

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

Part IX

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

Diagnosis and Intervention Strategies

IX — Cognitive Field Module: Attention

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IX—COGNITIVE FIELD

MODULE: ATTENTION

INTRODUCTION

“The cognitive field includes the cognitive skills that make learning possible. The existence of learning problems indicates a strong possibility of deficiencies at the cognitive level; if there is dysfunction at the level of cognitive skills, there is a strong likelihood of learning problems.”¹

As this passage makes clear, cognitive skills have a major impact on learning. Skills such as attention, language, perception, memory as well as planning and executing tasks are a part of daily, ongoing learning, and are all directly related to learning basic subjects. During workshops, it is important to encourage adult learners to speak, to think, to use their memory and attention span, and so on.

Although the development of cognitive skills is an ongoing process, specific activities and exercises can help foster these skills. It is important to present the adult learners with the objectives of each activity or exercise, to help them make the connection between cognitive skills and learning and to repeat these activities or exercises as often as possible.

Activities should be varied in order to stimulate different cognitive skills. Special attention should also be paid to the immediate environment (the organization of physical space), to the ground rules established within the group, to the kinds of work habits being fostered among the adult learners, and so on. Organize workshops in such a way as to encourage participation, responsibility, cooperation and mutual assistance—remember, interaction and the development of cognitive skills go hand in hand.

In short, the suggested intervention strategies for the various aspects of the cognitive field are designed to incite adult learners to interact, not only with the other members of the group, but also with the specific object of learning (a text to read, a problem to solve, etc.). This way, the adult learners’ efforts to grasp the object of learning—through mastery of the necessary cognitive skills—will shed new light on the object of learning, enabling them to gradually understand the purpose of the activity and to successfully complete it.

¹ Translated from J. Jasmin, *Guide d'utilisation de la grille de dépistage de problèmes d'apprentissage chez les adultes* (Montréal: Commission des écoles catholiques de Montréal, 1990).

COGNITIVE FIELD**ATTENTION**

1. Does the adult learner appear to be mentally alert (ready to work without displaying signs of mental fatigue)?

YES: The adult learner seems to be mentally alert.

NO: The adult learner often seems to be distracted.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Try to determine, with the adult learner, the causes of his or her attention problems. Begin by examining possible causes independent of the classroom, such as:
 - ◇ the learner's state of health
 - ◇ his or her vision or hearing
 - ◇ his or her lifestyle (food, sleep, use of stimulants, etc.)
 - ◇ personal problems

On the basis of the problems identified, encourage and, if possible, help the adult learner find a solution by consulting the appropriate resource person.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

If the attention problems are related to a lack of motivation:

- ◇ suggest that the learner meet with an educational and vocational information counsellor in order to redefine his or her training plan
- ◇ help the learner set realistic goals that are attainable in the short or medium term
- Help the adult learner explore other possible causes of his or her attention problems:
 - ◇ relationship with the instructor
 - ◇ relationship with other learners in the group
 - ◇ lack of interest in the material or type of work assigned
 - ◇ stress
 - ◇ repeated failure
- Ensure that the physical organization of the classroom makes it easier for the whole group to remain focused:
 - ◇ adequate ventilation
 - ◇ proper lighting
 - ◇ desks arranged in such a way as to give everyone a clear view of the instructor and the board
 - ◇ adequate soundproofing to prevent the hearing of potentially distracting sounds from outside the classroom
- Suggest that the learners with the most serious attention problems choose a seat in the classroom where they will be able to see and hear the instructor more clearly.
- Avoid putting up too many posters, decorations, etc. on classroom walls. Excessive visual stimulation could distract the learners.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Try to maintain a work environment within the group that facilitates attention and concentration:
 - ◇ Limit comings and goings.
 - ◇ Eliminate unnecessary noise.

