

Supporting learners with Special Educational Needs online

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Jessica Minaeian: One of the challenges of moving to online or remote learning has been how we adapt our resources and approaches to make sure that all learners feel supported, confident and that they are still making progress. This can feel especially challenging for learners with Special Educational or Additional Needs.

However, some of the daily challenges that learners with Special or Additional Needs may encounter whilst at school may actually have been improved in the remote learning space. This is an excellent opportunity for us all to explore new ways of approaching learning that foster an inclusive attitude for all.

In this webinar, we focus on inclusive and accessible education which is not simply for learners with extra or additional needs but is an approach that will help all your learners. This webinar will offer some practical strategies that you can use in your classroom to ensure inclusivity.

My name is Jessica Minaeian and I am an Education Manager at Cambridge Assessment International Education. I am currently doing an MA in Education with a focus on Special Needs.

Our guest presenter for this webinar is Abby Osborne.

Abby currently works at the Centre for Learning and Teaching at the University of Bath. She has experience of curriculum development across a range of subjects and has a particular interest in supporting staff to develop inclusive teaching and learning practice.

Abby also has extensive experience in supporting learners with Special Educational Needs, as well as experience in lecturing in English Language. Abby is particularly passionate about developing solution-focused, practical approaches to inclusive teaching and learning which are embedded, contextualised and sustainable for staff.

Her experience of working in both a teaching and learning support capacity, has provided her with a useful perspective, particularly in relation to the effectiveness of embedding Special Educational Needs support within mainstream provision.

I will now hand you over to Abby to take you through the rest of the webinar. Welcome Abby.

Abby Osborne: Thanks Jess and many thanks for joining me on this webinar.

At a time when we are all having to adapt to new ways of teaching and supporting our learners, providing effective support for learners with SEN, or Special Educational Needs, can seem particularly daunting and challenging.

In our current circumstances, there is no expectation that we are suddenly meant to become experts or SEN specialists. Instead, adopting some small, manageable steps towards inclusive teaching design and delivery can offer a powerful approach to effectively supporting learners with SEN.

SEN, or Special Educational Needs, includes learners who have specific learning difficulties such as ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia or autistic spectrum conditions. They also include students with visual and hearing impairments, mental health conditions, chronic fatigue or pain conditions.

So this quick guide is intended to introduce you to a range of practical inclusive teaching and learning approaches which will not only support your SEN learners, but will also benefit the wider student cohort. All of the strategies outlined will actually work both in an online or remote learning context.

I think it's worth noting, that the needs of learners with SEN are often not distinctly different from the needs of all learners - rather, they may experience a more exaggerated version of the challenges that we actually all face.

Ironically, many of the challenges that learners with SEN may face on a daily basis are things that we are all now increasingly experiencing, regardless of whether we have a special educational need or not. For example, challenges linked to motivation, feeling isolated or needing to set ourselves smaller broken down tasks in order to see our progress are all things that we are having to manage now on a daily basis.

Therefore, if you can plan and implement teaching and learning activities, and resources (and assessments where possible) in a way which will directly support learners with SEN, this will also indirectly support all of your learners during this very challenging time.

It is also important to note in relation to inclusive teaching practice, that it is not about getting it right every time or aiming for perfection – we are all learning at the moment and we're adjusting to new ways of thinking and working due to the change in our circumstances.

Instead it is about taking small steps, trying some new approaches, reflecting on their effectiveness and ultimately it's about remembering that you have a wealth of teaching experience and a knowledge of your cohort which puts you in a great position to start building on what you already know.

So just a brief note on SEN in these exceptional circumstances.

Some of the challenges that SEN learners face may be made worse at this time. So for example, dealing with numerous tasks demanding attention, a lack of structure or routine, or feeling isolated from peers and teachers, could exacerbate a students' SEN diagnosis.

