



**Literacy Victoria**  
EMPOWERING ADULT LEARNERS

Aboriginal literacy and essential skills pilot project: Tutor guide



## Aboriginal Literacy and Essential Skills Pilot Project



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E m p o w e r i n g   A d u l t   L e a r n e r s



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## Purpose

The *Tutor Guide* is intended as a tool for tutors and learners to work collaboratively in

- beginning a conversation about what literacy and personal goals learners would like to achieve and why;
- identifying current and future skill levels (where learners are and where they would like to be);
- developing strategies for enhancing existing skills and for developing new ones;
- exploring how learners would like to record their Personal Learning Path (e.g., a written journal, storytelling, artistic interpretations);
- problem solving when challenges emerge;
- remembering that success is individually defined; and
- celebrating success.

The *Tutor Guide* emphasizes that learners are at the core of a holistic lifelong learning process. The Guide demonstrates how assessment, learning path development and associated learning materials can collectively contribute to a learning experience.

## Different ways of knowing and learning

When we think of learning and assessment what typically comes to mind are images of students sitting in classrooms, writing papers and taking exams. What we tend to forget is that most learning happens informally: In the home, in community and in nature. We can learn as much by watching and doing as by reading and writing. We can learn as much through informal conversations with family, friends and Elders as through classroom conversations. It is not that one way of learning is better than the other—it is more that there is value in diversity.

This is one of the challenges you will likely experience as a tutor. Learners will come to you with very different stories, experiences and ways of knowing. The trick will be working with each learner so their varied experiences are transformed into a meaningful Personal Learning Path (PLP).

## What is a Personal Learning Path?

In a nutshell, a Personal Learning Path (PLP) describes what learners would like to learn, why this is important to them and the steps they will take in their learning journey. PLPs can be for an individual or they can be for a family (household) or community. PLPs can take many forms: They might be written, painted, woven, photographed or carved. The form is not as important as the focusing of attention on skills development and creating a record of that journey. To be effective, PLPs should be defined and described by learners (family/household or community) so that there is a strong sense of ownership about the vision and goals.

When you first start working with learners, they may be well on their way to figuring out what skills they want to learn or it may be a topic they have only started to consider. The place to start in either case is at the beginning:

- What is their context?
- What are their family and cultural affiliations, work history, learning history?
- How do they like to express themselves?
- What do they do for fun?

All of this above information will provide clues as to what direction the learning journey might take.

Adult learners will be much more inclined to engage in learning activities if they see it will lead somewhere and has relevance in their daily life. For example, someone might find learning basic math skills tedious. However, if they are learning those math skills so they can be a better carpenter, the learning makes sense and they will be more motivated to engage in their learning journey.

The document, *Creating a personal learning path: A benchmark framework for Aboriginal literacy and essential skills*, describes a series of skills that will provide learners with a starting point when thinking about their existing and future skills. The skills are organized around four broad areas:

### 1. Communication

- a. Observe and view activity for a purpose
- b. Listen actively and respectfully
- c. Speak so others can understand
- d. Read with understanding
- e. Write so others can understand

### 2. Numeracy

- a. Use numeracy skills to solve simple and complex problems

### 3. Lifelong Learning

- a. Create, monitor and adjust one's own personal learning plan
- b. Create, monitor and adjust a learning plan for the family or for the community

### 4. Interpersonal

- a. Have boundaries for oneself, one's family and one's community
- b. Create positive relationships with others
- c. Learn how to walk between two worlds (biculturalism)

When using the benchmarks to inform the development of a PLP, please keep in mind that flexibility is the key to success—there are no prescribed pathways, rather a personal journey to be taken.

Please also keep in mind the importance of celebrating success and acknowledging gains both big and small. As a tutor, you may want to consult with learners as to how they would like to celebrate:

- Do they want a small gathering of family and friends or a large community event?
- Is success acknowledged with something tangible or having others bear witness?

The following three case studies illustrate the different ways the benchmarks can be utilized to inform and guide the development of a Personal Learning Path.

***The case studies are fictitious and written to illustrate that Personal Learning Paths are as individual as the people who undertake them.***



## Three case studies

### DARYL

Daryl is a First Nations man who is 19 years old. Daryl is currently enrolled in an adult upgrading program in his community. He wants to increase his reading and writing skills. His long term goal is to become an RCMP officer. The first time you meet with Daryl you come to understand that he has many commitments besides school. He works part-time at a local gas station and helps to take care of his sister's four children. His passion is soccer which he plays twice a week.

You realize that Daryl has a lot of personal insight regarding his skill levels and abilities. To assess his reading abilities, you ask Daryl to read a paragraph from *In from the Cold* by Deborah Ellis ([www.grassrootsbooks.net](http://www.grassrootsbooks.net)). Daryl struggles with sentences that contain more than one clause. When reviewing the *Creating a personal learning path: A benchmark framework for Aboriginal literacy and essential skills* document, Daryl feels that, under the “read with understanding” benchmark, Level 2 best describes his skill level. Daryl can: Read texts with simple sentences, up to several sentences long and can complete simple forms that require personal information to be written on them.

