*Technical Note #4*

# Individual assessment: Clarifying learner needs, abilities, interests, and progress

*"Collaborative Learning for Continuous Improvement"*

*New York State Education Department Workplace Education Project*

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## *Introduction*

### Why this Tech Note is being written

This Tech Note is provided as a resource to education planning teams (EPTs) participating in the federally-funded workplace education project run by the New York State Education Department. It is also for other workplace educators interested in developing new, collaborative forms of practice.

As its title suggests, readers can use this publication to develop and use appropriate individual assessment instruments. The text builds on the information and experience readers have already gained regarding portfolio assessment and other forms of individual assessment. It responds directly to questions on individual assessment raised by project site coordinators in a May 1995 technical assistance survey. It attempts to show how individual assessment might be linked to other program components, especially workplace needs asessment, curriculum, and evaluation.

### How this Tech Note is being prepared

This Tech Note draws on (1) information already discussed in workshops and handouts within the New York State project, (2) interviews with Jane MacKillop and others with expertise in using alternative assessment tools, (3) interviews with sites to learn how they are dealing with assessment issues, and (4) review of existing documents (articles, guidebooks, etc.) This Tech Note should be seen as a draft, to be revised over the life of the New York State project via input from sites, from the central planning team which coordinates the project, and from other colleagues who share an interest in developing "new and improved" forms of assessment.

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*CHAPTER I*

# *What is "individual assessment" in a collaborative curriculum?*

## How "assessment" has been viewed to date

Until recently in the workplace education field, the term "assessment" has tended to be associated with . . .

*1. a "test" of some kind (either a "standardized" test or one customized to the particular demands of participants' jobs), and/or*

*2. a "literacy task analysis," a procedure for determining the literacy skills required for particular jobs and, subsequently, whether workers in fact possess those skills. Such an analysis would clarify for curriculum developers who needed to learn what to do their jobs better.*

## A new, "collaborative" perspective on workplace education

More recently, workplace educators have developed new approaches to workplace education and, with them, new perspectives on and procedures for assessment. Proponents of one new approach -- which we might here refer to as a "collaborative" approach -- argue that workplace education . . . .

*. . . should be able to prepare workers for not just narrow job tasks in isolated jobs; instead workers need to be able participate actively in a wider range of work responsibilities and understand the larger systems of which they are parts. "Basic skills" is thus not just performing a few reading, writing, and/or math tasks; rather it can include a wide range of competencies required in a number of contexts.*

*. . . should focus not solely on changing individuals but on helping to create a larger organizational context which enables all workers to use their knowledge and skills.*

*. . . should involve all key stakeholder groups -- higher- and supervisory-level managers, union representatives, learners, and education providers -- in program decision-making, to ensure that the joint effort effectively serves those stakeholders' interests. Those interests can include both improvement of the organization and improvement of individual workers' lives.*

*. . . needs to see all program components (e.g., assessment, curriculum, evaluation, staff development, etc.) as integrated, mutually-reinforcing functions guided by similar principles and procedures.*

## Assessment from a collaborative perspective

With these assumptions as a frame of reference, "collaborative" workplace educators are rethinking what "assessment" should look like, in these ways:

- *"<u>Assessment" should be seen as one of several decision-making tools</u> which stakeholders can use to clarify learning goals, map out strategies for meeting those goals, and monitor and refine those strategies. Assessment should thus focus less on "identifying deficits" and more on . . .*
  *. . . <u>clarifying goals and abilities</u> (resources, capacities) of the organization and individuals involved, and on*
  *. . . <u>mapping out strategies</u> for using existing resources (individuals' knowledge and skills and the organization's training and organizational improvement mechanisms) to enable the organization and individuals to improve themselves.*

- *As such <u>assessment has much in common with the monitoring tools used in "total quality management</u>" and related approaches to organizational development which emphasize continuous planning and improvement of operations to meet customer needs.*

• *Because workplace education needs to focus on changing both individuals and organizations, assessment likewise should focus on both individuals and the larger organization. "Assessment" might thus be divided into "individual assessment" and "workplace (organizational) assessment" procedures.*

• *Assessment procedures need to focus on information which stakeholders really need to make decisions at various stages of the learning process, rather than on less-relevant information which distracts stakeholders from what they are really trying to accomplish in their educational efforts.*

• *Assessment procedures should be "user-friendly," use existing information, and make it easy for stakeholders to get involved in program decision-making.*

• *Individual and workplace needs assessments should be integrated with each other and with related functions of program evaluation, curriculum development, and staff development.*

• *For many individuals in a workplace, "assessment" is often associated with "tests," "performance appraisals," and similar situations in which individuals are "judged" or "evaluated." Assessment is thus often seen as a potential threat. Assessment procedures must therefore be presented to learners and other stakeholders as a positive decision-making tool. Those involved must maintain the confidentiality of what is said and avoid using what is said to punish or in any way jeopardize those involved.*

*CHAPTER II*

## *Clarifying the needs, abilities, interests, and progress of individual learners: Tools to use*

### Questions which sites have been asking about individual assessment

The New York State Education Department project has promoted the use of "portfolios" as an assessment tool and provided site representatives with some initial training (via readings and some workshops) in the portfolio concept. Some site representatives already have experience using portfolios, although most of that experience has been in non-workplace settings.

