

Life Skills

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The first extensive proposal for life skills education was made by Winthrop Adkins and Sydney Rosenberg (1965) in their plan for the training component of the Training Resources for Youth Center in New York. Although this project did not achieve realization, the concept of life skills which they enunciated was used to develop a Life Skills course in Saskatchewan, Canada. This course has been widely adopted in Canada and had also received considerable attention in the United States and in England. This article reviews the original course, the development of cognitive counselling in the United States and the articulation of some seven models for life skills training in Great Britain, and indicates further needed developments in life skills education.

Life Skills are the utilization of appropriate and responsible problem-solving behaviours in the management of personal affairs. Problem-solving behaviours include a relatively small group of behaviours usable in many life situations. Appropriate use requires an individual to adapt the behaviours to time and place. Responsible use requires maturity or accountability. As behaviours used in the management of personal affairs, the life skills apply to five areas of life responsibility: (1) self, (2) family, (3) leisure, (4) community, and (5) job.

The Life Skills course

In achieving its objective, the Life Skills course provides the students with competence in the use of problem-solving skills to manage their personal affairs as suggested by the terms: self, family, leisure, community, and job. Although the training concentrates on behaviours, it does not discount the effects that these new found competencies have on the attitudes of the adult student towards himself and those around him.

The Life Skills course recognizes that true learning (behavioural change) occurs when the learner has: (1) a clear understanding of his goals, (2) a clear description of the new behaviour, and (3) an understanding of those conditions which make the behaviour acceptable. The concept to these new sought-for behaviours as skills makes a happy fit with the recognition of 'learning as changed behaviour'. A skill has these characteristics: (1) the connotation of clarity in description, (2) a definite purpose, and (3) certain standards by which people judge their acceptability (Himsl, 1973a).

The Life Skills process

Life Skills training integrates the content described above and three process dimensions: (1) student response to content, (2) student use of group, and (3) problem solving.

The student response to content dimension

In responding along this dimension, the student may react first in any one of its three domains: (1) the cognitive, (2) the affective, or (3) the psychomotor. When he or she reacts in the cognitive or knowing domain, he/she might rephrase a sentence in his/her own words, or summarize the happenings of the lesson. If so, he/she might combine the rather simple act of recalling with the more complex act of synthesizing, or he/she might relate the discussion in a lesson to an experience in his/her home life, thereby contrasting and comparing. Or, he/she might link the items in one lesson to those in another, thereby showing relationships. Any manipulation of course content, such as repetition or recall, explanation, analysis, application, synthesis or evaluation, represents a cognitive or knowing response.

Students also respond on this dimension with affect or feeling. This affective response may occur before, at the same time, or after the cognitive or knowing response. Indeed, it may be characteristic of the disadvantaged to hold knowledge in low esteem, in which case the initial reaction might occur in the affective domain. Whatever the exact sequence, Life Skills training recognizes the affective reaction and encourages its expression and control. At the worst, unexpressed or suppressed feelings inhibit the development of behavioural change and prevent the student from facing him/herself and others. At the best, expressed feelings open the student to new understandings of those around him/her and help him/her recognize that other have the same fears and uncertainties. Yet, they manage to function. Furthermore, the student soon comes to the realization that the mere expression of feelings

often assists in controlling them. At one extreme, he/she may blurt out that some things look stupid, and reject lessons by walking out. Or, he/she may stay, but participate passively. At the other extreme, he/she may speak 'loyally' of the group and the activities of the lessons. Or, he/she may defend the activities of the course and the group against outside criticism and enthusiastically tell others what he/she has learned. Though such expressions of feeling and attitude demand a great deal of the coach, he/she responds quickly to them, helping the members of the group accept their own feelings and those of others.

When the student responds in the third category of behaviours, the psychomotor or acting category, he/she uses his body: he/she may conduct interviews, demonstrate new behaviours to others, or participate in role-playing situations. The student's psychomotor responses often provide the most obvious evidence of his/her full participation in the activities of the lesson. Cognitive, or knowing, manipulation of the content provides him/her with a necessary 'factual' base: his/her affective, or feeling, response to content expresses his/her will to face the consequences of the new knowledge and its effect on him/her. Psychomotor response represents commitment to action.

