

Section 2 – WLES Program Model Lessons Learned

Reading Document Use Writing Numeracy Oral Communication Thinking Working with Others Computer Use Continuous Learning

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ISBN: 978-0-9878971-1-4

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LESSONS LEARNED – PROGRAM PLANNING

As identified by *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970)*, it is only when the lower order needs of physical and emotional well-being are satisfied that the higher order needs of personal growth can be addressed. Adult participants in pre-employment programs frequently have complex lives and face multiple barriers to successfully transition into employment. In addition to identified and unidentified learning difficulties, participants may:

- have very low levels of confidence,
- have experienced significant trauma in their lives,
- be experiencing significant difficulties associated with poverty,
- be dealing with current or past health, mental health, or addiction issues,
- be employed part-time and have unpredictable schedules.

These barriers have an impact on participants' ability to both access training and education programs, and maintain regular attendance.

LESSON LEARNED: Programming that is mindful of these barriers can maintain high attendance rates. The second Literacy Victoria pilot expanded the number of group learning hours offered, and included both morning and evening learning sessions. All participants attended for 40 hours or more and several for 60+ hours.

Examples of difficulties associated with poverty may include anything from poor nutrition that impacts participants' ability to focus on learning tasks, to lack of appropriate clothing for job interviews and the potential for embarrassment and the defensive reactions this can entail.

LESSON LEARNED: Programming that takes place in a safe, welcoming, and non-judgemental environment provides a base to build participants' confidence. All learners, tutors and staff at Literacy Victoria sign the same Behavioural Standards Agreement, so that there is an understanding that this is a place where respect for others is valued.

LESSON LEARNED: For break periods between group learning sessions, healthy snacks and drinks were provided specifically for WLES participants. Initially participants requested more typical high sugar/high fat 'snack foods' but such requests diminished over time. Participants reported that fresh fruit in particular was something that they rarely purchased and greatly appreciated.



LESSON LEARNED: *It was clearly stated that when participants entered the transition phase of the program, a budgeted amount had been set aside for clothing and dry-cleaning costs. Individual participants stated that they were willing to accept financial assistance in this manner as they viewed it as part of the program. Single male participants were especially appreciative of assistance from project staff and volunteers in selecting appropriate interview clothing from retailers handling gently used items.*

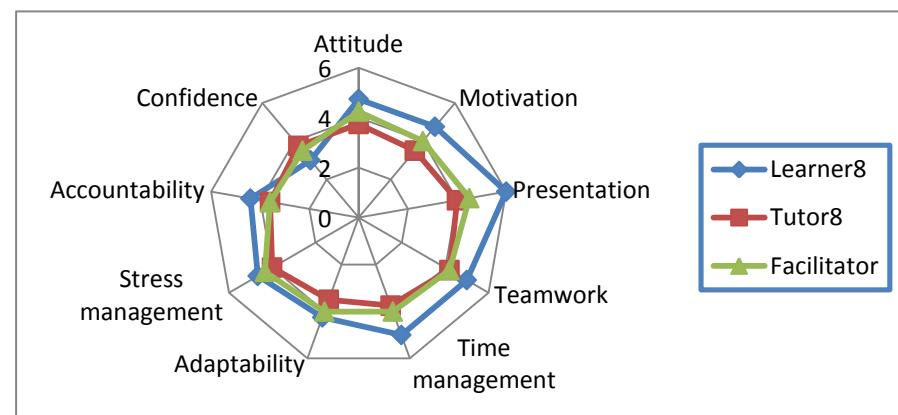
This program model recognizes that participants will continue to require significant support, whether or not they have transitioned into employment by the end of the program. Some participants may wish to address skills gaps and enrol in continuing education or training in order to pursue long-term goals. Others may be continuing the job application process.

