activity is viewed as a chore.

3.3. Personal consequences

Problems can also arise on the personal level, especially in daily activities. Adults with learning problems can easily become lost in the maze of budget management (assessing the cost of a product in relation to one's means, handling money, understanding financial paperwork, dealings with personnel at financial institutions, etc.). This also holds true for the functional organization of an apartment where tasks such as cooking and house cleaning can be difficult to organize. Situating oneself in time and space (inability to assess the distance between home and the training centre or the time it will take to get there) can also pose serious difficulties.

Other problems can arise at the personal level. For instance, not knowing how to use the appropriate resources in the event of illness or an emergency, difficulties using the

public transportation system and not knowing how to use a telephone and its related services and accessories (local versus long-distance calls, telephone book, cordless telephone, phone booth, etc.) can limit the sphere of action of an adult with learning problems. Driving a car is another major challenge for these individuals. Deficiencies in visuo-motor coordination (eye-hand coordination), difficulties in making quick decisions, poor lateralization, inability to memorize the rules of the road and difficulty deciphering road signs “contaminated” with too much written information often prevent these individuals from getting a driver’s license or can lead to unsafe driving.

3.4. Professional consequences

Finally, at the professional level, adults with learning problems complain that they do not know how to look for a job or read a job application, how the job search process works, how to fill out a job application or be successful in a job interview, or where to get basic training to do so.

Furthermore, when adults with learning problems are hired, they need to learn how to manage their time, and how to tell time, in order to respect schedules. Sometimes, a “guide” can be very supportive in teaching an individual, step by step, the rudiments of a job. This new employee then requires time to “digest” the information. In the workplace, there are also orders to follow and safety rules to observe which are not always easy to understand. Individuals may also have a hard time accepting criticism for repeated errors at work. Intervention methods must be found that help to minimize the impact of these kinds of difficulties.

4. PROFILE OF THE ADULT POPULATION EXHIBITING LEARNING PROBLEMS

Before describing the characteristics of adults with learning problems, it is important to point out, even at the risk of repeating ourselves, that such individuals experienced learning problems as children and adolescents. Sometimes these problems were associated with improper conduct or behavioural problems, including lack of discipline, delinquency, unwarranted absenteeism and violent or aggressive behaviour towards companions or teachers.

Furthermore, the decision by an individual with this profile to embark on literacy training should not be viewed as a chance occurrence or an isolated factor in his or her life. This person's entire life has been marked by failure at the educational, social, personal and professional level. He or she has also been labelled as lazy, unmotivated, crazy, a social parasite, antisocial, mentally handicapped and so on.

In addition, these individuals have likely received a whole range of services, from remedial education to a range of health and social service support measures. By the time they get into literacy training, they often think they have finally found their panacea. This wishful thinking, however, soon collides with reality as they must once again confront failure. This explains the scepticism in some circles of the real learning potential of this group of adults. Which is why it is so important to set the record straight!

Adults exhibiting learning problems are usually of average intelligence, equal to that of someone with no learning problems at all. The causes of their problems are what prevent them from functioning like everyone else. There is, therefore, a divergence in results.

In fact, even an adult with **acquired learning disabilities** resulting from brain damage can possess a normal intelligence quotient. The fact that certain cognitive functions are irreversibly damaged as a result of neurological lesions, explains why this person is not able to function successfully at all levels. Since certain cognitive processes are not functioning normally, anomalies may appear when this person is in a learning situation. He or she will therefore exhibit an unbalanced medley of strengths and weaknesses.

For adults with **learning difficulties**, simply solving personal problems or addressing various disruptive factors in their lives (community, school, family) will resolve a temporary inability to learn. Adults are always capable of learning, regardless of the deficiencies they may have experienced. Once initial obstacles are removed, they will be able to learn and then apply their new skills and abilities in their personal activities.

Adults with **innate learning disabilities**, including those with an intelligence quotient similar to that of the previous group, do not have the same success indicators. In fact, there is a gulf

between what is expected and what is actually accomplished. These adults must confront “cognitive” obstacles before being able to acquire knowledge and put it to good use. Any learning process therefore involves an incalculable amount of work, without knowing what the outcome will be. The point is, the fact that adults have the ability to learn must never be lost sight of. They learn differently, however, and, above all, slowly. Furthermore they will remain “inactive” in several areas of life if they are not sufficiently stimulated.