Our May 1995 survey (Jurmo, June 1995) of sites indicated that site coordinators wanted more guidance on how to apply what they already know about portfolios to the particularities of workplace settings. These are the kinds of questions on people's minds abut portfolios -- and individual assessment in general -- at this stage of the project:

- *If we are trying to develop alternatives to standardized tests, what alternatives might we explore? And how might those alternative forms of initial and ongoing assessment "fit" with portfolios? (That is, should those alternative procedures be incorporated into a portfolio or be seen as something separate from portfolios?)*

- *What kinds of assessment information would workplace stakeholders be most interested in? And how can such information be presented in ways that stakeholders are likely to use it?*

- *Is using portfolios feasible in a program which has only limited time available for interaction between learners and facilitators? (That is, can learners and facilitators really afford to spend time developing and discussing portfolios, or should they use that limited time only for "instruction"?)*

This chapter presents some responses to those and related questions, based on input from site representatives, resource persons, and print sources.

## Portfolio as a container for various kinds of assessment procedures and information

We propose that a portfolio should not be seen as a rigid, prescribed assessment procedure. Rather it should be viewed as a vehicle for collecting and using information about learner needs, interests, abilities, and progress; this information should, in turn be used by stakeholders -- learners, facilitators, and others -- to shape learning activities so that agreed-upon goals are met.

This view of portfolios borrows from definitions presented by Hanna Arlene Fingeret and Jane MacKillop in their respective handbooks:

### Hanna Arlene Fingeret

Fingeret begins her book by quoting from another portfolio advocate:

> *. . . The range of items to include in a portfolio is almost limitless but may include written responses to reading, reading logs, selected daily work, pieces of writing at various stages of completion, classroom test, checklists,unit projects, and audio or video tapes, to name a few. The key is to ensure a variety of types of indicators of learning so that teachers., . . . students, and administrators can build a complete picture of the student's development. . . (Valencia, quoted in Fingeret, 1993, page 2).*

Fingeret notes that although "portfolio assessment essentially has to be reinvented in every situation," portfolio is basically a process for learners, facilitators, and others to reflect and make decisions to guide the learning process.

### Jane MacKillop

MacKillop notes that a portfolio contains samples of learner work which teachers and students can review to assess learner progress, using criteria they develop jointly. Portfolios can include data from standardized tests and can also include other types of evidence of learner abilities, interests, and progress.

Portfolio assessment, she says, not only provides information which funders can use but has the added benefits of promoting learner responsibility for learning, documenting learner performance in particular instructional activities, promoting teamwork among learners, and otherwise documents and reinforces good educational practice (MacKillop, 1994, pages 8-12).

## What information do we want to collect?

Individual assessment has many of the same purposes and procedures associated with workplace needs assessment and program evaluation. All three are mechanisms for collecting some kind of information which, in turn, someone will use to make some kind of decision.

When planning any of these three functions, it is important to be clear about what kind of information will be collected. Mikulecky and Lloyd (Mikulecky and Lloyd, 1993, pp.30-32) propose that workplace education evaluations consider adopting a framework developed by Susan Lytle and others (Lytle et al, 1989) in the adult literacy field. That framework looks at the literacy *practices* which learners engage in, the *strategies* (processes) they use to deal with those literacy tasks, their *perceptions* (beliefs) about literacy and learning, and their learning *goals* (plans). That framework tends to focus on the "traditional" basic skills of reading and writing and perhaps oral English.

However, in our New York State project, we are using a broader concept of "basic skills," trying to help learners develop not only the reading, writing, oral English, and math skills they need for their jobs, but problem-solving and other skills which historically might have been categorized as "higher order skills." This broader range of skills which we might choose from is summarized in the SCANS competencies list (cite SCANS summary, and/or put in Appendix).

To complicate matters further, in our New York State project we want to determine not only whether learners are developing skills in the classroom but whether they are actually using them in reality to improve their workplace and/or their own lives.

