

# Module 1: Approaches to Deaf and Deaf-Blind Adult Learners

## About the Deaf and Deaf-Blind Adult Learner:

Deaf and Deaf-Blind adult literacy learners are people who want to improve their literacy skills. They may have a hard time with reading to understand or writing so other people can understand them. They may have problems with math and using numbers to solve problems. Some may want to improve their communication skills.

Learners all have different life experiences, different skills and abilities, different needs and different expectations. It is important that the practitioner understand and respect these differences and teach the right things in the right way.

## Why do Deaf and Deaf-Blind Adults come to Literacy Programs?

Learners don't usually just come to literacy programs because they are bored or want something to do. There is usually a reason they have come.

Many are referred by vocational services because they need to improve their literacy skills to find a job. Other learners come because something important is happening in their lives. For example, they will be getting married or divorced, they have recently moved, they lost their job, their children are starting school, or they have had some other big change in their lives.

It can be helpful for practitioners to know the reasons why learners have come to a literacy program. It will help to know and understand their attitudes and feelings about learning.

For many adults coming back to school can be stressful. Learners may have bad memories of past experiences and frustrations in school. This makes it

hard for them to have realistic goals for their training. They tend to expect too much or too little.

As a practitioner you will need to be sensitive and understanding with learners. This also means making sure the learning environment is appropriate.

### **Here are three basic but important strategies:**

- Provide a safe place to learn. Be welcoming and encourage mutual respect, acceptance, and trust.
- Know your learner's preferred method of communication. Use adaptive technologies and make sure the learning environment is fully accessible.
- Spend time with each learner in conversation and in activities. Help them develop realistic goals and a clear plan of how they can develop their skills.

### **Three categories of goals:**

Adults who come to literacy programs tend to have one or two of these goals:

- 1. Education** – to prepare for more education  
(GED, college, university, or other training)
- 2. Independence** – to become more independent in daily living
- 3. Employment** – to prepare for getting a job;  
or to be more successful at work

Some learners will come to a program with clear goals in mind. Others may be very unclear about their goals. Helping the learner understand and take responsibility for their training can be a challenge for both the learner and the practitioner. It is most important to work together with the learner to bring their goals into focus.

**\* See Module 3 for more information about setting goals.**

## About Deaf and Deaf-Blind Adult Learning:

### Common Characteristics of Deaf:

Of course not all Deaf adult learners are the same, but in general adults share some characteristics:

#### Deaf people usually:

- attended a residential school
- prefer to use ASL or LSQ, not Signed Exact English (SEE)
- don't use speech as their main way of communicating
- spend much of their social time with other Deaf people
- use TTYs, computers, videophones, webcams, and Blackberries, as a secondary way of communicating (appointments, telephone, and so on)
- use closed-captioning when watching TV
- prefer to work with interpreters if other people can't sign
- don't depend on hearing aids for communication, but may use them for awareness of environmental sounds

### Working in a Deaf Literacy Program

#### In a literacy program, Deaf learners need:

- to know hearing and Deaf people can have problems with literacy
- access to American Sign Language (ASL)
- strong communication skills
- to be taught by practitioners with good ASL and English skills, and knowledge of Deaf culture and their diversity
- opportunities to improve their ASL skills, if necessary

- printed language to be an important part of their learning experience
- to see writing as an important way of communicating
- positive approaches to Deaf culture and ASL, and various other cultures
- access to good role models
- to learn how to access different resources and services

## **Common Characteristics of Deaf-Blind:**

Of course, not all Deaf-Blind adult learners are the same. In general, adults share some characteristics:

### **Deaf-Blind people usually:**

- attended a residential school
- prefer to use ASL, ASL Tactile, PSE, SEE (Signed Exact English), voice over, lip-reading, large print notes, Braille, hand over hand
- mode of communication depends on the individual; some use dual communication such as ASL and PSE, others use SEE and voice over
- spend much of their social time with other Deaf-Blind or Deaf people
- use TTYs, computers, Blackberries, e-mails, intervenors as a secondary way of communicating (appointments, telephone, and so on)
- use large print closed-captioning when watching TV,
- CCTV (Closed Circuit TV) to enlarge small print documents, read over “ZoomText” for computer, Brailleur to Braille printed documents (depending on individual preference.)
- prefer to work with intervenors or interpreters if other people can’t sign
- some depend on hearing aids for communication, some may use them only for awareness of environmental sounds

