

# the bottom line



Western Canada Workplace Essential Skills Training Network

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## 'Literacy, Economy and Society' Focus for Workshop

PAT SALT

On September 3 and 4, WWESTNET hosted the first of a planned series of workshops addressing the International Literacy Survey (IALS) and its Canadian component. The purpose of the event, *The Bottom Line on Basics: A Workshop on Literacy, Economy and Society*, was twofold. The first goal was to bring together western and northern Canadian literacy and language umbrella groups to identify and examine relevant issues raised by the studies. The second was to facilitate the development of action frameworks targeting concerns raised. By all accounts, the workshop was very successful in both respects.

The workshop opened with Jean Pignal of Statistics Canada, manager of the Canadian literacy study, presenting an overview of the IALS project—its history, objectives, methodologies, findings and future directions. Margaret Robinson, a policy advisor with the National Literacy Secretariat, then explained the importance of IALS within a number of specific contexts, including the implications it holds for the workplace education and basic skills training communities. Dr. Bill Wong, Director of Evaluation with Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, rounded out the background discussion by reviewing the recently released Canadian component of IALS, *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*.

The central message of all three keynote speakers was the same, and is summarized in the highlights to the Canadian report: "Literacy is important. Society rewards individuals who are proficient and penalizes those who are not, whether expressed in terms of employment opportunities and job success or active social, cultural and citizenship participation in society. Literacy is also a key step to economic growth and improvement of the human condition as well as a cornerstone of democracy and of the exchange of knowledge and information."

Workshop delegates were next given the opportunity to consider the implications of IALS from the perspective of essential skills training in the workplace. Greg Maruca, Manager of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees Local 459, outlined the challenges facing unions (both externally and internally) in the quest to improve employee literacy and language skill levels. Lloyd Campbell, Special Projects Manager with Syncrude Resources Ltd., outlined Syncrude's highly successful training model, one based upon a company-wide commitment to basic skills improvement and impressive 'bottom line' results. Delegates ended the first day in round table discussions which were facilitated by WWESTNET's business and labour representatives.

The second day of the workshop concentrated upon information sharing and conversations among the delegates from the

various jurisdictions. Delegates discussed burning issues arising from the IALS findings and possible strategies for tackling these concerns. A large-group forum yielded an array of imaginative and practical suggestions, action plans enthusiastically received by delegates and speakers alike.

By the conclusion of the workshop, all participants agreed that the opportunity to connect with other practitioners and training experts from a number of jurisdictions was extremely fruitful. Also, the chance to listen to and interact with those directly involved with IALS and Canadian literacy policy issues enabled delegates to take ownership of the information presented. In the words of one delegate, "I return home with the feeling that I want to adopt the workplace literacy issue as an avocation in my province and with a new found commitment to the issue. I feel that the energy and optimism gained from this event will serve our province well for some time." \*

## **SkillPlan Offers Insight into English at Work**

In early July, eighteen adult education instructors took a first hand look at reading and writing in the construction industry during a four day 'English at Work' program. The event was organized by *SkillPlan* and supported by the B.C. and Yukon Territory Building and Construction Trades Council. The program participants, basic education instructors from a variety of college, correctional, and industry settings, toured trade schools and construction sites to learn how reading and writing skills are applied in the construction industry. Lynda Fownes, Manager at *SkillPlan*, described the workshop as "a way to help create linkages between educators and industry."

