



Chronicling the Learning Curve:

Workplace Education Instructors Share their Stories

Edited by
Mary Ellen Belfiore



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Introduction

This collection of narratives written by your colleagues is an intimate look at teaching basic skills in different cultures. We don't mean capital "C" culture, but rather the culture of organizations, professions and communities with all the diversity of the people who work in them. We asked instructors to tell you their best stories of how they taught, how people learned, and most importantly, how everyone changed — including the organizations. We hope that through these narratives you will experience the authors' learning processes, feel their anxieties, share in their revelations, and come away with a productive curiosity and new paths to explore in workplace education.

We also hope these narratives offer you useful examples of how instructors incorporate the workplace setting, its routines, and its materials into their basic skills courses. While each of us has preferred methods and models for program development and instruction, each workplace forces us to shape delivery to the context of the participants and the organization. For example, you will see how workplace and individual needs assessments, curriculum development and evaluation differ in each setting and how well they succeed. Instructors are called upon to marry the needs, interests and goals of the participants with those of the organization. Whether these overlap, complement each other or diverge, our curriculum design and learning activities have to satisfy both the individuals and their organizations in order for workplace education to succeed.

The essence of workplace education is teaching and learning in distinct cultures. Even when we are part of an organization or profession, as is the instructor/farmer in this collection, as instructors we have the opportunity to position ourselves differently and understand new perspectives. Most frequently though, we walk into the unknown: organizational cultures in full swing with their own complex patterns of communication and work routines built on what we presume are shared assumptions, values and attitudes. We often find that, in fact, these assumptions are not shared but are understood differently across diverse populations within organizations, communities and professions. There, in that misty territory of unspoken or unacknowledged differences, workplace educators dare to venture with their own set of assumptions and interpretations.

Sound too far-fetched or exotic for a manufacturing site? When you read Brian Nicholson's narrative, you will see how teaching a highly successful math course is positioned within a company's move toward high performance. Brian's detailed, inventive and engaging math lessons capture the imagination of all the participants. They are well-prepared for the next steps the company wants to take, perhaps even ahead of them in wished-for opportunities.

In a rural setting, Leo O'Rourke takes us into the lives and learning of experienced farmers as they overcome hesitation and fear to successfully pass agricultural certification exams. We sit stunned with these farmers as they first encounter the bureaucracy's ideas of how they should work and learn. Leo not only takes us through their journey of rediscovering reading and learning, but also invites us to be part of his own journey towards professional and personal development.

Taking our workplace skills to the community we step into an extremely demanding cultural mix: teaching basic skills and job readiness for remote mining jobs to members of a First

Nations band. Rebekah Courtney, the coordinator, sets the stage by introducing the partners, the expectations, the problems, and the first results. Don Matthews, the instructor, plunges us into a series of remarkable discoveries about learning and cultures for both the participants and for Don himself.

Leah Morris's approach to "getting her foot in the door" is to use clear language as a graphic demonstration of how companies obscure understanding of their messages rather than encourage full comprehension. Leah writes about her experiences with two companies and how she managed to deliver customized services to suit their different orientations, commitment and employee populations. While the culture of one organization limits her role, the other offers possibilities for wide-ranging change and policy-making to ensure clear communication for the benefit of all employees.

Finally, Judith Bond's "Communicating in Diverse Workplaces" addresses differences head-on in sessions offered to all employees in a team-based manufacturing company. Even after working with this company over several years on various basic skills projects, Judith found that these sessions on communications and diversity revealed the extent to which employees and management differed in their assumptions about, and understanding of, life on-the-job. Judith carefully leads the groups (mixed job levels as well as mixed language capabilities) through activities in which they examine their communication patterns, their misunderstandings and assumptions, and tryout solutions.

We hope you can picture yourself in each storyline and find your place as a workplace educator in your own communities. Please write to us with your stories and let's keep the spiral of learning from each other moving upwards.

Mary Ellen Belfiore
June 1998

1

Math Works!

By Brian D. Nicholson

Over two months in late 1996 and early 1997, I conducted a two-hour, bi-weekly math refresher course. Twelve men and women from the staff of a small, unionized Toronto manufacturer of architectural products were involved in the training. The firm was full of good intentions and great ideas about how to respond to increased competitive pressure domestically and internationally. However, the organization was concerned about its ability to implement them effectively given its diverse, largely ESL workforce.

I assessed a group of approximately 35 production workers on an individual basis over the course of several days. Following a mini organizational needs assessment, these 35 people were "invited" to join the course, based on their volunteering or being suggested by supervisors. There was little resistance to the invitation, however, and the skill review assessment was a combination of having a friendly chat, giving reassurance, examining current English and math skills, and checking prior learning.

The results showed that there were several clearly defined areas of concern. Among the participants was a group of new Canadians whose prior learning was largely limited to basic education in their home countries. They expressed a great deal of worry regarding their current math and English skill levels for both personal and work-related activities. Moreover, they seemed to exhibit little confidence regarding their future trainability, especially in terms of adapting to technological changes rumored to be coming in the near future. The people who would participate in the class wanted to brush up on long-forgotten skills and reassure themselves that they could upgrade their skills.

These concerns jibed nicely with those of the company. The organization was looking for training that would prepare employees for future training - something that would build their foundation skills and their confidence levels. In addition, the company was keen to address issues as diverse as teamwork, problem solving, and continuous improvement skills.

Curiously, all parties within the organization seemed to believe that limited language skills were the greatest impediment to changes in the organization. The results of the assessment indicated otherwise. Language skills, although not without room for improvement, were not an impediment to training or communication in most cases. Math skills, commonly used in this setting and a major cause of self-doubt among interviewees, seemed a better target for the training. I decided, therefore, to design a math program to address the needs of all the stakeholders.

With all of this in mind, I set off to design my program.

Since learning math skills is a cumulative process, and since it is important to have well-organized material available for review, I intended to have the course designed, printed, and proofread before the first class. I didn't quite make it I began the design process by immersing myself in the results of my individual assessments, my discussions with the head supervisor, and my consultation with management I had asked all of them some variation

on the question, "What would you like (your employees) to be able to do?" The various answers provided me with a list from which I was able to draw all of the skills required. The skills were organized into categories (whole numbers, decimals, percentage, etc.) arranged chronologically, and edited to fit into a ten-week time frame.

At that point, with the most vague of outlines to use as a guide, it became apparent that the most important result of any math course would not, in fact, be any of the math skills themselves, but the skills to apply them. In order to ensure that the skills reviewed in the classroom were portable to the shop floor and beyond, and to more fully meet the company's expectations, I decided to structure the program around a simple seven-step problem solving system. I had half-borrowed, half-developed a system over years of teaching survival-type math in a United Way training centre.

Seven-Step Problem Solving System

1. **Make sure you know what you want.**
2. **Write down all the things you know.**
3. **Find the operation using key words.**
4. **Guess (estimate).**
5. **Do the math.**
6. **Compare your answer to your guess.**
7. **Check your work**

Reduced to its simplest terms, the system requires participants to practice organization of information, clarification, estimation, and confirmation. In other words, common sense applied to math. It sounds simple, but it is easier said than done. However, I felt that to present a "Problem Solving System" as the centrepiece of the program would not be wise. Even those aware of limitations in their arithmetic skills are unlikely to respond well to the suggestion that they fail to use common sense.

Instead, I introduced problem solving as a theme in the first class and reiterated it in each of the subsequent nineteen classes. I decided to have the course run the gamut from whole numbers to decimals, fractions, the metric system, percentages, ratios, and a little basic geometry. We applied math skills to problems ranging from the four basic operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division) through simple word problems, to a grand finale mastery class. In the final sessions, the class would work as a group and undertake a project that would involve all of the skills in a multi-task, problem solving environment.

I submitted an outline of this fairly ambitious program to the company's vice-president and management. When it was approved, I used it as the starting point for the actual class materials.

In the end, each class had a certain amount of structure. The printed material became a unifying factor, and its structure did a lot to put people at ease in the class, especially at the beginning.

At the start of each class, we exchanged pleasantries and dealt with any outstanding homework. Following that, I presented the participants with that day's lesson — stapled, hole-punched, and not too overwhelming in volume. There was always an inspirational quotation on the cover page, always a brain teaser to get everyone up for the challenge, and always review exercises, primarily focused on the material covered in the previous class. People knew what was coming next and the sequential nature of the review provided some reassurance to the less confident members of the group.

Typical Warm-Up Exercises

If a person goes to a well with an 8 litre can and a 3 litre can, how can he or she come home with exactly 4 litres of water?

Beyond that, the class usually featured a short explanation of the topic of the day. People were encouraged to interrupt (which they did after a while). Interruptions were usually to get clarification or to find out if the real world example they had thought of fit. Examples done on the white board followed the explanation. Work then moved to pairs, small groups or teams. Participants presented their results to the group using a variety of media: overheads, white boards, flip charts, graphs, diagrams, and so on. I wanted to enhance the "continuous improvement skills" of the group, to make them more comfortable using the tools of business and to ensure that they could contribute in similar settings. At this point, the class would be a little more than half-way through. The remaining time was usually devoted to some sort of prepared project that portrayed a real world application of skills. They had to use their problem solving system in a context that was not classroom oriented.