If we apply Lytle's framework to the broader SCANS-type competencies focused on in our project sites, the following questions might be the "territory" we might explore in our individual assessment activities:

### *For individual assessment:*
### ***Questions around which data-gathering activities might be organized***

*Current SCANS-related practices*

- *In what situations does the learner use selected SCANS skills . . .*
  *. . . at work?*
  *. . . outside work?*

*Current strategies used*

- *Which of those uses of SCANS skills are of particular importance and interest to the learner?*
- *For selected work- and non-work-related tasks, what strategies does the learner use?*
- *What are the strengths and limitations of those strategies?*

*Impacts*

- *When the learner uses the above SCANS skills, what is the impact on . . .*
  *. . . the organization?*
  *. . . the learner?*

*Perceptions about change and learning*

- *What changes is the learner currently facing . . .*
  *. . . at work?*
  *. . . outside work?*
- *What are the learner's plans for dealing with those changes . . .*
  *. . . at work?*
  *. . . outside work?*
- *What if any plans/hopes does the learner have in using education and training to help deal with those changes . . .*
  *. . . at work?*
  *. . . outside work?*

*• What has been the learner's experience to date with education and training?*

*-- What education and training has the learner had . . .*

*. . . at work?*

*. . . outside work?*

*-- What were the strengths and limitations of that experience .*

*. . . at work?*

*. . . outside work?*

Learning goals

*• For the next ___ months, what learning goals/objectives will the learner focus on?*

*• How will the learner monitor progress toward those goals? (What evidence/indicators will he/she collect? How will he/she analyze that evidence and make decisions based on it?)*

Each educational planning team should decide for itself just what kind of information it would like portfolios to generate. The above list of questions is broad, encompassing a number of SCANS competencies typically of concern to workplace education stakeholders.

## When might information be collected?

The above questions might be seen as "questions to get started with" -- information to be collected in an initial round of data-gathering activities. Such information would provide facilitators and learners with a baseline snapshot of learner needs, interests, goals which facilitators can use to shape guide learning activities.

Subsequently, variations on these questions might be asked on a regular basis throughout the life of the program. In a 12-week course, for example, learners might be asked to formally respond to variations of such questions at the end of Week 2 (to allow the instructor to adjust course content), at the end of Week 6 ("a mid-term check-in"), and at the end of the Week 12 (an end-of-course summative assessment). The Week 2 and Week 6 assessments would enable learners and facilitators to refine their plans to respond to new interests, needs, and so forth as they emerge in the course of instruction. The Week 12 summative data-gathering would provide information to include in an end-of-course evaluation and in planning for future learning activities.

Facilitators and learners have to decide how much information to collect, what questions to focus most attention on, and how frequently information should be gathered and analyzed. This decision will depend on how much time facilitators and learners have for assessment.

Regardless of how often information is gathered, portfolios provide a "place" where learners and facilitators can store and then analyze information (evidence) related to the above questions about learner practices, strategies, perceptions, and goals.

## What data-gathering tools might be used?

We have thus proposed:

*1. We view a portfolio as a "container," "vehical," or "storage place" where various kinds of information about the individual learner can be stored and analyzed.*

*2. The information might include evidence of the strategies the learner uses to deal with particular tasks, as well as future learning goals and plans.*

*3. Information should be gathered at several points -- beginning, during, and at the end -- in the cycle of learning activities, to help stakeholders plan, refine, and learn from those activities.*

*4. Learners, facilitators, and other stakeholders decide the specific questions to gather information for at any point in the learning process.*

Given the above, we now need to be clear about the various means we can use to collect the kinds of information to be included in the portfolio. Shown are some examples of data-gathering activities which you might adapt to your own situation.

Note that, whatever, means is used to collect information, emphasis should be placed on procedures which are "user-friendly" (not cumbersome, not intimidating) for both the learner and facilitator and which produce a clear picture of relevant learner abilities and interests. (See Apendix ?? for a discussion of ethnographic data-gathering methods.)

Also note that you might use a number of data-gathering procedures within a single assessment activity. When conducting an initial asessment with a learner, you might, for example, conduct an interview, observe the learner's behavior, and conduct a brief "simulation" in which you ask the learner to suggest solutions to a particular problem.

## *Possible ways to collect information*

*Note: In future drafts, we will expand on the following list and include examples taken from the NY State project sites as well as from reports by Fingeret, MacKillop, Lytle, Wolfe, El Paso Comm. College, Heininger, Medina, Johnson and McBride, et al (including a Canadian participatory assessment procedure.)*

### *Individual interviews*

*Education staff can use personal interviews with individual learners to elicit the above kinds of information prior to, during, or at the end of the program. Learners and facilitators might set up appointments at times outside of regular classroom hours.*

*These meetings might cover not only the specific questions which facilitators need but any other questions the learner might want to cover. Facilitators and learners might make a record of the information discussed on notes, checklists, or other forms and include those records in the learner's portfolio. Some programs have videotaped such interviews and included the videotapes in portfolios, as a visual-and-audio record of learners' responses and abilities at a given point in time (Young, 1994, p. 67).*