- some live independently in a Deaf-Blind apartment complex with 24 hour intervention services and security

## **Working in a Deaf-Blind Literacy Program**

### **In a literacy program, Deaf-Blind people need:**

- to know hearing and Deaf-Blind people can have problems with literacy
- access to American Sign Language (ASL) and other modes of communication
- a strong working language
- to be taught by people with good communication skills in ASL and other modes needed
- opportunities to improve their ASL skills, if necessary
- print language to be an important part of their learning experience based on the individual needs
- to see writing as an important way of communicating
- positive approaches to Deaf-Blind culture and ASL
- access to good role models
- one-to-one instruction and a flexible schedule
- other various services

## **Adults are self-directing**

Most adults are independent. They have their own lives and homes. They make their own decisions about relationships, activities and work every day. They control their lives and decide things for themselves.

## **Adults have real world life experience**

Adults have lived for many years so they have had many different life experiences. Those experiences have affected how they think, feel and the way they do things. They have experienced challenges and hard times. They have also experienced joys and some of life's pleasures. All of these experiences and how they reacted to them go together to influence what the person is like. Past experience has a big impact on the adult. Will they take risks? Are they willing to try new things? Develop new skills? It often depends on their past experience.

For some Deaf and Deaf-Blind individuals, life experiences may have been limited. That too will influence what the person is like as an adult. Because adults are problem solvers, some may have found their own ways of coping in the world and be resistant to change.

## **Adults have some form of communication**

By the time people become adults, most have found some way of connecting with the people around them. The form of communication depends on the individual's experiences growing up – their home and school environment.

## **Adults are physically mature, but continue to change**

Adults go through different developmental stages. For example, between age 35 and 40, adults may experience changes with their vision and hearing. For women, menopause changes their levels of energy and strength, and can cause other general health changes. At each new stage of development the adult needs to learn new ways of doing things and make adjustments in their lives.

## **Adults are active in solving daily problems**

In everyday life, adults must take action - for example, the sink is full of dirty dishes, the fridge is empty, or bills need to be paid. Most adults have learned to solve these daily problems in their own way.

## **Adults' attitudes sometimes come from past experiences**

When a person has many negative experiences growing up, they may have a negative attitude as an adult. Some never learn to accept disappointment or failure. If they don't have support for dealing with life's problems, it can affect their attitude and behaviour. For example:

- Their behaviour may be self-protective (withdrawn). They close themselves off from other people so they can't get hurt. They may not be willing to take risks or want to learn.
- Their behaviour is self-inflating (egotistic). They think they are better than other people. They may want to control people and seem to have too much confidence.

In the same way, we know that positive experiences in the past can help a person have healthy self-esteem. These people may be more willing to interact with other people and try new things.

## **Adults have many roles and responsibilities**

Most adults are busy people. They may have jobs or other commitments that take their time and energy. It is important for the practitioner to consider the many roles their adult learners may have, for example:

- take care of children and other family members
- work full or part-time
- drive children or others
- have time with friends
- take care of own health needs
- shop and prepare meals regularly
- take care of housework, cooking, cleaning, laundry, and so on
- go to appointments with doctor, dentist, and other professionals
- take care of everyday living – pay bills, manage money, and so on

## What does this all mean?

It is important to understand the general characteristics of the adult learner and how they relate to learning. Of course, they do not apply to all learners, but are meant to give a general overview only.