The program pursued several strands or themes and took participants to a number of locations in the Vancouver area. Entry forms were the object of study when Operating Engineers Local 115 hosted the group for an afternoon of 'taking care of business.' Pairs of participants were required to carry out a number of tasks which might be required of any union member—register for a pension plan, get on the list for a training program, or sign up for work on a construction job. Reading for work fell into sharp focus when Steve Salloway, electrical instructor at BCIT, gave the group a condensed introduction and overview of the Canadian Electrical Code. "The Code is extremely demanding reading," he admitted, "and I try to help students with reading skills and study strategies. We often get

Continued on page 2

## 'English at Work' cont.

down to examining individual sentences, clauses, even individual words—there's a big difference between 'must' and 'may,' and in the Code, a 'notwithstanding' can change everything." A different set of 'document' literacy skills were highlighted by Sheila Whincup, a *SkillPlan* instructor who has been working on an upgrading course for crane operators. She gave an introduction to the reading of load and range charts for heavy cranes. The 'search strategy' she teaches for using these charts depends on defining the problem in terms of given and requested information and then using the given values to extract information from complex tables to come up with the correct solution.

A site tour of the Delta Catalytic bridge construction project at Annacis Island showed the group that the construction is a highly complex activity controlled by an equally complex set of drawings, specifications, and contracts. Project engineer, Adam Neil led the group, outfitted with hardhats and steel-toed boots, on the tour of the worksite, and then into the site construction office to review of the plans and other contract documents. Afterwards, several in the group were heard tossing around terms like 'coffer-dam,' 'caisson,' and 'piling.' At the Piping Industry Apprenticeship Board trade school, welding instructor John Little guided the group through the safety warnings and procedural reading related to oxyacetylene welding and cutting. Then



*Kate Digby, 'English at Work' participant, burns her way through steel bar at the Piping Industry Apprenticeship Board trades school in Delta, B.C.*

the group took to the shop floor for a demonstration of the school's new orbital welder, and the opportunity to try cutting through pieces of steel bar with oxyacetylene torches.

On the final day, a panel of industry experts presented three views of writing at work. Debbie Stushnoff, a flagger and safety instructor for highway construction projects, pointed to the importance of keeping a daybook and briefly recording the details of unusual events such as accidents and near misses. On several occasions, her written depositions and daybook notes have been instrumental in avoiding liability for both herself and her employer. Randy Scott, Project Manager for Dominion Bridge, pointed to the very real costs of ineffective writing, the unclear specifications which raise the risk of the project and therefore the amount of everyone's bid. He commented that "Not many new hires have the writing skills we need. When we bring someone new onboard, we have to spend a lot of time helping them to develop effective writing skills." Contract lawyer, Marina Prachett, gave examples of contract disputes where written records such as operational logs had made the difference between winning and losing cases worth several millions of dollars. She stressed that careful documentation and an attention to the 'tone' of workplace communication by everyone on the job site can often help to keep disputes out of the court.

Comments from participants indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to become more familiar with the construction industry, and get a more realistic view of reading and writing requirements in the various trades. They went back to their respective practices with a firm conviction that reading and writing are important 'employability skills' for all workers. \*

## She's just a waitress . . .

### A.R.F.A Begins Needs Assessment

Heard that one before? Comments like that are hard to swallow for leaders in the foodservices and hospitality industry. The assumption is that food and beverage servers and other front-line workers need no essential skills to do their jobs—just ears to hear the order and arms to carry the food. The Alberta Restaurant and Foodservices Association (A.R.F.A.) is determined to change that image.

A.R.F.A. consists of over 800 members province-wide, ranging from small, independent restaurants to large, multifaceted operations like the Northlands Coliseum. A long-time supporter of education initiatives, A.R.F.A. recently contracted the Alberta Vocational College - Calgary to conduct an organizational needs assessment for its membership. With financial assistance from Advanced Education and Career Development, consultants from AVC-Calgary will spend the next few months investigating training needs and identifying barriers and incentives for training in the foodservices industry. The goal of the project is to clarify how the Association can best support workplace training for its members and their employees.

