

Learning Support Matters

Produced by the Learning Support Reference (LSA) Group



This update has been produced by Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), for LSAs, and will support you in your role. Indeed, anyone working with disabled learners should find it useful and interesting.

The role of learning support is complex, varied and challenging. Many people doing this job will have different titles, roles and experiences. What they have in common however, is the capacity to make an invaluable contribution to the successful education of disabled learners.

If you have any views, comments or ideas for future content we would love to hear from you, so please let us know by emailing viv.berkeley@lsis.org.uk.

The Learning Support Reference Group comprises practising LSAs working across the further education and skills sector. The group was originally set up to act as a critical friend to the [Enhancing Learning Support Programme](#), a project aimed at raising the status of learning support staff by providing training and development activities specifically focussed on this important role.

The group, which consists of members from all nine regions, includes practitioners from Colleges of Further Education, Independent Specialist Providers and a Work Based Learning Provider, all of whom are actively involved in supporting learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities on a daily basis.

TOP TEN TIPS - practical ideas to support you in your role

1. Remember that each learner is an individual and no one approach works for all. It's important to spend time getting to know each learner individually.
2. Remember you cannot be expected to know everything. It's okay to ask for help.
3. Never underestimate the abilities of your learners.
4. Try not to take it personally if learners get upset/present challenges. If there is an incident, it's a good idea to give yourself "time out" before you write the incident up.
5. Think about individual learner's needs and the implications for the learning environment. For example, some learners with a visual impairment will benefit from a consistent room layout.
6. It is a good idea to use a learner's name first so they know you are speaking to them. This tip might be particularly useful if you are working with learners with autism or with a visual impairment.
7. Think about the language you use. Using too many words can be confusing for some learners. It might be useful to chunk information in short simple sentences, using plain English.
8. Try and find out as much as you can about the different impairments that learners present with and the implications for learning support.
9. Keep up to date with teaching and learning information including risk assessments. Don't be afraid to ask for the resources, information/materials you need in order to do your job even more effectively.
10. Do your best to form positive relationships with all the staff you work with.

Providing an inclusive environment

How one mainstream college has created a purpose-built social space for individuals with autistic spectrum conditions.

The **RUGROOM** at **City College Norwich** was developed in consultation with learners, to provide a social space which is safe and familiar for learners with Asperger's syndrome and high functioning autism. It is somewhere learners can go for advice, to socialise and to get away from the anxieties that a mainstream college environment can sometimes create.

Some advantages;

- The RUGROOM has a supervisor whose role is to manage the space, be the point of contact for any learner needing advice or support and to encourage social interaction.
- Specialised staff are on hand to work with the learners in the RUGROOM and/or in-class, either as one-to-one or group support.
- The RUGROOM provides a safe space for learners to take time out
- Learners like to use this space as a common room, meet up with their friends, play games, play music, eat their lunch, use the computers and make themselves a cup of tea.
- Social activities such as nights out and lunch clubs are now organised by the learners, often as part of their programme of study. This has enabled them to take responsibility for their own social life and gives them opportunities to take control of what they and their peers want to do together

Looking ahead

The RUGROOM is constantly evolving to reflect the learners' individual needs and to take account of new technology, training and information about Aspergers syndrome and autism that are emerging.

A learner's take on the RUGROOM and his college experience

"The RUGROOM was a Godsend, now I look backThree years from starting City College I feel more capable, confident and able than ever. Wow! It is satisfying to know that I have worked hard to get here. It was not easy, but I feel that I have really increased my quality of life".

Vicki Gates
Senior Curriculum Services Support

Learning Support Staff contribute to successful Independent Specialist College inspection outcome

Derwen College is an Independent Specialist College on the Welsh Border which provides specialist further education for over 250 learners in residential and day placements. It was inspected in February 2012, when Ofsted again judged the quality of provision to be outstanding. Sian Roberts, a member of the LSA Reference group and LSA at Derwen who specialises in supporting learners on vocational programmes, provides an account of her experience of inspection.

My experience of an Ofsted inspection

At Derwen College, we knew an Ofsted inspection was due as it had been nearly six years since our last one. Talk of it was in the air for more than a year before the three week notification came through. Finally, we had the news we had been waiting for!