- Establish a work schedule that allows for regular breaks and takes into account the adult learners' capacity to remain focused:
 - ◇ Present the day's program or workshop (it can be written on the board so that the learners know what lies ahead).
 - ◇ Limit the duration of activities requiring sustained attention, such as writing explanations for the group on the board, individual work periods, etc. (The adult learners are returning to the classroom after several years without studying. Sustained intellectual effort requires gradual training and guidance.)
 - ◇ Present the most attention-intensive tasks at a time of day when the group is most inclined to be attentive, that is, at the beginning of the day rather than the end.
 - ◇ Gradually increase the duration of activities requiring sustained attention.
 - ◇ Fix time limits within which the learners are required to complete a task they have begun. It is important, however, to take into account the learner's actual capacity to attain the expected results within the given time limit.
 - ◇ Set aside relaxation periods or plan activities requiring less attention following periods of sustained attention.
 - ◇ When planning a day of training, take into account the degree of attention required by each of the activities proposed.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Stimulate the adult learners' capacity for attention and observation by means of a variety of visual and auditory discrimination exercises. For example, have them:
 - ◇ identify familiar sounds that have been recorded on tape
 - ◇ spot the differences between two apparently identical drawings
 - ◇ determine, in a given message, the portion of the message that represents a visual, taste, olfactory, tactile or sound sensation
 - ◇ describe the arrangement of furniture in a room, how another person in the group is dressed, etc.
- **At the beginning** of each activity requiring a certain level of sustained attention on the part of the learners, give special consideration to the following:
 - ◇ Explain the objective being pursued and the pertinence of the activity or theoretical explanation. If learners understand why it is necessary to do a particular exercise or listen to a set of instructions, they may pay more attention.
 - ◇ Ensure that the adult has the knowledge and skills necessary to learn new material and that the target objective represents an appropriate challenge. Follow the recommendations in *Driven to Distraction, Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood to Adulthood* and *Answers to Distraction* (see bibliography).
- **During the activity:**
 - ◇ if the learner's attention wanders, bring him or her back to the task at hand
 - ◇ stimulate the adult learner's attention by asking questions about the activity under way or about an explanation that has been given
 - ◇ from time to time, ask the learner to reformulate something that was just said or to explain instructions
 - ◇ stimulate the learner's auditory and visual attention

2.	Is the adult learner attentive:	
2.1.	in a quiet environment?	
YES:	The adult learner is attentive in a quiet environment.	NO: Even in a quiet environment, the adult learner is not attentive.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Try to determine, with the learner, the causes of his or her concentration problems. Give special consideration to causes that may be linked to factors outside the classroom: preoccupations, motivation, etc. See the interventions suggested in section 1.
- When giving explanations or information orally, avoid raising your voice, in order to help the adult learner remain focused.
- Encourage the adult learners to adopt certain work habits, such as:
 - ◇ keeping only the material required for the activity in progress on their desk
 - ◇ eliminating any potentially distracting elements from their field of vision
 - ◇ ensuring that they understand the task they are required to perform
 - ◇ while working, regularly reviewing the instructions related to the task
- Coach the adult learners at the start of a task; encourage them to explain in their own words the nature of the task, to select the tools required to carry it out and to explain the strategy they intend to use to attain the desired result.
- Set objectives for the learner to attain, such as completing part of the task within a specific time limit. Gradually increase the challenge.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Start by assigning the adult learner tasks that he or she can accomplish easily within a reasonable amount of time. If necessary, reduce the scope and degree of difficulty of the task to be accomplished.
- Present longer or more complex tasks by breaking them down into several steps. Make it easier for the adult learner to follow each of the steps by explaining them in simple language, either orally or in writing.
- **During the activity:**
 - ◇ if the learner's attention wanders, bring him or her back to the task at hand
 - ◇ stimulate the adult learner's attention by asking questions about the activity under way or about an explanation that has been given
 - ◇ from time to time, ask the learner to reformulate something that was just said or to explain instructions
 - ◇ do not unnecessarily interrupt a learner who is concentrating on a task; let him or her take the risk of making a mistake
- Establish a work schedule that allows for regular breaks and takes into account the adult learners' capacity to remain focused.

