

Community Learning Alternatives: "Next Steps"

Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Beta Test Report | February 2023

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The DWLES Project

Community Learning Alternatives' (CLA) "Next Steps" beta-test was part of the Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills (DWLES) project, which was a collaborative project that was managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda) and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Learning Metrix.

The overall goal of the DWLES project was to better understand how literacy organizations can support hard-to-reach remote and rural communities by integrating literacy and essential skills (LES) and employment services for a range of displaced workers, with a particular focus on equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, people with disabilities, and others. The project began in 2019 and beta-testing was done in 2021 and 2022.

The project began with 10 literacy organizations in British Columbia (BC) being selected to be part of the data collection phase of the project. This included a literature review, interviews with the BC literacy organizations, focus groups with key stakeholders, and a survey and interviews with displaced workers in each of the 10 communities.

Following the completion of this background research, 11 literacy organizations across Canada—including 7 from the earlier phase—were selected for the beta-test phase of the project, which included implementing and evaluating projects that integrated LES and employment services targeted for displaced workers in their communities.

The purpose of the beta-test phase was to uncover and disseminate evidence-based LES support, training models, and promising practices to inform development of programs and models to improve the employability of displaced workers across Canada. The beta-test projects can be viewed as trial or experimental interventions, and thus were intended to be small in terms of the numbers of learners, with the potential to be scaled up to a full pilot study if deemed successful.

The following report provides an overview of the beta test "Next Steps" that was implemented in Belleville, Ontario.

Bay of Quinte Region, ON

The Bay of Quinte Region of Hastings County includes a cluster of small and medium-size communities between Toronto and Ottawa, including the Mohawk Indian reserve which is controlled by the Mohawk of the Bay of Quinte First Nation. Hastings County is the second largest county in Ontario, stretching about 160 kilometers from the Bay of Quinte to Algonquin Park.

The area has experienced many large manufacturing plant closures in the past few years, with more closures potentially coming in the future. Although new plants have opened, the skills needed are not always a good match with the skills of job seekers. Workers who have been displaced often struggle to identify and describe their transferable skills, leaving a lack of confidence to move on to other employment.

Community Learning Alternatives – which provides adult upgrading in Belleville, Trenton, Madoc, and surrounding rural areas – aimed to address this gap by developing the Next Steps beta test project.

Next Steps

Next Steps aimed to help workers understand their current skills and how these skills make them good candidates for employment opportunities. Next Steps was delivered virtually, which allowed CLA to support learners from across the region. In small groups, learners explored their skills and values while building confidence in working with others. They completed soft skills certification and developed a portfolio to illustrate their strengths. Individually, they brushed up on relevant skills, while also learning new skills in areas of communication, numeracy, and digital literacy. The project aimed to increase learners' knowledge of community supports, labour market information for job searching, and the value of their existing and newly gained skills.

Next Steps was delivered to four cohorts of learners between April 2021 and November 2021. The training was delivered virtually using Zoom over a four-week period. Learners were in class every day for 2.5 hours and also had a one-hour coaching session each week. Across the four cohorts, 19 learners completed Next Steps.



Highlights from Next Steps

There were several highlights that were identified by learners and staff about Next Steps:

* The beta test helped many of the learners **identify and communicate their transferable skills** to potential employers. The program focused on helping learners to identify the skills that they had acquired outside of the workplace and understand how these skills could be applied in a work setting. Learners were also taught how to communicate these skills in cover letters, resumes, and interviews. They indicated that this was a very valuable aspect of the program.

* One of the main activities in Next Steps was for learners to **develop a portfolio** to demonstrate their skills, provide examples of their work, and highlight their strengths. This activity increased learners' ability to communicate their transferable skills and provided them with a tangible product that could be used in job applications.


* Participation in Next Steps provided an opportunity for learners to **access additional supports and resources at CLA**. Learners expressed their appreciation for the ongoing support provided by staff after the training to help them continue to work towards achieving their goals.

Promising practices from Next Steps

There were several promising practices that emerged from Next Steps that strengthened learner recruitment and engagement while supporting learners in their personal growth and building their LES and job search skills.

 **Initiating an ongoing referral process with a well-established community partner to support learner recruitment.**

CLA was able to receive regular client referrals from Ontario Works as their clients are required to take part in activities that improve their skills and ability to find work. Next Steps was a natural fit as it helped learners identify and communicate how their skills were applicable in a variety of workplaces.

 **Adapting course materials to make them more accessible and user-friendly.**

Staff were able to make changes to the beta test based on feedback from learners and facilitators over the four cohorts. One major change was how the course work and material were distributed to learners. Initially, learners would receive numerous emails with course materials and activities. Feedback from learners and facilitators was that it was challenging to navigate and manage all of the materials this way. Based on this feedback, the materials and activities were all developed into one workbook for the whole training. In addition to the workbook, staff created email templates and mail out packages to help ensure that learners had the necessary materials and that they were easy to use.

What we learned from Next Steps

1 Opportunities for learners to access one-to-one career planning and workplace skills coaching can support learners with challenges that may not be addressed in a group learning environment.

As part of Next Steps, learners participated in one-to-one coaching for one hour each week over the four-week training. The coaching sessions provided learners with the opportunity to engage in career planning and develop job application skills. An unexpected outcome of the coaching sessions was that they provided an opportunity to guide learners to much needed resources and community support. Further, learners would sometimes discuss the challenges and barriers that they were experiencing, which often led to deeper discussions about the learner's wellness and specific needs, so that referrals could be made if necessary.

2 Virtual learning can be challenging for some learners, especially if they are uncomfortable using technology or have limited experience using technology. Providing learners with an optional "prep day" prior to the beginning of training can help increase learner participation and engagement.

The Next Steps beta test was delivered virtually. Recognizing that some learners may be uncomfortable using computers or certain computer applications, prior to the first class learners were offered a "prep day." This was a session that was dedicated to addressing learners' questions and concerns about the virtual format of the training. Learners were introduced to the main computer applications that would be used during the training (e.g., GSuite and Zoom), received support filling in the various training forms, and asked questions related to the technological aspects of the training. This helped to increase learners' comfort and confidence in participating and engaging in the training so that they could focus on the material and not be intimidated by the virtual classroom.

Additional project information

This report is part of a series of 11 individual beta test reports developed for the DWLES project. To learn more about the DWLES project and to access project reports, please visit:

decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing.

