

Learner-Centered Education In California WIC

Learner-Centered Education: Overview

Over the last ten years, California WIC has been seeking new ways to engage WIC participants in the nutrition education process. One of the most promising approaches has been **learner-centered education (LCE)**. LCE, an innovative approach to adult learning that includes all voices, encompasses key elements required for personalized, engaging learning. LCE redefines the traditional, didactic educator-learner roles.

In LCE, the educator-learner relationship is a partnership based on mutual respect and exchange of ideas. In this capacity the partners may end up switching roles: The educator may become the listener and learner, and the learner may become the educator. Learners in the LCE approach will do at least 50 percent of the talking and doing during any given period. In group classes, this would include time for the learners to talk with one another, rather than just listening and talking to the educator.

In traditional didactic learning, the educator decides on the topic, the content, and the method of teaching, and provides information without necessarily consulting the learner. Some of the key differences between this traditional approach and the learner-centered approach are that in LCE:

- Learners are responsible for identifying the information they already know and practice, and what they want to learn more about.
- Educators are responsible for listening to the learners and determining what they already know, practice, and want to learn. In this interactive fashion, the educator is able to facilitate dialogue with learners, and tailor the session to learners' needs. Educators acknowledge that learners must be the decision-makers: Learners decide *if* they will learn and *what* they will learn. The educator cannot make these decisions for learners.
- Information provided in a learner-centered class is brief and snappy, and learners are given an opportunity to anchor the topic of the class in their own lives, transfer the knowledge they learn, and apply the new information to their own life. Educators focus on listening to learners and asking questions that do not have right or wrong answers. Learners are praised for volunteering and sharing their own experiences. Ultimately, learners leave the class with information that is immediately useful in their own lives.

Please see enclosures for more information describing LCE principles and practices, traditional vs. LCE roles of educators and class participants, and a checklist for designing LCE lesson plans.

Finding the Teacher Within Training Program

Preliminary work with this teaching approach was very well-received by WIC participants as well as WIC teachers and leaders. Building on this success, California State WIC staff developed an intensive, year-long, training program entitled *Finding the Teacher Within (FTW)* to help local agencies integrate LCE into their nutrition education services.

Local agency leaders participating in FTW attended four train-the-trainer workshops in Sacramento and conducted two workshops with their own agency staff throughout the year. California WIC contracted with Global Learning Partners (GLP), an organization specializing in adult learning, to assist with the development of FTW, and to provide two four-day LCE courses (one introductory and one advanced) for WIC staff. Attendance at these courses was a prerequisite for leaders' participation in FTW.

Summary of FTW Training Events:

- ◆ Before FTW training events began, participating agencies were asked to:
 - Designate a two-three person team responsible for adapting and implementing the agency's own FTW program;
 - Enroll all team members in two GLP LCE courses; and
 - Conduct an orientation meeting for all agency staff who would support, influence, or actively participate in the program.
- ◆ All agency leaders attended **four** Train-the-Trainer sessions in Sacramento over the course of the program.
- ◆ WIC class teachers were trained during two on-site FTW Workshops:
 - In preparation for the workshops, agencies were asked to:
 - Conduct a learning needs and resource assessment of their own agency staff,
 - Create or revise at least two lesson plans incorporating LCE principles and practices; and
 - Use input from teaching staff, participant field tests, and GLP mentors to finalize plans.
 - During these workshops, teachers were trained to *lead* the new LCE classes, while agency leaders observed and provided them with feedback.
- ◆ Agencies also:
 - Conducted a series of follow up staff in-services, and
 - Participated in the evaluation of the program.

One-to-one partnerships were established between local agencies and the state: Each agency was assigned their own state partner(s) to help support and mentor agencies throughout the FTW process. Agency leaders and state partners spent a great deal of time communicating during the year to develop classes and to troubleshoot problems.

