

Bringing Lifeskills to Life: A Structured Pathway to Programme Planning

Too often, in large-scale service provision, people who have learning disabilities are treated as a group, with rigid routines, limited choice and lack of personal contact. An approach which recognises the importance of respect for individual needs and preferences combined with structured goal setting and follow-up evaluation can significantly enhance the acquisition of vital and empowering independent coping skills.

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IMPORTANCE OF LIFESKILLS FOR QUALITY OF LIFE

What are Lifeskills? They are tasks which you complete everyday in the ordinary running of your life. Lifeskills, once acquired, become so automatic that we take them completely for granted. Lifeskills are much more conspicuous by their absence. A grown man who day after day has to, ask his mother to button up his shirt is continually reminded of what he is not able to do. Lifeskills, often referred to by other terms such as independence skills, coping skills, living skills or social skills, dictate the quality of one's life. Lifeskills can be defined as :“those skills which enable a person to function as independently and as happily as possible in their own environment”.

LIFESKILLS FOR SATISFACTORY WORK PRACTICES

There may also be the presumption that young adults who have completed their education and training in workshop skills are now ready for work. This may not always be the case. It has been discovered that if trainees have failed in sheltered or open employment it is much more often because of lack of lifeskills than the specific skills of that job. To give one example : a young man on work experience in a supermarket learned quickly and efficiently how to stock shelves. He had no

difficulty completing each stage of the process. However he regularly lost his temper and insulted customers who interrupted him to make an enquiry or seek help.

This article will refer to eight stages in effective lifeskills teaching.

KEY STAGES IN LIFESKILLS TEACHING

- 1. Understanding lifeskills : Lifeskills network**
- 2. Know the trainee**
- 3. Agreeing Goals and Selecting Skills**
- 4. Know the task yourself**
- 5. Planning the Training Programme**
- 6. Implementing the Training Programme**
- 7. Evaluating the Training Programme**
- 8. Teaching Methods, Materials and Resources**

STAGE 1 : UNDERSTANDING LIFESKILLS: THE LIFESKILLS NETWORK

As lifeskills are so vast and so interlinked it is necessary to have a method of identifying individual tasks and understanding how they link up to develop more complex skills.

Real Life Example

It is 7.30 am. John gets up, takes a quick shower and gets dressed. He makes his bed and goes downstairs. For breakfast John has a bowl of cereal, a cup of tea and toast. While eating, he listens to the 8 o'clock news. John brings his mother a cup of tea in bed, and at 8.30 am. he puts on his coat and leaves home to get the bus to work. This is a standard first hour of the morning for many people and it is simple for John. Jane however cannot get up and dress herself independently in the morning. She needs to learn how to manage, as her mother, who has always helped her, is no longer able to do so due to poor health. To achieve what John can do, which many of us would not rate as a major achievement, Jane would have to acquire all the following skills :-

LISTING THE SKILLS

Functional Numeracy	-	telling the time
Personal Hygiene	-	showering
Self-Care	-	dressing
Home Skills	-	making breakfast
Communication Skills	-	speaking with mother on the bus
Decision Making	-	what coat to wear etc.
Community Skills	-	using public transport

How does the instructor know how to separate these skills and then decide where to begin?

The Lifeskills Network

In order to examine the vast range of lifeskills and divide them into categories which are comprehensive and can be easily understood, a structure called 'The Lifeskills Network' has been developed by the writer.

One of the most difficult aspects of teaching lifeskills is knowing where to begin. It is common for both instructor and trainee to feel overwhelmed by the huge range of lifeskills which the trainee requires for day-to-day living. Frequently there seems to be so much to learn that both parties can feel helpless and despondent. One often takes on too much too quickly. The resulting training can only touch the surface of a range of skills but see no tangible or satisfying results. Familiarity with the Lifeskills Network helps one to find his/her bearings, see the whole picture and avoid falling into the trap of taking on too much.