During a segment on decimals, for example, my class was transformed into tables of diners (four to a table) listening to a tape-recorded conversation between a waitress and four customers. The participants had to total the bill using their listening skills, their math skills, the problem solving system, the menus, and their ability to work together. Since these activities tended to be fairly light hearted, I never gave a break in my class, and no one complained! I suspect, although they sometimes protested to the contrary, that they were having too much fun.

In another assignment, participants role-played members of the payroll department, calculated (and wrote) phony pay cheques based on time cards that I supplied as well as tax rates and other deductions that I imposed. Not only was this assignment a great opportunity to review skills, but it gave them some insight into the job of a co-worker, especially when I announced that we were working against a deadline and that no one could leave until the job was done. It was a threat that I was not forced to carry out.

On another occasion, more directly of interest to management, I gave class members a stack of invoices with all of the numbers, but none of the calculations. I asked them to complete the invoices accurately and quickly - a task that convinced them that they didn't want to work in the office. It was a good example of a task that they might be asked to complete in a more "team oriented" activity in their workplace.

Some alterations in, and variations of, this class routine inevitably occurred as difficulties arose. I extended the amount of class time dedicated to the metric system and the amount

of time spent on fractions due to difficulties in comprehension. The company's products are often built to U.S. specifications, so we were stuck with dealing with fractions. They had to be faced.

The previously mentioned doubt about personal English skills reared its head more than a few times during the course. I addressed the concerns as they came up, in short tutorials. The class had a very supportive atmosphere. People would offer assistance with pronouncing unfamiliar math vocabulary or explanations of new words. When participants with weaker English skills stood at the front and presented for their groups, they always received an extra long round of applause. No one seemed to mind three or four minutes of English instruction during the class. I'm not sure how to explain the easy camaraderie among participants; perhaps it was due to the fact that they had all been with the company for many years. In addition to this spontaneous help, I also asked class members with higher math and English skills to act as coaches. I organized groups and teams to address not only reading comprehension doubts, but limitations in math and problem solving skills as well.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that arose was the company's decision to suspend the class for a period of time to clear a production backlog. Two months later, the class resumed on a reduced schedule, meeting only once a week, instead of the usual twice a week. Carrying confidence forward from one session to the next proved challenging: "I forgot everything" became the common refrain. Abandoning my 200 pages of prepared text, we held several review classes, with real world projects that used as many of the already-learned skills as possible. Gradually, the participants realized that they had (with a little bit of coaching) retained most of the material covered. In the end, I put a positive spin on the situation and convinced my class that their ability to learn, remember, and overcome the unscheduled break was all the more reason for confidence in themselves. Moreover, it gave me some reassurance that this sort of interruption need not necessarily ruin a good class.

Shortly after these "review" classes, the end of my 40-hour allotment was in sight. It was time for the mastery classes. The class organized itself into two groups. Each group completed a mock costing of a job carried out at a fictitious site (we used the company's lunchroom as a model). To cost the job, participants had to complete all measurements (imperial or metric); calculate costs based on the number of pieces required and the amount of material consumed; include percentage based on scrap factors; formulate costs (based on rates, times, and tax rates supplied by me); add on a profit margin; calculate the costs required for shipping; and find GST and PST. Finally, they presented their results verbally and visually in a meeting of the two groups, where their results had to be the same except for minor differences due to rounding. It worked!

Although the course included short quizzes for evaluative purposes at the beginning and end of the program, as well as homework each class, it was the successful completion of these mastery classes that fully communicated to the participants their level of achievement. They found themselves able to perform not only the math skills, but also the new requirements of conducting a meeting, making a presentation, and public speaking.

The class concluded on a high note. Final reports were written, certificates were distributed, and pizza and pop made their inevitable appearance. Unfortunately, that is where progress seems to have stopped.

Without diminishing the accomplishment, the course seemed to have taken place in a vacuum. Management made no swift follow-up with subsequent training and no attempt at

cross-training, so life continued pretty much as usual at the plant. It is a source of some frustration that my recently energized "continuous improvement ready" participants returned to jobs where they had no opportunity to use their improved problem solving and teamwork skills. People who were thoroughly ready to participate in Quality Control (QC) circles found that there were no QC circles to attend. Ultimately, the responsibility for acting upon, and using the progress made inside the classroom, rests with the company.

Given another opportunity to conduct this same class, I would double my efforts to ensure that there was adequate recognition and use of accomplishments outside the classroom. Perhaps I failed to make clear to the company how much more the participants would now be comfortable doing. I did produce monthly and final reports with all the details about what we had reviewed, giving high praise for the participants. I placed an emphasis on the significant improvements between initial and final grades. The company did not, however, have a "next step" in place. Perhaps owing to the fact that no full scale organizational needs assessment was done, the company failed to capitalize fully on the changes. The end result of heightened math, problem solving, and English skills as well as increased confidence at home and in training situations is not an entirely disappointing one. I had, perhaps naively, hoped for more.

2

Tending to Literacy in Rural Ontario

By Leo O'Rourke

8:30 a.m. The farmers and vegetable growers drift slowly into a makeshift classroom set up at a local Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAF)⁽¹⁾ regional office. I feel the apprehension in the room as people mumble to each other and wander around with coffee and donuts supplied by the coordinator. We pay our \$50 registration fee and take our seats at tables with books neatly laid out at each place. The OMAF manager calls for quiet and then explains why this training session is obligatory. He outlines the new Ontario laws and regulations for pesticides and how they now affect the farmers in the province. He then proudly introduces the instructor, a university graduate and part-time farmer, for our one-day Pesticide Safety Course.

The instructor holds up the Pesticide Safety Manual which is one inch thick with 24 chapters and 250 pages. As he asks us to turn to the index, participants look at the list of 24 chapters. "We have to cover twelve chapters by 11:30 a.m. for an exam before lunch," he says. "In the afternoon, we'll complete the final twelve chapters so we can finish the second exam by 4:30 p.m. You have to score over 70 per cent to pass the course and receive a Pesticide Certificate."

The room is silent. As he turns on the overhead projector to explain the agenda, people begin to whisper, loud enough to be overheard by the instructor: "How can we understand this book in one day?"

"It would take a week to read this book. I can't even pronounce most of the words, let alone understand all this information."

Grumbling. The nervous instructor tries to get quiet in the room. An elderly farmer wants to ask a question: "Why do I need a pesticide certificate now to work on my own farm? I haven't needed one in the past!" The instructor takes a quick sip of coffee to clear his throat.

"The new Ontario law states that you can't purchase pesticides in Ontario without a valid Pesticide Certificate. It'll be like a driver's license. You'll be issued a number and a certificate. You'll have to renew it every five years by taking a new pesticide course."

Now the room gets loud again as thirty people talk at once. The instructor calls for order but another farmer shouts out, "I'll get my neighbour to buy the chemicals for me with his certificate."

¹ Now the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

"That's not recommended. Under the new law, the person who purchases the pesticide is responsible for where it is used." The instructor looks at his watch, nervously puts up the first overhead and calls for our attention. The course is already behind schedule. "This course is being offered to farmers throughout Ontario over the next few months. The goal of the course is to train the agricultural community in handling and using pesticides. The government wants to ensure that people are properly trained to use the products safely and correctly. With proper usage, you can protect the food supply and the environment which is precisely why the new law is in place."

Regaining his composure, the instructor asks us to introduce ourselves and give our occupations. We reluctantly do so. Ninety per cent are self-employed, a few have hobby farms, the rest are employed by large cash crop farmers. Most of us are more than fifty years old and have been out of school for more than thirty years. The fear and tension in the farmers' voices strikes a chord with me.

I listen attentively as the course continues at a rapid pace, outlining how pesticides are regulated, and explaining the new laws that now apply to farmers who work their own land. The farmers are fearful of change and see the "Spills Bill", as the law is called, infringing on their rights as self-employed people. The instructor explains the risks of using pesticides and the new safety clothing and masks that we should wear to protect ourselves against exposure to the chemicals.

11:30 a.m. Time for the first exam. More than six people get up and leave, knowing they don't have the reading comprehension skills to absorb all this information in one day.

In the afternoon we cover storage, transportation and spills, including reporting and clean-up procedures. We spend only one hour on calibration of the pesticide sprayer. Since all pesticides sold in Ontario are now in metric amounts, the calibration has to be in metric. "I've always used imperial measures - acres and gallons. I don't understand metric," says one farmer with great frustration.

"You'll have to learn to convert from imperial to metric."

The room is dead silent. Most of the farmers are in shock. Having been out of school for only about twenty years, I'm one of the few with a knowledge of the metric system. "What portion of the exam is on the calibration of the sprayer?" I ask.

"Thirty percent. It's important to do the calibration properly."

After I finish the exam, I am exhausted from the overwhelming strain of trying to absorb 250 pages of information in one day. Many course participants ask for more time, struggling to understand the metric system and the calibration questions. I see tension and disgust on people's faces as they hand in their exams.

I decide right then to go to the regional OMAF rep to explain how I feel about the course and ask if he has had any other feed-back on the intensity of the day. He explains, "All over Ontario the problems are the same, with more than 50 per cent failure, and farmers are refusing to attend the second course."

