

Case Studies on Adult Learning

Work Readiness Program

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ADULT LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

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Overview

In 2007-2008, at the request of the Inuvialuit Regional Development Corporation (IRC), Bow Valley College (BVC) in Calgary, Alberta developed and delivered a Work Readiness Program for young Inuvialuit beneficiaries¹. Built on the essential skills framework, the *Work Readiness Program* is designed to assist individuals who have had limited past success at work to be better prepared for work or for further work related training.

The Inuvialuit live in the Mackenzie Delta region of the Northwest Territories, in Inuvik and other smaller communities in the region. The IRC has invested heavily over the years in a number of different businesses in the region including motels and transportation and wanted to develop a program to prepare their members (whom they call “beneficiaries”) to work in these businesses. They also wanted the workplace preparation program to:

- preserve Inuvialuit cultural identity and values within a changing northern society
- ensure that the Inuvialuit be equal and meaningful participants in the northern and national economy

Because Aboriginal people, and particularly northern Aboriginal people, often have problems making the transition to work in a wage economy, the IRC recognized that residents needed a program that would facilitate the transition.

In order to prepare participants for this workplace transition, the curriculum focused on topics such as communicating in the workplace, building entrepreneurial skills, living away from home, understanding employer expectations, and a section that explored the link between traditional skills and essential skills in the context of problem solving, critical thinking and decision making. By the spring of 2008, Bow

¹ See Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (2007). *Inuvialuit regional corporation annual report 2007*. Inuvik, NT: author. Retrieved May 30, 2009 from <http://www.irc.inuvialuit.com/publications/pdf/2007%20IRC%20Annual%20Report%20-%20Combined.pdf>

Valley College had developed the curriculum and delivered a pilot to about 15 residents.

Program focus and type

The Work Readiness Program strives to improve participants' essential skills² and workplace-relevant skills using a meaningful, practical, culturally appropriate, and transferable approach. The program is individually focused and uses a variety of activities and learning locations (classroom, workplace, community settings) to ensure that the learning is relevant and active.

Program phases include: orientation, assessment, individual career action plan, essential skills upgrading, streaming, work practicum, and completion. Integrating the use of HRSDC (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) skills profiles, the TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills) assessment and the supporting curriculum helps develop participants' job readiness skills³.

Specifically, the program aims to⁴:

² Essential skills are enabling skills for all types of work. They are not technical skills but rather the skills that people use to carry out a wide variety of occupational tasks and daily activities. Essential skills include tasks such as reading texts, using documents, writing, numeracy, finding information, communicating on the job, job task planning and organizing, critical thinking and problem-solving, working with others, and computer use.

³ The Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) was developed with project funding from the National Literacy Secretariat at Human Resources and Skill Development Canada. TOWES was developed beginning in 1998 under the joint responsibility of Bow Valley College in Calgary, and SkillPlan (The British Columbia Industry Skills Improvement Council). The resulting product is a test of the three essential skills (reading text, document use and numeracy) which has been measured at the population level in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). TOWES is unmatched by other individual-level tests of literacy and numeracy skills for two reasons: first, it has been validated against the IALS - and therefore also with the Essential Skills profiles - and proven to correlate very highly with it; second, because the test materials are authentic workplace materials collected by researchers and rated for complexity, test candidates are assessed realistically for their capacity to function in actual workplaces. TOWES is not a single test; it is a bank of test items which can be assembled into countless test variations. Each test item is based upon an authentic workplace task, ensuring the validity of the final assessment.

⁴ Summarized from Gardner, M. (2008). *Work readiness program: Inuvialuit Regional Corporation in partnership with Bow Valley College*. Calgary, Alberta: Bow Valley College. Retrieved May 30, 2009 from <http://www.towes.com/pdfs/IRC%20Work%20Readiness%20Training.pdf>

- help young Inuvialuit beneficiaries (16-30 yrs of age) transition into the workplace by developing skills, attitudes and behaviours needed for work, learning and life
- develop individual learning paths based on realistic career goals and job markets
 - focus on essential skills using culturally and contextually appropriate workplace materials/activities
 - develop personal management and coping strategies
 - incorporate workplace experience and provide opportunities for work-related certification
 - help build regional capacity
 - engage employers and use local resources
 - ultimately be managed and driven by the community

Program topics include:

- Exploring Urban Centres (understanding the urban context, traveling to and from urban centres)
- Living Away from Home (renting, dealing with homesickness)
- Understanding Workplace Forms and Functions (reading workplace documents, completing HR forms, understanding workplace safety, communicating with others)
- Banking and budgeting (opening a bank account, managing finances)
- Getting Ready for Work (completing a resume, preparing for interviews, completing portfolios, preparing to write the TOWES assessment)
- Writing TOWES G1 or G2⁵

⁵ TOWES is also available in 3 broadly based general series (G-Series) versions. Items in the G-Series booklets represent a range of occupational settings and results can be compared to national standards established by HRSDC.

