Supporting students with an intellectual disability

Having an intellectual disability means a student may have problems with cognitive processes, usually associated with learning academic and social skills. As a consequence, the student may require support in specific areas related to the teaching and learning environment. They may have difficulties in the following areas:

- limited attention span
- speech impairment
- language comprehension
- limited reading ability
- limited writing ability
- limited reasoning ability
- limited impulse control
- interpersonal behaviour.

Implementing reasonable adjustment for a student exhibiting any of these difficulties has more to do with modifications to teaching strategies, curriculum delivery and assessment events than the use of physical equipment and adaptive technology. Guidelines and ideas for some modifications for a student with an intellectual disability are presented here under the headings of:

- teaching strategies, incorporating communication issues associated with the delivery of learning materials
- curriculum modifications
- modifications to assessment practices.
Teaching strategies and students with intellectual disabilities

Students with an intellectual disability are not a homogeneous group. All do not have the same educational needs. An individual student's reasonable adjustment needs may vary depending on the requirements of the industry and vocational course. For example, a student who has limited literacy skills may not have the same support needs in a catering course as he or she would have in an office course. Although individual cases will vary, a student with an intellectual disability is likely to require adjustments in teaching strategies to suit their own style of learning. They may also present with a range of difficulties in relation to teaching and learning and require support with:

- language communication
- non-verbal communication
- awareness
- self-confidence.

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1 - Learning styles and students with intellectual disabilities

Students with intellectual disabilities can learn but not necessarily as quickly as students without intellectual disabilities. Part of the reason for this may be:

- short attention span
- difficulty with memory retention
- a lack of automatic informal/incidental learning
- difficulty in transferring skills to new environments.

Taking a more positive approach, research findings suggest that some students with intellectual disability respond best to a functional approach, which uses graphics and other forms of visual stimulation rather than text. In particular, the use of multimedia (videotapes, cameras, scanners, sound, computer graphics etc) has been found to complement good teaching practices.²

Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has difficulty with attention span

The disabling effects of intellectual impairment can limit the student's attention span. If a student with intellectual impairment advises, or his or her advocate/carer advises, that the student's attention span is limited and will interfere with the student's opportunities to learn, you can implement several specific teaching strategies, including:

- using plain English language for instruction
- staying on the topic
- varying your approach to delivery with props, demonstrations, multi-media presentations etc
- keeping information segments brief by breaking presentation into small parts
- checking for understanding at regular intervals using open ended questions or 'show me' techniques
- using repetition and consistent cues or prompts as reminders of important points.³

Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has poor memory retention

The disabling effects of intellectual impairment can also limit the student's memory retention. If a student with intellectual impairment advises, or his or her advocate/carer advises, that the student has limited memory retention that may interfere with the student's opportunities to learn, you can implement several specific teaching strategies, including:

- devising memory prompts or cues to suit individual needs, using
  - single words
  - graphics
  - associations
- using repetition and consistent reminders of important points.⁴
Supporting a student with an intellectual disability for whom automatic informal/incidental learning does not occur

Automatic informal/incidental learning should not be assumed. Therefore, you may need to consciously plan to teach specific behaviours, including appropriate:

- codes of behaviour in the classroom/workplace
- interpersonal communication in the classroom, workplace and elsewhere
- dress codes
- hygiene rules.\(^5\)

Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has difficulty in transferring skills to new environments

The ability to transfer learned skills to other environments should not be assumed. Therefore, you may need to apply teaching strategies to facilitate the transfer of skills, including providing the student with:

- learning opportunities in a setting in which skills are to be used, eg a real office or shop environment or realistic simulated one
- a learning environment that remains unchanged in the early stages of learning
- as much 'hands on' experience as possible, using authentic workplace tools and equipment
- additional initial support for any work experience program or change in the teaching/learning environment.\(^6\)

NB Any decision about the most suitable option for the student should be made in full consultation with the student and, where relevant, his or her carer.

Using multimedia with students with intellectual disabilities

According to Stack (undated), the use of multimedia is finding increasing importance in educational programs. The students, by using interactive aids, gain a better understanding of the subject, which enables and enhances learning. Multimedia has been seen to assist in the expansion of visual, verbal, logical and sequential intelligence and can assist the student to solve problems, think flexibly, analyse situations, improve self-esteem, and create interest and motivation. Importantly multimedia can assist students to generalise their skills. In practical terms, video cameras, scanners, computers and audio have been used in combination to address issues of poor language use, limited attention span and memory retention. They can also create awareness of dangers, dress codes and appropriate behaviours by having students:

- make video films of specific teaching situations to enhance learning
- create PowerPoint presentations of their work and achievements
- use scanners and computers to create resource folders and portfolios
- design posters and newsletters with inserted photos to augment text.\(^7\)
2 - Language communication and students with intellectual disabilities

