

So you've never had a workshop participant with a "special need"?

Maybe in your secret thoughts you think this whole "special need" thing (as per National Training Packages and other material related to accredited training) is a bit over-stated, maybe you're someone who thinks it is "political correctness gone overboard". Or maybe you are a caring, inclusive educator keen to give the best chance of participation to all, though you haven't yet been called upon to do so. Is it possible you haven't interpreted some signals or missed a few cues?

The writer is a person with a medical issue which impacts on life, including study life (hesitates to apply a label such as "special need" or "disability") and also a trainer. See if you recognise any of the following situations, this time perhaps with new eyes (and ears);

The participant who chooses the elevator when the stairs are closer and there is only one floor to be taken (maybe they have a mobility or balance problem. "Come on lazy, it's only one floor" isn't that funny a riposte)

The student who appears to be mucking up by taking frequent breaks, breaking the flow of the session and distracting everyone as they slip out again – surely they are checking their phone or just being a pain (could they have a medical need for using the toilet frequently, or need privacy to use an injector pen or perhaps to express milk if they have a young baby)?

The attendee who refuses to turn off their mobile phone and is frequently seen checking for messages making others who turned their phones off feel resentful and testing your authority (perhaps they are a carer for a loved one with a disability or vulnerability who may need monitoring)

The learner who turns up to workshops without having done their homework and makes humorous excuses (have they got problems with literacy and/or family problems making outside-hours work very taxing but are not comfortable sharing this)?

In these cases of course things would have been a lot easier if the person had disclosed their issue before-hand. Sometimes people don't. Why mightn't they?

Sometimes they are not asked before-hand or the environment is not a comfortable one for them to do so. Sometimes people feel (correctly or incorrectly) that their spot on the course may be withheld or cancelled if they disclose they are "less than" what is required for participation, sometimes they fear reprisals or mockery from others and sometimes they just don't want to draw attention to themselves.

From direct experience and observation over the past 15 years here are some dos and don'ts;

Do not tell a person with a disability, impairment or someone who claims to have one (perhaps without any visible signs) that there is a wonderful new drug, alternative therapy, diet, exercise, meditation regime or guru that could fix them even if it worked for your friend, lover or grandmother and you think you are offering brand new insight and help (it is not appropriate even if kindly meant, it is not the right time and place and may well be insulting, uninformed and even dangerous for the person to follow this advice)

Do not make personal remarks such as "are you sure", have you got a second opinion, "you seem too fat/old/skinny/young etc for ..." or "well you certainly are a trouper" etc.

Do create an environment before-hand, during and after where people feel they can speak up, privately if they wish without repercussion or exclusion.

Do apologise for any inadvertent comment if it becomes clear that it was offensive, unwanted or on reflection could be considered so; it is acceptable to say sorry, no-one is perfect.

Do ask if there is anything you can do to make the workshop accessible and be comfortable saying you aren't sure how to address a specific issue which may come up without notice, the person themselves will usually be able to tell you what they need to be involved safely.

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