"Whoever set up the course didn't understand who would be receiving the training. Didn't you do a pilot course to understand who the participants are?" I ask angrily.

"There was a rush to get the training completed this spring."

Still upset, I respond, "You take \$50 from each participant and overwhelm them with a 250-page manual in one day. What do you expect? These are very proud, self-employed people. They will find a way of beating the system and will not be humiliated again in this kind of forum." The rep asks me to calm down.

"Do you have any suggestions to improve the course layout?"

"Either you run the course over two or three days or do some pre-course instruction in the evenings. I'm willing to help give pre-course information to farmers."

And that is how I got involved as an instructor. Two weeks later the OMAF rep called to say that pre-course instruction would be offered to all farmers who wished to attend. I volunteered to be an evening instructor in my area.

In preparation for instruction I was given materials and instructor training. The materials consisted of a video and a workbook put out by Centralia College of Agriculture Technology through a workplace literacy incentive grant from the Ministry of Education. In our instructor training we learned the principles of adult literacy, which emphasize building on what people already know, understanding their environment and working conditions, and using their strengths to promote a positive attitude toward learning. We left our training sessions motivated and committed to achieving our goal of helping fellow farmers understand the pesticide manual.

I still remember my first evening class and how scared I was that the participants would see me in the same way as the instructor who had given the previous pesticide course. I was expecting ten people but only six had the courage to attend. I wasn't surprised considering how upset they must have been after the one day pesticide course. I had notes in front of me to keep myself on track and to overcome my nervousness. I began by telling them how I felt after taking the course and that I could empathize with people who had no familiarity with the metric system. When I explained that this time they would work at their own pace with no set time for completion, I could see the relief on their faces.

Then I explained that I needed some background information from each person so I could prepare lessons with them in mind. Here's what I asked:

Background Information

Name:

Have you taken the pesticide course before?

If so, how did you feel about the course?

How familiar are you with the metric system?

Taking turns, they expressed how unprepared they were to understand the pesticide book in one day. Not one of the six participants had any knowledge of the metric system - it was like a foreign language to them. After an initial exercise I was confident that they had a

good grasp of imperial measures. When I tried an exercise comparing imperial to metric, all I got were blank looks and I knew they were not understanding me.

I switched to the video which explained how the course was set up by the college and then I suggested some ground rules for the group to ensure respect and cooperation. When they all agreed that they felt comfortable with the course, promised to return and not give up, I felt a sense of accomplishment, that we were on the right track.

For the next session I decided to be creative and bring in some visual aids to help everyone understand the metric system and the difference between metric and imperial. I laid out the visual aids in front of me on the table: a glass quart, gallon bottle and litre bottle; a yardstick and a metre ruler; a pound of lard and a kilogram container. Afterwards, they said this visual representation was the turning point they needed to understand metric. The video provided the visual assistance they needed to compare acres to hectares. As I played the video over and over, they drew diagrams to show that they understood the conversion from metric to imperial and back to metric. I had hoped the conversion would come quickly to them but it took ten sessions before they felt comfortable with their newly learned skills.

Two of the participants, who described themselves as having a mental block with math, were struggling to understand the conversion. I worked with them one-on-one, at their own pace, for an hour each session. I quickly understood that I had to have empathy and develop a personal trust with each participant or I would lose them. I tried to relate to the farmers, such proud and independent individuals, on their own terms, and learned as much from them as they did from me.

In each three-hour session, we spent one hour on conversion and the other two hours on the pesticide manual. Here are some examples from the manual:*

Applying the Right Amount of Pesticide

The next step is to calculate how much pesticide to use. You need to know how much pesticide and carrier to add to each tank or hopper, and the amount of pesticide you need for the whole area.

You will learn to calculate the following information:

1. **How large is the treatment area?**
2. **What is the application rate for this pesticide?**
3. **How much pesticide should you buy?**
4. **How much pesticide should you add to a full tank?**
5. **How much pesticide should you add to a part tank?**
6. **How much pesticide solution should you add to a part tank?**
7. **How much granular pesticide do you need for a certain area?**

* Sample sections from the Grower Pesticide Safety Course reproduced with permission from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs.

How to Calculate the Amount of Pesticide You Need

- **Multiply the length of the field times the width.**
- **If you are using metres, divide this number by 10,000 – the number of m² in a hectare. This gives you the number of hectares.**

$$\text{Ha} = \frac{\text{length (m)} \times \text{width (m)}}{10,000 \text{ m}^2/\text{ha}}$$

- **If you are using feet, divide the number by 43,560 – the number of ft² in an acre. This gives you the number of acres.**

$$\text{acres} = \frac{\text{length (ft)} \times \text{width (ft)}}{43,560 \text{ ft}^2/\text{acre}}$$

Sample Question

A farmer has 45 acres of potatoes. He needs to spray BRAVO to control disease at the recommended rate of 2 L/ha. His sprayer output is 50 gallons/acre, and it has a capacity of 500 gallons.

- How many litres of BRAVO does he need to buy to cover the 45 acres?**
- How many acres can he spray with a full tank?**
- How many litres of BRAVO should be added to one full tank?**

During the sessions, participants learned how to read for main ideas, using a yellow highlighter to bring attention to key sections in each chapter. For homework, I asked them to read the chapter we had covered and the chapter to be taken up in the following session. They found this amount of reading difficult at first because many of them were not used to reading on a regular basis. They honestly admitted that they did not enjoy reading because their skills were weak from lack of use. They felt comfortable with farm magazines although some only looked at the pictures and the caption underneath. Now they were using the dictionary, their wives were helping them read, and their children were asking for bedtime stories. Working together as a group created trust, respect and confidence. When I heard their stories about being involved again with their children, it became clear to me that we were on a new path for lifelong learning.

The participants took twenty sessions before they felt confident enough to write the pesticide exam again. They decided to take the one-day course as a group and I agreed to accompany them. Although they felt unsure of their skills at the start of the day, I reminded them to stay calm and focused and follow along in their books as the instructor went through the chapters quickly. They were able to understand the course content this time and could calibrate the sprayers in metric.

At lunch time, one of the participants was ready to quit and leave because he didn't have enough time to finish the first part of the exam. His reading skills were weak and he couldn't understand all the information quickly enough. I asked the instructor if this participant could have an oral exam and he agreed on two conditions: he had to ask all the questions and the participant had to write down his answers after giving verbal answers. With this reassurance, the participant agreed to finish the afternoon portion of the course. In the end, everyone got more than 80 per cent on the exam and felt proud of their accomplishment.

Before the exam I spoke to the OMAF office and was given permission to videotape their pesticide course. I thought the video would be useful for future training, and to help review the course in five years, when the exams had to be taken again.

In the last few sessions we got to know each other on a personal level and decided to meet after writing the pesticide exam. When we got together again, we talked about what we wanted to do to continue improving our literacy skills. One person suggested we get together at the Agricultural Museum located at the Central Experimental Farm (CEF) in Ottawa. The CEF is 110 years old with many of the original buildings still standing. It displays equipment from the early 1900s as well as old pictures of the farm on loan from the National Archives. Our trip was the beginning of a new understanding of our history, of learning from our own experiences on the farm, of looking at the improvements in equipment through engineering, and of seeing how research improves the animals and crops we work with every day.

As we walked through the museum we were back in our childhood and could remember the long hours we spent with horse-drawn equipment and the first tractors used in the fifties and sixties. As we all reminisced over each piece of equipment, we were excited about our history. It is part of who we all are: self-employed farmers. Many of us were second- and third-generation farmers, still working the same land as our families with our wives and children. I bought a copy of *100 Harvests*, a book celebrating the 100th anniversary of the farm.

After this trip we decided to meet at our local community centre each week and read part of *100 Harvests*. As the weeks passed and we read several chapters, we wondered why there were no pictures in the book. We decided to visit the archives and were amazed at all the beautiful pictures taken at the CEF over the century. When we met the following week, the idea came up to put together a photo history book and share it with our families and friends. Learning became fun for all of us as we read about the history of Carleton County and the Ottawa Valley and stories of life on the CEF in the early 1900s. We used a computer to write our own text. Our group meeting started to get larger as families got involved in our photo history project. Family members pasted in pictures from the archives and captions we chose from *100 Harvests*. We met the author and got permission to use the captions in our book. We were very proud of our book, complete with sixty pictures and captions, and gave copies to family members to share our learning experience together.

We have gone our separate ways since our photo history project but still keep in touch. Several participants went back to school to complete their Grade 12 diploma. One took his Class D driver's license and now enjoys a new job as a truck driver. Another participant took part in a promotional video for the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy where he explained how he overcame his fears and was able to learn new skills in a positive environment with fellow participants. We were all proud to hear that he felt comfortable

enough to be part of the video and pass on to others his new appreciation for learning as an adult.

I feel comfortable as an instructor now that I have had this experience and I want to break the cycle of apathy with regard to learning new skills. In my community I give St. John Ambulance First Aid and CPR courses and understand the need for a refresher and re-certification every three years — a procedure the farmers were not prepared for with pesticide use. I also give training courses for junior and senior umpires to improve their skills and enhance their confidence in their own abilities. Instructors need on-going training and practice to reinforce our learning and understanding, letting us (like the farmers) use our skills with insight and knowledge.

