Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework

Curriculum Framework Conceptual Foundation

Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities

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What is this document about?

This Curriculum Framework Conceptual Foundation paper provides background information on the new curriculum framework of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF). Specifically, the document

- discusses the purposes of the new curriculum framework

- describes the curriculum framework and its key features

- explains the curriculum framework's levels of performance

- details how the curriculum framework can be used

- talks about how the curriculum framework was developed

Why did we develop a new curriculum framework?

The primary purpose of the new curriculum framework is to support adult learning—more specifically, the development of the skills, knowledge and behaviours, or *competencies*, that adult learners need to fulfill their responsibilities at work, in the community, and within learning situations. A curriculum framework that uses a competency-based approach goes beyond literacy instruction as discrete skill building. Instead, it focuses on the interaction of skills, knowledge, and behaviours that reflect learners' goals and interests.

The new competency-based curriculum framework helps practitioners and learners make clear connections between literacy development and the real life tasks learners perform in work, learning, and community contexts. It provides a common language and criteria for all learning, regardless of learners' goals, backgrounds, and interests.

What is the new curriculum framework?

The curriculum framework is at the core of the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF). It defines the scope of learning in Ontario's adult literacy programs and provides common criteria against which learning can be articulated. The new curriculum framework is organized by the competencies that adults require to fulfill their responsibilities at work, in the community and within a learning setting.

Whereas the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) outcomes point to the discreet literacy and numeracy skills that learners need to achieve, the new curriculum framework focuses on the performance of realistic tasks related to learners' goals. Designed to stimulate reflection and ideas about the work practitioners do, the curriculum framework can be used to guide program development, assessment, and instruction.

Key elements of the curriculum framework

The curriculum framework consists of the following five key elements and uses three levels of performance to describe the developing proficiencies of learners:

- Competencies

- Task Groups

- Indicators

- Descriptors

- Task Examples

Competencies

Competencies, the broad, generic categories of a learner's abilities, capture and organize the learning that takes place in Ontario's literacy programs. These competencies represent the full range of skills, knowledge, and behaviours that adult literacy learners can expect to develop in literacy programming as they work to achieve their specific goals. The curriculum framework's six competencies are context-free, supporting learning regardless of learners' goals, backgrounds, and interests. The competencies are

- Find and Use Information

- Communicate Ideas and Information

- Understand and Use Numbers

- Use Digital Technology

- Manage Learning

- Engage with Others

Furthermore, the competencies

- allow programming to relate to, or be *contextualized* to, learners' goals

- organize learning in ways that allow learners to draw on multiple skills to perform integrated tasks

- bundle skills, knowledge, and behaviours so that learning reflects the real-life demands of literacy practices

Task Groups

Task Groups organize the content within each competency. They link the broad competencies to program development, and make it easier to determine what a learner can or cannot do. For example, three task groups for the competency "Find and Use Information" are

1. Read continuous text

2. Interpret documents

3. Extract information from films, broadcasts, lectures, and observations

When taken together, task groups describe what is included in each competency. Task groups present no implied hierarchy, as they can be taught or selected in any order, depending on the learner's goals and needs.

Indicators

Indicators are rooted in each task group and describe achievement at each level of proficiency. Therefore, they provide a snapshot of the level. For example, an indicator for the task group "Interpret documents" at level 1 is "Interpret very simple documents to locate details."

By reading the indicators alone, learners and all stakeholders can get a sense of how complexity increases across a task group.

Descriptors

Descriptors provide details about the qualities of tasks and a learner's performance at a specific level. They are intended to work in combination with each other to foster an understanding of task complexity at a given level within a given task group. Descriptors

- are typically unique to a level; however, some qualities may apply to more than one level because descriptors are intended to be interpreted in combination

- work in concert to provide the most complete and accurate picture of tasks at a given level and should not be taught in isolation

The following are the draft descriptors under the level 1 indicator "Interpret very simple documents to locate details":

- Involves one document

- Contains brief text, symbols or both

- Uses a very simple format

- Contains common, familiar vocabulary

- Has a familiar context

- Addresses concrete, day-to-day topics

- Highly explicit purpose

- Scope of the task is limited, set by others

- Scans to locate specific details

- Decodes words and interprets common symbols

- Locates specific details on simple documents such as labels and signs

- Identifies how lists are organized (e.g., sequential, chronological, alphabetical)

- Requires support to identify sources and to evaluate and integrate information

Task Examples

Task Examples exemplify the task group, indicator, and descriptors at a specific level.

