

# **Organizational and individual assessment: Decision-making tools for workplace educators**

by  
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## **Redefining "assessment" in workplace education**

### **How it has been used until now**

"Workplace literacy" attracted the attention of public policy makers, the media, employers, unions, researchers, and adult educators beginning in the late 1980s. From that attention came pilot projects aimed at developing resources for this new field.

During this period, workplace educators were increasingly urged to develop curricula and assessment tools geared to the contexts they worked in. At the same time -- and seemingly in contradiction to the push for context-specific assessment -- practitioners were also being pushed to use assessment tools (especially standardized achievement tests) borrowed from academic settings. This pressure came from decision makers who perhaps didn't have the time or background to understand the need for more-customized measures.

Those "academic-type" assessment tools were, however, not geared to either the particular literacy tasks found in workplace contexts or to the outcomes which stakeholders actually expected from workplace programs. Data resulting from such non-contextualized instruments did produce "numbers" which resembled the statistics which public- and private-sector decision makers like to refer to. However, these were numbers which really didn't get to the heart of clarifying whether learners were actually learning and using skills that were truly meaningful.

### **New approaches to workplace education and assessment**

Since the early 1990s, a growing cadre of workplace educators has been developing new forms of workplace education and, with them, new forms of "assessment." These tend to share certain common assumptions, including:

- *Worker productivity and quality of worklife are shaped by a number of variables, of which employee basic skills is just one.*
- *Attempts to improve worker performance must take into account not just what employees know and can do but other working conditions. These conditions include both the "software and hardware" of the organization: how decisions are made and rewarded, the clarity and accuracy of technical training and other*

*documents, communication patterns (especially in multicultural settings), and the quality of equipment used. Upfront and ongoing workplace and individual needs assessments are needed to identify organizational and worker goals for self-improvement, factors which inhibit or support attainment of those goals, and steps which the organization and individuals can take to meet their goals using available resources.*

- *An employee basic skills initiative is just one of a number of self-improvement efforts an organization and individual workers might get involved in. Also, an employee basic skills effort might include several different kinds of activities, ranging from longer-term "courses" and shorter-term "workshops" for groups, to individual tutorials and mentoring relationships, to self-study (using texts, computers, and video- and audio-tapes).*
- *To ensure that learners actually use (transfer) what they are learning in the educational program back in real-life contexts on the job and off (and thereby get in the time on task they need to master those skills), others with whom the learners interact (e.g., supervisors, union stewards, co-workers, technical trainers) should be prepared to facilitate that transfer process. Supervisors and technical trainers, for example, might need to be shown how to communicate better in meetings and/or with workers of a different language background. These steps can build a context which enables workers to use the skills covered in the basic education program.*
- *Learning is thus "holistic" and "integrated" in several ways. Basic education is not a "stand-alone," but one of several initiatives for organizational and individual development. Classes, tutorials, computer-assisted instruction, and other learning opportunities are not isolated entities, but part of an integrated learning-and-continuous-improvement strategy.*
- *Effective workplace learning respects and builds on what workers, as accomplished adults, already know and are motivated by.*

Within such an approach to workplace education and development, "assessment" is not just a matter of monitoring learner progress from one "grade level" to another. Rather, assessment is part of a larger decision-making process in which stakeholders set goals, plan and implement strategies for meeting them, monitor progress, and decide what happens next.

Within that decision-making cycle, assessment clarifies the goals, needs, and abilities of not just the individual (as is common in more-traditional approaches to education) but the organization, as well. This dual-focused assessment is ongoing, continually feeding information to decision-makers, who use it to set strategies and keep the effort on track.

This approach merges best practices from adult literacy education ("whole-language, integrated learning," "collaborative and participatory decision-making") and from organizational development ("planning based on assessment of customer needs," "continuous improvement through careful monitoring").

## **A work in progress**

This dual approach to assessment is currently being developed in "Collaborative Learning for Continuous Improvement," a seven-site workplace education program managed by the New York State Education Department and funded by the National Workplace Literacy Program. The project is attempting to develop curriculum and related practices to (1) help workers develop the knowledge and skills they need in a problem-solving, team-oriented environment and (2) help work organizations restructure themselves in ways which maximize the potential of employees (ABC CANADA; Jurmo, 1995b; Jurmo, 1995c). Organizational and individual assessment -- and the related function of program evaluation -- are central to this model of workplace learning and change.

Each site is encouraged to interpret the details of the program model in ways appropriate to its particular "culture" and context. The following are guidelines related to assessment and evaluation which sites are experimenting with:

- Create an education planning team. Each site is managed by an "education planning team" (EPT) composed of representatives of various stakeholder groups. These include higher- and supervisory-level managers, union representatives, learners, and education providers.
- Conduct a workplace needs assessment. The EPT carries out a workplace needs assessment (WNA) which clarifies (1) what stakeholders hope the organization will achieve in terms of improved productivity and quality of work life for employees, (2) factors which block or support progress toward those goals, (3) whether and where employee skills and knowledge are inhibiting or supporting progress, and (4) what steps the organization might take to overcome obstacles and build on its strengths to improve the organization. Such an organizational assessment provides the EPT with a basis for deciding whether and where a basic skills initiative might fit into the organization's larger plans (Folinsbee and Jurmo, 1994).

