Support for learning
giving learners support to succeed

What?
- understanding learning
- learning in context
- learning support
- practical support
- technical and specialist support.

Why?
Learning is both an individual and a group activity. People learn by themselves, and by working things through or talking with others. It’s quite likely that learning will happen naturally in either or both of these ways, without people needing any support. But support can help, for reasons like these:

- Some people may not be confident at learning on their own, or with others – they may benefit from support that builds their confidence.
- The right support can help to focus and accelerate learning, making it more rewarding and motivating.
- There are sometimes barriers that get in the way of efficient learning, and support can help people to overcome the difficulties.

Support is particularly useful when people move into a new environment. Young people leaving school for work are a good example. Throughout school there has been steady pressure to succeed as an individual learner. It takes time to adjust to the idea that learning at work often happens through working as part of a team.

It’s helpful for learners to know this, and to get support from their employer during the early stages of their experience to integrate more smoothly. One approach is to find someone at work – another apprentice, for example – to act as a ‘buddy’ and help to ease the new employee into the working environment. A buddy can do things like:

- introduce the learner to colleagues
- explain and reinforce information given during induction
- include the apprentice in leisure or break activities.

Different people benefit from support in different ways, and at different times – their support requirements may vary during the programme. This means it’s not such a good idea to plan support too rigidly. In fact it’s good to have support available so that:

- learners can get it when they want it
- people supporting the learner (trainers, assessors, mentors etc.) can guide learners towards the kind of support that’s best for them.

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All this means that employers and providers should make the time to get to know what support individual learners are likely to benefit from most. This should happen at every stage of their programme. It’s important to build on previous experience, but bear in mind that people may have performed below capacity in the past and may underestimate their learning abilities as a result. It’s a good idea to start simple and progress towards more complex tasks. This will help to focus the assessment positively, on what learners can do.

It’s an area where there’s already good practice in work-based learning, so there’s a lot to build on

**How?**

**Understanding learning**

There are some myths about learning that can get in the way of providing good support to learners.

### Unhelpful myths

- There’s no difference between learning at school and learning at work.
- It would be cheating to get someone else to help me.
- Young people have no relevant previous knowledge and experience when they start.
- Everything has to be covered in induction.
- Questions are a disruption of learning or training.
- Nothing will happen until someone takes learners in hand and teaches them.

The first real challenge is to help learners, and those supporting learners, to think about learning in different ways. It’s especially useful to know that:

- there are a number of ways to learn
- different ways suit some learners better than others
- some things are easier to learn in one way than another – for example, learning how to use equipment is often best done by watching, then having a go (as long as it’s safe to do so) under close supervision by a suitably qualified supervisor.

Much of the learning at work is not theoretical and doesn’t take place in formal settings. It’s the employer’s job to make learners aware of these ‘informal’ ways of learning, and to show them the practical benefits that come from learning in these ways. However, learners also need to be taught how to cope with theoretical learning at an early stage if they are to progress to higher level qualifications.

Here are some useful ways of thinking about the ways in which people learn:

- By experience and reflection – learning starts with doing something, then people move on to thinking about what they have done.
- By asking them!
- In visual or verbal forms – some people learn better from visual forms (diagrams, charts, maps etc.) while others find it easier to absorb words, e.g. in descriptions or summaries. It’s related to the idea that some people prefer to process information holistically, others sequentially.
- Using ‘multiple’ intelligences – based on the idea that intelligence takes different forms. By playing to their strengths, most learners can reach a level of achievement that has seemed beyond them in the past.
Multiple intelligences

- Linguistic
- Mathematical and logical
- Visual and spatial
- Musical
- Interpersonal
- Intrapersonal
- Kinaesthetic

The point about this is that learning is likely to be more efficient if:

- learners themselves understand that they can be intelligent in different ways
- learning opportunities are provided in ways that make the most of individuals’ strengths
- managers ensure that the systems, processes and resources are in place for learners to learn in modes that suit them best.

Learning in context

People tend to be motivated more and to learn best when:

- experience is meaningful
- short-term goals are set and pursued
- feedback is given on progress
- achievements are recognised and celebrated.

For this reason, it’s essential that the situation in which learners are supposed to be learning match their aspirations and aims as closely as possible. Learners in work-based learning are at work much of the time, so it helps greatly if employers are involved in:

- setting learning goals
- providing opportunities and resources for learners to achieve these goals
- giving feedback.

Learning support

The key role of trainers and assessors in work-based learning is to facilitate learning. Part of this is being able to assess whether a learner is competent at a particular task, but that happens at the end of the learning process. A lot has to go on before then, to:

- help learners acquire new skills or knowledge
- make sure there are enough opportunities to practise these new skills
- give learners feedback on how well they are doing.

That’s what is meant by learning support. In the workplace, support can be given in many different ways. Examples are:

- one-to-one coaching – good for helping learners acquire a specific skill or overcome a problem, e.g. with literacy or numeracy
- small group sessions – good for demonstrations and instruction, and for getting learners to learn with each other
- structured tasks and assignments – good for giving learners the chance to demonstrate a range of skills and show they can carry out a complete task.

It’s important to recognise that learning is often less efficient when learners’ literacy, numeracy and IT skills are not sufficiently well developed. This is an area where the support given to learners has been generally weak. The fact sheet entitled ‘Literacy, numeracy and language’ gives information on how to improve the level of support.
A significant proportion of learners need to develop the skills to operate effectively in work and in their lives generally. There are plenty of resources that can help when planning and setting up support. For example, the Key Skills Support Programme has produced a wide range of products to help staff develop learning strategies in key skills.

