



# Why care about literacy and essential Skills?

Learning at work: it's our right • L'apprentissage au travail : c'est notre droit

## Why care about literacy and essential skills?

You're a busy union executive member. You barely have time to keep up with your members' existing issues and concerns. There are important provincial and national campaigns that take time and energy. Then, there are the rounds of bargaining, long hours, and juggling family life.

If you think about literacy and essential skills as just one more issue, you'll probably file it under "pending" and move on. But we think there are some very good reasons to put literacy and essential skills on your 'to do' list. And, we'd like to offer you some ways to do this that can help you meet your goals.

## Protect jobs in changing times

Heard it all before? The nature of jobs is changing, requiring more skills and more demands of workers. You face a major challenge in helping your members weather the change.

When workers are faced with increased paperwork, when their

job requires them to document processes, or when they have to adjust to new or different organization of work, their opportunities for success are better when they have strong literacy and essential skills. Workplaces are becoming less about physical tasking and more about mental strengths and workers are being challenged to adapt.

As you negotiate technological change provisions with the employer, consider how literacy and essential skills upgrading could become part of the package. You'll be protecting jobs as well as improving the skills of your members.

## Protect jobs in the face of increased certification

Another feature of the new work order is the emphasis on certification. More and more jobs are demanding some form of certification. It is important to make sure that your members have the literacy and essential skills they need to be successful at certification.

Taking courses, studying for or taking an exam, are difficult for

Have you considered how literacy and essential skills can play a role in the adjustment process?



many of us who have been out of school for some time. For those who struggle with reading and writing, or who haven't taken a test in years, it can be frightening. As an adult the consequence of failing is not just a poor report card, it could mean a cut in pay or even the loss of a job.

CUPE has long been familiar with the challenges faced by workers who must pass exams and demonstrate their credentials. It's why we commissioned *Up to the Certification Challenge*. The study was based on water workers, but the principles and findings would apply to any job that requires certification.

If certification requirements are in place or are on the agenda, this is a good time to make sure that the employer, the certification board, the government and CUPE all share responsibility for workers' success at certification.

The burden should not fall on the worker's shoulders alone.

Your members have been performing their jobs well and that ought to be recognized. But if the process of certification is a barrier because it requires strong literacy skills, then it is important to smooth the path for your members.

### **Take advantage of training opportunities in your collective agreement**

Having heard the rhetoric about the need for more training in this global economy, you probably have had discussions with the employer about the need for training for your members. You might have already been successful in achieving language that funds training.

After all the hard work of securing training, how do you make sure that members actually take advantage of the training?

Often, people who have been away from school for some time or who have weak skills are reluctant to take training programs. Offering a 'return to learn' or 'refresher' program helps to ease members back into learning. Part of this program could include making sure people have the literacy and essential skills needed for the training. You can

do this by providing a peer tutor (another member who is willing to help). You could also work with your local college or school board. They can bring their expertise in teaching literacy skills while you and your members ensure that what they are teaching connects to the realities of the workplace.

Literacy becomes the entry point for the other training that you've negotiated. By addressing literacy needs, you can make sure that the gains you have won at the bargaining table are not lost.



*Up to the Certification Challenge* is a popular version summary of our research report on education initiatives to support water workers facing mandatory certification.

## Take advantage of existing employer-sponsored training

Look beyond the training provided for in the collective agreement. All training offered by the employer can become part of your strategy to improve your members' literacy and essential skills.

Some members might need a math refresher or a 'how to write an exam' workshop before taking a more technical course. Others might need to obtain their GED or high school equivalent to be eligible for further training or a job promotion.

Then again, some members might be better served by having the employer integrate or 'embed' literacy and essential skills in the training program. The instructor would find ways to reinforce literacy skills, like reading a text or navigating a document, as part of the training program.

You can work with the employer to help them understand why it is important to deal with the workers' literacy issues in a positive and progressive way. Some locals have offered to pay the GED exam fees while the employer provides an instructor and time-off for GED preparation.

Other locals have trained peer tutors who can work with members to help them succeed in training programs. At the end of the day, your members have an increased set of skills and the employer has a better trained workforce.



*It's our Right* tells the story of eight workplace education programs from across the country and illustrates the impact on our members through interviews with program participants.

## Encourage employers to invest in workers' training

International evidence shows the power of improved education and training. It is in the area of literacy and essential skills training where we see the greatest benefits for workers and for the employer.

A comprehensive study commissioned by the Canadian Council on Social Development concludes that the benefits of workplace literacy programs are well documented including:

- increased worker confidence,
- increased participation and communication,
- improved problem-solving and decision-making,
- increased ability to take on and apply workplace training, and
- better health and safety records.

Canadian municipalities have learned about the benefits of improved literacy through the partnership between the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) and CUPE. The past

president of CAMA, Simon Farbrother, stated:

“An investment in workplace learning programs pays off – in a better-skilled workforce, improved quality of work life, and employees who have an increased commitment to the organization.”

CAMA and CUPE have promoted improving workplace literacy skills and doing so with the guidance of joint labour/management committees. This model continues to grow within the municipal sector.

### It's our right

It's our right to learn at work. We need to advocate for learning at work. Literacy and essential skills are the first step to extending training opportunities to all members. It's about providing access to everyone.

People with strong literacy skills are more likely to be involved in their community and in their unions. They are more likely to ask for and receive training. They earn more and are more likely to have full-time jobs. Literacy is fundamental to the well-being of Canadian workers. Making a case for literacy makes good sense.

<sup>1</sup> The CAMA Connection, Vol. 4, Spring 2007.

### For more information

Attend a *Literacy in Workplace* workshop offered by CUPE Education.

Check out our website at: [www.cupe.ca/literacy](http://www.cupe.ca/literacy)

Contact us at: [literacy@cupe.ca](mailto:literacy@cupe.ca)