NS Employment Assistance Services-PLA
National Demonstration & Evaluation Project

Presentation at the Recognizing Learning: Recognizing Skills CAPLA Conference
Fredericton, NB
October 16, 2006

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The PLA Centre (1996-2006)

- Independent, non-profit, community-based collaboration
  - shopping mall location - small staff (6) - diversified contract resources/applications - ‘dance with partners who want to’ development model

- Early adoption of leadership training and capacity building strategy - 325 + PLAR Practitioners trained and certified (employed by partner institutions/agencies)

- 5,000 + participants completed program over past decade in NS, NB and beyond - via direct and indirect delivery

- Ongoing PD support and development, new adaptations/applications/partners - materials/guides in both official languages - Portfolio@Distance delivery capacity
‘Discovery’ of Innovative Portfolio Learning Applications

• Broad diversity of adults-in-transition including: blue collar workers, unemployed and receiving social assistance, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal and African Nova Scotian communities, male and female prison inmates, low literacy learners, immigrant newcomers, mid-career professionals

• PSE not top priority for most but Portfolio Learning not a ‘one-trick pony’ - opens employment/career change & advancement/community engagement options as well as further education/training
• PLA Centre track record and impact led to proposal to attempt a larger scale R&D initiative using leadership training and capacity building approach

• Complex NS system - HRSDC/Service Canada funds and coordinates through region and Human Resources Centre offices across province

• Services and programs delivered to the unemployed through community-based EAS agencies on individually negotiated annual contract basis
PLAR Practitioner Certification Process

- Portfolio Component
- Transition to Practicum Workshop
- Practicum
- Summary Report
- Certification
Project Scope

• **Began Practitioner Training with 105 practitioners.** Of those -
  - 60 completed certification
  - 7 are completing (post-project)
  - 20 left their EAS organization
  - 5 went on maternity leave
  - 13 did not complete

• **Under this project, 650 EAS Clients completed Portfolios**
Context of Research

• National Demonstration Project
  - HRSD considering wider support for PLA portfolio as an EAS option delivered through community partner agencies

• HRSD-NS wanted PLA for EAS clients

• Wide variety of community partners
  - Some are self-serve resource centres
  - Some offer services to the general public
  - Some focus on particular client populations
    • Persons with disabilities, women, etc.
Research Objectives

1. Compare employment outcomes for portfolio “graduates” with comparable clients receiving other EAS interventions
   • “Employment outcomes” includes:
     • Return to employment or self-employment
     • Participation in employment-relevant education/training

2. Identify/compare outcomes and impacts for clients facing different employment challenges
   • Who benefits most, and how do they benefit?
Core Issue

- What does portfolio PLA actually do?
- “Hard” versus “soft” outcomes
  - “We know clients ‘feel good’, but does it get them into a job?”
- What is linkage between self-esteem, confidence, overcoming social isolation and practical changes on jobs, community integration?
Research Challenges

• Organization/data access
  - Uneven commitment to evaluation
  - Privacy protections
  - HRSD Data systems
  - Contractual complexities

• Valid comparisons
  - “Apples with apples” in terms of clients facing different employment challenges
  - Isolate the influence of portfolio program
Program Structure

• > 100 staff members of EAS agencies trained as portfolio practitioners in > 60 EAS agencies around the province

• Practitioners then recruited EAS clients for portfolio courses
  – Groups of 6 to 10 clients
  – 30 hours contact time, usually 10 sessions

• 650 EAS clients completed portfolio programs
  – 84% Women
  – 22% persons with disabilities
  – 36% “targeted populations”
Research Design

• Surveys
  – 6 & 12 month follow-ups on portfolio graduates
  – Comparison group of non-PLA EAS clients
• Focus groups with clients
• Practitioners
  – Contacts throughout the project
  – Workshop & focus groups at end of project
  – Survey
• Interviews with HRSD and EAS agency managers
Findings - Clients

• **Survey analysis incomplete**
• **Overwhelmingly positive on portfolio**
  - Notable: uniformly high rating for practitioners
• **Similar employment outcomes to non-portfolio**
  - Face more substantial employment challenges
• **Measurably higher participation in education/training**
Findings - Clients

• Focus Groups
  – Overwhelmingly positive
    • Self-confidence and esteem
    • Social support
    • Discovering knowledge and competencies
  – Emerging issue for EAS clients
    • Problem of raising expectations
    • Need for follow-up to portfolio
Findings-Practitioners

- **Recruitment challenges**
  - Length/intensity of portfolio course a barrier for many clients
- **Concern**
  - Practitioners act as gatekeepers
- **Make-up of portfolio groups**
  - Practitioners favour mix of age, backgrounds,
  - Some debate about education levels (literacy an issue)
- **Ideal group size - 7 participants**
  - Co-facilitated groups - 11
Findings - Practitioners

- Major beneficial impacts on clients
  - Increased awareness of skills, competencies
  - Increased confidence, self-esteem
  - Building support groups
    - Often ongoing

- Negative impacts (few mentions)
  - Difficulties clients have dealing with history of personal trauma
  - Workload stress
  - Literacy constraints
Findings - Practitioners

• Effectiveness in helping different types of clients
  - Scale of 1 to 5
  - Good employability characteristics - 4.5
  - Homemakers returning to work - 4.5
  - Females - 4.5, males - 4.0
  - Individuals who are under-employed - 4.4
  - Individuals forced to change trade/occupation - 4.2
  - Youth-at-risk - 3.5
    • Range of views
    • Interest in a tailor-made portfolio program
  - Clients with low literacy levels - 3.3
Post-project Follow Up

• Licensing Agreements for ongoing use of Portfolio Program with 14 EAS partners.

• Interviews HRSD/EAS managers indicate strong commitment to ongoing delivery of portfolio

• Major achievement of the project to date
  - PLA-Portfolio now an integral component of EAS program in NS
  - PLA-Portfolio available at little or no cost to unemployed people throughout the province
Concluding Comment

• Need to challenge the false dichotomy between the “hard” and “soft” outcomes
  - Frontline EAS practitioners and EAS managers have deep understanding of extent to which self-confidence and self-esteem issues are “hard” barriers to employment and social integration
  - Mounting evidence that portfolio learning is a powerful tool to overcome these barriers
    • Essential to the re-integration of marginalized populations and people facing more serious employment challenges
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