

**LEARNING OUTCOMES IN ONTARIO'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES:
CHANGE IN PROCESS**

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Ontario's community colleges can no longer provide programs which require learners to fit the structures that have been created for them, instruct learners using traditional delivery methods and conventional teaching techniques, and have similar content for all learners.

Ontario's community colleges have to (1) meet the financial challenges facing the system, (2) use available resources for educationally sound purposes, (3) equip learners with the tools they need to direct their own learning, and (4) serve larger numbers of learners with reduced funds.

The stimulus for change in college education also comes from business and industry. People previously not served by community colleges are in need of training and upgrading. Unemployed workers are seeking post secondary accreditation and are requesting academic credit which recognizes learning acquired through work experience.

A new direction for Ontario's community colleges is proposed redesigning the educational process, along with its institutional roles and processes, around learning-centred education. Learning-centred education involves a process of learning that supports learner achievement of an explicit set of learning outcomes. Learner performance is assessed and evaluated on the basis of individual progress toward and achievement of learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes that accurately assess learner achievement are essential in order to demonstrate accountability to practitioners, learners, employers, and provincial funding agencies. Clearly stated and measurable learning outcomes support equity for all learners by verifying all learners have met the same outcomes. Ultimately, learning outcomes serve as reliable indicators and tangible proof of the quality of education provided by Ontario's community colleges.

Learning outcomes are simply statements of responsibility. Each program accepts responsibility for preparing learners in a variety of ways, for the requirements of the working world. Learning outcomes reflect a growing recognition that a global society is more competitive, and in order to prosper, has higher expectations. Ontario's community colleges have to, therefore, define learning outcomes related to these employability skills, and develop curriculum which enables learners to achieve transferable abilities for the 21st century.

The Literacy and Basic Skills Program, funded by the Ministry of Education and Training, and delivered by Ontario's community colleges, is currently engaged in a far-reaching reform of literacy services to adult learners. A central component of this reform is learning outcomes: a common language for measuring and documenting the achievements of learners.

When examining the Ministry of Education and Training document, Working with Learning Outcomes, 1998, four statements seem most significant: (1) learning outcomes are performance based, (2) learning outcomes are demonstrated by the application of learning to complex role performances, (3) the achievement of learning outcomes represents a demonstration of integrated learning, (4) demonstrations of learning outcomes must meet the minimum acceptable level of achievement required. Ontario's community colleges are, however, expressing a great need for clarity and consistency in presentation of learning outcomes, applicability of learning outcomes, and empirical information in order to make decisions on the approaches they will use.

The consequence of not having reliable learning outcomes data at the local program level is that college practitioners are left with no alternative but to operate on the basis of what they feel they know about and what presently works, intuition and reflection on personal experience. The lack of learning outcomes data also makes it more difficult for Ontario's community colleges to communicate the value of their efforts to funding agencies, articulating organizations, and the learners. Implementation of learning outcomes in Ontario's community colleges has, consequently, been limited.

To bring about successful change, knowledge, will, and skill are needed. Knowledge must be understood clearly, must be meaningful, and must be exemplified in special actions. There must be motivation and interest to do something with the knowledge. There must also be actual ability to do the action envisioned.

Change, however, is a journey, not a blueprint. Unanticipated changes in the course of any plan or project are guaranteed. They are not abnormal intrusions but natural inclusions in the dynamics of the change process.

Change flourishes in a "sandwich". There should be consensus from above and pressure from below. As clarity and skills are gained, training and new approaches accumulate, consistency is achieved, and pressure to alter the organization and structures to change is increased.

In response to the concerns and needs expressed by Ontario's community colleges regarding the implementation of learning outcomes, the following initiatives are currently being supported by the Ministry of Education and Training: (1) the establishment of Provincial Working Committees with community college representation, (2) the delivery of learning outcomes training and video development, (3) the completion of an Assessment Basics Self-Study Package, (4) the development of a demonstration definition and model demonstration activities, (5) the establishment of guidelines for developing, modifying, and using quality demonstration activities, (6) the creation of the Resource Coordinator Project, providing support, guidance, and training at a local program level.

A clear understanding of the conceptual framework of the learning outcomes approach, an accurate interpretation of terminology, and the establishment of explicit guidelines and standards will now ensure the quality and consistency of learning outcomes in Ontario's community colleges: change in process, not in crisis.

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