



## Case Study October 2005

# Setting the Course for Success Workplace Literacy Skills Training at The Ark

### OVERVIEW

**T**he Ark/Lunenburg County Association for the Specially Challenged is a small community organization dedicated to providing services for persons with special challenges, including intellectual and physical disabilities and mental illness. The Ark was founded in 1967 by a group of parents and concerned citizens who saw a need for services for individuals with different challenges that would provide respite for families and help participants reach their full potential. Many of the individuals at The Ark come from rural communities where access to schooling for people with disabilities is very limited. The Ark is located approximately 100 kilometres west of Halifax on the South Shore of Nova Scotia. It has a core staff of eight serving more than 60 clients from across Lunenburg County.

Creativity, caring, adaptability and innovation make up the foundation of the programs at The Ark.

Ark programs combine training with financial sustainability through operation of a craft and woodworking workshop and retail store run mainly by participants. At the participants' request, and in recognition of their contribution

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and lifelong learning programs and initiatives. This case study addresses workplace literacy.

**Name of Program**  
Workplace Education

**Date Established**  
1997

**Skills Developed**  
Literacy  
Numeracy  
Computer  
Communication  
Vocational

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to the organization, The Ark refers to its client base as “workers” rather than “clients.” Crafts produced by the workers in the workshop include braided and hooked rugs made from recycled corduroy and woolen clothing, antique furniture reproductions, folk art carvings and various wooden items for home decorating. The Ark also offers furniture restoration and repair, and traditional cane, rush and basket weave chair seating. Approximately 30 per cent of the funding for The Ark is obtained through the sale of the products that workers make during their training activities.

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The Ark’s first workplace education program was established in 1997. For a time, vocational training and work activity were the mainstays at The Ark. Today these opportunities still exist, but the programs have expanded to include far greater educational and recreational opportunities, including basic life skills, literacy, numeracy and computer skills training. Basic skills training was established at the workers’ request and is intended to foster greater independence.

## OBJECTIVES

The Ark initiated the basic skills training program to help people with disabilities reach their full potential as productive members of society. To achieve this goal, The Ark:

- Facilitates hands-on training, tailored to individual needs;
- Encourages participants to undertake greater responsibilities and become more independent on the job; and
- Strives continuously to develop worker autonomy in all aspects of life.

## TARGET GROUPS

The programs offered at The Ark are aimed at all workers who require basic skills training to succeed in their jobs.

## ACTIVITIES

Programs at The Ark are based on the needs and choices of each worker. Workers have an individual service plan to identify areas where they require assistance. The result has been continuing education programs that are customized to suit each worker’s individual needs and enhance basic life skills while helping him or her maintain a daily work routine. Classes at The Ark are taught using hands-on techniques that allow the participants to apply what they learn to real-life situations. Classes concentrate on skills that help workers take over more aspects of the business, including cash register operation, measurement, counting of money and customer service.

The literacy component of the program has played a key role in the success of the store. It has greatly increased the number of workers who are able to participate as receptionists and sales clerks. With decreasing supervision, many now possess the basic reading, writing and numerical skills to make out receipts and give change. Reading skills are taught on a regular basis in several small group settings. To match individual abilities and learning styles, a variety of instructional strategies are used, including recognizing sounds and letters, visualizing, and sounding out letters. At first, some participants are hesitant to read aloud. However, when the appropriate level of high-interest books is carefully chosen, reading aloud soon becomes a welcome experience and inspires confidence in individuals. Workers’ improved communication skills translate into greater confidence when interacting with the public.

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Recently, The Ark introduced computer classes to the program. Although some members of the community were skeptical due to the perceived complexity of operating computers, it was been a great success with the workers. The Ark computers are in constant use—workers use the computers to make cards for special occasions, write letters to friends, improve their literacy skills and search the Internet. Computers have opened up a whole new world of opportunities for individuals.

In addition to courses in basic skills training, The Ark offers a “Healthy Lifestyles Program.” This program focuses on the development and implementation of individual fitness plans based on sound lifestyle choices that include fitness and nutrition, as well as smoking cessation. The Ark has invested in exercise equipment to facilitate the running of the program in-house.

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## RESOURCES

In 2000, The Ark was able to purchase a permanent facility on one of the busiest streets in Bridgewater. The move allowed the organization to incorporate a retail component with a workshop and to dedicate a large permanent space to continuing education.

To best meet the learning needs of its workers, The Ark invests in the following resources:

- Eight full-time instructors;
- Classrooms for literacy training;
- Equipment for numeracy training, such as cash registers and calculators;
- Fitness equipment, including weights, stationary bicycles and treadmills; and
- Seven new computers and computer programs geared toward improving literacy skills.

## INNOVATIONS

One of the greatest challenges for people with disabilities is finding a job that provides enough hours of work at a salary high enough to achieve economic independence. For those who find a job, education is the most important determinant of earnings. People with disabilities with higher levels of education are more likely to have work-related training and be employed in more lucrative occupations. A key innovation that has boosted the employability skills of workers at The Ark has been the introduction of computers. An estimated 85 per cent of all workers have been introduced to the use of computers, and many have surpassed the staff in their knowledge of programs and the Internet.

