Evaluation of the Integrating Foundational Learning Project

BowValley COLLEGE | Adult Literacy Research Institute

Submitted to:

Calgary Learns

Evaluators:

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BowValley | Centre for Excellence in
COLLEGE | Foundational Learning

BACKGROUND

Program Description

The Integrating Foundational Learning (IFL) program trains agency staff (educators) in the non-profit community to better integrate essential skills and literacy practices into their learning programs for adults. Participating agencies attend a series of workshops on integrating foundational learning into practice and participate in an extensive mentorship process where participating agencies are able to engage with mentors in action, applying what has been learned in the IFL workshops in their practice with the opportunity for reflection, support, and guidance.

The IFL program was designed

> to make explicit the literacy and essential skills included in foundational learning and to help program staff strategize around embedding this foundational learning in their programs. Project activities included the assessment of current program goals and group training on identifying and integrating foundational learning in their programs. A mentor assisted each program throughout the project. (Peters and Messaros 2011, 2)

The IFL program's short-term aim is to increase opportunities for learners to improve their foundational skills. Its long-term goals are to create a process and ongoing forum for literacy specialists and other community-based educators to share 1) understanding of foundational learners' strengths and needs and 2) pedagogical expertise.

The IFL program first ran from September 2010 to October 2011 as a result of Calgary Learns' Initiative Funding. Seven Calgary Learns-funded agencies participated in the first IFL

program. The IFL program has completed its second round of training with eight Calgary Learns-funded agencies, which ran from July 2012 to December 2013 —this evaluation focuses on the second sequence of the IFL program.

Evaluators

Audrey Gardner, Coordinator of the Adult Literacy Research Institute (ALRI) at Bow Valley College, and Candace Witkowskyj, Project Officer (ALRI), were contracted by Calgary Learns in the fall of 2012 to conduct an external evaluation of the Integrating Foundational Learning program. The Adult Literacy Research Institute (formerly the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning) conducts critical inquiry and applied research and promotes innovation in the field of foundational learning (adult literacy, basic education, upgrading, and essential skills). The ALRI's work centres on research that is grounded in practice, bringing people together to collaborate on local and national projects and to share their knowledge and experience in research and practice. Working with practitioners (instructors, tutors, assistants, specialists), learners, administrators, and funders, the ALRI uses participatory approaches in developing research proposals, conducting research projects, and organizing knowledge-dissemination events.

INTENDED EXTERNAL EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

We identified the following objectives:

> ➢ to identify how participants apply what they learned about foundational learning from the training and mentoring into their organization's programs; and

> to establish and facilitate a project advisory group made up of representatives from community-based organizations funded by Calgary Learns. This group will recommend how to integrate sustainable foundational learning approaches and awareness of them in diverse community programs and organizations.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

In evaluating the Integrating Foundation Learning Project, ALRI staff employed a mixed-methods approach guided by a community-of-practice model to gain insight from both project participants representing the collective agencies involved as well as the mentors. A mixed-method approach utilizes a number of different approaches based on which methods would be most beneficial within the scope of the project's objective. We gathered formative and summative information

The project has changed the way I approach my work. I look for ways to incorporate essential skills "training" into both formal and informal learning opportunities and I try to write using clear language in my everyday communication.

—Participant

through a quantitative/qualitative on-line survey with workshop participants; a grounded-theory-based focus group with IFL mentors, open-ended individual interviews with the IFL project lead, follow-up open-ended survey questions, case study analysis, and participatory observations of IFL workshops, fellow workshop participants, and participants' agency workshops. ALRI staff gathered seasoned community professionals from the field of literacy and essential skills to form the IFL advising group with the intention of sustaining the IFL program's positive outcomes and ensuring that the knowledge gained was transferred into community-based programs that Calgary Learns supports.

INTENDED IFL PROGRAM OUTCOMES

The IFL program identifies these intended outcomes:

> ➤ To embed literacy and essential skills (LES) within community learning opportunities where LES

The real challenge is time to integrate the knowledge — on a personal level it's on the forefront of my brain but ideally that knowledge should be transferred to my colleagues and in written form in some fashion within our materials. The factor that influences these challenges is that it's not on my plan for the year —I need to squeeze it in —which I will do — it will just take time and patience from all involved.

—Participant

considerations may not have been explicitly identified as a means to increase literacy levels in Calgary

➤ To create a system of knowledge dissemination for community LES specialists to share their wisdom with the Calgary non-profit community (through direct and facilitated mentorship)

➤ To raise awareness in the non-profit community staff so they better understand the LES practices they already utilize and expand on their skill set

➤ To provide training that inspires the non-profit community's feeling of investment in integrating foundational learning.

