

Road to Success

Helping Young Adults With Learning Disabilities Plan and Prepare for Employment

D. Richard Johnson

Daryl F. Mellard

Paula Lancaster

Road to Success is an innovative curricular offering for adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) as they transition from school to employment or post-secondary educational settings. *Road to Success*, using efficacious instructional methods as suggested by Swanson and Deshler (2003), addresses the content and skills adolescents with LD need so as to overcome behavioral issues that have made school difficult, and later become barriers to successful, productive employment.

U.S. schools expend a great deal of energy preparing children and youth with disabilities “to lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible” in compliance with the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; Public Law 108-446; p. 3). Yet, despite supporting federal legislation, research on effective practices, and an emphasis on interagency collaboration, progress in creating effective, comprehensive transition services has been slow (Johnson & Sharpe, 2000; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking,

& Mack, 2002). Clearly, adolescents with learning disabilities (LD) can be difficult to engage in the learning process, and they are often ill-prepared to succeed in high school and beyond (Swanson & Deshler, 2003). Before exiting school, many of these students evidence performance and adjustment problems, such as higher rates of absenteeism, lower grade-point averages, higher course failure rates, more prevalent feelings of low self-esteem, and higher rates of inappropriate social behaviors than in the general population of students (Schumaker, 1992; Wagner, Blackorby, & Hebbeler, 1993). Those outcomes can lead one to question whether the educational system has used the best methods in teaching these students. Further, one may also wonder, What will these students’ success be as they begin participating as adults in the workforce and community?

Regardless of their readiness, most young adults with disabilities—over half of whom reported having LD—transitioned into employment within 2 years of leaving school (Wagner, Newman,

Cameto, & Levine, 2005). The recent National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) described the experiences of youth (ages 15–19) with disabilities during the first 2 years after exiting from school and found that 75% of this population engaged in postsecondary education, job training, or employment (Wagner et al., 2005). Of those individuals engaged in these three activities, 60% participated solely in employment, 35% were employed and enrolled in postsecondary education or job training programs, and 5% were enrolled solely in postsecondary education or job training programs (Wagner et al., 2005).

Despite the number of youth with disabilities who enter employment after completing secondary education, the judgment of the National Council on Disability is that “the Department of Education transition initiative has not met with the degree of success expected, hoped and needed” (NCD, 2000, p. 1). In fact, less than 5% were employed throughout the entire 2-year post-graduation period addressed by the NLTS-2 (Wagner et al., 2005). Moreover, many

of the youth reported holding several jobs for only brief periods: 27% of youth with disabilities held a job for 2 months or less, 35% held employment for only 2.1 to 6 months, and only about 8% worked for 12.1 to 24 months (Wagner et al., 2005). This pattern of brief periods of employment may be due, in part, to the tendency of youth, while still in school, to hold temporary jobs that end shortly thereafter (Wagner et al., 2005). With regard to individuals with LD, little research exists that investigates their longer-term employment experiences (Gerber, Price, Mulligan, & Shessel, 2004).

The NLTS-2 data indicated youth with disabilities faced significant barriers and had limited success transitioning to sustained employment. One consistently identified barrier to successful transition for youth with disabilities was poor social skills (i.e., inadequate psychosocial adjustment and problems with interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, and employers that lead to disciplinary actions at school, being fired from a job, or even being arrested). Furthermore, youth with disabilities infrequently communicated and advocated their own interests and needs. Only 16% of youth with disabilities exhibited high social skills, whereas 22% had markedly low social skills (Wagner et al., 2005). At a minimum, this 22% of youth with disabilities needed more purposeful instruction, focused content, and practice with the skills required to obtain and sustain employment. The need for such interventions is even more crucial for those students with LD. Some transition experts suggest that learning of social skills, such as community participation, self-determination, communication, and interpersonal relationships, should become a matter of focus and everyday practice (Baska et al., 2003; Clark, 2005; Lindstrom & Skinner, 2003).