*One EPT, for example, found that workers needed to better understand the "big picture" of the economic context within which the company and employees operated. Workers also needed to improve the communication skills required for team problem-solving. And the EPT felt that workers should orient themselves to a new way of approaching "education" and "learning" as adults. These broad needs became the focal points for the first round of learning activities.*

- Conduct individual assessments. With a framework of education-related needs and activities in hand, education staff conduct an initial round of individual assessment activities. Through interviews, simulations, and other confidential data-gathering activities, learners clarify for the educators what they personally would like to achieve in a new learning effort, and what their current literacy-related behaviors, abilities, and needs are. From these individualized assessments, educators and learners map out learning plans for individuals as well as clusters of needs for group learning activities. These initial individualized assessments are packaged in portfolios for each learner, to serve as baseline evidence against which future evidence (collected during interim and end-of-cycle phases of the program) can be compared (Fingeret, 1993, Jurmo, 1995a; MacKillop, 1994).

*In its WNA, one EPT had identified improving workers' abilities to handle various forms of "paperwork" as a focal point for the first round of instruction. To develop a system of individual portfolios, managers identified some fifteen common uses of written documentation. From existing reports and forms completed by workers, the managers selected "model" versions which exemplified close-to-ideal clarity and accuracy. These became standards against which all employee documentation was to be measured.*

*The instructor then asked all 35 production workers to collect samples of their own documentation for two weeks. They were to avoid artificially "improving" their work in any way and instead simply fill out forms as they usually do and place copies in a working folder. They were assured that their folders would be kept confidential and would be used by the instructor to clarify their strengths and limitations related to documentation.*

*The instructor used the resulting evidence to design customized learning activities (one-to-one tutorials and some small-group workshops around common learning objectives) which focused directly on the needs of each learner. Such customization allowed the most efficient use of the busy workers' time, avoiding forcing them to sit through classes not focused directly on their specific needs.*

*In another site (which wanted to improve workers' listening and "reflective response" abilities), the instructor broke learners into small groups. Each group was asked to draw a picture (an "etching") depicting the organization and its challenges. One group drew a modern, high-tech aircraft cruising along at high altitude, but threatened from below by "missiles" representing various workplace problems. Another depicted a mouse in a maze. By observing the content and process of this small group work, the instructor identified themes to cover in her problem-solving curriculum, as well as strengths and limitations of particular workers to follow up on in the first phase of instruction.*

EPTs are being urged to use the individual portfolios as a forum in which learners and instructors can clarify (1) in what situations they currently are called on to use basic skills, (2) what strategies they use when confronted with those tasks, (3) the impact of their literacy practices on the work organization and on the quality of the workers' lives, and (4) their perceptions and plans related to change and learning. These variables are a mix of the individual assessment and program evaluation criteria developed by Lytle et al (1989) and Kirkpatrick (1987), and adapted by Mikulecky and Lloyd (1993) and others. At this writing, sites are in the early stages of figuring out which of this information to build their portfolios around.

- Tie assessment in with program evaluation. The site-level EPTs and the statewide program's two external evaluators can use the above WNAs and individual portfolios for program evaluation purposes, as well (Sperazi and Jurmo, 1994). Educators can summarize evidence from a number of portfolios to show, for example, what learners are learning and how they are using it. Individual portfolios can thus be used by educators and learners to guide the learning process and by other EPT members and outside evaluators to determine what the program is achieving.

- Create "site portolios." EPTs are extending the above-described "individual portfolio" concept to create "site portfolios." This is a collection of evidence (e.g., a WNA report, artifacts from individual portfolios, summaries of individual gains and needs taken from individual portfolios, minutes of EPT meetings, lesson plans) produced by a site. It can be used for the above-described program evaluation purposes.

## **Lessons learned so far**

These attempts to create new ways of thinking about and "doing" assessment are "works in progress." Here are some lessons learned so far, one year into a three-year project:

Patience and flexible guidelines are needed. These alternative approaches represent potentially more effective ways of "doing" workplace education. However, they are as yet not fully proven or perfected. Stakeholders interested in trying such practices need to inform themselves about the thinking and work which underlie them. They then need to figure out how to make the practices work in their situations. This requires time, patience, creativity, and work.

But because of the newness of these tasks and stakeholders' limited time, those who provide funding and technical assistance need to provide clear, user-friendly guidelines to sites. These guidelines should help sites learn from others' prior experience, and encourage sites to create practices relevant to their evolving conditions.

Staff development is vital. Guidelines should be backed up by a staff development system which carefully selects, trains, and supports (via supervision and compensation) not only the educators involved but other stakeholders, as well. (Supervisors and union stewards, for example, can benefit from customized training to prepare them for the roles they might play in planning, implementing, and monitoring learning activities.)

The New York State project's technical assistance system uses a "practitioner inquiry" model of staff and program development to help sites deal with questions emerging as they attempt to implement the project model. This is done via statewide workshops, site visits and telephone consultations by resource persons, "technical notes" and other print resources, an e-mail link between sites and resource persons, and cross-site peer support. This system is coordinated by a state-level "central planning team" composed of representatives from each site, the project director, a planning consultant, and two outside evaluators.

As a national demonstration project -- and in the spirit of continuous improvement -- those involved in the above project are continually building on, refining, and documenting the practices described here. Those interested in learning from -- and helping us improve -- what we are doing are urged to give us a call.

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## **Bio statement**

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