Integrating Foundational Learning: A Training and Mentoring Project for Community Organizations Working with Adult Learners

The Integrating Foundational Learning (IFL) project is an innovative training initiative designed to educate and mentor staff in community agencies on how to better integrate essential skills and literacy practices into their program activities.

In 2010, Calgary Learns identified a "specific need for training and mentoring of funded agency staff in two categories of funded programs: Community issues and Employability Enhancement. These programs offer meaningful learning opportunities to adult

Image from IFL Phase II: Stories of change. Project results and case studies.

learners and intuitively meet foundational learners at their skill levels" (Peters and Messaros 2011, 2). The result was the IFL project.

In our conversation, Calgary Learns Executive Director Nancy Purdy shared how the IFL project grew from an idea to a project entering its fourth year:

> Many adults with literacy challenges don't enroll in literacy programs. However, many are attracted to other community programs such as a parenting class, or an employment program at the drop-in centre because these programs will help them move forward. There are a number of programs in our community that are working with foundational learners. [1] We realized that we really have to integrate literacy and essential skills into those programs when they naturally fit and help organizations realize they can enhance the learning of their program participants. This was the original start of the IFL project: to extend literacy beyond a [traditional] literacy program and help learners in a variety of programs.   (interview with author)

Literacy Alberta delivered the first round of the project (funded by Calgary Learns) which ran from September 2010 to October 2011 and worked with seven agencies in the Calgary area.[2] The second round (with funding from an anonymous donor) ran from

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[1] "Foundational learning refers to the basic skills or competencies adults require to fully participate in life: the ability to participate as neighbours and citizens, have satisfying employment and prepare to pursue further learning" (Calgary Learns qtd. in Peters and Messaros 2011, 2).

[2] Literacy Alberta is a provincial literacy organization providing support, resources, tools, and professional development for literacy practitioners, learners, tutors, and employers across Alberta. http://www.literacyalberta.ca/

July 2012 to December 2013. Terri Peters has been a project manager and facilitator for the project for the past three and a half years. She describes the focus of the project like this:

> The IFL project is focused on working with adult learning organizations (not adult literacy programs) who are working with foundational learners. Its intent is to provide skills for staff (facilitators, coordinators, front-line workers) to understand their work differently in terms of literacy and essential skills. For most of them, their program delivery is content based. The learners are coming to learn information about a particular topic, for example the Multiple Sclerosis Society or the Canadian Mental Health Association Art of Friendship class or participating in a community kitchen program...[3] We help the facilitators and coordinators to think beyond the content they're delivering to what skills are embedded within the content. We move them from thinking about their programs as content and knowledge to thinking of them as content, knowledge, and skills.

Terri also spoke about the necessity of the project being learner centred, which in this case means organization centred. She says this about the learning process:

> I see learning as transactional and transformational. Transactional in that the learner [in this case the organization] transacts with others to do the learning. The transaction is side by side, not top down. Organizations learned from each other during the training. The transformational part comes from Paulo Freire's work.[4] The whole point of adult learning is for the learner/organization to use the information in ways that will transform their own lives.

The project activities include:

- Teaching organizations' program facilitators what literacy and essential skills are;
- Observing the programs to see which literacy and essential skills they already include;
- In discussion with facilitators, deciding which literacy and essential skills would be best to teach to their learners;
- Teaching facilitators literacy and essential skills strategies they can embed into their current training/education;
- Mentors helping the facilitators embed the literacy and essential skills and reflect on their facilitation and the content they teach. (Peters and Messaros 2011, 3)

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[3] The Canadian Mental Health Association's Calgary Peer Options program provides group support where adults with a mental illness can increase their health and well-being by reducing isolation and building social skills. See http://calgary.cmha.ca/programs-and-services/peer-options/ for more information.
[4] Paulo Freire, renowned Brazilian educator, theorist, and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

Community participants engage in four workshops: Introduction to Literacy and Essential Skills, Introduction to Learning Styles and Plain language, Assessment and Evaluation, and Facilitation Techniques. In addition to offering extensive training for staff, the workshops also ensure that participants are carefully matched with mentors (adult learning and literacy specialists). This proved to be instrumental in helping organizations look at their practices. "An outside person can look at your program, ask you questions, and help you think about your program differently… The mentors for the IFL project were chosen not only because they had a literacy and adult learning background, but they also understood the program content and topics well," Terri explained.

