

Literacy in Isolation:

An Assessment of
the Literacy Needs
of Oil & Gas Camp Workers
in the Fort St. John Area

Research Report

Fort St. John Literacy Society 2000

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Introduction

British Columbia's Oil & Gas Industry generates about \$2 billion in economic activity every year, and directly and indirectly employs about 39,000 British Columbians¹. Much of this Oil & Gas activity takes place in Northeastern British Columbia, and Fort St. John acts as a service hub for the Oil & Gas Industry. In Fort St. John itself, roughly 10% of the workforce works in the Oil & Gas Industry², in addition to many workers who provide oilfield services. For many, camp work is part of that routine.

The Fort St. John Literacy Society has been serving the community of Fort St. John since its incorporation in 1990. Camp workers are unable to access many of the services that the Literacy Society offers, however, due to the nature of their work. Remote locations, erratic schedules, and transient employment all play a role in the ability of camp workers to participate in town-based programs.

Last year, a strategic partnership between Fort St. John's longstanding literacy partners – the Fort St. John Literacy Society, Northern Lights College, and the Fort St. John Public Library – and two oilfield-related partners opened an avenue to examine the challenges of providing literacy services to camp workers. JobSearch, now Employment Connections, provided a link to the camp workers themselves. Many camp workers take advantage of the employment services offered through Employment Connections when they are in transition between camp jobs. Diamond Resource Services is a camp services company that owns and operates open camp services throughout British Columbia and Alberta, including three camps in the Fort St. John area.

Through Cost-Shared Funding received from the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada and the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, the Province of British Columbia, the Fort St. John Literacy Society and its partners were able to conduct an assessment of the literacy needs of camp workers and explore several program ideas.

Statement of Research Question and Rationale

The question that we hoped our needs assessment would answer was twofold:

What are the perceived literacy needs of Oil & Gas camp workers in isolated work camps in the Fort St. John area and what types of programs could be implemented to meet these needs?

Perceived literacy needs provide us with the context of our needs assessment. By inquiring about educational levels, educational barriers, and other education

¹ <http://www.em.gov.bc.ca/Oil&gas/Initiative/default.htm> (June 19,2000 – Ministry of Energy & Mines Website)

² Employees in mining, quarrying & oil wells divided by total workforce. Information from 1996 Census of Canada, Statistics Canada

and training issues, we hope to be able to portray the educational climate of isolated work camps as the workers themselves see it. Perspectives of employers and camp attendants, and observations of those conducting research round out this portrayal.

The aim of our research was to determine potential programs that could be feasibly implemented for the camp environment. We collected ideas from the camp workers we interviewed, and we also asked the workers to respond to ideas that others had suggested. This information forms the basis of our recommendations regarding programs.

Literature Review

Our literature review focussed on research and programs that had previously been conducted in isolated work settings. We soon found that little to no information was available specifically on literacy programs in oil & gas camps. We did, however, find limited information on programs that had been conducted in other isolated settings:

Sunco Basic Skills Project – this project took place at a remote logging camp at the head of Jervis Inlet. A fairly informal assessment was conducted over two evenings, and a program was developed. Some workers were trained as peer tutors, and a computer-based learning program³ and laptop computers were purchased to go into the camp.⁴ The learners could sign out lap-tops “to use at their own discretion in the privacy of their own room, or they could enlist the help of a volunteer peer-tutor who [had been] trained using a revamped VALT curriculum. When the camp was closed (fire, snow etc) learners could come to the IAS (community partner) office for classroom instruction . . .or to work on their own.”⁵ Despite the successes of the project, it was not continued due to a falling out between two of the partners.

Rabbit Lake Education Development Project – this project took place in a fly-in uranium mine in northern Saskatchewan where employees work 12-hour shifts (reversing a.m. or p.m.) in a one week on, one week off rotation⁶. A learning centre was developed for the employees: “After three months researching the needs of the Rabbit Lake workers, the program was designed to emphasize literacy, computer basics, and academic upgrading.”⁷ The program is continuing, and the participants, “mostly males and many Aboriginal people, prepare for apprenticeship tests, learn basic computer use, practice reading and writing and basic mathematics. The program uses computer assisted learning (PLATO

³ SkillsBank4 Software

⁴ e-mail from Jean Bennett jbennett@TheHub.capcollege.bc.ca dated Wed, 01 Dec 1999

⁵ e-mail from Julia Dodge jdodge@TheHub.capcollege.bc.ca dated Wed, 26 Jan 2000

⁶ <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/rabbit/page03.htm> (November 20, 1999 – Phase 1 Final Report, September 1996)

⁷ <http://www.nald.ca/province/sask/weecs/source/source2.htm> (November 30, 1999 – New Learning Opportunity Excites Employees - Education Programs Starts at Uranium Minesite)

system) on two computers in the classroom.”⁸ The company matches one hour of company time for each hour of employee time spent studying.

Frontier College Labourer-Teacher Program – this program “recruits, trains, and sends Labourer-Teachers to work and teach on farms, railway camps, factories, and other places where people live and work.”⁹ Labourer-Teachers have some post-secondary education and have participated in an intensive training session. They work in labour positions, especially on farms and in nurseries, receiving the same wage as other workers. On their time off, Labourer-Teachers volunteer by tutoring other employees and by organizing recreational activities.

Each of these projects achieved some degree of success, proving that it is possible to provide literacy programs in isolated settings. Each project also faced unique challenges, however, dependent on the environment of specific workplaces.

Methods/ Data Collection Techniques

The research team for the *Literacy in Isolation* research project consisted of a Researcher¹⁰ and a Research Assistant¹¹, as well as an Advisory Committee¹² to call upon as needed. The Researcher, also the local Literacy Coordinator, focussed largely on the “office” side of the research – conducting the literature review, organizing Advisory Committee meetings, assisting in the design of interview questions, analyzing data and writing reports. The Research Assistant visited camps, conducted interviews, and data-entered or transcribed interviews as appropriate.

Our primary data collection technique consisted of interviewing camp workers. While we had hoped to conduct most of these interviews in the camp setting, we found that a particularly short season this year¹³ intruded on these plans. We therefore supplemented the camp interviews with interviews done with camp workers at Employment Connections. We also conducted interviews with several employers in town and with camp attendants at one of the open camps.

