

**Evaluation of "The Cutting Edge,"
A National Workplace Literacy Program Project
at El Paso Community College**

1993-1995

**Evaluation Report Prepared by
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Executive Summary

From information gathered at three points in 1994 and 1995, the evaluator prepared this report about the 1993-1995 cycle of "The Cutting Edge," the workplace education program operated by El Paso Community College with funding from the National Workplace Literacy Program. Summarized below are the evaluator's findings and recommendations:

Project goals

Project staff focused on two major goals:

- To field-test and refine curricula in a number of workplace sites.
- To prepare a number of products and services -- and mechanisms for disseminating them -- once the federal funding ended.

These goals were appropriate, in keeping with the research-and-development purpose of the federal grant.

What was achieved

Field-testing: A number of factors (including reductions in project staff and non-education-related changes going on within field-site companies) made field-testing difficult. Nonetheless, EPCC staff persisted. They became more "customer-oriented," asking sites what they needed. Staff then designed new curricula, revised curricula developed under previous federal grants, trained instructors, and implemented instruction (including shorter-term "seminars") purposely geared more closely to the interests (e.g., "TQM") and time constraints of host sites. This field-testing reached approximately 72 percent of the learners called for in the proposal, a commendable number given the limited time which the companies appeared willing to give to employee education.

Dissemination: EPCC has essentially met the goals of preparing 144 hours of Basic Skills modules and 144 hours of Communications modules, with accompanying videos and instructional guides. Staff also prepared 15 hours of

math modules and a series of six teacher-training videotapes. Staff have been disseminating these products via conference presentations, by writing the model into other proposals, via electronic listserves, and by institutionalizing the model in the College's new Literacy and Workforce Development Center. The project's largest corporate partner has also adopted many of the elements of the project model into the corporate education strategy being implemented in their plants nationwide.

The quality of the products is high, based on extensive research and revisions; using video technology in innovative ways; and providing a user-friendly, flexible format adaptable by instructors to various contexts. The dissemination mechanisms are also outstanding in their variety and in the likelihood that they will enable the field to learn from the project's valuable experience.

Key program components

Curriculum: EPCC has developed high-quality, innovative curricula geared to the evolving needs of U.S. workplaces. The curricula are in keeping with research done in the field sites and elsewhere in the adult education and workplace education fields. The curricula also use video technologies in innovative ways.

EPCC's experience showed the need for the full range of stakeholders to be involved in the curriculum development process. EPCC responded to that need by creating a curriculum process which places control for the learning process in the hands of instructors and learners. It encourages them -- with other stakeholders -- to figure out what needs to be learned, bring in literacy tasks and materials to focus on, and monitor progress in thoughtful ways. This was a conscious shift away from a more-traditional perspective which views curriculum as a series of prepackaged lessons.

Communication with partners (site development): The project underscored the need for mechanisms (e.g., a site coordinator and planning team) to facilitate clear communication among project stakeholders. Such mechanisms enable all to have input in goal-setting and in the design, implementation, and monitoring of project activities. This ensures that the project is responsive to changing site needs and conditions and that stakeholders stay invested in the project.

Stakeholders must also recognize, however, that companies and unions are under pressure from other non-education factors which can distract stakeholders from giving the attention required to create and sustain a high quality education program. This suggests that education providers have procedures and authority to assess stakeholder readiness to participate in a workplace education project and, if that readiness doesn't exist, to withdraw from that site.

Coordination of program components: The project demonstrated the need for education providers to have one or more staff with the expertise and time to coordinate and support the many components of an effective workplace education

program. Such coordination also requires a collaborative structure to facilitate decision-making among education staff members.

Assessment: EPCC staff put great emphasis on developing a variety of assessment mechanisms which emphasize dialogue between learners and facilitators and which merge assessment with learning. These tools, organized in portfolios, enabled learners and facilitators to reflect on learner goals and progress and shape learning activities accordingly. Such mechanisms, however, require facilitators interested and able to use them.

Future such projects might borrow from these learner portfolio tools and create similar mechanisms by which other stakeholders (e.g., managers, supervisors, and union representatives) can monitor whether and how learners are transferring what they learned back to the job.

Staff development: The project put great emphasis on staff development, relying heavily on staff meetings and on-the-job involvement in developing and trying out new ideas. The project showed the value of careful selection of staff and of providing the supports needed to ensure continuity of staff and, thereby, continuous improvement of practices. Education providers should develop clear strategies for staff development to enable staff to create an internal "learning team" which mirrors the kind of learning they are promoting at the site level.

Dissemination: EPCC staff have put together not only high-quality products to disseminate but a number of mechanisms for disseminating them once the federal grant ends. This emphasis on dissemination is in keeping with the research-and-development purpose of the federal grant and is relatively unique in the workplace education field.