LESSON LEARNED: *In order to have the confidence to continue their efforts, participants will frequently seek reassurance that they are making good decisions. Facilitators and tutors must be prepared to devote time to participants well beyond the timeframe of the group learning sessions. The integration phase of the program is key in supporting participants when difficulties arise in the workplace.*

Finding an appropriate balance in relationships between program staff and local employers can be difficult. When a participant is applying to a prospective employer who is a project partner, a clear understanding of the expectations on both sides of the relationship will have been identified at the outset. There is an argument for contacting employers to inform them that, if hired, this applicant will receive additional support to negotiate in-service training or other job requirements. The counter argument states that, by contacting the employer the applicant is singled out as an individual who needs support and this will actually be detrimental. Where an employer is not a project partner the decision whether to contact them or not should be made by the participant.

LESSON LEARNED: *Knowledge of employer hiring processes is extremely valuable. Many companies utilize a variety of screening tools which may be challenging to participants. Activities such as on-line assessments and personality inventories are designed to screen out applicants with literacy and essential skills challenges.*

LESSON LEARNED: *With appropriate support, individuals with literacy and essential skills challenges can successfully negotiate on-line screening. WLES staff created an on-line knowledge quiz based on the history and operations of The Fairmont Empress Hotel. Participants used this as a practice tool prior to interview.*



Example of ESAT analysis
(Adapted with permission: Employability Skills Assessment Tool, FUTUREWORX)

www.futureworx.ca



LESSONS LEARNED – ADULT EDUCATION

Principles of adult education were applied in developing all aspects of the WLES program model and curriculum, the underlying principle being:

“The single most important factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows.” David Ausubel

Research of these principles revealed that learning in adults is directly affected by:

- belief in personal capacity to learn (Marsh, 1986), (Costa, 1991)
- the ability to choose or use a process, technique or method used successfully in the past (McMillan and Reed, 1994), (Armstrong, 1994)
- facilitators' and tutors' expectations (Brattesani, Weinstein and Marshall, 1984)
- interest in, or prior knowledge of, the subject to be studied (Pearson and Gallagher, 1983), (Ellis et al, 1991)
- belief in the purpose or relevance of the subject to be studied (Purkey, 1978).

LESSON LEARNED: In developing a program model and curriculum to meet the needs of adult learners with lower level literacy and essential skills, these principles were significant. The success of the pilot project may be attributed to its integration of these principles into the program model and curriculum. The following are key suggestions for organizations and facilitators:

- introduce topics through materials that learners recognise as purposeful in their lives
- build foundational skills and knowledge before attempting to introduce higher level or unfamiliar curriculum content (the ‘Velcro’ effect)
- use familiar contexts that allow for added levels of complexity as learners grow (scaffolding)
- reinforce meaningful connections between different topic areas and skills
- build learners' self confidence and belief through personal success.

Most participants required continued support to develop organizational skills. A core aim of the WLES program model is to increase learners' independence and capabilities in planning and organizing their own learning pathway. Use of simple tracking documents is emphasized throughout this manual. Another key element of programming, following adult education principles, is the use of familiar techniques, through repetition in curriculum activities.



LESSON LEARNED: Many participants had never encountered learning activities where there was no ‘correct’ answer. Exploring concepts as a group was an unfamiliar task in the context of learning. However, through repetition of activities such as the ‘Sort and Predict’ vocabulary building exercise, participants gained confidence in this activity, and in their ability to adapt to new ways of learning.

LESSON LEARNED: There are valuable resources not specifically designed for use with adult learners that can be adapted extremely successfully for this type of program and participant group. The favourite resource of the Literacy Victoria project facilitator is one developed for teachers in grades K-12:

Success for All Learners: A Handbook on Differentiating Instruction, 2007

A final thought: “Learning occurs when students link new information and experiences to their prior knowledge to extend and revise their understanding of the world” Joan Thomas



Authentic learning and employment goals are those identified by participants



LESSONS LEARNED – PARTICIPANTS

In any pre-employment or workforce training group a wide range of abilities should be anticipated. This curriculum model relies heavily on oral participation in order to build both confidence and communication skills. It has not been developed to meet the needs of participants for whom English is a second language. Non-readers will have difficulty accessing many of the activities suggested; however, they may nevertheless benefit from participation in group learning activities.

LESSON LEARNED: Adult non-readers have often developed a number of strategies to by-pass the necessity for reading. These can be valuable if shared with other participants. The goal of these discussions is to reinforce the use of coping strategies and self-directed learning, and may form the basis for ongoing discussions about learning priorities.