⁸ E-mail from Bebe Ivanochko ivanochkob@rongenet.sk.ca dated Wed, 01 Dec 1999

⁹ “Frontier College – Labourer-Teacher Program” – pamphlet

¹⁰ Michele Wiens

¹¹ Tanya Clary-Vandergaag

¹² Lyn Adamson, Employment Connections; David Griffiths, Northern Lights College; Cheryl Bush, Pioneer Land Services

¹³ The busy season for the oil & gas industry, when most camps are open and filled to capacity, lasts from after “freeze up” to before “spring break up”. Industry slow-downs occur during spring break-up, and to a lesser degree, during freeze-up. Generally, the busy season lasts from November to mid-March; however, a warm season this year meant that freeze up didn’t occur until the end of December, while road bans were already coming into effect by the end of February

The camp worker interviews conducted during the initial phase of our research were survey-style interviews, with most respondents providing us with short answers to approximately twenty-two questions plus demographic information¹⁴. Based on the responses we received in these interviews, we redesigned our questionnaire to include fewer, more open-ended questions to be used in the interviews conducted in-town at Employment Connections.

We conducted thirty-three survey-style interviews in the initial phase of our research. These included ten interviews conducted at two separate company-based shift camps, eight interviews at a company-owned work camp, fourteen interviews at two open camps, and one interview conducted with a contact in-town who had experience in open camps.

Camp interviews ran fifteen to thirty minutes in length, and were conducted in the dining room in the evening after the workers had showered and eaten. The Research Assistant had approximately two and a half hours of interview time at each camp. The Research Assistant selected research participants from workers who were in the living areas during the interview process, and only two workers declined participation. Participants received a copy of the interview questions during the interview. Most interviews were taped (with the exception of one open camp), and the Research Assistant also took notes during the interviews. The data from the survey-style interviews were entered into an MS-Access database to facilitate analysis.

In the supplementary interviews, the Research Assistant interviewed nine workers in eight interviews at Employment Connections. Potential participants were asked to participate by employees of Employment Connections who were familiar with the participants' employment backgrounds. All individuals who were approached and who had actually worked in the oil & gas field participated in the interviews. Interviews at Employment Connections ran twenty to forty minutes, and were conducted in the boardroom with one or two participants present. The interviews were taped and later transcribed by the interviewer.

In both sets of interviews, we focussed our questions on several aspects that we hoped would provide insight into the work lives of camp workers, which in turn could inform any planning and programming done for this target group. We covered the following issues:

- Motivation – why do workers choose to do camp work?
- Goals – do workers see camp work as a temporary or permanent occupation? Where do they see themselves in 5 years?
- Education – what are the workers' own educational levels? How do they view their coworkers education levels? Do they have coworkers who have poor literacy skills? How does this affect their work?

¹⁴ See Appendix A for copies of interview questions

- Literacy at Work – what types of reading, writing, math and computer skills do workers actually use on the job?
- Practical Issues – how much free time do camp workers have? How much transience is there between camps?
- Program Ideas – what suggestions do the camp workers have for educational and training programs? What are their reactions to other suggestions we've received?

Findings/ Results

Initially, we spoke to workers in both shift camps and in open camps. Shift camps are attractive from a programming perspective, as shift camps are run by a single company, and workers tend to work on a regular schedule such as two weeks in, two weeks out. However, after interviewing ten workers in shift camps, we found that 80 % had a grade 12 education, and 80 % had some technical or other post secondary training. As well, workers in shift camps tended to have access to a variety of training programs. The Research Assistant recorded the following observation in her journal:

After doing the two shift camps out here and talking to the human resources man about another shift camp, I feel these sorts of camps have all the resources and opportunities they could possibly desire, in the way of programs, training and upgrading. With the ten interviews I conducted, I don't feel any more interviews need to take place at these type of camps. Computers, Internet, libraries, company, courses, and motivations for upgrading and training- these men admit that they are not in need of any more training programs¹⁵.

Due to these findings, we chose to focus the remainder of our research on work camps, especially open camps. Open camps are run by a camp service company, and are occupied by workers from a variety of oil & gas companies. Workers stay at the camp for the duration of the job, and may then move to another camp, another company, or both, depending on their job situation.

Motivation

We began by examining the motivations of camp workers – why, we wanted to know, had these individuals chosen to do camp work? Would these reasons affect any programming attempts?

Of the twenty-three workers at work camps interviewed in the initial phase of our research, over 60 %¹⁶ cited money as their reason for choosing camp work. Comments from workers interviewed at Employment Connections expanded on this answer:

¹⁵ Research Assistant's Journal: January 7th, 2000

¹⁶ All statistics are based on interviews at work camps during in the initial phase of our research. Interviews at Employment Connections were not included in these numbers.

Interviewer: So, when you say the money- what do you mean?

*Frank*¹⁷: I'm working all the time.

Steven: It ensures your working all the time, normally- everyday, seven days a week

Frank: Yup.

Interviewer: Okay.

Steven: And then you get your- more than two days off- more than a weekend off

Frank: I don't usually- if I can work, I usually work straight through. Whenever I want I can take days off, but I usually don't-

Steven: -Whenever you want?

Frank: Ya- but I usually don't. If I want sixty days, I can work sixty days.

Steven: Right.

The idea of working long hours for good pay makes camp work appealing for many workers. Wages for a labour-type position in the oil patch start at approximately \$12/hr working twelve-hour days.¹⁸ And, as another participant stated: "You go, you work hard, you make your money. You can't spend it anywhere."

Almost 15 % of respondents stated that they do camp work because their jobs take them out to camp – it's just the nature of the oil & gas industry. Other, but somewhat related, responses included "it just worked out that way," "nothing else came along," and "it's what we do up here in the north." Interviews at Employment Connections confirmed the perspective that camp work is not seen as a choice by many workers: "Why- I have no choice, if I want to work in the oil patch, I have to go, " "because that's where the work was. It was out of town, so it was more feasible to stay at camp, than driving back and forth," "Cause the work was out in the bush," "because in the winter that's where work is more accessible. And, when you're six hours from town, camp is the obvious alternative"

Todd: That's where the work was . . .

