

Action Research Project Summary

Measuring SMSD Skills in Literacy Learners: Using United Way's Outcomes Measurement Model

Quinte Adult Day School

Belleville & Trenton, ON

Research Question

Using United Way's Outcome Measurement Model (UWOMM), can we develop a tool that will measure and evaluate changes in learners' self-management, self-development (SMSD) skills, and use it to demonstrate the importance of SMSD skills to a learner's future success?

Objectives

- Develop a tool to measure and track changes in learners' SMSD skills
- Pilot the tool at Quinte Adult Day School (Belleville and Trenton)
- Liaise with two other community based literacy agencies (preferably receiving United Way funding) to pilot our tool and process to gain insight into their validity and usefulness

Team Members & Responsibilities

Project Manager	<i>Marsha Roadhouse</i> , Executive Director, Quinte Adult Day School Project management and oversight; was liaison with the <i>Connecting the Dots</i> (CtD) project; conducted initial literature review; coordinated tool development and pilots of the tool
Funder	<i>Brandi Hodge</i> , Director, Community Investments and Partnerships, United Way of Quinte Provided the UW Outcomes Measurement Training, clear direction and unending support
Research Friends	<i>Mark Gallupe</i> , Professor of Social Work, Loyalist College <i>Phil Jones</i> , Statistician, Ontario Early Years Provided the theoretical underpinnings and research support for the project; assisted in clarifying and rewriting outcomes and indicators, improving the validity of the tools; rolled up the data collected into the indicator statements
Practitioner-Researchers	<i>Stacey McQuoid</i> , <i>Chris Pleizier</i> and <i>Cory Lloyd</i> Provided core support to the project in the classroom; demonstrated instructional expertise, practical outlook and genuine interest in the learners; contributed concretely to keeping the project moving, and to the development and implementation of the tools

Methods

1. A literature review on SMSD skills
2. Training in *United Way's Outcome Measurement Model (UWOMM)*
3. Creation of a logic model and identification of outcomes and indicators
4. Development of an observation sheet (linked to the Essential Skills), learner scan and activity log to support the assessment and development of SMSD skills
5. Preparation of Time Management/Goal Setting workshops and compilation of "intervention files" for each of the skill areas identified
6. Development of attendance and scoring sheets for use with common software to record and organize data
7. Development of instruction sheets so that other agencies can pilot our tools and offer feedback
8. Two pilots — employing the tool with learners
9. Organization, analysis and evaluation of the data

Challenges

- We faced various challenges throughout the project. From a broad perspective, the Action Research process itself tried and pushed us. As our funder Brandi Hodge noted, ... *the plan changed so often; it sometimes led to losing focus of the intended goal. [...] from my perspective as funder, who already views the outcome measurement process as action research, this was the greatest challenge.*
- Defining and clarifying our research question was one of our biggest challenges. We were surprised how difficult it was to articulate exactly what we do and our expectations of our learners into clear and measurable statements. Our mid-term report discussed this in more detail, outlining the changes we made to our original question and objectives. We should have recruited our statistician research friend at the beginning. Had we foreseen some of the problems with our methodology and tools, it would have saved us a great deal of time.
- Articulating the intermediate and long-term outcomes for our project continues to be a challenge. We only do "official" follow-up calls at three and six months, both of which would be considered as "intermediate" outcomes. However, we have started to do follow up calls at the one-year point as well, in the hope of identifying more specific long-term outcomes.
- The very definition of what "success" constitutes has been a challenge. We never did escape from defining "success" primarily by the definition used by MTCU.
- Finding a common language to articulate the SMSD skills was also difficult. Since we wanted to link as much as possible with MTCU's Learner Skills Attainment Initiative, we originally planned to articulate the SMSD skills using four of the Essential Skills (oral communication, working with others, continuous learning and thinking skills). This proved difficult for two reasons. First, we struggled to fit concepts like self-confidence and self-reflection within the Essential Skills categories. Second, we realized that the Ontario Literacy Coalition's SMSD outcomes measured the skill level of the learner, while the Essential Skills are a measure of the complexity of a specific task.
- As expected, using clear language on the learner scan that could be understood by lower level learners and still capture the complexity of the concept was challenging. We simplified several items after our initial pilot phase.