To assess Daryl's writing ability, you ask him to write a short 200 word essay describing his last soccer practice. Daryl finds this assignment quite difficult and it takes him a while to pull his thoughts together. Together, you review the assignment and agree that Level 2 describes Daryl's current writing abilities. Daryl can: Write sentences and short paragraphs that others can understand.

Over the next two meetings, you and Daryl spend time talking about the best way that he can achieve his long term goal of becoming an RCMP officer. You discuss the importance of taking a big goal (e.g., becoming an RCMP officer) and breaking it down into small achievable steps so that progress can be seen and a sense of accomplishment is experienced.

Taking into consideration the importance of short, medium and long term goals, Daryl builds his Personal Learning Journal around the following goals:

Goal #1. In four months, I will

- write so others can understand at Level 3, and
- read with understanding at Level 3.

I will achieve this goal by meeting on a weekly basis with my tutor to review the work that I have completed the week before. My assignment will be to research the history of my favourite soccer team and to write a 1,000 word essay on when the team started, what were their greatest victories and defeats, who were the great players and what, in my opinion, makes them a great team. As part of this assignment, I will find two supporting articles or books that I can read and understand.

Goal #2. In five months, I will

- use the internet to research what it takes to join the RCMP as an Aboriginal Community Constable; and
- interview an RCMP officer about what the job is like and what qualifications I need to have in order to apply to join the RCMP as an Aboriginal Community Constable.

I will achieve this goal by using my network of family and friends to identify an RCMP officer that would be good to interview and speak with. I will write an email to that RCMP officer requesting time for an information interview. I will write some questions that I can ask in the interview. With my tutor, I will practice asking the questions and writing down the answers.

Goal #3. In six months, I will

- take the information that I have gathered through my research and outline what I need to achieve in applying and subsequently joining the RCMP as an Aboriginal Community Constable.

Although Daryl is positive about his goals and how he will achieve them, he does express concerns about being part of a large organization, like the RCMP, that has at its core a mainstream culture. Daryl is clear about his own traditional ways of knowing and being; however, he is less clear on how his belief system will fit with those of a larger mainstream organization. When you start to talk to Daryl about the idea of walking between two worlds, he is relieved to find a point of reference and a context for thinking about this personal challenge. To help Daryl further his thinking about strategies and approaches, you reach out to people you know who successfully walk between two worlds and ask them if they would be willing to spend time with Daryl. As is often the way, you find your key contacts more than willing to provide a mentorship role to Daryl.



## DORIS

Doris is a 35 year old First Nations mother of six children. Doris is currently employed at the local grocery store as a deli clerk. In your first meetings with Doris, she is clear that she wants to increase her math skills as she is having difficulty completing customer orders accurately and within a reasonable timeframe. Keeping her job is important to her because she makes more money than on social assistance and she feels proud to have employment to support her family.

You ask Doris to complete some math exercises that include addition and subtraction. Doris can complete the exercises but it takes her a while. She expresses concern that she needs to be much faster when working. You notice that Doris has particular difficulty with math problems that are written. You realize that Doris' struggles with math are compounded by her difficulty with basic reading. When you discuss this with Doris she agrees and together you decide to work on both her math and reading skills.

Doris feels that while she is working a Level 1 in numeracy, she needs to become quicker and more comfortable working with numbers. In terms of her reading skills, Doris feels she is working at Level 2 as she can read texts with simple sentences, up to several sentences long; and she can complete simple forms that require personal information to be written on them.

Together, you set a goal of increasing Doris' speed and comfort at reading and writing work-related materials. The measure of success will be increased confidence for Doris at work and a positive performance review. To ensure that the work and practice activities you complete with Doris are relevant, together you replicate the kinds of activities and forms that Doris is required to use at work. For example, when taking deli order, Doris has to complete the following form:

<i>Good Foods Deli Bar</i>			
Name of customer			
Date order taken			
Dietary restrictions/ allergies			
Day and time order required			
<b>Order details</b>			
Item	Cost per item	Amount	Total
Credit Card Type	Credit Card #	Expiry Date	
Signature of Deli Clerk who completed order			

By practicing her reading and writing skills in context over the next few months, Doris demonstrates increased proficiency in both areas.

However, her increased skill level does not seem to translate into increased confidence. Doris expresses apprehension about an upcoming performance review. When you try to explore the issue, Doris struggles to describe exactly what her concerns are—all she can clearly articulate is that she feels anxious and is having difficulty sleeping.

One day, Doris unexpectedly says that she does not want to keep meeting and that she does not feel she is improving. When you clearly show her the improvement in her work over the past several months, she just shakes her head and says she cannot go on. You tell her that something is not making sense. On the one hand, she has clearly demonstrated improvement and on the other hand, she still lacks confidence. You keep talking and the story emerges that Doris is very nervous of her current boss and often feels bullied. The bullying triggers feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. You realize that the kind of support that Doris needs is beyond your level of expertise and you encourage Doris to seek counselling support. Doris has not done this before and is nervous about talking to someone she does not know. Doris says that she would appreciate it if you could help her find a counsellor she likes and perhaps go to the first counselling session with her. You agree. Also, the both of you agree to keep working on her math and reading skills while she also sees a counsellor.