Interviewer: So, you didn't specifically go in to do camp work? You started working for F— then you went out to camp?

Todd: Ya. That's exactly what happened. You mean some people are out there just looking for camp work? . . . I go where the work is, period. If they require me to stay at camp, I stay at camp. It's cheaper out there.

Only one worker mentioned education as a motivating factor in choosing camp work. When asked why he chose to do camp work, he responded "I didn't like school." However, when asked if there have been situations where more education would have helped with goals around advancement at work, over 65 %

¹⁷ all names of research participants have been changed

¹⁸ information from Employment Connections

of the workers responded affirmatively, with comments such as “Yes, always. Wouldn't be here if I had more [education],” “Yes, if I wanted another job, I probably couldn't get it.” Locally, it is commonly accepted that the oil & gas industry is one of the few fields left where one can earn good money with a limited education. As one employer put it, “Most don't plan to work in this industry for long, but they always stay.” The responses of the workers provide some support for this viewpoint.

Goals

Sixty-five per cent of the workers see camp work as a stepping stone to something else. Having worked in camps from half a year to twenty years, with a median of 6-7 years, these workers have a wide range of goals, from advancement within the oil and gas field to trades to office work. However, when we asked the participants at Employment Connections to tell us more specifically what they could see themselves doing in five years, many revealed that they didn't really have any future plans. “Whatever comes up” and “I don't know” were common responses. Those who had a ready answer to this question were generally already working towards a specific goal. Several were working towards power & process or petroleum engineering – still in the oil & gas field, but a more desirable position. One worker was in the process of starting a small business.

Another worker revealed some of the uncertainties involved with employment in the oil & gas field. When asked what he could see himself doing in five years, he indicated that he saw himself driving trucks, as he was now. However, later he revised his answer “actually- that's what I see myself doing but I can't see myself doing that- my back is pretty messed up . . . And I start thinking- if it starts bothering me again I don't know about work. It'll change- I'll have to start thinking about something else.”

Thirty per cent of the workers in work camps say they see camp work as a permanent job. Their goals indicate that that they are happy doing the job they are doing, or something similar to it. Those workers who have worked in camp for over twenty-five years all say they see camp work as a permanent job; several workers with between two and fifteen years camp experience also indicate that they see camp work as permanent.

Education

All the employers we interviewed said that they do not have any specific hiring practices in place regarding education. As one employer put it, “Genetically capable to climb in and out of a truck. No stipulation for education. ‘An education is important’ does not mean you're stupid. A certain amount of education is good, though.” One employer figured the average education of his employees was grade 12, another employer said grade 8 with some employees

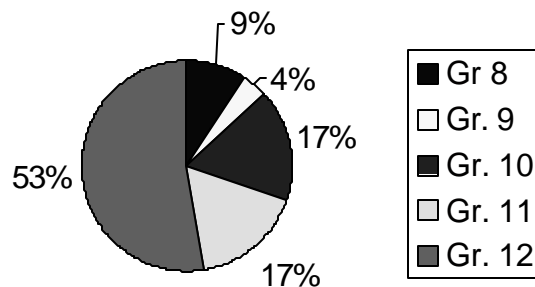
having finished their GED. The third employer was unsure of the education level of his employees:

Do not know- may have high school, less than high school, some are planning to go away for more schooling. One is doing upgrading, another plans to become an RCMP officer. . .

Over 80 % of the workers at the work camps felt that the level of education of their coworkers was somewhere between grades 10 and 12¹⁹, with 35 % suggesting that the average level of education for their coworkers was grade 12²⁰. Few employees estimated the education level of their coworker below the grade 10 level. One respondent²¹ thought that the average level of education was grade 8, one thought grades 9-12, and one thought that while the younger employees were at a grade 12 level, the older employees were more likely to be at the grade 8-10 level.

Sixty-five per cent estimated that their coworkers level of education was the same as their own, or gave a range which included their own education level. Seventeen per cent figured their own education level was up to two grades higher than the average education level of their coworkers, whereas 13 % felt that their own education level was up to three grade levels below that of their coworkers.

The following graph represents the actual education level as reported by the 23 camp workers interviewed in work camps:



Thirteen per cent of the workers cited trades qualifications in addition to a grade level.

¹⁹ many camp workers reported ranges rather than a specific grade level

²⁰ no distinction was made between individuals who had begun a grade, and those who had completed the grade

²¹ that is, 4 %

Despite the estimated and reported levels of education, almost 60 % of the workers responded positively when asked if any of their coworkers have difficulty with reading, writing, math or computer skills²². Several others qualified their negative response with comments such as “we don't need any skills so it doesn't ever come up,” “Not that I know of, but we don't do those things enough to see problems,” and “Probably- I don't see them in this job, but I suspect they are there.”

Interviews conducted at Employment Connections reinforced the perception of low skill levels among oil & gas camp workers. The introduction of our project to one interviewee prompted the following exchange:

Interviewer: There's been concern in the past or some people inquiring in the past about, you know, upgrading and stuff like that, but because they work out at the camps, they don't have access to the in-town programs, so, we're doing this research project to see if we could offer specifically camp workers-

Todd: Yeah, because they're the stupid ones.

Interviewer: No, just because-

Todd: I mean people who are put into that group of work don't tend to be graduate scholars

Interviewer: Well, I don't know- it's funny, I've met a lot of educated people out there-

Todd: Really?

Interviewer: Yeah, it's not too bad.

Todd: You were at a different camp than I was then.

Other interviewees seemed to agree with this perception, with comments such as “cause there is a lot of them out there that ain't all that literate” and references to “big, dumb rig hands.”

Several of the camp workers cited specific examples of coworkers with low literacy skills. “Todd” tells of a co-worker in his mid-twenties:

Interviewer: Do you have any co-workers that have difficulty reading?

Todd: Ya- T—. He couldn't read.

Interviewer: Okay. So, one person couldn't read, and you knew that.

Todd: Ya- couldn't read nothing. Smartest guy I ever met in my life- he was amazing, all the pipefitting that he knew- everything. He could do math like (snaps his fingers). He was awesome, but he couldn't read a word. He was-

Interviewer: Was that common knowledge?

Todd: Yup. . . .