Evaluation of Learner-Centered Education and the Finding the Teacher Within Training Program

Local agency WIC staff found FTW training extremely useful, and the most rewarding outcome was the response from WIC participants. Based on this experience, California WIC was in an ideal position to formally evaluate the effectiveness of LCE. In 2004 California WIC was awarded a three-year WIC Special Project Grant by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. The goal of this project was to:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of LCE to facilitate behavior change in WIC participant fruit and vegetable consumption, and
- Assess the feasibility and sustainability of implementing LCE in California WIC's nutrition education services.

In order to assess the effectiveness of LCE to facilitate behavior change, longitudinal data was collected on **participant's fruit and vegetable consumption behaviors**.

Ten California WIC agencies participated in this evaluation study: five intervention and five control. Intervention agencies participated in the 2005 FTW training and implemented LCE principles and practices in their Fruit and Vegetable nutrition classes. Control agencies had not previously participated in FTW and used their usual teaching methods in their Fruit and Vegetable education classes.

At the end of the study, it was found that the learner-centered teaching approach had several distinct advantages over the traditional education classes:

- **First, and most importantly: WIC participants in learner-centered classes were more likely to report changing their eating behaviors.** WIC participants who attended a LCE Fruit and Vegetable class were 1.2 times more likely to eat more vegetables than control participants. LCE class participants reported adopting new ways to include more fruits and vegetables in their diets at home. New practices included: starting a garden, replacing visits to fast food outlets with offerings of fresh fruits and vegetables, and increasing the variety of fruits and vegetables that are offered.

“It really encouraged me to get out there and do a garden.”
Quote from WIC participant who attended a LCE Fruit and Vegetable class

- **Second, WIC participants reported greater satisfaction with learner-centered education classes.** Participant satisfaction is critically important for the WIC Program to be successful. This study showed that participants in the learner-centered education classes were more likely to rank their learning experience higher – these participants significantly increased their enjoyment of learning from other participants.

[Using a learner-centered approach, the teacher] “asked us for our opinions, and that was fine because we learn more when we are talking... I think that is why I felt comfortable, because she gave us the confidence that we could say to her what we were thinking.”

Quote from WIC participant who attended a LCE Fruit and Vegetable Class

- **Third, WIC teachers using a learner-centered approach were more satisfied with the WIC nutrition education teaching experience.** Teachers engaged in the learner-centered approach, as compared to those using the traditional approach, reported that the things they liked best about teaching were active class discussions, participants asking questions and more class participation. These teachers came to value the principle of having participants talk and learn from each other, a hallmark of LCE.
- **Fourth, WIC agency leadership identified positive outcomes from their adoption of learner-centered education classes.** WIC leadership observed that dialogue between agency leadership, teachers and participants was enhanced. One WIC leader reported that their teachers who used the LCE approach had gotten participants to set goals that they had previously deemed impossible.

On the basis of this study, we recommend that WIC agencies and other similar programs offering health education consider integrating learner-centered principles and practices into their nutrition education programs. Nutrition education classes need to emphasize participants’ learning needs. Additionally, this study points to the importance of training and ongoing support for WIC teachers and WIC leadership in order to implement and sustain this approach to education.





Learner-Centered Education Resources

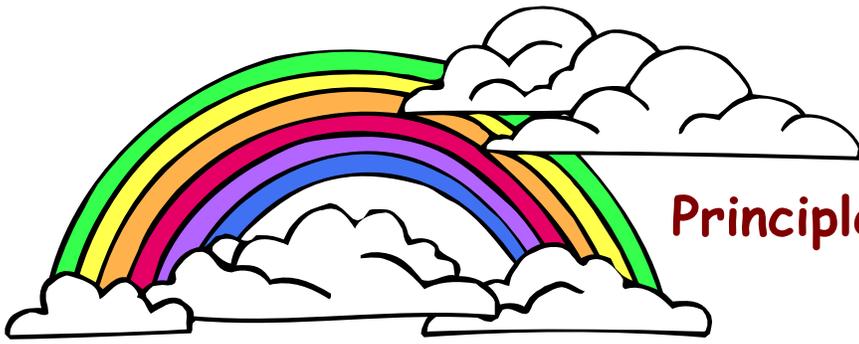
Several LCE resources are currently available on the California State WIC Program website (http://www.wicworks.ca.gov/education/education_index.html), such as lesson plans, guidelines for developing class designs, and staff inservice materials. Additional materials will be added to the web-based resource kit, including: FTW training materials, LCE principles and practices, lesson plans, and evaluation tools and results.