The Lifeskills Network is made up of six core areas :

CORE AREAS IN LIFESKILLS NETWORK

- 1. Self care**
- 2. Home Skills**
- 3. Community Skills**
- 4. Interpersonal Skills**
- 5. Leisure Skills**
- 6. Work Skills**

Each of these subdivides into a series of main skills. The Lifeskills Network is detailed in *Lifeskills: A Positive Approach* (Macnamara, 1995).

STAGE 2 : KNOW THE TRAINEE

It is vitally important for the instructor to have a real sense of who the trainee is, i.e. his/her personality, support system, an understanding of his strengths and weaknesses, and the hopes and dreams which he or she has. A training programme should address the trainee's desires - only then will the trainee be motivated to learn.

Key Point :

The trainee's motivation is an essential part of the learning process.

Too often, random skills are taught and not retained because they were not needed or wanted by the trainee in the first place. It is common for instructors to think that they know the individual trainee and that therefore they know what the trainee's needs are.

Knowing the trainee 'for years' is not a sound basis on which to make important decisions regarding his/her future. In fact, this familiarity can often lead to assumptions, generalisations and mis-information. Instructors seeking information on trainees should not depend on files or data which has been collected over the years. These can contain a lot of documentation but may amount to little in the way of real information on the trainee. Just as useful information should be gathered on meeting a new trainee, information on existing trainees should be examined at regular intervals for its relevance and updated as necessary. The instructor must aim to find a balance between the information required and the time available to seek it out.

Personal Profiles

John and Connie Lyle O'Brien, (1989), state that a key factor in training is to be familiar with the individual's interests gifts, capacities and needs. They developed a method of building a detailed personal profile of the individual. According to the authors: " A Personal Profile is a recording of an individual's whole life, past events, relationships, choices and ideas about a better future" (J. and L. O'Brien. 1989. *Framework for Accomplishment* Atlanta, Georgia: Responsive Systems Associates).

The aim of a Personal Profile is to assist the trainee in thinking about his/her future. The trainee is encouraged to look at and select to work on, some small but significant changes in his/her life. These should be within reach and, when achieved, should bring the trainee in the direction in which he or she wishes to go. The Personal Profile gathers information by means of questionnaires, and discussions with the trainee and others who have been identified as being important in the trainee's life. Whether the instructor is a parent, a new helper being introduced to the trainee for the first time or a teacher who has several people's needs to consider, this systematic method of gathering information can be of great help.

STAGES IN DEVELOPING A PERSONAL PROFILE.

- 1. Select the individual whose profile you will be exploring.**
- 2. Spend time with that trainee discussing his/her strengths/needs/lifeskills under a range of headings.**
- 3. Meet and speak with other relevant people to gather more information.**
- 4. Analyse the information gathered and make a summary.**
- 5. Use the information gathered and develop a personal identity to search for potential.**
- 6. In conjunction with the trainee, build up a vision of a worthwhile future.**

STAGE 3. AGREEING GOALS AND SELECTING SKILLS

The importance of well-informed skill selection and firm agreement on specific and realistic goals, cannot be emphasised enough. Familiarity with the range and breakdown of Lifeskills, knowledge of and respect for the individual and a range of other considerations, must come together in the successful selection of skills and identification of goals for any trainee. If this procedure is followed, the training process will almost certainly yield positive, tangible results. As trainees become more confident and adept at sharing information and making choices, the whole procedure will become more efficient and streamlined. When training programmes genuinely address a trainee's needs and wishes, he or she will be better motivated to participate and progress will be evident.

Key Point:

Energy is used constructively in the preparation of a training programme rather than wasted on continuous training which has no specific goal.

Movement towards goals of any kind, must start with an awareness of some personal need and a desire to do something about it. People are hardly ever motivated to solve problems which have been defined for them by others. It is essential, therefore, that the needs being addressed, should be those seen and expressed by the individual. It is still very common for parents/teachers or helpers to think that they know exactly what the trainee needs to learn and in what direction they should be moving. Goals are regularly decided without the trainee's agreement or opinion being sought. Learning is possible without the trainee's consent - so is brainwashing! Learning is likely to last longer and take deeper root when the trainee concerned has freely chosen to cooperate with the proceedings, has formulated his/her own goals and pursues them in an organised and willing way. Sometimes it is necessary for a trainee to learn a particular skill in which he/she has little interest or perhaps even resents. In such situations the instructor should make every effort to help the trainee to understand the importance of the skill and to see it in relation to his/her chosen goal. Voluntary participation is the lynch pin of the following guidelines for selecting a skill and agreeing a goal.