. . .

Interviewer: So, everyone knew that he couldn't read? But, he functioned...fine?

Todd: Fine. - Yup.

Interviewer: How about the bosses- did they know?

Todd: Far as I know, everyone knew. I don't know for sure- it wasn't talked about all the time, but, once in a while a joke would be made and he was fine

²² Three respondents (13 %) specified computer skills as the only area of difficulty.

with it. Didn't matter. Got through life no problem. But, couldn't read a Dr. Suess book.

Another camp worker tells of a co-worker with low literacy levels:

I know a guy- now he has a hard time- he's a good equipment operator but he has a hard time reading, and ah, he's worked for a guy I know for 15 years. He's running a skidder for that whole time, and a couple other pieces of equipment and the owner was taking on new guys- with no experience on this equipment, and my buddy goes to the boss and says "train me- on one of these pieces- I deserve it" and he wouldn't do it. Let him go.

Other camp workers tell of the effect of the low literacy skills of coworkers on their own jobs, directly or indirectly.

Interviewer: Do you have any co-workers that have difficulty reading or writing?

Oliver: I've worked with lots of people who have difficulty reading and writing....

Interviewer: So, what do you mean?

Oliver: Well, you know, I've worked on locations where the truck driver hardly knew how to write his name- I'd have to fill out his tickets.

Interviewer: My next question was- how does it affect your job?

Oliver: Well, it takes time away from me to do his job.

...

Oliver: . . . this is just in battery testing. But I've done gas testing where I'll have hands- my helpers – that are almost illiterate. And that affected all facets of the job. And, that is just from lack of education. They never had any schooling.

Interviewer: Do you have any co-workers that have difficulty reading?

...

Larry: Yeah, a lot.

Interviewer: A lot- what do you mean by a lot?

Larry: Well I would say anybody that is- well I shouldn't say that. Say working in the bush, right- I'd say... I'd say at least 25% of them over 40- 45- have just the basic-basic reading skills.

Interviewer: Okay- how about the guys under 45?

Larry: They'd have more. But you still get the odd younger guy- his father worked in the bush his whole life and he started out in the bush in grade 2 or grade 3 but- nowadays, you don't see that as often. I'd say it's better than the older generation.

...

Interviewer: So, how does this effect your job? Did it effect you job at all?

Larry: No.

Interviewer: It didn't?

Larry: Let's see...no. 'Cause there wasn't anything really tough. Everything was pretty basic, you know road signs. Although, I guess I've seen where they've mistakes, and I'm pretty sure it was because of their reading. On equipment and stuff, although they'd never admit it. And I'd never push them-

Interviewer: Right-

Larry: I think they've made mistakes because they've maybe misread or couldn't read it at all- they didn't understand. I've seen things like that, actually.

Other camp workers say that they don't know of any coworkers who have difficulty reading and writing, but even then, there are often qualifiers: "I imagine they are out there. But, if someone says anything about it on the job, they probably get bugged so bad about it they probably go home or something. So, a lot of guys probably do, but [they] hide it or something. "

Literacy at Work

The amount and types of reading, writing, math and computer skills required on the job by the camp workers we spoke to varied widely according to the position they held, and even within a position. Thirty-five per cent of the workers interviewed in the initial phase carried the job title "labourer" or "helper," and almost 20 % carried the job title "operator." The job titles "welder", "truck driver," and "coil tubing specialist or supervisor" each represented just over 5 % of the workers, while we also spoke to a consultant, a foreman, and a service specialist. The numbers are somewhat misleading, however, since a "cat skinner," for example, may have either the job title "labourer" or "equipment operator," depending on the company.

When asked if any jobs required *no* reading, writing or math, two out of the three employers indicated that labourers did not use these skills. The third, however, disagreed, saying that "even buckets have things to read on them." The labourers and helpers themselves differed in how much of these skills they said they used on the job. Almost 40 % said they used basic to no reading, writing, math or computers on the job. One labourer said he used all, with lots of reading and math. Those in between generally indicated that they read signs and other work-related paperwork.

The labourers and helpers interviewed at Employment Connections revealed the same scope of responses. Those workers who indicated they used reading, writing and math skills were able to be more specific. One pipefitter's helper indicated he used writing for "time tickets and stuff you write down in your journals" and math to "add and subtract my fittings, and all that." A labourer confirmed the use of written journals on the job, "at the end and beginning of the day we have to fill in that you were there . . . just that you were there on the job- then it would say what you were doing, which company you were there for on this job site, blah, blah, blah." Each of the helper/ labourers said that he did not use computers on the job – one indicated that "all the compressors and everything is starting to become computerized. We're not allowed to touch that anyway. So, I stay away from it right now."

Those with operator in their job title were somewhat more homogeneous in their responses to what reading, writing, math and computer skills they use on the job. Most indicated that they used a little bit of each of the skills, with the possible exception of computers. Math, specifically, was mentioned regularly by the operators. This was confirmed by one of the operators interviewed at

Employment Connections: “Math- yes, that’s a must in my area. As a battery operator, is what I’m doing right now. Like I say, because you have to do a lot of formulas by yourself, and gas testing which involves a lot of formulas, you have to figure out flow rates and that involves a lot of equations.”

When we asked the employers what skills are required of their workers, one indicated that they should know what the signs mean, another listed maps, graphs, mileage, ISO (International Standards Organization), documentation, time slips, and invoicing. The response of the third employer was rather revealing. He said no skills are required of his workers, and followed up with “Well, perhaps safety manuals – but I assume everyone can read them . . . WHMIS gives them their tickets, so I assume they have passed the course – it’s not my responsibility after I see they have taken the course.”

Tickets are a big part of the oil and gas industry; two out of three employers indicated that their employees required H2S and WHMIS certification²³, and mentioned other tickets that their employees required. Almost 45 % of the workers indicated they had required sort of safety training before being employed; over 60 % have taken some sort of safety training since. Of those who have taken training since being employed, over 90 % indicated that their company paid for them to take this training. Of those who hadn’t taken any training since being employed, 50 % indicated that they paid for their own training, almost 40 % didn’t indicate who would pay for training, and one worker (about 10 %) said training was paid for by contractors and by himself.