**Practical support**

More people are coming into work-based learning. Inevitably, this means that there will be some learners who will benefit from, and are entitled to, practical support.

Learner support funds are available to help learners with costs associated with their learning. These costs could include transport, books and equipment, childcare provision and residential charges. Priority groups for funding are:

- learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties
- those leaving care
- probationers
- learners reaching 19 and losing benefits during their course.

Where employers or providers identify support needs they should be recorded on the learning plan and appropriate funds sought from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

**Technical and specialist support**

There are two main reasons why learners may need some kind of technical support:

- the demands of the programme – special equipment or facilities that learners may need
- to help learners with learning difficulties and disabilities.

If a programme requires learners to learn and work on specialist equipment, such as computer-aided design facilities, it’s important to find out the exact specification of the equipment and where learners can access it. It may be available on employers’ premises or at a college or specialist training centre.

Technological advances have made an enormous difference to access to learning for learners with difficulties and disabilities. This is particularly true for learners who have physical or sensory impairments, and those who are dyslexic or have learning difficulties. It’s important to remember that effective use of technology hinges on detailed and effective assessment, followed by reviews at appropriate stages. It also requires human support through enablers, technicians and scribes.

Techdis is a service which aims to improve provision for disabled staff and students in higher and further education through technology. The website contains details of the full range and types of equipment available including:

- equipment that can meet audio, visual and ergonomic needs
- a comprehensive list of: timing and measuring devises, speech synthesisers, hardware and software products, overlays, pagers etc.

The website also has practical suggestions for modifying the learning and teaching environment to provide effective and efficient support for all learners.

The statutory code of practice for providers of post-16 education and related services sets out that institutions should be proactive in encouraging students to disclose a disability.
Induction is a good opportunity to do this, but the process needs to be handled sensitively and confidentially. It’s also possible that by monitoring learners’ progress in the normal way, trainers and assessors may identify where specialist support will help.

Disabled applicants’ support needs [should] be identified and assessed in an effective and timely way, taking into account the applicant’s views.


Employers and providers should know where to go for specialist support if needed. Some have their own well-trained, experienced staff. Others rely on local agencies to provide exactly the support needed by learners. It may be worth carrying out a skills audit of staff to see whether there are skills in the organisation that are not being well used.

Where and when?

Learning can be happening all the time, all over the place. But there are certain times when learners might benefit from support:

- At the start – when they are making the transition into a new working and learning environment.
- For certain aspects of learning – most individuals find some things easier to learn than others, and it helps if trainers and assessors can predict the tasks that a learner may struggle with.
- At specific points in the programme – for example, when they are about to take a test or carry out a complex or challenging task.
- During reviews – to check whether the learner’s situation and support needs have changed in any way.

Sometimes it’s helpful to take learners away from the pressures of the job so the support can be focused on their learning. It’s not always necessary for this to be done outside the workplace, as long as it’s somewhere quiet. At other times the best support is given on the job, often by the learner’s supervisor or mentor. The more that can be done to encourage and facilitate this kind of support, the better.

Case studies and examples

Learning at work

An apprentice in his last year of an engineering apprenticeship recounts his experience of learning at work. His employer, a medium-sized manufacturing company, provided the opportunity to move around the different departments and gain experience in various aspects of work.

Day release to college was part of the programme, but work provided the best environment for learning, partly because of the support available.

I find it easier learning in the workplace. You gain more knowledge, and it prepares you for the future.

My assessor comes to make sure I’m doing the work properly and he’ll come and help if I have any trouble. I also have a mentor - and I can ask anybody if there’s something I don’t know. Everybody here is very helpful.

Learning resources

One employer has recently worked with a local college to improve its initial assessment system so that as well as identifying learning needs, they also find out what resources may be needed to support learning. Many of the learning needs were in literacy and numeracy.
The training manager asked the college to produce a report showing:

- the number of learners that had joined in the last six months
- the type of support needs identified
- the types of resources needed
- where the resources could be obtained and how much they would cost
- recommendations for staff development

The training manager commented:

“...I found this a really interesting piece of work. I was aware that our new approach to initial assessment identified early on a range of learning needs. I also suspected that the resources in the college needed both updating and extending.

The documents on adult literacy and numeracy were a good starting point for tracking the physical and technical resources currently available on the market. The Key Skills Support Programme also provided excellent material for supporting learners in the workplace.

Our biggest problem is the level of confidence and competency. We can’t leave it all to the college — but getting supervisors to support learners with their basic skills learning is a new thing for us.”

Resources

- Doyle, C and Robson, K (2002) Accessible Curricula: Good Practice for All. University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

Stay in touch

- www.qaa.ac.uk
- www.techdis.ac.uk

Checklist

1. How does the initial assessment process help to identify learners’ likely support needs?
2. What information does it provide about the kind of support most likely to benefit individual learners?
3. Are learners’ practical support needs identified at an early stage?
4. How do you get across to learners and those supporting learners that learning can happen in various different ways?
5. How does knowing this help to provide the right support for an individual?
6. Are there enough opportunities to facilitate and support learners at work?
7. Are there enough opportunities to identify support needs in literacy, numeracy and IT?
8. Which of your learners requires technical support with equipment and facilities?
9. What support is available for learners with disabilities and/or learning difficulties?
10. Which agencies does your organisation go to for specialist support?
11. What are the mechanisms for reviewing the amount and type of support individual learners need?
12. Where is the information about support needs recorded?
13. Does the organisation have a policy and procedures for supporting learners?
14. How does the organisation encourage staff to improve their skills in this area?