

Intentional Online Learning Plans

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INTRODUCTION

The literature suggests a strong tie between literacy and job security; education and poverty. We know that those with higher literacy skills are able to participate more fully in the economy and society (Crichton & Kinsel, 2001, p. 46).

In Canada, due to provincial laws concerning compulsory education through grade 10, educators working in K-12 education and/or training programs are rarely dealing with issues of total illiteracy. However as Freire (1985) suggests, literacy/illiteracy is situationally different within a specific society. He explains that if a society does not write, being unable to write does not constitute illiteracy, but in a society where writing is seen as a fundamental skill, it forms part of what it means to be literate. As a society shifts its situations (e.g., moves from an industrial economic base to an information management economic base), the standard of what defines basic skills shifts as well. Therefore, as Canadian society moves toward a knowledge-based, global economy, mastery of the competencies required to function in that changed workplace become the new definition of what it means to be literate and functional. These competencies then constitute the new literacies (Eisner, 1998; Kist, 2003) and exclusion from them forms the evolving definition of illiteracy.

New literacies for the 21st century were defined at a 2002 summit in Berlin (Starks, 2004). Foundation skills and competencies in "... five types of literacies [were] promoted: technology, information, media creativity, global, and literacy with responsibility," (paragraph 6) recognizing that while traditional core literacies such as reading, writing and numeracy were still essential, they need to be considered in conjunction with the new five. Therefore, a community or society's desire to participate in a global context is tied to being able to function within this definition of literacy for its citizens.

This notion of an evolving literacy, directed by the changing economic needs of society, is supported by the 1991 SCANS report (The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) that states in order to find meaningful work, high school graduates needed to master a combination of foundation skills and competencies (Crichton & Kopp, 2004). The foundation skills were determined to be:

- Typical skills inherent in grade-level appropriate literacy and numeracy;
- Thinking skills (reasoning, decision making, creative thinking, and problem solving); and
- Personal qualities (responsibility and self-management).

Suggested competencies include:

- Identifying, organizing, planning and allocating time, money, materials and workers;
- Negotiating, exercising leadership, working with diversity, teaching others new skills, serving clients and customers, and participating as team member; and
- Selecting technology, applying technology to a task and maintaining and trouble shooting technology (The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991, p. 8).

Research (Armstrong, 2000) refers to similar skills and competencies, tending to group them into (1) hard skills—math, reading, and problem-solving at high levels; (2) soft skills—group work and effective oral and written presentations; and (3) computer skills—routine tasks such as word processing, data management, and creation of multimedia presentations. Regardless of the terminology used, it is apparent that the demands of the changing work force in Canada are requiring education institutions to rethink their mandate and consider how to address the learning needs of those needing education, re-education, training, or re-training. The Canadian Council on Social Development states that almost half of the new jobs created will require at least 16 years of education, so the need for upgrading and retraining is even greater than it was a decade ago.

While a certain degree of emphasis must be placed on education for employment opportunities, it is important to note that many adult learners return to formal learning for other reasons. Research (Crichton & Kinsel, 2001) suggests that the acquisition of skills adds to an individual's sense of self worth and confidence. This has the potential to translate into an increased personal agency that allows individuals to volunteer and participate more fully in the life and unpaid work in their communities. While previ-

ously these individuals might have stayed in their homes or felt reluctant to volunteer their services, a study in rural western Canada discovered that participation in adult classes increased an individual's social capital and increased the volunteer labor pool in important social areas such as long-term care facilities, pre-school programs, home support for seniors, and similar unpaid yet very important community work. It is common knowledge that communities are as vibrant as their citizens and that much of the unpaid work that goes on in them is what makes them humane and civil places to live.

This paper argues that it is not enough for schools/training institutions to just recognize the importance of returning to school, but they should also begin to design programming to invite back these learners. Nor is it enough for learners simply to want to upgrade their skills and education and return to formalized programs. Based on the literature and ten years of experience in the field, it appears that for learning to be effective and successful, there needs to be an intentional learning plan in place to bridge the complexities of the institutional structures, assess learners' prior knowledge, place learners appropriately within the existing programs, modify the content, and ensure that credential standards have been met. Without an intentional learning plan, research (Crichton & Kinsel, 2001, 2002, 2003) suggests that this vulnerable sector of the population, typically at-risk youth, minority groups, low-income women, and individuals in rural communities who have seen their work supported from traditional jobs in resource extraction disappear, may be attracted back to schooling by new programs and incentives, but they may not stay. It appears that their ability to stay is affected by a range of confounding variables. These variables include tolerance for "getting things wrong," test anxiety, social support from family and friends, economics, child care, and other issues that may be deeply personal. These variables, plus the elements that Knowles (1980) describes as competing interests for adult learners, tend to impact and confound the learning experience.

Sparks (1999) suggests that rich and meaningful learning opportunities should provide a bridge to the future by helping students to learn how to learn, "... so they can keep up with the rapidly changing world" (p. 20). Crichton and Kinsel (2001) found that by allowing students to return to school with the goal of learning to learn rather than learning specifically for a work-related skill, students are often more able to experience success, discover that they could tackle something and carry it through, and develop a "zest for learning" (p. 52). This appeared to allow the learners to enroll in academically challenging courses and programs with a sense of self that had been missing in both their personal and professional lives. This finding is consistent with the early work of Goffmann

(1959, p. 20) who states, "We come into this world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons." The development of a positive sense of self appears key to learner success, and it must be recognized that it is something that individuals must create for themselves. Further, it appears that it is this increased sense of self that allows reluctant and/or seemingly passive individuals to become empowered to actively and fully participate in their communities.

The rationale for the development of a learning program is predicated on the understanding that "the development of a complex, multi-faceted sense of self can increase student achievement and self-confidence. Individualized learning links the personal and social identities of students with the academic curriculum, mapping a pathway to activities appropriate to the needs and goals and the development of an increasingly complex sense of self" (Crichton & Kinsel, 2002, p. 143). This complex sense of self has the potential to translate into both academic and social success, adding a rich dimension to the lives of the learners.

THE LEARNING PLAN

Based on the work of Bandura (1977) and Chesebro et al. (1992), the learning plan suggested here is a critical tool to help build and support sustained relationships between students returning to school and facilitators in the individual sites. The plan allows students to learn over time the important "school" attitudes and behaviours that are key to success in various institutions.

The online learning plan allows students to respond either onsite with the assistance of the facilitator or later online by themselves. Because it is online (www.netidea.com/~ekinsel), it can be accessed virtually anytime/place. Currently, the plan is quite text heavy, but further development will see more multimedia options, making it more compatible with the research on multiple literacies and intelligences (Crichton & Kopp, 2004). However, there is concern that the introduction of multimedia elements will increase the required bandwidth and potentially limit access by rural users.

The theoretical framework for the learning plan is anchored in activity theory (Vygotsky, 1997). It encourages learners to think about what they want to do, how they learn best, what supports they need, and what their prior learning has afforded them. It also includes an interactive, personal journal area where the learner and facilitator can communicate about experiences, successes and failures, and generally document and personalize the learning experience. The purpose of the learning plan is to help learners articulate their personal needs and goals and allow the facilitator important insight in order to

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