2.	Is the adult learner attentive:	
2.2.	in the presence of noise?	
YES:	The adult learner is attentive and is able to ignore noise while continuing with the task.	NO: In the presence of noise, the adult learner is incapable of keeping focused on the task at hand.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- First check whether the learner is capable of concentrating when everything is quiet. See the interventions suggested in section 2.1.
- Reduce ambient noise as much as possible:
 - ◇ Close the classroom door to reduce distractions caused by noise in the corridors or nearby classrooms.
 - ◇ Establish rules within the group of learners aimed at fostering a calm work environment that is free of potentially distracting sounds. For example:
 - ⇒ Require that the learners talk quietly and limit their movements.
 - ⇒ Restrict the use of devices such as radios and portable tape players inside the classroom.
- Suggest that adult learners who are easily distracted choose a seat away from more talkative participants.
- Set an example for adult learners who are easily distracted by ambient noise by remaining impervious to unexpected noises that may occur in the course of an activity or explanation. If the instructors themselves are easily distracted, the same will probably be true of the learners with whom they work.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- From time to time, expose the adult learners to pleasant, regular and discreet background noise during classroom work, such as soft instrumental music. This may help improve their ability to focus.
- If the adult learner's sensitivity to ambient noise is due to nervousness, suggest brief relaxation periods, to be taken at regular intervals or as needed.
- Use a tone of voice that, while rising above the normal ambient sounds, at the same time forces the adult learner to pay attention in order to understand what is being said.

3.	Is the adult learner capable of selective attention; that is, is he or she able to focus exclusively on the auditory, visual or other element requiring his or her concentration in a perceptual, auditory, visual or other field?	
YES:	The adult learner is capable of focusing his or her attention exclusively on the stimulus in question, while ignoring all other stimuli.	NO: The adult learner seems unable to focus on a specific stimulus, but rather seems to divide his or her attention.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Make the adult learners aware of their difficulty in concentrating on an element by drawing their attention back to the main object whenever they stop focusing on it. It is not a matter of constantly monitoring the adult learners, but rather of helping them become aware of their problem.
- Try to limit the quantity of auditory and visual stimuli in the classroom:
 - ◊ Establish rules within the group aimed at maintaining a relatively calm environment that is conducive to work.
 - ◊ Limit the number of visual elements on the walls.
- Encourage the learners to take measures aimed at minimizing the number of potentially distracting elements in their immediate classroom environment, such as:
 - ◊ positioning their desk in order to see the instructor clearly and to eliminate potentially distracting stimuli from their field of vision
 - ◊ choosing a seat away from more talkative participants
 - ◊ keeping on their desk only the material necessary for the activity in progress
- Give the adult learners simple work instructions and ensure that they have mastered the concepts and skills necessary to perform the required task.
- Gradually increase the difficulty of the objectives to be attained and try to avoid introducing several tasks at once.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- From time to time, pair an adult learner who has trouble focusing on a particular element with another person in the group who can provide coaching through a specific task.
- **During the activity:**
 - ◇ bring the learner back to the task at hand should his or her attention wander
 - ◇ keep the learner's attention focused by asking questions relating to the activity in progress or an explanation given
- Stimulate the learners' capacity for attention and observation by means of a variety of auditory and visual discrimination exercises. For example, have them:
 - ◇ identify recorded sounds
 - ◇ spot differences between two apparently identical drawings
 - ◇ in a given message, identify the portion of the message that represents visual, taste, olfactory, tactile or auditory sensations
 - ◇ describe the arrangement of furniture in a room or the clothing of another person in the group
- Set an example for adult learners who are easily distracted by the surrounding environment by remaining impervious to potentially distracting noises or other elements that may occur in the course of an activity or an explanation. If the instructors themselves are easily distracted, the same will probably be true of the learners with whom they work.
- Provide guidance to learners at the beginning of a task; ask them to explain the nature of the task in their own words, to select the tools required to perform it and to explain the strategy they intend to use to achieve the desired result.
- Fix objectives, such as completing a given part of a task within a specific time limit. Gradually increase the challenge.

