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DESIGNING ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY TRAINING FOR PARAPROFESSIONALS

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With an increase in the number of students with disabilities being included in regular education settings internationally, there has also been a subsequent increase in the number of paraprofessionals supporting these students (Ghere & York-Barr, 2007; Giangreco, Smith & Pinckney, 2006). In many school situations, the paraprofessional holds responsibility for assisting students with special needs to access the curriculum of the classroom, as well as to manage the social and emotional environment (Carter, O'Rourke, Sisco & Pelsue, 2009). Assistive technology use is one area in which the paraprofessionals may be expected to assist students, and indeed, on occasion, the family and classroom teacher. The role of the paraprofessional in supporting students with special needs through the use of assistive technology is multi-faceted and it is therefore timely to consider the type and structure of training that these staffs receive.

There is generally little, if any, targeted assistive technology training for paraprofessionals in their entry-level training in Western Australia, and they are often expected to 'learn on the job'. The development of a relevant and targeted program for training paraprofessionals in the area of assistive technology will assist in ensuring that the needs of all parties are able to be met. "Staff who know their roles and have the skills to perform their designated tasks are more likely to contribute effectively to the aims of the organisation" (Ryall & Goddard, 2003, p. 73) as well as developing their own feelings of satisfaction and self-efficacy. A focus on designing effective training for paraprofessionals requires the trainer to consider a number of aspects including: paraprofessionals' prior knowledge and training; education system requirements; content to be included; accessibility to the assistive technology; timing

of the training; venue; transfer of learning; and maintenance of the skills (Goldman & Schmalz, 2005).

When developing any training package for a specific group of people, it is important to firstly determine what knowledge and skills are already held by the participants (Scales, 2008). There are many tools that may be used to collect this data, including survey instruments and questionnaires. The information gathered via these instruments will assist the trainer in developing an overall picture of the existing level of skill and knowledge from which they can then scaffold the learning of the participants in the training. The data collected may be very specific (i.e. Are you a competent user of the Boardmaker software package?), or broad in nature (i.e. Have you had any previous training in assistive technology?), depending on the information required. The length of time the paraprofessional has been in their current role, what they feel the role entails, educational level achieved and their recent experiences in the classroom may also be ascertained. It is generally useful to collect a variety of data from which to make decisions about training directions.

When considering the needs of the paraprofessionals, it is also vitally important to take into account the specific education system requirements that may be in effect. For example, the education district may require the paraprofessionals to be proficient in using specified software programs or hardware. There may also be restrictions on the types and quantity of assistive technology devices and services that are available to schools. It is disappointing, discouraging and a poor use of limited available time and resources to be trained to apply a useful piece of assistive technology and then find that you will not be able to access this for the students. Consistency with the local education district will also ensure the trainer is aware of formats for planning and evaluation of the assistive technology in the trainees local region (i.e. SETT proforma, WATI materials), and the focus of the content of the training.

Content may include: planning for the use of AT in the classroom; specific assistive technology for communication, physical difficulties, sensory impairments, and learning difficulties; and keeping records.

The more closely aligned the training is with the existing knowledge and skills of the group, the expectations of the organisation, the support available to the trainees and the actual requirements of the paraprofessionals in their roles, the more likely it is that the learning will be transferred from the training situation to the classroom (Goldman & Schmalz, 2005; Thomas, 2007). The trainer can enhance the transfer of learning by incorporating opportunities within the training and post-training to reflect on what has been learnt and where it is situated within the workplace setting. Developing appropriate mentor or coaching systems (Thomas, 2007), post-course reflection (Leberman & Martin, 2004) and using tests (Rohrer, Taylor & Sholar, 2010) have all been described as effective ways to build transfer of learning.

A maintenance probe initiated post-training will assist in determining whether the knowledge and skills learnt in the training have been maintained or lost. The information obtained from the maintenance probe will assist in fine-tuning the training for future cohorts and for providing follow-up training for the group. It will also provide insight into the actual use of the assistive technology within the classroom setting, as the skills that are used often will be maintained more effectively than those which are not.

Along with the pedagogical requirements to be considered, the timing of the training and the venue for the training will be important, and sometimes critical, considerations. In busy school environments there is pressure to ensure that the time allocated to paraprofessional support is utilised as effectively as possible. In some situations it may require ‘logistical gymnastics’ to organise appropriate times when all parties can come together, particularly when dealing with more than one school location. Paraprofessionals may be asked to give

up some of their own time (voluntarily) to participate in the training, especially if it increases their own skills and knowledge base. Working with more than one school can be cost effective and promotes a network of staff supporting each other in the district. One consideration, however, is the venue that will be used for the training. This can be negotiated with the paraprofessionals or may be dependent on available resources at the schools.

The development of a strong and utilitarian training program for paraprofessionals will be of benefit to the trainees, the school, and the students with special needs. Time devoted to thorough analysis of the requirements of the individuals and the school system will be time well spent when the skills and knowledge learnt in the training are successfully transferred to the classroom setting and are maintained over time.

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