They help learners and stakeholders understand how the framework applies to all learners, regardless of their goals. Draft task examples for Level 1 "Interpret very simple documents to locate details" are

- Find the expiry date on a coupon

- Read a parking sign to identify restrictions

- Interpret a WHMIS symbol on a product label

- Read a clothing label to identify washing instructions

- Identify books required from a reading list

Levels of performance to describe proficiency

The curriculum framework uses three levels to describe a learner's developing proficiency. Informed by the same factors that drive complexity at Essential Skills (ES) levels 1, 2, and 3, these features include the extent to which the context is familiar and the factors that make text and tasks increasingly complex. The interplay of context familiarity, text complexity, and task requirements contributes to how challenging a task is. It is this interplay which is documented in the curriculum framework. For example, for the task group "Interpret documents"

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- a Level 1 indicator is "Interpret very simple documents to locate specific details."

- a Level 2 indicator is "Interpret simple documents to locate and connect information."

- a Level 3 indicator is "Interpret somewhat complex documents to locate, connect, and integrate information."

The curriculum framework departs from the ES framework in that its primary purpose is to support adult learning. To do so, the curriculum framework moves away from using the skill domains established by the ES framework and adopts instead a system whereby learning is organized and articulated to competencies and task groups that allow for integrated skills development.

While the curriculum framework scale is consistent with the interpretation of the ES complexity scales for several of the Essential Skills (ES), the framework is not organized by the nine skill domains articulated in the ES framework, nor does it draw exclusively on the ES for its conceptualization of levels.

How can the curriculum framework be used?

The curriculum framework serves the needs of

- learners

- literacy practitioners

- employers and workplace trainers

- other Employment Ontario (EO) service providers

Each of these users will apply the curriculum framework in different ways.

How can learners use the curriculum framework?

Literacy learners can use the curriculum framework in a general way to understand the broad competencies required to achieve their goals of education and training, employment, or independence. The competencies answer the learner's question, "*What abilities will I develop if I attend a literacy program?*"

The curriculum framework can help learners understand the types of tasks they need to be able to do to make progress toward the achievement of their goals, which, in turn, will help them connect literacy programming to their own goals and the world around them. Completing tasks that are reasonably broad in scope helps learners understand how they can use their newly developed skills, knowledge, and behaviours to respond to the real world demands they will encounter as they transition to their next step.

Although the curriculum framework is a standard provincial framework, it responds to the diversity of Ontario's literacy learners, ensuring that learners' tasks take into account their cultural backgrounds. Since learners' tasks relate to, or are contextualized to, their individual goals and cultural backgrounds, learners will feel more motivated and empowered to become more self-directed in their learning.

Finally, having consistent provincial indicators organized under competencies helps learners to demonstrate their abilities if they move to another geographic area or to a different delivery organization.

How can literacy practitioners use the curriculum framework?

Literacy practitioners can use the curriculum framework to support their work in delivering Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programming in community-based, school board, or college settings. Key applications include

- information and referral
- assessment
- learning plan development
- the development of training

Using the framework for information and referral

The curriculum framework provides a common language to help practitioners describe LBS programming when making referrals to other agencies, allowing for greater learner mobility between LBS Programs anywhere in the province. It also provides a common reference point for describing and discussing learner performance across the competencies.

Using the curriculum framework for assessment

The curriculum framework can help practitioners decide on appropriate placements for learners within the LBS Program. It can also be used to develop assessment tools to evaluate learners' progress. Since practitioners will now be able to describe an individual's performance in the competencies at any point in time, they will be able to monitor and assess progress more accurately.

The specificity of the framework also allows practitioners to identify individuals' strengths and needs with some precision, and target training to areas of need while recognizing that a learner may be able to do tasks at different levels across the six competencies.

Using the curriculum framework for learning plan development

The curriculum framework fully describes the task groups and indicators that practitioners and learners can relate to learners' goals. This information provides the foundation for the development of learning plans.

Using the curriculum framework for the development of training

The curriculum framework can help practitioners deliver quality and consistent service to Ontario's literacy learners. The framework is not prescriptive in nature; it provides direction but, it does not specify the details of what is taught and learned. Practitioners can use the framework as:

- a baseline against which to develop appropriate programming, including selecting the types of tasks learners need to do to achieve one of the following five learner goals:

    1. Employment
    2. Apprenticeship Training
    3. Secondary School Credit
    4. Postsecondary
    5. Independence

- a foundation to build training packages, resources, and curricula

- an assurance that all competencies are adequately addressed

- a guide to help them identify learning activities related to the task groups and answer the question, "*Is the resource at an appropriate level?*"

How can employers and workplace trainers use the curriculum framework?

Employers and workplace trainers can use the curriculum framework to identify and discuss the competencies needed for success in the workplace. These stakeholders will be able to use the curriculum framework to understand and make connections between a learner's LBS programming and her or his employment readiness. The framework also provides a standard approach for discussing the competencies that support learners' abilities to transition to employment. Given that the framework draws on Essential Skills research, employers can also make connections between occupational requirements and the skills developed in the LBS Program.