I personally felt that, as we were already a grade one college and a very well run organisation that the inspection would be basically crossing the t's and dotting the i's. I soon realised however, that the process is very thorough and extremely demanding for everyone involved. I fully understand that from a management perspective there is a huge pressure to maintain the already high standards we deliver. They were not alone in this. Although it was evident that every member of staff carried this weight on their shoulders, there was also a great deal of camaraderie which helped to keep us all going.

My general point is that no one enjoys being observed and this inevitably creates personal tension, although a part of you also wants to have the opportunity to show how well you are able to support your learners and showcase a session in an area that you feel the learners enjoy.

I feel that the key to success at Derwen College is communication. The senior management team at the college is very good at filtering all relevant information through to all the staff so that we didn't feel alone and if we needed advice or support then it was readily available.

The biggest thing I learnt is that Ofsted don't turn up in big black cars wearing dark glasses and black suits but that they are people just doing their job to try to maintain and improve standards.

In the end we all have the same aim – to work hard to give our learners the best experience and education that we can and hope that they gain from their time at college.

Sian Roberts LSA, Derwen College

WEBSITE ALERT

This is a useful website developed as part of the DfE's programme [Preparing for Adulthood](#).

It has a range of relevant information and downloadable resources for young people, families and professionals, which include videos explaining what "Preparing for adulthood" is about and of parents talking about what transition means for their son or daughter.

The site is updated regularly, including details on the Green Paper Pathfinder activities, and includes an option for you to sign up to ensure you are kept informed of any new developments.

National Star College is an Independent Specialist College in Gloucestershire, which provides specialist further education for over 145 learners in residential and day placements. Their qualifications, courses and pathways enable students to prepare for the best that adult life can offer. Ofsted inspectors ranked National Star College as an 'outstanding' specialist education provider in July 2012.

We had been awaiting an announcement of an Ofsted Inspection for some time, our last inspection having taken place in November 2005. We had received a monitoring visit in June 2011 where Inspectors had looked at the quality of learning support across the organisation. It was judged to have made significant progress, demonstrating our specialist support in the areas of IT access; work experience; functional and vocational specialisms. Since our last inspection the college has extended its intake of learners. Therefore our focus on staff development has been increased also.

The work carried out since our last Inspection and Monitoring Visit prepared us for the inspection. Ofsted said:

'Tutors and facilitators are skilled at responding to learners imaginatively and flexibly.'

'Staff make highly effective use of assistive technology in supporting learning, improving communication and enabling learners to make choices.'

'In practical sessions in the college's enterprises, the staff are clear about what learners can achieve unaided and where they need to direct other learners or members of staff to help.'

Having the inspection take place in the summer term proved beneficial to the Learning Support team, as they had settled into their timetables and were already familiar with the learners and their support requirements. Strong working partnerships had already been established between the tutors and LSAs, and LSAs understood the aims of the sessions and how they support the learner's yearly and primary goals.

As much as the LSAs were prepared for the inspection, the thought of an observation still brought on apprehensions.

'It was a nerve racking process, with so much expectation expected.'

'I welcomed one inspector to the classroom and showed her where to sit, but I had very little response from her! The second inspector was cheerful and responsive which helped remove any tension from the classroom. I was very much aware that the inspector was sitting in the corner and writing down their comments.'

In some sessions the LSAs were supporting learners not only with their task but also their anxieties of having a 'stranger' in their learning environment.

'An inspector came into a practical session where we were producing soaps and candles. The inspector was interested in the activity and wanted to ask the learners questions. One learner became very anxious, and her agitation started to disrupt the other learners. Having an awareness of her support strategies, I was able to support the learner and bring her back to the activity and the discussion with the inspector.'

After the Inspection our Principal informed the entire college of the Grade 1 outcome, at which the college erupted with celebration, recognising that it was the diverse contributions from all the teams that had made this possible.

