

Levels of Learning
A Framework for Organizing Inservice Training

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In a competency-based training system, the competencies and the curricula developed to impart them are organized and sequenced to support the natural, predictable process by which most people learn. This learning process can be divided into four general stages. Training and education will be most effective if learning activities are congruent with and support this sequence. Each level in the sequence reflects different desired outcomes and requires different teaching strategies and methodologies. This paper outlines and describes the four stages, and identifies educational and training strategies best suited for each stage.

Level I: Awareness

Before learning can occur, we must first get learners' attention and create a "need to know" that sustains their interest. Level I activities create this readiness to learn by raising awareness of the issues and problems being considered, and by clarifying their relevance to the profession and to learners' jobs. The trainer/instructor facilitates this by: introducing the topic, need, or problem; describing the competencies and scope of the information to be covered; explaining the rationale for including the content; and clarifying learning objectives. Level I activities also begin to establish a conceptual framework within which new learning can be organized, labeled, and integrated. In colloquial language, Level I learning defines and describes the ballpark, and the broad objectives of the game.

Preferred Level I training methods are presentation by the trainer/instructor and the use of audiovisual aids to provide learners with a broad overview of the topic and stimulate their interest. Experiential exercises are also useful in raising awareness of critical issues, eliciting what learners already know and think about the topic, developing self-awareness, and helping learners recognize what they have yet to learn.

Appropriate outcomes for learners at the completion of Level I include the ability to: identify the rationale for training or education in the topic area; identify the problems or needs the class or activity is designed to address; identify and describe the pertinent issues and problems; identify learning goals and objectives; describe the specific competencies they will learn by attending; and explain why further learning in the topic is necessary to achieve job proficiency.

Level II: Knowledge/Understanding

Level II has two sub-stages. "Knowledge" refers to a body of concepts, principles, and factual information about a topic. Mastering knowledge generally means learning, remembering, and accurately repeating factual or descriptive information. However, to use knowledge effectively to guide behavior or to solve problems, the interrelationships and linkages among these facts, principles, and other elements of knowledge must also be mastered. This seemingly complex synthesis of information is called, more simply, "understanding." Understanding includes accurately interpreting the meaning of information; recognizing how concepts or principles may be congruent, or contradictory; recognizing inconsistencies, gaps, or illogic in the information; and ultimately, fitting elements of knowledge into an integrated conceptual system, which subsequently also promotes retention. Understanding also allows us to predict how knowledge may have to be modified to be relevant to a variety of diverse situations.

The process of risk assessment offers an excellent example to help differentiate knowledge from understanding. Knowledge about risk assessment enables us to explain why it is essential in child welfare practice, and to identify and describe factors that increase risk and safety. When caseworkers "know" about risk

assessment, they are likely to consider a list of discrete, individual elements that can each be assessed and ranked, and ultimately added up to compute a global level of risk. Thus, children in situations with eight high risk factors and one safety factor could be considered at high risk.

By contrast, a thorough understanding of risk assessment enables us to concurrently weigh the interacting effects of multiple risk and safety variables, and to predict how they might collectively impact risk to a child. Caseworkers who understand risk assessment consider an interactive system of potentiating environmental, interpersonal, and personal factors that cannot be accurately assessed independently of each other. They understand that one powerful safety factor can potentially mitigate or eliminate all present risk factors, thereby reducing a potentially high risk situation to low; or, two moderate risk factors can potentiate each other to create a dangerous, high risk situation, even when there are a multitude of family strengths.

Understanding also has an emotional component. When training content references situations and circumstances learners have experienced, drawing parallels between the learning content and their personal experiences can expand and deepen their understanding. For instance, reminding learners of the stress they felt rocking a sick, agitated infant through a very long night can generate empathy for the feelings and needs of a single parent with a premature, developmentally delayed infant. Appropriate empathy can enhance relationship development and promote more relevant, effective casework. However, interpreting others' feelings and needs only through one's personal experiences can also impede new learning by reinforcing and sustaining misunderstandings, misconceptions, and stereotypes. Thus, Level II activities typically challenge learners' preconceived beliefs and attitudes, and promote an openness to considering other perspectives before attempting to teach concepts, issues, and dilemmas.

Devoting sufficient attention to Level II learning is particularly critical in child welfare training and education. Child welfare is, above all, a "thinking person's profession." Many fundamental child welfare competencies require rigorous and often complicated mental activity. Consider the following essential child welfare practice skills – observing personal and interpersonal behavior; gathering and

assessing information; interpreting behavior and interpersonal dynamics; attributing accurate meaning in the context of personal and cultural differences; defining and delineating desired outcomes; setting and prioritizing measurable goals and objectives; considering and weighing options; developing step-by-step action plans; making informed judgments and decisions; formulating and guiding a cogent dialogue to achieve an identified purpose (also called "interviewing"); and evaluating outcomes.

