

Community Learning Alternatives: "Next Steps"

Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Pilot Project Report | December 2023

Lauren Brooks-Cleator, Shawn de Raaf, & Patrick Wray

Bay of Quinte Region, ON

DWLES Project Overview

Community Learning Alternatives' (CLA) "Next Steps" pilot project 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).

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 first phase of the project began in June 2019 and finished in June 2022. It included two components: background data collection and analysis and beta-test projects. Detailed implementation and outcomes findings of this phase of the project can be found in the [Second Annual Report](#) and the [Final Project Report](#), respectively.

The project received an extension to December 2023 to implement a second phase focused on pilot projects. The purpose of this phase of the research was to expand select organizations' beta-test projects into scalable and transferable pilot projects. Upon completion of the beta-test project phase of DWLES and receiving funding for a pilot phase, five literacy organizations were selected to continue for the pilot phase of the project. The organizations were selected based on their successes and lessons learned from the beta-test phase.

CLA's pilot project involved expanding the reach of their programming to new communities and increasing the capacity of other local literacy organizations to offer Next Steps. The following profile provides an overview of this pilot, including the transition from the beta-test to pilot phase, program implementation, key findings, and promising practices.



Beta Test to Pilot Project

For the original beta-test phase of the DWLES project, CLA designed and delivered the Next Steps program. It was offered in the Bay of Quinte Region of Hastings County in Ontario, which includes a cluster of small and medium-sized communities between Toronto and Ottawa, such as Belleville, Trenton, and Madoc – where CLA offices are located. The area has experienced many large manufacturing plant closures in the past few years, with more closures possible in the future. Although new plants have opened, the skills needed are not always a good match with the perceived skills of job seekers. Thus, Next Steps aimed to help learners identify their current skills and describe how they could be applied to other areas of employment.

The aim of the pilot project was to expand the reach of Next Steps by increasing the awareness and capacity of other local literacy organizations in Central Eastern Ontario to facilitate Next Steps within their own communities. To do this, CLA partnered with Connections Adult Learning in Sharbot Lake, Trent Valley Literacy Association

in Peterborough, Prince Edward Learning Centre in Picton, and Peterborough Native Learning Program. Partners supported participant recruitment and program delivery of Next Steps. To increase partners' awareness of the curriculum and build their capacity to independently deliver it in the future, staff from the partner organizations could attend a Next Steps program delivered by CLA and support facilitation as appropriate. Partner organizations could then decide to take on Next Steps and deliver it in their community. Partners were not required to recruit learners for Next Steps, but were encouraged to promote it within their networks and communities.

Program Implementation

Like the beta-test phase, Next Steps was delivered virtually, which was particularly useful for the pilot since the program's reach had extended to communities beyond where CLA's offices are located. However, if needed, learners had the option of participating in Next Steps virtually via one of CLA's offices in Belleville, Trenton, or Madoc where computers were



available to learners. This was a change from the beta-test phase to the pilot, which enabled learners to participate in the program who did not have access to a computer or internet at home or who needed additional technical support to participate. In the beta-test phase, staff had to ensure that upon intake or in the first class that all learners could connect and navigate the virtual platform. A few learners noted that they would not have been able to participate in the pilot project if this option was not available.

The Next Steps curriculum was quite similar from beta-test to pilot project, with an emphasis on identifying and communicating transferable skills, developing a skills portfolio, career planning, resume- and cover letter-writing, and interviewing. Some content was pared down from the beta-test based on feedback from learners from the beta-test. Other content from the beta-test was rolled into group discussions or one-on-one coaching sessions to give learners an opportunity to focus specifically on the areas they were interested in or needed support. The curriculum was also constantly adjusted during and after each cohort to reflect feedback from participants during the pilot phase.

Similar to the original beta-test, one-on-one coaching was a significant part of the Next Steps program. In the beta-test, the coaching was spread out over the four weeks of online learning, whereas in the pilot phase coaching was spread over the first three weeks and the fourth week was solely focused on one-on-one coaching. Coaching could occur in-person or virtually, depending on learners' needs and availability. This gave learners the individual support they needed to help transition out of the program. During the coaching, learners could go through their resumes and cover letters in detail,

do mock interviews, develop a tailored plan outlining their next steps toward employment, and/or be referred to other life-stabilizing programs and partners. The four partner organizations played an important role in the coaching sessions. Learners who were recruited by partner organizations would meet with their staff since they were more aware of local resources and employment opportunities and had stronger relationships with the learners compared to CLA coaches.

Key Findings

Learners

In total, 12 learners participated in the Next Steps program, with all learners fully completing the program. Learners ranged in age from 19-59 years old.

Findings from the surveys, focus groups, and follow-up interviews with CLA learners further validated and strengthened the findings from the Next Steps beta-test. Ontario Works continued to be a regular referral source for Next Steps, with most learners indicating that is how they found out about the program. Additionally, learners continued to highlight how Next Steps helped them to better understand and communicate their transferable skills. The program focused on learners identifying skills that they acquired in previous jobs and outside of the workplace and then developing a skills portfolio.