A student with an intellectual disability may demonstrate problems with language communication when compared to students without an intellectual impairment. These may include difficulties with:

- coping with the speed of speech during interactions or lesson delivery
- comprehending complex language, generalisations and/or abstractions
- comprehending the subtleties of language
- articulation.3

Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has difficulty with the speed of speech

The disabling effects of intellectual impairment can create difficulties for a student in following speech delivered at a rate too fast for him or her to process. If a student with intellectual impairment advises, or his or her advocate/carer advises, that speech delivered too fast can interfere with the student's opportunities to learn, several adjustments can be made, including:

- slowing the pace of your speech and the pace of presentation
- keeping your speech segments brief by breaking presentation into small parts
- allowing extra time for the student to process the information and respond
- using plain English in your delivery
- supporting your message with appropriate facial expressions, body language and gestures
- supporting your message with appropriate actions and/or demonstrations
- whenever possible, facing the student when talking to him or her
- checking for understanding at regular intervals using open-ended questions or 'show me' techniques.

NB Any decision about the most suitable option for the student should be made in full consultation with the student and, where relevant, his or her carer.

Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has difficulty with comprehending complex language, generalisations and/or abstractions

The disabling effects of intellectual impairment can include difficulties in comprehending complex language. In particular, students with an intellectual disability may not have a wide vocabulary or understand the use of generalisations or abstractions. If a student with intellectual impairment advises, or his or her advocate/carer advises, that the use of complex language will interfere with the student's opportunities to study, then you can use specific teaching strategies to help maintain opportunities for learning, including:

- using plain English language and avoiding
Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has difficulty with comprehending the subtleties of language

The disabling effects of intellectual impairment can include difficulties in comprehending the subtleties of English language. In particular, students may not understand the use of humour that is dependent on language. If a student with intellectual impairment advises, or his or her advocate/carer advises, that the student has limited understanding of subtleties in language use then you can use specific teaching strategies to help maintain opportunities for learning, including:

- using plain English language for instruction and general communication
- avoiding the use of puns, irony and sarcasm
- keeping language segments brief by breaking presentations into small parts
- checking for understanding at regular intervals using open ended questions or 'show me' techniques.3

NB Any decision about the most suitable option for the student should be made in full consultation with the student and, where relevant, his or her carer.

Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has difficulty with articulation

The disabling effects of intellectual impairment can include difficulties with articulation and phrasing of speech. If a student with intellectual impairment advises, or his or her advocate/carer advises, that the student has difficulties with articulation then you can use specific teaching strategies to help maintain opportunities for learning, including:

- maintaining eye contact with the speaker
- allowing the student time to articulate (do not hurry the student)
- automatically asking for a word or phrase to be spelled or repeated if you do not understand it
- clarifying your understanding of student communication by rephrasing comments or questions and having the student confirm accuracy
- using written communication or other aids.3 8
NB Any decision about the most suitable option for the student should be made in full consultation with the student and, where relevant, his or her carer.

3 - Non-language communication skills and students with intellectual disabilities

The disabling effects of intellectual impairment can include difficulties with understanding codes of interpersonal behaviour and maintaining appropriate personal space during conversations and discussions. If a student with intellectual impairment exhibits difficulties with personal space issues then you can use specific teaching strategies to help maintain opportunities for learning, including:

- refusing to allow an invasion of your personal space
- being consistent with your standards
- modelling appropriate behaviour
- where appropriate, encouraging students without intellectual impairment to do the same
- establishing an environment to discourage harassment of students with impairment.

4 - Students with intellectual disabilities and OH&S

A student with an intellectual disability may not have had opportunities to experience particular types of machinery or equipment before commencing study and may not be aware of some inherent dangers. While others may have had some experience, they may not have generalised or transferred the learning to a new or different teaching/learning environment. At the same time, a student may exhibit no sense of fear, which you may assume or expect him or her to show, while another may exhibit fear in a situation you regard as non-threatening. Therefore, your teaching must include strategies to:

- minimise the risk of the student harming him or her self in potentially high risk situations
- embed safety into tasks to be practiced
- teach the need for caution in the presence of potential danger
- teach confidence in practices associated with fear in non-threatening situations.

These strategies should be implemented in a way that does not restrict the student's rights to learn and develop skills.4

5 - Supporting a student with an intellectual disability who has difficulty with self-confidence
Consequences of the disabling effects of intellectual impairment can include difficulties with self-confidence. If a student with intellectual impairment advises, or his or her advocate/carer advises, that the student has difficulties with self-confidence then you can use specific teaching strategies to help maintain opportunities for learning, including:

- modelling confidence in the student
- modelling respect for the student
- encouraging the student to participate in discussions and/or activities
- using and building on what the student has achieved
- using age appropriate plain English language
- introducing processes, such as multimedia use that encourage independence
- introducing processes that discourage harassment and discrimination by others.  

