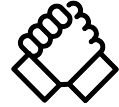


SUPPORTING LEARNERS WITH DIVERSE LEARNING NEEDS



Instructors are supported as they design instruction to be accessible to all learners, ensuring multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. The learning environment is safe and welcoming, and supports positive mental health. Learners with disabilities are welcomed, valued, supported, and accommodated to ensure their full participation.

Statements of Best Practice

for Supporting Learners with Diverse Learning Needs

Instructors are supported as they design instruction to be accessible to all learners, ensuring multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. The learning environment is safe and welcoming, and supports positive mental health. Learners with disabilities are welcomed, valued, supported, and accommodated to ensure their full participation.

86. The program accommodates learners with disabilities to ensure their full participation in education.

- **Accommodations** are made to ensure the institution’s environment and practices do not have a discriminatory effect based on a learner’s hearing, mobility, vision, learning, mental health, or developmental (etc.) disability
- The program ensures that policies, rules, and admission standards (etc.) minimize discriminatory effects and hardship for learners with disabilities.
- There is a recognized accommodation policy with procedures for requesting accommodations, determining appropriate accommodations, developing and implementing accommodation plans, and/or refusing accommodations.
- Learners are involved in these procedures as they communicate needs and information, collaborate with the program to identify and evaluate options for

Accommodations

“The [Alberta Human Rights] Act recognizes that all persons are equal in dignity, rights and responsibilities when it comes to provision of services available to the public. The process for ensuring all persons are treated equally is called accommodation. Accommodation of students with disabilities involves activities like making adjustments or alternative arrangements in the educational environment to ensure it does not have a discriminatory effect on a student because of the student’s disabilities. ...

The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that where the educational environment has a discriminatory effect on students with disabilities, the post-secondary institution is required to provide accommodation up to the point of **undue hardship.**”

Alberta Human Rights Commission (2010). [Duty to accommodate students with disabilities in post-secondary educational institutions](#)

reasonable accommodation, and implement the plans.

- _ Sample accommodations include the following:
 - _ Steps to ensure the accessibility of the building, classroom, labs, etc.
 - _ Accommodations in cases of appointments, attendance, and other related issues
 - _ Modifications to classroom physical arrangement (use of ergonomic chairs, movable tables/desks, etc.)
 - _ Provision of assistive technologies, for instance:
 - _ Magnifiers
 - _ Large-print keyboards
 - _ Large-print materials
 - _ Lighted-tip pens
 - _ Roger pens (pair with hearing aids)
 - _ iPads/tablets (and various apps)
 - _ Mics/pens that pair with hearing aids
 - _ Stylus pens
 - _ Pencil grips
 - _ Online accommodations, such as text-to-speech, immersive readers, built-in accessibility features for changing font size, recordings of the instructor accompanying written instructions, transcripts, audio books, etc. (See Best Practices for [Technology and Online Learning](#))
 - _ Provision for classroom support (e.g. tutorials, educational aide, first language support worker, interpretation/translation support)
 - _ Evaluation accommodations, such as extended time and distraction-reduced settings for tests/exams
 - _ Modified tasks (e.g., reduced numbers of questions, reformatted documents)
- _ When a program cannot accommodate a learner's needs, the learner receives help and referrals to access resources available in the community (see below).
- _ Where offering accommodations may be viewed as "**undue hardship**" for a smaller program, that program may make an effort to collaborate with other organizations to organize overarching service (e.g., by supporting a mental health or learning support specialist to provide services for a number of smaller programs or non-profits in a region).

87. The program ensures that learners who require accommodations or supports are connected with support services.

- _ Instructors identify early signs of learning difficulty, record observable behaviour that is not addressed by teaching interventions, and make necessary referrals of learners to learning support services where available to address learning difficulties.

- _ Learners are offered help to fill in forms to apply for support services.
- _ Privacy of information related to a learner's disabilities is considered when providing additional support or intervention.
- _ There is a clear process for connecting struggling learners with support services, whether within the organization or within the community.
- _ There are clear processes and/or point people to contact for emergency situations (e.g., if suicide or abuse is mentioned).
- _ Services for learners with disabilities are presented in the same way that any other service is presented.

