



**Learning from the Experts
A Qualitative Report
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For
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Introduction

The purpose of this project was to collect information from adult learners who previously attended programs at the Saint John Learning Exchange (LEX), in order to augment quality in program delivery and obtain a realistic comprehension of the learning needs of adults who access literacy programs. Understanding the learning needs of adult literacy learners and valuing their voice is an essential element in developing effective programs, as well as, a standard principle in adult education. It is also inherent with the Learning Exchange's core philosophy.

Seventy-two learners were interviewed over a two month period. The themes in this paper emerged from the analysis of those interviews. The questions for the interviews were developed around what assisted learners to complete the programs they attended at the LEX, and to move forward towards other educational or employment goals. For those individuals who did not reach their goals, an understanding of what might have assisted them at that time was extended.

The questions were poised to elicit feedback from various aspects of the learners experience at LEX to ensure a well rounded view was captured. When learners had difficulty responding to questions the interviewer would offer prompts, however the learner was always provided with the opportunity to revise or decline the prompts to ensure authentic discussion was sustained. Learners were communicative in their responses to questions upon rephrasing and clarification.

The most problematic issue of the project was accessing up-to-date contact information for past students, therefore the number of interviews originally projected was impossible to attain, given the available information. A significant amount of time was spent on pursuing learners for interviews and flexibility was a key component for collecting the data.

A qualitative approach was applied in the data analysis due to the nature and the objective of this project. Learners were, for the most part, articulate and clear in terms of how the LEX affected their learning experience and how they could be better supported to reach their goals. Therefore recommendations came directly from learners themselves and by identifying gaps in relation to learners' needs.

Emergent Themes

Support

Learners who completed the program, and, or met their learning goals indicated they lived in stable environment in addition to having a good support system. A good support system was described as either a circle of support (family and friends) or a strong presence of one person in their life who could assist them with their personal/family needs and provide support when necessary.

Learners, who left the LEX before completing their learning goals, or experienced attendance issues, described their lives at the time as “very stressful.” Three main reasons cited for leaving classes were; lack of support when alternative childcare was needed; a situation with sick or disabled family member; and lack of financial resources to continue. According to the interviews, home situations directly affected a person’s ability to focus on and achieve their learning goals. Most of those interviewed indicated they were willing to return to a learning environment when their situations improved.

Learners who have been struggling with survival issues, such as sufficient nutrition and stable housing, for long periods of time appear to have made little progress, signifying a cycle of poverty which is hard to overcome. These learners experienced more difficulty and frustration in achieving their learning goals. Most felt they would never attain a General Education Diploma (GED).

Learners who had been in abusive relationships seemed to be genuinely at a loss to understand why they had initially got into this type of relationship, or why they stayed in that type of relationship for so long. The need to make meaning out of such life experience is a necessary step in moving forward. Therefore more information and education on abusive relationships was identified.

Monetary support was cited consistently in three areas. Financial difficulty with a \$40 payment each time the GED tests were written was also expressed numerous times. Learners seemed to understand a need for the first initial fee, but felt a partial fee dependent upon the number of tests to re-write would alleviate some of the financial pressure they incurred.

Parking fees were also described, frequently, as a barrier to continuing in programs at the LEX, as fees are \$100 per month for parking if you are attending class for three hour period per day. Another common financial strain was childcare expenses, which could cost up to \$160 per month in addition to the amount covered for those on Social Assistance. Learners indicated they were unable to afford these additional expenses.

Learners also described the need for moral support and positive encouragement, as being critical to their success. Especially for those individuals who were without positive role models or encouragement when they attended school. Initially upon entering a program, students often perceived themselves as unable to learn, or as “wasting everybody’s time.” Instructor encouragement and attitude was important in developing a more positive and realistic view on their learning abilities.

Instructors also were credited for providing support, understanding, and “someone to talk with” when learners were experiencing a crisis or dealing with personal issues. A genuine caring relationship between instructor and learner played a significant role, in how they handled these situations. “Caring” was illustrated to learners through someone who was interested, spoke respectfully and had their best interest at heart, even when instructors and learner were dealing with difficult situations, such as changing negative behaviours.

Learner’s indicated they would be willing to talk to another familiar person, instead of their instructor, but would not be willing to “talk to a stranger” about their personal issues. This suggests that “trust” is a key component in assisting learners to overcome obstacles and negative patterns of behaviour.

