

Practices Developed When Using the OALCF Milestones

This research brief describes program practices that have been put in place in response to the introduction of the OALCF Milestones. It is part of a larger study that investigated the digital technology and OALCF Milestones overseen by AlphaPlus. For an overview of the study, refer to *Research Overview — Assessment Challenges, Contradictions and Inequities: An analysis of the use of digital technology and OALCF Milestones*.

The Milestones and accompanying reporting requirements introduced a series of curricular, pedagogical and administrative challenges for individual programs (service providers). As a result, individual programs have developed various practices to ensure compliance and remain learner-centred.

The LBS program is delivered in vastly different contexts throughout the province. Program resources, such as curricular supports, program size and location, staff supports, program delivery formats and funding levels are unevenly distributed. Although smaller programs received additional funding in order to meet new administrative demands some informants told us that they cancel planned activities for learners the day before quarterly reports are due in order to devote time to the task. In comparison, a large college program was able to reallocate resources and hire additional administrative staff. Learner educational experiences and their program aims are also unevenly distributed. Adult learners with the lowest levels of education and most diverse goals are in community-based programs, which also have the fewest program resources. Learners with the highest levels of education and predominantly academic goals are in college programs with far more program resources. (For a statistical overview of programs and learners, refer to *Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program Data*.)

The mandatory use of a standardized reporting system in a highly non-standardized LBS program context has exacerbated existing inequities and created new ones. Various program practices are put in place to mitigate the negative impacts of

the standardized system on both learners and programs, and to ensure reporting compliance.

A unique curricular and assessment system creates challenges, contradictions and confusions

The Milestones and the OALCF Curriculum Framework were designed to provide MTCU with ‘objective’ and ‘reliable’ data that could be used to evaluate program ‘effectiveness’, and to make a direct connection between LBS program outcomes and the results of large-scale international adult literacy surveys such as IALS, IALSS and PIAAC¹. The decision to make a direct connection between individual literacy development and the methods used in international surveys was made without any evidence that this is pedagogically sound or even possible. International surveys developed and continue to use a unique model of reading called information-processing. This approach was not derived from theories about learning to read, and does not align with school-based literacy testing or standardized reading tests. It is distinct from the reading comprehension model used to teach reading, and on which most published texts and student instructional supports are based.

Transposing some of the international survey methods into an educational context required significant adaptations and modifications. This results in the creation of a unique methodological approach for the OALCF and the Milestones, one that is different from both the information-processing approach used in the international literacy surveys and the reading comprehension approach used in most standardized reading tests and published instructional materials. (Refer to *Lessons Learned from Analysing the OALCF Use Digital Technology Milestones* for more information.) There are very good reasons that study informants and a document analysis revealed pedagogical challenges and confusions when using the Milestones. First, the tests contain unfamiliar content that is not connected to learners’ goals and life experiences.

Milestones provide us with no guarantee that learners have the ability to apply the same skills in their world outside of the LBS classroom. I have in fact accidentally used the same Milestone twice, and the learner has not realized it. When I discovered my mistake, I compared the results of each Milestone and discovered that their score was higher the first time it was given than the second time.

Survey Respondent

Unfamiliar and generalized content is an unfair obstacle for beginning readers. Second, the unique approach used to develop test questions combined with decontextualized content makes the tests too difficult for learners with low levels of formal education. Since the approach uses only one aspect of a broad reading comprehension approach the tests are far too easy for those with academic goals and higher levels of education. This fundamental mis-match between the Milestones and literacy development makes the Milestones an unfair assessment for the LBS system, and demonstrates the challenges in using aspects of the international survey methodology in an educational system.

Compounding the design problems are challenges using accompanying administration guidelines.

Restrictive Milestone administration guidelines compound the problems

Our description of the administration guidelines, similar to the Milestones themselves, is derived from a document analysis and study informants who described the various ways they use and interpret the guidelines. Overall, the guidelines are written to support the production of 'objective' and 'reliable' data rather than to support learners and learning. Only designated assessors can access all 60 Milestones. This prevents instructors and practitioners who are not assessors from analysing their content in order to make professional decisions about their use with particular learners, and to adequately prepare their learners. Guidelines also describe how assessors should restrict the way they discuss the test with learners and limit support before, during and after the test. They are not permitted to provide interpretive information related to content, test instructions, and test questions. Nor are they permitted to provide relevant details about test results to learners or their instructors that could be used to help learners complete additional Milestones.