An emphasis on oral communication serves multiple purposes. It ensures that all participants can express their views to the group and build a sense of belonging. It allows all participants to process vocabulary and opinions from a variety of sources, which closely resembles the workplace environment. It allows all participants the opportunity to explore new and challenging concepts.

LESSON LEARNED: Adults with Level 1 Essential Skills are able to participate in oral discussions whether or not they possess the skills to complete the related tasks. Inclusion in discussions was particularly important to these individuals, who attached high value to contributing to the group and reported increased understanding of many concepts as a result of participation in discussions. This was particularly true of group vocabulary building exercises.

Facilitators need to have a range of materials on hand that reflect the abilities of all participants. As far as possible, learning materials should reflect activities and documentation found in the workplace. This curriculum model focuses on learning activities for participants at IALSS Levels 1 and 2. It is equally important to provide activities that challenge more competent participants, as well as build the confidence of participants working with Level 1 Essential Skills.

LESSON LEARNED: Participants in this program with high Level 2 Essential Skills did not object to completing less challenging tasks. These participants are valuable peer mentors in group learning activities, and frequently gain in confidence by taking a leadership role when certain curriculum areas are addressed. Facilitators must beware of relying on these participants, however; learning sessions must include activities that challenge these participants in those areas identified or targeted for development.

Participants are able to identify a wide range of life and work situations where they make use of numerical operations, numerical data in documents, oral and written communication skills, text documents, and technology skills.



LESSON LEARNED: Building upon existing knowledge through group learning activities and discussions, participants expressed confidence in enhancing their skills and expanding their knowledge of concepts. Participants working with low Level 1 Essential Skills found the emphasis on group discussion particularly beneficial in building confidence in the use of terms and vocabulary.

Participants reactions to assessment activities will vary with their past experiences and confidence. Most adult learners understand the value of assessment, are willing to examine their own skills, and recognize where gaps existed in their ability to work with concepts, documents and co-workers.

LESSON LEARNED: Some participants exhibited extremely negative behaviours that were attributed to past trauma in relation to assessment of skills. This was particularly marked where the activities undertaken resembled educational tests rather than workplace tasks.

Improvements in oral communication skills are more difficult to assess and also to address. There are self-assessment tools available in Canada, but other countries have developed assessments based on observed oral behaviour. The Literacy Victoria pilot made use of a modified version of the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT) as a starting point for discussions of oral communication skills as one of a broad set of skills impacting employability.

LESSON LEARNED: There tends to be more disparity in facilitators' and individuals' perceptions of oral abilities than in other skill areas. Adult learners are able to accept feedback regarding communication that is inappropriate due to content or tone of voice. Highlighting grammatical errors is more problematic, and is more likely to be viewed as judgmental. A functional approach is needed. Are the errors going to lead to miscommunication, or are the errors going to make a difference in the participants' target employment sectors?

Where connections are clear between skills explored and skills required for job roles in specific employment sectors, participants are motivated to engage in individual and group learning sessions to improve personal competencies. Learners' personal notebooks or diaries are recommended throughout the program. Learners' personal inventory checklists for numeracy, communication and technology skills or similar tracking documents are recommended to actively inform Individual Action Plans.

LESSON LEARNED: Participants required support in setting realistic learning goals. Goals appropriate to each person's level of competence (Individual Action Plan) required updating and adjusting on a regular basis; participants who were able to work outside group learning sessions with strong tutor support were most successful.



Organization of materials was a challenge to many participants. Time is allocated at the end of all group learning sessions for a Plan and Review activity. Through repetition of this activity, participants develop both organizational skills and take possession of their own learning.

LESSON LEARNED: The use of enclosed portfolios (with zipper fastenings) enhanced learners' confidence in retaining control of their work.

