
Literacy and learning disabilities: Defining terms and supporting the print-disabled

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There have been many discussions of the overlap between literacy and learning disabilities, mostly in reference to problems in learning to read and write. In literacy programs, many adults have undiagnosed learning disabilities, but others have reading and writing difficulties due to any number of other causes in the environment, in the individual or in their prior schooling.

Although the causes of reading difficulties may vary, an individual's inability to read fluently and at a reasonable level, influences the capacity to access information necessary for full participation in Canadian life. "Information" here is defined in the broadest of terms to include reading the latest best seller, understanding tax forms, mastering a mechanic's manual, or participating in any type of post secondary education.

This article has two purposes. One is to explain what is meant by the term 'learning disabilities' by outlining the national definition of learning disabilities proposed by the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.¹ The second is to describe a Canadian initiative to support individuals, who are printdisabled, in their pursuit of enjoyment and knowledge from the written word.

A national definition of LD

The proposed LDAC national definition (full text available at <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/>) reflects the current research on learning disabilities as a "distinct lifelong, neurological condition." This implies that learning disabilities are not to be confused with other disabilities or difficulties. Learning disabilities are established through differences in brain, or neurological, functioning, and remain throughout a person's life. The causes of these disabilities may be attributed to genetic inheritance or other biological factors influencing the developing fetus and the individual as he or she grows and matures. Such disabilities are not the result of "visual or hearing impairments, generalized intellectual impairment or emotional disturbance." Learning disabilities may be severe and interfere significantly in learning in one or several areas or they may be limited in their impact. These neurological differences in brain functioning are manifested in varied patterns of strengths and weaknesses influencing the following abilities:

- a. to learn and understand language;
- b. to make the large muscle movements required by bicycle riding and various sports, and the small muscle movements required in handwriting and drawing;
- c. to be aware of oneself in space, as in finding one's way around a building, reading maps, doing geography;

- d. to remember spelling words, people's names, directions;
- e. to focus, shift and sustain attention, to organize and to plan;
- f. to acquire academic knowledge, such as reading and writing and mathematics; and,
- g. to interact appropriately with others, including teachers, peers, family members.



It should be noted that few individuals who have learning disabilities show a profile indicating weakness in all areas. Finally, the pattern of learning disabilities in any one individual will interfere with the “acquisition, application and integration” of any of the abovementioned abilities. As such, a learning disability is a complex phenomenon.

Despite this complexity, individuals with learning disabilities can have a successful school experience if they are identified early and provided with “specialized interventions appropriate to their individual strengths and needs, including direct instruction, teaching of compensatory strategies and appropriate accommodations.”

However, a large number of adolescents and young adults still leave school without receiving any specialized intervention and before completing their secondary education. Often this means that they enter their post secondary life with weak reading skills, either because they cannot decode (sound out words), remember words or read fluently enough to cover large amounts of text within a reasonable time span. These weaknesses influence the schooling, job and training options available for such young adults. Some of them do end up in adult literacy programs. Without accommodations of various kinds, they will not be able to access information readily available to other Canadians.

¹ All quotations in the LD section have been taken from the LDAC definition on <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/>

Access to information for print-disabled Canadians Access to information is crucial for knowledgeable citizenship, personal growth, successful job performance and leisure activities. In the summer of 2000, Roch Carrier, National Librarian of the National Library of Canada (NLC) and Dr. Euclid Herie, President of the Canadian National Institute of the Blind (CNIB) initiated a Task Force on Access to Information for Print-Disabled Canadians.

Some broad principles guide the work. The first principle is that the definition of print-disabled includes those with vision impairments, learning disabilities or physical or motor impairments, which interfere with the reading of print. The second principle affirms that

“all Canadians have the right to access all publicly available print information in a timely, affordable and equitable manner” (Task Force on Access to Information for Print-Disabled Canadians, p. 8). Contributors to the final report included individuals with print disabilities, those providing support and assistance, producers of alternate formats (e.g. large print, audio, Braille and e-text) in both the public and private sectors, and service providers. In all twenty-six wide-ranging recommendations were made, from one that “self-identification be sufficient to give a person with learning disabilities the right of access to multiple alternate formats.” (p. 12) to one that calls for the establishment, of a Council on Access to Print information to “provide advice, recommend funding, monitor progress and make recommendations regarding the implementation of this report” (p. 43).

This Council was established in February 2001, and includes members from consumer groups, publishers, alternate format producers, educational institutions, public libraries and the Federal government. As its work progresses, the Council will set priorities from among the recommendations made by the Task Force and will establish the funding needs to implement these priorities.

Over the next three years, improvements in the availability of and access to information should become apparent to print-disabled Canadians. Availability refers to a variety of printed materials, such as those providing general information, recent literature and biographies, as well as textbooks. Availability also refers to having knowledge of what has already been published across Canada and elsewhere. Accessibility to materials published elsewhere may be helped through negotiations with alternate format producers in other countries. In addition, some individuals with print disabilities would benefit from having screen readers, but they will need access to computers powerful enough to run the software programs and training in how to use the software. Screen readers can make websites more accessible for those who have difficulty reading text. Although some of the report’s recommendations touch on how these goals might be achieved, the Council has just begun its deliberations.

Such an initiative establishes that all Canadians have the right to equal access to new information and emerging knowledge, as well as to enjoyment derived from the written word. Availability and accessibility to alternate formats and supports to read these formats will allow print-disabled individuals choices among options for learning and pleasure. Finally, this undertaking has the potential to make lifelong learning a real possibility for all persons needing support to access print either in a paper or in electronic format.

References

Learning Disabilities Association of Canada. Definition of learning disabilities. Web site: <http://www.ldac-taac.ca/>

Task Force on Access to Information for Print-Disabled Canadians. (2000). Fulfilling the promise. Ottawa. Web site: <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/>

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Copyright law on photocopying for the print-disabled in Canada

The rights of print-disabled students to request photocopies of journal articles and selections or chapters of texts or manuals that are required reading, are often ignored because educators do not know that Canadian copyright law permits this. Section 32 of the copyright legislation allows single copies of such materials to be made by institutions providing secondary, post-secondary, or vocational education. This in turn allows the student to scan the material into a computer and use a screen reader, to increase the print size, or to print it on coloured paper to make contrast more evident. The institution has the responsibility to (a) make sure that the student requires such adapted format to fulfill course requirements; and (b) that only a single copy is produced for that specific student. This can be very helpful to students who lack the fluency to cover the extensive reading required by many courses and vocational programs. [E.G.]