The student use of group dimension

The second dimension describes the purpose of the learning group. The student uses the group to practice new behaviours. He/she uses feedback and criticism from the group to modify new behaviours. He/she studies individuals in the group as models for new behaviours, and uses the group as a setting in which to develop skills of self-expression. The group affects its members most when they developed a strong sense of mutual trust and an interest in helping one another through the lessons. The group provides both acceptance and challenge, and seeks an essential balance between the two: all acceptance stunts improvement in skills and development of problem-solving capabilities; all challenge makes people react defensively and become more set in ineffective behaviours.

Students respond at three rather distinct levels on this dimension:

- 1) The student continues interpersonal behaviours which in the past have met his/her needs. If previously withdrawn at a first or safe level of use, he/she continues to withdraw; if previously a bully, he/she continues this behaviour; or if he/she in the past tried always to harmonize the group activities, he/she continues this.
- 2) At the level of careful group use, he/she ventures into the practice of new behaviours. He/she models new behaviours after those of the coach and

- other members of the group. He/she draws attention of other group members to this new behaviour, seeking support and acknowledgement. At the upper edge of this level, he/she tries the behaviour with strangers.
- 3) At the level of risky group use, he/she asks directly for criticism of the new behaviours, seeking to refine them and make them more effective. He/she gives feedback to others; ventures opinion which he/she knows others in the group might find startling coming from him/her. He/she expresses strong feelings to other members of the group, or objects to some procedures the coach has used. On the use of group dimension, the student extends the range and increases the effectiveness of his/her interpersonal behaviours.

The student then, has three levels of activity in the learning group: the level of safe group use, the level of careful group use, and the level of risky group use. These add to each other: behaviours characteristic of the third level do not replace those of the second or the first level, nor do those in the second level replace those of the first level. The student retains the safe group use behaviours that serve him/her well. To assist him/her in his/her necessary learnings, the coach encourages him/her to add to his/her behaviours the more venturesome two upper levels.

The more effective the learner, the more he/she uses all responses named in the 'response to content dimension', and as a consequence of this, he/she will use more of the behavioural categories named in the 'use of group dimension'.

The problem-solving dimension

The learner could use both of the content group dimensions to their fullest, and still achieve none of the objectives of the Life Skills course. The complete Life Skills process/content model requires a third dimension. The Life Skill student uses a whole array of problem-solving behaviours: (1) recognizes a problem situation, (2) defines a problem, (3) chooses an alternative solution, (4) implements it, and (5) evaluates the result. Of course, each of these processes contains many sub-processes. As he/she matures in the course, the student increases the array of the problem-solving behaviours he/she uses, until, ideally, he/she uses them as the situation requires. This array of behaviour provides the third dimension. Figure 1 represents the complete process model.

The Life Skills lesson

The lesson model

The Life Skills lesson model combines techniques of counselling, learning, and skill training. The approach which the lesson model describes permits the student to display knowledge and concerns about a particular problem as a first response to it. Then he/she seeks information and practices skills which help him/her develop new approaches to its solution. He/she then applies these skills and knowledge to the problem as his/her first response to it, and finally evaluates the effect of his/her action.

The model requires the precise statement of each skill objective which gives direction to the student activities in the lesson. The student works toward the achievement of the objective through the five phases of the lesson model: (1) stimulus, (2) evocation, (3) objective enquiry/skill practice, (4) application, and (5) evaluation.

Application of the model

The coach always articulates the skill objective for the students by drawing their attention to its skill components so they know exactly what behaviours they are to manifest during the application phase of the lesson. Usually, the coach presents the objective during the stimulus phases of the lesson: however, some lessons gain from delaying its presentation.

In the stimulus, the coach presents the problem. In one lesson, he/she uses a film; in another, a case study; in yet another, a trust exercise. During the stimulus, the coach might provoke, inform, or question. Whatever the procedure, the aim is to stimulate a reaction from the students.

In the evocation, the coach encourages the students to express their opinions and feelings related to the stimulus. Using counselling techniques, he/she remains non-judgemental, assisting the students to verbalize their concerns, to express their knowledge, and tell of their experience. The coach permits, and may encourage, the articulation of disagreements about the topic under consideration, and then uses these disagreements as a basis for the development of the investigation which takes place later in the lesson. In the evocation phase, the coach helps the students classify their ideas and helps them frame fact-finding questions for investigation in the next phase of the lesson.

In the objective enquiry/skill practice phase, the coach acts as a teacher or guide helping the students seek out and relate new knowledge to the problem they defined. He/she helps them search for answers to their questions and to

practice new skills. They might critique themselves on video, or use check-lists to examine their behaviour. They might study films, books, or clippings from magazines. Or, they might seek information from resource persons in the community.