These figures, together with the problematic nature of preparing youth with disabilities at the secondary level, make it imperative that both educators and adult service providers have appropriate and more effective means to help students with disabilities plan and prepare for employment. As educators, we

must ask ourselves whether we have failed this population, particularly because we have not used the appropriate instructional methods nor provided the right content to help them plan for and sustain employment as they enter life after high school.

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Additionally, successful transitions happen in particular contexts. That context for young adults with serious cognitive and/or orthopedic disabilities may involve curricula and support systems, such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) or supported employment. Adolescents with LD, however, appear to need an employment planning and preparation context that is specific to their learning needs, and require a support system that is less intense than supported employment but more explicit than typically used with proficient learners.

Instructing Youth With LD

The statement that not all forms of instruction work equally well with all students is accepted knowledge. Individualized instruction can be crucial to effective learning for any student, particularly those students with LD. Indeed, after completing a meta-analysis of 180 intervention studies of effective instruction for adolescents with LD, Swanson and Hoskyn (1998) found that the strongest positive outcomes for students with LD occurred when instruction was provided to them using strategic instruction, direct instruction, or a combination of the two methods.

Strategic instruction generally uses a top-down processing approach that focuses primarily on rules (Swanson, 1999). Strategic instruction helps students build understanding through systematic explanations, plans to direct task performance, modeling from instructors, cues and reminders to use learned strategies, and learner-instructor dialog.

Alternatively, direct instruction generally uses a bottom-up processing approach that primarily focuses on isolated skills. Direct instruction “emphasizes fast-paced, well-sequenced, and highly focused lessons” and includes “several opportunities for students to respond and receive feedback about accuracy and responses” (Swanson, p. 130). Both of these methods of instruction employ instructional objectives, frequent reviews, teacher presentation of new material, guided practice, independent practice, and formative evaluations.

This article reviews *Road to Success* as a curricular innovation that addresses needs of adolescents with LD as they transition from school to employment or postsecondary educational settings. A variety of curricula exist for aiding the general populace of job seekers in planning and preparing for employment, but few exist for job seekers with LD of any age, including those first-time job seekers transitioning from school to adult life. *Road to Success* is the product of past research projects, and is currently part of a study involving VR clients, including transition students.

The *Road to Success* curriculum relies on a combination of strategic and direct instruction, that is, the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM; Ellis, Deshler, Lenz, Schumaker, & Clark, 1991), a research-validated instructional technique for teaching adolescents with learning difficulties (Lenz & Hughes, 1990; Scanlon, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1996; Schumaker & Deshler, 1992; Schumaker, Deshler, Alley, Warner, & Denton, 1982). Using strategic and direct instruction as suggested by Swanson and Deshler (2003), *Road to Success* teaches content and skills needed by adolescents with LD to overcome behavioral issues that have made school difficult and that later become barriers to successful, productive employment.

Road to Success Curriculum and Instruction

Course Goals

The ultimate goal for any participant in a *Road to Success* course is to obtain meaningful employment or to continue education and training. Specific *Road to Success* course goals, however, are

Figure 1. Unit Organizer

NAME _____
DATE _____

④ BIGGER PICTURE

② LAST UNIT	① CURRENT UNIT Discovering My Path	③ NEXT UNIT Charting the Course				
⑧ UNIT SCHEDULE	⑤ UNIT MAP					
	<div style="border: 2px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; margin-bottom: 10px;">Discovering My Path</div> 					
⑦ Unit Self-Test Questions	<p>How will this course help me in the future?</p> <p>Why is it important for me to know about myself and discuss this knowledge with other people?</p> <p>What are my personal rights and responsibilities related to work, and how will knowing these help me to be more successful?</p>	⑥ Unit Relationships				
		<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">Explanation/characteristics</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">Cause & Effect</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;">Process/steps</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 2px;"> </td></tr> </table>	Explanation/characteristics	Cause & Effect	Process/steps	
Explanation/characteristics						
Cause & Effect						
Process/steps						

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employment planning and preparation, including developing supportive networks, learning specific skills and behaviors that will help in gaining and maintaining employment, and making connections with local employment options and support services.