Needs in a Learning Environment

Factors that led to overcoming initial fear and anxiety when entering a learning environment for students were; being introduced to the class and to LEX staff; being given a tour of the facility; and having information provided in advance so they understood expectations associated with the program. These practices assisted learners to overcome fear of the unknown by being clear on what was expected of them, and witnessing other learners at ease in a classroom setting.

Many learners honestly expressed their surprise at being treated respectfully at the LEX, indicating a difference from previous learning experiences. “It felt good that she took the time to show me around the first time I went to the LEX, even before I started classes.”

Learners who felt vulnerable due to unstable backgrounds or abusive relationships expressed a fundamental need to feel safe in the learning environment. This was articulated in terms of boundaries and knowing what to expect in the classroom in addition to knowing that inappropriate behaviours in the classroom were dealt immediately. These learners equated feeling safe with knowing what to anticipate. A number of learners talked positively about having a schedule to refer to. Having a schedule seemed to provide learners with a sense of comfort, some direction and control over their learning.

Learners generally reported a positive experience with instructors at the LEX, albeit a few exceptions and instructors were often credited for learner success.

In addition, Learner’s acknowledged other LEX staff as helpful, friendly and approachable. Lack of hierarchy was noted as creating a positive and safe learning environment. Staff and instructors were described as being “down to earth”; and comments such as “there weren’t any cliques or bullies” and “they treated me like a person,” were often repeated.

Being treated as an adult frequently came up as a positive attribute in the LEX environment. Learners felt having choices allowed them to gain confidence in their decision making and provided a sense that they were in control of their learning. Flexibility in class times and personal schedules enabled learners to work around employment and child care issues.

The interviews revealed that the self paced programs enabled learners to feel “less pressured”, which assisted them in overcoming negative self perceptions and other barriers to learning. Small class sizes were seen as less intimidating and assisted learners to work more with instructors than in a traditional class room. Being given appropriate (learning level) classroom work was also critical to learners continuing in the program after the first week. Learners described frustration at being given work that was too hard, which reinforced the initial self perception of their inability to learn, or being bored due to having to wait for work because instructor was under prepared, or had provided work which they completed quickly.

Many learners talked about needing more structure in the programs they attended at the LEX. They often felt they were “left on their own too much”, especially new and lower skilled learners, which seemed to cause boredom, confusion, and frustration. Structured activities with choices which provided an interactive approach were favoured as the most effective, followed by working on their own with guided choices. This suggestion does not advocate a “one size fits all curriculum”; however there was a distinct need expressed for increased guidance in the classroom and more of a connection between lesson plans.

Some favourite structured learning activities mentioned were: activities which fostered discussion, identifying mistakes in paragraph on the board, history lessons/movies, Thirty Ways to Shine, going to the library and other outings, guest speakers, and learning activities that provided a sense of connection from one class to the next. Many learners found they got bored or frustrated when “just doing academic work out of a book”, with no additional interactions during class time.

Activities followed by discussions, provided a way for learners to understand other perspectives and opinions and to reflect on their own beliefs. It also assisted them to get to know others better including the instructor. Learners felt that classroom discussions helped them to improve communication and social skills. Most individuals recognized their need for self development in areas of social/communication/people skills.

The academic subject Learners experienced the most difficulty with was Math, followed by Language Arts, which were also the two GED tests most often failed. Having one instructor as “math subject expert” was suggested as a way to improve learner’s and instructor’s abilities. Such a person could prove to be a valuable resource in understanding difficult math concepts by providing additional one on one tutoring group tutoring.

In addition to the GED test results, it was suggested that feedback be provided on sections within the test that were completed incorrectly. Learners also expressed a preference of writing GED tests at the LEX as a way to increase success rates.

The number one motivation for continuing to work towards their goal was progress, which provided learners with a sense of accomplishment and the incentive to continue. Having a regular assessment “of” learning was indicated as extremely important as most learners could not sense whether they were progressing on their own, most seemed surprised by their own development. With development, learners have the capacity to self assess through the use of tools such as portfolios.

Surprisingly most learners could not see how their academic skill development could be transferred to their everyday life, other than it would lead to a GED. This would suggest that transference of skills may not be happening in their daily lives. Additional classroom emphasis on “literacy practices” appears to be necessary in order to enable learners to bridge this gap.

Many learners interviewed expressed the need for new and updated learning resources, as well as, comfortable chairs. There were very few complaints about the physical building as the “positive atmosphere” seemed to override any concerns about classes being held in an older building. Students, who were financially able to spend money on snack food, indicated that a vending machine with healthy snacks would be preferred and appreciated.