Facilitators encourage all participants to engage in all learning activities. This is a deliberate rationale with multiple benefits for individual and group learning:

- participants confirm competencies or discover skills gaps for themselves.
- participants reinforce personal knowledge and confidence in specific curriculum areas through mentoring within the group.
- participants receive information from a number of sources through multiple activities, which increases the possibility of finding a style of learning that works for them.
- participants work as team members to produce group outcomes, which more closely resemble typical workplace requirements.
- participants build relationships that change over time and more closely resemble workplace relationships.
- participants are not 'one among many' in a learner-instructor relationship; all participants are able to assume multiple roles.

LESSON LEARNED: Adult learners with a wide range of ages, life experiences and skills abilities who had not previously participated in group learning workshops of this nature were able to readily adapt to this delivery model. The consistent use of the principles of adult education proved foundational in building confidence through personal success.



Participants seek ongoing support to pursue their learning and employment goals



LESSONS LEARNED – TUTORS

For the WLES project, Literacy Victoria was able to call upon the services of volunteer tutors who had already undertaken the core in-service training within the organization. This core training includes discussion of principles of adult education, Essential Skills, and use of authentic documents, as well as organizational guidelines for behavioural standards and relationship boundaries. Host organizations will need to address the question of preparedness of their tutors in relation to this knowledge base. At the conclusion of the group learning sessions, feedback was requested from tutors on the second WLES pilot. Eight of the ten tutors responded.

An additional information and training session was provided for tutors who expressed interest in being matched with a learner for the duration of the WLES project. In addition to general tutor attributes there were several considerations in recruiting tutors for this project:

- time commitment, because of the extended nature of the program model that continued support into the workplace;
- organizational skills, because of the need to mentor participants in planning and tracking their learning goals;
- relevant workplace or life experiences, because of the need to discuss job roles and expectations.

LESSON LEARNED: One aspect of tutor competency that was not accorded sufficiently high priority was computer use. In the transition phase of the program some participants found themselves at a disadvantage because their tutor lacked the necessary knowledge of computer applications to support them. Another aspect was knowledge of current job seeking procedures. Some extremely able and experienced tutors had been in the same job for many years and were out of touch with typical requirements for the job seeker. Facilitators and staff were able to provide guidance on resume building, online application forms and e-mailing (See Section 3 of this manual for Module 8 activities), but this meant that some participants were limited to specific times to receive this support. However in a survey of WLES tutors' opinions, only one felt that an IT skills in-service would have been useful. Literacy Victoria is an organization serving clients with literacy and essential skills challenges. Organizations with expertise in employment counselling services may not encounter this issue.

Learner-tutor matches were not made until several weeks into the project. This permitted facilitators to observe participants in several group learning workshops and gain an insight into their personalities, levels of competence and preferred learning styles. Based on these observations a general descriptive 'match list' of learner attributes was created, and potential tutors were given the opportunity to indicate personal levels of comfort in working with these learner characteristics. Tutors were then provided with background information on their learner, including assessment information if the individual had agreed that this could be shared.



LESSON LEARNED: This ‘match list’ approach worked well. Only one tutor expressed concerns regarding her ability to appropriately support the learner with whom she was matched.

LESSON LEARNED: In feedback received from tutors, several stated that they would have preferred to meet with their learner individually on a couple of occasions prior to attending the group learning workshop (Session 7). A suggestion was also made for a more formal one-to-one information meeting to discuss the outcome of the ‘match list’.

Tutors were encouraged to attend group learning workshops whenever possible. Facilitators were comfortable with this open format which permitted tutors to support all learners present and to observe first-hand how their learner functioned in a group setting. It also provided the opportunity to observe the delivery style of facilitators, and the expectations of the program in terms of targeted skills and documentation.

LESSON LEARNED: Tutors found it difficult to attend group learning sessions because of work or other commitments. A flexible schedule with both daytime and evening workshops therefore benefited tutors as well as learners. All eight tutors who responded had attended at least one group learning session.

All but one tutor reported that they had met with their learner on a regular basis, at least once per week. Tutors reported that they were continuing to support WLES learners with ongoing Essential Skills and employment goals following the conclusion of group workshops.