Practical Issues

Interviews quickly revealed that practical issues such as free time and transience play a major role in any program set up to meet the needs of camp workers, especially in open camps.

The camp attendants who we interviewed indicated that camp workers had two to three hours of free time per night. Of the camp workers themselves, about half agreed with this assessment. Just over 15 % said they had no free time up to one hour. Over 10 % said they had three to four hours or more. One respondent said he had “lots” of free time, one said “a few hours,” and one responded in terms of days rather than hours per day.

Watching TV was the number one free time activity mentioned, with almost 90 % of those camp workers who indicated free time activities saying that they spend time watching TV. Almost 60 % said they spend time reading; almost a quarter spend time visiting, talking or phoning people; and almost 20 % said they spend some of their free time drinking. As one worker interviewed at Employment Connections said, “when you’re not working, there’s not a heck of a lot to do out there. Like – you have the TV room, but that gets awfully boring.”

²³ H2S and WHMIS provide the option of a written or oral exam

The quality of free time is also an issue. Camp workers interviewed at Employment Connections expanded on this concept: “you come in physically and mentally tired, after 12 hours of work,” and “you get back, eat, and go to sleep right away. When you work 12, 16 hours- you have to sleep.” Over 70 % of the workers interviewed at camp said time was an issue to receiving education or training while on the job. Other workers disagreed, however. At one interview at Employment Connections, we heard the following:

Because, nowadays, it's not...how do you put it...camp is okay, but everyone is so short on the hours- most places you don't work any more than 10 hours a day- when you're at camp. So, you're used to, I don't know- you're asleep 6 hours- so you got 10 hours a day, just sitting around watching TV, right. That's the way it is in most places now- you're not- they don't want you working any more than 10 hours because of the overtime.

This still seems to be the exception rather than the rule, though. A more representative comment came from another camp worker: “some guys they just want to put there 12 hours in and go to sleep, and go home and go to sleep, get up and do their job. Other guys, they want to stay up for a couple hours and just watch TV.”

The other practical issue around training and camps is the issue of transience. Over half of the employees who had worked in camps ten years or more said they had worked in “hundreds” of different camps over the course of their career. Those who had spent less than five years doing camp work had worked in an average of 7 or 8 different camps, according to their own estimation.

Camp workers who we talked to at Employment Connections confirmed the transient nature of camp work: “Because one company, you have a two-week job. When it is done, it's done. You only have a company have a two-week stay. So, we have only chance to work is on the weekend. So- we have to run after on job to another job to another one . . . Every two weeks you jump from one place to another place.” One worker indicated several camps he had worked for this past season, and then added: “Then, there's hotels. I usually stay at a lot of hotels, so that doesn't count.” The exact nature of the transience varied from camp worker to camp worker. One indicated that he works for one company, then goes out to different rigs. Another explained: “Well, I work for that one [company] - well, depending on what happens I work for one and then I go and work for another, for a similar contract, or whatever . . . - some of the jobs you only get a three-week stay, then you're off.”

As mentioned previously, camp workers saw time issues as the main barrier to training or education on the job. Other issues raised included the isolation in camp, nothing available, sporadic work, lack of money, and tiredness. Just over 10 % of the workers also indicated that “nothing” makes courses or training

difficult, or they just didn't want to. As one worker said, "I don't need any more training- I've trained for what I wanted to do."

When asked what makes taking courses or training difficult off the job, a quarter of the workers responded with schedule or time issues. Over 15 % indicated that nothing was available, and several related this to their schedule, suggesting that specifically, nothing was offered during Spring Breakup. Another 15 % suggested that family and other responsibilities were a barrier to training. Again, over 10 % of the workers said there were no problems with taking training, or they didn't feel like it.

When we asked the workers at work camps what would encourage them to participate in a program in camp, some of the same issues came up. Twenty-two per cent indicated that money or company incentives would encourage them to participate²⁴, while 17 % said they would need time to participate in programs. Seventeen per cent said if the program interested them, they would be encouraged to participate. Thirteen per cent said nothing would encourage them to participate in a program in camp.

Program Ideas

When asking about programs for camp workers, the research assistant initially felt a lot of resistance; however, as she records in her journal:

there have been several incidences where once I explain and asked some questions about some of these people's personal education level and their goals and aspirations regarding careers, almost every one of these guys have said how a program to suit the needs of *camp workers* would benefit them. They have eventually come to the conclusion, through there own assessments, that they would personally use programs that suited they needs and time frames of camp workers.

When asked what areas they would be interested in upgrading, three quarters of the workers, 75 %, indicated that they'd be interested in some sort of computer training. Almost 70 % of camp workers are interested in upgrading their computer skills for work, and almost 60 % are interested in upgrading their computer skills for their personal life. A third of the workers indicated that they were interested in improving their math skills, and over 10 % were interested in each general upgrading and writing skills.

Ideas that were raised among the advisory committee and through interviews about types of programs included an audio program that could be listened to through headsets, computer stations at camp, book tables out at camp, tutors available at camp, courses during spring break-up, and distance education

²⁴ More than one answer per respondent was accepted.

courses. Camp workers were asked to suggest their own ideas, as well as to respond to the ideas listed.

About 15 % of the workers thought all the ideas presented would work – with one camper specifying that all would work with younger workers, but none with older workers. Almost 10 % figured that no programs would work in a camp setting.

Almost 60 % of the camp workers specifically commented on the idea of Spring Break-up Courses, all stating that having a course during spring break-up would be beneficial to camp workers. This is confirmed by almost 60 % of workers who indicated they would prefer a course in-town, and the over 65 % of workers who thought spring, break-up, or off-seasons to be the best time to offer courses. One worker suggested a crash course from 2 weeks to 30 days in length.

Camp workers we spoke to at Employment Connections also gave a largely positive response to the idea of Spring Break-up Courses: “Yeah, because that’s perfect timing- you’re out for a few months. A couple good weeks, anyways. Six, eight weeks sometimes. Sometimes it’s longer- two, two and a half months,” “most work up here, if your working up here, there’s break-up – there’s always time to get training. As long as it doesn’t go too long,” “Absolutely. They’d be great. That’s a good idea. That’s a time when everybody has time,” “you have lots of time on your hands, and you’re not being paid money because you’re on break-up and that’s the best time because you don’t have to go to work – you can concentrate on your courses,” “A lot of it’s break-up. If you want to get courses, break-up would be the best time to do it – more time . . . like right now- I got nothing but time on my hands. . . A lot of other guys are the same way, too.”

