In-service Development for Educational Assistants

Abstract

The Special Needs Opportunity Windows (SNOW) Project is an online provider of professional development opportunities and resources for educators and supporters of students with special needs. Using Web-based courseware tools, SNOW offers training and curriculum materials along with interactive discussion forums to assist Ontario educators in applying experience and strategies to benefit all learners. The Inservice Development for Educational Assistants (IDEA) workshop series provides educational assistants with the opportunity to receive Web-based training to support learners who have special needs.

With budget pressures and crowded classrooms, demands on educators today have never been greater. Classroom management becomes more complex as Ministry guidelines to handle students with special needs become more comprehensive. Educational Assistants provide support to teachers by working individually with students to assist with their responsibilities. For such a paramount role within the Ontario education system, an EA is inclined to tread through uncertain waters in an effort to help, though more often than not they are unqualified to do so. In some cases, an EA has little to no experience in dealing with students who have special needs.

One solution is the Special Needs Opportunity Windows or SNOW Project, an initiative funded through the Ontario Ministry of Education that is hosted and administered through the Adaptive Technology Resource Centre at the University of Toronto. The SNOW Project is an online provider of professional development opportunities and resources for educators and supporters of students with special needs. Using Web-based courseware tools, SNOW offers training and curriculum materials along with interactive discussion forums to assist Ontario educators in applying experience and strategies to benefit all learners.

Recognizing the need to support educational assistants, SNOW launched its In-service Development for Educational Assistants or IDEA workshop series in January 2001. The goal of the program was to provide educational assistants with the opportunity to receive training to support learners who have special needs. Covering a wide range of exceptionalities, the IDEA workshops are designed by experts in special education and feature moderators experienced in delivering distance education and are adept at creating an engaging and interactive learning environment.

Web-based training has inherent advantages compared to standard classroom training. For instance, SNOW workshops:

- Have anytime, anywhere access providing convenience for those who require a flexible schedule,
• Are developed using multiple file formats (text, images, audio and video) to support learning objectives across multiple platforms,
• Offer opportunities to perform investigative research and lateral learning in addition to the authored course content,
• Are offered in asynchronous formats so participants can choose when is most convenient for them to schedule their study time, and
• Afford participants the ability to communicate both with the instructor as well as peers to receive a broader base of knowledge and experiences.

IDEA workshops cover topics surrounding support for learners with autism, cerebral palsy, acquired brain injury, spina bifida, epilepsy, behaviour disorders and learning disabilities. The workshops are not restricted to educational assistants; anyone who works with learners who have special needs will benefit from these workshops.

*The SNOW Project is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education through the Provincial Schools Branch. For information on the SNOW Project and the IDEA workshop series, please visit [http://snow.utoronto.ca/](http://snow.utoronto.ca/)*

Written by Craig Hegins
Curriculum Coordinator for the SNOW Project