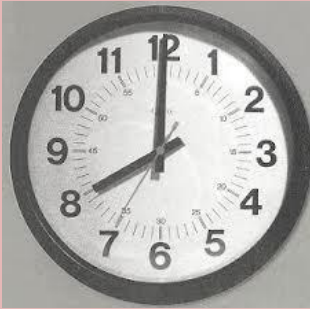


Kim McCall
Learning Support Coordinator,
National Star College

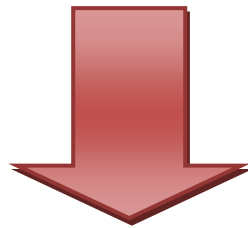
A day in the life of Clive Allen

As many LSAs will confirm, no day is the same. To give you a flavour of the challenges LSAs like me face, I want to describe a typical day for me.

I work at a specialist residential college in Northumberland for young adults with learning difficulties that aims to provide learners with the skills that will help them in their transition towards adult life. This includes developing interpersonal skills, independent living skills and employability skills to name but a few.



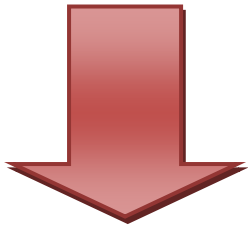
My working day begins by waking the learners up about 8am - this can require a few attempts for some of them. Once up they prepare for their day by completing personal care routines and then making their own breakfast, with my support. When ready we leave the accommodation and the learners use visual timetables to help them find their way to sessions for 9.15am.



Once in session, my role is to facilitate learning working alongside the tutor. Primarily this involves me encouraging communication, helping learners meet their targets with visual prompts, being aware of individual learner's targets and providing assistance with behaviour management.

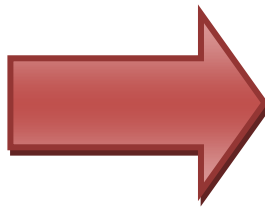
This morning I am in animal care supporting learners to feed the small animals and to meet embedded numeracy, communication and literacy targets. Communication is a key area of development for many of the learners I work with. For example, a learner's communication target may be to recall the amount of feed that a certain animal gets and relay this information to the group. My role is to support the learner to achieve this target, using support for communication such as photos, sign, symbols and gesture. I also help track progress by feeding back to the tutor.

During this session I provide 1:1 support to a learner who does not talk, following individually designed strategies aimed at encouraging communication. For example, I provide visual input to support the learner to both understand what is being communicated and to express himself. I emphasise key words, avoid unnecessary language and do my best to manage background noise in the learning environment, because this learner finds a lot of noise hard to tolerate. I also need to be aware of and employ, where appropriate, specific behaviour management strategies. For example, if he becomes distressed, this learner may need time outside of the classroom or benefit from access to sensory stimuli like a stress ball to help calm him down.



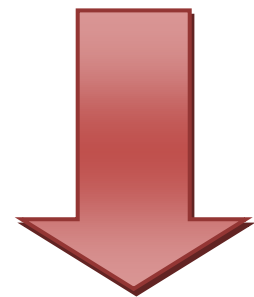
As lunchtime approaches I support the learners to remove their overalls and boots and head to the dining hall. Here lunch has been prepared by learners who have spent the morning working in the main kitchen. It is a busy time that enables the learners to socialise with peers.

During this time my role is to support and monitor a learner who has epilepsy, as I have been trained to administer medication and provide care in the event of him having a seizure. After this I have a lunch break for myself and a well-earned cup of tea!

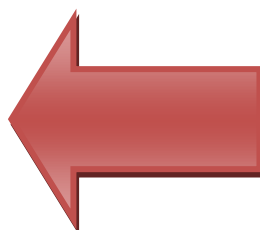


At 1.15pm I am working in a sensory session, where the primary aim is to promote learner engagement through sensory activities designed to help learners feel calm and to fulfil individual sensory needs.

The main learning outcomes for this session revolve around learner interaction with each other. My role in this session is to support learners in communicating with peers and making decisions for themselves. For example this may be to ask a peer for an object, through a combination of verbal communication, using Makaton and/ or by using symbols, depending on the preferred method of communication of the individual.



It's been another busy day, but a good one. One of the things I love about my job is the variety, it is certainly never dull. But perhaps the best thing about it is seeing the progress the learners make, and knowing that I have contributed to that.



