Individual learning

What?
- set aims and targets
- choose an approach
- know what the learner prefers.

Why?
Learners on work-based learning programmes do most of their learning on the job. Work is a great natural environment for learning and people tend to learn a lot at work almost without realising it. But:
- learning doesn’t always happen without input
- it can happen more efficiently and quickly with the right support
- sometimes there are barriers that people need to get over before learning can go well.

Work-based learning for most young people has become much more than the development and assessment of competence at work. Apprenticeship frameworks now demand what the chief inspector of the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) has called ‘a programme of education and skill-training in the workplace.’ Inspectors in their turn are looking for ‘a wider range of learning activities and observable learning in the workplace.’

ALI inspectors evaluate the effectiveness of teaching, training and learning. In particular, they look at the extent to which trainers:
- plan effectively with clear objectives that all learners understand
- use methods and styles of teaching and training consistent with the aims of their programmes and learners’ personal objectives
- set, use and mark assignments and other tasks in a way that helps learners to progress.

It’s not always done well: the Adult Learning Inspectorate’s Annual Report 2001-02 commented that training sessions ‘rarely took sufficient account of the needs of individual learners’. And as one organisation commented after an inspection:

“Individualised learning was the buzzword. Individual learning plans were scrutinised to measure their effectiveness. Schemes of work, lesson plans, materials and methods were all inspected with the impact on the individual learner in mind.”

When employers and providers plan and support learning, they should always put the individual learner at the centre of the process.
Key facts
The main things that learners on work-based learning programmes value from the people who support them are:

- understanding how they like to learn
- good management of the learning
- prompt, regular feedback
- setting clear targets
- well-planned learning sessions
- making the subject interesting and enjoyable
- support given to learning.

How?
Set aims and targets
Aims help learners to see where they are going in the medium to long term. Having a clear aim is good for motivation. It also helps to bring the various aspects of learning into a coherent whole, so that a learner can see the links between them.

To set good aims, learners need an overall picture of what learning is expected to take place. Employers and providers can help by giving learners a view of the learning that should happen:

- while they are doing their jobs
- when trainers and assessors visit them at work to support a particular aspect of the training
- off the job, including NVQ training; key and basic skills and any other specialist training they may get.

A learner’s aims should be clearly reflected in their individual learning plan (see the factsheet entitled ‘Individual learning plans’ for specific details about what the plan should contain).

Targets are more short-term and specific than aims. They specify what learning should be achieved in a limited time – anything from the next ten minutes to the next ten weeks. For example, a learner on a retail programme might agree the following targets for the next two weeks:

- complete unit 1.1: plan to set up displays
- start and complete unit 1.2: set up and dismantle display areas.

There’s a separate factsheet on this topic, entitled ‘Targets for learners’.

Choose an approach
There’s a wide range of ways in which learning can be supported, and no need to restrict the choice for individuals other than for practical reasons. In work-based learning the limitations are often logistical – it’s not always easy to get learners away from their work for long. The more approaches that can be offered, the more likely it is that individual learners will be able to take advantage of them, whatever their circumstances. Some examples are shown in the box on the top of the next page.

Some approaches work better than others for some learners, and some types of learning are best tackled in certain ways. For example, it’s obviously best to develop team-working skills in a group, although that doesn’t rule out giving an individual learner one-to-one support to help them become more effective in a team setting. Conversely, intensive work to improve someone’s writing is best done one to one. However, short bursts of intensive individual support can be given in a group, providing the other members of the group have something productive to get on with.
Know what the learner prefers

Finding out how individual learners prefer to learn increases the chances of successful learning. The table below shows:

- some of the main ways in which people learn
- examples of the approaches providers can use
- the settings in which they are likely to work reasonably well – ‘near the job’ means away from an actual job task, but still at the place of work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If a learner likes to learn by</th>
<th>Try this</th>
<th>Lends itself to this setting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening and observing.</td>
<td>A presentation or formal instructional session. Do the task alongside them, one step at a time. Let them try things out for themselves, reflect on what they did and learn from any mistakes Giving group tasks and allocating clear roles followed by discussion on what has been learned. Giving written guidelines or instructions.</td>
<td>Off the job. On or near the job. If it’s complicated, costly or dangerous: off the job. Otherwise, on the job for immediate feedback. Off the job. Off or near the job.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doing.</td>
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<td>Experimenting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being part of a group.</td>
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<td>Reading, following instructions.</td>
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Not all learning fits neatly in to these categories, and there are plenty of other categories as well. The most important thing, as learners themselves say, is to understand what works for the individual.

It’s possible to get a sense of what learners prefer by using learning style inventories. They give a broad picture of preferences, e.g. dividing learners into activists, reflectors, theorists and pragmatists (Honey and Mumford). It’s just as useful to ask learners themselves, and to suggest approaches that may not ‘fit’ with an individual’s apparent preferences. It sometimes helps to use a different approach.
When and where

Learners’ individual needs in learning can be met in the workplace, at a training centre, in a college, at a learndirect centre, in a library, or at home. The focus on learning means that all these environments, and any others learners are in, can be seen as places where fruitful learning can happen.

Resources and logistics may influence which approach to use, where and when. For example, it’s easier to carry out a demonstration with a group of ten than to do ten individual sessions. In a case like this, where it may not be possible to take learners’ individual preferences into account, it is still important to check on an individual basis what learning has taken place: can the learner do the task as a result of the demonstration?

Case studies and examples

Supporting individual learning

A key skills tutor has developed a systematic process to support individual learning. She recognises that everyone has a ‘spiky profile’, and that the areas in which learners will benefit from help are all different.

The process starts with a comprehensive diagnostic assessment. This produces a list of skills in Part A of the key skills units that the learner needs to improve. Their work is built around a four-week planning cycle. At the start of the cycle, each learner agrees a plan for improving one or two specific aspects of their key skills. The support available might include:

- short one-to-one sessions with the key skills tutor, either on day release or sometimes at the workplace
- workshops on specific topics
- self-study using worksheets and a range of other resources that the tutor has collected and prepared.

Progress is reviewed at the end of the four weeks and the cycle starts again until all the areas identified in the diagnostic assessment have been completed.

Resources

- Learning and Skills Council (2002) Seeking the Views of Learners: Findings from the LSC’s first national learner satisfaction survey 2001/02.

Stay in touch

- www.lsc.gov.uk
- www.lsda.org.uk
- www.peterhoney.co.uk

Checklist

- How can you demonstrate that your organisation puts the learner at the heart of all you do?
- How does the process of setting aims and targets work at an individual level?
- Which approaches do you use to support learning?
- How do you select which approaches are likely to work well for individuals?
- Does your organisation identify individual learners’ learning styles or preferences?
- How do you extend the range of approaches learners are able to use?
- How do you make the most of the different environments in which individuals can learn?