An initial analysis of the job-skills used by food servers indicates that a complex set of skills is needed to provide good service. Competent servers just make it look easy. \*

# BladeRunners Introduces Youth to Skilled Trades

## Unique program puts disadvantaged youth to work on construction sites.

RICHARD SAUNDERS

BladeRunners is one part of a solution to the increasing poverty and despair of young people in inner cities. It was just over two years ago that the Executive Council of the B.C. Yukon and Territory and Construction Trades Council gave its approval to building trades unions' participation in the BladeRunner Program. The BladeRunner program was a pilot project, the first of its kind in North America. And during its two years of operation has experienced some remarkable successes. Lives have been changed from dependency and despair to productivity, pride and accomplishment as increasing numbers of our BladeRunner youth move into full apprenticeships.

The BladeRunner Program is a community hiring initiative developed by Downtown Eastside activist, Jim Green. The North West Arena Corporation, controlled by Arthur Griffiths, was the first builder to endorse the program and join the BladeRunner partnership for the extent of the construction period at GM Place, the new arena which houses the Vancouver Canucks. The Provincial Government (under the B.C. 21 initiative, Lower Mainland community groups, pre-employment programs), private developers, contractors and the building trades unions have all played a part in the partnership.

The program targets youth who are in the 17 to 25 age bracket. They have not had easy lives and come from disadvantaged backgrounds—victims of abuse or neglect. They have no employment skills and are considered to be at great risk of substance abuse, AIDS, sexual exploitation, crime and homelessness. As redevelopment continues in our communities, this sector of our society is of increasing concern. BladeRunners is one attempt to change the life prospects for these young people, to change their position in society from welfare recipients to tax-paying, money-spending citizens.

The BladeRunner program has two phases. The first provides opportunities for former street involved youth to experience entry-level construction work and the second provides support, advocacy and job coaching by coordinators while on the job. The program also offers a number of services to address many of the problems experienced by street youth including academic upgrading, trade union initiation and apprenticeships, housing, counseling and recreation.

The B.C. Construction Industry Skills Improvement Council (*SkillPlan*) has been contracted to supply the daily administration

and delivery of the program for the Lower Mainland. *SkillBase*, a delivery partnership between *SkillPlan* and the Open Learning Agency, has assisted a number of BladeRunner participants in the past two years. Their academic levels were increased by the one-on-one tutoring they received from *SkillBase*, making apprenticeship an achievable goal.

After three months on the job, BladeRunners participants are evaluated on a number of performance measures. It is the one-on-one support provided by the coordinator's visits to the work sites which is the key to the program's success. Youth in the program are given the support they need to succeed in a work setting. Contractors and tradespeople are given a feeling of security, knowing that there is someone to answer their questions and help with any problems which may occasionally arise.



*Richard Saunders, program coordinator, and four Bladerunners participants who worked on GM Place Stadium (home to the Vancouver Canucks).*

The construction contractors pay the BladeRunner youth a minimum of \$10 an hour plus benefits. The program pays \$3 an hour subsidy to the contractors for every hour a BladeRunner worked, up to a maximum of 50 weeks. The pilot program over the past two years has seen 43 youth employed on 15 different construction sites. More than 20 BladeRunners have achieved their first, second or third year apprenticeship status. For the year 1996/7 the BladeRunner program has been awarded funding to run a provincial program with coordinators in the Lower Mainland (Vancouver), Nanaimo, Victoria, Kamloops and Vernon. The anticipated number of youth to be placed on construction sites for the province is 80-90.

Richard Saunders is the coordinator of the BladeRunners program in the Lower Mainland. He is employed by *SkillPlan*. \*

# NWT Workplace Literacy Update

CATE SILLS

In May 1996, the Government of the North West Territories (that's GNWT to locals) approved funding for a \$200,000 workplace literacy initiative. The proposed program will work to raise awareness of workplace literacy issues among key stakeholders such as employers, unions, aboriginal & community development organizations and service providers. It is hoped that increased awareness and dialogue will further the development of collaborative partnerships among stakeholders. Some of the money will also be used to promote participation in workplace literacy training and provide funding for program delivery.