Target audience

The program focuses on participants between 16 and 30 years of age. These participants, are usually unemployed but eager to gain employability skills, and many have been unsuccessful at finding and keeping work in the past.

Referrals for the program come from agencies and youth groups, employers, community organizations, and through self-identification.

Evidence of effectiveness

Most of the “beneficiaries” (participants) in the initial pilot have secured full-time employment and all have improved their essential skills improvement scores using the TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills).

The program was also effective in enabling members of the Inuvialuit community to gain essential skills in a culturally appropriate and learner focused setting. The College worked tirelessly to develop the program and deliver the pilot; although, the pilot of the program was a challenge for the corporation members as they were not initially set up to act as a training delivery agent⁶.

In the end, it is the personal challenges that the students overcame that reflect the core success of the program. Students, who previously did not have the skills to cope with outside interferences, such as childcare or balancing work/home life learned effective ways to deal with those issues. Even those students who attempted the program, but did not complete the program gained skills that they can use in the workplace. All graduates either obtained positions in the workforce or went back to school following completion of the program.

⁶ See Inuvialuit Regional Corporation (2007). *Inuvialuit regional corporation annual report 2007*. Inuvik, NT: author. Retrieved May 30, 2009 from <http://www.irc.inuvialuit.com/publications/pdf/2007%20IRC%20Annual%20Report%20-%20Combined.pdf>

Indications of innovation

This initiative illustrates how an essential skills framework can be used in conjunction with Aboriginal traditions and culture. The essential skills training is integrated and organized around emerging themes and is relevant to the culture of the North and to Inuvialuit culture in particular.

The program also incorporates a variety of active learning delivery strategies (e.g. group work, individual research, role-playing, field trips, hands-on production, oral presentations) to ensure that the activities build on existing experiences and develop new skills. Further, the program uses a TOWES problem set format for many review activities to help learners prepare to write the TOWES G1 or G2.

Such cultural relevance, thematic activities, and workplace readiness suggest that the program could be used in other Aboriginal communities – perhaps with some modifications to make it consistent with the culture of a different First Nation. Bow Valley College is currently negotiating with the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation to sign an agreement to this effect which would make the program available to other First Nations or Inuit communities and/or interested parties..

Challenges and lessons learned

College providers are sometimes criticized for having a narrow focus on skill training and a rather traditional approach to adult basic education. Some critics even suggest that colleges are not able to change their approach to assessing and providing training to respond to different contexts and cultural circumstances. However, this program demonstrates that such criticisms are disappearing into the dustbins of history as Colleges continue to develop professional and culturally appropriate approaches in delivering services and essential skills to Aboriginal communities. The program is an example of a trend in College programming across Canada with tangible and measurable benefits.

From a review of the research and program data, several lessons emerge⁷:

- The use of culturally appropriate materials in a holistic fashion is critical to the success of the program
- The work experience component needs to be integrated throughout the program in order to demonstrate the practical value of skills learned in the classroom and to maintain the interest of the participants
- The use of the portfolio allows participants to identify existing skills while also acknowledging learning needs. The portfolio is an empowering learning tool for Aboriginal youth.
- The program must pay close attention to the employment needs of participants and use various activities (e.g. role playing, group work) to help participants feel at ease in the workplace
- College instructors must understand the nuances of working in the North and must appreciate and show respect for Northern culture and ways of learning
- Program numbers should be kept small (perhaps less than 15 participants) in order to build rapport and trust

Partnerships

The primary partner for this initiative is the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation which provided a range of supports to BOW Valley College including financial support, staff resources and logistical assistance for the project.

Overall impact

With large oil and gas reserves and abundant natural resources, the North is drawing major investment and lots of attention. But what about the people who live there?

⁷ See Gardner, M. (2008). *Work readiness program: Inuvialuit Regional Corporation in partnership with Bow Valley College*. Calgary, Alberta: Bow Valley College. Retrieved May 30, 2009 from <http://www.towes.com/pdfs/IRC%20Work%20Readiness%20Training.pdf>

See also Hughes, T. (n.d.). New opportunities for drilling Paktoa. *Inuvialuit Regional Development Corporation Newsletter*, 2(2). Inuvik, NT: IDC. Retrieved June 1, 2009 from <http://www.idc.inuvialuit.com/news/pdf/IDC%20Newsletter%20Nov%2005.pdf>

How does the proposed economic boom affect them? How will they get jobs and be able to continue to provide for their families?

The Work Readiness Program developed by BOW Valley College in partnership with the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation is an innovative example of how to help Inuvialuit beneficiaries move into the workplace. The program provides essential skills and job exposure through work placements and respects and builds upon local culture.

As northern development continues to escalate, programs that empower young people to assume key employment and decision making positions become more critical. Many Inuit young people are not sure what they want to do for a career. The Workplace Readiness Program is one example of a program that helps them see and experience the career options available to them. Further, the program provides practical skills that provide the building blocks for the Inuvialuit to gain access to better careers and help support more robust communities.