

“Who are your learners?”

Introduction

Think back to the last time you were in a new situation in order to learn something. How did you feel? Were you full of confidence, eagerly looking forward to the opportunity? Or did you have a few doubts and anxieties lurking at the back of your mind? Did you wonder whether you would match up to your fellow learners? Were you wondering whether you would find sufficient challenge to keep you interested?

There will be very few of us who approach learning without experiencing some mixture of these feelings. And if we – who are in the business of learning – feel like that, think how it must be for learners coming to our classrooms or workshops for the first time.

They bring with them diverse back-grounds and experiences. Some may need support with basic skills; others may find it hard to express themselves. There may be those with a disability whilst some may feel apprehensive about working in a group. Maybe there will also be one or two confident learners who may want to work more quickly than some of their peers.

In this section, we focus your attention on what each learner brings to your sessions, and the implications for the way you teach. Differentiation is about identifying and addressing the different needs, interests and abilities of all learners to give them the best possible chance of achieving their learning goals.

When you have completed this task, you will have:

information about certain learners;
assessed your procedures for collating and sharing information about individual learners and agreed on what else should be done;
assessed the extent to which your teaching currently caters for the needs of different learners;
made plans for incorporating ‘differentiation’ into your teaching in the future.

Implications of learners’ strengths, anxieties and obstacles to learning

Below is a pen portrait of a learner taken from a diverse group in a large conurbation.

Richard is a 29-year-old white English male who has worked as a labourer in the construction industry for some years. He decided to train to be a craftsperson. He needs help with reading and writing because he is dyslexic. He enjoys the practical side of the studying but gets bored in theory lessons.

1. Activity: What do learners bring to the learning environment?

Here is a pen portrait for you to think about. What strengths, anxieties and barriers might this learner be experiencing? Make notes in the space below.

Pravin is a 24-year-old Indian British National. He is unemployed and retraining after redundancy from his previous employment. Although he works hard and is committed to his college studies, he doesn't appear to have much confidence.

Notes

2. More examples

If you found this first part of the activity useful and interesting, you may like to make notes about some more pen portraits.

1. George is a white English 18-year-old advanced modern apprentice attending part-time as part of an industry sponsored programme. He has been on the programme for one year. George requires specialist learner support for his impaired hearing.

Notes

2. Hooshang is an adult Iraqi asylum seeker who has only recently started the programme. Hooshang, through an interpreter at initial assessment, has indicated that he is a highly skilled craftsman but has no vocational qualifications from his previous country. He requires English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) support.

Notes

3. Jenny is a 40-year-old white English single parent adult returner who has a BA in business administration. She progressed from a community-based education project. Jenny is undertaking this programme to help her move into employment in the construction industry. She strode through the initial assessment programme. She is keen to start her own business.

