ABSTRACT
                Life Online is an online program in Victoria, Australia
designed for young adults with mild intellectual disabilities. The program
appeals to both teachers and students through content that is relevant to the
everyday lives of this client group; real life characters to whom students
can relate; activities that are achievable but need teaching and
reinforcement in the classroom; easy navigation tools; and support through
visual and auditory cues throughout the program. Topics included in the
online programs include nutrition, budgeting, menu planning, shopping, money
skills, electronic banking, independent travel, and community access. The
program was a finalist for the Innovative Training Category of the 2001
Victorian Training Awards announced in September 2001. (KC)

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Life Online

from the Writers' Desks

Lu Butler

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2

Life Online from the writers' desks

By **Lu Butler** Co-ordinator and teacher and **Lesley Wilson-Jones,** teacher, General Education Department, South West Institute of TAFE

Life Online is an online program designed for young adults with a mild intellectual disability. When we began this project we were beginners in the online environment. We had a number of years' experience working with students with a mild intellectual disability so we felt reasonably confident in our knowledge of this client group's needs. But applying this to the online situation was another matter!

We looked at other programs designed for ESL learners and/or for higher levels of the Certificate in General Education for Adults (CGEA). These programs required a higher literacy skill or greater knowledge of the online environment than we felt our students could cope with. Other programs that were designed for children had some great concepts but we didn't feel they were appropriate and may only serve to entrench behaviours that we are trying to move away from. After all, to be socially competent in society we expect adults to behave like adults so it is contrary to those expectations to engage these students in children's programs.

The survey of other regional providers backed up our research on the lack of availability of suitable programs and the types of topics that are most useful to this client group. Subsequent responses to Life Online have backed up this research and the changes we made after piloting the first two topics of the program.

The appeal of this program to students and teachers is through:

☐ content that is relevant to the everyday lives of this client group

☐ real life characters students can relate to

☐ activities that are achievable but need teaching and reinforcement in the classroom

☐ easy navigation tools that are repeated throughout the program to increase confidence and independence

☐ support through visual and auditory cues throughout the program.

Although it took time and patience to capture the shots and narration, the production team feel well rewarded with the results and response to their efforts. The students employed for the topics have gained in confidence and competence through this experience. Our local students have enjoyed seeing other students they went to TAFE with on the 'Net'. This appeal seems to be reflected in the response from other providers even without the familiarity of the characters. The use of sound to support the text has also been valuable to students with low literacy levels but technical

requirements need to be checked. Free software can be downloaded to support the program but allow time to do this and trial the audio.

Students from the Work Education Unit, NMIT were asked for their comments about the content of Life Online

THE CONTENT

The topics chosen relate directly to student's lives rather than creating situations to fit the activities. The topics arose from the group of students we were working with at the time and made real by setting them in context through a character.

NUTRITION

Dale and his struggle to lose weight is the focus of the Nutrition topic. Choosing healthy foods and planning exercise seems to be a struggle for many of our students as they are enticed by the 'sometimes' foods at the café or snack machine. The concept of eating healthy foods 'often' and foods with a low nutritional value 'sometimes' is a continuing theme throughout the first four topics. Dale's character, typifies a young man living at home with his family who is increasing his independence through learning more about how to look after his health, exercise, planning meals and good shopping practices.

BUDGETING

The other character in these first four topics is Sally. She shares a house with a friend and has to work out a budget. Sally's income is based on a pension, rental assistance, and an education allowance. From this she has to pay her bills, buy groceries and pay for entertainment and sport. The budgeting topic requires a lot of calculator use and knowledge of common fractions. This is why we emphasise that this is not a 'stand alone' program. The students will often need to be taught the skills before they go into the program. There is also a budget planner to print off and fill in throughout the topic

3

and that can then be used for the students to work out their own budget. Other extension activities could include saving for an excursion, camp or holiday which can lead to searching other websites for information. This is quite a difficult topic for students in this client group and would take a significant amount of time to be used effectively.

MENU PLANNING

Menu planning involves both the characters of Sally and Dale in budgeting, preparing food and making healthy choices. Dale is shown preparing lunch for a friend and preparing a family meal. Sally wants to organise a dinner party for her friends but her recipes are a bit difficult to read as there have been a few spills. This topic has more of a literacy focus and uses activities based on planning a menu, reading recipes, information on food packages and preparing a meal.

SHOPPING

This topic has a maths focus, as Dale takes on the task of shopping for healthy foods, sticking to a budget, estimating and checking costs. The concept of estimation is quite a difficult one that needs considerable teacher support. Dale is shown purchasing foods with the National Heart Foundation tick to emphasise buying healthy foods. Where to put foods in the trolley and what to unpack first is another area covered in this topic eg should you put the hot chicken on the frozen peas?

MONEY SKILLS

Kathy wants to be able to shop independently and learn the importance of keeping cash secure. However, she has problems recognising coins, notes, making amounts and calculating change. Through a short video of a tutor, Kathy learns how to make up amounts with other coins and notes, and how to give the closest amount for something by counting on from the 'dollar number' to the next nearest 'note number'. Each new skill is reinforced with activities and a summary.

ELECTRONIC BANKING

This topic has two sections: using an ATM and using EFTPOS. The advantages and disadvantages of both forms of electronic banking are discussed, security of cards and PINs. David wants to be able to use an ATM so that he doesn't have to rush into the bank at lunchtime. The activities are largely language based in relation to reading screens, choosing transactions and following instructions. Activities revolve around 'real' shopping experiences. A highlight of this topic is the very 'lifelike' ATM and EFTPOS 'machines' that the students can 'use' in the activities.

INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

Karina wants to be able to get around town independently, rather than relying on others to take her places. Karina and her friend Jodie learn how to use public transport such as buses, trains and taxis. She also brushes up her sign reading skills when she is walking around town. This topic is largely language based using very basic timetables and developing an understanding of related words. Using the phone to book a taxi is a skill that is covered using a short video clip on the screen. Karina learns about flag fall and giving the closest amount. The cost of travel is in the context of a personal budget.

COMMUNITY ACCESS

Lee is new to town and has moved in with his brother Tim. Lee uses a wheelchair and needs to contact Human Services to make some changes to the house. Lee wants to find work and so organises an appointment with a local job agency. This topic covers many communication skills such as, preparing for and making a phone call, preparing for a meeting, managing time by using a calendar and diary. At these meetings Lee's brother acts as an advocate. The advocate's role is defined in the topic.

Lee is a social person and keen to meet people. He is asked by a friend to go to a 'Socialisers' meeting at which he learns the basics of meeting procedure and basic form filling. Lee joins a basketball team and uses a four wheel drive wheelchair at the local surf club. Through these experiences, Lee learns to follow instructions and work in a team. Time management through simple processes is a theme of this module and Lee needs it with so many new activities in his life and a job interview coming up!

News Update:

Life Online is a finalist for the Innovative Training Category of the 2001 Victorian Training Awards to be announced on September 4th.

It will also be showcased at 'Networking 2001' in Brisbane October 16th.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lu Butler was a member of the project team from South West Institute of TAFE that developed Life Online in partnership with Access Training and Employment in 2000/2001. She also coordinates and teaches the Certificate 1 In Work Education, CGEA and VCE.

Lesley Wilson-Jones is working .4 at SWTAFE and teaches in the CGEA youth program and Maths in the CGEA study program. Both share a passion for developing more on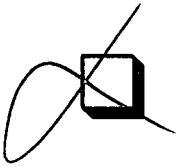line materials for specific student groups.