Aurora College received funding through the National Literacy Secretariat to hire a coordinator to consult with Western NWT employers, development corporations, band councils, unions and professional associations to facilitate the development of a Workplace Literacy Advisory Council with wide representation.

Nunavut Arctic College has formed a workplace literacy committee to begin to define and develop appropriate approaches to workplace literacy development in Nunavut. Its current workplace literacy programs include:

**Building and Learning** - The Building and Learning Strategy was developed in collaboration with the Departments of Education, Culture & Employment and Public Works and Services. The program provides pre-apprenticeship training within the construction industry, including pre-trades upgrading, as part of capital construction projects.

**Learning in the Workplace** - This program provides workplace learning opportunities aimed at entry-level employees in the community. Instruction is delivered in primarily a small group setting coordinated through the Community Learning Centre.

**Pre-employment Mine Training** - is a program which will be offered in several communities in the NWT this year. The program integrates skills-based training specific to the mining industry with literacy education. It has already been successfully piloted in two communities and has the support of the mining industry. \*

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## Miners Meet Workplace Literacy: A Model for Saskatchewan Business

PHYLLIS RAMSDEN

The new workplace literacy project at Cameco's Rabbit Lake site provides an excellent model for future literacy initiatives undertaken by Saskatchewan businesses. The unique workplace literacy program is being developed for delivery at the remote uranium mine site in the province's north. The \$170,000 program will upgrade the skills of Cameco employees at the company's Rabbit Lake mine, located more than 700 kilometres north of Saskatoon.

In June of this year, the workplace Education Consortium in Saskatchewan (WECS) initiated this one year, two-phase workplace literacy project in co-operation with Cameco, the Mineral Sector Steering Committee and Northlands College.

Each partner will contribute to the project, either through direct funding or in-kind donations; development funding is being supplied by the National Literacy Secretariat. Cameco will also contribute employees' time to the project, and will be matching one hour of company time for each hour of employee time spent upgrading essential skills.

The project began with a three month organizational needs assessment. The phase I instructors were Bebe Ivanochko and Karen Kjargaard, experienced practitioners who have taken the *Staying in the game: Workplace Education, Training for Trainers*, offered by WECS earlier this year. They assessed skill levels of staff and investigated the basic skills requirements of the job site. They will use this information to build a relevant educational program. Their success can be attributed to the efforts they made to understand the job requirements by 'tagging' workers on the jobsite, research which earned them the respect of the workers in the process.

The data collected in phase one will be analyzed and a final report will be produced. The results will be used to prepare a plan of action for phase two. Activities will range from improving general reading and mathematical skills to learning specific skills such as interpreting technical manuals. The success of this program will serve as a model for similar workplace literacy programs throughout Saskatchewan.

Anyone interested in getting more information can contact Phyllis Ramsden at the Workplace Education Consortium in Saskatchewan. P.O. Box 2311, Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3Z5; phone: (306) 777-6013; fax: (306) 777-6100; e-mail: [pramsden@rpl.regina.sk.ca](mailto:pramsden@rpl.regina.sk.ca) \*

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## http// WWESTNET . . .

You can now drop in on WWESTNET's home page and pick up *the bottom line* as an Acrobat portable document file (the Acrobat reader needed to open the file is available free from Adobe.com). WWESTNET's address is:

<http://acs.ucalgary.ca/~kmills/WWestNet>

## Coming up

WWESTNET's next workshop on '*Literacy, Economy and Society*' will be held Nov. 3 and 4 in Calgary, and will target key policy and decision makers from Western Canadian business, labour, government and education. Future initiatives will include 'open' provincial IALS-related symposia and an international event with a similar theme.

Enquiries and submissions to *the bottom line* should be directed to the editor:

Julian Evetts

#103, 1720-13<sup>th</sup> St. S.W., Calgary, AB, T2T 3P4

Phone (403) 541-1367. Fax (403) 541-1835

[jvetts@avc.calgary.ab.ca](mailto:jvetts@avc.calgary.ab.ca)