But actually, some of the barriers to learning which exist for SEN learners may have been reduced or removed entirely. Now that learners are working remotely, they may not have to deal with social pressures, busy and potentially overwhelming learning environments, meeting deadlines or dealing with inaccessible classrooms or corridors.

Many of the SEN based interventions learners already use will also work in an online or remote learning context. I think that's really important because the current situation we find ourselves in therefore provides a really powerful opportunity for learners to really reflect on what works for them, to focus on their own strengths and their metacognition.

Learners with SEN will be used to exploring different ways of working. And in some ways learners can now have even greater autonomy and more control over their own learning. For example, they can now have more control over where or when they work, the pace they choose to work at and how they adapt their environment to support their work.

Before we go through some practical interventions that you can apply to your teaching, it may be useful to introduce one way of thinking about inclusive teaching and learning which can be used to help us focus on the challenges our SEN learners are facing at the moment, as well as focusing on what learners can do, particularly linked to the impact on their learning.

The Patterns Beyond Labels model can help us to move away from the individual labels of our SEN learners such as, dyslexia or autistic spectrum conditions or ADHD. This can be an overwhelming starting point and can leave teachers feeling really unprepared to support their learners. So instead we can consider the patterns in learner challenges which actually exist across the learning cohort and in particular this helps us to focus on the impact on learning rather than the cause so that we can find practical strategies to support this.

Moving away from labels can actually also help us to focus on what learners can do, rather than what they might find challenging.

The Patterns Beyond Labels model identifies a number of lenses that can be used to conceptualise patterns in inclusive practice in terms of physical, cultural and cognitive contexts. The model can then be used to identify strategies to support learners to overcome these common challenges.

The lenses can be applied to both face to face and online teaching. For the sake of this guide, I will outline the model with particular reference to online or remote learning.

So let's start with the Physical lens. The Physical lens refers to 'where' learning takes place. In the current context the space where learning takes place, ironically, is largely virtual so we need to consider that all learners have 'access' to this space.

This could include ensuring that all learners have access to the necessary hardware and software. This may also include specialist software programmes which learners usually have access to in school. For example, screen readers or magnification tools or alt text for images, if you have learners with visual impairments, could all be really powerful learning aids at the moment for a student. This may also be in relation to additional software packages that could be useful to learners in light of the changes to learning they are currently experiencing.

However If a student does not have access to specialist software then you could also consider how to adapt any resources you produce. For example, you could change the colour background to

ensure a good contrast between background and text; pastel colours for example are particularly effective.

Making use of spacing on the page and other features such as headings and bullet points and using simple things like accessible sans serif fonts such as Arial or Calibri and highlighting key words as well, all these can be effective strategies and adaptations for all of your learners.

So next is the Cultural lens and the Cultural lens refers to the 'what' of learning. So this lens really helps us to focus on making sure that we provide clear instructions and avoid making assumptions about our learners' prior knowledge. This could also include using relevant examples to help engage and motivate learners which could be particularly important at the moment in this context.

In the current context, the Cultural lens also involves not making assumptions about learners' ability to engage with technology. For example, a student may actually find the work itself really manageable and may have access to the technology but they could feel more vulnerable or anxious due to the technology they have to use. For example, if a student feels vulnerable or anxious in submitting to an online forum, is there opportunity for them to submit their work to you first? Or, can they work in a small group and submit a group statement?

Finally, the Cognitive lens really refers to the 'how' of learning. This includes considering that learners are able to learn and demonstrate this learning in a way that is as effective as possible. This could include things like providing really clear and explicit instructions about 'how' to approach a task or learning activity, rather than just focussing on 'what' is being learnt.

This might also include things like visual prompts and actually using virtual space on the page to break up text so that we can reinforce new learning and support students' working memory. The Cognitive Lens might also include things like offering a menu of options in terms of how students can present their learning.

It's worth noting that the lenses often overlap, rather than existing separately so do bear that in mind when using them.