Milestone results are not used to decide whether a learner will pass a course, achieve a goal, or transition into further education and training. In fact, guidelines advise assessors not to rely on the Milestones for this type of information. Without

a clear purpose for learners or learning, instructors and assessors must convince learners of their use and value.

The guidelines also state that learners must wait six weeks before attempting to re-do a Milestone that was not successful. Or a new Milestone can be administered. However, if a learner had difficulty completing one Milestone (that is somewhat familiar) substituting a different one will only add to the completion challenges. The required waiting period is punitive. The intent is to ensure learners forget the content and questions in the Milestone. If learners achieve their LBS goals during the wait period their progress does not count in the system. Learners may choose to leave before re-attempting the Milestone and the wait period could compel programs to intentionally hold back a learner to ensure there is a reportable Milestone. However, assessors told us they try to avoid this situation by modifying or disregarding the guidelines.

They also told us about a range of practices that involve modifying and disregarding Milestone administration guidelines.

Some of their strategies include: not entering data in EOIS-CaMS until a learner is ready to complete a Milestone, not waiting six weeks to re-administer unsuccessfully completed Milestones, not reporting incomplete Milestones, integrating Milestones directly into learning activities, developing duplicates of the Milestones so learners can have a practice test, not reporting all selected Milestones, administering Milestones in American Sign Language (ASL), providing learners with detailed instructions during testing, allowing learners to use dictionaries and glossaries, and administering Milestones during intake and registration.

Assessors, coordinators and instructors are developing these practices to respond to the complex learning challenges and educational experiences of their learners, yet still comply with reporting requirements.

EOIS-CaMS data reveals limited and carefully considered Milestone use

Supporting informant findings is an analysis of EOIS-CaMS data for 2013-2014. The data reveals several trends and tendencies that indicate assessors are using the Milestones primarily to comply with reporting requirements, and not to assess learning or show progress.

Only 1.6 Milestones were used for each learner in the LBS system. The Milestone system, with its 60 test tasks, was designed to show progress over time. The intention was to have each learner complete several Milestones. Using less

than two Milestones per learner indicates that they are not being used to show literacy development and progress.

Many assessors avoid using Milestones that are intended to assess reading, writing and math skills, a focus of LBS programs. Instead, they rely on Milestones from other OALCF Competencies, such as Use Digital Technology and Manage Learning. These OALCF Competencies and their accompanying Milestones are not as comprehensively developed. By making this choice, assessors bypass the levelling system and content development principles derived from the international literacy survey. They also avoid using the unique test question approach developed specifically for the Milestones.

Assessors limit their Milestone selections overall, relying on only four Milestones out of sixty for one-third (33%) of all learner plans. Three of the four are digital technology and manage learning Milestones. Our interview and survey data suggests that assessors and instructors select and administer the same Milestones because they are familiar with the content, and thus can predict if a student is ready to complete it. In addition, the unique features of the digital technology Milestones give assessors and instructors control over content, context and complexity of a test task.

The most commonly-selected Milestone is from the Manage Learning Competency, Milestone 57. It is selected on 19% of learner plans². This Milestone directs test-takers to complete a self-assessment related to goal-setting and managing their own learning. Assessors said it was used during registration and intake. However, Milestone 57 is completed only 5% of the time. The substantial difference between selection and completion rates suggests this Milestone is used to open a file within EOIS-CaMS. It also suggests that learners are having difficulty completing the Milestone. Using it as part of an already lengthy intake and registration process may pose a barrier for learners working at a basic level who need time to learn the content, format and expected responses to complete the Milestone.

Only one of the four most commonly selected Milestones is related to reading. Milestone 1 directs test-takers to read a classified ad and email. Although Milestone 1 is selected on 7% of learner plans, it is completed at less than half that rate. The difference between selection and completion indicates that some learners are having difficulty completing what is deemed to be the easiest reading related Milestone.

Starkly different practices and impacts in two programs

The uneven distribution of program resources, learner educational experiences and their goals directly impacts the

ways that programs put practices in place to integrate the Milestones. As an example, a well resourced college program readily fit Milestones into its current curriculum and courses with minimal disruption to instructors, students and its curricular and organizational structure. In stark contrast, a small community-based program in which one person is the coordinator, instructor and assessor developing individualized learning programs for a variety of goals and learner challenges, experienced far more disruption. Overall, she had to do far more work to accommodate the Milestones, taking already limited time away from supporting learners.