### *Questionnaires*

*Learners use questionnaires to respond in writing to the same kinds of questions covered in the above individual interviews. They might be asked to respond to open-ended questions using a narrative format. Or the questions might be more "closed-ended" (e.g., multiple choice, checklists).*

*The former (narrative) format has the advantage of giving the learner the opportunity to demonstrate her writing skills and thinking and experience on a particular question. However, such narratives take time for the facilitator to analyze and don't easily lend themselves to statistical analysis. Conversely, the closed-ended questions can produce quantifiable responses which appeal to audiences looking for numerical evidence of program impact. However, the closed-ended formats tend not to enable the learner to capture the rich details of her thinking or experience.*

## Group discussions

*Either apart from or as part of a classroom session, learners might meet with a facilitator as a group to discuss their interests, uses of SCANS skills, and so forth. This collective input might be recorded on flipcharts or videotape and would serve as a record of the range of individual interests, abilities, needs, etc. represented in the classroom.*

*If noted carefully, the particular feedback given by individuals might be incorporated into those individuals' portfolios.*

*In California, for example, practitioner Raul Anorve takes photos of work areas, machines, and other features of the workplaces. He then meets with groups of workers in two-hour sesssions, showing them enlargements of the photos. He asks them to identify what they see and, in the process, elicit key themes and vocabulary for treatment later in the classes. These interviews also allow him to clarify what workers already know and are interested in, information he can compare with managers' perceptions.*

*In subsequent classroom problem-solving sessions, learners identify and anlayze workplace problems and, in the process, identify additional issues to focus on in later sessions. This ongoing dialogue thus serves as a vehicle for continually demonstrating learner abilities, uncovering new learning objectives, and agreeing on what to do next (Anorve, 1989, pp. 38-39).*

## *Learning logs and dialogue journals*

*Learners keep journals containing their aspirations, accomplishments, frustrations, and ideas. These entries may or may not be directly related to what is being covered in classes. These logs serve as a record of not only learners' writing abilities but their uses of literacy, their views on learning, and their plans for developing their skills and knowledge further. Learners can submit these logs periodically to their instructors who respond to learners' questions and add comments and encouragements through a "dialogue." In a briefer version of a log, learners might be asked to take five minutes at the end of each class to complete the following sentences:*

- *In today's session I learned . . . .*
- *I enjoyed . . . .*
- *In future sessions, I'd like to do more of the following . . .*

## *Simulations*

*"Simulations" are essentially "problem-solving tests" in which learners demonstrate their ability to use particular skills to perform particular tasks. Learners might, for example, be asked to demonstrate their abilities to solve a particular problem or carry out a given communications task while facilitators or others observe. Referring to an observation sheet or check-list outlining what evidence is desired, the observer takes note of the learners' "performance" (i.e., how well he/she used the skills in question to solve the particular problem or perform the particular task). These observations might be recorded in narrative form and/or in some kind of quantified format (e.g., a rating scale or checklist). Learners might also be video- or audio-taped as a way of documenting their "performances."*

*California's Raul Anorve, for example, gives what he calls "informal tests" to his ESL students. These tests focus on grammar, vowel, sounds,or ability to respond to technical uses of English.*

*"For example, I ask in English, 'Where is the fire alarm?' Or I ask them to write a memo. Because workers themselves have asked for job-specific tests, I develop such tests for each worker. The tests give workers a sense of their relative progress. The results are recorded in a notebook for each worker, because workers identify 'having a book' as a sign that they are really receiving an education" (Anorve, 1989, page 40).*

*Workplace educators at a Boston nursing home presented ESL learners with a number of scenarios (e.g, greeting a patient in the morning, explaining personal care procedures to patients, notifying a supervisor of an emergency situation) in which they would be required to speak English on the job. Learners had to demonstrate through role plays how they would perform in such situations. Instructors and/or fellow students "rated" the participants' performances on a 3-point scale (not acceptable, acceptable but needs improvement, acceptable). This simulation served dual purposes as an assessment and learning activity.*

*In that same nursing home program, learners were presented with a typical situation in which they were to help an elderly patient groom herself, use the bathroom, and take a walk. The students were then asked to fill out -- in written English -- a daily flow sheet for that patient, using a code to describe what the patient did and how well she did it. The students were then rated on how accurately and clearly they completed their respective flow sheets (Sperazi, Jurmo, and Rosen, 1991, pages 45-6).*