On this webinar we'll now outline a number of approaches that can be used to support learners to overcome common challenges or barriers that they may face linked to this new normal of learning that we find ourselves in.

Please use these strategies in a way so that they are useful to your learners' needs based on your particular subject and cohort. Use the suggested approaches as a starting point and draw on your own knowledge of your specific learning context to use the lenses to identify other common challenges and therefore also other potential solutions.

So never has there been a time where more information is available to us all. Endless new resources and sources of information are emerging on a daily basis, but navigating this can be a real challenge.

The potential for information overload can be really overwhelming and make it hard to know where to start or how to identify the most useful information.

So therefore, when making resources, you can avoid information overload by breaking information and tasks down into smaller and more manageable chunks and steps.

You can also use bullet points, space on the page and bold text to make information accessible and easier to navigate.

Make sure critical information or instructions are explicit so they don't get missed or overlooked. You could do this with bold or highlighted text.

If you are recording sessions for your learners, then try and limit the length of each session. An hour lesson for example is much harder to concentrate on when viewing online. So identifying the key concepts and points that you would like learners to retain is really important and I think sometimes a 'less is more' approach and a shorter session can actually be just as powerful and if not even more powerful in this context. Shorter videos which emphasise the key concepts or ideas can be useful and this can really allow student to focus on the key points in a shorter time period.

It can be really useful to consider the important distinction between being busy and meaningful learning to ensure the tasks we set encourage effective learning without overloading or overwhelming learners. You should reflect on learning outcomes and how effectively and efficiently learners can achieve a specific outcome. For example if a learner could show in a paragraph what they could in an essay, we should be asking ourselves is this ok, does this demonstrate that meaningful learning has actually taken place?

Furthermore if you're directing learners to online resources, try to direct them to specific pages, chapters or sections and avoid directing them to resources which only offer further links to numerous resources as this can be potentially very overwhelming.

I think one of the biggest motivators for learning is seeing progress and breaking tasks down into smaller bite size chunks can really help reduce feelings of being overwhelmed and support learners to see that they are moving forwards and achieving, which in turn will support motivation.

If learners are working on a larger project, we often break this down into smaller sections to make the work more manageable and enable learners to see that they are moving forwards. However, even when working on a single task, breaking this down further can help to motivate learners and help them to see that they are moving in the right direction.

As an example, if we take something like baking a cake or cooking a recipe, this could be regarded as a single task or it could be regarded, equally, as a number of smaller steps and these could be broken down into buying ingredients, preparing ingredients and then baking or cooking in a dish and then decorating it, finishing it off. And all of these steps actually contribute to the final product. So if we keep breaking the task down this can be really powerful as it enables a student to break it down to a level that supports their own motivation and focus at that time.

Finally, it can also be really useful to encourage learners to produce a 'done- list' rather than a 'to- do list' which can be overwhelming. This can support motivation and give them the chance to reflect on how much they have actually achieved in potentially difficult circumstances as well.

So I think it can also be really useful to think about the flexibility of learning at this particular time and whilst routines and goal setting are useful and effective tools to ensure success, I think it's also important to remember that a degree of flexibility (particularly linked to our exceptional circumstances) is a really powerful way of ensuring that all learners succeed.

Therefore, where possible, when possible, incorporate learning activities and assessments which are flexible and offer choice in terms of how a student can demonstrate their learning e.g. a poster, a presentation, an essay, or a short summary, all of those will give a student greater variety.

As well as breaking tasks down for learners as mentioned before, you could also support learners to set themselves smaller goals so that they can actually start to see progress. It can be useful to encourage learners to work on tasks in an order that they can face or that feels natural to them and working flexibly in this way can actually really increase productivity and output.

I think it's also really important that as teachers we help to support learners to vary expectations of themselves at this important time. They may have good days, they may have bad days and it is important to promote the idea that expectations linked to achievement and progress can and should change.

As a teacher you are there to support them through both the good and the bad, so remind them of this and be available to listen. It is possible to actually maintain really high expectations and still be very flexible in terms of our approach to this.