In the objective enquiry/skill practice phase, the coach arranges situations in which the students practice the skills specified in the objective of the lesson. Often, the students do this practice in a role-play situation designed to resemble the circumstances in which they use the skill in the application phase. In some lessons, for example, the lesson objective requires students to conduct on-the-street interviews and to make telephone appointments. In such instances, the coach prepares the students for the use of the necessary skills by conducting skill practice in role-play situations. The students use video-tape feedback to modify their performance, and so improve their skills.

In the application phase of the lesson, the coach helps the student apply knowledge and skills to the solution of a problem. Whenever possible, he/she applies his/her solution in a real-life situation. The real-life situation changes as the course develops; in the early part of the course, the student applies the skill in the learning group; later with visitors, in the community, in the home, or in the planned simulations of other real situations.

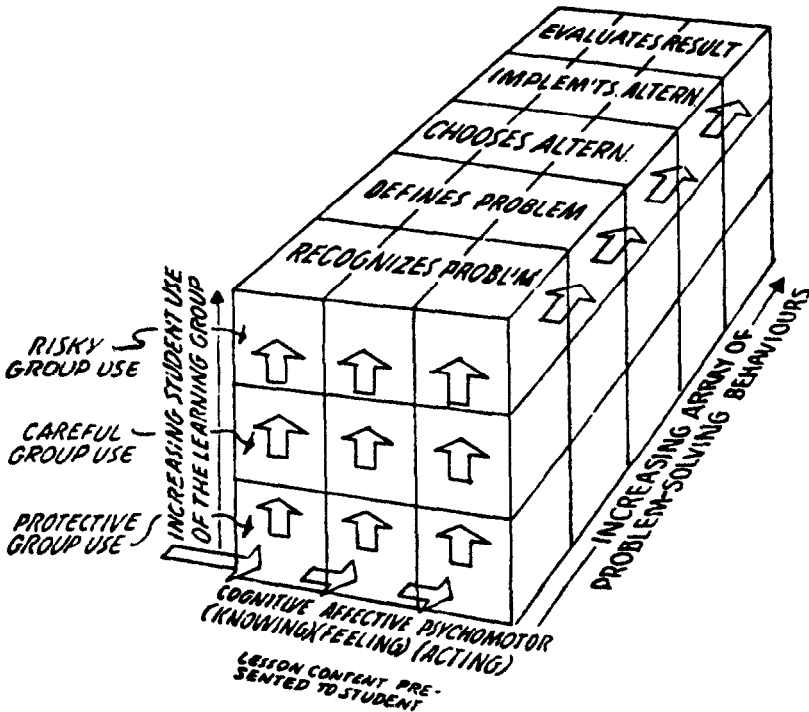


Figure 1. The Life Skills Process/Content Model

In the evaluation phase, the students and coach assess student progress towards achievement of the skills specified in the lesson objective. In some lessons, the students assess their development by means of discussion, analysis of video-tape, providing feedback based on check-lists, and by direct interview with other students. In other lessons, the coach provides each student with direct feedback on his/her skill achievement. However, in the evaluation model, assessment of skill achievement accomplishes only part of the evaluation. To complete the evaluation, coach and students must plan for further skill development. Often the coach does this by encouraging the students to teach the skill to other persons; sometimes he/she provides for additional skill practice following the feedback; sometimes he/she provides a one-to-one instructional situation in which another student, skilled in the use of the particular behaviour models, instructs the less skilled person.

Models for social and Life Skills development: A British study

The analyses of a British team (Stanton et al., 1980) provide particularly valuable study rendering

- 1) a discussion of the distinction between product objectives and process objectives; and
- 2) the description of seven models for programs in Social and Life Skills (SLS).

Product vs. process objectives

Product approaches, the authors of the study state, view SLS development as a way of achieving a certain desirable *end-product*; this end-product is an individual who knows certain facts, has mastered certain skills, or perhaps has acquired 'appropriate' attitudes or values. In this kind of approach, it should be possible to scale learners according to their competence or incompetence. Two of the examples offered are that the learner should be able to write an acceptable letter of application for a job, and to prepare a simple meal.

Process approaches, on the other hand, are more open-ended, emphasizing continuous development; goals are perceived in terms of desirable processes and potentialities (such as thinking, feeling and acting), which individuals become able to use for their own purposes. 'Unlike product competencies, process competencies are never mastered, only improved' (p. 13). In *process* approaches, the aim is always the development of the learning process; course

content is not considered the end of learning but the means to it.

