

## Learning Disabilities Overview and Definition

Learning disabilities, while “invisible”, are nevertheless real. Scientific evidence has shown that this type of disability is neurologically-based, permanent in nature and exists across the life span. Various types of learning disorders have been identified, the impact of which varies from mild or moderate to severe. You may observe, in the classroom, individuals who demonstrate academic difficulties that are unexpected and puzzling in light of demonstrating at least average intelligence.

Psychologists and learning disability specialists define learning disabilities as specific impairments in one or more of the following psychological processes related to learning:

- acquiring, using and understanding verbal and non-verbal symbols of communication
- language processing (receptive, expressive and pragmatic)
- memory
- processing speed
- visual-spatial processing
- perceptual-motor integration
- executive functions (such as self-monitoring and organizational skills)

These types of disabilities can run in families and are **not** due to lack of motivation, poor teaching or second-language or cultural differences. Academic skills that can be affected include:

- reading (decoding and comprehension)
- written language (both conceptual and the mechanics of writing)
- oral language (listening, speaking and understanding instructions)
- math (concepts and computation) and organization/planning skills

Other types of learning disabilities may affect spatial, mechanical abilities, as well as socially-based non-verbal deficits (missing social cues).

Learning disabilities are permanent and affect all aspects of life. Other conditions can co-exist with learning disabilities, for example, an Attention Deficit Disorder, as well as anxiety or depression.

Individuals with learning disabilities have generally well-developed intellectual abilities, success at college and/or university is possible if compensatory strategies are learned, self-advocacy skills are developed and used and appropriate accommodations and services are put in place for and used by the student.

## **Educational Implications and Instructional Strategies**

There are many educational implications for students with learning disabilities.

Students may demonstrate a significant discrepancy between theoretical understanding and their practical achievements in areas such as labs and field placements.

They may have well-developed oral communication skills but demonstrate significant deficits in written expression.

Speed of processing may be slow, so that students cannot keep up to the pace of the class.

Lecture material may not be retained, and in testing situations, remembering formulas to solve application questions may be a significant challenge.

Students may listen to content presented through lectures, understand and retain it, yet reading skills may be deficient.

Deficits in word recognition, reading speed and vocabulary can, in turn, affect reading comprehension and the ability to deal with large amounts of reading.

For some students, application courses where spatial reasoning, organization and following a sequence of steps in completing a “hands-on” project may be a challenge, while another student may misunderstand social cues and find it difficult to communicate their needs with professors and peers

The following instructional strategies are recommended:

- introduce a variety of study strategies that will reinforce important concepts
- provide feedback such as error analysis of tests
- use visuals, demonstrations and practical examples to reinforce theoretical concepts
- introduce key concepts and vocabulary at the beginning of new units of study
- provide structures such as outlines and advance organizers to lectures
- provide reading lists ahead of time
- allow time to review and clarify concepts presented in class as well as to answer questions prior to the student starting an assignment or task
- give several short assignments rather than one long one
- work closely with the Access Resource Centre staff to ensure a successful learning experience for the student

## Academic Accommodations

Students with disabilities are expected to accomplish the “core competencies” of their programs. To achieve this, accommodations are provided to minimize or eliminate any disadvantage their disability presents. Accommodations are unique to each individual.

The Access Resource Centre staff authorizes these accommodations based on psychoeducational testing results and a needs assessment. Some of the most commonly provided academic accommodations to students with learning disabilities include:

- a reduced course load
- provision of a notetaker for lectures
- audio recording of lectures
- access to alternative to print materials (e.g., electronic text)
- clarification of information on overheads, charts and lecture material
- alternative methods of evaluation, such as point form responses rather than full sentences, in content courses
- extended time for tests and exams
- supplementary oral exams
- exams may need to be written on a computer with editing functions and/or assistive software
- exams/tests may need to be scribed and written in a quiet writing room
- clarification of questions on tests/exams
- use of a calculator on tests/exams

## Resources

The Access Resource Centre has a variety of resources available for loan as well as information about local resources. Contact us at 250.960.5682 or email [arc@unbc.ca](mailto:arc@unbc.ca).

Available at the Access Resource Centre: *Destination Literacy: Identifying and Teaching Adults with Learning Disabilities*, published by LDAC (ISBN: 0-919053-62-9)

Additional Resources:

Learning Disabilities Association of British Columbia  
3292 E. Broadway, Vancouver, BC V5M 1Z8  
Tel: 604.873.8139 Fax: 604.873.8140  
[info@ldav.ca](mailto:info@ldav.ca)

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada,  
323 Chapel St., Suite 200, Ottawa, ON K1N 7Z2  
Tel: 613.238.5721 Fax: 613.235.5391  
<http://www.ldac-taac.ca>