Some learners are attending classes without having access to meals and proper nutrition. Food donations or a free lunch program operated by volunteers might assist with this problem.

Personal and Community Benefits

In addition to those who reached learning goals, increased reading skills and a new found love of reading were frequently mentioned in interviews. This ranged from reading the newspaper everyday to becoming an avid book reader. Many learners had never read the newspaper or an entire book previous to attending the program and suggested that the ability to choose and exposure to reading materials influenced their development. Comments ranged from; “I never picked up a book before I went to the LEX, but when I was there I discovered the Chronicles of Narnia. Now I have all the boxed sets!” to “I now know what’s going on, because I read the newspaper every morning.”

Not surprisingly, many learners talked about the LEX as a first and foundational step back into education. The LEX enabled learners to look long term and make realistic decisions about where they want to go in terms of education and employment, while breaking their larger goals into short-term steps. Many learner’s go onto some form of post-secondary education after leaving LEX. This highlights the increase in confidence which was mentioned by the majority of learners in addition to, increased interpersonal and communication skills.

They feel that they are able to communicate their ideas and feeling in a more effective manner. Many learners felt that the LEX experience had transformed their lives.

A reoccurring theme for learners who were single mothers was to become role-models for their children. Many indicated part of their interest in attaining a better education was to help their children with their schoolwork, and assist to make education a priority in their lives. These parents recognized an intergenerational cycle of educational difficulties within their families and were taking the necessary steps to foster change.

Learners also talked about taking better care of themselves as a result of attending the programs, which reveals positive development of self perception and self worth. One learner poignantly pointed out that a healing of sorts had occurred “inside of herself” as she listened to other learners speak at a Learner Awards Ceremony. “I recognized strength within that I had not recognized before, it was almost like a healing had taken place.” Connecting with peers and learning from each other stories was another reoccurring theme of personal transformation.

Many learners have found ways to give back to their communities as a result of being exposed to new information through attending the LEX. A learner in her early twenties indicated that she now gives blood on a regular basis, because of a discussion in the program.

Non-Readers and Low Skilled Literacy Learners

Learners who were non-readers or very low skilled literacy learners attended the program for longer periods of time, from six to ten years part-time. Their progress has been significant to their lives in a variety of ways.

One learner who has been attending the program for six years obtained his driver license because he was now able to read, and therefore no longer had to rely on his aging parents for transportation. He also had secured full-time seasonal employment, which allowed him financial freedom and a sense of pride at being part of the community as a contributing citizen. Through learning to read and write, he has been able to exercise his rights and freedoms as a citizen, as he now votes. Through class participation during an election he came to understand “what it was all about.”

Another learner talked about reaching one of her goals which was to “write excuses for her children when they missed school”, thereby significantly reducing the amount of stress in her household. She also described how she managed her finances better, because she had learned how to budget her money as a result of attending the program. She was now able to make her grocery money stretch because she could figure out how much what she was buying was going to cost. Her reading skills have increased enough that she is now able to read books to her grandchildren. Reading has strengthened family bonds and encouraged positive home interactions. Reading the newspaper, to find out what is happening in her community has become a daily activity; and a choice which she now has the ability to make. Simply stated she says; “School and education have become a priority in my household.”

A woman dreams of “having a job”; however her reading and writing levels have not developed enough to acquire employment. Interestingly though she is a valued volunteer in the community, who has contributed her time and talents for many years working in school breakfast programs, special needs children’s camps, and the Salvation Army. It would seem beneficial to develop transferable skills in a learning program, which included an employment component for individuals with low literacy skills.

According to this research, Learners at this level, strive to find their place in the world through successful achievement of everyday living activities. Learning how to manage typical tasks through learning to read and write affords a more “natural” existence within their community, and contributes to a healthier and happier lifestyle.

Stepping From Education to Employment

When learners were asked about their goals when beginning programs at the LEX, nearly all said they want to obtain their GED in order to “get a good job” so as to improve their quality of life. The belief was that a GED meant a good education and a good job; however it appears that a GED is more of a stepping stone on to further education, which then leads to improved employment options. The LEX programs have been a gateway for many learners. In addition to improving their literacy skills, the programs have shown learners what to do and where to go to find resources and information that they were previously unaware of.

Those learners who were able to obtain their GED and move onto further training found better jobs with better pay. A learner describing her situation stated; “Instead of making \$7.00-\$8.00 per hour, you can work at a nursing home for \$15.00 per hour, which makes a big difference in your life.”