I am a firm believer in lifelong learning and continue to grow as a person each day. I feel everyone must understand their own positive abilities and by sharing them we can all learn from each other. Through trust and friendship we are better individuals, parents and community leaders.

3

More Than Job Preparation: Turning Literacy into Gold

By Rebekah Courtney and Don Matthews

Rebekah and Don worked on a basic skills program intended to prepare residents of a remote northern community for work in a mine. First, Rebekah sets the stage, describing the work that went into preparing the curriculum, then Don writes about his experience of bringing the curriculum to the community.

For over a decade a mining company and people from several remote northern communities discussed the use of native land for mining. They finally reached an agreement allowing development to proceed, with a commitment from the company to train and employ a set percentage of the local aboriginal people. Community band members, tribal council representatives and mine personnel agreed that some candidates for the jobs needed basic skills upgrading and employment preparation in order to participate in training and apprenticeship programs at the mine. A partnership was formed, including: provincial and federal governments, two tribal councils, four bands, the gold mine, and a community college, to offer a basic skills workplace preparation program to the four communities in the area surrounding the mine site.

I was immediately interested when this history was described to me; and became the curriculum coordinator for the project. Although I was based in an urban centre, my job was to work first with the partners, and later with the teachers.

My first task was to better understand the communities' needs and program goals, but we only had one month to prepare for the September start date. There was not enough time to visit each community, so all the partners met together half-way. Each partner had a different sense of what was essential in the program, but common goals included direct employment, further post-secondary training or skills-based training, and the development of skills to deal with personal, social and cultural issues. These goals would be achieved through three phases of the nine-month program: life skills, job readiness training and academic upgrading. Participation was limited to fifteen adults who had at least grade seven level literacy and numeracy skills. I left the bands and tribal councils with the tasks of recruiting participants and conducting individual needs assessments, while I returned to the city to begin work on the curriculum.

The partners had identified key elements that defined the program for them: familiarity with the mine operation and working environment, cultural awareness, community-based activities, and materials consistent with those offered in other college upgrading programs. In addition, the curriculum had to meet the ministry's quality standards. Given these factors and the teacher/student ratio of 1:15, the learner-centred model seemed the most appropriate choice for the project. The learner-centred model involves an individualized approach to curriculum materials, teaching methods, and assessment. The teachers had not been hired at this point, so I struggled with several questions: Which resources would be helpful at the outset and which should be developed or purchased with teacher input later?

What manuals would instructors need as guides? Which materials would appeal to the adults participating in the program? Clearly no off-the-shelf package would meet the needs of all the participants in all the communities.

For phase one of the program I compiled five life skills manuals with lessons and materials. The materials had to be flexible enough for the instructors to select the resources relevant to each group. As it turned out, these materials were not enough. Instructors created activities and materials which added more meaning to the life skills topics.

Although we had anticipated that participants would be young men seeking work, in fact, each community had very different groups. One consisted entirely of women, men were in the majority in two others, and the fourth was more gender-balanced. The ages varied, as did attitudes toward religion and spirituality, traditional ways of life versus modern technology and lifestyle, and personal and social issues. We had expected more consistency among the communities since, by northern standards, they were relatively close together, but a unique life skills course was needed for each site.

Job readiness was the second phase, including a more structured series of employment preparation modules, with activities and written assignments as well as materials from the mine. These materials included mining journals, pamphlets, videos, job descriptions and prerequisites, and safety manuals. The instructors could adapt them to each community and select other materials to meet individual needs. Each instructor tried different approaches and materials to link the program with the community during this phase: employer visits, job shadowing, employment research in the community, guest speakers, and mine tours.

Phase three of the program was devoted to upgrading in mathematics and communications. The ministry direction was to use the newly drafted outcomes. An outcome-based curriculum and the learner-centred model require a variety of resource materials to meet individual goals and enable participants to progress in their preferred learning styles. In theory, instructors would begin with an assortment of texts, booklets and software, purchased in small numbers with a plan to add to this menu after they had a chance to better assess their learners and receive feedback from them. Eventually we hoped to establish a small resource centre in each community where materials could be selected, adapted and shared.

The councils supplied computers to each site, but these were not available in all the communities in time for classes, so software purchases and implementation were delayed. When computers and software arrived, instructors said the participants enjoyed learning in the new medium. However, the instructors all agreed that the overall resources for this wide-ranging program were inadequate and they wanted materials with more native content at a basic level. With the demands of teaching in a new context with new methods, they didn't have sufficient time to create or adapt materials that would be most appropriate.

Since we had adopted a learner-centred model, I encouraged the instructors to use a variety of teaching methods such as one-on-one tutoring, small and large group instruction, computer-assisted learning and peer tutoring. Although instructors experimented with different methods, most continued with familiar methods. Participants' reactions to different teaching methods also played a role in deciding how to teach and learn. For instance, some instructors felt that the group process may not have been culturally appropriate since so many participants had difficulty learning and speaking in groups. In contrast, another instructor found that the participants, all at a similar academic level, preferred learning as a group and helped design curriculum materials and activities.

Our initial assessments also had to be more individualized to work within a learner-centered model. We used a three-part process beginning with the assessment tool, "Getting Started," developed specifically for this project. This tool guided an interview with the participants to gather information about education, previous work, interests, learning styles and goals. The second part was a basic communications and mathematics assessment to determine where to begin with each person. The information from both "Getting Started" and the academic assessments was condensed into a Learning Plan Summary. This process provided a starting point for curriculum planning, on-going assessment and learner evaluation. Participants and teachers worked cooperatively at each step of the process, including the development of personal portfolios to evaluate progress and achievement of goals.

The instructors found that because they had not done the initial interview, they had to complete learning plans and give academic assessments after the fact. They also found that the participants' numeracy and literacy skills were not at a grade seven level but somewhere between grade two and grade five. Thus, participants needed to develop their skills more before they could achieve the required levels in their academic upgrading and job readiness for mining. This meant that some mining-related reading materials (e.g. health and safety, mining projects across Canada) were too demanding for the participants.

Interestingly, the focus on preparation for mining work began to shift as instructors and participants recognized that more upgrading was needed and as participants became more interested in other fields such as tourism and community and band work. Above all, the projects provided opportunities for community members to improve their literacy skills and expand their horizons.

When I look back on this unique project my thoughts turn to what I might do differently next time. It is essential for the instructors and curriculum coordinator to visit the communities and conduct the initial needs assessments with learners before the program begins. Remote communities have unique needs which cannot be fully understood from an urban centre. Materials can be better developed or organized when the instructors have assessed their group in advance. In addition, staff training is critical for the learner-centred model. I recommend more time for workshops and discussion among instructors. Band leaders will also benefit by a presentation on the learner-centred model and how it differs from traditional teaching models. Finally, conference calls and faxes are useful forms of communication but more face-to-face site visits would help break down the distance barrier.

Each site delivered successful programs. The following narrative is one instructor's reflections on his experience. He implemented the learner-centred model in the fullest sense and was impressed by its effectiveness.



I arrived at this isolated First Nation community of five hundred people on a Saturday afternoon. My class started Monday morning at 9 a.m., so I had one day to transform a storage room into a classroom. I found some long tables, chairs and, most importantly, a coffee pot — my students loved coffee. I was also equipped with a life skills binder, job readiness material and some mathematics and communications materials. I stapled colourful corrugated bulletin board paper to the walls and wrote snappy quotations on flip chart paper. I then arranged chairs in a circle. I was ready — or thought I was. Monday morning, my students didn't show up at nine o'clock. It took all day for the room to fill.

We started with sixteen participants, but shortly after the start of classes three students left to work at the mine. Of the thirteen remaining three were men and ten were women. These students ranged in age from nineteen to sixty-one years. There were single parents, grandparents, some married people and a few single individuals.

Before this program, many students had had negative experiences with formal education. A couple of the older students had never been to school except for a few months here and there. They lived in the bush and were busy making a living. Like many teens from remote communities, some of my students had been sent to high school in southern cities. They boarded with host parents who were mostly non-aboriginal, and who, though well-meaning, were not equipped to deal with the culture shock and loneliness of their visitors. Far from home, these young people often fell into the trap of drugs and alcohol. Many were sent home, and many never went back to school because the experience was so harsh.

Our program was learner-centred, individualized, and dependent on students developing and following through on their own work plans. Many students, especially the younger ones, found this process difficult because they were used to being told what to do. In school they were continually told to memorize information like "all the lakes and rivers in Bolivia," and the way my classroom worked was completely novel to them.

For instance, we used circle activities, although it took months for the group to get used to them; and they were never easy. However, one successful circle activity was passing imaginary objects to one another. We would name the object and the person we were passing it to as we pantomimed handing it over. As we got to know each other, we went from passing wiggly snakes and large spiders to full size pianos and live moose. We liked these kinds of silly games — they made us laugh. We laughed with each other a lot — if we felt embarrassed we laughed, and if we were happy we laughed too.

Discussions and role playing were more effective and enjoyable when they were informal. By informal I mean sitting comfortably, speaking when ready and allowing for flexibility — letting students direct the activity. This is how we learned about each other, how we grew to be more united and open.