We hope that other state WIC programs can adapt many of our implementation strategies and training materials to fit their state program and local WIC agency needs. Programs and agencies serving similar populations (such as Head Start, Food Stamps Nutrition Education Program, Cooperative Extension, and school-based nutrition programs), may also find application for WIC's LCE approach in their own health education activities.



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Learner Centered Principles and Practices

Respectful: Learners feel important and valued. Adults need to feel respected for who they are, where they've been, and what they know how to do.

Immediately Meaningful: Something that learners feel is helpful in their own lives right now, that they can take back and use right away.

Safe: Learners feel comfortable and confident and willing to jump in.

Engaging: Learners are involved, and participate in their learning. We look for the smiles, conversation, laughter, questions, and movement that let us know our learners are engaged.

Open Questions: Questions without set "correct" answers. Often have the words "what" or "how," and "you." Don't feel like the teacher is "fishing" for an answer.

Pause for Answers: Waiting at least 5 seconds for a group to answer an open question. Learners may feel shy, or may need time to think about the question before they respond.

Affirm: Praising someone who volunteers an answer. Even if you do not agree with what they say, they will feel respected and you will encourage others to contribute.

Work in Pairs: People often feel more comfortable talking to just one other person than in front of an entire group. This is safer, and gets more people involved in the class at the same time.

Learning Style — Hear, See, Do: Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may not remember; involve me and I'll understand.

Provides Information: The class gives participants important new content.

Traditional approach to nutrition education

Expert



Educator

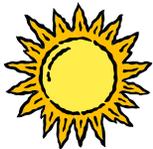


Participant

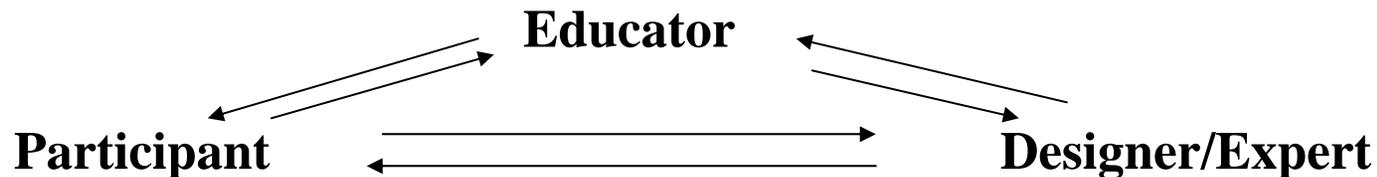
Decides the topic participant should learn
Decides method of class
Gives knowledge to educator

Follows expert's outline on topic
Uses expert's method of teaching
Passes knowledge on to participant

Listens to educator
Learns
Changes behavior



Learner-centered approach to nutrition education



- May already know about nutrition and health topics
- Is the expert of her own circumstance
- Decides if and what she will learn
- Decides what behavior to change and how
- May share experience and information with other participants
- Suggests ways to make WIC education more helpful

- Knows about nutrition and health and ways to effectively change behavior
- Knows ways to find out about the participant's needs and concerns, what she already knows and what behaviors she is willing to change
- Has experience helping participants identify possible barriers to behavior change
- Facilitates ways to help participants learn from the class and each other
- Gets feedback from participants about education
- Gives feedback to expert/designer about participants and educators need and want

- Asks participants and educators what topics they are interested in and how they like to learn
- Asks educators what techniques they would like help with
- Gives educators up-to-date information
- Helps educator improve techniques to help participant
- Blends expertise with input from participants and educator to design effective learning experiences
- Gets input on how to make training and learning more effective for future session