Typical *process* objectives are that the learner should be able to seek information and organize it into frameworks, and to see an argument from someone else's point of view.

The *product-process* distinction is utilized by the British team to delineate seven models of SLS teaching (p. 17).

Descriptions of the seven models

There are four *product-oriented* models:

1) The *deficiency model* assumes that the target population has certain basic deficiencies, which must be remedied before individuals can make progress in the kinds of study or work that are normally expected for people of their age. Two classes of deficiency are distinguished:

- a) in basic skills, such as literacy and numeracy; interpersonal skills; manipulative skills;
- b) in motivation, as the result of a poor or inappropriate self-image, the image held of others, or inability to recognize needs as learning needs.

2) The *competency model* emphasizes 'mastery', or 'competent performance of specific skills in pre-specified tasks for which agreed criteria of competence can be established' (p. 21). Using the telephone, and surviving with simple ('bed-sit') cooking, are two examples of the competence aimed at in this type of program.

3) The *information-based model* assumes that knowing a body of pre-selected facts is the goal of SLS development. These facts may involve either *knowing how*, as in how to obtain an unemployment insurance benefit, or *knowing that*, as in knowing that vitamins are essential for good health.

4) The *socialization model* aims at developing specified attitudes, values, or willingness to adjust to particular requirements in the world of work or to the expectations of society in general.

Three of the seven models are *process-oriented*:

5) The *experiential model* is based on open-ended learner activities that incorporate a range of skill and knowledge demands; in these activities, the opportunities for developing particular capacities are not clearly predetermined. Organizing and carrying out a community service project, or the performance of work activities in a simulated office, are examples.

6) The *reflective model* aims to develop a student's 'ability to "pattern" experience or data in alternative ways, perceive relationships, make and check generalisations and develop conceptual frameworks' (p. 29). In an academic

application, students are introduced to systematic ways of tackling problems, engaging in enquiry, and so on. In a personal application, the reflective process concentrates on the direct experience and activities of the participants. Usually conducted in a learning group, *reflective personal* programs seek to help students develop their own perceptions of patterns and relationships and to learn certain methods of approach to problems.

7) The *counselling model*, emphasizing the importance of the affective domain, arranges for individual and/or group reflection on experiences in order to increase individual understanding and control of behaviour, understanding of others' feelings and emotions, and ability to distinguish between emotional and cognitive elements, as in decision making. This model refers to counselling as a general teaching activity rather than as specialist therapy.

The Life Skills approach: Product or process?

Life Skills training consists of definite and clearly stated *product* objectives. The behavioural skills are competencies that can be mastered, and the 'level of learning' to which they are taught in existing lessons has been assessed.

The overall program objective of developing in students the power to use the new behaviours for their own purposes, in solving their personal problems of everyday life, fits the definition of a *process* approach.

As *product* objectives, the behavioural skills are the means to an end. Each forms part of a larger, functional objective; that is, it is learned in order to be used in the accomplishment of a more complex purpose. Thus, the skill 'to ask himself 6-W questions', which is clearly a *product* objective, is learned not for itself but for use in solving problems. Similarly, the skill 'to describe personal feelings as a result of a stressful situation' is a *product* objective, a competency than can be mastered, but it is learned for use in solving problems, developing control over emotions and changing behaviours in group members.

It is interesting to position the Life Skills objectives on a *product-process* continuum, according to their degree of complexity.

- When life skills are analyzed to the most specific behaviours, they appear as competencies to be mastered, that is, as *product* objectives.
- When life skills are summarized under the category headings of problem-solving skills, human relations skills, process skills, and coping skills their character as *product* objectives becomes blurred. Problem-solving skills, for instance, are described as those 'which enable the student to set, implement and evaluate short- and long-term goals and resolve personal problems'. That definition, which lodges control over the skills in the student, has moved closer to a *process* approach, which seeks to develop 'certain processes and potentialities . . . which the learner is able to use for his or her own purposes'.

- And when life skills are seen as a synthesis, aimed at developing individuals confident enough to express themselves in the discriminating use of a repertoire of problem-solving skills in meeting the problems of every life – *product* has been enveloped by *process*.