In time it became easier for students to plan their weekly work, but at first I felt as if I was planning thirteen individual weekly programs. Although it was frustrating, the effort was worthwhile. Once they got some experience and confidence, the students learned to set specific goals with realistic time frames.

As students pursued their academic goals we had to deal with other challenges: some happy, some sad, some desperate. We dealt with abuse — physical, emotional, sexual, and alcohol/ drug — related; we dealt with abandonment and suicide. These issues surfaced as we were discussing family life and the lifestyle of the reserve. Often the discussions were forced on us. Sometimes women came to class with black eyes and swollen faces. One evening a 10-year-old girl hanged herself from a tree limb in the schoolyard. This event paralyzed the school and our class for a week. Everyone was in shock, but of course this was not the first suicide. There had already been so many.

Everyone in the class had lost a relative, friend or other loved ones in the last ten years. These issues and situations seemed to demand discussion, and though in the past, they were not much discussed, they were now being talked about openly. Students often brought up these topics in class, because, I believe, we had built up a good deal of trust together.

People could express their opinions and feelings without judgement from me or the other students.

Once the winter road opened we lost some students because of the increased availability of alcohol and drugs; however, because the program was individualized, people were able to return to the program and pick up where they had left off. Students who faltered often remarked that they were relieved to be back in the program and worked hard to get back on track.

The program goal was to prepare students for jobs at the mine, 50 air miles away. We were to bring academic skills to roughly a grade 10 level or to a point where students could participate in health and safety training and apprenticeships.

Company representatives visited our class several times. The native employment coordinator helped us with interview skills by actually interviewing every student and making suggestions on an individual basis. A mining career night was organized and presented by the coordinator, the mine public relations manager and the mine training supervisor. They showed films about mining and explained the mining and smelting process. They encouraged the students and other community members to take a serious look at some of the well-paying jobs and apprenticeships. They encouraged them to get an education so they could access these opportunities. We also toured the mine and received first-hand knowledge of mine and mill operation. Many had never seen the mine before or understood the nature of the jobs offered there.

When the time came at the end of the program for job placement, only four students took the opportunity for a job. The noise from the mill had scared some of us, as did going underground. Many of the women did not want to subject themselves to the constant harassment of the male camp attendants. Drug and alcohol abuse at the mine was another deterrent to working there. In addition, as the students improved their skills and confidence, and learned more about the mining work, their interest in the mine waned. Six months into the program they started talking about getting their GEDs, going on to college, or looking around for other kinds of employment.

One of the problems we had to deal with was that our computers did not arrive until close to the end of the program. From the initial assessment I realized that only two of the students had any computer experience, and the rest were deathly afraid of the machines. I was fortunate to acquire three cast-off 286s, and after a few nights of frustrating work with MS-DOS for Dummies and Martin, the school principal, we had them up and running. After a few weeks the students were no longer afraid of computers. Each person learned by doing. Peer tutoring also proved to be effective. The director of education visited one day and was so impressed by our computer skills that he gave us his office computer. It was a 486 with a CD ROM drive and laser printer and it opened up a whole new vista for us. Now we were really word processing! What an inspiration to go from scared to writing perfect resumes with confidence. When our four Pentiums arrived, one of the grandmas in the class hooked it up. We listened to CDs, learned to cut, paste and merge, and had a taste of the Internet. Unfortunately we could not afford Internet service, and the poor phone lines were problematic, but we were still enthusiastic.

Communications skills were a major focus in our classroom. I wanted meaningful activities for the students so they could progress and enjoy learning language skills. The texts we had available were not very practical for us, so after some consideration I chose some useful books for reading and discussion, and decided to study communications in large and small

groups. I found the series *The Sacred Tree* in the school library, and we read it aloud and discussed it. I learned that because of the students' Christian upbringing, this was not an appropriate choice. We stopped using it after a discussion about spirituality and religion. The next book we tried was *Killing the Shaman*, a fascinating book about traditional culture versus the mainstream. Again, it was not appropriate, and I was frustrated. Every community is different: some embrace tradition more than others.

We used Bible quotations sometimes, with some success, but the most successful text was the Ontario driver's handbook. We read it aloud and silently, we studied and discussed it. We drew arrows and cars, and related the book to the community. The one and only First Nations constable authorized to give driving tests came and administered them for us. We opened the tests up to the community as well, with the result that eighteen people got their licenses, almost doubling the number of drivers in the community.

As a culmination of activities the students were presented with a choice of three projects: a newspaper, a book of their own short stories, or a book of history derived from interviews with elders. The newspaper was not chosen by enough students to make it a viable project so we concentrated on the two books. These projects were especially valuable because they combined so much of the work we had done in the program. The book of student short stories was the most popular project.

We sat down as a group and decided what kind of book we would make. We decided there would be a deadline for publication and that the book would be the best we could make with the materials and equipment we had to work with. The theme that was developed within the group was "Stories for Our Children."

The purpose of the project was to get the students to use their newly acquired language and writing skills to compose these stories. I wanted them to use their computer skills in word processing, including cut and paste, and put their hidden artistic abilities to work on illustrations. We followed four writing steps: outline, rough copy, revised copy and final product. The outline was produced using a giant story web. Once I explained the concept of the web, we made several, and chose the best one. After writing the rough copy the students learned the value of proofreading and revision. Classmates proofread each other's work and gave each other ideas. One woman revised her story seventeen times before she was satisfied with it. The layout of pictures and text came next. After the pages were prepared they were photocopied and bound, complete with a front and back cover and a table of contents. A scanner would have been wonderful, to include colour in the books, but we settled for black and white.

This project generated a lot of documents that could be used in the students' portfolios. Most of the students had difficulty submitting their work either because they thought it was not good enough, or because they did not want to invest the effort into perfecting it. Then again, they might just have been waiting for me to ask them to recite the names of the rivers and lakes of Bolivia!

The students presented their publication to the community at their graduation. It was a proud moment when two class representatives presented the Chief and Council with a copy of *Stories for Our Children*. It was enthusiastically received and was passed from one reader to another all night. It was a triumph for my students, people who had not failed this time, but had demonstrated to their leaders and their families and friends that they could succeed.

I left the community on that high note, hoping that the program would continue. I hope I have given you a glimpse into the classroom and a sense of our problems and successes. We struggled as we learned, but we were happy. For me Monday was as good as Friday, and I would do it again in a minute, and this time better.

4

Clearly The Way to Go... in the Workplace

By Leah Morris

As a regional workplace education coordinator, my responsibilities included outreach, training, assessments and student-tutor coordination. Through outreach into the community, I learned about workplace needs and in 1990 I began marketing to workplaces in the Haldimand-Norfolk area.

I quickly realized that most employers do not recognize the literacy needs in their workplace. The challenge is to convince employers that our services are not only available, but also necessary to them. I usually approached the workplace through human resources personnel who are often more aware of the literacy needs in their workplace than management are. However, marketing strategies must be convincing enough to move discussion past human resources to the management level.

Getting a foot in the door – marketing approaches

The most successful strategy I have found is to use clear writing to demonstrate how effective communication can benefit the workplace. To assess the need for literacy upgrading and obtain buy-in from all the workplace players (such as management and union), before I enter a workplace I obtain samples of forms, memos, newsletters etc. and assess them for readability, clear writing style and design. Once the assessment is complete and some of the materials rewritten according to clear writing principles, I meet with human resources, samples of clearly written materials in hand. Quite often the reaction is immediate and very positive. Within days, I am meeting with management, once again with clearly written documents in hand.

I know that clear writing is a useful marketing tool to get a foot in the door of a workplace, and I am also convinced that it is truly an effective communication tool, useful beyond the workplace into everyday life. The sales pitch to the employer should focus on the benefits to the workplace, but the sales pitch to the employees should focus on the development of personal skills. Management may see personal development as transferable and valuable, but in my experience the number one concern is the benefit to the workplace itself.

Once management agrees with the possible benefit of clear writing, the next step is to show the benefits of investigating literacy upgrading through a needs assessment. The needs assessment should examine the cultural and social factors within the workplace, skill and educational requirements, types of communication used within the workplace, initial and ongoing training available to employees, and technological changes which have occurred in the past few years. The analysis of the needs assessment will either prove or disprove the need for upgrading within that particular workplace.

Once I have completed the analysis of the needs assessment, I present my findings and recommendations to management, the union, employee representatives (in non-union

workplaces) and human resources. At this point, management must make a decision as to its level of commitment. Will they offer upgrading to all employees or only to a few? Will employees have paid time for upgrading or will it be volunteer time? Will the cost of materials be covered by the employer? What type of program will be offered, small group or one-on-one? Together, we set timelines and goals for the upgrading program. A word of caution: I have found that sometimes management wants results right away, but the goals cannot possibly be achieved within their timeline. I have to effectively sell timelines based on my experiences with other workplaces.

Workplace example 1: greenhouse

This workplace had a high population of Mexican Mennonites, who do not believe in formal education. Many of the employees were illiterate both in English and in their native tongue. Communication barriers were creating problems in the workplace; for example, written communication created problems and frustration for most of the workers. The language level of the employee handbooks and basic workplace information was suitable for university research papers, yet there was no minimum educational requirement for the greenhouse worker.