Despite the positive reviews, Spring Break-up Courses are not entirely without obstacles. While very positive about the idea of courses during break-up, “Fred” also reminded us that break-up can be a time of financial pressures for some of the workers:

Fred: There’s an opportunity- for a lot of people. Break up- it all depends on how smart a guy was with his money. He’s got a chance- a couple months off. Like me, I got a couple months off- there’s a lot of things I could be doing to upgrade for next year.

Interviewer: Right. So, you could see that working.

Fred: Yeah – breakup. That’s a good chance right there.

This was confirmed by another worker, who, again, liked the idea of Spring Break-up Courses, but was hesitant to give it full approval: “Yeah, I could do that, but you never know. I’m full time. I could get into a course and then, bang, I’d get called out to work, right away. I really can’t turn down the work.”

So, while the idea Spring Break-up Courses are endorsed by most camp workers, issues such as timing, length, and flexibility, as well as financial issues need to be considered if planning such a course.

Almost 60 % of workers interviewed at work camps commented on the idea of computer stations in camps. About 80 % of these workers thought Computer Stations would work in a camp setting, while just about 15 % thought they would not work. One worker responded with “maybe”.

Workers at Employment Connections were happy to discuss the idea of Computer Stations in a camp setting:

Oliver: Well, if your talking about camps- the only thing that would be feasible is to bring something out there. I'm sure that if they brought somebody out there- brought some technology out with them, there would be all kinds of response. Because, when your not working, there's not a heck of a lot to out there. Like- you have the TV room, but that gets awfully boring. I'm sure they'd response if you had some sort of mobile unit or if they could arrange to- say, go to a camp company and say- look we have this- could you set this up- we have this course for people who want to take it.

Interviewer: So, if there were computer stations out there, do you think people would actually use them?

Oliver: Oh- absolutely.

Interviewer: Now, do you think it would work if you had a tutor out there or somebody out there-

Oliver: -Other than that or some kind of tutorial that was on the computer itself.

Workers were also quick to point out the challenges that would be involved in setting up computer stations in a camp setting. These included potential vandalism or theft, practical requirements such as electricity and possibly, phone lines and, from a literacy standpoint, the possibility that the computers might be monopolized by the “more educated” camp workers or used for non-educational purposes. Also, as with any program set up in camp, time availability becomes an issue.

Vandalism and theft were mentioned by several of the camp workers, though the general consensus seemed to be that this issue could be dealt with by proper placement of the computers near a responsible individual. As one worker pointed out, items such as televisions, VCRs, and stereos are also available in camps and generally do not get vandalized.

Several workers reminded us that the isolated settings of many camps would pose other practical issues. Computers would probably have to be run off of generators, and, if internet access was desired, phone lines could definitely be an issue. The electricity issue may be a minor; as one worker said, “I don't think that would be a problem. They throw away a lot of it out. A couple extra bucks to run a generator never hurt nobody.” Phone lines were mentioned, but not discussed. This issue would have to be explored further if computer stations with internet access were to be pursued.

Another issue that was brought up was who would be using the computer stations, and for what purposes. Most workers indicated they thought computer stations would be used, and several expressed a personal interest in using computer stations. However, the issue was raised that computer literate or “more educated” workers would be the only ones to take advantage of computer stations:

Fred: Ah, I think the guys that are into the computers would probably use them.

Interviewer: They would probably use them more?

Fred: The more educated- ya.

Interviewer: So, what about the guys...

Fred: -I, I wouldn't hit a computer. I wouldn't care-

Interviewer: Is that right? If they were sitting there, you wouldn't fiddle with them...?

Fred: Ah, I might. Ya, but like I said, I don't know much about computers.

This distinction was reinforced by another worker: “There is two kinds of groups they have over there. That's something. That one- they want to continue their education and they want to learn new skills . . . To have a computer for someone who needs it is good.” But, as “Fred” said, “not everyone will take advantage of the situation, but a lot of guys would probably jump on it.”

Several workers mentioned the possibility of having an instructor or trainer out at the camp along with computer stations. One worker saw this as “very important,” while another wasn't sure it would even be a possibility: “You can't really have a teacher out there teaching a course. Something like that- or maybe you could. . .” “Oliver”, quoted earlier, felt that a tutorial on the computer itself could be sufficient.

A less high-tech method of delivery suggested was using audio instructional programs that could be listened to on Walkmen and headsets. Of the almost 40 % of the camp workers who responded to this idea, 55 % thought it would be a good idea, while 45 % thought it wouldn't work. Audio programs were not explored further as an option.

About 55 % of the workers interviewed at work camps responded to the idea of book tables. Over 60 % of those workers thought book tables would work in a camp setting, 15 % thought they wouldn't work. Twenty-three percent responded with a “maybe”. We asked all the workers interviewed at work camps whether reading material was provided at the camp; 45 % indicated there was no reading material provided, a quarter said there was. Twelve per cent responded with “nothing I'd read” or a similar response. Interestingly enough, at each camp there were some workers who said reading materials were provided and some who said they weren't. Over 15 % of the workers indicated that they hadn't brought any reading materials out to camp with them; the others brought various combinations of novels, magazines, newspapers, and word puzzles. Of those workers who didn't bring reading materials out to camp, three quarters also said there were no reading materials at the camp.

Three quarters of the camp workers indicated that they would use reading materials if they were provided – though several indicated that it would depend on the type of reading materials available. As one worker said, “that’s a good idea – books that *men* would read.” About 20 % said they would not use reading materials if they were provided, including one worker who indicated he did not like to read. One worker responded with a maybe, followed with a “watcha got?”

The idea of distance education, or correspondence courses, was responded to by just over half of the workers in work camps. A third of these workers thought that correspondence courses would work in the camp setting, while the majority, almost 60 %, thought that correspondence courses wouldn’t work. The reasons for this are laid out more clearly in the interviews conducted at Employment Connections:

Interviewer: How about correspondence?