Successes and Innovations in the IFL Project

Programs and organizations incorporated the new learning into their programs in many different ways depending upon organizational capacity, staff experience, and programming needs. Terri said that "Up front, the one thing most of the programs took from the training was the education on learning styles and plain language. They began thinking carefully about how they speak and write so that it's useful for the learners and isn't full of jargon or words we assume learners will know."

Image from IFL Phase II: Stories of change. Project results and case studies.

Other organizations used what they'd learned about plain language to help them analyze and improve their intake process.

> We no longer rely completely on our written referral form. Our mentor has guided us with a literacy-conscious approach to ensure that our learners are able to complete the process successfully. We have a shorter, simpler form and combine that with a second stage conversational interview. Our mentor suggested we ask the more difficult questions orally rather than list them on the form. Because of this format, more people are invited to come in for a face-to-face intake, which allows assessment in a relaxed, informal environment. Writing sensitive material can be intimidating to some clients with limited literacy (reading and writing) skills. A small percentage of our learners speak and write English only as a second language. We want to be sensitive to our learners' comfort in communicating. Receiving information through both mediums enables us to assess learners' fit in our program. We can assess their skill level tactfully, eliminating much

anxiety. (Canadian Mental Health Association Peer Options program, qtd. in Peters and Messaros 2011, 6)

Some organizations redesigned their entire programs following their experience with the IFL project. For example, Momentum reshaped some of their start-up financial literacy and small business training.[5] "They recognized a gap between one entry level program and the next program to which learners were being promoted. They also recognized that not enough time was spent developing the essential skills required to be successful in the programs and in the students' small business. As a result, Momentum created three classes to replace the original two to better address the needs of the students and enhance their success in their businesses" (Peters and Messaros 2011, 5).

> We knew we had an increase in participation from foundational learners in our programs. We knew our programs were struggling to meet their needs. The IFL project helped us identify the gaps in training and gave us the courage and the tools to redesign the programs. (Momentum staff qtd. in Peters and Messaros 2011, 5)

Whether they were experienced facilitators or new in their positions, working with local or national organizations, participants were able to incorporate new learning from the facilitation workshops. Terri says that

> For some programs, the content they deliver can't be changed — it's part of a national standard. However, they could change how they deliver the content. The IFL project gave them tools to deliver it differently, to be more aware of pausing, to ask learners questions, to talk to learners not only to deliver content, but to engage with learners.

Participants spoke about having "an increased understanding of the importance of formally or informally assessing learners in terms of Literacy and Essential Skills competencies before moving forward (to be able to gear their presentation)" (Gardner and Witkowskyj 2014, 8).

Non-profit staff also identified many benefits and positive outcomes for their learners after completing the IFL project, and attributed these to participation in the project. Namely:

- Observed better and more stable employment and social connections
- Increased learner success (more learners passing!)
- More variety of resources to better suit different learning styles (i.e., PowerPoint for visual learners, activities for tactile learners)
- More interactive exercises so learners can practise interpersonal skills and benefit from group learning

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[5] Momentum works with low-income learners in the areas of financial literacy, small business development, micro loans, and money management. See http://www.momentum.org/home for their full range of services.