Clear communication was badly needed. While management recognized the cultural communication barriers, they were unwilling to take part in any type of internal clear writing training. They did, however, begin a basic literacy program available to all employees.

Before literacy upgrading could be effective, the communication barriers had to be dealt with. Clear writing provided one way of opening avenues of communication to allow learning to begin, and it became my responsibility, as the literacy provider. In the short term, this was effective, but in the long term, when funding ended and the program was no longer under my mandate, clear writing no longer occurred.

This company wanted the benefits of clear writing without having to train their staff. Management felt that because of high staff turnover, training was not useful. They felt that staff trained today would probably be gone tomorrow, and the company's investment in training would benefit another workplace. The only way I could ensure that clear writing remained accessible in this workplace was to put all rewritten materials onto computer disk and leave them with the personnel manager.

At this workplace, I rewrote many forms, including the employee handbook which presented the workplace benefits package, work ethics, rules and schedules. I designed three different handbooks, one each for full time staff, part time staff and seasonal staff. The human resources manager and her office staff gave input and suggestions around the development of these handbooks.

Due to the 90 per cent illiteracy rate and the 60 per cent ESL population in this workplace, I went beyond the usual clear writing principles in order to present information in a manner that was understandable to the majority of the workforce. At the bottom of each page in the handbooks I included a small dictionary which explained the meaning of important words. I also designed an orientation package with visuals as well as text.

The basic literacy instructors used the rewritten handbooks and clearly written forms as a basis for curriculum development specific to this workplace. They designed discussion activities around communication needs within the workplace and possible solutions to overcome communication barriers. They also used the classroom as a focus group to

evaluate the effectiveness of clearly written materials by comparing original forms with the rewritten ones.

The results were very positive. Seven years after the project ended, this workplace continues to use the orientation package and handbooks that I designed. Despite this success, if I had the opportunity to begin the process with this workplace again I would approach things a little differently.

In the written contract with the workplace, I would include an agreement to train all employees who are responsible for written communication in clear writing and I would set the date of the workshop immediately. This formal commitment to training helps ensure that the clear writing training will indeed take place. I would also develop a clear writing committee which would be involved in the clear writing process, so that should formal training not occur, the knowledge and practical experience of clear writing would be accessible. The involvement of this committee would include polling employees about communication needs, reviewing materials in the workplace and recommending materials to be rewritten. I know that many programs suggest a "train-the-trainer" format, but in the case of this workplace, there was so much racial tension that I am not certain "train-the-trainer" would have worked, at least not until there was some diversity training in place.

Workplace example 2: wire and cable manufacturer

This manufacturer not only bought into basic literacy upgrading, but also accepted clear writing with open arms. As I was waiting for my initial meeting to make my sales pitch to human resources, the training officer, union representatives and management, I noticed a huge poster signed by all employees of the company. When I realized that probably a number of employees had signed this agreement for "Quality Assurance" without understanding what they had signed, I rewrote the information.

The first question I asked in the meeting was, "Do you believe that all the employees who have signed your Quality Assurance statement understand what they have signed?" Management representatives were quick to state they were sure every employee understood what the Quality Assurance statement meant; however, the union representatives and human resources staff disagreed. I offered to present their statement as I had understood and rewritten it.

Original Quality Assurance Statement

**Quality has to be defined as conformance to requirements, not as goodness.
The system for causing quality is prevention, not appraisal.
The performance standards must be zero defects, not "that's close enough."
The measurement of quality is the price of non-conformances, not indexes.**

My rewrite (which they adopted later on)

Quality means:

- **following the guidelines**
- **looking ahead for possible mistakes**
- **doing it right the first time**

Quality is measured by results, not numbers.

As soon as I presented my version of the Quality Assurance statement, they hired my organization not only to upgrade their employees, but also to train their staff in clear writing. Those trained included office staff, management, the union representatives, the training officer and the forepersons.

Three separate clear writing workshops, with ten to fifteen participants in each, were held during a three week period. To meet the scheduling needs of the workplace, workshops were held for each shift and included employees from all workplace sections (e.g. management, floor workers, secretaries). At the end of the three weeks, a focus group of participants came together to review workplace materials and discuss their clear writing needs.

The clear writing workshop itself was three hours long. I find that a half-day workshop is always received with greater enthusiasm than a full-day workshop. The cost in time and dollars involved in releasing staff for a full day is too great for many companies, especially smaller rural workplaces. Instructors who present full-day or longer clear writing workshops will probably wonder how effective a three-hour workshop can be. I have found it to work very well.

In the three hours, we cover the general tips of clear writing, using the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs paper on clear writing as a snapshot of the principles. There's no doubt that this is a workshop! Participants rewrite sentences, consider commonly used words and find clearer ways to express those words. They learn how to determine reading levels of materials using the Fry Readability Test and Gunning Fog. The participants work in small groups to rewrite materials from the workplace. To re-emphasize the clear writing principles, the workshop concludes with the "Clear Writer's Hit Squad" video produced by Frontier College. Is this the end? No! This is just the beginning of clear writing in the workplace.

Follow-up continues via fax, phone and Internet. I remain in contact with the company until they have firmly established their clear writing skills. In some instances, companies have contacted me three to four years after their initial training. This manufacturing company assessed accident forms, machinery operating manuals, policy and procedure manuals, health and safety documents as well as their newsletter and memos. We maintained contact for two years after the completion of the project.

During the clear writing workshops I held for this company, people brought in materials from work and from the various organizations (e.g. church, Lions) they were involved in. The employer's training needs are achieved by giving skills to the employees which are used in the workplace, and employees find they gain skills they can use to benefit their personal life as well. In one workshop, an employee brought in a letter for her child's school PTA. By using the training in the workshop, she was able to learn the skills her employer wanted her to have, and was also able to prepare a clear piece of information that would go beyond the door of her workplace. Another participant was a volunteer at a hospital that was developing a "satisfaction" questionnaire for patients, and she was able to use the clear writing workshop to form a useable and clearly written questionnaire.

Advisory vs. Hands-on

My involvement in clear writing for this manufacturing company was more on an advisory role than the hands-on role I had in the greenhouse workplace. This type of involvement

works best because the clear writing skills are refined within the workplace. In this case, the skills also benefited other plants belonging to this company. Two years after the completion of my project with this workplace I was informed by the training officer that clear writing had become a workplace policy in all of the plant locations. In this case, "train-the-trainer" was successful, ensuring that clear writing continued long after the upgrading program was completed. The training officer offered his knowledge of clear writing to the other plant locations, resulting in the company-wide policy of clear writing.

One very time-consuming exception to the advisory role was the union contract agreement, which I rewrote. Although clear language contracts do exist, in this case many loopholes appeared when the legal jargon was replaced with clear language. In the end, the countless hours spent rewriting resulted in a useless document. The dynamics of this company, including downsizing turmoil, played a role in the decision by management not to allow the clearly written union contract agreement to be used.

Conclusion

As changes occur in the literacy field, providers are being asked to prepare business plans, which are, I think, an effective way of presenting an upgrading program and timelines to a company. Allow the employer to know what they can expect from you and be sure that both parties agree on the timelines and expected results. Indicate an evaluation process in your business plan. I evaluate the process every three months for the first year and then every six months if I am there longer. The form of evaluation I use is focus groups at all levels of employment (the floor worker through to management), and/or a one-on-one format. The evaluation looks at the effectiveness of the program design (small group, on-site, off-site, one-on-one); the timelines, to see if they are still appropriate (if necessary they are adjusted); and the goals set out by the company in the initial stages of the program, to see if they are still relevant.

If a company agrees to a business plan, they have in essence agreed to a training contract. My services continue as long as the company is willing to fulfil its role in the process.

If the company does not live up to the agreement, discussion is necessary to determine why the company is not working within the contract agreement and if possible, a new business plan can be negotiated. If I am not meeting the expectations of the company they have the right, based on the training contract, to terminate my services. Through the ongoing evaluation process, both the company and I are well aware of problems as they come up and usually ongoing evaluation ensures the contract is fulfilled by both parties - but there is always the possibility of surprises.

For me, clear writing has always been an effective way to open the door for other types of upgrading within the workplace. I have been involved in the design of basic literacy, numeracy, and English programs, and have referred companies to other trainers and programs to meet their specific needs. In each workplace I have entered, clear writing was the vehicle I used to get the company's attention and its buy-in to upgrading. Whatever approach you choose to get buy-in from the workplace for upgrading, I recommend something that clearly shows benefits to both the employer and employee.

** I would like to acknowledge and credit Barb Shipley (responsible for rewriting the Pesticide Workbook and co-developer of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs "Clear Writing Fact Sheet") who trained me in the principles of clear writing and who also helped develop the workshop I now present.*

5

Communicating in a Diverse Workplace

By Judith Bond

As a training consultant for the last eight years, I have had the privilege and challenge of developing a broad range of training programs to meet the changing needs of employees and organizations. One of the greatest challenges workplace trainers face is to develop training that is accessible to individuals regardless of their language skills. The story that follows describes our experience in one organization.