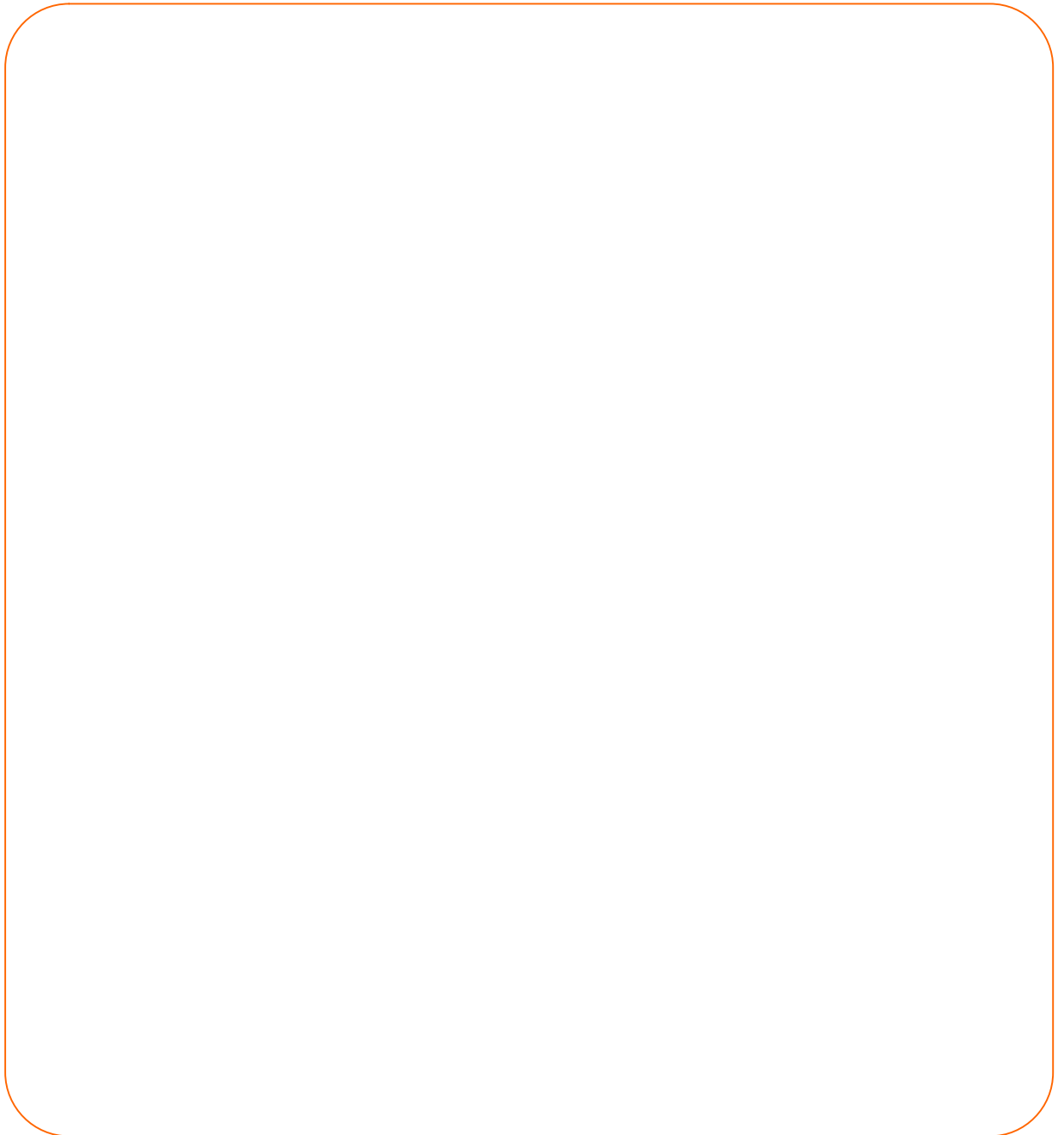
Notes

4. John is a long-term unemployed 35-year-old white English New Deal client undertaking the further education option. He attends solely because his benefits will be cut if he does not participate. He requires significant additional learning support with literacy and numeracy.

Notes

3. Information about your own learners and the implications for your teaching

Now think about your own learners. What strengths, anxieties and obstacles to learning might they be bringing with them? And what are the implications for your teaching?



Information about learners and the implications for teaching

Learner 1:

Information

Implications for teaching

Learner 2:

Information

Implications for teaching

Learner 3:

Information

Implications for teaching

4. Recording and sharing information

Thinking about your learners and their needs is not just a one-off activity. The process needs to become a regular feature of your practice. You will be more likely to do it if you and your colleagues agree on a system for collecting, recording and sharing information. Start constructing this system now. Your organisation must have protocols in place to comply with the Data Protection Act 1984. You should be familiar with these, and observe confidentiality procedures.

Consider how you record information about learners.

Notes

Consider how and why you share this information with other colleagues.

Notes

Consider what else you might do and what the benefits might be.

Notes

Here are two ways you could keep and use information:

'I use a spidergram to make it easy to see and take in the relevant information about each learner in a group.'

'I put names and all the information into a spreadsheet, with headings such as age, qualifications, experience, skills, support needs etc. Then I can easily group and regroup them according to different categories