GUIDELINES FOR GOAL AGREEMENT

- 1. Refer to the trainee's 'Personal Profile'.**
- 2. Prioritise his/her needs, ask the trainee what he/she would like to work towards first.**
- 3. Find the chosen skill area on the Lifeskills Network to identify all the skills involved.**
- 4. Identify long, medium and short-term goals.**
- 5. Ensure that the goals and the time scales are realistic.**
- 6. Ensure that newly acquired skills can be used immediately so that they will not fade;**
- 7. Do not take on too much, this usually results in disappointment.**
- 8. Check out the requirements of the skill**
 - a) In order to learn it;**
 - b) In order to put it into practice;**
- 9. Make sure that there is no other easier way to acquire the skills.**

When a skill has been selected and a short-term goal agreed, two questions should always be asked

1. What difference will this skill make in the life of the trainee?
2. What is the skill leading on to?

If the process of selecting a skill and agreeing a short-term goal has been carried out carefully these questions will be answered easily and with conviction.

STAGE 4. KNOW THE TASK YOURSELF

For many of us, Lifeskills are the tasks which we do automatically every day. By virtue of this fact, Lifeskills can be difficult to teach. To give one example: to be able to tie your shoelace is a given task; to be able to clearly explain how it is done to another person, is an entirely different matter.

Key Point:

Teaching Lifeskills is not simply a case of : 'I can do it, so I can teach it'.

In order to successfully teach a task to another person, the instructor must know that task in detail, have broken it down into its simplest elements and have established what the trainee already knows and what he/she needs to learn. This applies regardless of: What the task is, who is teaching it, or where it is being taught.

TASK ANALYSIS

Task Analysis identifies the simplest sequence of actions which allow the completion of a task to the required standard. It is an essential stage in the preparation of any Lifeskills training programme. Carrying out a Task Analysis makes the instructor think clearly and logically about what he/she is about to teach. The following is a simple, effective method for completing a Task Analysis.

STEPS IN TASK ANALYSIS

- 1. Select a task**
- 2. Define the task to suit the individual**
- 3. Break down the task into its simplest elements**
- 4. Draw up a check list.**

STAGE 5. PLANNING THE TRAINING PROGRAMME

The scene has been set for the individual by agreeing long, medium and short-term goals, towards which the trainee is motivated to work. One task is selected to begin with, and that task is analysed and it is established what the trainee already knows and therefore, where training needs to start.

Careful planning of the training programme is now essential. Good quality planning will directly affect the success with which the skill is learned. On-the-spot planning of training sessions is very common. This cannot be efficient. It eats into the time that has been made available for training. It stops the flow of the session causing confusion and loss of concentration. It reduces the sense of importance which trainees feel. This type of training is more about filling in time than genuinely passing on skills. Progress is likely to be slow and morale is likely to be low.

The following steps aim to provide a basic formula that can be applied to the training of any skill, at any level, with an individual, or a group.

STEPS IN PLANNING A TRAINING PROGRAMME

- 1. Identify how much time you have to devote to the Training Programme;**
- 2. Decide who the Training Programme is for and the skill it will cover;**
- 3. Invite the trainee(s) to take part in the Training Programme;**
- 4. Liaise with the trainee's family or supervisor;**
- 5. Complete the pre-test with the trainee;**
- 6. Make out a timetable;**
- 7. Anticipate difficulties which might arise;**
- 8. Draw up an agreement with the trainee.**

STAGE 6 : IMPLEMENTING THE TRAINING PROGRAMME

When all the planning has been completed, the relevant people consulted and the details agreed and confirmed, the instructor and trainee are ready to implement the Training Programme. This is the exciting stage where plans come into action, the instructor and trainee work together within the framework of the carefully planned timetable, to bring about change.