Frank: You could do that too, but you could run into a problem, or anything like that- if you get stuck, you don’t know the next time you will see someone.

Interviewer: Right.

Frank: I don’t know- I did correspondence before. I took it out to camp and I ran into a bunch of problems-

Steven: -You have to have a lot of will power to do it a course at home. And, a lot of quiet time.

Interviewer: So, you tried it out at camp and...

Frank: No, I just ended up putting it aside. For later on...

While several of the workers at Employment Connections thought that distance education could work, and a few even indicated that they had or were looking into correspondence courses, others weren’t so sure. As one worker put it, “Hard to say. Depends if I wanted it bad enough.” The main issues with correspondence courses seemed to be time and the availability of assistance: “No one to ask questions to when you’re out there – you’d sorta be hooped.”

The idea of tutors out at camp was suggested to the workers at work camp. Equal numbers of those responding thought that tutors would and wouldn’t work, with one “maybe” in between. The workers at Employment Connections who commented on the idea of tutors tended to connect them with another method of delivering programs at camp, such as computer stations or correspondence courses.

The idea of telephone access to an instructor was also raised, but camp workers commented that cell phone usage from the camps was expensive, and, in the evenings, the air waves tended to be heavily used so phones were often busy.

Discussion

The responses that we received varied widely; an indication of the complexity of the issues that we are dealing with. There are no simple answers to providing effective literacy services to those working in camps; however, several common themes do emerge, providing with them opportunities to reach this target group who have little access to traditional literacy services.

According to our findings, the biggest motivating factor for camp workers is financial. Camp workers go out to camp and work hard for long hours, mainly to make a lot of money. This implies that any training programs to be set up for camp workers cannot interfere with the camp worker's ability to make money. Workers confirmed this by suggesting that money or company incentives would encourage them to participate in programs at camp. When such incentives are not available, we must expect camp workers to see education and training programs as low priority, and therefore make programs as convenient as possible around the camp worker lifestyle.

The low priority of training and education in the oil patch is reinforced by the fact that employers generally do not have hiring practices in place based on education. As long as there are no educational requirements, education can be relegated to a subordinate role. Many of the camp workers do see education related to advancement at work, either within the oil & gas industry or simply to provide them a way out of camp work. Practical, work-related programs that clearly show benefits to the workers and employers will likely be more readily received than general, non-specific opportunities to upgrade skills.

The education levels of the camp workers we spoke to were somewhat higher than expected, though most workers indicated that they did have coworkers who had difficulty with reading, writing, math or computer skills. While it is obvious that there are workers out at camp who have very limited literacy skills, many are operating at a somewhat higher level, and would need assistance with "brushing up" on their skills or obtaining their high school completion. As always in literacy work, reaching those at the lowest levels of literacy will prove the most difficult, especially if program delivery is offered through technology or other "impersonal" means. We will need to find a balance between offering programs to those workers who have expressed an interest at improving their skills at the somewhat higher levels, and providing services to those at very basic literacy levels.

The age issue also needs to be considered. Several workers pointed out the fact that older workers tend to have lower literacy levels than the younger workers. Workers who have been in the oil patch for more than twenty-five years also tend to see camp work as a permanent position, meaning that any education and training they do would have to fit around a camp-work schedule. Not all older workers see camp work as permanent, though, and even some who have been out at camp for ten or fifteen years still see the work they do at camp as a stepping stone to something else. Work-related programs offering transferable

skills would seem to balance the needs of both groups of workers. This is also important, as the specific skills used and required by workers out at camp vary widely from job to job and from individual to individual. Using materials that apply to a range of camp workers, but at the same time providing general skills would make the training relevant to the largest subsection of workers.

Safety courses and tickets are industry-standard. Most camp workers who have done training or education courses since beginning to work out at camp have done so to obtain or renew safety tickets. Providing opportunities to improve basic skills in relation to safety training could also be an avenue to make training more relevant to the needs and desires of camp workers.

Regardless of what type of education or training is offered to camp workers, the issue of free time will need to be addressed. As long as education is not seen as a priority, education or training in a camp setting will take place after a full day of work. Although most workers do have a few hours of free time in the evenings, many say they are too tired to accomplish anything at that time. Any program offered out at camp could not be intense or time consuming, but would rather have to be spread out in short segments over an extended period of time. Camp workers would need to fit any program into an evening that already includes basic necessities such as eating, sleeping, and preparing for the next day, as well as some time dedicated to relaxation.

The other issue that will affect programming for camp workers is the issue of transience. Many workers move from camp to camp and company to company over the course of a season. This precludes the idea of one-on-one tutoring relationships or courses delivered over an extended period of time in a single camp location. Programs that are offered out at camp need to be, in some form, able to travel with the employee or, at the very least, be able to be started and stopped and restarted with minimum disruption.

On the other hand, out at camp may not be the best location to provide training to camp workers. Spring break-up provides an opportunity for more focussed and intensive courses that fit into the lifestyle and schedule of camp workers. While the idea of Spring Break-up Courses brings with it its own set of challenges, this method of program delivery was preferred by most camp workers. Workers do seem to have time on their hands during spring break-up, though the duration and even the start date of spring break-up is variable. Start dates and end dates of any programs would need to be flexible, as spring break-up is weather-dependent.

Because many camp workers are unemployed during spring break-up, any program taken during this time would most likely be seen as the worker's responsibility. Camp workers are not paid while unemployed during spring break-up, though they may be on Employment Insurance. So, spring break-up could provide an opportunity for workers to concentrate on their courses, or it could be a time of financial pressure with workers constantly waiting to be called

back out or trying to find another job. Any programs offered would need to be endorsed by Human Resources Development Canada, so that workers would not lose their Employment Insurance benefits while availing themselves of education or training.

Out at camp, computer stations seem to be the most practical way of introducing education and into the camp setting. Because a high percentage of camp workers are interested in upgrading their computer skills, both for work and for their personal life, having computers with instructional software available could be a motivational factor to attract camp workers to spend some of their valuable free time doing training or education. Employers who we spoke to also supported the concept of computer stations for their workers. Computer stations could be placed in several camps as well as in town, and, if the educational component is provided in modules, workers could move from computer station to computer station and continue working on the same training. Most camp workers think that computer stations would be used in a camp setting; the larger issue, from a literacy perspective, is whether computer stations would serve their intended purpose, that is, to provide camp workers with a chance to upgrade their literacy skills. Computer stations come inherent with the danger that they will be monopolized by the so-called "more educated" workers, or become an alternate form of entertainment rather than a tool to upgrade skills.

