WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT FOR OLDER ADULTS

Learning Community Principles & Practice Ideas

Using a Learning Community in Workforce Development

A key aspect of workforce development is acquiring new skills, certifications, or knowledge and applying them in volunteer and employment settings. A learning community can be an ideal way to bring learners and program staff together to problem-solve, innovate and make decisions to support work successes.

What is a Learning Community?

A Learning Community is a group that comes together with a shared goal of transferring knowledge and expertise. The group shares personal experiences and knowledge on topics of interest and the sharing is meant to be mutual and collaborative. The primary purpose is for participants to expand their knowledge through mutual learning, discussion, and engagement with others in the group. Learning communities take a learner-centered approach using a participant-facilitator model instead of a faculty-student model. A participant-facilitator model acknowledges participants' pre-existing expertise and uses it to lead the learning experience. It is very important for participants to share common interests and values relating to the topics, as well as embrace differences among the group.

Benefits of a Learning Community

Learning Communities benefot both participants and facilitators:

- Strengthen expertise and continue professional development
- Improves quality of practice through reflection, engagement, and problem solving
- Promotes a sense of belonging by fostering a sense of community through support and mentorship
- Development of new knowledge and skills
- Stimulation of creativity and innovation
- Translation of research into practice

Challenges of a Learning Community

- Participants may hesitate to join due to the greater time commitment compared to other learning formats
- Achieving active participation from all members can be challenging, as participation styles vary
- Repeatedly meeting with the same group may lead to groupthink and limit new ideas
- Creating group guidelines and choosing meeting times, locations, and platforms pose minor challenges that must be addressed to support access by a broad membership
- Program staffing issues can disrupt attendance and participation

KEY ASPECTS OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY

PRACTICE IDEAS

	KEY ASPECTS OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY	PRACTICE IDEAS
Information	Easy access to relevant information and resources helps to maintain engagement	Create one place for participants to locate relevant information
Confidentiality	Ensure safety and trust by keep participants identities confidential	Keep participants comments confidential by not recording meetings or dispersing their information (e.g. emails or phone numbers)
Guidelines	Shared expectations ensures trust and safety, ultimately encouraging participation	Create a group agreement with clear expectations of behavior of the group. Discuss how to deal with conflict and tension
Participation & Autonomy	Engagement among all participants is essential for a worthwhile learning process across the board	Encourage participant autonomy when making decisions. Use a whole person approach that values identity, prior skills and experiences, and informed opinion. For example, let participants choose topics for meetings, presentations, and discussions
Reflection & Respectful Environment	Regular reflection on learning by discussing learning experiences allows the participants and facilitators to gauge how the group is working	Allow participants to communicate their needs within a respectful environment. Check in with participants individually via email or phone call
Relationships	Building and supporting relationships among the participants and with facilitators increases social connection and peer-sharing among the group	Create a space for participants to interact 1:1, such as an online forum or small break out rooms on zoom

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