

Synergis

Synergis Inclusive Learning Certification Playbook

As the U.S. continues to face [labor shortages](#), employers are focusing [upskilling efforts](#) on a sizable portion of the population: the 62% of Americans without a college degree. To effectively tap into this pool of often-overlooked talent, learning and development opportunities must be designed using a comprehensive and inclusive approach. This is especially important when implementing large-scale, self-directed online learning programs for non-degree holders. To ensure high quality, rigorous L&D offerings, employers should consider The What, the How, and The Why of inclusive adult learning.



The What

Identifying What Learners Need to Know and Be Able to Do

For an L&D initiative to be most successful, employers should conduct a needs assessment to identify exactly what [knowledge, skills, and/or ability gap](#) a program needs to address. This step ensures the learning is what's needed and will have the impact on the intended business goals.

Once the learning objectives have been identified (what learners need to know and be able to do), the content can be selected. One mistake many companies make is designing the content before identifying the learning objectives. Rather than the content driving the learning, effective instruction identifies [what learners need to know and be able to do](#) and what acceptable evidence of that learning is, and then selects or designs the content and instructional sequences.

In selecting content, inclusive learning programs should offer a variety of delivery methods - articles, videos, demonstrations, lectures, visual representations of data and concepts, infographics, etc. Such multimodal content will appeal to the diverse needs of a variety of learners.

Adult learners also crave content that reflects real world situations and teaches problem solving skills that can be used relatively quickly on the job. Content that strays too far into theory versus practice is likely to result in low motivation and retention.

Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) should be engaged to design content to ensure it's accurate, industry-relevant, and up-to-date. It's important to engage SMEs who are actively working in the area they're designing for to ensure their technical knowledge is applicable. SMEs also need to be trained in the purpose of the learning opportunity and the intended audience - without such calibration, experts often design for a grad-school-level or above learner.

Finally, it's crucial for the content selected to be accessible to learners from a variety of backgrounds and reading skills. Texts should be written no higher than a high school level - or scaffolding (glossaries, in-line annotations and summaries) should be provided for those that are. Content providers can use tools built into word processing software to measure text complexity or web-based applications like the [Lexile Text Analyzer](#) (subscription needed). Videos should be captioned and platforms should offer accessibility tools like screen readers and font size increase and should follow all [W3 accessibility standards](#).

The How

Using Research-Based Practices to Design Inclusive Learning Experiences

1 Incorporate Universal Design for Learning Principles from the Start

The [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) framework offers a set of guidelines based on scientific insights to support instructional designers to optimize learning experiences, reduce barriers to learning, and to increase access to rigorous curriculum. The guidelines center around three design themes: [providing multiple means of engagement](#), [representation](#), and [action and expression](#). The list below and, in fact, all of the suggestions in this playbook, offer concrete suggestions for inclusive learning programs to incorporate to meet the needs of all learners.

Engagement:

- Optimize individual choice and autonomy
- Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity
- Provide options for sustaining effort and persistence
- Heighten salience of goals and objectives
- Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge
- Foster collaboration and communication
- Develop self-assessment and reflection

Representation:

- Offer ways of customizing the display of information
- Offer alternatives for auditory and visual information
- Illustrate through multiple media
- Provide options for comprehension
- Activate or supply background knowledge
- Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships
- Guide information processing, visualization, and manipulation
- Maximize transfer and generalization

Action and Expression:

- Vary the methods for response and navigation
- Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies
- Provide options for expression and communication
- Use multiple media for communication
- Use multiple tools for construction and composition
- Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance
- Provide options for executive functions
- Guide appropriate goal-setting
- Facilitate managing information and resources



2 Use Backward Planning

Identifying learning objectives and assessment criteria are crucial first steps in instructional design - objectives and demonstration of learning become the driver for designing learning experience. Effective instructional designers establish the end-of-course intended outcomes and then plan the experiences that will get learners there. This is often referred to as [Backward Design](#) (Wiggins and McTighe 2005) because the learning goals drive instruction rather than the content, text or test. There are typically [three steps to the backward design process](#):

1. Identify desired results (described above as "[The What](#)");
2. Determine acceptable evidence;
3. Plan learning experiences and instruction.

3 Determine Acceptable Evidence

When determining how learners will demonstrate their understanding in an online learning setting, instructional designers need to make sure their [assessments are closely aligned to their learning goals](#). If there's not a way to assess a learning goal, it should not be included in the course. Likewise, all learning goals included in the course need to be assessed in order to confidently validate learning. Completing this step prior to designing instructional sequences helps ensure that instruction is tied to demonstrable outcomes. A guide to designing assessments aligned to learning outcomes can be found [here](#).