How can other Employment Ontario service providers use the curriculum framework?

Other stakeholders, such as employment service providers within Employment Ontario, can use the curriculum framework to gain a better understanding of the literacy demands adults face in work, training, and community contexts and to identify the scope of LBS programming offered to literacy learners. Since the curriculum framework clearly describes the skills, knowledge, and behaviours that all learners need to meet identified goals, employment service providers will find it easier to determine whether or not their clients may require LBS upgrading. These service providers will now be able to answer the question, "*If I send my clients to an LBS Program, what abilities will they develop?*"

How was the curriculum framework developed?

Identifying competencies and task groups

The competencies were established by synthesizing responses from the field to the question, "*What do learners learn in literacy programs?*" Development team members who were knowledgeable about the needs of learners who are francophone, Deaf, Native, and anglophone, and who were experienced practitioners from community-based, school board, and college service providers independently identified tasks typically included in LBS programming. Through discussion, the team reached consensus on the six competencies in the curriculum framework and their task groups.

Taken together, the competencies cover the full range of ways in which learners will need to use their abilities upon reaching their goals. In this sense, the competencies in the curriculum framework extend beyond traditionally narrow concepts of reading, writing, and numeracy. They allow for the integration of thinking, interpersonal skills, and behaviours that help learners apply their learning to manage at work, in the community, and in other educational settings.

To identify task groups, developers gathered and sorted examples of learning activities deemed appropriate and representative of all literacy service providers and all learning contexts within Ontario's adult literacy system. Taken together, the task groups cover the full range of content within each competency.

Developing the framework

During ongoing consultations with practitioners and other stakeholders, the following two factors guided the development process and ensured consistency:

- the curriculum framework was to allow learners to work toward goals of their own choosing

- the same three levels of proficiency were to apply to all learners regardless of their goals.

Developers explored numerous approaches to develop the curriculum framework. One approach involved reducing the competencies into component Essential Skills; however, this approach was too limited in its ability to capture the full range of learning that was important for Ontario's literacy learners. Instead, developers decided on an approach that used tasks to explore the different elements of each competency in more detail. Using task groups also enabled the Essential Skills to be situated meaningfully within the curriculum framework and allowed it to extend beyond the Essential Skills to encompass the full range of knowledge, skills, and behaviours required for success in work, learning, and life.

In this way, the notion of task groups to organize the content within each competency became a key feature of the curriculum framework. They are a mechanism for allowing the full exploration of competencies without prescribing that literacy programming should follow a task group-by-task group approach.

Defining the levels

The curriculum framework is designed as an aid for practitioners to help learners develop the abilities they need to manage work, learning, and life demands. Despite an interest in using the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 500-point scale, developers determined that literacy instruction should not be limited to the skill domains easily measured by large-scale tests. Therefore, the development of the curriculum framework draws on Human Resources and Skills Development Canada's (HRSDC) Essential Skills to describe the features of increasingly complex tasks. Like the Essential Skills (ES), the framework focuses on the ways in which individuals use their abilities to accomplish tasks outside of a learning context. However, although the ES served as a strong reference point in establishing the curriculum framework levels, the new curriculum framework goes beyond the ES' conceptualization of levels to serve its primary purpose as a learning framework.

The Essential Skills (ES) complexity scales served as a starting point to define levels for task groups that were clearly related to an ES domain. For example, the task group "Read continuous text" draws from complexity as described in the scale for the ES "Reading text." The framework is not, however, limited to the descriptors in the ES scales. The curriculum framework adds other supporting descriptors absent in the ES to ensure that literacy programming is appropriate for learners, regardless of their goals.

Developers consulted additional sources to define the three levels for the curriculum framework, as no single source was considered sufficient to explore task complexity for the purposes of establishing a learning framework. These sources included

- the Manitoba Stages of Literacy

- the Australia Core Skills Framework

- the Canadian Language Benchmarks

- England's Adult Literacy and Numeracy Core Curricula

- the United States' Equipped for the Future standards

Using these sources helped developers to understand differences between levels and to distinguish between less and more complex tasks. Furthermore, the sources provided enough detail so that programming supports, such as user guides and assessment tools, could be developed.

The interpretation of task complexity in the literacy skills domains covered by the HRSDC's Essential Skills is very strict and draws heavily on information processing skills to define complexity. Therefore, developers supplemented the curriculum framework with task and performance descriptors beyond those captured by Essential Skills complexity. Developers also felt that more detail was necessary to reflect and support instruction in different learning contexts, including instruction for learners with academic goals.

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