It often comes as a revelation that essential child welfare job skills are generally invisible to observers, unless the person performing them chooses to describe and explain their thinking, choices and behaviors. Other people, including colleagues and supervisors, normally see only the products of this internal mental and emotional activity -- i.e. completed risk assessment instruments, case plan documents, verbal or written reports, and observable on-the-job behaviors. These can be accurate, effective, and beneficial to families, or inaccurate, ineffective, even harmful, depending upon the assessment skill, judgment, critical thinking capacity, and decision making abilities of the person completing them.

"Skills training" for child welfare thereby means developing learners' capacity for critical thinking, and imparting the ability to apply these cognitive processes to guide their behaviors on the job. Skills training also promotes development of personal insight to enable learners to recognize when emotional reactions and personal prejudices are negatively affecting their objectivity and the accuracy of their judgments and conclusions.

To be effective, child welfare education and training must first transmit an extensive knowledge base and develop learners' understanding of its complicated and interrelated dynamics, while simultaneously developing personal capacities for self-awareness and critical thinking. Only if learners fully understand the complicated relationships between the many areas of prerequisite knowledge can they creatively, and appropriately, apply and modify their activities to address the diverse, continually changing circumstances encountered in daily practice.

A variety of strategies can be used to promote learning at Level II. The preferred training methods to develop knowledge include: presentation by the trainer; audiovisual aids; group exercises to elicit information from learners; and guided group discussion, which allows the trainer to identify and fill gaps in learners' knowledge, and assures that all relevant points are covered and explained.

To promote the development of understanding, trainers must challenge learners to think. Learning objectives include exploring the content from a variety of perspectives; helping learners identify and explore inconsistencies, contradictions, and dilemmas; raising and integrating issues not previously considered; highlighting the fine points and subtleties of the content; and considering the content in light of learners' pre-existing attitudes and beliefs. Teaching strategies can include: directly challenging learners' thinking; guided group discussion to help learners refine and exercise their critical thinking skills; and experiential exercises that require learners to apply their learning to a variety of problems and circumstances, and that promote self-awareness.

As a result of Level II activities, learners should be thoroughly familiar with the elements of the content and how they interrelate; should be able to integrate new learning into their previous knowledge and beliefs; should recognize and be able to express inconsistencies and contradictions among the concepts and principles; and should be able to apply these principles creatively and critically in addressing practice problems in a variety of circumstances and environments.

Level III: How to Apply Knowledge and Skills to the Job

Learning at Level III answers the question, "Now that I understand all this, how should I use it?" Level III activities define and describe, often in considerable detail, how the new learning should be implemented within the day-to-day activities of the job. Teaching strategies include: reaffirming desired practice outcomes and "best practice" principles; describing the variety of contexts in which the concepts might be applied; reaffirming and clarifying learners' job roles and responsibilities; delineating appropriate job activities and behaviors; presenting the sequence of steps in implementing job tasks applying the newly

learned material; and identifying how to modify job behaviors to counteract or overcome barriers in the work setting.

When learners have already acquired the prerequisite skills to perform an identified job task, simply knowing how and when to apply them can promote a change in job behavior. For example, developing learners' understanding of why certain questions are critical to determine potential risk (Level II), and describing how to ask these questions at intake (Level III) should prompt the collection of this information. Learners are already skilled in talking on the telephone, asking questions, and recording information on forms. Likewise, if a learner is aware of the high prevalence of developmental disabilities among maltreated children (Level I); knows the early warning signs of disability (Level II, knowledge); and understands the positive impact of early detection and intervention on the child's development (Level II understanding), a simple directive to "observe children and refer them for developmental assessment when you suspect a delay" (Level III) can increase screening, referral, and early intervention services.

Preferred Level III workshop training methods include group discussion; presentations by the trainer; simulations; case examples; audiovisual aids that demonstrate others applying the concepts to practice; and action planning. Level III training also includes a variety of on-the-job and field-based learning activities that include directed readings; shadowing and modeling other professionals; coaching and mentoring; supervised practice; and feedback.

As a result of Level III activities, learners should be able to clearly define how to use newly acquired learning to meet job expectations, describe the appropriate steps in completing job tasks, and articulate the skills they must yet develop to effectively perform each job activity.

Level IV: Skill Development

Learning at Level IV develops and refines the learner's capacity to perform specific behaviors to complete job tasks or activities. Skills may range on a continuum from very simple and straightforward, such as using a can opener, to a highly complicated series of integrated behaviors performed in a predetermined sequence, as are needed to rebuild a car engine. Simple skills can usually be acquired and perfected after a few trials. By contrast, complex skills often require protracted periods of education and practice, with coaching and feedback throughout.