Probably the most crucial element of any certified learning program is the validation process so employers, L&D teams, and learners themselves can confidently report what specific new knowledge and skills have been attained. To do this, high quality, authentic, and reliable assessments are needed. Designing these assessments requires a strong understanding of the content, and also Depth of Knowledge and levels of understanding frameworks, Universal Design for Learning practices, and experience writing assessment items that align with learning outcomes. Consulting both SMEs and assessment specialists during this stage is vital.

4 Sequence Activities to Encourage Engagement and Retention for a Variety of Learners

Many online learning programs deliver one-way content - providing the input (typically via lecture, reading, or other one-way delivery models) and then testing the output (via multiple choice quizzes). More effective learning programs use research-based practices and knowledge of how the brain works to structure learning in inclusive ways.

One such approach, designed by [Zaretta Hammond](#), draws on [neuroscience research](#) and includes the following instructional components:

Ignite:

Get the brain's attention; stimulate curiosity to find answers

Chunk:

Make information digestible

Chew:

Support the active processing of new information

Review:

Provide a chance to apply new learning

A special note on the "Chew" phase - online learners need to be engaged as active learners, need structured opportunities to construct meaning and new knowledge, and unstructured time to just think. This is often the component least likely to be included in self-guided online learning programs - and if it is included, it's most likely to be skipped or skimmed by the learner. Effective and inclusive learning programs should underscore these processing opportunities and make their successful completion an integral part of the course.

5 Provide Engagement Opportunities

Designing authentic opportunities for learners to engage with content and each other is often challenging in self-guided online learning programs. But it's not impossible. Especially when considering the [essential role social interaction plays in the construction of knowledge](#), inclusive learning programs will ensure regular opportunities for peer-to-peer discussion and interaction. Content-related interactions such as these provide students the chance to coordinate multiple perspectives as they solidify new learning.

In many cases, this offering comes in the form of an online discussion forum, where learners write posts and responses to content-related prompting. Some questions have been raised regarding the authenticity and impact of these discussion forums, resulting in the omission of such discussion opportunities from several high profile online learning platforms. This shift is one in the wrong direction - content-based peer engagement is an essential part of the online learning experience.

To increase the impact of such discussions, employers should consider creating cohorts of their employee learners who enroll in the same course at the same time, meet one another virtually, and who complete the course on the same timeline. Such cohorting allows discussion forums to be personalized to the smaller group of learners, who will be posting to each other and not into a thousand-plus, impersonal void.

Alternatively, learners can be encouraged or required to participate in synchronous, live discussion using video to engage in face-to-face discussions with their cohort mates. The solution in these cases is not to remove opportunities for discussion but to make them more meaningful.



6 Add Scaffolding

Inclusive instructional design assumes that learners will have varied needs when it comes to support and scaffolding. To set all students up for success, L&D teams should start each online learning experience with a "How to take this course" session. Offer sample note-taking templates, tips for scheduling self-guided learning sessions, and information on who to contact with questions about the learning platform or other technical needs. Some learners will want to take the course entirely independently, with little to no supports; others should be offered the opportunity to enroll in informal study groups or "learning pods" - small groups of 3-4 individuals that agree to complete certain portions of the course by certain dates, and who may meet virtually or in-person to discuss and apply content. Finally, consider creating a chat group hosted by 1-2 SMEs from your company where online learners can ask questions they have about content.



The Why

Establishing the Purpose for Learning

One of the most important [Principles of Adult Learning](#) is establishing the purpose for learning. Adults learn best when they can make a clear connection between what they are learning and how it will impact them. Making time for learners to identify the underlying goals of the offering they're participating in will increase engagement and motivation.

Some learners will be motivated because of a pathway to promotion or a financial incentive. Others are driven by intellectual curiosity or are seeking a way to be more successful in their current role. For many learners, it's a combination of these motivations and more. Most adult learners do not respond well to compliance-driven learning - for upskilling initiatives, it's strongly recommended that learners make an active choice to participate.

Framing the purpose for learning opportunity should happen prior to enrollment, and also throughout the learning process. Having learners [set goals](#) in writing and return to it throughout a course of study can help sustain motivation.

In addition to this “big picture” purpose setting, it's essential to offer adult learners a strong rationale before beginning a module - one that clearly states what will be learned and why it matters. Such framing respects the learner and their time and helps instill confidence in the value of the learning experience they've undertaken.