*One workplace education project in San Marcos, Texas used a variety of qualitative procedures to assess learners' abilities to respond to situations they faced on the job. For example, child care workers were presented with a written "scenario" of a dispute between two children at the day care center. Learners were asked to write a short passage describing what they would do in such a situation. Learners then read an article from a professional publication which discussed what a child care worker should do when a child says "no." After reading the article, the learners were asked to rethink and write about what they might do in response to the original problem scenario. They were also to state what* *their opinion was about the article, whether they agreed or disagreed, and why. Facilitators then scored each learner's written responses using a pre-determined scoring guide which looked for the learner's prior knowledge of the problem addressed, as well as her ability to state and justify an opinion (Johnson and McBride, 1993).*

## *Observation*

*Facilitators might observe learners carrying out particular tasks either in the classroom or on the job. Observations can be recorded in narrative form (quick notes about the tasks being performed, the learner's performance, learner's accomplishments and problems, and implications for future learning activities). The facilitator might also have a more pre-determined list of things to look for and perhaps a rating scale for each item.*

*For example, the facilitator might want to know how well the learner performs a particular workplace task -- such as an oral presentation at a team meeting-- which had been practice in the class. The facilitator would observe the learner's performance, and "rate" the learner on a pre-determined scale. The resulting ratings could be shared with the learner in a private conference, and the ratings for all learners might be summarized in an anonymous, aggregate form for reporting to the education planning team. The facilitator could also observe and rate the learner's performance of particular tasks carried out in the classroom.*

## *Communication mapping*

*Learners draw a "map" which shows whom they communicate with in the organization, for what purposes, and what forms of written and oral language and math they use. They also show any obstacles which block those communications. Learners then share their "maps" with the group, and the group identifies patterns of types of communications and blockages. The group agrees on steps they and the organization might take to reduce those blockages, through improving worker knowledge and communication skills and other changes which the organization might undertake (e.g., training supervisors and technical trainers to run meetings better, revising* *workplace documents for clarity, providing incentives to effective work teams, etc.) The knowledge and skill needs identified through this process become focal points for learning plans.*

*Review of learner-generated documents* ***(sample writing)***

*Facilitators might review samples of learner writings done either in the classroom or on the job to clarify learner comprehension, clarity of expression, vocabulary, etc. Learners might also supply summaries of reading or writing tasks completed, sample math or writing materials generated on the job, training courses completed, or other evidence of how they are using what is being covered in the classroom.*

*Review of classroom or workplace records*

*Facilitators might review class attendance records to get a gauge of who is coming to class, completing assignments, etc. Such information might be included in each learner's portfolio and peridocially reviewed by the facilitator and learner. Such records might be summarized for all learners and included in reports sent to the education planning team.*

*If the company maintains records (e.g., performance appraisals) which provide evidence of learner performance of tasks covered in the classroom, the facilitator might review those records to determine how well learners are transferring what they learn in the classroom back to their jobs.*

# *CHAPTER III*

## *A portfolio assessment system in three stages*

Chapter II provided a laundry list of possible information-gathering activities which might be used to document learner needs, interests, and abilities. This chapter shows practical ways of using such activities in three "stages" of a portfolio assessment "system": initial assessment, ongoing assessment, and end-of-cycle assessment. (To more deeply ground themselves in these forms of alternative assessment, readers are urged to carefully study Fingeret's and MacKillop's excellent, detailed guides on portfolio assessment, as well as the other related documents presented in Appendix A.)

### Initial assessment

Jane MacKillop argues that adult educators need to pay special attention to how they carry out initial assessment. A collaborative initial assessment can provide . . .

> *. . . comprehensive baseline information for placement, . . . (to) help ensure a good fit between what the student expects and needs and what the program offers and requires. It helps set the stage for sound instruction and increased retention (MacKillop, p. 7).*

She uses "TQM-type" terminology to explain that "as the assessor, you are looking for the most appropriate customers of the organization's services" (MacKillop, page 15). Learners and facilitators can use the initial assessment to help them make decisions about whether the program matches the learner's interests and, if so, what needs to be in place to ensure that the learner can get maximum benefit out of the program.

As such, the initial assessment -- and subsequent assessment activities, for that matter -- help the facilitator get to know the learner, what he/she wants to accomplish, what barriers might block learner success in the program, and strategies to ensure learner success. At the same time, the initial assessment can help the learner better understand his/her own needs, clarify strategies for future learning, and establish trust with program staff.

Practitioners might consider conducting initial assessment activities as part of an "open house" at the beginning of the program cycle (Wolfe, 1988). A team of facilitators and previous program participants can be on hand to welcome prospective learners, "show them around," answer questions, and conduct an abbreviated, friendly, and confidential initial assessment activity like that shown below.

