

Creating an effective learning environment

This guide focuses on skills and strategies to help you be an effective mentor and create positive learning experiences.

You may be delivering learning sessions in small groups or one-to-one. The opportunity for group work encourages peer support and social interaction, whilst individual sessions allow for greater personalisation of the learning content and dedicated support.

However, both of these approaches present their own challenges. Here are a few tips to help you.

Mix it up

Having variety in your sessions allows learners to work in their comfort zones for some of the time, provide them with new challenges at others, and cater for a combination of learning styles.

Try including some of the following for a blended learning experience:

- Group discussions - either facilitator-led for the whole group or breaking into small groups
- Offline and online activities - with participants working in small groups or individually
- Demonstrations - let people watch you do something and either 'follow along' or do it afterwards at their own pace
- Self-directed learning - allow individuals time to practise at their own pace, make mistakes and learn without direct supervision

Support different rates of learning

Be prepared for things to take longer than you planned. Timings are good for ensuring key points are covered but that doesn't mean that everyone will have learnt what you'd planned by the end.

It's important to understand the needs of each person for each skill your supporting. Some may be unsure and want more direct support, others may want to 'get on with it' and just see what happens. Be flexible with timings where possible and have options to accommodate slower or quicker learners.

Here are some ways you can include differentiation:

- Encourage peer to peer support, ask people who know the basics to 'buddy up' with less confident people
- Plan 'extra time' after the session has ended so that people can stay behind and practise.
- Have extension activities for faster learners, eg quizzes and worksheets
- Signpost quicker learners to websites that provide more content on what they've been learning about. Online games, such as those on the Be Connected website, can give quicker learners a challenge and help them develop their skills further

Allow people to make mistakes

Allow learners time to practise on their own without you watching them. 'Quiet time' is important and allows people to focus on what they're doing and explore things at their own pace. Give them an activity, eg an online course or worksheet, then leave them to it. In a one-on-one session, move away from the learner's device. Let them know that they can ask you if they need any support.

Try to have something else you can be doing so that it doesn't look like you're waiting for them to finish. Use open questions to check in and make sure that they aren't stuck.

Ask positive, open questions

How you ask questions can have a powerful influence on the way people feel. The way you phrase your questions to a group or individual is important to make sure you don't highlight someone's inadequacies or negatively affect their confidence.

Asking open questions (questions that can't be answered with a 'yes' or 'no') will encourage learners to consider their answers.

Here are some example questions with alternative ways to ask a similar thing:

What's wrong?	Can I help with something?
Do you think that's a good thing?	How do you feel about that?
Do you feel confident in doing that?	How confident to you feel about doing that?
Is there anything more you need?	What else can I help with?

Leaving time for people to answer is important. Allow them time to think and rehearse their answers before speaking up. If someone doesn't answer straight away, try waiting 3-5 seconds and be patient. Asking follow-up questions, eg "Why do you think that?" is a good way to get people to expand on their answers and demonstrate a deeper level of thinking and understanding.

Be mindful of positioning yourself alongside the learner

With a one-on-one session, it's important to consider where you sit in relation to the learner. You need to be close enough that they can see you and you can see the screen, but not so close that you're squashed together or the learner feels uncomfortable. They might need room to make notes so make sure there's space on the table for books and notepads. If you are going to sit next to your learner, ask them if they have a preferred side for you to sit on, as some people have hearing or visual impairments on one side only.

Sitting alongside the learner with the device in front of them is a good option whilst you're giving instruction. It's also useful to have a separate space that you can move to when the learner is practising or doing an exercise. This change in position reinforces the switch from being taught to self-directed learning.

Accept that sometimes less is more

One-on-one sessions can be more intense for learners than being part of a group session. Short, regular sessions can be more effective than a single long session. Sessions can be lengthened if required through the use of extension activities or increased practise time. Wherever possible, you should try to incorporate different learning techniques into every session. These could be demonstrations, practise activities or discussions.

No matter how long the session, it's important to set agreed learning goals or aims so that you and the learner can determine if it's been successful. Check with the learner at the end of the session if they feel the goal has been achieved and if there's anything more they'd like to know about that subject. This can help you plan future sessions or signpost to other learning resources.