A college program readily fit Milestones into its curriculum and is insulated from serious impacts

Program staff from a large college program described the process they undertook to limit the Milestones' impact on their program and maintain the integrity of their existing secondary school equivalency curriculum.

All of the coordinators, assessors and instructors met to talk about how to meet OALCF reporting requirements with the least impact on learners, instructors, administrators and

We came in with our curriculum ready made and simply pulled out pieces of the OALCF that matched. Others were not able to do this. Instead, they are asking 'How can I take these Milestones and teach to them?' They think that this is their curriculum.

College Program Instructor/Coordinator

curriculum. Milestones were integrated into existing course modules with minimal disruption to existing program learning activities. College staff focused on aligning curricular topics with the Milestone topics and generally disregarded more complex alignments with specific skills, knowledge, strategies and insights. Learners were told the Milestones were simply a bureaucratic requirement and their results would not be used by the program to evaluate their progress. This approach alleviated any anxiety that could be associated with test results. The program hired an additional support staff member whose sole function was to meet the increased reporting requirements. The program also developed administrative protocols that shifted the extra work associated with the Milestones from the instructors to administrative staff. The college program was able to keep Milestones separate from teaching and learning.

In general, college programs have several advantages over small community-based and school board programs. Not only are they relatively large, with several instructors and

administrative staff, they also work with learners who have the most formal education. These programs also focus almost exclusively on two academic goal paths—postsecondary and apprenticeship. College programs also use a formal curriculum that leads to a secondary level equivalency certificate. Their curriculum, which has a direct connection to the provincial secondary curriculum, remained intact and college staff did not have to do additional work to alter their existing curriculum to accommodate the OALCF and the Milestones. They and their learners are insulated from the effects of the unique OALCF curriculum and maintain their explicit connection to the provincial education system.

A community-based program encounters more work, challenges and contradictions

In comparison to the college example, a small community-based program with one staff person who is the coordinator, assessor and practitioner experienced the impact of the OALCF very differently. Without the option of discussion with colleagues, she had to figure out how to meet reporting requirements and integrate the Milestones into existing curricular practices and frameworks. She decided not to rely on the digital technology Milestones and Milestone 57 simply to fulfil reporting requirements, and developed an approach more in line with the way Milestones are described in the *Milestones User Guide*³.

This meant she attempted to use a Milestone to represent learner progress. However she described how she encountered challenges with content that is unfamiliar and not aligned to learners' goals. She also discovered that the questioning approach is not aligned to academic goals and everyday literacy uses related to independence and employment. Her biggest challenge, she explained, was figuring out how and if the Milestones align with her collection of instructional materials that she relies on to develop individualized learning plans. She spent time developing additional support materials, including practice Milestones, which took away from time normally devoted to helping students meet their goals.

She explained that she recently had two learners successfully complete all program learning activities and gain acceptance into further education. Yet they were not able to complete a

Milestone. This led her to question her ability to adequately prepare learners. The situation is perverse. The learners met their goals and were 'transition ready'. She developed comprehensive and ultimately successful individualized learning programs, but questioned her professional expertise because of incomplete Milestones.

The program coordinator was also placed in a vulnerable position when pressured by her Employment Training Consultant (ETC) to administer Milestones soon after learners entered the program to ensure she met Milestone reporting targets. But this contradicted Milestone guidelines. She could ignore the guidelines and follow the advice of her ETC or follow the guidelines and ignore her ETC.

Her attempt to re-organize her planning and program delivery processes to accommodate the Milestones as suggested leads to far more work, creates confusion and unnecessary anxiety for learners, places her in a vulnerable position with the program funder, leads her to question her expertise and takes away from the limited time she has to support learners.

Conclusion

The Milestones introduce a series of pedagogical problems and learning barriers. Practices developed in response are neither 'good' nor 'bad' but are carefully considered and grounded in expertise and first hand knowledge of LBS learners. The ministry's focus on the production of data over sound pedagogical practice and a learning- and learner-centred approach to accountability interferes with programs' primary concern to remain responsive to learners and to support their goals and aspirations. Sometimes this interference can be readily addressed, other times it leads to more problems.

¹ The three adult literacy surveys conducted by the OECD over the past two decades are the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (IALSS) and the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Literacy Competencies (PIAAC).

² However, Milestone 57 is not commonly selected in Francophone programs.

³ Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2012) *Milestones User Guide*. Available from MTCU.

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Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Program Data

Lessons Learned From Analysing the OALCF Use Digital Technology Milestones

Practices Developed When Using the OALCF Milestones

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