The following is an attempt to adapt the kinds of procedures for initial assessment developed by Lytle, MacKillop, and others cited above to collect the particular types of information needed by the New York State project sites:

## *A sample initial assessment process for a workplace education program*

### *Purposes of the initial assessment activities*

*This initial assessment activities will . . .*

*1. Help the facilitator and learner to clarify (a) situations in which the learner must apply SCANS competencies, (b) strategies he/she uses to do so, (c) learner plans for the future, and (d) specific goals for future learning activities.*

*2. Thereby help the facilitator and learner plan for future collaborative learning activities.*

*3. Provide a baseline of information against which future progress/change/improvement can be measured.*

*4. Create a positive, trusting relationship between the learner and the facilitator and education program.*

*5. Identifies job-related problems/issues to possibly focus on in future learning activities.*

## *Assessment activities*

*The following activities can be used with individuals and/or groups of "newcomers" to the program and can be conducted in one session or over more than one session.*

***1. Facilitator welcomes learners;*** *explains the purposes, guidelines, and agenda for this assessment; and responds to learner questions and requests.*

***2. Facilitator collects information.***

*a. Learners complete a Learner's Summary Sheet containing basic personal information (name, department, . . . )*

*b. Facilitator interviews the learners as individuals or in a group, asking:*

*1. Practices:*
*a. Describe your current job.*
*b. In what situations on the job (including technical training programs) are you currently expected to use the SCANS-type skills of concern to the EPT. These might include:*
- *-- Reading*
- *-- Writing*
- *-- Speaking*
- *-- Listening*
- *-- Math*
- *-- Working in a team*
- *-- Solving problems*

*2. Strategies:*
*a. In which of those situations are you most confident?*
*b. In those "successful" situations, what do you do that helps you to succeed?*
*c. In which of those situations are you less successful (i.e., when do you run into trouble)?*
*d. When confronted with a "snag," what do you do?*

*3. Future directions:*
*a. What are your plans for the future. . .*

*. . . at work?*
*. . . outside work?*

*b. How might education and training help you fulfill those plans?*
*c. What education and training programs have you participated in as an adult?*
*d. What did you achieve as a result of participating in those education and training programs?*
*e. What did you like about that experience? What didn't you like?*

*4. <u>Specific learning goals:</u>*
*-- If you are to participate in an education or training program in the coming 6-12 months, what would you like to achieve/focus on? (That is, what would you hope to get out of it?)*

*c. <u>Facilitator conducts an informal inventory of learner reading and problem-solving skills</u>.*
*Facilitator provides learner with three written "assignments" or "scenarios" describing problems of the type typically found at this workplace. These three assignments vary according to their readability level. The learner selects a text she/he feels most comfortable with, then responds to the following kinds of questions from the facilitator:*

*1. What have you just read? Tell me in your own words.*
*2. What do you think about this passage? Why did you choose it?*
*3. Was this passage difficult to read in any way? If so, how?*
*4. What problem(s) is/are described in this passage?*
*5. What are some possible causes of the problem(s)?*
*6. What are some steps that could be taken to solve the problem(s)?*

*Learners respond to these questions orally, with the facilitator recording responses on paper, flipchart, or tape recorder.*

*d. Facilitator collects a writing sample.*
*Facilitator asks learner to complete a written assignment dealing with a type of problem they might find in their job. Here is a sample:*

*Problem-solving on my job*

*Describe what you would do if you encountered the following problem on your job:*

*Your department has been asked to properly discard waste materials at the end of every shift. However, you frequently find packaging materials, scrap and spare parts, and even food wrappers and other junk lying around on the floor. This is unsightly, unsanitary, and hazardous. You suspect that it is the same two or three individuals who are most responsible for this mess.*

*1. In your own words, describe the problem in the above situation.* ______________________________

______________________________________________

*2. What are the causes of this problem?* __________

______________________________________________

*3. What are some steps you might take to help rectify this problem once and for all?* __________________

______________________________________________

***3. Facilitator reviews results with the learner.*** *Facilitator asks the learners "how was it?" (How do you think you did?") Facilitator then (perhaps after taking some time to review the results on his/her own) discusses the results of the assessment with the learner, clarifying the learners' strengths and what might be improved. Facilitator suggests possible learning activities learner might participate in, and facilitator and learner agree on which if any activities learner will commit him/herself to in the coming months.*

***4. Facilitator and learner store results in the learner's working folder.*** *Results serve as a baseline against which learner progress/change/improvement can be measured and as a learning contract between the learner and facilitator.*

*5. **On his/her own, facilitator privately analyzes results of initial assessments to guide future learning activities for individuals and groups.** Facilitator does a careful analysis of the individual assessments, to clarify for each learner the range of interests, particular needs, workplace problems, and learning goals to factor into learning plans for individuals and groups of individuals.*

## Ongoing assessment

Once initial assessment is completed, learning plans for individuals and the group are ready, and learning activities are underway, learners and facilitators regularly collect information which indicates any changes in the practices, strategies, plans, and goals of learners. These indicators of progress or change are stored in a working folder for each learner. Over time, items from these folders are then selected for inclusion in a better-organized portfolio.