88. The program works with disability organizations in the broader community and promotes their services to learners.

- _ The program searches out funding for assistive technologies, classroom support, and accommodations, such as educational assistants, interpreters (sign languages and first language), scribes, as well as ergonomic chairs, keyboards, etc.
- _ The program supports learners with disabilities to connect with relevant support and funding: AISH; transportation (Calgary Transit Access, CTA, or Edmonton Disabled Adult Transit Service, DATS); low-income eye and dental assistance programs, etc.
- _ The program builds connections with experts and relevant organizations in the community, such as Cerebral Palsy Association, Access Mental Health, the Trauma Informed Network, CNIB, Arthritis Society, Southern Alberta Brain Injury Society (SABIS), Developmental Disabilities Resource Centre of Calgary (DDRC), VECOVA, and the Alberta Brain Injury Initiative.
- _ Instructors are made aware of the services offered by relevant organizations.
- _ Learners are made aware of the services offered by relevant organizations, through for instance:
 - _ Guest speakers (See Community Resources)
 - _ Flyers
 - _ Emails
 - _ Classroom announcements
 - _ Posters
 - _ Individual referrals from instructors and/or settlement counsellors

89. The program builds the capacity of staff to promote mental wellness and support learners with diverse needs.

- _ Organizations create positions to provide in-house expertise, consult with area experts, and offer opportunities for instructors to develop knowledge and skills to support learners with diverse needs. This may be done in the following ways:
 - _ Identifying “point people” who are willing to be consulted in certain areas
 - _ Mentoring
 - _ Team teaching
 - _ Developing an in-house “Speakers’ bureau”
 - _ Encouraging teachers to take turns in rotating support role positions.
- _ The program supports instructors and staff in taking courses and gaining certification in topics such as psychological first aid, trauma-informed practice, learning disabilities, etc.
- _ The program supports instructional staff in taking part in professional development opportunities addressing a selection of the following:
 - _ **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** principles and practices
 - _ Learning preferences
 - _ Learning disabilities
 - _ Pre-referral strategies to support learners
 - _ Strategies for teaching reading and writing skills, including the 5 components of reading instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, word recognition/decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension)
 - _ Psychological first aid
 - _ Trauma-informed practice
 - _ Zones of regulation (teaching learners to be more aware of managing their emotions and impulses and helping them improve their problem-solving skills)
 - _ Signs of trauma
 - _ Stresses and challenges faced by learners who have had to flee their country as a result of war
 - _ The experience of living in a refugee camp (e.g., first person accounts; virtual reality and 360-degree videos)
 - _ Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
 - _ Mental health first aid
- _ The program supports instructors who may experience vicarious trauma as they support their learners.

90. Instructors apply the principles and practices of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to maximize the potential for success of *all* learners.

Provide multiple means of **Engagement**

- _ Learner engagement is maximized through, for example, allowing for collaborative learning, gamification, choosing topics that are intrinsically interesting for that group, peer learning, etc.
- _ Learners have opportunities to make choices in the following:
 - _ What to learn (participating in setting classroom and individual goals)
 - _ How to learn
 - _ How to demonstrate learning (choices in assignments, choices in procedures, role-plays)
- _ The instructor, as an encouraging voice in the classroom, provides guidance as learners set and achieve individual goals.
- _ Classroom routines provide predictability in the classroom.
- _ Class set-up is flexible and allows opportunity for movement and the creation of safe learning spaces.
- _ Throughout the day, activities transition between whole class, group, and individual learning to accommodate different learning preferences.
- _ Instruction is carefully sequenced to promote mastery of skills with varying amounts of support, review, and practice for different learners. For example:
 - _ Tasks may be highly **scaffolded** for some learners, with multiple opportunities for practice.
 - _ Other learners may work through a task independently with less scaffolding.
- _ Instructions for activities and assessments are clear, step-by-step, presented in language the learners can understand (plain English), and accompanied by visuals when possible.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

“UDL aims to change the design of the environment rather than to change the learner.”
(Cast, 2018)

UDL is based on the following 3 principles:

- _ Make use of multiple strategies for engaging, challenging, and motivating learners.
- _ Provide learners with multiple ways to acquire content.
- _ Provide learners with multiple ways to demonstrate what they know.