Often there is also a natural desire to encourage or prompt learners to get organised so we'll often say things like 'create a timetable', or 'set up a clear and tidy' work space.

Whilst getting organised and managing time is really important, and that cannot be disputed, it is also really useful to remember, particularly for learners with SEN, that our versions of organised may look slightly different and may actually need to be modified based on our experiences at the moment.

We forget that having a plan, managing time and being organised are actually sets of conditions that enable us to progress and to achieve. But if we have slightly different approaches, if they actually still help us to work towards and achieve the same goals then this doesn't matter.

As an example, an ideal timetable for working could involve starting work at the same time every day and working consistently for structured periods. However, if that doesn't work, then the student can potentially be left feeling really dejected and like they have failed so instead, encouraging a student to set a workable, flexible timetable that allows for the fact that motivation can fluctuate can be actually far more effective. If we set ourselves the goal of working for a couple of hours twice a day as an example, then we actually give ourselves more opportunities to successfully achieve the target we set ourselves.

I also want to touch on the subject of managing our environment. I think, ironically, one of the potential benefits of the current situation is that we can actually all have much greater control over how we adapt our environment to suit our learning preferences. For many SEN learners, the classroom can represent a challenging environment which may be overwhelming and distracting.

Working at home however, whilst not ideal in many ways, does allow us to reflect on how small environmental changes can help us to increase our concentration, motivation and focus. So when

you can, encourage your learners to be mindful of their environment and see if they can make any small changes which will help to support learning.

Again, be wary of solely suggesting a one size fits all or 'ideal' approach in terms of how we think our environment should be set up. Whilst a quiet, tidy space may be beneficial for some, others may be best working listening to music, sitting outside or even standing up.

Some strategies which learners will find really helpful such as changing their location, playing background music, changing the lighting are not always appropriate or possible in the classroom. But now is the perfect opportunity for all of us to reflect on the little changes we can make to our environment that will actually help us to take control of our learning experience and when you start to think about it, the possibilities are endless.

So just some final thoughts before we finish off.


Many of the strategies outlined in this quick introduction work both in an online and a face to face learning context, so anything you try now and find to be beneficial will actually also be applied in the classroom to support both SEN learners and the wider cohort when we return to our schools.

Start small and implement approaches that work for your subject context and your cohort of learners. It's really important to draw on your own strengths. Teachers are resourceful, we are creative and we're used to problem solving. So you have experience and expertise that will be invaluable at this time to your learners.

Whilst this guide has outlined things that you can do directly as a teacher to develop your inclusive teaching design and delivery and therefore differentiate the learning process for your learners, I think it's easy to think of differentiation as solely being the role of the teacher. Many of the approaches outlined in this quick guide actually also demonstrate that if we support our learners to develop their own metacognition, their own autonomy and their growth mind-set we actually help learners to differentiate their own learning by giving them the skills and the opportunity to mould their effective learning habits which directly draw on how they learn best.

The unusual circumstances we find ourselves in provide us with an exciting opportunity to reflect on all the amazing work we do and how learning helps to dramatically shape and change lives. Having to adapt to new circumstances and new challenges is something that teachers are actually already accustomed to.

As we all strive to develop our teaching practice further in these new circumstances, on a personal level, I have also been reflecting on the way in which we often separate out teaching and learning as somehow being distinctly separate. Yet at the moment we find as teachers, we are also now very much occupying the space of being learners, as we grapple with new technologies and new ways of communicating and assessing learning.



One of the things I will certainly take away from this period is that the strategies I use to support my SEN learners' learning are not only beneficial approaches for all my learners, but also provide powerful approaches to supporting my own children's home learning.

Furthermore, what we often perceive as 'learning' strategies are now proving to be invaluable to me on a personal level for my own effective working when planning my teaching delivery and resources.

Thank you for joining us on this webinar. Thank you and keep safe.