One user of portfolios "describes this level of collection as a 'scrapbook,' recognizing that adults may want to include many types of evidence of participation in new literacy practices outside of class, such as copies of menus, a driver's license, application forms that have bee filled out, and letters to children's teachers" (Jonker, quoted in Fingeret, page 22).

Those considering using portfolios typically express the concern that the portfolio process is time-consuming and might distract from "instruction." Here are some responses to that very legitimate concern:

- *Rather than add "extra," formal assessment activities onto already-busy learning schedules, try to use information (evidence, artifacts) which is already being produced in learning activities. For example, use written assignments, quizzes, teacher notes, material from flipcharts and action plans which learners and instructors are already generating.*

- *Use simple, unobtrusive activities to periodically "check in" with learners to get updates on how they are doing and what they want to do next. For example, take five minutes at the end of a class to ask learners to tell you in writing or* *orally what they learned that day, what they liked, what they had trouble with, and what they'd like to focus on next.*

- *Emphasize that, just as work teams need to continually monitor what they are doing, so do learning teams. In this way you present assessment as a positive part of the learning process rather than something apart from or distracting of it.*

Your initial assessment activities should have given you some "baseline" information about the learners which you can refer to in ongoing assessment activities. Through learner logs, individual conferences, group discussions, simulations, and other information-gathering activities, work with learners to get "updates" on the kinds of questions you focused on in the initial assessment activities. Find out, for example, whether they are taking on new tasks, how they are using the strategies you're practicing in the classroom, what if any impact their learning is having on their jobs, and whether they are thinking about new learning objectives to focus on in the coming months.

As you get updated input from learners, compare what they say and demonstrate with the baseline information collected in the initial assessment. Via dialogue journals, individual conferences, and/or group discussions, give learners feedback on the changes you are seeing in this assessment information and help them revise goals and learning plans accordingly. Portray these discussions as a "continuous improvement dialogue" which will help them keep focused on worthwhile learning goals.

As part of this dialogue, decide with learners which artifacts to move from the learner's folder to the portfolio. Label each artifact with a cover sheet showing when and why it was selected. Peridocially review these artifacts and judge whether they reflect significant change in learner practices, strategies, plans, and goals.

The educational planning team should decide whether it wants to go the additional step of developing formalized "rubrics" (codes, rating systems) to produce more-systematic, quantified versions of the information stored in the portfolios. It is natural to assume that such quantified information will appeal to those who normally use "numbers" to make work-related decisions. However, in many cases stakeholders are close enough to the program and to the learners to see learner growth with their own eyes and don't need "numbers" to prove it. Keep in mind that generating rubrics and "numbers" can be time-consuming and requires particular skills of those involved. An EPT needs to decide whether it really needs numerical data and, if so, whether it wants to invest the time required to develop mechanisms for translating evidence of learner change into quantified formats.

EPTs might avoid pushing too heavily for quantified data when beginning to use portfolios for the first time. Instead, they might see the initial use of portfolios as a "research" or "pilot" stage. In this initial go-round, learners and facilitators try out some new ways of gathering information, see what information appears most useful to gather and which mechanisms are "user-friendly," and try out various ways of summarizing and analyzing the information they collect. As stated above, to avoid overwhelming anyone with "collecting data," facilitators might put special emphasis on using information (e.g., student writing, learner logs, checklist in which learners docment how they are using their skills, observation notes scribbled by instructors) which is naturally generated in instruction anyway. These experiments will give EPTs a basis for deciding how to use portfolios to serve their particular audiences and purposes in the future.

Whatever forms of information the EPT decides to include in the portfolios, facilitators can use the resulting information to guide future learning activities. The facilitator can also summarize key findings from the individual portfolios in a "group portfolio." These findings can then be conveyed to the education planning team, outside funders, and other audiences who have an interest in the program's progress and needs.

## End-of-cycle assessment

At an agreed-upon point near the end of the program cycle, learners and facilitators summarize the evidence collected in the portfolios and agree on plans for future learning and development activities for the learners.

In aggregate, confidential form, the facilitator can also summarize key findings from the individual portfolios. As appropriate, the facilitator can report those findings and her/his recommendations to other stakeholders on the education planning team, as well as outside funders. These summaries of information about individual learners can be incorporated into any larger program evaluation.

