

Abstract

National Field Test of *Workplace Essential Skills*

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Workplace Essential Skills (WES) is a 24-unit multimedia (print, video and online) course designed for pre-GED adults who want to learn how to apply for a job, increase their knowledge of the workplace, and refine their reading, writing, communication, and/or mathematical skills to meet the demands of common workplace settings. The program is designed for students reading between the 5th and 8th grade levels. A summative evaluation was conducted between September 2000 and June 2001 in which the WES product was examined in Adult Basic Education (ABE) classrooms in six states and Washington, D.C. Each of the four WES content strands—reading, math, communication and employment—was tested in six or more classes.

The goal of the study was to determine the potential of WES to enhance the knowledge and skills of ABE learners who engaged the materials under optimal conditions. Student learning and job-seeking behaviors were measured using a pre-post research design with each student serving as his/her own control. The sample was self-selected; interested candidates were screened based on their demonstrated literacy levels. Wherever possible, student growth was measured using standardized and normed tests. Tailored tests of knowledge and skills were developed for those WES topics for which no standardized tests have yet been developed.

Findings

Reading and Math. The most dramatic increases occurred in the test scores of those students studying the Reading and Math strands. Impact was assessed using content area tests from the CASAS Employability Competency System—a standardized testing package that is widely used in adult education. Forty percent of the students showed impressive gains in their scores (5 points or more), even though the WES instructional time in this study (24-30 hours per strand) was considerably less than the 100 hours CASAS suggests is needed to show such gains. However, 60 percent of students did not improve, which indicates the difficulty of meeting the needs of all ABE students with a single instructional approach. Further study is needed to determine which students most profit from these WES strands.

Employment. Students studying the Employment strand showed varied amounts of growth. Overall, student knowledge gains were modest. Adults with the lowest pretest scores tended to show the most improvement. This finding is not unexpected, given that WES is designed to introduce individuals who have minimal employment experience to basic information associated with finding and maintaining a job. In a special site where

the instruction was more intensive, students demonstrated greater gains on the assessment measure. This finding points to the difference good teaching can make in student learning. Studying the Employment strand also had a motivational effect: 20 – 25% of participants increased their job-seeking activity in areas such as searching for job information at the library, preparing a resume and sending it to an employer, and actually securing a job interview.

Communication. Students in the Communication strand showed a small increase in knowledge in the areas of recognizing good practices in written, oral, and non-verbal communication in the workplace. Students learned more about different forms of written communication than they did about verbal and non-verbal communication. But they did not improve their skills in producing specific workplace forms—writing a memo or completing a work order. They also did not improve in the skill of identifying appropriate information in a chart or table. To master skills needed to produce and/or extract information from certain types of text requires extensive practice, which was not possible given the breadth of material covered in this introductory course.

Multimedia Usage. Products like WES are taking ABE instruction in new directions. The combination of video, print, and online taps into students’ interests and addresses differences in learning style. Yet, with new technology comes a large learning curve and the need for technical support systems at the local level. While national field test sites were provided with training in the online portion of WES as well as with ongoing technological assistance, many sites and teachers were unprepared to utilize the online component. Test participants attempted well less than half of the available online activities (from 15% of the activities for employment to 42% for mathematics).

Summary

WES can be viewed as a workplace survey course. It emphasizes understanding how and when various skills are needed in the workplace. As a survey course, most topics are not covered in sufficient depth for students to fully master the topic in just six hours of class time per unit. Skill mastery in particular requires additional teacher guidance and learner practice. In a typical employment skills class, student learning needs vary widely. For each unit of instruction, teachers should assess student needs carefully and plan to provide extra guidance and practice tailored to those needs.