4. Is the adult learner sensitive to all types of potentially distracting elements (whispering, sneezing, noises outside the classroom, the sound of pen on paper, etc.)?

YES: The adult learner is distracted by everything and seems incapable of filtering stimuli in order to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant stimuli.

NO: The adult learner is capable of ignoring irrelevant stimuli.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

See the interventions suggested in section 2.2.

5.	Is the adult learner capable of concentrating:	
5.1.	for several seconds?	
YES:	The adult learner is capable of concentrating for this length of time.	NO: The adult learner is incapable of concentrating for this length of time and seems to become quickly distracted from the task at hand.

5.	Is the adult learner capable of concentrating:	
5.2.	or several minutes?	
YES:	The adult learner is capable of concentrating for this length of time.	NO: The adult learner is incapable of concentrating for this length of time and seems to become quickly distracted from the task at hand.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Train the adult learners to increase the length of time they are able to concentrate by starting with simple activities, such as copying exercises. Insist, however, that the work be well done and establish a reasonable time limit.
- Gradually increase the difficulty of the objectives to be attained; break down the training into learning units of short duration that focus on one concept at a time.
- Require that the adult learners complete any task they have begun, even if the time limit has been exceeded.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Use a variety of teaching strategies and methods that encourage the adult learners to participate actively in class and stimulate different forms of attention. For example: role-playing, simulation exercises, recreational activities, group work, use of audiovisual documents.
- From time to time, pair an adult learner who has trouble concentrating with another person in the group who can provide coaching through a specific task.
- Pay special attention to the areas of interest and training needs expressed by the adult learners. Given that attention and concentration abilities are often linked to motivation, we can help the learners improve their skills in these areas by offering them learning content and activities that correspond to their interests.
- Suggest that learners experiencing concentration problems opt for part-time training initially, with classes scheduled at the time of day when it is easiest for them to concentrate.
- Establish a work schedule that allows for regular and frequent breaks, if necessary, and that takes into account the learner's ability to concentrate. For example:
 - ◇ Limit the duration of activities requiring sustained concentration.
 - ◇ Present the most concentration-intensive tasks at a time of day when the group is most inclined to be attentive, meaning at the beginning of a workshop rather than the end.
 - ◇ Gradually increase the duration of activities requiring sustained attention.
 - ◇ Alternate periods requiring sustained concentration with short periods for relaxation and physical activities (stretching, walking, etc.).

5.	Is the adult learner capable of concentrating:	
5.3.	for a training period of about one hour?	
YES:	The adult learner is capable of concentrating for this length of time.	NO: The adult learner is incapable of concentrating for this length of time and seems to grow increasingly distracted from the task at hand as time goes by. It is obvious that mental fatigue is setting in. After an hour, the learner is exhausted and can no longer concentrate without a break.

5.	Is the adult learner capable of concentrating:	
5.4.	for a half-day of training, or approximately three hours?	
YES:	The adult learner is capable of concentrating for this length of time.	NO: The adult learner is incapable of concentrating for this length of time and seems to grow increasingly distracted from the task at hand as time goes by. Exhaustion sets in at the end of the half-day.

