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A Model for Sustaining Participation with Hard-to-Serve Clients: The Learning Continuum

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A Model for Sustaining Participation with Hard-to-Serve Clients: The Learning Continuum

Abstract

This article reports on a model developed by the Florida Crown Workforce Board in cooperation with the University of Florida's Welfare to Work Initiative. The model proposes a sustained educational experience that includes a variety of activities to enable welfare transition clients to become employed and self-sufficient. The concept of a Learning Continuum is described, and implications for Extension are discussed.

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Introduction

This article reports on a model developed by the Florida Crown Workforce Board (WFB) in cooperation with the University of Florida's Welfare to Work Project (WtW). The purpose of the model was to improve and sustain the participation of the Welfare to Work clients in the instructional programs offered by the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Welfare to Work project (UF/IFAS WtW). The goal of the project was to move this targeted group from welfare subsidies to unsubsidized employment and self-sufficiency.

The Florida Department of Labor, currently the Agency for Workforce Innovation, funded the project with the stipulation that all work with the target population must be in coordination with the Regional Workforce Boards in Florida. Florida Crown Workforce Board was particularly innovative in using the curriculum and resources provided by the UF/IFAS project that dealt primarily with the delivery of instruction to the target group.

The development, delivery, and evaluation of the project evolved into a process of training, education, and personal mentoring designed to reach this hard-to-serve welfare transition client that came to be known as the "Learning Continuum." The elements of the model and the benefits to the recipients are described, with suggestions for using the Learning Continuum concept with Extension audiences.

The Curricula

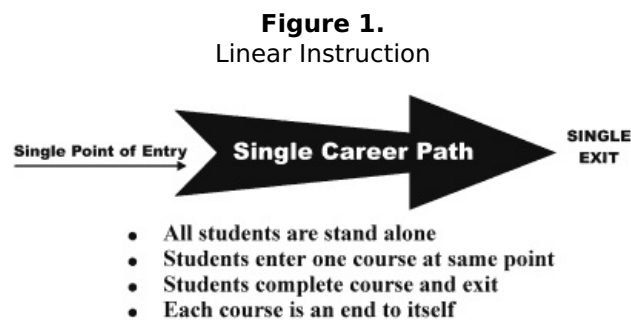
The course materials were developed by faculty in the Department of Family, Youth and

Community Sciences and the Department of Horticultural Sciences, with the exception of FastTrac First Step, a copyrighted entrepreneurship education course for starting a small business. Attention to the needs of the learner was the first priority, with attention to group participation, role-play, site visits, and other methods used to engage and stimulate the learner. Employment training and life skills preparation included six courses that comprised the initial curricula.

Linear Instruction with Stand-Alone Courses

At the beginning of the project, a linear instructional model was used in which each course was a stand-alone program with all students entering one course at the same point. The stand-alone nature of the courses allowed for small classes and individualized instruction. However, it limited the flexibility needed to work with clientele having multiple barriers to employment.

As shown in Figure 1, all clients in a given linear instruction course would exit the course at the same time. They were required to complete a specific number of hours of instruction to receive a certificate of completion. This linear approach to instruction resulted in a high level of success and course completion rate by WtW students; however, many of the clients who completed a course and got a job could not maintain employment for an extended period of time. The WtW student would obtain employment, only to be out of work in 3 to 5 weeks. What was the problem? How much skill did it require to work an entry level, non-technical position?



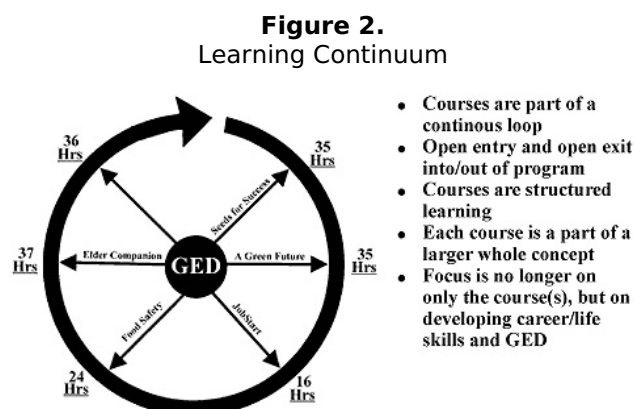
Upon reviewing the WtW student employment patterns, it was determined that the curriculum provided the student with sufficient entry level skills to obtain and maintain employment under normal conditions. Additionally, Regional Workforce Board (RWB) OneStop career managers worked closely with the client to eliminate recognizable barriers to employment (child care, transportation issues, etc).

What was not being addressed was basic education, a high school diploma or GED, required for many good jobs, and the individual's perception of self-worth. The client group being taught was predominately women who had dropped out of school around the age of 16 due to a pregnancy and who had a poor work history. They did not exhibit perceptions of positive self worth.

A new approach was needed that would enhance the clients' chances for employment and self-sufficiency. The educational delivery would be modified to include basic education and GED preparation, job skills courses with emphasis on personal aspects of employment, and a more intensive and lengthy educational activity than provided for in the linear approach. The result, a continuum of learning, is described below.

A Learning Continuum

A continuum of learning activities replaced the linear nature of the stand-alone classes. This is shown in Figure 2 with a circular approach that came to be known to the WtW client as "The Wheel to Success." Using the learning continuum concept, the focus of the program and the hub of the wheel is the completion of the GED rather than the completion of individual courses. As implied in the continuum concept, the UF/IFAS courses were offered on a continuous basis. Rather than each course being an end in itself, the courses become the core of a larger continuous program that ultimately leads to a GED, promotes greater self-esteem, and improves work ethic.



The continuum concept offered open entry at the beginning of any course offering or activity in the continuum. However, entry was not allowed during a course in progress. Each course was an integral part of a total learning continuum that focused on the particular needs of the WtW client. The UF/IFAS courses were set up on a rotating basis, and a different course was scheduled every other week. This ensured that the client attended classes on a regular basis. The focus was no longer on a course or courses. Rather the focus was on the WtW client developing a set of career and life skills and the requisite GED.

Implications for Extension Programs

The best part of the Learning Continuum is the flexibility it provided to meet the needs of the learner, in this case the WtW client. Although most Extension learners would not need the counseling, remediation, GED instruction, and testing provided by the RWB, the concept of a continuum is still viable, given the notion that the client group might need some core of education.

An additional aspect of the continuum appropriate for Extension is the level of learning, or a hierarchical approach implied in the continuum concept. It should be noted that when implementing the continuum concept, the needs of the learner were the major factor determining the elements to be included. This is not a new idea to Extension educators, but the continuum of learning gives emphasis to combining multiple learning goals into one educational experience.

Florida Crown Workforce Board, the early innovator and adopter of the Learning Continuum, indicates a great potential for the WtW client. The students who have completed the cycle have walked away with a sense of accomplishment and a new view of themselves. They have gained success, value, and self-esteem. They have been more diligent in seeking permanent employment. And once employment is found, the WtW student has exhibited outstanding work ethics.

Cooperative Extension can use the continuum concept in working with Regional Workforce Boards to offer courses that fit the needs of the area, either in building vocational skills or the attitudes of self confidence and self worth. County offices can expand their accountability base in terms of reaching clients, not otherwise served, through working with the Workforce Boards on mutually beneficial educational programs.

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