Having an instructor, volunteer tutor, or trained camp attendant at the camp could solve some of these issues; however, this may not be a practical solution. Camp attendants and volunteer tutors from among the camp workers would be affected by the transience of the oil patch. An instructor would often spend more time travelling than actually instructing, especially if there is more than one instructional site. Telephone access to an instructor could be considered, but practical issues such as availability of telephone service and cost of such a service would require further investigation before such a decision could be made.

A link between a Spring Break-up Course and computer stations could also be a possibility. Effective usage of the computer stations could be increased by providing camp workers with the opportunity to begin working on educational software in town during spring break-up, under the guidance of an instructor or tutor, and then providing the option to continue upgrading upon returning to camp. This integrated approach would allow for monitoring of progress from season to season, and would provide the personal contact that is otherwise essentially absent from computer-based training and education.

Distance Education courses did not receive as positive a response as computer stations. While some camp workers felt that distance education courses were a good idea, most thought that these would not work in the camp setting. Time issues factor in, as does the possibility of "getting stuck" without available assistance. Because correspondence courses tend to require a high degree of motivation and discipline, they tend to be problematic in the camp environment,

where time and relaxation are premium. Also, for those who are interested in distance education and able to commit the time and energy that it takes, opportunities are already available.

Book tables seem to be an easy method of increasing the availability of reading material for camp workers, especially if the interests and tastes of camp workers are taken into account. Some high-interest, low-vocabulary reading material could be provided to appeal to camp workers who might not avail themselves to reading materials otherwise. While book tables are unlikely to solve any literacy issues that camp workers have, they will provide the opportunity for workers to have access to books, and to indicate that reading is valued in the camp environment.

Recommendations

Providing access to literacy services for camp workers will provide challenges, and none of the options is completely unproblematic. The following recommendations, however, represent what appear to be the most feasible opportunities to allow camp workers to upgrade their skills while respecting the schedule and pressures of camp life.

Spring Break-up Courses

Spring Break-up provides an opportunity for camp workers to upgrade their skills in-town during a slow period in the cycle of the oil & gas industry. Spring Break-up Courses should be pursued as an effective means of providing education and training to camp workers. Options include:

- Providing short-duration upgrading courses at Northern Lights College. These could be integrated with the Spring Break-up Training Series that is already offered through the Continuing Education Department. This would involve expanding the selection to include courses in reading, writing, math and computer skills as well as the safety training that is currently offered.
- Offering a drop-in program through the Fort St. John Literacy Society for the duration of spring break-up. Have tutors or instructors on a daily basis to provide assistance in upgrading and literacy skills using materials that are relevant to camp workers, as meeting once or twice a week as is the norm in the Volunteer Tutor Program does not provide enough time for learning to take place before workers are out at camp again.
- Initiating short-duration combined programs, such as computer training or safety training with a literacy or upgrading component. These could be offered through the Literacy Society, through Employment Connections, or through other venues.

- Offering a computer-based educational program during spring break-up, which could be associated with computer stations in camps, as per recommendations below under “computer stations”.

Issues to be considered when planning Spring Break-up Courses include:

- Endorsement by Human Resources Development Canada so that participants in a spring break-up course need not fear losing Employment Insurance benefits.
- Some degree of flexibility with start and end dates to coincide with weather conditions

Computer Stations

Out at camp, computer stations seem to be the most feasible option. Camp workers expressed interest in both computers and computer skills, suggesting that computer stations would provide the extra motivation for camp workers to use some of their free time to access educational opportunities. Computer stations can also be set up at several camps and provide some measure of continuity as workers move from camp to camp.

Recommendations about computer stations include:

- Pursue funding from sources that have expressed an interest in educational technologies, especially in regards to workplace education or remote education.
- Set up computer stations at several camps as well as in-town at the Fort St. John Literacy Society and, possibly, Employment Connections.
- Select educational software that is easy to navigate
- Select educational software that provides upgrading in modules, so that transferring progress from computer station to computer station is relatively simple.
- Provide an in-town course during break-up on the educational software, to allow camp workers to become comfortable with using both the computers and the program before returning to the camp setting.
- Ideally, provide an instructor or tutor to visit the camps while the computer stations are in operation to assist in trouble shooting and to evaluate whether the computers are being used for their intended purposes.
- Evaluate further the possibility of telephone access to an instructor

- Offer in-town courses annually during break-up, both to allow new camp workers to familiarize themselves with the program and to remain in contact with camp workers who have been working on the program during the past season.

Book Tables

Book Tables are a relatively inexpensive and simple way to increase literacy awareness in the camp environment. Recommendations about book tables include:

- Ensure that the reading material provided is of interest to the overwhelmingly male population of the camp environment
- When sorting books obtained through Literacy Society book drives, reserve appropriate reading materials to distribute to camps
- If funds are available, purchase a selection of low vocabulary, high interest novels to appeal to camp workers with lower literacy levels
- While preparing this report, the local Women's Institute contacted the Fort St. John Literacy Society to inform them that the Women's Institute was beginning a project to collect and distribute reading materials to camps in the area. The Fort St. John Literacy Society should show their support for this project.

Conclusion

This report only scratches the surface of the literacy needs of camp workers, and what can be done about them. It does, however, provide a clearer idea of what camp workers themselves think could be useful in terms of education and training. Spring Break-up Courses, computer stations, and book tables each have a role to play in providing access to literacy services to this target group. Like many target groups that have been "missed", oil & gas camp workers are less inclined to believe that they could have effective access to literacy services, and that this access could make a difference for them. However, interest has been shown, both by the workers and by the employers, and this interest needs to be cultivated through effective literacy options.

Appendices

- Introductory Fax for Literacy in Isolation project
- Literacy in Isolation Information Sheet
- Employers/Management Questionnaire
- Employee Research Questionnaire
- Revised Employee Research Questionnaire