5. PORTRAITS OF ADULTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

The following portraits will contribute to a better understanding of learning problems and their dynamics.

Adults from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds who lacked sufficient stimulation in their immediate environment as children and continue to live in a similar environment may exhibit **learning difficulties**. Even if they are now enrolled in literacy training, we must keep in mind that they likely experienced learning “complications” as children. Since they suffered materially and possibly experienced affective and emotional deprivation in childhood, they now have learning deficiencies, despite possible corrective action taken in the past. As children, their basic needs were not met and anxiety soon replaced motivation, resulting in learning difficulties. These same difficulties led to slow progress in school. Not surprisingly, illiteracy and insufficient schooling can lead to poverty and hinder access to employment.

In addition, certain immigrants, upon arrival in a new place, experience culture shock as a result of a new way of life and a different value system, which can temporarily affect the cognitive process, leading to **learning difficulties**.

A single mother, once a victim of conjugal violence, left alone to provide for her children, or a woman still living in an abusive relationship, will not be able to excel at the cognitive level. She may experience **learning difficulties** since she is constantly preoccupied with personal problems and overcome by anxiety and anguish, and is therefore unable to devote herself to productive intellectual work.

6. PORTRAITS OF ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Brain injury and head trauma are the most common causes of acquired learning disabilities. This type of event causes adults to lose considerable knowledge, depending on the severity of the brain damage. Since most of these individuals are educated, there is a subsequent period of relearning. Most of them will take a literacy or pre-high school course to recover their cognitive loss.

Not everyone, however, is able to relearn. Memory is almost always the principal function affected, and the seriousness of mnemonic loss varies from one individual to the next. While in some cases learning new knowledge is possible, it is often a very arduous process. Consolidating old and new knowledge is, therefore, most often accomplished in very small steps.

A young motivated woman, with no attention deficit or memory problems, who writes relatively well (acquired knowledge at the level of first year of high school), but can only read in a very syllabic fashion (acquired knowledge at the level of a literacy class), and does not always have a firm grasp of what she has read, is an example of a person with innate learning disabilities. In daily life, she would be able to write and then reread a grocery list or a short telephone message, but would be unable to reread a letter she had just written to someone.

Another individual would be able to read and understand information she encounters on a daily basis (newspapers, advertisements, etc.), but would not be able to write a single word based on its sound: her grapheme-phoneme (letter-sound) correspondence is non-existent.

A young man, by taking literacy training and attending an awareness workshop on learning problems, may discover he has attention deficit. He realizes that he is easily distracted by the smallest sound, causing him to lose his concentration. He never realized this before because as a child he was always “accused” of being temperamental and unmotivated. Now he knows he has a learning disability, caused by attention deficit, and he wants to “get better.”

An adult enrolled in literacy training says she does not know how to organize herself after a lesson with an instructor. During the lesson, she understands everything and can read what is written. But after the lesson, she is lost! She doesn't know how to plan her time, what to study and, above all, how to study. She attends every class, but she is slow to learn and her learning is riddled with gaps.

CONCLUSION

Learning difficulties or learning disabilities have the greatest impact on an adult's socioprofessional life and daily activities. In fact, adults often become aware that they have learning problems because they function differently in society. Since these individuals cannot refer to something they never learned, nor employ knowledge they do not possess, nor have effective recourse to mechanisms enabling them to organize their cognitive process, they have a hard time covering up their inaptitude.

They cannot grasp written or verbal information important for their "survival," and are therefore deprived of fundamental rights, that is, the right to lead an autonomous, dignified life. As soon as their autonomy or job is dependent on "academic knowledge," they are often reduced to silence or to extreme dependency on others. They may well be able to carry out a task based on simple verbal instructions, but they quickly become ineffectual if they are required to use complex written information in an activity.

If the objective of instructors is to support adults in training, including those with learning problems, it is essential that these adults be made aware of their problems. This is an excellent way to enable them to become proactive agents in their own learning.

Finally, we must remember two important points. Firstly, adults in learning situations can sometimes "break down" and "vegetate" for a period of time. It is important to proceed carefully, not jumping to the conclusion that they have learning problems. Time, patience and tolerance are often the best guides in this situation. Secondly, we must follow the rule of thumb that adults in learning situations are capable of learning. Learners have different backgrounds, and the development of a teaching method adapted to their varied needs is the winning formula.

