



## English at the Workplace A Safety Solution

Standens Ltd. is a leading manufacturer of truck and trailer suspensions, and agricultural components. Based in Calgary, the company has a diversified workforce of over 500 employees, a large percentage of which have English as a second language.

As the greatest number of non-English speaking employees is Vietnamese, Standens decided in 1998 that it was crucial to plant safety to translate important documents, such as their Health and Safety Policies, Safety Rules document, and the Employee Handbook into Vietnamese. It was also decided to broadcast public address announcements within the plant are in both English and Vietnamese. These measures served to improve safety within Standens facility, however it was not enough.

Peter Hollett is the Safety Coordinator at Standens and is an enthusiastic backer of the English at the Workplace program at Standens. "The key incident that provided the push for an onsite English program happened about a year and a half ago. A valued employee who had been with us for about 13 years was seriously injured on

the job. His English could be described as broken on a good day. When he was injured, he lapsed into Vietnamese and could not communicate with EMS personnel to tell them how the accident had occurred or the extent of his injuries. We realized that lack of spoken English skills was a safety issue".

This incident prompted Standens to become fully committed to English language training at the workplace. Mr. Hollett and Human Resources Manager Troy Blackley contacted the Workplace Learning Services department at Bow Valley College in Calgary to set up a pilot program in spring of 2001.

Of the 14 employees enrolled in the pilot, only seven completed the program. Many quit because they found the program too difficult. "This pointed out the need for more extensive English language training", explains Peter Hollett.

An ESL evaluation team was brought in to test employees, selected by plant supervisors, for English language skills, both written and spoken. Ninety-seven employees were assessed and grouped into classes based



*Standens management and the first ESL class celebrate graduation*

# Go AWAL!

By Wendy Magahay,

Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology

"But why do I have to do this?" asks the frustrated tenth grader who just doesn't believe he'll ever need algebra.

"I don't have time to do this in a team; why can't I just do it on my own?" asks the time-pressured forest worker retraining for a new career.

"I'm interested in software design; everybody just talks in IT. Why should I spend time writing essays?" asks the anxious Grade 12 student.

Sound familiar? Then AWAL has something for you. AWAL is a one-day professional development activity designed to help educators answer these questions and others like them by working to connect the curriculum they teach in the classroom, with how that curriculum is used in the workplace.

AWAL (Applications of Working and Learning) is an Essential Skills research and development project of Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) and is managed by the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer & Technology in Vancouver. Begun in 1998 as a BC secondary school initiative, the project's initial success led to enhanced HRDC support in 2001, which has permitted the project to go national. The mandate of the AWAL National Project is to broaden AWAL participation not only across Canada, but also to include a wider community of educators, adding adult educators to those who work in K-12.

As reported in *The Independent* (1999), "learners who can merely obediently reiterate what they have been told by others will be about as sought after in the next few years as those who cannot read have been for the last few. What counts are the skills; how they deal with knowledge." Consistent with that, AWAL is about making links between HRDC's nine "essential skills," and how they are presented in the classroom. Participants are placed in a variety of workplace environments and guided through the use of structured interviews to learn how essential skills are used everyday in every job. The HRDC nine essential skills are:

- Reading Text
- Working with Others
- Thinking Skills
- Continuous Learning
- Writing



AWAL at Yellowknife Fountain Tire

- Oral Communication
- Document Use
- Numeracy (Math)
- Computer Use

The first AWAL NWT session was delivered April 23, 2002 in Yellowknife. The local partner working with the AWAL Manager was the territorial Ministry of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE), and in particular, Janice Render, Coordinator, Labour Market Programs. More than 20 K-12 and adult educators drawn from the Public and Catholic Boards, Arctic and Aurora Colleges, and the Ministry participated in the day-long session.

After a brief morning orientation (including coffee and bannock), program participants were off to their assigned workplaces. The educators work in pairs, and benefit from having two perspectives on what they see and hear.

The eleven workplace partners represented a broad cross-section of sectors; typical of the AWAL process. Among the local employers visited were diamond companies BHP (Ekati) and Arslanian Cutting Works, local CBC Radio, Fountain Tire, the Yellowknife Inn, and Arctic Sunwest Tours.

While at the workplace, the pair of educators first interviews a manager or HR person to understand the context of the workplace and then they tour the facility. The bulk of the morning is spent interviewing a front-line worker about the work he or she does. In Yellowknife these positions represented a broad spectrum including diamond cutter, pilot, cook, mechanic, reporter, drill operator and marketing representative.

Following the interviews the educators returned to the Ministry offices and, using what they learned, developed relevant teaching and learning

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# WWestnet Takes it to the Streets

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In April, WWestnet, with support from the National Literacy Secretariat (HRDC), hosted the Calgary 2002 symposium on incorporating essential skills into workplace training agendas.

The theme of the conference, "Taking it to the Streets", worked well to guide the one-and-a-half day event from start to finish.

The theme was especially apparent during the opening reception on the evening of April 17th where delegates dressed in their finest street apparel took time to renew old friendships, meet new people, and ready themselves for the journey ahead.

Thursday morning saw all 45 delegates hard at work participating in round table discussions based on a variety of presentations. WWestnet co-chair Sue Turner took the wheel and, as symposium moderator, ensured that the group maintained the speed limit and took no wrong turns throughout the event.

Thursday's presentations began with Stacy Huget (Special Projects Consultant, Literacy BC). Her presentation, "An Essential Skills Drive Thru", introduced delegates to what constitutes essential skills, and the underlying issues and implications of essential skills training in Canadian workplaces.