Classroom Practices

Road to Success classrooms operate with four community principles, five learning rituals, and three performance options. The community principles, which are intended to build commitment from learners, are (a) self-determination, (b) urgency, (c) action, and (d) positive attitude (e.g., “We are all taking action to gain employment”; “The time is now; we’re making serious effort and not waiting for everything to be perfect.”) The learning rituals that help learners accomplish the course goals are (a)

class discussions, (b) small-group activities, (c) daily assignments, (d) case studies, and (e) scenarios—to make the experience as interactive and near to the real world as possible. Because of the instructional methodology, instructors rely on learner performance (e.g., role-playing a job interview, filling out a job application) rather than traditional tests to assess learner mastery of practical skills.

Road to Success utilizes course and unit organizers, two instructional devices that benefit learners with LD (see Figure 1 as an example). The organizers illustrate big ideas and essential information, keeping the instructor and learners focused on the main concepts and not the less important details. As learner handouts, organizers are instruments for discussion and are used as a tool for the learners to concretely

individualize the content of classroom instruction.

The organizers also demonstrate how course units are connected to one another, thus helping learners see the relationships among various topics and lessons and keep track of their own progress toward mastering course content. Finally, by helping learners understand the expectations, routines, and purposes of the course, the organizers contribute to a safe, supportive atmosphere for learning new skills.

Instructional Methods

Instruction in *Road to Success* is based on SIM (Ellis et al., 1991), in which instructors routinely use eight elements to facilitate learner mastery. Six of these stages (Figure 2) are woven throughout instruction in *Road to Success*: (a) Describe, (b) Model, (c) Verbal Practice,

(d) Controlled Practice and Feedback, (e) Advanced Practice and Feedback, and (f) Generalization.

During the Describe stage, instructors share the rationale for doing or learning a skill or behavior, because youth and adults need to know why they are learning things and how the skills or content will benefit them. In the Model stage, instructors perform or demonstrate a skill or behavior and concurrently verbalize their own thought processes so that learners hear instructors explain their thinking while completing the task.

The Verbal Practice stage is an instructor's first opportunity to check learner understanding of the new skill. Through an informal, rapid-fire question-and-answer format, instructors engage learners about the steps involved in acquiring a skill or learning a lesson. Instructors continue the "call and response" routine until they are certain that all students grasp the skill or content. Previously introduced cues, such as mnemonics or visual aids, are gradually reduced as the verbal practice progresses. The rationale and purpose for using the skill are explored in an interactive dialog.

During the Controlled Practice and Feedback stage, students perform the skill in whole- or small-group formats with feedback from instructors or peers. When necessary, instructors provide private, one-on-one feedback to those students who appear to be struggling with the content or skill.

