

Technical Note #1

Collaborative learning for
continuous improvement:

An introduction

New York State Education Department
Workplace Education Project

1994-97

December 1994 edition

CONTENTS

Background	1
Why a "team" approach to workplace education? ...	2
Why use an "education planning team"	2
Why structure learning activities on a "team" basis	3
Why use a "team" approach to collaborate across sites	3
Stakeholders, their needs and interests, and how we'll organize ourselves to respond	5
Whom we hope to serve	5
What the stakeholders want and need	6
What needs to be in place to respond to stakeholders' interests and needs	9

Background

In November 1994, the New York State Education Department began a three-year workplace education project in nine workplaces. Funded by the National Workplace Literacy Program of the U.S. Department of Education, this project was designed to test a "team" approach to workplace education which linked adult education methods to companies attempting to shift toward a "high performance" organizational model.

This Technical Note presents the rationale, stakeholders, and components for such an approach.

Why a "team" approach to workplace education?

We hope to implement a "team" approach in three areas of the project: in site-level education planning teams, in the classroom at each site, and across sites via a statewide resource team. Here is our rationale for doing so:

Since the late 1980s, experience in the fields of workplace education and organizational development indicates:

Why use an "education planning team"

- To succeed, workplace education programs need to have the active involvement of all key stakeholders: worker-learners, managers, supervisors, union representatives, and education providers. Their involvement helps the program to be a true partnership. Through ongoing communication with other stakeholders, education staff can more effectively identify and respond to those stakeholders' interests; in turn, those stakeholders can more easily understand and support the program.
- To facilitate this stakeholder involvement, programs need user-friendly ways of involving busy stakeholders. Just as they need to prepare for their work with learners in the classroom, education staff also need to prepare carefully for how they communicate and work with other stakeholders.
- An education planning team composed of representatives from the various stakeholder groups can provide a forum for communication among stakeholders. A well-organized team can go through a process of needs analysis, goal-setting, planning of education-related activities, implementation of those activities, and ongoing monitoring and fine-tuning.
- This process borrows techniques from the "continuous improvement" approaches to organizational development. By going through a collaborative decision-making process, an educational planning team can:

- Ensure a high-quality, meaningful education initiative;
- Develop skills and relationships which they can apply to other workplace needs.

Why structure learning activities on a "team" basis

- As companies make the transition to a "high performance" model, they want employees who are invested in the continuous improvement of the organization. Employees in this new workplace should understand the organization's goals and take initiative and work in teams to identify and take actions needed to meet those goals. Employees should also invest in their own personal "continuous improvement" through ongoing development of their skills and knowledge. They can do this through participation in education, training, and job enhancement opportunities.
- Worker education activities should be structured to enable workers to develop the perspective, skills, and knowledge they need to participate in the above-described continuous improvement of the organization and themselves.
- To do so, workers and instructors can be organized in "learning teams" which help workers develop the perspective, skills, and knowledge they need through collaborative learning and problem-solving activities. Not only will they develop the "basic skills" needed for the new workplace, they will actually produce products (action plans) which the organization can use to improve workplace operations. Learners can also develop "personal" action plans, strategies for meeting their own personal development goals.

Why use a "team" approach to collaborate across sites

- In keeping with what we are asking stakeholders to do at the site level, we should also view our entire project as a "learning organization." We assume that each site brings much expertise to this project, and we therefore hope that each site will share what it knows with other sites.
- Representatives from each site will therefore work with state-level resource persons to operate as a "resource team." Through ongoing communications (in meetings, via e-mail, via telephone,

etc.) members will share ideas and information and help each other solve problems as they emerge.

Stakeholders, their needs and interests, and how we'll organize ourselves to respond

This is a research and development project. We will be testing the hypothesis that the above-described "team" approach to workplace education can serve the education-related needs of the various stakeholders involved in the project.

But who are those stakeholders? What are their needs and interests? And what, specifically, will we need to put in place to respond to those needs?

In this section, we borrow a planning method developed in the "TQM" approach to organizational development. We clarify whom we hope to serve, what their needs and interests are, and what processes (procedures, program components) we need to have in place. By laying out our assumptions about these key elements of the project at the beginning of the project, we will start off with a clear understanding of where we're headed and what we will have to do to get there.

