

Executive Summary

LiteracyLink Pilot Test, Fall 1998

Workplace Essential Skills Materials for Adult Learners and
LitTeacher Online Professional Development Courses for Teachers

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The original plan for developing LiteracyLink products included a pilot test of the emerging products midway through the project period to determine if any design adjustments were needed to better meet the needs of the target audience. Two sets of products were pilot tested in the fall of 1998. From the 24-unit *Workplace Essential Skills* series, two "mini-courses" were tested: *Finding a Job* (units 1-5) and *Workplace Writing* (units 13-15). From the *LitTeacher* professional development series, three courses were tested: *Creating a Technology Plan*, *Integrating the Internet*, and *Planning for Technology*. This is an executive summary of the findings. The full report is available from PBS.

Workplace Essential Skills

Finding a Job and *Workplace Writing* were tested in 10 of the 25 LiteracyLink innovation sites. Adult literacy teachers in these centers recruited students in their service area to study one of the two mini-courses for a 4-6 week period during October and November. Seven instructors taught *Finding a Job* to a total of 42 students. Eight instructors taught *Workplace Writing* to a total of 24 students.

In general, the materials were well received by both teachers and students. The videos were seen as refreshing, and the online components were viewed as *very* exciting additions to the centers' instructional offerings. Several features were identified as needing adjustment to maximize the utility of the *WES* products for the target audience.

- *Redundancy among the Components.* There appears to be more redundancy in the content of the print and online than is needed. Given how much time it takes for students to complete the materials for any one unit, it may be useful to eliminate some of the redundancy.
- *Reading Level of the Print & Online Components.* In places, the reading level of the material exceeds the target of 5th - 8th grade.
- *Video Style.* The videos are produced in what is referred to as a magazine format, with several story lines threaded within individual videos and across the series. Multiple, interwoven story lines proved challenging for students with lower

academic skills. These students experienced difficulty tracking the variety of stories and story elements, particularly when videos were shown in their entirety. Producers should consider whether anything can be added to the videos that would better assist viewers in keeping track of the different story lines.

- *Video Model.* The video model for the series calls for showing stories from the workplace. This model is more highly valued in the Finding a Job units than it is for Workplace Writing. Given that the writing units typify the bulk of the videos remaining to be produced, some thought needs to be given to the appropriateness of this model.
- *Online.* Teachers and students alike felt this medium contributed the most to student engagement and attainment of course goals. In addition, while learning content, students also learned computer skills that are valued by employers. However, some design elements hinder learning some of the content. Materials on the Web do not look the same as they do in a book. Despite the fact that the LitLearner Web site is clean and uncluttered, learners sometimes had problems knowing where they were and what they should do when they wanted to find their next task. For example, LitLearner screens have identical formatting that hindered students in their attempts to find out where they were in the Web site at any given time. Some of the Web tools (portfolio, log-on, video replay) need minor design adjustments so they work more easily for users.

For the typical literacy center, Internet connectivity and online instruction are still novelties. The test sites were no exception. Sites had difficulty assembling and maintaining the necessary equipment: high-end computers, a fast Internet connection, and properly configured software. In some cases, the difficulty could be traced to financial resources, in others it was having sufficient technical support to insure dependable connectivity. Before online technology can become as transparent to use as broadcast television, teachers and others in adult literacy environments will require assistance to understand their technological needs and learn how to acquire and manage the necessary tools.

LitTeacher

The *LitTeacher* model of Web-based professional development is a significant innovation in the field of adult literacy. The online model developed at NCAL is a strong one. The first three *LitTeacher* professional development courses were tested by 57 adult literacy educators and administrators in October and November of 1998. All three courses were well received. A number of adjustments will ensure that the courses become widely used when they are made available in the summer of 1999.

- *Content.* The content of each of the courses was highly rated for its quality and value to the learners.
- *The Learning Tools in LitTeacher.* In addition to the usual text and graphics that comprise a Web site, NCAL has developed a suite of reading, writing, and communication tools to support online instruction: log-in, video playback,

electronic portfolio, chat, and bulletin board. These tools are both attractive and functional; minor adjustments will improve their usefulness.

- *"Classroom Communication."* The online chat and bulletin board functions did not fully meet the needs of students for communicating with one another or with the instructor. Some other modalities may be worth considering.
- *Timing.* The courses were tested in the fall season. The majority of testers suggested courses be offered during other seasons to better fit the schedules of teachers and administrators in adult literacy.
- *Course Length.* Many testers wanted their course to be longer than 3-4 weeks. The current amount of time allocated by the designers for reading and related exercises worked well. But many students wanted a longer period of time than was allotted to complete class "projects" such as developing a technology plan for one's center or testing out an Internet lesson plan with a tester's own students.
- *Web Literacy among Adult Educators.* Many testers had difficulty with basic navigation tasks. They requested a mini-course be offered in computer and Web skills to prepare them for the demands of a regular online course.
- *The Internet as a Delivery System.* Currently, substantial problems exist with the reliability of the system that delivers the LitTeacher content from PBS in Alexandria (VA) to the end users' computer screens. The system includes three components: the national Internet system, the local connection between an ISP and a user's computer, and the typical adult educator's computer hardware and software. Current problems with each of these components will likely solve themselves in the coming years, but at present they make this type of online learning challenging in many localities.

The ultimate success of *LitTeacher* will depend on what incentives exist for teachers and administrators to sign up for and complete these courses. Careful thought needs to be given these issues by the LiteracyLink developers and their advisors.

Overall, *WES* and *LitTeacher* show great potential to become important resources in the adult literacy enterprise in the United States. Their potential can be realized by making minor adjustments to the products and by educating those responsible for the technological infrastructure in adult literacy centers regarding the design of the 21st century virtual classroom.