It is at this point that all the benefits of the time and effort put into the planning of the programme can be clearly seen. The instructor can implement the programme with confidence and efficiency, sure that each trainee will make progress. The trainee who, at the outset, was assisted in deciding the direction in which he wanted his life to go, begins to see development in that direction. Genuine progress in a chosen direction is very satisfactory and encouraging for both the instructor and the trainee and should be acknowledged to the full. Success, for which we all strive, is a powerful experience and perhaps the best motivator of all for the future and increasing effort.

When implementing the Training Programme by closely following the agreed timetable, there are some important points that the instructor should bear in mind. They are:

KEY POINTS FOR A TRAINING PROGRAMME

- 1. Use an age-appropriate approach.**
- 2. Make maximum use of allocated time.**
- 3. Prepare sessions carefully.**
- 4. Use appropriate language.**
- 5. Be friendly, positive and provide enjoyment.**
- 6. Deal effectively with unwanted behaviour.**

STAGE 7. EVALUATE THE TRAINING PROGRAMME

The evaluation of the training programme serves two main purposes:

- 1. It enables the trainee to check or to be made aware of his own progress. The trainee should always know where he/she stands in relation to the short, medium and long-term goals which can be agreed with his/her instructor;**

2. It provides feedback on the content and effectiveness of the programme so that the instructor can adjust it where necessary.

Evaluation is made easier and more meaningful if it relates to the specific objectives which the instructor had in designing the training session and, in turn, the whole programme.

METHODS OF EVALUATION

The evaluation that is carried out at the end of a Training Programme should be more elaborate and specific than the 'mini-evaluations' completed during the Training Programme. The evaluation is the means by which the trainee and the instructor can determine the value of the Training Programme.

STEPS IN EVALUATING THE PROGRAMME

1. **Decide what method of evaluation is most appropriate.**
2. **Refer to the criteria for success which were detailed when setting objectives.**
3. **Decide on sources of feedback.**
4. **Decide on a method of collecting information.**
5. **Identify to whom the findings would be of relevance and interest other than the instructor and the trainee.**
6. **Identify what are the implications of the evaluation for the trainee now and in the future.**

There are several methods of evaluation. The four most commonly used are:

- Observation
- Formal/Informal feedback from students
- Testing/Assessments
- Check lists

STAGE 8. TEACHING METHODS, MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

If the trainee is to learn and make progress as a result of the Training Programme, then each training session must capture his or her interest and sustain concentration. Every effort should be made by the instructor to ensure that the training sessions are of real interest to the trainee. Information should be channelled through as many senses as possible to heighten the trainee's awareness and increase the likelihood of retention. The most effective way to ensure variety

and interest is to include as many different teaching methods as possible when drawing up the timetable. The teaching methods which have been found to be most useful and productive in Lifeskills Training are:-

TEACHING METHODS

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| . Verbal Instruction | . Demonstration |
| . Discussion | . Role Play |
| . Brainstorming | . Prompting |
| . Written Work | . Games |
| . Practical Experience | . Quizzes |
| . Video / Slides | . Educational Visits |

LIFE EXPERIENCE : LOCATION FOR LIFESKILLS TRAINING

Because of the nature of Lifeskills Training and practical application of the skills, almost all important teaching materials and resources are the everyday things, people and places with which life brings us into contact. The location in which a skill will be used is the ideal location in which the skill should be learned. This is not always possible and the instructor may have to create a learning environment which simulates, as closely as possible, the real environment where the skill will be used.

In addition to the natural resources for Lifeskills Training which surround us there is a great need for specialised teaching materials. Such materials will aid the training process by:-

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| • simplifying the subject; | • adding variety; |
| • holding the trainee's attention; | • involving the trainee; |
| • stimulating the trainee's interest; | • excluding unnecessary information. |

The more Lifeskills a person acquires, the more independence and dignity he or she will have at home or at the work. Such is the importance of lifeskills training.

The material in this article is expanded on in the book *LIFESKILLS A Positive Approach* by Monica Macnamara, published by Souvenir Press, Human Horizons series and retailing at Ir£10.99.