

Mass Learning of Psycho-Social Competencies

Winthrop Adkins,
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Winthrop Adkins, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Education, Teachers College, Columbia University gave a presentation entitled “Mass Learning of Psycho-social Competencies” which described the rationale for his work on Life Skills Education. He is the principal author of The Adkins Life Skills Program: Career Development Series, a group career and personal development program which combines pedagogical and behavioral science principles, carefully designed learning activities and multimedia technology to help economically disadvantaged adults and youth become employable and employed. The Adkins Program has been used in over 2000 educational and social service agencies in 46 states. Over a million and half persons have participated in the program and over 8,000 counselors, teachers and administrators in some 20 different kinds of institutions have been trained. The program is now in its third edition and there are Spanish and Italian language versions. In the presentation, the Career Development Series was seen as the first, or the prototype of many hundreds of programs which will someday be developed to help people learn and refine a wide variety of essential life competencies. This kind of cognitive, affective and behavioral learning will most likely be delivered through a combination of Internet and face-to-face group and individual learning activities in the home and in the thousands of funded institutions which are intended to help people learn to cope more effectively.

Dr. Adkins gave the rationale for his approach. He noted that there are millions of people who cannot cope successfully with the predictable developmental tasks faced at different stages of life in the areas of personal development, career development, marriage and family life, health and so forth. The personal and societal cost in terms of prisons, welfare dependency, mental/physical illness, drug abuse, broken homes, violence, physical and sexual abuse and dysfunctional families is enormous. He noted that unless a person learns the major coping skills in his early home from parents, surrogate parents or at school, church or community agencies like the Boy/Girl Scouts or YMCA, he/she is unlikely to be able to learn them later, and often will experience real difficulty in areas of life where their coping skills are limited. When careers or marriages fail and psychological problems manifest themselves, individuals often will turn to counselors and therapists, but much of the time the problems have become so serious that counseling and therapy is not successful. Unfortunately there are few places where a person can acquire the coping skills he/she missed in the home and at earlier stages of development.

Dr Adkins noted the unavailability and expense of time-intensive counseling and psychotherapy and their weaknesses as a means for learning when feelings,

perceptions, knowledge are distorted and effective behavior has not yet been learned. He noted that too often counseling and therapy are not approached as processes of learning in which *what* needs to be learned and *how* it could be learned have been made explicit. He noted the complexity of the learning problem when deep feelings, values, perceptions, conceptions, lack of knowledge and lack of behavioral models all confound the learning process. He indicated the limits of a learning process which relies almost exclusively on talking and listening and rarely makes use of other learning instrumentalities.

He then described his approach to learning based on carefully designed multimedia learning activities which incorporate major principles and methods of learning stemming from both Education and the Behavioral Sciences. He indicated that his structured, four-stage group method makes use of *experiential* learning and *inductive* learning processes modeled on John Dewey's problem-centered focus and inquiry learning processes. Dr Adkins showed a schemata of the model and demonstrated a few video learning activities. Time did not permit a full presentation of the program, nor of the design and development scaffolding that was required to create it. He did mention that he and his wife, co-author and collaborator, Caroline Adkins, an Emerita Professor from Hunter College of the City University of New York, are now working toward the creation of a new Life Skills Series on Marriage which could be used on a large scale in multiple settings by, for example, couples in the military whose marriages have been severely disrupted by war and separation.

Those interested in learning more about the Institute for Life Coping Skills and the Career Development Series can go to www.adkinslifeskills.org.