CAST (2018). *Universal Design for Learning guidelines*, version 2.2. Retrieved from <http://udlguidelines.cast.org>

Provide multiple means of **Representation**

- _ Information is offered in multiple formats to appeal to different ways of learning (text, audio, video, visuals aids, exploratory learning, field trips).

- _ Options are included that make materials accessible for everyone (e.g., text-to-speech, text enlargement, screen colour/contrast, captions for videos, transcripts for audio).
- _ Support and scaffolding is provided through, for instance, highlighting patterns, using graphic organizers, explaining symbols, etc.
- _ Course, lesson, and activity goals and outcomes are clearly communicated to encourage reflection and self-assessment.

Provide multiple means of **Action and Expression**

- _ Learning is demonstrated in a variety of ways (tests, projects, presentations, individual and group work, creation of a video/podcast).
- _ Learners are provided with alternate ways to present ideas and communicate (e.g., small-group presentations, class presentations, role-plays, forums, blogs, wikis, videos, visuals).
- _ Learners receive regular feedback on, and are encouraged to reflect on, their progress in meeting their individual learning goals.
- _ Self-directed activities encourage independence and autonomy in learning.

91. Instruction aims to reduce stress, anxious feelings, and isolation for learners while creating a safe, welcoming, and supportive community of learning.

- _ Learners have a sense of what will happen next through the development of predictable routines and cues (e.g., a daily schedule written on the board; repeated beginning and ending activities; timers).
- _ In face-to-face contexts, learners have the opportunity to move around and collaborate and interact with others.
- _ In online courses, technology is used to promote engagement, collaboration, and a sense of community; learners have the opportunity to get to know their instructor and classmates. (See Best Practices for [Technology and Online Learning](#))
- _ Teachers build trust as they demonstrate sincere concern for the wellbeing of the learners through consistent, respectful, compassionate, and non-judgmental communication.
- _ Classroom instruction includes ground rules for confidentiality and respect, for example, through setting “no judging” and “be kind to everyone” expectations.
- _ Common stressors faced by learners are addressed in classroom activities, providing opportunities for learners to share their own stories. These stressors/stories may include the following:
 - _ Stories of migration
 - _ Experiences of isolation

- _ Feelings of helplessness
- _ Barriers to education and training opportunities
- _ Resilience in the face of adversity
- _ Role reversals (both parents, spouses are working)
- _ Culture shock
- _ Parenting across cultures
- _ Barriers to employment and financial stability
- _ Current crises (e.g., Covid-19)
- _ Classroom activities that are perceived to be “high stakes,” such as timed activities and PBLA assessments
- _ Self-care practices, with a focus on relieving tension, managing fear, and building concentration, are incorporated into class activities.
- _ Instructional approaches give learners an opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and highlight accomplishments.
- _ Learners are encouraged to recognize and label their own emotional reactions as a strategy for regulating emotions.

92. Instructors both provide trauma-informed instruction and promote positive mental health.

- _ As far as possible, triggers (themes, content, and materials that are likely to remind learners of past traumatic experiences) are avoided.
 - _ Common triggers include war, family violence, sexual abuse, talking about family, and more.
- _ Learners are given a choice in whether and how much to share of their past experiences. For example:
 - _ Learners share pictures of “someone you like” rather than “someone in your family.”
- _ When learners are distressed, instructors follow learner preferences to provide the flexibility, safe spaces, time, and privacy needed for learners to recover composure. This may include, for example:
 - _ Connecting the learner with someone they have rapport with in the organization

Academic signs of psychological distress:

- _ Worsening grades
- _ Chronic lateness
- _ Absenteeism
- _ Chronic incomplete/late assignments
- _ Sleeping in class
- _ Difficulty focusing
- _ Withdrawal from class activities
- _ Increased isolation from classmates

Other signs of psychological distress:

- _ Worsening hygiene
- _ Avoidance of eye contact
- _ Flushed or sweaty skin
- _ Agitation and restlessness
- _ Irritability or aggression
- _ Lack of facial expression
- _ Inability to control emotions, tears

- _ Following up with the learner, while not making a big deal out of the incident
- _ When instructors notice signs of psychological distress, they check in with the learner to find out if any supports are needed or desired. For example:
 - _ They talk with the learner about what they have observed using non-judgmental language and open-ended questions (“I noticed... How can I support you?”)
 - _ They avoid taking on the role of counsellor.
 - _ They focus on issues related to academic performance and connecting the learner with ongoing mental health support.
 - _ If suicide is mentioned, instructors follow the organization’s protocol for what to do in this situation.