After a discussion with the tutor about how the session went and learner progress it is time to rest up and get ready for another day!

Spotlight on policy

The Green Paper: Support and Aspiration

The current policy agenda surrounding learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities focuses on the DfE Green Paper [Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability](#) (March 2011). The Green Paper will ultimately lead to a new Act of Parliament which will change the face of educational provision for young disabled children and adults, aged 0 – 25 years. In June 2012 the Government published [Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability - Progress and next steps](#) setting out progress to date and a plan for the future. The [draft legislation](#) which follows this will be included in the Children and Families Bill which is expected to be put before parliament in 2013 and enacted in 2014.

LSIS has been working with the Further Education and Skills sector to help them focus on some of the issues outlined in the Green Paper. Phase 1 of the work took place between January and March 2011 with 54 providers involved. Providers formed regional clusters to share effective practice. Learner involvement was a central tenet of the project. The work providers shared can be found on a dedicated area of the [Excellence Gateway](#) aimed at staff working with learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Some of the work in Phase 1 was concerned with learning support. For example [specialist support staff](#) at Weston College talk about supporting learners with autism.

Phase Two will take place from October 2012 to July 2013. It will be developmental in its approach and aims to move the project from a regionalised approach to one that is more localised and, at the same time, significantly increase the number of providers involved from 54 to 200. The focus of the project work will be on preparation for adulthood.

Viv Berkeley, Programme Development
Manager, LSIS

New guidance for LSAs who fulfil a dual role of care and support

Many LSAs working with learners with learning difficulties and disabilities, particularly those with complex needs, effectively undertake a dual role that covers both Learning Support and care duties. Although the National Occupational Standards for Learning Support Assistants refer to care standards, this is only in general terms. In recognition of this,

LSIS commissioned the National Association of Specialist Colleges ([NATSPEC](#)) to carry out a short piece of work to look more specifically at those care standards which are likely to be covered by staff carrying out a dual role and also to produce some general guidance for the sector about the management and training of this group of staff.

This work is now complete and the outcomes will be of interest to those whose role involves both supporting learning and providing care, whether in specialist or general Further Education (GFE) settings.

The report and audit tool are available on the [Excellence Gateway](#).

Enhancing Learning Support (ELS)

The [Enhancing Learning Support](#) project has produced a range of practical resources and materials, in consultation with practitioners, to support the training, development and practice needs of LSAs working across the sector. Hopefully, you are already familiar with the materials, but if not, one of the easiest ways to find out what is available is by downloading [“The Enhancing Learning Support suite of materials”](#).

Although this does not include all the materials, it gives you an overview of how the site works and a description of the practical resources most likely to be of interest to practitioners in their daily work. It provides a brief description of each resource, and it is easy to access anything you are interested in by simply clicking on the embedded link.

You might for example, want to find out more about the [accessible risk assessment](#) developed for use with learners who have speech and language impairments, in order to help them conduct their own personal risk assessments. This resource includes a completed example, as well as a template and some guidance to support you in using it with your learners. A number of practitioners found the [Catching Confidence](#) tool, designed by NIACE in 2006, very useful in capturing changes in learners' confidence levels during an episode of learning.

This page contains information about what the tool is and how to use it as well as a couple of case studies written by providers who have implemented it successfully with their learners. If you have used any of the ELS resources and found them beneficial, we would be delighted to hear from you.

Allie O'Brien, ELS Project Manager

Book review

‘Who moved my cheese?’

By Dr Spencer Johnson

Published March 1991

Sniff it out and scurry to get a copy! *Who Moved My Cheese* is an enjoyable little book which uses mice as characters dealing with change. Scurry, Sniff, Hem and Haw are representative of all of us, making it very easy to identify with the characters. Their experience is a metaphor for how one has to be proactive and accept change, to move with it and to affect the future for the better. A great read for practitioners and learners alike, this book is short and easy to read without being ‘cheesy’



Cate Cassidy, Wirral Metropolitan

We hope you enjoyed this update. Our next will be published at the end of January 2013. If you want to feedback to us or you have any ideas of what you might like to see covered in future editions please contact viv.berkeley@isis.org.uk.