FINDINGS

Here is a summary of the IFL program evaluation's overall findings. We examined participants' responses, mentors' observations, and participatory observations in a variety of formats to gather the following formative and summative information.

Participants

The majority of participants expressed great satisfaction with the workshops as well as the mentorship process. Participants indicated that they felt the workshops were facilitated very well and the content was relevant to participants' workplace skills. All of the participants indicated that they had broadened their knowledge of literacy and essential skills as a result of the workshops and then felt supported in applying what they'd learned with the support of their mentor. Participants identified agency policy limitations and time as the two most

significant factors hindering their ability to apply workshop learning. Although many

participants thought that more of their fellow staff should have attended the workshops, they

recognized that it was difficult to commit to the amount of time required to fully participate in

the IFL program. The majority of participants identified the length of the project as necessary to

integrate new concepts learned from the IFL works, and spoke of how having the time to

explore ideas with the mentors made all the difference for learning retention.

Participants identified the following outcomes as a result of their participation in the IFL

program:

- ➢ Enhanced understanding of the concepts of foundational learning and essential skills

- ➢ Increased understanding of the importance of formally or informally assessing learners in terms of LES competencies before moving forward (to be able to gear their presentation)

- ➢ Increased awareness of the skill levels and competency that a learner needs to participate fully and successfully in programs, and tools to assess and address them

- ➢ Greater understanding of the challenges learners experience navigating documents, communicating with others, etc. and a broader range of tools to respond to these challenges

- Greater understanding of the adult learning outcomes that were already happening in the program but were not being identified (i.e., increased funding opportunities, increased opportunity for positive feedback to learners)

- Inspired aim to embed learning from IFL in more or all areas of the agency

- Agency-specific LES training created for staff

- Now have the "tools and confidence to develop our own resources founded on the principles of literacy and essential skills which will have a positive impact on the program, the learners, and the staff members"

- Increased "check-ins" with learners to ensure more opportunities to identify challenges/barriers

- Increased variety of evaluation tools to ensure everyone can provide feedback

- More thought about learners' attention span

- Experienced personal enhancement in own workplace skills performance (as a staff person)

- Raised awareness that LES is perceived by the non-profit community as a separate and distinct field—the non-LES non-profit community needs to be engaged with IFL training to understand that they are not separate from LES learning

- Newly created indicators of what success would look like for each task rather than previous measures which were too objective and difficult to define

- Participating for a second time in IFL offered an opportunity to build on knowledge and increase learning

- Feeling humbled in returning to a place of learning

I would like to learn more about "next steps" with essential skills, such as how to work with complexity levels, how to approach learning for specific groups such as Aboriginal or EAL, and how to work with learners you don't have a lot of time to assess.

—Participant

- Creating/editing documents/text used in program to make them more accessible ("IFL friendly" or plain language) and in verbal communications of text (e.g., explaining a form)

- Regarding text materials:

  o reduced the amount of text on materials

  o reduced the number of questions relating to text (smaller chunks)

  o reduced abstract language

  o increased white space

  o added more visual props (i.e., sticky notes, diagrams, illustrations)

- Ensured webcasts/technology use plain language as well

- Provided learners with intake forms ahead of time.

Learners

Community non-profit staff who participated in the IFL program identified the following observed outcomes among, or to the benefit of, their learners and attributed these changes as a direct result of the IFL program's impact:

- Content more directly relates to program

- Confidence boost observed

- Observed better and more stable employment and social connections

- Reduced anxiety observed

- Increased familiarity with relevant materials

- If learner is struggling, now easier to identify why and provide support

- Increased learner success (more learners passing!)

- Higher application-completion rate (fewer questions left blank)

- More variety of resources to better suit different learning styles (i.e., PowerPoint for visual learners, activities for tactile learners, etc.)

- More interactive exercises so learners can practise interpersonal skills and benefit from group learning

Staff working on the front lines of program delivery need to get information about incorporating essential skills into programs, and they need to be able to identify the skills in their own work.

—Participant

- Even adding just a few additional strategies for enhancing foundational learning increased adults' competency in navigating day-to-day activities (i.e., better time management, budgeting, etc.).

- The more foundational learning skills are embedded, the less the onus lies on the learners to identify tasks as a challenge—the opportunity for learning exists without needing to be requested.

- Decreased facilitator-to-learner ratio allowed for greater time with facilitator (learners noticed and commented on this).