Furthermore, learners continued to highlight the value of the one-on-one coaching sessions provided by CLA and partner organization staff throughout the program. Learners described how the coaching sessions personalized their

participation in the program since they could focus on their goals and needs. It allowed them to do more specific work, such as tailoring resumes or cover letters, preparing for an upcoming job interview, or having a coach help them make appointments with employment agencies.

An additional finding that emerged from the pilot project was learners' increased confidence in their communication skills. This included communication both within the program and with potential employers. Many learners described how at the start of the program they were very anxious about communicating with others in the program, especially in a virtual environment. As the program progressed, however, they described how they felt more comfortable and less nervous about speaking up. Some learners described specific activities within the program that helped increase their confidence in communicating, including the group discussions and an activity where they had to instruct a partner about how to draw a specific picture.

For communication with potential employers, many learners described how developing an elevator pitch increased their confidence in their ability to communicate their skills and experience to employers. For one learner, this helped to increase their confidence in interviewing:

“ I had never been to an interview before based on [the jobs I was in before]...now I am not afraid to try and interview, before I was hesitant. ”

Program facilitators also observed changes in learners' communication throughout the program. As one facilitator described, some

learners started the program by only communicating through the virtual chat function, and at the end of the program, they were communicating verbally with their cameras and microphones turned on:

“ [One cohort] started off with cameras off and nobody was talking and it ended up with cameras on and everybody chatting. And when they were leaving the program, they're all exchanging email addresses so they could keep in touch because they had built such a relationship with each other. If you think about the growth of not wanting to exist on camera to now you have this community of people you created online, that's really cool. ”

Program Staff

The pilot project also led to changes in the capacity of CLA staff to connect across the three CLA centres and communicate with other community organizations.

During their interview, program staff shared how they have been meeting weekly since the beginning of the original beta-test Next Steps program. Since it was a new program, it was important for staff who were involved as facilitators and/or coaches to meet to discuss challenges, successes, and program changes. They described how the additional funding from the DWLES project allowed them to meet more often. Over time and as COVID-19 restrictions eased, these meetings helped staff become more connected and less siloed across the multiple centres, as they would meet in-person and rotate throughout the three CLA centres, instead of just working out of one centre. Staff

indicated that this has made them feel like a more unified team that has a shared vision and understanding of the Next Steps program and its value to learners. Staff noted how this helped them better communicate the value of their programming to the broader community, particularly during the pilot phase.

With the expansion of Next Steps during the pilot phase, CLA staff had to enhance the promotion of the program to community organizations in order to bring them on as potential delivery partners or as a referral source. CLA staff felt that collectively, with their shared understanding of the program and its value, they were not only able to communicate to community partners about the content and logistics of the program, but also how Next Steps could align with the needs of different communities and partners' clients (e.g., clients at employment agencies and other literacy organizations). As one staff member described:

“It came to the forefront [throughout Next Steps] of the importance of us communicating to our community partners not only about our programs specifically, but also how we fit with them and how we can help them to help their clients. That's been something we've really been working on over the last year and to really cement that within our regional and provincial networks.”

CLA staff indicated that through this work, they have noticed certain organizations referring clients to CLA that previously expressed a lack of understanding of the value of literacy organizations. Additionally, by communicating

the value of Next Steps to community partners, and building their capacity to deliver the program, there are now four additional organizations (i.e., the pilot project partners) that can deliver Next Steps in the region. CLA staff indicated that beyond the pilot project they will continue to deliver Next Steps, but maybe more importantly, they will also continue to promote the program to community partners to engage them in program delivery.

Promising Practices from the Pilot Project

In addition to the promising practices from the original beta-test outlined in the [beta-test report](#), two main promising practices emerged from CLA's pilot project, which are described below.

1 Promoting Next Steps throughout regional and provincial networks:

CLA is part of regional and provincial literacy networks that bring together literacy practitioners. They also participate at employment conferences, such as the Eastern Ontario Employment Services Conference. During these meetings and conferences over the pilot phase, CLA staff made sure to discuss Next Steps and its value to potential partners and the clients they serve. This promotion helped to increase awareness and interest in Next Steps and encouraged other organizations to refer clients to the program. In some cases, it helped to strengthen existing relationships between CLA and other literacy organizations who then partnered with them for the pilot project to deliver Next Steps.

2 Focusing on building capacity of partner organizations:

CLA staff focused on a slow expansion of the program due to the recognition that partner organizations do not have the same resources as CLA (e.g., no full-time staff). This allowed partners to build their capacity to deliver the program in the future rather than immediately delivering it independently. CLA staff met weekly with partners to go through each component of the curriculum. Partners were also encouraged to audit different classes and then co-facilitate with CLA staff if they were interested. CLA found that once partners audited one class, they were very engaged in the program and typically would co-facilitate with the CLA instructors in subsequent classes. By building capacity of partner organizations, four other organizations outside of CLA are now able to deliver Next Steps .



Additional project information

This report is part of a series of 5 individual pilot project reports developed for the DWLES project. To learn more about the DWLES project, please visit: decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing.