<b>Characteristics of Adult Learners</b>	<b>Principles of Adult Learning</b>
<b>1</b> Adults are self-directing and independent, in control	involve the learner in training plans and in making decisions
<b>2</b> Adults are affected by past experiences	include past experiences in their curriculum – new learning is related to what they already know
<b>3</b> Adults are physically mature	use adult equipment not children's: chairs, desks, activities and resources
<b>4</b> Adults are active problem solvers	teach to the learners' needs; show them how the activities are connected to their goals
<b>5</b> Adults learn in different ways	respect and accommodate their different learning styles; make the learning environment fully accessible
<b>6</b> Adults' attitudes about learning may be affected by past experience	make the learning environment safe and non-threatening; discuss the differences between their past experiences and the adult literacy experience



<b>7</b> Adults have many roles and responsibilities	focus on the specific skills adults want or need to develop; help the learners meet their goals quickly
<b>8</b> Adults come from different backgrounds	make sure all learners have equal access to learning
<b>9</b> Adults see their life experience as part of their identity	value and respect the learners' experiences; include them in activities in positive ways
<b>10</b> Adults are motivated to learn by change	show the learner how the activities relate to their needs; times of change are often good opportunities to learn
<b>11</b> Adults will use their old ways of learning	support the learner in trying new ways of learning
<b>12</b> Adults have their own way of doing things	give learners the opportunity to discuss "their way" in groups; be supportive and encourage them to try new ways

## Diversity Issues

Diversity in the classroom is good. It adds to our culture and makes it more interesting. But, we need to be culturally aware and understand the diverse issues that may arise.

When we talk about learners being affected by diversity issues we mean:

- a learner feels left out or isolated
- something causes the learner to be treated unfairly

- something prevents a learner from being fully involved
- it continues to have a negative impact on a person's learning

Learners sometimes come to literacy programs with issues and concerns that burden them and interfere with their learning. They may be dealing with issues related to:

- **Past Experiences**, such as:
  - fears related to past experiences at school or at home
  - stress
  - limited social skills
  - missed opportunity for learning language and education
- **Present Barriers**, such as:
  - mental or emotional problems
  - low self-esteem
  - illness or disability
- **Daily Life Situations**, such as:
  - too many responsibilities
  - unhealthy relationships
  - lack of child care or transportation

### **What can the practitioner do?**

Of course, as a practitioner you cannot solve your learners' problems or remove their burdens. But you may be able to help your learner push past these barriers.

Here are a few suggestions that may help:

- Watch for issues that interfere with the learners' ability to learn.
- Be careful not to assume what those issues might be.

- When the time is right for the learner, give them information about the issue they are struggling with. Be very careful to respect the learner's dignity and right to privacy.
- Make sure the learning environment supports the learner.
- When diversity issues come up, remember they may be related to the learner's private issues.
- Choose learning activities and resources that will help the learner with making better choices in everyday life.
- If issues are still interfering with learning, refer the learner to the appropriate services.

### **Challenges literacy learners face every day:**

Learn about the day-to-day realities for literacy learners. Research done by the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) shows literacy learners with low literacy are often:

- unemployed or work at the lowest paying jobs
- don't have opportunities to get a job or get a better paying job
- tend to be very dependent on other people
- have a hard time accessing proper health care
- have the most workplace accidents
- have the worst eating habits (are the most poorly nourished)
- are the most "at-risk" or vulnerable people in our society (they struggle to meet basic needs)
- usually don't have the technical equipment to allow them some independence (Blackberry, TTY, computer)

For the Deaf and Deaf-Blind adult with low literacy skills, these challenges are made even more complex by language and cultural barriers. They may also have gaps in learning because of limited life experiences. The practitioner will

need to develop a good working relationship with the learner to understand their specific learning needs.

### **So what can a practitioner do?**

When practitioners think about all the issues of their learners, they often admit feeling helpless or frustrated. How can a practitioner help and support each learner's emotional needs so they will be successful? The answer is: they cannot. But, they can offer knowledge and help them develop their skills. This will make a big difference in the learner's ability to move forward.

Literacy learners often come with many personal "issues" that create barriers to learning. Practitioners respond with strategies and ideas to help break down those barriers. Then, hopefully, learners become more confident, less fearful and their learning improves.

**\* Remember your role:**

You are a practitioner, not a counsellor. If you become too involved in the learners' lives and problems, it can be harmful to you and the learner.

Be able to refer the learner to the right agency for the help they need, but do not try to counsel.