Description of the training

"Communicating in a Diverse Workplace" is a three-hour workshop in which participants explore the values of individual culture, group culture and organizational culture. "Culture" here includes gender, age, ability, ethnicity, race, religion and all the areas of our lives that may reflect differences from others. The workshop addresses the issue of communication as messages filter through individual and group experiences.

The training was developed to respond to an identified need in many of the organizations we worked with. Over and over again, we saw assumptions being made about the communication structures in a company, a department or a production line. Often the message "receiver" was blamed for not understanding, when in fact the "sender" was sending an unclear, culturally-biased message.

While the core training information remains the same, we add to and adapt the model according to the needs of the organization and the individuals who will be involved in the workshop. Through a variety of interactive training activities, participants identify possible barriers to clear communication and develop strategies for clearer communication. Case studies introduced via video give individuals the opportunity to put the new information and strategies to work. We suggest that this training be co-facilitated. Each trainer brings his or her own diversity to the group along with personal stories and workplace examples. This model also ensures more active participation because there are two individuals "working the room" during group and pair activities.

Traditionally, this workshop is offered to employees who are at least at a supervisory level. Participants usually have fairly high-level listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. In 1997 we were given the opportunity to offer the training to individuals whose English language skills were not as well developed (ESL/low literacy).

Profile of "ABC Manufacturing"

ABC Manufacturing has been on a journey towards a high performance workforce for at least five years. The company produces several well-known household products and must meet stringent customer standards. It has high expectations of all its workers and uses self-directed work teams. The company introduced the concept and motto of "Learning a Living" when it began a process of change from a traditional hierarchy to a high performance

organization. The company rewards useful ideas with cash, and rewards individuals for learning with ceremonies and certificates.

The company runs three shifts daily and two of those shifts run without supervisors or managers on site. The workforce is diverse. The largest number of front-line employees are from Jamaica and the other front-line employees are Asian and European. The management is primarily Canadian-born, English speaking and white.

Rationale for Training

Over a long and evolving relationship with the organization, we developed and delivered a variety of training programs, including basic skills, math and WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System). Then the company asked us to do a company-wide survey looking primarily at communication processes and relationships. We identified two areas for further training:

- Clear Language and Design
- Communicating in a Diverse Workplace

In the survey we asked employees about diversity issues related to employment. An interesting picture emerged. Many employees expressed the opinion that certain cultural groups were treated differently and were given more opportunities than others. These perceptions had hardened into strong beliefs that were expressed in terms of cultural/racial bias and cultural differences around authority and time.

The organization asked us if we could design our training to meet the language needs of all employees. Instead of organizing training groups by language ability, rank, shift or department, we randomly selected four groups and assigned them to workshops. All employees were expected to attend. My co-facilitator Grace Nicholson and I were excited about the opportunity and the challenges, but were nervous about delivering the training to such a diverse group.

We knew from the organizational survey and from reported comments from participants in our other courses that there was a poor relationship between some supervisors, managers and front-line employees. In this organization, employees call managers the "white coats" because they tend to wear white lab coats instead of blue uniforms. The "us and them" perception of floor and front office is certainly not unique to ABC Manufacturing. It is all about power and shows itself in differences in dress, hours, and parking spots; in who speaks to whom; in which cafeteria or washroom an employee uses; and in the use of titles for some and first names for everyone else. All of these differences existed and still exist in this organization.

In preparing the training, we needed to consider these issues as well as:

- cultural issues — respect for authority, risk-taking, loss of face
- language issues — level of English skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking
- organizational issues — power dynamics, management styles
- training issues — appropriate, accessible materials

Needs Assessment

We were fortunate in that both Grace and I were familiar with the organization. Although we had not done a workplace needs assessment, we had a great deal of information to draw

on: a consultant's report on company operations, the survey, several training project reports, training needs assessments, document reviews, and personal acquaintance with many of the potential trainees.

Our knowledge of the company, along with several interviews with company personnel, gave us a very clear picture of the workforce at ABC Manufacturing. We knew that each of the four workshop groups would include senior management and office staff as well as front-line workers, some of whom had difficulty listening to and speaking English and/or reading and writing English. We knew that each group would have 22 to 25 participants for a total of 89 employees. We also knew that while the training was on company time, some individuals would be unwilling participants.

Our trainees ranged in skill levels. Some were functionally illiterate in their own language, there was a Vietnamese-trained surgeon who worked on a production line because of poor language skills, and others were well-educated individuals with few language difficulties. Through our years of working with the organization we knew which managers were liked and trusted and which ones were not. We knew who never volunteered for anything and who were willing to try anything.

Learning Objectives and Outcomes

Since this training was essentially an information and learning workshop about perceptions, awareness and behaviours, Grace and I outlined the following as workshop objectives:

- look at the reasons why people do things differently
- increase personal awareness of culture, gender and other differences
- increase awareness of the internal culture of ABC Manufacturing
- recognize the value of clear communication
- look at how misunderstandings occur in the workplace

We used a variety of activities to introduce information and concepts. Participants used this knowledge and problem-solving skills to discuss several workplace case studies. Learning outcomes were therefore:

- describe the misunderstanding or poor communication depicted in a video-based case study and suggest appropriate strategies for problem solving
- relate one piece of information from the workshop that will change the way you work

Training and Material Development

Agenda

Introductions and Objectives

R.O.P.E.S (the ground rules for the session: Respect, an Open mind, Participation, Experimentation, Sensitivity)

Culture Brainstorm

Workplace Culture

Strategies for Effective Communication

Supervising Differences (Video)

Evaluation

Normally we hand out a twenty-page workbook with extra reading and information about communication strategies. In this case, though, we decided to include much less written material, knowing that the language skills of the groups were diverse. We did not want to intimidate people with minimal reading and writing skills by putting stacks of inaccessible information in front of them. We handed out

- agenda and objectives
- simplified work sheets
- a clear language version of the iceberg model of culture
- case studies including essential material only (all case studies had a visual and listening component to ensure understanding)
- strategic material rewritten into lists of important information
- a clearly written evaluation form

The extra information went into the Training Corner at the company. The Training Corner is an area in the lunchroom that is set aside for college calendars, Board of Education calendars, and any material related to learning. We always recommend that an organization promote lifelong learning. This is one strategy that has proven effective.

Delivery

In delivering the program, our first goal was to increase the comfort levels of participants. We gave everyone choices and worked to keep everyone involved. Instead of expecting all groups to record and share the brainstorming they did about culture and later on the mistakes that result from poor communication, we explicitly stated: "You may want someone to write the ideas down or if you want, just remember all your ideas to share with everyone. That's okay too."

We noticed that most tables had at least one person write down ideas. Some lists were not in English, some were poorly spelled, but participants were ready to share with the larger group when we called them back. At this point in the exercise, I usually hang flip charts around the room. Instead, Grace and I put two easels at the front and did the note-taking as participants talked. We used clear language and printed the words; we avoided coded language: jargon, acronyms, short forms. We then posted these sheets.

As the first group activity, this set the expectations for the group. Participants relaxed visibly as they realized that although they had to read and write in the workshop, they were not expected to perform beyond their comfort levels. The next three sessions were easier as the grapevine informed participants of what to expect.

Grace and I used movement as a way of capturing and keeping attention and moving the activity along. Participants had two of us to focus on, and we were always writing, speaking, listening or standing back and observing the groups. The active learning techniques that we used also kept people involved. In the three hours (less a break) we used the following techniques:

- brainstorming (more than once)
- organizing information
- discussion
- mini-lecture
- case study
- role playing
- problem solving

- demonstration
- video
- story telling

One of the most powerful activities we did with these groups was a brainstorming activity which moved beyond personal and social culture to look at organizational culture. As Grace and I recorded, the large group defined the written and unwritten rules of their organization. They stated the mission statement in their own words, and were clearly familiar with the values and beliefs of the organization. For example, each group paraphrased the statement that ABC Manufacturing "gets it right the first time." There was also an understanding of the idea of lifelong learning. In its own way, each group talked about the importance of continuous improvement. Senior managers in the groups later asked us for the worksheets from this session and made them into posters which were put up around the workplace.

Another successful activity stressed the importance of clear communication. This activity calls for volunteers, which is often difficult because participants do not like volunteering for the unknown. In this case we had to ask participants to help us with the activity. Grace was also a volunteer.

Paper Activity

Ask for five volunteers. Give each a sheet of paper. Tell them that their job is to close their eyes, listen carefully to all instructions and follow them. They have to keep their eyes closed and cannot ask questions. The others in the room observe. Have volunteers follow these instructions:

1. **Fold the paper in half and tear off the right corner.**
2. **Fold the paper in half and tear off the right corner.**
3. **Repeat this step at least three times.**
4. **Open eyes and unfold the paper.**

You should end up with five different designs. (To ensure that at least one is different, the co-facilitator volunteer folds the paper in half lengthwise. Most will fold the paper top to bottom.) Ask the observers what they saw and heard. This activity generates a lot of discussion around the importance of clear communication. Participants usually agree that while everyone heard the same instructions, they were not clear enough. They also agree that the volunteers should not be afraid to ask for clarification.