The specific behavioural skills, which give the Life Skills program its concrete substance and rigorous training structure, are in reality sub-skills. 'A new act is mastered, only to be supplanted by a 'higher-order action' that usually encompasses it as a subroutine' (Bruner, 1960: 4). The whole is greater than the sum of all its parts. It is as an ongoing process of moving continually to life skills of an increasingly higher order that the Life Skills program, in its totality, can best be described.

The viewpoint of cognitive science

The developing discipline of cognitive science, with its fresh interpretation of the meaning of *cognitive*, provides the theoretical tools to show the inter-relationships between observable behaviours and inner conceptual development. Certain basic principles of cognitive science are particularly appropriate to Life Skills theory and practice.

- An individual's model of the world determines the acquisition and organization of knowledge.

One of the truisms used by Life Skills as the source of its methodology is that 'learning starts at the learner's current level of functioning and his understanding of present reality' (Himsl, 1973b: 14).

The Life Skills coach recognizes that 'each individual in his group carries a unique life experience to the learning setting which affects his response to it' (Himsl, 1973b: 203).

- The individual's world model is organized pluralistically in domain-specific knowledge, as a set of 'loosely aggregated microworlds' (Apostel, 1977: 111).

The domain on which Life Skills concentrates is the management of *personal* affairs, with particular relation to the life areas of job, family, leisure and community. The problems that Life Skills students tackle and learn to solve are all problems that concern *self* in relation to those life areas. 'The course design provides the student with an opportunity and the skills to study his

problems, or to put it another way, to study himself as a problem' (Himsl, 1973b: 59).

This principle of pluralistic cognitive organization explains how it comes about that even some adults who are well equipped cognitively to deal with data from the external world may lack the skill to deal effectively with internal data. A genius in solving algebra problems may be at an utter loss in solving problems concerning himself and his relationships with other persons.

- Knowledge is represented as 'procedures' or 'skills' rather than as 'assertions'. In cognitive science, 'knowing how' has superseded 'knowing that' in importance. To know something means to be able to do something.

In Life Skills, learning is defined as changed behaviour. The learning model alternates abstraction and application: knowing how-to-do and doing.

- Knowing, acting and feeling are interacting functions of each individual's world-view.

The Life Skills process/content model claims that each student responds to the content of a Life Skills course on the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains, in knowing, acting and feeling.

Cognitive development

The cognitive viewpoint also accounts for the effectiveness of Life Skills training, which is rooted in observable behaviour. According to Piagetian theory, individuals develop cognitively through ordered stages. In Piaget's conception, thought is internalized action, and the process of this internalization can be charted from infancy to maturity. The word *operations* is Piaget's term used to signify a step beyond mere action in the internalization process. Operations are 'a means of getting data about the real world into the mind and there transforming them so that they can be organized and used selectively in the solution of problems' (Bruner, 1960: 35).

Piaget described a stage of concrete operations', in which children are not yet readily able to deal with possibilities not directly before them or not yet already experienced. This type of operation is a means for structuring only immediately present reality. Children at this stage are able to anticipate things that are not present, but they do not review systematically the full range of alternative possibilities that could exist at any given time. They can grasp intuitively and concretely a great many basic concepts, but they are not capable of making systematic deductions form abstract theory.

The stage of 'formal operations' ordinarily emerges during adolescence and is characteristic of mature adults.

To formal reasoners, reality is only one of many possibilities. They can appreciate hypotheses which are not proven concrete realities and are able to consider as possibilities all potential variables and combinations of variables that might affect an outcome. They can make deductions from the possible to the empirically real in order to verify hypotheses. Thus, confronted with a problem, the pattern of formal reasoning is first to envision possible causes and combinations of causes and afterwards to act in a systematic *if... then* manner of deducing what should happen.

Recent research, according to Berzonsky (1970: 279), suggests that all adolescents, or even adults, do not develop complete formal reasoning. Furthermore, those adolescents who do reason formally do not do so in an all-pervasive manner; they may reason formally in some situations but not in others.

A comparison of the formal reasoning pattern with the Life Skills problem-solving process is instructive. That process trains students to:

- *recognize the problem situation.*
- *Define the problem*, by collecting many facts; hypothesizing with the question 'In what ways might...?'; evaluating these hypotheses with the question 'Why?'; and choosing the best hypothesis.
- *Choose a solution*, by finding possible solutions; finding criteria; choosing a solution; and predicting results.
- *Implement a solution*, by planning how to carry out the solution and doing so.
- *Evaluate the result*, by comparing the results of the action with what was predicted.