NB Any decision about the most suitable option for the student should be made in full consultation with the student and, where relevant, his or her carer.

Curriculum modifications for students with intellectual disabilities

The concept of 'competency' recognises outcomes rather than method or time taken to achieve the results. Outcomes based learning focuses on the student building skills to achieve the standards required by industry. Curriculum such as the Certificate of Career Access allows extra practice time to help students to achieve competence in the vocational modules.

The overlap of subject areas within related modules allows students' skills and knowledge to be reinforced in different contexts. Delivery strategies that integrate theoretical and practical modules may be developed to allow for the needs of each student. However, the achievement of competencies needs to be monitored, as students within the group may be achieving skills at differing rates. Therefore evaluate and revise methods so you can:

- train for skills gap
- build on an existing skills base
- extend basic skills and knowledge into 'holistic tasks'
- provide flexible delivery and recognition.

Points to consider

- Project work, for example constructing a farm building, enables the teacher to integrate several vocational modules for delivery/assessment. Such a project, undertaken by the students as a group, simulates on-the-job training, establishes benchmarks for appropriate workplace behaviour and social skills, and integrates key competencies such as teamwork.
- If theory modules are delivered alongside practical learning, in planning take into account the most effective student learning times, which may be early in the day. Use concrete examples to explain concepts and break skills or knowledge into small steps.
- To keep a vocational focus for the students, deliver the theoretical component in the environment where the skill will be practised. For example, this might be in a farm building for rural studies, or in a kitchen for cookery modules.
- Students respond well to 'rewards'. For example, regular weekly lunches or social events provide time for teachers and students to get to know each other and build up trust.
- To maintain the students' motivation and interest, sequence the modules according to the needs of the group.
- Holiday breaks disrupt the set routine and may affect student performance. This needs to be taken into consideration when introducing new material or setting assessment events.¹

Modifications to assessment practices for students with intellectual disabilities

In making any adjustments to assessment practices, accreditation authorities and education providers are fully entitled to maintain the academic requirements of the course, so that those on whom it confers an award can hold themselves out as having the appropriate knowledge, experience and expertise implicit in the holding of that particular award.1 Therefore, clarify guidelines on the industry standards required and ensure that the assessment tools and outcomes meet these standards. You can then advise students how to demonstrate work ready competence using a range of evidence and methods, eg:

- Introduce students to assessment concepts by allowing them to work as a group and to determine group or team competencies.
- Inform students of the variety of ways in which they can show competence.
- Negotiate with students to establish assessment tools, integrated assessment events, a timeframe to demonstrate the skills, the performance criteria and the standards required.
- Establish a range of evidence or assessment opportunities to confirm that students have a consistent level of competence. When competence is confirmed by working in an industry location and also in a simulation (such as a college canteen for cookery students), the final summative assessment event will be the confirmation of competence.
- Ensure that written work in assessment tasks is kept to a minimum. Where oral prompts are given, this can be noted on the assessment record. Graphics, colour and displays on charts can build self-confidence for students with low literacy levels.
- Use holistic assessment methods. For example, cookery students could prepare and serve a formal luncheon to guests at the college. They could keep a copy of the menu, resources or graphics developed, as a record of their role in the function and confirmation of their level of competence.
- Use task sheets for students to record skills learned during VET and tasks/skills/competencies to be extended or integrated when in the workplace. This allows students to discuss why they are, or are not yet competent, and to compare assessment methods and events with each other. Include key competencies such as communication skills or working as a team.
- Request that the workplace supervisor marks the task sheets to confirm competence. This informs the teacher who assesses and formally records the competencies for the course. If a student working in industry has a skills gap to achieve the required level of competence, they may return to VET for further training.
- Outline the assessment criteria clearly for the students and get feedback to ensure that they understand the process as well as the actual event.
- To make the assessment process transparent, give the students an opportunity to practise the event, rather than being assessed on ‘discovery
learning'. Where possible, allow the student to self-assess and to determine their own readiness to be assessed.

- To improve students' level of self-esteem, especially at the start of their training, give them immediate, positive feedback for small tasks successfully achieved.

- Where possible, use the same class teacher for a series of modules or topics. The teacher will then be able to conduct assessment events over a longer period, thus allowing students to practise until competence is achieved to the industry standard.

- Keep assessment methods and processes consistent throughout the course. This is especially important if teachers are changed. If the teacher who delivered the training is replaced by another teacher who assesses the students, there could be confusion over expectations and standards if consistency is not maintained.

- Avoid 'over assessing' when breaking tasks down into smaller components. If teachers constantly assess a group to confirm competency over a long period, there could be a tendency to have higher expectations and to set more difficult assessment tasks. Performance criteria need to be established and monitored to avoid expectation levels being raised.²

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