- 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.) (Gardner and Witkowskyj 2014, 11-13)

The IFL project has been offered twice and proven effective for a wide range of non-profit organizations and programs including:

First Phase: the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Calgary Workers' Resource Centre, Canadian Mental Health Association (Peer Options Program), Deaf and Hard of Hearing Society (Family-Focused American Sign Language Program), Families Matter, Momentum, SCOPE (Integrated Community Kitchen Program)

Second Phase: CanLearn Society (Magic Carpet Ride and Learning Starts at Home programs), Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada (Support Services), Calgary Public Library (Digital Literacy and Community Learning Advocation: Careers), Momentum (Business Basics, StartSmart, and Train-the-Trainer), SCOPE (Integrated Community Kitchen), the Drop-In Centre (Employment Services Training), and Youville Recovery Residence for Women (New Beginnings Group Residential Program)

Mentorship Was Key to Success in the IFL Project

Mentors were a critical component of the project. Terri recruited mentors who had a background in adult learning, adult literacy, and/or working with individuals with developmental disabilities. Each organization was assigned a mentor who was responsible for observing a workshop to learn about the organization, as well as helping the staff think about how to incorporate the learning from the workshops into their daily work and organizational practices (Peters 2014, 6). "Many organizations felt that without a mentor, they would not have been able to see the changes they wanted to make or received support to make them" (Peters 2014, 5).

> Our mentor's flexibility was critical to our success. Her background knowledge was invaluable in creating training that met the needs of the Library... Our mentor was also very receptive to hearing and incorporating our ideas for making the content relevant to Calgary Public Library program subjects and situations. This allowed staff to see immediate tie-in and connections... The training was critical to raising awareness of the integration of foundational learning system-wide, and our learners will benefit far into the future as the discussion continues. (Calgary Public Library staff qtd. in Peters 2014, 6)

Challenges That Came Up During Implementation

As happens with all new programming, the IFL project was not without its challenges. Staff turnover in mid project, resistance to change from learners and co-workers during implementation, and simply getting everyone—staff and mentors—in the same room for training and meetings tested the IFL facilitator's capacity to deliver the project effectively. Identifying and addressing the challenges resulted in creativity and improvements in the way the project activities are offered. For example, instead of

holding large workshop meetings with all the participants, Terri shifted to delivering some of the workshops to staff right in their own organizations. This proved very popular because she could provide specific suggestions about how to integrate the training into their programming during the workshop (Peters and Messaros 2011, 9).

Staff turnover and organizational restructuring is part of any workplace, but it sometimes resulted in the newly trained staff leaving the organization, and new staff not being able to follow through with implementing changes. Terri realized that in future IFL training projects, it is crucial to include supervisors, decision makers, and others in the organization so that the learning has greater impact and longevity (Peters 2014, 18).

Future Directions

Both Terri Peters (Project Facilitator) and Nancy Purdy (Executive Director of Calgary Learns) want to use the learning gained from these first two phases of the Integrating Foundational Learning project to create a sustainable collaborative model that can be recreated in other communities. Nancy envisions IFL as a more fluid type of professional development offered to community organizations.

> In future, it's possible that we will have two streams of the program: one with training only (organizations pick and choose which sessions to attend) and one with the training plus mentoring (organizations would commit to attending all the training sessions and be assigned a mentor).

This type of model would provide greater flexibility for organizations to commit as much time and energy as their capacity allows and still receive the training. "Sometimes instructors have only one session with their learners. These one-time workshops are a different kind of program so you can't make the same type of [in-depth] change. But the facilitation training, for example, might be a really good piece for these educators to pick up some strategies," Nancy explains.

Both Terri and Nancy emphasize that one of the really important side benefits of the IFL project is the opportunity for creating partnerships and collaborations. Organizations work alongside each other during the workshops. "This in turn helps foster relationships, breaking down some of the barriers. People start seeing the fit where they might be able to work together," Nancy says.

Alberta's Social Policy Framework includes community collaboration as part of the roles and responsibilities for the non-profit and voluntary sector. Specifically, the policy encourages community organizations to collaborate with one

Image from IFL Phase II: Stories of change. Project results and case studies.

another, sharing knowledge and raising awareness, assist one another to develop their own place-based response, and work with other non-profit and voluntary sector organizations, and foundations around shared interests and building system capacity (Government of Alberta 2013, 16).

The Integrating Foundational Learning project fulfills all three roles within the community literacy landscape — providing opportunities for sharing knowledge, assisting communities to develop their own response to the needs of foundational learners, and building system capacity within non-profit organizations. Terri and Nancy are hopeful about securing funding to carry the project forward.

References

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