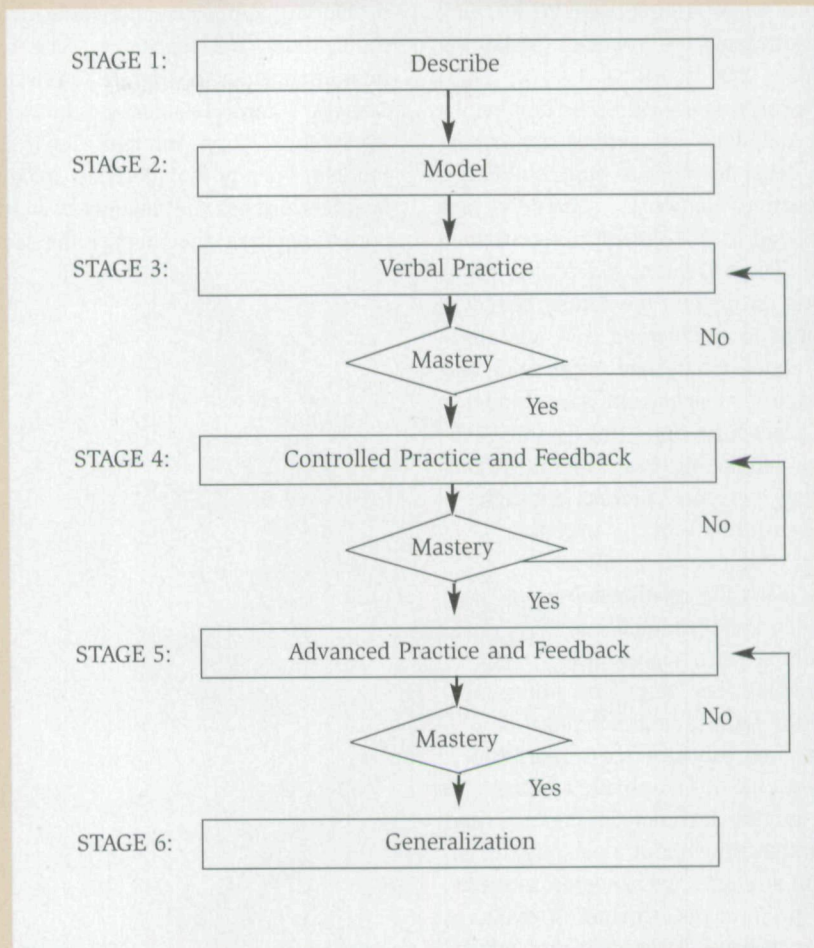
The Advanced Practice and Feedback stage often consists of role-play activity followed by "homework" as the learner tries out the new skill or behavior independent from the instructor and outside the classroom setting. Discussion and feedback occur during the next classroom meeting.

During the Generalization stage, the instructor and students identify various settings and situations in which the new skill can be used, and how the skill might be adapted. Learners set goals for using the skill in real-life situations.

Other Instructional Considerations

Because one of the goals of the *Road to Success* course is that job seekers devel-

Figure 2. Strategic Instruction Model: Instructional Sequence



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op supportive networks, we recommend using group rather than individual or self-paced instruction, maintaining the optimal class size at 10 to 12 learners. We also suggest that instructors make ample class time available for participants to communicate successes and challenges, as well as get to know one another. Historically, the entire course requires 80 hours of class time.

Road to Success instructors make instructional decisions about individual learners' instructional needs by using questionnaires prior to instruction. Learners provide self-descriptive information and respond to a Likert-type questionnaire about their goals, skills, social support, and learning preferences. Instructors administer the same questionnaire after instruction to assess

learner progress from the beginning of the course to the end.

Course Concepts

Road to Success teaches job seekers with LD eight concepts through five course units. The concepts are (a) self-determination, (b) responsibility, (c) independence, (d) interdependence, (e) networking, (f) action, (g) communication, and (h) work ethic. The units—"Discovering My Path," "Charting the Course," "Making Decisions & Moving Along," "Responding to Roadblocks," and "Reaching My Destination"—are cumulative and recursive (that is, lessons learned in Unit 1 are reinforced, used, and retaught as needed in Unit 2, etc.) For many learners with LD, explanations, demonstrations, and one or two

practice opportunities are frequently not enough; "practicing a new skill just once a week is equivalent to learning the skill anew every week" (Mellard & Scanlon, 2006, p. 3)

Discovering My Path. The unit begins with activities for getting acquainted with other learners to start building a supportive network. Learners are instructed in The Paraphrasing Strategy (Schumaker, Denton, & Deshler, 1984) so that throughout the course, they will be able to understand and succinctly talk about what they have read and heard. They learn about class standards and procedures for using positive language; interacting as a community; and seeking personal success through self-determination, urgency, action, and a positive attitude. They learn the relationship between their personal and an employer's rights and responsibilities (e.g., if you have the right to be treated like an adult, then you have the responsibility to act like a mature adult.) Last, this unit guides learners in creating and communicating about a personal inventory of strengths, weaknesses, interests, and preferences (including what it means to have LD) so that they will be able to respond with confidence to such questions in employment interviews.