93. Learners with disabilities (mobility, vision, learning, mental health, developmental, etc.) are equally welcomed, respected, and valued in the classroom, and they *know* that they are equally welcomed, respected, and valued.

- _ Clear expectations are set out for respectful interactions and inclusion of *all* learners in the class.
- _ Instructors model respect and support for learners with disabilities or mental health challenges, for instance, in the following ways:
 - _ Demonstrating patience and encouragement in interactions
 - _ Validating and encouraging learners’ ideas, attempts, communication styles, etc.
 - _ Ensuring all learners have opportunities to share through strategies such as Think-Pair-Share, offering turns, clarifying
- _ Comments that stereotype or discriminate against people with disabilities are addressed in a timely manner.
- _ People with disabilities see themselves reflected in posters, messaging, and advertising, as well as in the content and curriculum of the class.
- _ The voices, perspectives, stories, and contributions to the community of people with physical disabilities, learning differences, and mental health-related conditions are incorporated into class content, including, for example:
 - _ Inspiring accounts of people in the above categories (e.g., Terry Fox, Rick Hanson, Joey Moss, Robert Munsch, Leonard Cohen, and many more)
 - _ The voices of ordinary people with disabilities (e.g., CBC’s *You Can’t Ask That* series)
 - _ Accounts of people with disabilities with whom learners can relate on other dimensions (e.g., immigrants and refugees, parents of children with disabilities, students, members of professions, job seekers, teachers, etc.)
- _ Inclusion of persons with disabilities in Canada is embedded into classroom themes, for

example:

- _ Rights: reading about the Duty to Accommodate (Alberta Human Rights Commission)
- _ Employment: reviewing online tools and resources for people with disabilities, such as the Government of Canada Accessibility Resource Centre and the Alis Alberta resource guide for persons with disabilities
- _ Transportation: listening to a TED talk on why design of transportation should include everyone
- _ Education: watching a TED-Ed video on educating a neurodiverse world; completing a web search based on the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta website
- _ Study skills: listening to a podcast on ADHD; participating in a workshop on test-taking anxiety
- _ Smalltalk: Reading the CBC article by Taylor Katzel titled *The problem with making small talk about my big disability*
- _ Stereotypical portrayals of people with disabilities are avoided or are addressed from a critical perspective.

Vignettes

for Supporting Learners with Diverse Learning Needs

This section includes descriptions of what the Best Practices might look like when applied in a variety of contexts.

Vignette 1: Supporting Struggling Learners

I work in an ESL program in a non-profit organization. Some learners in my class struggle with reading but do not have a diagnosed learning disability. I am learning that there are many reasons a learner might struggle with reading. Exploring Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles on the [CAST](#) website has helped me understand how to support learners without a diagnosis. I also do the following:

- _ Privately talk to the learner about what reading is like for them in their home language and what their school experience was like
- _ Gain a better understanding of the learner's English decoding skills with tools like the [Beginning Alphabets Tests and Tools](#)
- _ Draw on [Rising to the Reading Challenges of Adult Learners: Practitioner's Toolkit](#) by CanLearn Society
- _ Include explicit, intensive instruction on the 5 components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, word recognition/decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension
- _ Offer accommodations, like longer time to complete an activity or assessment
- _ Invite a volunteer reading teacher to work with the learner on specific reading and writing skills

Vignette 2: Finding Supports for Learners in a Small Non-Profit

I work in a small non-profit organization. Our organization does not qualify for the Alberta Education Supports that are available to large organizations like colleges and universities. In my role, I provide support for learners. Here are some of the things I do to support learners:

- _ I connect learners with disabilities to other community organizations in my region. For instance, I have done the following:
 - _ I have connected learners who are deaf with [Deaf and Hear Alberta](#). For a small fee, the organization helped us apply for hearing aids and a Roger pen and mic.
 - _ I helped a learner apply for the local brain injury program. That involved making sure the learner advocated for herself. She needed a referral from her doctor.
- _ I help learners figure out what kind of health insurance they have. Learners may be eligible for eye exams and glasses.
- _ I advocated in my non-profit for a small budget line for assistive technology, such as one or two large keyboards, ergonomic chairs, and magnifiers.
- _ I've helped arrange for and train volunteers to assist learners who require individualized support.