Mentors

Participants who participated in the IFL program identified that the mentorship aspect of the IFL program was integral to learning the principles of essential skills and literacy practices as well as being able to apply their learning within their practice. Participants identified the following key outcomes as a result of receiving the guidance and teachings of a mentor:

- Benefit of having mentor observe program facilitation and teaching style

- Site-specific advice and guidance was invaluable

- Mentors made themselves very available and accessible

- Practical solutions

- Supported staff in a non-directive way, resulting in co-learning by both staff and mentor

- Opportunity to engage in conversational analysis with an LES specialist was invaluable

- Identifying and prioritizing needs of learners taught staff how to later independently identify learner needs

- Assistance in developing new training workshops (for learners and staff) to respond to those needs

- Opportunity to develop self as a facilitator

- Opportunity for reflection and "far less misguided ambition"

- Having someone to bounce ideas off, create new resources with, and troubleshoot with.

The participants were not the only beneficiaries of the IFL program's mentorship

Some of our material is supplied by an outside source and we are unable to change some written content, however, we can change *how* we deliver the material and facilitate the session.

—Participant

process. Mentors identified how they also experienced a great deal of benefit as participants in

the mentorship process, and also identified that they were situated as learners in some regard.

Mentors identified the following outcomes as a result of their role in the program:

- ➢ Learned a great deal while engaged in this process

- ➢ Realized the importance of being able to build relationships

- ➢ Felt valued in helping participants explore and apply skills

- ➢ Struggled at times to balance time constraints

- ➢ Challenged to embed learning with high staff turnover and limited staff
  participating in the IFL program

- ➢ Had to find creative ways to implement change/learning when often limited by
  organizational constraints and/or standards

- ➢ Observed two distinct areas of change: organization and personal

- ➢ Humbled to be situated as a learner (i.e., how to be a mentor, learning about the
  organization, the participant's facilitation, content, etc.)

- ➢ Many participants struggled with differentiating between content and skills

- ➢ Gained a greater understanding of the LES community as a result of being a
  mentor

- ➢ Felt a depth had been added to their own practice

➢ Felt the need to reflect on one's own practice, facilitation, and skills as a result of participating.

SUSTAINING POSITIVE OUTCOMES

The advising group played an integral role in evaluating the IFL program. The evaluators met with the advising group on two different occasions, once shortly after the program's commencement and again at the program's close. The advising group members were provided with written documentation of the evaluators' most recent observations — the discussions were centred within sustaining the IFL program's positive outcomes in the short term and in the long term. The advising group identified certain considerations that will sustain the IFL program's positive outcomes:

- Need to pay attention to how people are talking about IFL, essential skills, and literacy

- Need to nurture noticing how many skills it takes to complete a task (we stop noticing/being aware of certain skills required once we have mastered a skill)

- Increasing accessibility of the IFL program: What if IFL workshops were offered continuously for no or little cost, open to the non-profit community? And once participants had completed all four workshops they would be eligible to apply for the mentorship program?

- Need to increase community access to learning about IFL because those who could not commit to a mentor would still learn about IFL

- Need to connect the formal education programs (i.e., Mount Royal non-profit studies) to IFL so that up-and-coming practitioners and non-profit workers are aware of IFL.

The advising group also speculated about the potential of an IFL community of practice made up of IFL alumni and advising group members. They spoke of wanting to see people who were participants in IFL become mentors.

INTERPRETATION

The data demonstrate a variety of observed benefits and learning as a result of the IFL program's second wave. It was made apparent by all parties involved—participants, agencies, and mentors—that the IFL program offers a significant learning opportunity for community agencies. A majority of participants identified the workshops as being extremely informative, however it was obvious in the data that the mentorship process significantly increased the

Staff training is key because we fall back into old habits in order to get the work done, and we need to practise, reflect, and apply what we've learned repeatedly before we will make a lasting change. —Participant

opportunities to embed lessons learned into everyday practice, thus increasing the chances

that the positive outcomes resulting from participants' involvement in the IFL program would

be sustained. Participants identified a desire to learn more, suggesting additional workshops

should be offered to explore embedding foundational learning skills with particular population

groups (i.e., Aboriginals, people with disabilities, etc.) or in building on the foundational

principles currently taught in the workshop segment of the IFL program (i.e., offer introductory

learning, then enhanced concepts relating to the same topic).