Charting the Course. The second unit addresses three topics essential to job seekers: goal setting, time management, and positive thinking. Using the metaphor of planning a trip, learners think through where they are now, where they want to go, and what the potential roadblocks and alternative routes might be. They work through a process that begins with values and dreams and ends with actionable goals. Because achieving goals typically requires good use of time, they learn such time-management skills as prioritizing, organizing, and delegating. This unit also includes lessons on positive thinking, that is, knowing one's successes and building on them, recognizing the negative things one can change and those one cannot, and surrounding oneself with people who encourage future successes, as well as being an encourager for others.

Making Decisions and Moving Along. The third unit tackles decision making, developing supportive networks, communication, and teamwork. The curriculum includes the Surface Counseling Strategy (Crank, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1995) for talking through day-to-day problem solving and decision making. Learners discuss the benefits of a supportive network and practice the social



skills needed to develop and maintain one (e.g., telephone skills, such as leaving a message with a receptionist or on voice mail). Good communication skills are important to developing a supportive network as well as gaining and maintaining meaningful employment. In this unit learners review and practice positive communication skills (e.g., listening, making eye contact) and identify and work to extinguish barriers to communication (e.g., interruptions, harsh criticism, fear of asking questions). As a natural extension of networking and communicating, this unit also teaches about teamwork (e.g., getting along with co-workers, dealing with our differences.)

Responding to Roadblocks. The fourth unit teaches about topics that, if left undeveloped, can become barriers to employment: dealing with stress, being assertive, maintaining a strong work ethic, and understanding job qual-

ifications and accommodations. As learners identify what creates stress in their lives, they also learn about coping with that stress in a positive way. They learn about assertiveness in verbal and nonverbal communication and in conflict situations. This unit also addresses basic skills for maintaining a strong work ethic, such as dependability, trustworthiness, punctuality, staying on task, being courteous, being honest, maintaining a positive attitude, and having a neat, clean appearance. Last, this unit helps learners understand what it means to be qualified for a job, and what rights and options they might have for job accommodations.

Reaching My Destination. The fifth and final unit addresses how to respond to employers' expectations, understand the work environment, and stay on track once in a job. Learners discuss their responsibility to understand and meet an employer's expectations so as to obtain and retain a job. This responsibility begins with the job interview, continues daily on the job, and is reflected when responding to a performance review. This unit also highlights the importance of understanding the work environment, including written rules and procedures (e.g., work hours, attendance policies, timekeeping, lunch and break times, training periods, performance reviews, pay periods); and the work climate (e.g., relaxed vs. rigid.) Finally, the course ends with a lesson about staying on track—persisting in employment with organization, communication, and stress-management skills learned through *Road to Success*.

Road to Success Implementation

Successful transitions happen in particular contexts. For academically proficient job seekers, that context may include a school guidance counselor, a local workforce center, a commercial placement agency, or a personal network. For young adults with serious cognitive and or orthopedic disabilities, the context may involve curricula and such support systems as VR or supported employment. Adolescents with LD, however, appear to need a comprehen-

sive transition curriculum, such as *Road to Success*, that is specific to their learning needs. They need a support system that is less intense than supported employment and more explicit than typically used with proficient learners. Well-prepared instructors, small and diverse class composition, and relationship and procedural bridges to adult service providers are crucial elements provided in a *Road to Success* transition process.

Because of the unique instructional method used in *Road to Success*, instructor preparation is particularly crucial. Not only do instructors need to know and follow the stages of SIM, they must have practical knowledge of the content to be able to provide the rationale (Describe stage) and benefits to the learner. For instructors to Model behaviors from the curriculum, they must have practiced them to a level of mastery that allows them to verbalize their thought processes while completing a task. In the Verbal Practice stage, instructors must be adept at making accurate observations of learner performance while leading classroom activities. Further, instructors must be highly skilled in giving constructive feedback. Instructors discover that because of the course content, discussions about generalizing and adapting skills to real-life situations occur quite naturally.