Whom we hope to serve

For us, a "stakeholder" is an individual or institution which will be making an investment (of money, time, or other resources) in the project and will be expecting something in return. This project has "stakeholders" at a number of levels. They include:

At the seven sites:

Employers/managers

- Higher-level production and HRD mgrs.
- Supervisors

Union representatives

Workers:

- Participants
- Other workers

Education providers

- Administrators
- Instructors

At the state level:

State-level resource persons
New York State Education Department

At the national level:

National Workplace Literacy Program (the funder)
Others in the workplace education field

Internationally:

Workplace educators in Canada and elsewhere

What the stakeholders want and need

To adequately understand what these various stakeholders want and need, we will need to do ongoing assessments of organization and individual needs. At the beginning of the project, we speculate that the stakeholders might want the following from the project:

At the seven sites:

Employers/managers

- Higher-level production and human resource development (HRD) managers:

Production managers want employees who can participate fully in new work processes (e.g., team problem-solving and decision-making, record-keeping, following work orders . . .), properly use equipment, and comply with safety and other regulations. They also want the education program to not interfere with production.

Human resource development managers want people who can participate in further training and new jobs, understand benefits and new opportunities open to them, have good morale and contribute to good morale. These HRD managers

also want the program to not interfere with production.

- Supervisors

Supervisors want employees who can contribute to both production and morale in the supervisors' respective departments. Supervisors also want the program to not interfere with production.

Union representatives

Union representatives want employees who fulfill the needs of both production and HRD managers. They also want employees to be able to have a good quality of work life (as indicated by high wages, good benefits, opportunities for promotion and training, good morale and job satisfaction -- a feeling of self-worth and being part of a workplace community). The program should also reinforce employee loyalty to and involvement with the union.

Workers

- Participants: Learners want to gain in terms of their own personal development, both on and off the job. The program should also not in any way jeopardize participants' job security or self-esteem.
- Other workers: Other workers not enrolled in the program might want to see what the impact of this program is on participating workers. (If it's positive, other workers might sign up next time.) These co-workers also want the program to not interfere with production.

Education providers

- Administrators: The administrators of the education-providing institution want to learn more about how to provide a good workplace education program, to make the agency more marketable. Administrators also want to provide good work for instructors.

- Instructors: Instructors want to serve workers and their communities, as well as the companies sponsoring the program. They also want to learn more about how to provide a good workplace education program, to make themselves more marketable.

At the state level:

State-level resource persons and NYSED: Want to learn how to provide a good workplace education program, to make this program a success, to ensure continued funding, to make a contribution to the field, and to make their agencies/themselves more marketable.

At the national level:

National Workplace Literacy Program: NWLP wants to ensure that the project is successful, to be sure federal money is properly spent. Wants to learn about how to provide effective workplace education, to ensure continued funding and to make a contribution to the field.

Others in workplace education field: Want to learn how to provide effective workplace education, to make themselves more marketable.

Internationally:

Workplace educators in Canada and elsewhere: Want to learn how various education practices (many also being developed in their countries) play out in U.S. settings. They thereby develop their understanding of what is required to provide effective workplace education, and in the process make themselves more marketable.

What needs to be in place to respond to stakeholders' interests and needs

At the site level

Local-level education planning teams are to serve the needs of local stakeholders. They will do so by implementing all components of the planning cycle shown on the chart on page 11.

At the state level

The state-level resource team is to serve the local-level education planning teams (not vice versa). It is assumed that the local-level teams come to the project with significant expertise, but will need to expand and fine-tune what they know to make this model work. The state-level resource persons are here to help local teams do their work, which is to serve the local stakeholders.

The state-level resource team is composed of representatives from each site and a number of state-level resource persons. These resource persons will include the project director and advisors on several program components: workplace needs assessment, individual needs assessment, curriculum design, and evaluation.

The state-level resource persons will:

- Put infrastructure in place:
 - Develop, disperse, and account for financial resources;
 - Initiate communications with stakeholders;
- Facilitate planning (goal setting, action planning);
- Provide staff development opportunities, including:
 - An initial workshop (which will focus on team building, workplace needs assessment, curriculum design, and evaluation components in particular)
 - Printed resource materials

- An E-mail and telephone network
- A directory of resource persons in NY State and elsewhere
- Site-level research and development, with subsequent feedback in workshops, etc.
- A second workshop (to develop curricula and prepare evaluation and assessment procedures)
- Other workshops over three years

-- Monitor progress and identify possible ongoing improvements to be dealt with through ongoing staff development and resource development.

What needs to be in place at the site level:
Components of the planning cycle

1. Initial discussions (to identify possible needs and options)
2. Creating the education planning team
3. Workplace needs assessment
4. Developing a workplace development strategy
5. Individual needs assessment
6. Staff development
7. Planning of basic skills activities
8. Planning of an evaluation strategy
9. Scheduling and preparing facilities
10. Learner recruitment
11. Implementation of basic skills activities
12. Ongoing monitoring of progress (formative evaluation)
13. End-of-cycle evaluation and decision-making