A manager who was not well-liked by the front-line employees asked how we got a particular employee to volunteer for this activity. According to the manager, this employee never volunteers and is seen as difficult — yet we had him involved and interested in what we were doing. I replied, "We asked him." The manager looked quite thoughtful (I really want to say gob-smacked) at such a simple strategy.

Since participants got really involved in the training and participated at their own comfort level, we never had to resort to translators in any of the sessions. Everyone had something to say or a story to tell. Participants from senior management were both surprised and

shocked by some of the discussions. Several employees brought up specific examples when we brainstormed on workplace errors caused by poor communication. They also discussed the cultural differences around time and discipline that were a problem for some individuals and/or for the organization. We discussed both sides of the issue and developed strategies for change.

Evaluation

We used the video "Supervising Differences" as a measurement of how much participants had learned. We discussed and examined each of these four vignettes and developed strategies for problem solving the issue:

1. A worker is upset because he feels people are talking and laughing about him in a language he does not understand. This segment suggests techniques for managing conflict.
2. A supervisor embarrasses an employee by chastising her in front of others. The segment challenges the idea that we treat everyone the same way. The video suggests that we treat everyone equally, not the same. This generated some heat in discussion. Some in the group wanted everything, good and bad to be said in public, while other group members agreed that this would embarrass them. A senior manager in the group admitted that he needed to know more about the people he worked with because he had made a lot of assumptions about what people were comfortable with.
3. A woman starts a new job in a non-traditional occupation. The comfort level of the supervisor and his orientation training are showcased as he starts a man and the woman in the same job.
4. In an office setting, a supervisor makes assumptions about a variety of people, based on familiar stereotypes. She is then shown to be totally wrong (e.g. the 'too-fragile' blind man is a marathon runner).

This is one of a series of videos we use in our communications training. We like to use this one because people recognize the situations from both sides: worker and supervisor. It has real meaning to their own situation.

Learners were asked to complete an evaluation form. We made it as simple as possible but we knew that not everyone would complete it (7 per cent did not respond). Some people completed the whole form, while others just completed the checklist and did not try to write answers.

Some responses from participants to the question "What information did you learn that you will use at work?"

- how to communicate effectively
- respect for others and their ideas, ideals and cultural differences
- how to work with different types of people
- better acquaintance with co-workers
- how to listen better

Reflections

When Grace and I met to debrief and examine the dynamics of the groups, we realized that one of the four stood out. This session had a higher number of managers and supervisors attending. In every other session the groups sorted out fairly equitably at their tables.

However, in this one, the management group sat together and was less involved in the session. The participants were Canadian-born and white, with one woman among the men. As a group they interjected "jokes" that would not be understood by most participants because of language level or cultural bias. We were able to stop the behaviour, but their attitude certainly affected the larger group. Participants were more reticent about responding in the larger group. Next time, we would use seat assignments to get a more equitable mix.

When Grace and I debriefed we were astounded at how positive the experience had been for us as trainers. With training of this sort, you do not often get a strong sense of a shift in attitude or behaviour. You usually know through feedback that people were interested, that they learned a lot (or a little) and that the training experience was good. At ABC Manufacturing, there was a noticeable shift. It was apparent that after the first session, people were more willing to enter the room and more willing to participate. We were approached after sessions and quietly thanked by some participants (from all levels of the organization).

One situation we heard described in two of the sessions was resolved when the two individuals involved in the dispute identified their own barriers to communication. In this case, a supervisor made assumptions about an employee in her department. She assumed that the worker "knew how things worked," which included all of the unwritten rules of Canadian workplaces as well as the written ones. ABC Manufacturing has a code of behaviour that is not unique. As with any expectations, if you don't tell someone what they need to know, you will generally be disappointed in their behaviour. In this case the issues centred around time and work scheduling. The two women had very different cultural beliefs about time. Once they became aware this, the supervisor communicated clearly the time lines for projects.

The evaluation form, comments during the training, our learners' participation level and our debriefing sessions were all used in our evaluation. The company met its goal of offering all employees training that would improve communication, and the training certainly met the company definition of continuous improvement. The response from the organization was positive at every step of the training process.

As for the participants, they responded positively in an unfamiliar training situation to a topic that can create dissension unless people are willing to work together with good will. Everyone had a voice. The training techniques and activities we chose involved participants, yet enabled them to work at their skill level. All participants received a certificate of completion to add to their skills portfolio.

We enjoyed being part of this training and we continue to encourage companies to offer this kind of program throughout their organizations. As our workplaces increase in their diversity and their complexity, this workshop can be a useful tool for change.

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Author & Editor Biographies

Mary Ellen Belfiore

Mary Ellen Belfiore is a teacher, writer and researcher in adult education as well as a consultant in workplace education. She began teaching adults 25 years ago in an ESL community program. Mary Ellen has taught ESL in a variety of settings and complemented her teaching with research and materials development. She was a consultant with the Workplace Education Centre of ABC CANADA offering direct service to employers and unions, as well as support to the field nationwide.

Mary Ellen is the author of *Understanding Curriculum Development in the Workplace* and *The Benefits of Participating in Collaborative Committees*. She is also the co-author of *Teaching English in the Workplace* and *English at Work: A Tool Kit for Teachers*.

Judith Bond

Judith is a training consultant with the Toronto District School Board (formerly the Etobicoke Board of Education). She has been with Workplace Training and Services (WTS) for eight years. In that time she has specialized in programs such as: Basic Skills Training, Team Building, Communicating In Diverse Workplaces, Improving Business Through Diversity, Communications Skills, and Training-the-Trainer (for the workplace).

As part of the WTS team, Judith has presented workshops at the national workplace literacy conference "Moving Forward," for Workplace/Workforce Equity and Basic Skills (W/WEBS) program coordinators, and two Train-the-Trainer programs in southern Ontario. She works as both a facilitator and a trainer in the public and private sectors of service and industry. As a life-long learner herself, she is firmly committed to workplace training and education where everyone involved learns.

Rebekah Courtney

Rebekah Courtney is an education consultant. Her recent work includes research and writing for adult literacy projects with the Ministry of Education and Training. Previously she taught in a college, developed curriculum for workplace and college programs, and administered a youth employment preparation program. She holds a master's degree in education and is currently studying international literacy.

Don Matthews

Don has lived and taught in the north for nine years. Most of his experience has been with middle year students, but after working with adult learners he found that he enjoys teaching adults best of all.

Born and raised on the prairies, Don lived both on a farm and in small-town Saskatchewan. After joyously tossing his books in the air at the front door of Eyebrow High on the last day of grade 12, he proceeded to gain dynamic work experience ranging from entry-level labour jobs such as store clerk, underground miner and truck driver, to retail and grain industry management. After pursuing a business career for fourteen years, living in four provinces, and accumulating a large family of daughters, he attended the University of Saskatchewan. He gained a B.Ed., majoring in Indian and Northern Education.

After several years of teaching, and because of his background and community involvement, Don was asked to manage some capital projects, including a community-wide sewer and water system, and a beautiful brick high school complete with new teacherages for a large First Nations community. He returned to teaching with the attitude that adaptability may soon be the most important skill to have, both inside and outside the workplace.

Upon completion of his basic skills contract in a small First Nations community, Don returned to the prairies, and now lives in Moose Jaw. He coordinates a Youth Service Canada project funded by Human Resources and Development Canada and sponsored by the Great Trails Getaway Region, an organization encouraging and developing tourism in South Central Saskatchewan.

Leah Morris

Leah Morris worked for the Haldimand-Norfolk Literacy Council as the Haldimand/Workplace Coordinator for nine years. She is now the executive director of the Hamilton-Wentworth Adult Basic Education Association. Leah is a supervising trainer and an ESL trainer for Laubach Literacy Canada, the developer of the Alpha-Bet puppet show and colouring book, and a consultant and trainer in clear writing. She has been an advocate of clear writing principles for eight years and has shared her clear writing skills with a number of workplaces, high schools, social service agencies, church groups, and literacy providers.

Brian D. Nicholson

Brian is a training consultant with the Toronto District School Board's (Etobicoke) Workplace Training & Services Department. He has ten years of experience in workplace training, serving adult learners in both the public and private sectors, including organizations from the automotive, electronic, chemical, and consumer products sectors.

Brian has created and conducted training seminars on a variety of topics: "Current Practices in Today's Workplace: SPC, TQM, and ISO," "Continuous Improvement Skills Training," "Creative Program Design" "Team Problem Solving," and "Math Works: Math Skills for the Workplace."

He has a Combined Honours B.A. in English and Political Science from McMaster University.

Leo O'Rourke

Leo is a Safety Officer and instructor for adult safety training courses at Natural Resources Canada. Before that, he worked at the Central Experimental Farm doing plant research.

He has been involved in adult education since 1994, when he was selected as an instructor for a Basic Education for Skills (BEST) program at Agriculture Canada. His program was selected by the Ontario Federation of Labour for a literacy case study sponsored by the University of Ottawa. In addition, the program was recognized with a Team Excellence Award from Agriculture Canada's Director General.

Leo is involved in his community and was recognized with an Ontario Municipal Recreation Award from the Township of West Carleton for his volunteer work. He has also served as a member of the Culture, Parks, and Recreation Committee for the township.