The inclusion of this process as a fundamental component of the Life Skills course implies that a basic need for elementary training in problem solving was identified by the program developers, and that is indeed the case. In the domain of personal affairs, the typical Life skills students seem not to have reached the stage of formal reasoning.

The implication is strong that, at least in the domain of personal affairs, the individuals who need a Life Skills course have not yet progressed from the concrete to the formal stage of cognitive development.

In the light of these comparisons, it can be hypothesized that training in the problem-solving and interpersonal behaviours of the Life Skills course functions to raise the cognitive level of participants from the concrete stage towards the formal stage, in the domain of self in relation to the external

world. Life Skills students learn, as Berzonsky (1978: 279) expresses it, to conduct 'thought experiments' prior to acting and consequently to proceed in a systematic rather than a trial-and-error manner when solving personal problems.

A corollary to this interpretation of what Life Skills training does is of vital importance in planning lesson activities and presentations. Training can help an individual to pass progressively from concrete thinking to a more conceptually adequate mode of thought, but this process can only be accomplished by beginning 'where the student is', that is, in the concrete mode. It is futile, declares Bruner (1960: 38), to present formal explanations based on a logic that is alien to the students' manner of thinking and sterile in its implications for them.

Much credit for the effectiveness of the Life Skills course, then can be attributed to its emphasis on the concrete: observable behaviours; active involvement by the participants; physical demonstrations of abstract ideas, such as trust; concentration on the 'here and now'. The process of developing basic concepts is not approached from abstract theory but through concrete experience.

Conceptual growth

The Life Skills course emphasizes the importance of gaining 'self-understanding'.

'Understanding', according to the cognitivist Moravcsik (1977: 101), involves having concepts. In Vygotsky's words (1966: 53):

... a concept is not an isolated, ossified, changeless formation, but an active part of the intellectual process, constantly engaged in serving communication, understanding, and problem-solving.

A concept is formed as the cognitive mechanisms identify external and internal data, differentiate between them, put them in order, classify them, establish relationships between them, and integrate them into existing cognitive structures.

However, the concepts that are developed do not always reflect reality accurately. The data base on which they are formed may be weak; the information may be wrongly interpreted: the world-view into which the new information is incorporated may be coloured by ungrounded assumptions. At any point in the chain of full concept formation, some distortion of reality may occur.

The importance of this point for Life Skills is that flawed concepts can play

a destructive role in an individual's relations with other people and in that person's acquisition of new knowledge. If the concepts being developed out of the experiences of Life Skills training are to play a constructive part in restructuring a student's world-view, those experiences have to be evaluated critically. The new understanding that emerges from the alternation of active behaviour and inner reflection has to be tested for its validity.

The skills of evaluating critically and testing the validity of claims are as necessary to mature living as attending behaviours and elementary problem-solving skills. From the cognitive viewpoint, critical-thinking skills are one variety of life skills:

Two senses of the term *cognitive* have to be distinguished:

- 1) The thinking activity that is teamed with affective and psychomotor activity to constitute the content dimension of student response to the training course.
- 2) The totality of stored knowledge, or meanings, that is structured in an individual's world-view and that functions in the acquisition of new knowledge.

The learning of life skills is a process of integrating sub-skills, manifested outwardly as observable behaviours, into cognitive structure. These sub-skills are successively subsumed into higher-order life skills, which in turn are manifested as observable problem-solving and interpersonal behaviours of an increasingly complex nature.

In this way, the cognitive powers are raised, in the domain of self in relation to the external world, from a concrete level to the level of formal reasoning.

In the process, the concept of self is developed, leading to the formation of a coherent self-other image, which generates the balanced self-determined behaviour that is the goal of the course.

This process of integration of life skills into cognitive organization has been expressed in *The Dynamics of Life Skills Coaching* (Curtiss et al., 1974: 89) as the sequence: unconscious incompetence → conscious incompetence → conscious competence → unconscious competence, 'where the skills learned so painfully seem to be a natural part of your life.'

The objective of Life Skills training

The overall objective of Life Skills training is to develop a *balanced self-determined person solving problems creatively in everyday life*. This quality of behaviour is made possible by the integration of life skills into cognitive structure and the growth of a self concept, which leads to the formation of a coherent *self-others image*.

This Life Skills goal may not be realized during the relatively short duration of a training course. However, the spiralling process that moves towards that ideal is initiated during training. The degree to which individual learners integrate that process cognitively into their world-view determines how far they will proceed towards the ideal.

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