

ICLife: Tools for inclusion

How to make life on a campus for higher education more inclusive.

Tool: Buddy system - Different tasks



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What's in a name?

With 'different tasks' is meant that all involved regular students can undertake activities with all involved students with a disability. The nature of these tasks is of course determined based on collective activities, not focused on one specific person.

The list of activities will always change depending on the wishes of the people with disabilities. The regular students can of course bring in ideas for the activities too. How people eventually construct the list and its size is up to the creativity of the campuses or degree programmes. People can start off by making a 'tree of wishes'. Ideas for activities are written down on post-its and stick to a tree-branch. Regular students can then choose the activities they prefer to do. For example, regular student X likes to cycle and accepts to go cycling outside with student Y (who wrote it down). However he could then decide to go to the cinema with student Z, etc.



Target group

People with an intellectual disability

Psychologically, the buddy system means more confidence and self-assurance for people with intellectual disabilities and a large drop in stress factors. Regarding the socio-communicative part we can conclude that people with an intellectual disability who worked with a buddy before have more positive relationships towards others, make contact more easily and - in the end - have a lot more friends afterwards. An added bonus is that they now tend to ask for help of others more easily and problematic behaviour is lowered. Participating at a university's campus means widening their horizons with a range of interests, hobbies, access to new networks and broadening the look on their living environments.

The regular students

For the buddies helping someone with an intellectual disability is definitely an added value. It brings responsibility, self-confidence and more. Advantages for students are linked on what motivates them to become a buddy in the first place, which can be personal conviction to mean something for someone, learning new skills or just for the fun of it. In some cases the students can be motivated because being a buddy is considered a form of workplacement or internship and they obtain credits by being a buddy. Regular students happen to close themselves off less from other communities and open up more to new cultures when they participate in a buddy system. They gain insight in each other's way of living and the university student develops an eye for discrimination.

What's needed?

The following elements must be structurally monitored:

- It is not the idea to try to realise any goals. Doing things together should be the focus.
- No individuals are to be coupled together. Only activities will be done together, nothing else. It aids social contact, social support, enlarging their network, broadening perspectives or even being accepted.
- The relationship becomes less artificial due to a professional organisation who links volunteers together with people with an intellectual disability. This relationship is based on common interests, which might immediately cause a good relationship between the two.
- The person with an intellectual disability is not looking for support, rather for doing an activity. The volunteer and the person with an intellectual disability do not try to work towards a goal, but to enjoy themselves.
- The relationship is symmetrical. The support of the regular student is practical.
- The commitment of the students is structured and defined. The contact period depends on the activities and day of the week and when the students are available. This period spans over a year.
- Moments of reflection are scheduled in. This could be possibly be done together with a teacher. During this moments the progress can be monitored.

Budget

The buddy system doesn't have to cost much. Actually almost nothing, although it depends on what arrangements you make with your students. Will transportation costs be refunded? Are other costs, such as cinematic tickets or restaurant fees refunded? That depends from university to university and from country to country...

Even though the buddy system is completely voluntary, we do want to stress that giving buddies credits would definitely be appropriate. In the current educational system, students are often overdemand, which means they need to handle a lot of tasks in a short period of time. If no credits are granted at all, many students might quit over time. This leads to people with a disability getting turned a cold shoulder and it would be a missed opportunity for regular students. This would also cause a problem for lecturers and management. Since no credits are offered, buddy work cannot be combined with regular school work. Their commitment would also suffer.

By giving credits, a university or course also makes it clear that the buddy system is important for the university or course. This message does not miss its purpose among the regular students: students still learn most from copying the experienced behaviour of what is shown in the programme itself. If the study programme feels that participation is important, it will also implement a student council and take it seriously. This is more important than repeating in theoretical courses how important school participation is. The same applies to caring for and taking responsibility towards people with intellectual disabilities. A well designed credit system with regard to the buddies seems to be an important signal from the degree programme to us.



Who gets what out of it?

People with intellectual disabilities

Regarding the socio-communicative part we can conclude that people with an intellectual disability who worked with a buddy before have more positive relationships towards others, make contact more easily and - in the end - have a lot more friends afterwards. An added bonus is that they now tend to ask for help of others more easily and problematic behaviour is lowered. When looking at their personal development, improved school performance becomes noticeable. The system motivates them for school and their buddy often assures them enough to make them build up confidence regarding their future.

Regular Students

For the buddies themselves helping someone with an intellectual disability is definitely an added value. It brings responsibility, self-confidence and more. Advantages for students are linked on what motivates them to become a buddy in the first place, which can be personal conviction to mean something for someone, learning new skills or just for the fun of it. In some cases the students can be motivated because being a buddy is considered a form of of workplacement or internship and they obtain credits by being a buddy.

The University/Campus

Like the “design for all” principle, we advise the implementation of the system not solely to help the students with an intellectual disability, but to help all students. The buddy-system is not only great for people with an intellectual disability, it could be an added value for everyone on the campus. Most certainly for freshmen this could have a lot of positive effects. A freshmen at university normally does not immediately know where they should head when problems occurs. That is why implementing the buddy system over the whole college could be advantageous. Having a person who is ready for you in case you have questions is nice and boosts the feeling of inclusion and belonging.

The society

Opposing the ‘passive individual’ whom, as initial consumer, demands his rights, there now is the ‘active individual’, who is socially involved and responsible. In the social and cultural sector, as well as the ones of care and education, the demand for volunteers and informal care is increasing. Underlying motives for moving from the professional to voluntary forces is the increasing criticism about the professional model being too dominant. The reasoning behind this is that realising ‘good care’ is only possible if and only if these two kinds of help are combined. Working as a volunteer is commonly viewed as a great thing by society for a good reason: it stimulates people to get involved with each other and with society.

