

Tips for Improving Access to this Curriculum for All Youth

Today's in- and out-of-school youth career development programs are a true microcosm of our local communities. Within one learning environment multiple categories of youth are often represented. This includes, but is not limited to, youth in the foster care system, at risk of dropping out of school, involved in the juvenile justice system, and/or for whom English may not be their primary language. The one population of youth that has the potential to overlap with all of the above-mentioned populations is youth with disabilities. The term disability applies to a broad array of differences, covering everything from learning disabilities to significant mobility impairment. Disabilities can be both apparent and non-apparent. As a youth service professional, you likely already encounter and serve many youth with disabilities. For instance:

- 36% of high school dropouts have learning disabilities and 59% have emotional or behavioral disorders
- 75% of youth in the juvenile justice system have some type of disability
- 20 to 60% of young children entering foster care have a developmental disability or delay
- 30 to 40% of the 500,000 foster care youth receive special education services

In addition to these youth with disabilities, there may be other youth you work with for whom their disability has not been identified or has not been disclosed.

Successful youth service professionals recognize that disability is an aspect of diversity, and are prepared to support students from different backgrounds, cultures, and educational environments. Furthermore, they understand that all youth learn in different ways.

If possible, prior to beginning the activities in this curriculum, take time to get to know your students. Talk with all students openly about strengths and weaknesses. Ask them to think about how they learn best and what they might need from you (or a supervisor) to facilitate their success. When you prepare to use these lessons remember - one size does not fit all.

To meet the youth's needs, try to step out of your preferred method of teaching (or your personal comfort zone) and use a variety of instructional approaches such as: discussions, PowerPoint presentations, inquiry-based instruction, hands-on experiments, project/problem-based learning, or computer-aided instruction. This curriculum is designed to provide information to learners and instructors in a variety of ways. Instructors are encouraged to adapt activities to meet the needs of each class.

Providing variety of instruction not only will address various learning styles, but also can help learners become more flexible in their learning. While most learners do have a preferred style of learning, this does not mean they are strictly dependent on that style to learn. By exposing young people to a wide variety of learning styles and methods, you will enable them to become more flexible learners. Providing a variety of activities and access to learning will enable students of all ability levels to succeed.

Consider the following global strategies:

- Appreciate the individuality of each youth. Having young people recognize that you appreciate their individuality is even more important.
- Demonstrate that you are committed to meeting the needs of all students and that you are open to conversation and discussion about how to help them learn and succeed.
- Recognize that we all have our own learning styles and cultural assumptions. These styles and assumptions influence how we teach and what we expect from our students. Often times our preferred method of teaching is not a student's preferred (or required) method of learning.
- Prepare multiple examples to illustrate your points and help students move between abstract, theoretical, and concrete knowledge, specific experiences to expand everyone's learning. Use pair and group work to help students learn from each other.

Consider the following inclusive teaching strategies:

- Get young people “doing” in addition to listening. Whether it is a group exercise, using a role play activity, or an individual paper and pencil exercise such as journaling or drawing, creating lessons that engage different learning styles and engage young people in a variety of ways allows everyone to access the curriculum.
- Repetition, repetition, repetition. It often takes repeated exposure to something before we remember it. Taking extra time to reinforce earlier topics in the context of the new ideas being discussed will help young people retain the important lessons and skills needed to be successfully employed. You can be creative in the ways you repeat concepts or emphasize a point: when the concept is considered again, offer it from a different point of view or when the concept is demonstrated again, use a different exercise.
- Excitement is contagious. Demonstrating honesty, authenticity, and excitement for working with youth can often inspire the same qualities within the youth themselves as they engage with this curriculum. Your passion is infectious. As a youth service professional, it is important that you find ways to maintain your passion and excitement and recharge when necessary.
- Presume competence and instill confidence. Providing young people with confidence and an opportunity to succeed is one of the best gifts you can give. Have high expectations for all youth and help them to realize their potential as you support them to become independent decision-makers for their future.

Whatever teaching or training strategies you put into place, there will be students who will require accommodations. Making accommodations benefits not only the intended recipient but also other class participants. Any adjustments or adaptations should be targeted specifically to the area of difficulty or functional limitation the individual is experiencing.

The following list of strategies is offered as a guide to use when considering changes, adaptations, and accommodations to the way information is both presented and received within the learning environment to create the greatest potential for success for all youth.

Possible Reading Accommodations

- Underline or highlight key concepts
- Provide a word bank or a list of important words for review and discussion
- Use recorded reading passages or use computer screen reading software
- Allow for extra time
- Provide an outline or a preview of the material before it is to be read
- Rather than require individuals read aloud, ask for volunteers
- Read aloud and use discussion and reflection strategies to ensure comprehension

Possible Writing Accommodations

- Allow for dictation (and have someone else write)
- Supply the individual with pre-written assignment sheets, rather than requiring copying
- Allow extra time for journal writing
- Provide (spelling) word banks for writing assignments
- Use computers with voice recognition software to allow for dictation
- Provide opportunities for proofreading before completion of a writing project

Possible Audio/Visual Accommodations

- Record information presented and allow it to be listened to for review
- Provide outline of lessons
- Provide pre-written notes or designate a note-taker
- Summarize lessons on a regular basis
- Keep instructions brief
- Present lessons in multi-sensory ways

Possible Math Related Accommodations

- Allow the use of calculators
- Provide graph paper for calculations
- Allow additional time and/or group projects involving math
- Read and discuss math questions aloud

Possible Organizational Skills Accommodation

- Use a recording device to allow the individual to listen to the information for review
- Color code papers, folders, or notebooks to help with organization
- Use post-it arrows to mark important pages or information in books
- Present material in multi-sensory ways, allowing for hands-on instruction
- For lengthier projects, encourage “check-ins” at different (and agreed upon) points