LESSON LEARNED: Three tutors confirmed that a job seeking skills in-service for tutors would have been useful. Other tutor suggestions for improvements to the program were:

- *more focus on assessing and addressing learners’ motivation for change;*
- *more information for tutors unable to attend group workshops (session content);*
- *updates of the topics covered (preferably weekly);*
- *updates of the materials and resources provided to learners;*
- *invite tutors to attend specific sessions targeting skills in their areas of expertise;*
- *‘brain storm’ session at course mid-point to allow tutors to share experiences;*
- *more opportunities for job interview practice to allow learners to gain confidence with the process.*



A learner-tutor pair at the certificate presentation event held in May 2011



LESSONS LEARNED – DOCUMENTS AND MATERIALS

This curriculum model recommends the use of authentic materials that will prepare participants for employment. Where they exist, simplified versions of typical workplace documents such as schedules and work orders can be adapted for demonstration purposes; however, participants need to be presented with realistic tasks.

LESSON LEARNED: There is a fine line between asking a participant to complete a task that is too difficult and presenting that person with an appropriate challenge. Adult learners are aware of the complexities of documents and systems in the real world; they recognize them and deal with them on a daily basis. Total removal of these barriers in a classroom setting is not useful; a gradual approach which introduces documents that vary in complexity is required.

LESSON LEARNED: A conflict arises between guidelines for plain language and the use of authentic documents. An adult education or training organization that aims to meet the needs of low literacy learners, as a matter of best practice, follows guidelines for plain language in all its documents. In the workplace, however, documents are designed to meet the needs of the organization and its systems. The use of plain language guidelines would, in effect, rule out most authentic workplace documents. To limit participants to only plain language documents is not in their best interests.

A large number of documents are used for a variety of purposes in the course of the program. For ease of reference these are classified into two types: curriculum learning materials and tracking documents.

CURRICULUM LEARNING MATERIALS:

This curriculum model relies upon a multi learning-style approach. Each curriculum area is explored over a number of learning sessions. Participants engage in discussions, individual and group learning, practical tasks and reflective practice, with each person taking responsibility for discovering his or her strengths and weaknesses and setting individual learning priorities. The availability of learning materials at different Essential Skills levels but covering the same curriculum area is therefore a crucial component of the program.

LESSON LEARNED: A variety of resources are available which target the development of Essential Skills for the workplace and aim to prepare jobseekers for employment. The majority are not suited to participants with Essential Skills at Levels 1 and 2. As a result of the limited resources currently available, facilitators must be prepared to adapt existing materials to the needs of the participants in their program. Resources intended for high school students or second language learners may be successfully adapted, as well as adult education resources from other countries.



Workplace manuals can be long and complex documents. One authentic example that was adapted for low literacy learners was the Colleague Handbook for employees of the Fairmont Empress Hotel. This employer partner of the project supplied a quantity of materials that were then summarized into plain language versions. The Human Resources Department also allowed project staff to 'job shadow' a number of roles at the hotel, interview experienced employees and take photographs of ideal final products in terms of both housekeeping for guest rooms, and organization of equipment. These were then incorporated into a plain language version that provided explicit instructions regarding duties and standards for housekeeping and kitchen staff.

LESSON LEARNED: Many adult learners find information presented through image much easier to retain. Both participants from the first Literacy Victoria pilot who entered employment in hotels stated that the photographs made a significant difference to their understanding of what was being asked of them. Participants confirmed that explanations in text, even plain language text, did not convey information as clearly as pictures.

Another example of a resource that was adapted for low literacy learners is the Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT). The original tool contains fifty questions and is being developed and validated for national use with employment training groups. Literacy Victoria piloted a version with only 25 questions, and plain language amendments that included rephrasing of some questions posed in the negative. The resulting data proved extremely valuable as a starting point for discussions between participants, tutors and facilitators - in particular, differences in perceptions regarding distance travelled in relation to the identified Employability Skills.

LESSON LEARNED: Questions posed in the negative continued to pose significant problems and future versions of the tool for use with low literacy learners may need to consider removing them altogether, despite their proven use as validity indicators.

TRACKING DOCUMENTS:

This curriculum model recommends the use of tracking documents that are accessible to all participants. Documents are developed to meet a specific purpose and the purpose must be clearly explained and evident to participants. To simulate the workplace, the same tracking documentation is completed by all participants. Every participant may not complete documents to the same level of detail or accuracy but should be given the opportunity.

