



Adaptation of learning content for students with SLDs
Educational Needs and Adaptations for students with SLDs

How to structure lessons and learning materials

Introduction

Designing a good lesson plan and organising the learning material in a structured way can be challenging. Yet, students need their learning to be structured in a sensible way in order for them to assimilate the taught material well. This is even more true for students with **Specific Learning Disorders (henceforth SLDs)**, who often have focus and memorisation issues and for whom the structure of learning is therefore essential. Fortunately, adopting some class routines and layout habits may drastically improve their learning experience.

The need behind this adaptation

Students with special needs may have difficulties with organisation, time management and retention of the lessons. They may also have a shorter concentration period. This may obviously have a negative impact on their learning. Fortunately, the situation can be improved with some

adaptations. Such adaptations foster a good understanding of the structure and content of a lesson and of what is expected from your students. They may also benefit other students of the group.

What is this adaptation all about?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The **Universal Design for Learning** (henceforth **UDL**) is a teaching and learning framework. UDL was born out of the realisation that **there is no such thing as an ideal standard student**. A class is indeed made up of a diversity of students, who do not necessarily learn in the same way.

Built around this idea, UDL is particularly suited to make your teaching more inclusive.

This framework is organised around 3 fundamental axes:


1. Provide multiple means of **engagement**: The “WHY” of learning
2. Provide multiple means of **representation**: The “WHAT” of learning
3. Provide multiple means of **action and expression**: The “HOW” of learning

It was inspired by “universal design” in architecture, which is the idea of building in a way that meets the needs of all people (young, old, disabled, etc.). Similarly, with the UDL approach, teachers don’t wait for students to ask for adaptations but **make learning content as universal as possible, right from the start**.

Class routine: start the session with a reminder of what has been covered in the previous session

Taking a few minutes at the beginning of each lesson to remind students of the content covered during the previous learning session results in several advantages for your students:

- it may **help them with fixing taught knowledge into their long-term memory**. More information can be found in our practice sheet “How to effectively improve the memorisation of your students with SLDs”.
- it may help them understand the structure of your **overall teaching plan**, which may help with making **connections between several learning contents**. Reminding the



content of a previously taught lesson prepares your students for what comes next. It helps them develop a sense of continuity in their learning.

Class routine: Introduce and summarize the content of the lesson

Once the content of the previous lesson has been reminded, it is good practice to **introduce the content that will be taught in the current learning session**. That way, your students may be able to anticipate what they are going to learn and feel better prepared for the lesson.

Providing an outline of the session and explaining what will be covered during the session can be very helpful. It will help with **focus**, and re-focus in case students lose track of the lesson. Updating the outline during the lesson to **make progression more apparent** can help further. Besides laying a table of content, drawing a **mind map** to make the connections between the topics more obvious can also be quite effective.

After the lesson, before leaving, going back to the outline and summing up what has just been learned will help students memorise better, and reflect on their learning. **Repetition and structured thoughts are the keys to any learning**.

The students may also feel more included and engaged in the learning process when the structure of the lesson plan is more transparent to them.

Break down the lesson and set clear instructions

Smaller is better. To begin with, the structure of your lesson will appear more clearly if it is broken down into smaller phases of learning. It may **help in terms of focus and memorisation**. Worksheets, tasks and instructions should also abide by this principle.

Big tasks can feel overwhelming and hinder motivation. It is always better to break down tasks into manageable chunks, presenting a small amount of work at a time. Head over to our practice sheet “Set achievable goals and track progress” for more information on task chunking and task analysis in general.

Instructions need to be short and straight to the point. Smaller step-by-step instructions will make exercises notably clearer to your students.

Adopt the structured literacy approach

The structured literacy approach may be particularly helpful for students with dyslexia. By teaching how words and the letters of those words sound, how letters are built into words, and how units of language fit together to form new words and sentences, students learn how to disassemble and reassemble the building blocks of the language. **Explicitly detailing linguistic features of the language may be extremely helpful for your students with SLDs.**

Balance theory with practice

“Practice makes perfect” as the saying goes. Students will be less engaged and less focused with too much theory. Students with SLDs may also learn way better with practice (active learning) than with theory, especially when adopting the **multisensory approach principles**.

Use icons, images and colours

Visually appealing documents and presentations are easier to deal with. Adding images, icons and colours can greatly improve the visual quality of your documents and make them feel easier to go through. **Using icons and colours in a sensible and consistent way guides your students through your document** even better. It will also help with focus.

For instance, always use the same icon and/or colour for vocabulary exercises, another for grammar, and another for spelling. It will help your students follow the lesson and revise it at home.

One final thought on colours, though: make sure that there is enough contrast between the background and the text. If you are unsure, you can use tools such as

<https://coolers.co/contrast-checker>.

Provide a digital version of the material to your Students

Technology can be very helpful to students with SLDs, as you can read in more detail in our practice sheet “Technology and students with SLDs”.

If you provide a PDF to students with dyslexia, for instance, they can use a PDF reader with text-to-speech, to help them with reading the material. They can also adapt the layout to their needs and preferences. Therefore, having a digital version of your material is always wise.

Highlight essential information in an inclusive way

Highlight important units of information in the text, for instance **using bold font and colours**.

Other methods, such as *italics*, underlining and **CAPITALS** should be avoided all the time. It changes the shape of the letters and makes it harder for students with dyslexia.

Consistence inclusive layout

With printed material as well as with presentations, try to keep the same fonts, the same layout for the titles and the same delimitations for the sections. However, choose your layout wisely and be prepared to update it if some students inform you that it is not suited for their needs.

The following few guidelines may help you with your layout creation:

- Use a clear **sans serif font**, for instance: Arial, Century Gothic, or Open Sans.
 - People with dyslexia tend to prefer these types of fonts because the space between the letters is clearer than with serif (for instance Times or Garamond) or cursive fonts (*this is an example of cursive font*), both of which may feel more cramped.
- The **font size** of the text should be at least **12pt**, or even **14pt**.
- Use a **line spacing of 1,5**.
- **Align your text to the left** (✓≡), avoid justified alignment (✗≡), because it can make it harder to find one's way around the text and can change the size of the spaces between words.
- **use 'bold' to highlight content** (no *italics*, underlining or **CAPITALS**).

Fonts specifically designed for dyslexic people, such as [OpenDyslexic](#) and [EasyReading](#) may also be used.

Adding a glossary in the content areas that has the same layout (or similar) from one document to the other may also be appreciated by your students.

Conclusion

Some **classroom routines** may have a very positive impact on the learning experience of your students. For instance, taking some time at the beginning of every session to **remind the content covered in a previous lesson**. Or **presenting the content that will be taught** during the current lesson.

Using an adapted layout, being consistent, highlighting important information in a proper way, chunking tasks into smaller, more manageable ones, making visually appealing and structured documents with clear and short sections and providing clear and straight-to-the-point instructions... all of these may greatly improve the learning experience of your students with SLDs.

Resources and references

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