Interestingly, the top employment choices by learners were mostly in the helping sectors, home support, early childhood education and social work involving youth or individuals with special needs, followed by the trades.

However not all learners are successful after attending programs. A number of middle age learners who have been living in the cycle of poverty, and have steadily worked in service and helping industries, expressed frustration with their situation. Due to a variety of factors it is not likely that they will obtain a GED, but have many years of employment experience, which is not validated or being built upon. They expressed the need for some type of accreditation for employment experience, which could be coupled with additional skill development. This type of accreditation would have value, similar to a GED, with employers.

A learner with over twenty years experience in the food service industry has written the GED tests six times without success. However she is well versed in kitchen management and food preparation skills, but cannot improve her employment situation due to the fact that she does not have a GED. Another learner has over twenty years experience in home support work and caring for individuals with special needs, however again because she cannot obtain a GED she is stuck in low paying work, which perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

It would appear that the longer a learner lives in poverty, the more difficult it becomes to focus on learning, as the center of attention is on survival issues. It also seems that learner’s who have been struggling for long times are mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted from life events. Some of these learners attend classes all day without proper nutrition and often suffer from intense anxiety and isolation.

Individuals from vulnerable backgrounds often have limited information for their decision making, and often rely on educational sales staff at private colleges to assist them. A learner, who did not obtain her GED after attending the LEX, went on to further training at a private college. She was initially hired by the hospital after graduating from the program, but was let go when they checked her educational background because she did not have a GED. She is now trying to pay back a student loan, and find employment in her field. A neutral resource person would be effective in assuring that learners are making their educational and financial decisions with as much available information as possible.

Conclusion

Generally learners found the Learning Exchange programs to be a positive experience and a foundational stepping stone in assisting them to reach their educational and employment goals. Many learners credited the LEX with making it possible for them to successfully return to a learning environment, which might not have been possible in a more formal institution.

Learners from this group attend programs to attain an education and get a “good job”, so as to increase their quality of life. It was also perceived that a good job meant working in an employment position that had personal meaning; such as a vocation. Many parents also wanted to go back to school in order to be good role models for their children and assist them with their own learning difficulties. An intergenerational cycle of low education was recognized by numerous learners and returning to a learning environment was cited as a method of hopeful change in that cycle.

Home situations in addition to the amount of personal support directly affect learners’ abilities and success in learning programs. Learners also need understanding, support, and increased guidance in the classroom, especially those with lower academic levels and those who have been living in poverty for long periods of time. Having a guidance person/counselor who is a familiar presence was viewed as a positive intervention for those struggling with personal and career issues.

Additional advantages to attending programs at the LEX for learners were gained in the areas of communication, social and interpersonal skills. Numerous learners changed their negative self perceptions, which in turn, positively transformed many aspects of their lives, including caring more about themselves and their community.

Through the research a variety of needs and areas for attention were determined. The recommendations listed in this report are based on addressing those needs, and include specific suggestions from the learners themselves. Suggested reading for program improvement has also been included in Appendix A.

Recommendations

- Partner with a social services agency to engage a social worker who would become a familiar presence at the LEX and would provide needed counseling services for learners on life and personal issues.
- Invite guest speakers to talk about abusive relationships, ideally coupled with people who have successfully moved on.
- Engage a guidance person and/or a mentor would give learners concrete moral support that is absent. A mentor/councilor would also be able to provide career path advice to assist learners in making positive employment decisions.
- Add a more holistic approach to academic learning programs, which encompass all aspects of life, mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual (also defined in this context as “to make meaning of”).
- Incorporate a lunch or food donation program.
- Develop a program that assists lower level learners to continue learning literacy skills but provides an employment component building on previous experience and successes.
- Provide additional professional development for instructors to strengthen how classroom learning can be transferable to learners’ lives.
- Provide additional professional development for instructors in the area of lesson planning and creating participatory learning activities. This must be coupled with adequate time for classroom preparation of such activities.
- Invite past learners as classroom guest speakers.
- Have a “math expert” on staff. Possibly a retired high school math teacher who volunteers a few times a week or an instructor who has a natural aptitude for and is groomed to be the subject expert.
- Have an annual graduation ceremony to celebrate learners who have reached their goals.
- Increase advertising to target potential learners.
- Additional and adequate funding in support of recommendations.

Appendix A

Suggested Reading on Program Improvement

Battell, E. (2001). *Naming the Magic: Non-academic outcomes in basic literacy*. Victoria, BC: Ministry of Advanced Education, Province of British Columbia and National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada.

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