The development of complex skills usually proceeds in a series of sub-stages over an extended period of time. These sub-stages typically include: observation of others performing the skill, sometimes achieved by "shadowing" another person; modeling or imitating another person's behavior; practicing new behaviors; using feedback to modify performance; continuing to practice in different contexts to achieve mastery; performing the skill frequently to achieve proficiency; and finally, performing it effectively without conscious thought (sometimes called "habituation.") The shift from modeling to habituation can be exemplified by comparing the initial attempts of a teenager to back the family car out of the driveway to the seemingly instinctive actions of a skilled driver maneuvering through heavy traffic in a snowstorm. Both are "driving," but their levels of proficiency are light years apart.

Skill development is highly dependent on practice, coaching, feedback, technical assistance, and support. While skills may be introduced and tried out in the classroom, they often will not generalize to the work place. (See Resource Paper on Transfer of Learning.) The environment in which the skill is performed will often govern how, or even whether, it is used. For example, a learner may effectively use interviewing strategies to defuse hostility when the "client" is a co-worker in a role play exercise. However, interviewing an angry, threatening client in the family's home changes the context and presents many variables that were not present in the workshop or classroom. Interviewing "in situ" often requires flexibility – the ability to modify or adjust the strategies practiced in training to suit the current situation. Thus, achieving skill proficiency requires considerable practice in a variety of settings and situations, with frequent

constructive coaching and feedback. This is best accomplished in the work place or field placement setting.

Preferred training methods to promote skill development include demonstration, modeling, experiential exercises, guided practice opportunities, feedback and coaching, self assessment, and action planning.

The objective of Level IV learning is production by the learner of job activities and behaviors in a manner that is consistent with "best practice" principles.

A Caution!

We must stress the significant liabilities of delivering training at Level IV to learners who have not mastered Levels I through III. A caseworker who learns a skill simply by modeling others may be able to approximate or even reproduce it, but will often have little idea what they are doing, much less why. They will also be unable to modify the skills appropriately to address changed objectives or circumstances.

Expecting learners to acquire complex skills by jumping directly to "skills training" will not achieve practice competence. As discussed above, child welfare practice skills require an extensive knowledge base, a thorough understanding of complex principles and models, and well-developed critical thinking abilities. Workers who are "trained to do risk assessment" in a short, skills-based training may learn to properly complete an instrument, fill in all the blanks, and compute an overall level of risk from the compiled ratings. However, whether their conclusions even remotely resemble the family's reality is suspect. Without extensive knowledge and understanding, workers will often misconstrue, misinterpret, or simply miss critical information.

For this reason, levels of learning should never be skipped nor shortened to accommodate workplace demands and imposed limitations on training time. Sequencing learning activities in their proper order, and allocating sufficient time to properly address them, are essential if complex knowledge and skills are to be mastered. It is the responsibility of training professionals to "stay the course" and insist upon cogent curricula that appropriately address the levels of learning,

even when faced with demands from the service system to "train skills and train them more quickly."

Competencies and Levels of Learning

In a competency-based framework, the wording of individual competencies reflects the level of learning the competency addresses. This provides a framework for the development of a coherent and logical sequence of learning activities within a training module or curriculum. For example, a sequence of competencies related to sexual abuse might include:

Worker is aware of the nature, scope, and prevalence of child sexual abuse, and recognizes its potential harmful impact on child victims. (Level I, Awareness.)

Worker recognizes the responsibility of the child welfare professional in identifying and protecting sexually abused children. (Level I, Awareness.)

Worker knows the physical, behavioral, and emotional indicators of sexual abuse in children, and knows how sexual abuse impacts all domains of the child's development. (Level II, Knowledge.)

Worker knows the range and sequence of adult sexual behaviors that constitute child sexual abuse. (Level II, Knowledge.)

Worker understands the frequent family dynamics in situations of intrafamilial sexual abuse, and understands how these dynamics support and sustain the abuse and prevent the child from disclosing. (Level II, Understanding.)

Worker knows how an intake/investigation interview in child sexual abuse differs from one conducted in physical abuse or neglect; and knows how to collaborate with law enforcement to conduct sexual abuse investigations. (Level III, How to Apply.)

Worker can recognize indicators of sexual abuse, contributing factors to abuse, and family strengths and resources; and, can assess the risk of future abuse if the child remains at home. (Level IV, Skill.)

Determining the specific competencies to be addressed by a training program, as well as their appropriate sequence, will greatly enhance learning by providing a cogent and logical sequence of activities consistent with the Levels of Learning.