5. 5.5.	Is the adult learner capable of concentrating: for a full day of training, or approximately six hours?	
YES:	The adult learner is capable of concentrating for this length of time.	NO: The adult learner is incapable of concentrating for this length of time, but he or she is able to concentrate for longer than a half-day of training. However, the learner seems to grow increasingly distracted as the day progresses, and is exhausted by the end of the day.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Suggest that learners experiencing concentration problems and abnormal fatigue after a half- or full- day of activities opt for part-time training, with classes scheduled, if possible, at the time of day when it easiest for them to concentrate.
- Within a given period or day of training, use a variety of teaching strategies and methods that encourage the adult learners to participate actively in class and stimulate different forms of attention. For example: role-playing, simulation exercises, recreational activities, group work, use of audiovisual documents.
- Use various means to help the adult learners anticipate the content of a half or full day of training and establish time references within a training week. For example:
 - ◇ Present a standard schedule covering a week of training, on which the learners can inscribe the activities that recur fairly regularly each week.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- ◇ Try to adopt a certain routine for each half or full day of training, by, for example, scheduling an individual work period at the beginning of the day and a daily period for reviewing vocabulary.
- ◇ Present the day's program on the board or orally, including the concepts to be addressed, planned activities, etc. This usually stimulates the adult learners' curiosity and gives them the impression that time is going by more quickly.
- Establish a work schedule that allows for regular and frequent breaks, if necessary, and that takes into account the learner's ability to concentrate. For example:
 - ◇ Limit the duration of activities requiring sustained concentration.
 - ◇ Present the most concentration-intensive tasks at a time of day when it is easiest for the group to concentrate, meaning at the beginning of a workshop rather than the end.
 - ◇ Gradually increase the duration of activities requiring sustained concentration.
 - ◇ Alternate periods requiring sustained concentration with short periods for relaxation and physical activities (stretching, walking, etc.).
- Ensure that the physical organization of the classroom helps everyone in the group to remain focused:
 - ◇ adequate ventilation
 - ◇ proper lighting
 - ◇ desks arranged in such a way as to give everyone a clear view of the instructor and the board
 - ◇ adequate soundproofing to prevent the hearing of potentially distracting sounds from outside the classroom

6. Does the adult learner tire quickly in a learning situation?

YES: The adult learner experiences mental fatigue quickly in a learning situation. He or she occasionally mentions headaches, dizziness, double vision, blurred vision, eye strain, etc.

NO: The adult learner does not have this problem.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

- Try to determine, with the learner, the causes of the abnormal fatigue. Begin by reviewing possible causes linked to factors independent of the classroom, such as:
 - ◊ the learner's state of health
 - ◊ his or her lifestyle (food, sleep, busy schedule, etc.)
 - ◊ difficulty assuming personal responsibilities

On the basis of the problems identified, encourage and, if possible, help the learner to find a solution by consulting the appropriate resource person: physician, psychologist, social worker, etc.
- Ensure that the physical organization of the classroom is such that everyone is able to work in acceptable material conditions:
 - ◊ proper ventilation
 - ◊ good lighting
 - ◊ desks arranged in such a way that everyone can see the instructor and the board
 - ◊ suitable furniture
- Establish rules within the group of learners aimed at fostering a calm work environment, by, for example, requiring the learners to talk quietly and limit their movements.

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS (cont.)

- Ensure that the learners have the skills and knowledge needed to participate in and benefit from the group activities. The learner may experience fatigue as a result of being required to make too great an effort to understand concepts that he or she cannot be expected to assimilate without knowledge of the prerequisite material.
- Gradually increase the difficulty of the objectives to be attained; break down the training into learning units of short duration that focus on one concept at a time.
- Establish a work schedule that allows for regular breaks and that takes into account the learners' level of physical or mental fatigue. For example:
 - ◇ Limit the duration of activities requiring sustained concentration.
 - ◇ Present the most concentration-intensive tasks at a time of day when it is easiest for the group to concentrate, meaning at the beginning of a workshop rather than the end.
 - ◇ Gradually increase the duration of activities requiring sustained concentration.
 - ◇ Alternate periods requiring sustained concentration with short periods for relaxation and physical activities (stretching, walking, etc.).

IX—COGNITIVE FIELD

MODULE: ATTENTION

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