## CHALLENGES

The Ark delivers workplace literacy skills to a very specialized population. In order to provide employability- and employment-related programs and services, it is essential that employees have the experience and understanding required to address the barriers and issues faced by people with various types and degrees of disability. It is challenging to employ staff with these skill sets when funding is limited.

Many people with disabilities have experienced negative societal perceptions and stereotypes that contribute to a lack of self-confidence. A lack of self-confidence may limit a person’s willingness to try activities that, for him or her, represent a risk. Therefore, one of the greatest challenges when preparing people with disabilities for employment is to ensure that the environment for training or development is supportive of the individual and helps to build his or her self-esteem. Building clients’ self-confidence requires an ability to nurture relationships that result in trust. When trust is established, coping, social and employment-readiness skills are enhanced.

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## SOLUTIONS AND KEYS TO SUCCESS

To counter the shortage of paid instructors, The Ark has a wide volunteer base that works one-on-one with clients. Including members of the Board of Directors, there are nearly 30 community volunteers who facilitate the operation of the various programs. A more formalized volunteer program is a partnership between The Ark and Dalhousie University that allows fourth-year nursing students to obtain credits for volunteering their time.

Other solutions to funding challenges include:

- The addition of the retail store;
- Contract work for local businesses, which increases yearly revenue by \$80,000; and
- A newly established foundation that will raise money on The Ark’s behalf.

Workers at The Ark have gained greater confidence in their skills through:

- Individualized work-readiness and skills training;
- Knowledgeable and dedicated staff;
- Adaptive technologies; and
- Ongoing support from family and the community.

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**The Ark's focus on abilities rather than disabilities has proven to be contagious.**

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## OUTCOMES

By participating in the various workplace education classes, workers have achieved their personal learning goals. The Ark's focus on abilities rather than disabilities has proven to be contagious and has led directly to the workers' "can-do" attitude.

Workers are able to:

- Write their name, address, phone number and work information with proper punctuation;
- Compose letters to friends and family;
- Independently operate calculators and cash registers;
- Count money and give correct change;
- Use a computer as a learning and communication tool;
- Understand a variety of reading materials;
- Communicate by signing with co-workers who are deaf;
- Use their enhanced communication skills to provide excellent customer service; and
- Make important contributions to their community.

*"No matter how small an accomplishment may seem to bystanders, it is still a measurement of success. From a business standpoint, productivity and morale in the workshop have never been better."*

—David Jodrie, Manager, The Ark

Workplace education has enhanced workers' skills, beliefs and behaviours that are necessary to succeed in the workplace. Workers have the confidence to apply skills to new and unfamiliar situations, and show initiative, commitment and persistence to get the job done. These skills allow workers to build and maintain working relationships and work within the dynamics of a group. Moreover, through The Ark's educational programs, a number of workers now act as peer tutors, which positively affects their self-esteem and personal visions for growth.

Several workers have chosen to expand their studies outside of The Ark through local adult education programs, and some aspire to attend the local community college. In addition, some workers are using their training in different workplaces and have secured employment outside of The Ark. One worker completed the culinary program at the Nova Scotia Community College in Lunenburg County.

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## IMPACTS AND BENEFITS

For some participants, the recognition of words and numbers has led to a new outlook on life and a thirst for more learning. The increased ability to read and interact with each other through classroom activities has given workers a new outlook on themselves as well. Even those workers who did not previously have the social confidence to address the public, use the cash register or count money have now found the confidence to do so. In addition to improving individuals' job performance, enhanced literacy skills are reflected in workers' daily living skills, such as grocery shopping, paying bills, cooking and proper recycling. Many individuals benefit from periodic reinforcement of these life skills and are able to improve them through literacy skills upgrading.

## USE AS A MODEL

The workplace education program at The Ark is well suited to other small community-based organizations. As with many small community and non-governmental organizations, securing funding has been an ongoing

challenge. Following The Ark's funding model of selling products that are made during training, providing services for local businesses and establishing a foundation for fundraising, other small organizations may be able to replicate The Ark's positive results.

### Acknowledgements

Our thanks to David Jodrie and others at The Ark who provided comments and resources.

### About the Education and Learning Case Studies

The Education and Learning case studies examine outstanding education and learning programs and initiatives. The case studies provide in-depth analysis of the methods used to develop, assess, implement, and deliver education and lifelong learning in schools, colleges, universities, workplaces, and communities. They focus on goals, activities, resources requirements, achievements and outcomes, benefits, innovations, and keys to success and challenges.

This case study addresses the theme of workplace literacy and is part of the Securing Literacy's Potential research project on workplace literacy being undertaken by The Conference Board of Canada and supported by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Setting the Course for Success—Workplace Literacy Skills Training at The Ark  
by *Maryester Gonzalez*

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