Instructors must be highly skilled in giving constructive feedback.

The curriculum and specialized training required to teach *Road to Success* are available through the University of Kansas, Division of Adult Studies (www.das.kucri.org). Typically, professional educators can acquire the skills necessary for teaching *Road to Success* in a 2-day workshop. Comprehensive training in SIM and advanced training in particular tools and strategies (e.g., unit organizers, feedback methods, paraphrasing) are available through the University of Kansas, Center for Research on Learning (www.kucri.org).

Although *Road to Success* is designed to encourage students to assume personal accountability for their job searches and other actions, it also promotes the building of community or supportive networks for students to communicate successes and challenges. A profound and unexpected outcome we have observed is that groups that are diverse in terms of gender, age, and race routinely succeed in building a community among the students. In effect, they really form genuine learning communities. We believe this outcome is also related to a small class size of about 10 or 12 learners. A group this size is small enough to be sufficiently individualized, yet large enough to build a supportive network.

Groups that are diverse in terms of gender, age, and race . . . really form genuine learning communities.

For many students with disabilities, the problematic nature of transition is compounded by complications involving coordination with different adult service providers (e.g., VR; Mellard & Lancaster, 2003). Further, most representatives from adult service agencies have little to no contact with students with disabilities until graduation or transition out of school-based services is imminent. This limited and untimely contact, along with the wide variation of skill levels among students, can hinder the ability of adult service providers to impart seamless services and supports as students leave their school environments. As with the formal support systems in place to aid young adults with serious cognitive or orthopedic disabilities in employment, adult services providers and educators need to come together with the students with LD. *Road to Success* can build a bridge between these parties by providing a common platform and language from which to operate. For this reason, we recommend that when a school or district adopts the *Road to Success* curricu-

lum, they make a commitment to include staff members from adult service agencies in at least the introductory instructor training.

Limitations

We must reiterate, *Road to Success* is not designed for proficient learners nor learners with significant MR or serious cognitive impairments. Rather, its instructional foundation, SIM, relies on a high degree of structure, repetition, and practice designed for individuals with learning difficulties. Our previous experience implementing *Road to Success* with Welfare-to-Work clients, including those adults with borderline MR, produced the best outcomes for the subgroup of low academic achievers. Current experience with more proficient learners struggling to obtain and sustain employment demonstrates strong utility for that population, as well.

***Road to Success* . . . employs a high degree of structure, repetition, and practice designed for individuals with learning difficulties.**

Conclusion

Johnson et al. (2002) have clearly identified the multiple challenges facing transition services. We know the essential elements that should be included in transition processes (Lindstrom & Skinner, 2003). We know that youth with LD can learn through strategic and direct instructional approaches (Swanson, 1999; Swanson & Deshler, 2003). We hypothesize that for many youth, learning the soft employability skills contained in *Road to Success* will be the difference between a lifetime of meaningful, stable employment and one of menial job after job. Our hypothesis is currently being tested in a 5-year longitudinal research study with VR clients—with transition students as an important subpopulation—in a collaborative study among Kansas Social and Rehabilitation Services and staff at the University of

Kansas, Division of Adult Studies. Preliminary data support the added value of the *Road to Success* curricular intervention. Instructors, counselors, and research staff have all seen early evidence of successful outcomes, including less impulsive behaviors, more self-directed planning, increased self-esteem, a high level of attendance, low dropout rate from this program, and an increase in positive social interactions.

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D. Richard Johnson, Senior Research Associate; and **Daryl F. Mellard** (CEC KS Federation), Associate Research Professor and Director, Division of Adult Studies, Center for Research on Learning, University of Kansas, Lawrence. **Paula Lancaster** (CEC MI Federation), Associate Professor, College of Education, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan.

Address correspondence to D. Richard Johnson, Division of Adult Studies, Center for Research on Learning, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045 (e-mail: drj@ku.edu).

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