Pat Salt (Coordinator of Special Projects for Bow Valley College) continued down the road with her presentation entitled "Putting the Pedal to the Metal: Workplace Essential Skills Familiarization". Delegates were led through an exploration of the definition of workplace essential skills and why these skills are important in the context of the workplace.

After a pit stop at the buffet table, delegates began the afternoon portion of the trip with Sandi Howell (Coordinator of Workplace Education and PLAR, Industry Training Partnerships, Manitoba Education Training and Youth) in the driver's seat. Her presentation, "Navigating Workplace Documents" gave valuable insight on the importance of workers' ability to read and assimilate essential information contained in the ever-growing, complex and often intimidating variety of printed material presented to employees.

The final leg of Thursday's journey was conducted by Sue Grecki (Workplace Educator and Researcher,

SkillPlan). Using actual workplace documents, her presentation "Teaching Numeracy Skills in the Workplace" showed delegates the variety of numeracy tasks that workers are asked to perform. She demonstrated how essential skill building can be integrated into technical training to accommodate relevant numeracy instruction.

The final day of the conference saw delegates hitting the road with Rob Black (Coordinator of Admission Assessments, Bow Valley College) shifting gears with his presentation "Assessment Using Plain Language". Delegates learned about the purpose of assessment and how to ensure that plain language principles are reflected in assessment strategies. His presentation included examples of teaching styles, and a variety of sample checklists designed to ensure that assessments are relevant to the workplace situation and training content.

Brigid Hayes (Program Manager NLS, HRDC) parked the conference bus to allow the media on board. With her PRESS hat firmly on her head, Brigid's presentation, "Word on the Street", allowed her to play the role of WES TV reporter and deliver a series of live infomercials regarding the resources available to trainers. A series of interviews gave delegates snapshots of such resources as the Industrial Workplace Reading, Writing and Math Assessment Tool, ERIC, WIN, TOWES, Numeracy at Work, Measure Up and a variety of CLC materials.

The wheel was once again turned over to Stacy Huget who drove delegates home with a series of round table discussions regarding the identification of the:

- People (or roles) in their respective workplaces that most need convincing of the importance of integrating Workplace Essential Skills training into existing programs.
- Objections that may be raised to the inclusion of Workplace Essential Skills in training agendas.
- Best ways to respond to the objections that may be raised.

The conference ended on a positive note with a hearty lunch and left delegates to embark on the real journey of exploring the challenges and benefits of integrating Essential Skills in their own training agendas. ♦

## Go AWAL!

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activities based on the framework of essential skills. Their ideas are then stored in an easy to use, searchable, electronic database ([www.awal.c2t2.ca](http://www.awal.c2t2.ca)). The AWAL database is available online to anyone searching for ways to bring workplace relevance to classroom activities. There are some 1400 activities in the database and they can be search by essential skill, National Occupational Classification (NOC), subject area and level, company and collectors. An HRDC project, the database is online in both official languages.

Was the Yellowknife AWAL session a success? Comments from the participants express it best:

Great thoughts and information from other members of group. Major "ah-ha s" with "necessary" skills, i.e., attitudes/communication. Good planning lessons to specific essential skills!

A new contact for student presentation. Reinforces my belief in what really is essential in school curriculum. Essential for teaching staff to refocus on practical application of theoretical contact. This is a great process and should be shared with parents.

AWAL sessions have been delivered in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Northwest Territories, Ontario and Saskatchewan, working with such partner companies as Air Canada, BCTV, CIBC, DND, RCMP Forensics and the Xerox National Call Centre. HRDC funding provides for the AWAL Manager to work with you in advance of the session as well as to come to your community and work with your educators on the AWAL day.

*For more information ...*

*On AWAL sessions for your educators, contact National AWAL Project Manager Wendy Magahay at [awal@c2t2.ca](mailto:awal@c2t2.ca), or visit [www.awal.c2t2.ca](http://www.awal.c2t2.ca)*

*On HRDC Essential Skills projects, visit <http://www15.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/english/es.asp>*



## English at the Workplace

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on these assessments. The classes range from those with little or no English to those who can speak English with little difficulty, but have problems with reading and writing. Workers participating in the program attend a two-hour class, twice per week. For each class, each employee volunteers one hour and is paid for one hour.

The curriculum for all classes includes conversational and written English with an emphasis on workplace safety. Employees are taught how to report hazards verbally and how to complete a hazard report as well as plant safety rules and regulations. Mr. Hollett describes the English classes as "Value-added safety training" and says that he feels that employees are "Better prepared for emergencies".

Standens return on its investment in English training has garnered nothing but positive results. Describing the training as a "No lose — win win situation", Mr. Hollett says that the "Safety training and QS 9000 programs both benefit" from the classes.

"In a recent Certificate of Recognition (COR) audit, the auditor said in his report that he was very impressed with the improvement in spoken English among Vietnamese workers at Standens". Mr. Hollett added that, "The employees really tried to speak English to the auditor, and most insisted on answering his questions without the aid of an interpreter."

Mr. Hollett has seen greater participation from employees in Safety meetings. He says that he is pleased when he is asked to repeat something he has said or to slow down in a meeting because "they are really trying to understand what is being said and, more importantly, they are participating".

Standens is fully committed to continuing its English at the Workplace training and sees the program as another part of its commitment as an employer in ensuring the safety and well being of its employees.

WWestnet acknowledges the financial support of the National Literacy Secretariat.

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