## *CHAPTER IV*

## *Miscellaneous other pointers*

Chapter III presents a "system" for carrying out individual assessment activities over the life of a program. Shown below are some considerations to keep in mind at any stage of the program:

### Gear information to your audience.

As stated in Chapter II, it is important to be clear just who it is your are gathering information for, what type of information they want, and how and why they will use it. Each stakeholder group in a workplace education effort is likely to want particular kinds of information and use it to make particular kinds of decisions.

As you put together your individual assessment system, ask yourself these questions:

**What information do stakeholders want?** Be clear about this, clarifying who wants what (including types and amounts of information) and for what purpose and when.

**How will you organize information relevant to various audiences?** If particular stakeholders want "statistical" information, you might try to find ways to put your information in a numerical format. You might also mix those "numbers" with anecdotes which capture -- in rich language -- the program's impact on learners and the organization.

**How will you present the resulting information to your audiences?** After you have gone to the trouble of preparing information for your stakeholder "audiences," take care to present your findings clearly. Gear your reports to the particular time constraints, interest levels, etc. of your various audiences. While some stakeholders might be willing to wade through a long, detailed report, others might want only a three-page executive summary, or a few charts outlining program statistics, or a brief oral presentation at a meeting of the human resources team.

## "Seamless" assessment: Merge "assessment" with "learning" and other program components.

To facilitate smooth operations, a workplace education program should try to efficiently "fit" its various components together. This is true of individual assessment, too.

Thus, those using the above kinds of individual assessment activities should have a clear plan for how individual assessment will relate to workplace needs assessment, curriculum development and implementation, evaluation, and staff development. Here are some suggestions:

**Workplace needs assessment:** A WNA should be the first major activity carried out by an education planning team. The WNA should, among other things, identify a range of workplace needs and organizational and individual goals which can be dealt with in educational activities. When taking the next step of planning individual assessment activities, the EPT should use this list of needs, goals, and activities as a framework and factor them into the questions focused on in individual assessment.

**Curriculum development:** As stated in the preceding chapters, the forms of individual assessment presented here are designed to feed directly into the curriculum development process -- and vice versa. Initial and ongoing assessment should continually identify learner needs, interests, contexts, topics, uses of literacy which, in turn, facilitators should use as focal points for learning activities. The learning activities should, in turn, produce evidence (products, artifacts, feedback) which facilitators can incorporate into their assessments of learner progress.

**Evaluation:** The distinction between individual assessment and program evaluation is for many workplace educators often a fuzzy one. Typically a program evaluation tries to determine what impact the program is having and what needs to be done to improve the program. The above-described individual assessment activities have the potential to uncover much of that same kind of information, as well.

To help clarify the relationship between the information gathered in a program evaluation and in individual assessment, let's first look at the "outcome" or "impact" part of an evaluation.

To do so, we might adapt Kirkpatrick's four levels of program impact to create the following framework of outcome-related questions to be dealt with in a program evaluation:

***Possible outcomes to focus on in a program evaluation***

*Question #1: What impact has the program had on individual learners' abilities (strategies) to use SCANS-related skills in a simulated classroom situation?*

*Question #2: What impact has the program had on learners' perceptions about work and learning and on their learning-related goals?*

*Question #3: What impact has the program had on the learners' uses of SCANS-related skills at work? (What if any change has there been on how they are now applying SCANS competencies on the job?)*

*Question #4: What if any impact has there been on productivity, safety, trainability, or other desired job-related functions as a result of the program?*

When we look at the above four questions, we find that most if not all of these questions can be dealt with in individual assessment activities.

Similarly, questions related to identifiying "needed program improvements" can also be raised in the individual assessment activities described in earlier chapters. Portfolio conferences, for example, can provide an opportunity for learners to give feedback to instructors about what they like about the program and how it might be improved.

Without going into further detail at this point, suffice it to say that those planning the program evaluation should understand what information will be generated in the individual assessment activities and, as much as possible, tap into that information. Conversely, those planning individual assessment activities should coordinate their efforts with those in charge of program evaluation.

**Staff development:** Workplace needs assessment, individual assessment, and program evaluation all produce information about organizational, individual, and program needs. If a program takes a TQM approach, it should structure itself to see that it meets the needs of its "clients." With such a perspective, a workplace education program thus needs a staff development strategy which ensures that staff are properly selected, trained, and supported so that they can effectively serve the needs identified in the assessment and evaluation activities.

## General guidelines for those conducting assessment and evaluation

*(To be completed. See existing evaluation and workplace needs assessment manuals which briefly discuss the following issues:)*

Beware of obstacles (time, etc.)
Confidentiality
User-friendliness
Quantitative vs. qualitative information
Reliability and validity
Standardized tests: pro's and con's
Etc.

# APPENDIX A

## Annotated bibliography of sources on assessment

(To be completed. See annotated bibliography in the Jurmo-Folinsbee evaluation handbook.)

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