## JAKE

Jake is a 45 year old First Nations single father of a nine year old boy, named Michael. In your initial interviews with Jake, he spends a lot of time talking about his son and how proud he is that Michael does well in school and is a talented baseball player. Jake has always been happy to help Michael with his homework; however, he worries that his assistance will be less helpful as the school work becomes more challenging.

In the past, Jake made his living as a construction worker, but now has a back injury that prevents him from doing intense physical labour. Over the past year, Jake has applied for many different jobs, but with no success. He recognizes that he reads at a low level and that this is getting in the way of both helping Michael with his homework and successfully finding work. Jake also feels that it is important to provide a positive role model for his son. To stay engaged in the community, Jake is a member of a First Nations art group and volunteers at the local food bank coordinating donations.

When you sit down with Jake to assess his skill levels, you notice that while Jake struggles with basic reading skills, he is very adept with numerical concepts, working easily at Level 3. Jake says that this has been the history of his academic career—in school, he excelled at math but struggled with reading and writing.

You talk to Jake about the possibility that his struggles with reading and writing may be a reflection of how he processes information and that it may be worthwhile exploring if he has a learning disability. You make sure that Jake understands that a learning disability does not mean that someone lacks intelligence or the ability to try hard; instead, they just have a different way of understanding and processing symbols and information. You find an organization that works with adults who have learning disabilities and encourage Jake to follow up. It takes a while for Jake to agree; ultimately, he is persuaded by the idea that he will be able to develop helpful strategies and approaches.

Jake's Personal Learning Plan focuses on

- getting support for his learning disability;
- beginning a job search journal—You talk to Jake about the importance of keeping track of his job search; who he talks to, who they in turn suggest he contact, a record of jobs he applies for, interviews and outcomes. While Jake sees that there is value in keeping track of his learning journey, he does not want to use a journal as he finds writing unpleasant and difficult. Instead, Jake comes up with the idea of capturing his journey through paintings and visual depictions;
- re-writing Jake's resume so that it emphasizes the skills he brings to the job, particularly his strong math skills and experience coordinating and managing (drawing from his volunteer work at the food bank);

- identifying the network of people that Jake knows (e.g., family, friends and acquaintances)—making a point of talking to his key contacts about possible job opportunities and, in turn, asking his family, friends and acquaintances for other contacts;
- practicing information interviews; and
- targeting Jake’s job search to positions that suit his skill set—Through talking to a variety of people, Jake realizes that he has an interest in managing construction projects.

## Appendix A: Resources (organized by topic)

### Community of practice

- *Community of literacy practice*. Retrieved from <http://decoda.ca/>

### Essential skills

- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). *Essential skills: Tools and Resources*. Retrieved from [www.hrsdc.gc.ca](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca)
- Literacy Victoria. *Workforce literacy and essential skills program, resource manual*. Retrieved from <http://www.literacyvictoria.ca/workforce-literacy-and-essential-skills-program-resource-manual>

### Inspiration

- *Elevating minds to infinite*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smLa-xN2zg0>
- *Learning To Read At 90+*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sv1431KnrSU>

### Literacy

- NALD (2006). *National adult literacy database*. Retrieved from <http://www.nald.ca>
- National Life/Work Centre (n.d.). *Blueprint for life/work designs*. Retrieved from <http://www.blueprint4life.ca/blueprint/home.cfm/lang/1>

### Teaching strategies for adult learners

- Brown, O. (1996). *Tips at your fingertips: Teaching strategies for adult literacy tutors*. Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association.

### Training materials for tutors

- Campbell, P. (2003). *Teaching reading to adults: A balanced approach*. Edmonton, AB: Grass Roots.
- Decoda Literacy Solutions. *Tutoring and tutor training materials*. Retrieved from <http://decoda.ca/resources/library/library-materials-by-topic/tutoring-tutor-training-materials/>

- ET3. *E-text for literacy tutors*. Retrieved from <http://solr.bccampus.ca/wp/>
- Harwood, C. (2001). *Handbook for literacy tutors*. Ottawa, ON: Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy.
- Horseman, J. (2001). *Drawing the line: Dealing with affective issues in literacy—Level 2 tutor training kit*. Saskatoon, SK: Saskatchewan Literacy Network. Retrieved from <http://www.sk.literacy.ca>
- *Learning for life* (n.d.). Calgary, AB: Literacy Alberta (developed by Literacy Coordinators of Alberta). VHS format.
- *Literacy and basic skills practitioner training* (n.d.). Ontario: Literacy and Basic Skills Program of Ontario. [www.lbspractitionertraining.com](http://www.lbspractitionertraining.com)
- Nunavut Literacy Council. (n.d.). *Online resources*. Retrieved from [www.nunavutliteracy.ca/](http://www.nunavutliteracy.ca/)
- *Who wants to learn? Patterns of participation in Canadian literacy and upgrading programs*. (2001). Toronto, ON: ABC Canada Literacy Foundation.
- *Why aren't they calling? Non-participation in literacy and upgrading programs* (2002). Toronto, ON: ABC Canada Literacy Foundation.