LESSON LEARNED: Adult learners are generally aware of personal abilities, but are not always accurate in self-assessment of specific skills. There may be a psychological or other barrier which limits the individual's ability to explore competencies outside their 'comfort zone'. Participants in the program reported increased confidence in document use after relatively few group learning sessions, which they attributed to observations of peers and peer-to-peer support in completing document tasks. Participants working with Essential Skills at Level 1 were most likely to comment on activities where everyone was being asked to complete the same document; although this was frequently a challenge, it was viewed as a positive experience that provided a real sense of accomplishment for these participants.



The personal skills inventory checklists used for the core curriculum areas of communication, numeracy and technology skills were developed to provide participants with a simple means of tracking and prioritizing their own skills. These documents listed those curriculum skills topics covered in the Literacy Victoria program by Modules 4, 5 and 6 as determined by the employment goals of participants in the project. Other participant groups, in other regions of the country, may need a curriculum covering different skills topics.

LESSON LEARNED: For many adult learners this was the first time that they had taken responsibility for setting learning goals and monitoring progress. Some found this extremely challenging at first and wanted facilitators to maintain control of learning goals. Significant amounts of time may need to be devoted to supporting participants, but the aim of the program should be to promote self-directed, continuous learning.

Introduction of Individual Action Plan documents is done gradually in this program model. In initial group learning sessions (Sessions 1-6) participants work through goal setting activities coupled with practice in the use of personal skills inventory checklists. As each curriculum area and personal development topic is explored, the concept of pulling all these elements together into a plan for an individual learning pathway is reinforced by facilitators. When individual learning and employment goals have been clarified, Individual Action Plans are introduced. Generally, items found on Individual Action Plans are mid to long term goals.

LESSON LEARNED: This approach was viewed as respectful by both learners and tutors. It allowed learners to speak with some assurance from a base of understanding and encouraged them to be actively involved in discussions about learning activities with their tutors.

Simplified activity planning documents for individual learning activities should also be available in order for learners and tutors to set more specific short term learning targets.

LESSON LEARNED: Although acronyms are not generally favoured by adult learners and are contrary to plain language recommendations, participants very much appreciated the idea of SMARTER guidelines (Specific Measurable Agreed Relevant Time-bound Enjoyable Realistic) for learning activities. Tutors also reported that this acronym proved a valuable tool when there was a need for a 'reality check' regarding a learner's goal.



A combination of existing resources, bespoke materials and authentic documents is recommended



LESSONS LEARNED – GROUP v ONE-TO-ONE LEARNING

Group learning sessions provide opportunities for practice and development of many curriculum areas. Oral Communication skills, Working with Others and Continuous Learning skills are practised in all modules in this program model. Group learning activities afford participants the opportunity to acquire and develop leadership and social skills in contexts similar to those of workplace teams. Use of tracking documents also encourages development of Document Use, planning and organizational skills, and aims to build a sense of ownership regarding the learning choices made by participants.

LESSON LEARNED: For participant success the documents used must clarify the steps they are taking on their learning pathway; they must understand the process and be able to both track their own progress and explain their own choices. The opportunity to observe others and share strategies around Document Use was reported by participants as a key component of group learning sessions.

This curriculum model relies upon one-to-one support for participants outside the group learning sessions. Substantial progress in reading, writing, numeracy, and computer technology skills are not likely to result solely from attendance at group learning. There is limited time available to explore all Essential Skills and Employability Skills in these group sessions. The goal of group sessions therefore is to explore as many curriculum areas as possible at different levels, using a variety of learning styles. Participants are expected to note personal skills gaps and determine personal learning priorities based on exposure to these activities in the group setting.

LESSON LEARNED: Facilitators must ensure that sufficient time is allotted in every group learning session for individual reflection to take place.

LESSON LEARNED: Participants who met regularly with tutors for one-to-one support were able to focus on and ultimately achieve realistic learning and employment goals.



Both individual and small group learning activities are recommended for all workshop sessions