Throughout the program, many participants consistently identified time, funding, and

organizational limitations (i.e., policy, staff turnover) as the three most significant barriers to

successful participation in the IFL program. Mentors expressed a great appreciation for

participating in the mentorship process and appreciated being able to take a significant amount

of time with participants on-site at the participant's agency. The most problematic aspects of

the mentorship process that mentors identified were staff turnover rates, not having

supervisory staff invested in the mentees' learning (i.e., not supporting additional time to

integrate IFL learning), and participants struggling to know the difference between content and

skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following a cumulative analysis of the findings, the evaluators make the following

recommendations:

Recommendation	Justification	Possible Implementation
Increase investment of participants (and supervisors)	Participants and their mentors were concerned that commitment was limited/impeded by a lack of agency support.	• Charge a small fee • Increase communication to agency supervisors to ensure clear understanding of commitment required for participation • Host information sessions for supervisory staff to convey commitment responsibilities • Get approval for accreditation so that participants receive credit for their learning • Provide completion certificate with attendance expectations
Increase number of workshops offered	Participants identified a need to learn more about implementing foundational learning with targeted populations (i.e., Aboriginal people, English as an Additional Language Learners, people with disabilities) and additional learning on each topic.	• Provide optional workshops on specific learning techniques with targeted populations/learning styles • Integrate more population-specific learning techniques (i.e., plain language in the Aboriginal learning context) • Create a second series of workshops for "graduates" of the first set of workshops to build on its concepts • Create an additional workshop to focus on areas that are more difficult to comprehend (i.e., content vs. skill) • Offer workshops on an ongoing basis or several times per year and allow participants to attend topic-specific sessions or as a refresher
Allow a certain number of community agency staff to attend the IFL workshops without having to commit to the mentorship	Although the mentorship process was praised as being highly beneficial, there were several participants who stated that more of their co-workers would have been able to come had they not been required to commit to the mentorship process. If there are multiple staff attending and the mentor	• Create a "drop-in" series version of the IFL workshops • Reserve a number of seats during the IFL program for non-mentored participants to attend • Offer to provide select workshops to agencies as professional development (particularly to agencies who

	later works with at least one of the staff on-site, the potential opportunities to embed IFL learning remains the same while increasing the number of participants who can attend.	have a staff member participating in the mentorship program to increase agency support) • Allow "drop-in" participants to apply for mentorship once they have completed all workshops in the series
Create an IFL community of practice	Participants, mentors, and the advising group saw a need to bond and build the collective knowledge of past years' IFL participants.	• Host an annual IFL reunion for IFL alumni • Create an on-line forum for IFL alumni to share how they are implementing what they've learned from the IFL program • Invite IFL alumni to train to become future mentors • Integrate a peer-observation component into the IFL program (i.e., each participant must attend another participant's workshop in an agency other than their own)
Build partnerships to enhance IFL	The advising group identified that the IFL program should be made known to academic institutions like Mount Royal's Non-Profit Studies or University of Calgary's Teaching in Adult Education program	• Engage practicum students from local academic institutions (e.g., students in Non-Profit Studies, teaching, and social work) to increase academic institutional connection to the IFL program • Present on the IFL program to faculty and students at academic institutions • Offer students at local academic institutions the opportunity to observe a workshop
Strengthen and build on the success of the mentorship program	Participants identified the mentorship process as integral to solidifying their learning in the IFL program.	• Offer follow-up meetings with the mentor six months following the program end date • Increase the amount of interaction between mentor and participant (i.e., extend duration of mentorship term) • Document some of the successes experienced by the mentors and mentees to use as a resource in future IFL

		programs
		• Invite IFL alumni to become future mentors in the IFL program
Increase experiential learning within the workshop	Nearly 50 percent of the participants identified that they enjoyed bringing documents from their agency into the workshop to critique and that they would have enjoyed further hands-on activities like this.	• Find a way to integrate hands-on experience (i.e., working with a document, modelling facilitation skills) into other workshops • Host a peer-editing workshop where participants are encouraged to bring a variety of different documents and the workshop is centred on editing each other's documents (expanding upon the plain language workshop) • Create an on-line forum for IFL participants and alumni to share documents, peer edit, or demonstrate the implementation of a new document (based on IFL learning)

CONCLUSION

The Integrating Foundational Learning program has successfully integrated essential skills and literacy practices into community programs serving adults. There were a number of reported learner-related outcomes which indicate that, overall, the IFL program is of great benefit to learners and that, despite challenges of time, funding limitations, and organizational challenges, learners felt both large- and small-scale changes within community organizations they were accessing. All of the practitioners who participated in the IFL program reported an increase in their sense of competency in essential skills and literacy practices. They appreciated the IFL program and identified the mentorship process as integral to their learning. A number of participants, mentors, and advising group members involved in the IFL program identified the need for a forum to carry forward the learning gained from IFL; they did not want to "put the learning down" (participant).

It's been a great learning process. My knowledge in the area was limited at the beginning, so there have been lots of great things to learn!
—Participant

REFERENCE

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