Vignette 3: Responding to Learner Stress and Uncertainty

I work in an employment training program for newcomers to Canada. While learners are eager to move into the Canadian workforce, they are juggling many demands on their time and energy. They also face many uncertainties about the future, and it often takes much longer than they had hoped to reach their goals. To foster a learning space that supports mental health, I do the following:

- _ I work to develop a class culture where learners are able to talk about their experiences and feelings without judgment.
- _ I invite former students as guest speakers in class to share about experiencing and overcoming challenges at work and in life in general.
- _ I ensure that learners are aware of available community resources and supports that to help them take care of their basic needs, referring them to settlement and integration programs, and family and legal counselling services, etc.
- _ I invite speakers from Alberta Health Services to talk about stress management,

mindfulness, and mental wellbeing.

Vignette 4: Addressing Learning Concerns

I work in a LINC program, and I find that learners sometimes raise issues they are facing in their personal lives. They ask questions about childcare subsidies, domestic violence, housing, and food banks. To address learners' concerns, I do the following:

- _ I incorporate information about local community resources (library, disability services, food bank) into my reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks.
- _ I set up a bulletin board with leaflets from community organizations that learners can take home.
- _ I invite other service providers (Alberta Health or Primary Care Network; mental health organizations; settlement counsellors) to speak to the class about resources available at their organizations.

Vignette 5: Supporting Learners with Disabilities

I taught a class with learners who had cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, hearing and sight disabilities, and learning disabilities. I used the following tools and apps to help the learners successfully learn:

- _ I had a student with vision problems. When we printed material for him, we used a large font. However, when he wrote, he used a smaller font and couldn't see what he was writing. We were able to order a lighted-tip pen. This allowed the student to see what he was printing.
- _ I had a higher-level learner who also had vision problems. We found a pen reader that would speak the written words aloud as it was dragged over the writing.
- _ We found that the learners with development disabilities responded to brightly coloured materials, so I always printed out their materials in colour and made sure to include pictures and illustrations.
- _ We found that pencil grips helped our learners who had trouble with hand-eye coordination as they struggled with holding a pencil. We also found that those learners were more successful when they used thick pencils or markers. They found writing on whiteboards with colourful markers to be very engaging.
- _ We used iPads. I especially like the Sentence Builder app, which has exercises at different

levels. Students look at pictures, listen to sentences, and drag and drop words into blanks. I can create my own activities where learners build sentences that are relevant to their lives.

- _ When we went to the computer lab, the learners read stories and did activities on the following websites:
 - _ [Storybooks Canada](#)
 - _ [Bow Valley readers](#)
 - _ [Tar Heel Readers](#)
 - _ [Learning Chocolate](#)
- _ I also created [Kahoot!](#) activities related to numbers, feelings, emotions, shopping, house chores, and more. They could see the game on my screen, and they used their computers to answer.

References and PD Resources

for Supporting Learners with Diverse Learning Needs

This section includes resources that informed this document and resources (academic articles, websites, videos, tutorials, courses, etc.) for professional development and further learning on this topic.

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Resources for the Classroom

for Supporting Learners with Diverse Learning Needs

This section includes resources (lesson plans, curriculum, readings, videos, podcasts, etc.) to use in class.

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Community Resources

for Supporting Learners with Diverse Learning Needs 

This section includes community sources for learner support, guest speakers, etc.

Centre for Newcomers, Calgary: Mental Health

<https://www.centrefornewcomers.ca/mentalhealth>

Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN)

https://emcn.ab.ca/corporate/programs/settlement/health_and_wellbeing_services.html

CCIS's Centre for Refugee Resilience

<https://www.ccisab.ca/refugees/centre-for-refugee-resilience.html>

Vecova

<https://vecova.ca/>

TIES Healthy Minds

<https://www.tieshealthyminds.ca/>

Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA)

<https://www.ciwa-online.com/>

Mental Health Foundation

<https://mentalhealthfoundation.ca/>

The Wellness Centre

<https://www.wellnesscentreab.ca/>

Government of Alberta: Supports for People with Disabilities

<https://www.alberta.ca/supports-for-people-with-disabilities.aspx>