- Time was a big challenge as a team. It was difficult to schedule meetings, when we could all get together and to find the time to deal with the additional workload created by the project. While project funding made it possible for us to tackle the research at all, we greatly underestimated the time it would take to accomplish what we said we would. The time constraints of the CtD project influenced the duration of our pilots and therefore how we administered and used the tools as well as the design of the tool itself. In some ways, this was good because it forced us to get things done and keep the project moving.

Findings

- The twin tasks of learning the UWOMM through the training we received and simultaneously developing the SMSD tool and observations sheets connected well, supported our learning and contributed to the quality of the outputs.
- We realized that in order to chart changes in SMSD skills, we needed to provide learners with the opportunity to identify and develop those skills. To this end:
 - We created and held a workshop on Time Management and Goal Setting Skills at both sites to address self-direction skills. We provided learners with appointment books and pens to start the new year and taught them how to use them.
- Piloting works. Conducting an initial pilot helped us refine the tool's components. As a result of the process, we also recognized that we needed to do more to assist educators in observing and identifying indicators of the SMSD skills. The Activity Log we created supported staff and volunteers in tracking progress and observations of SMSD skills indicators.
- Application and assessment of learner assessment tools need to be as painless as possible in order for both learners and educators to use them. Therefore:
 - We worked hard to design score sheets that can be used with commonly available software to record and organize the data that we collected from the learner scans and attendance sheets.
 - We developed (and revised after our first and second pilots) observation tools to assist literacy educators in identifying, measuring and tracking desired changes in learners' SMSD skills.

Outputs

- A tool (multi-component) to assess learners' SMSD skills. Quinte will continue to work on the tool this fall, refining, revising and piloting it with two other literacy programs in its region.
- We have already started to include SMSD goals in learner training plans and we are speaking the language of these skills in the classroom on a more regular basis. We have given conscious thought to the need for specific "interventions" that relate to SMSD skill development in the classroom as well as in our "embedded" learning programs. We have considered their relationship to and difference from the Essential Skills. We now recognize the necessity of addressing self-direction goals first. Until the learner has committed to change, the practitioner is unable to develop the "relationship" necessary to facilitate change in the more "nebulous" self-management skills.
- As a result of the project we have started to make a follow-up calls at the one-year mark as well as three and six months to see if we can make stronger linkages/correlations to the second question in the future.

Outcomes

- As noted in *Voices from the Research* below, the team received testimony from learners that taking the SMSD assessment made them more aware of the importance of these skills and of their role in literacy.
- According to the funder, the tool, in its adaptability, has the potential to be used community wide by non-literacy agencies and thus to increase the capacity of the social service sector.

Voices from the Research

A learner wrote:

In 2008 Quinte Adult Day School was given Federal funding to create a tool for literacy providers. The tool focused on peoples' self management skills. I was randomly chosen as a participant in the field testing of this specific tool.

After discussing my goals and completing the tool, it was suggested to me that I volunteer in the community and attend school at the same time. My Instructors noticed my growth over the last few months and suggested I volunteer at the School. I had more self confidence, and I feel they helped me through my struggles and made me feel good about my accomplishments. It has changed my life by me being able to show other people that they can be successful in achieving their goals the same way I have. Along the way, my dreams have changed.

The Quinte Adult Day School has provided me with support and educational guidance every step of the way. The essential skills that I have learned dealt with Health Studies, Personal Support Worker, Child Day Care and Parenting Courses. Along the way there has been a lot of sweat and tears but now, look what I have accomplished! At present, I am a part-time student, as well as a part-time volunteer.

Since attending Quinte Adult Day School, I have become a more responsible, reliable, caring and understanding individual. My respect for myself, my classmates, my Facilitators and others members of the community has increased. If it was not for the Quinte Adult Day School, there is no way I would have gained the confidence and strength to be here today to talk to you about my growth experiences.