

# Working Together:

## Furthering Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills in Nova Scotia

**R**ecently Literacy Nova Scotia (LNS) has begun to communicate that its scope includes workforce and workplace literacy and essential skills. While this is being done at the request of LNS's funder, it is in keeping with LNS's existing mandate to ensure that all Nova Scotians have equal access to quality literacy education. LNS conducted a review of what its role could be in workforce and workplace literacy and essential skills as part of its current strategic planning. LNS consulted with a range of players involved in workforce and workplace literacy and essential skills including those in the province's Workplace Education Initiative, Department of Labour and Advanced Education (formerly Labour and Workforce Development). The review recommended that LNS promote workforce and workplace learning in a general way and act as a bridge among the different players in adult, workforce, and workplace literacy, as well as essential skills.

**In keeping with the recommendations of the review, LNS must promote a better understanding of workplace literacy and essential skills as a starting point for a conversation among the different players in Nova Scotia.**

### Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Programming in the Nova Scotia Context

The provincial government's Department of Labour and Advanced Education (LAE) supports both literacy and essential skills. The Adult Learning Division traditionally uses the term "literacy" or "academic upgrading." However, recently it also has begun to use the terms "essential skills" and "adult learning."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See 2010 Workforce/Workplace Feasibility Project *Final Report* prepared by Brigid Hayes for LNS

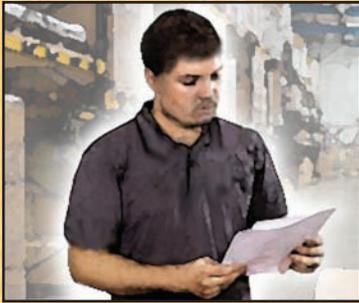


### The Essential Skills

- Reading Text
- Document Use
- Numeracy
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Computer Use
- Working with Others
- Thinking Skills
- Continuous Learning

Essential Skills are needed for work, learning and life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change.

# Workplace education is about challenge and change.



**Reading Text** refers to reading material that is in the form of sentences or paragraphs.

This generally involves reading notes, letters, memos, manuals, specifications, regulations, books, reports or journals.

Reading Text is the ability to understand reading materials in the form of sentences or paragraphs. Use this skill to search for information, skim

Reading Text includes:

- forms and labels if they contain at least one paragraph
- print and non-print media (for example, texts on computer screens and microfiche)
- paragraph-length text in charts, tables and graphs

The Adult Education Division supports adult literacy through the Nova Scotia School of Adult Learning (NSSAL). Literacy and adult education are offered through community-based organizations, school boards and the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC). The final goal of a common curriculum is an adult high school diploma.

The province's Adult Learning Program indicates the following goals that adults enrolled in the program can work towards:

- improving literacy, math, problem-solving, critical-thinking, and teamwork skills
- acquiring the Nova Scotia High School Graduation Diploma for Adults
- preparing to write the GED test to further employment opportunities
- entering the workforce
- preparing to enter a post-secondary institution.<sup>2</sup>

The Skill Development Division supports workplace education, workforce programs, and programs for laid off workers. This Division talks about "essential skills upgrading".<sup>3</sup>

The Skills Development Division administers the Workplace Education Initiative (WEI) which has been in existence since 1989 and is the dominant player in workplace literacy and essential skills. Its objectives are:

1. to create a lifelong learning culture in Nova Scotia
2. to help the Nova Scotia workforce meet the challenges of the new workplace
3. to partner with business, labour and workers to develop essential skills programs.

A provincial committee made up of employers, government, union representatives, program participants and the Association of Workplace Educators in Nova Scotia (AWENS) provide advice and direction to the WEI.<sup>4</sup>

LAE Skill Development Coordinators provide Human Resources Development (HRD) for participating companies through labour management collaboratives, project team development, needs assessments and strategic planning, program development for essentials skills and program evaluation. Programs are generally 40 to 80 hours long for 8 to 12 workers in a group and are held at the workplace. Instructors, hired on contract, are certified by LAE through specialized training offered by AWENS.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid



Joe Brown, Acting Supervisor, LAE and a long-time workplace educator indicates that workplace education is much more than essential skills. It's about partnership and human resource planning. He explains that traditionally Nova Scotia's economy was based on primary industries and there were more people than jobs. Now that jobs have changed, there is more need for HRD and training is a part of this. "Workplace education is about challenge and change," says Brown.

Brown emphasizes that the WEI's success is based on the partnership between government, employers and workers and the attention to adult education principles such as careful program planning. Everyone has a say in the various aspects of the program. Program participants carry the knowledge of a particular workplace and make a program relevant.

In addition, there are literacy and essential skills programs that focus on adults transitioning to the workplace either because they have been out of the labour force for an extended time or laid off. These programs are offered by Work Activity Centres, community-based literacy organizations and other community groups.<sup>6</sup> The Skill Development Division offers other specialized services for laid off workers, apprentices, small businesses, and those transitioning to employment, and sectors.<sup>7</sup>

## The Role of LNS in Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills

Ann Marie Downie, Executive Director of LNS, emphasizes the importance of literacy and essential skills in all its contexts as an imperative for Nova Scotia and the role that LNS can play around workplace literacy and essential skills within the provincial landscape. "Literacy Nova Scotia has always been interested in and supported workplace literacy and essential skills," she states. "Our mission emphasizes that everyone needs access to learning opportunities. According to recent research, half of those in need of essential skills support are in the workplace."<sup>8</sup>

Over the years, LNS has developed a strong role in the community-based and college sectors. This includes support, research, knowledge exchange, partnership development and government relations. LNS knows that strong roles in research, knowledge exchange and dissemination, and partnership development create solid support for



**Document Use** refers to tasks that involve a variety of information displays in which words, numbers, icons and other visual characteristics (e.g., line, colour, shape) are given meaning by their spatial arrangement. For example, graphs, lists, tables, blueprints, schematics, drawings, signs and labels are documents used in the world of work.



Document Use includes:

- print and non-print media (for example, computer screen or microfiche documents, equipment gauges, clocks and flags)
- reading/interpreting and writing/completing/producing of documents - these two uses of documents often occur simultaneously as part of the same task, e.g., completing a form, checking off items on a list of tasks, plotting information on a graph, and entering information on an activity schedule.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> See Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative 2009 at [http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/AdLKC/Reports09/NS\\_WEI\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/AdLKC/Reports09/NS_WEI_EN.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) identifies the levels of competency in numeracy and literacy, Level 3 is seen to be the benchmark. [http://www.ns.literacy.ca/factsheets/Skills\\_21century\\_factsheet\\_web.pdf](http://www.ns.literacy.ca/factsheets/Skills_21century_factsheet_web.pdf)

# *“Essential skills” is a term that resonates better with employers and does not carry the stigma of the “L” word.*



**Numeracy** refers to the workers' use of numbers and their being required to think in quantitative terms.

123456  
910121  
284374



**Writing** includes:

- writing texts and writing in documents (e.g., filling in forms)
- non-paper-based writing (e.g., typing on a computer)



LES learners wherever they do their learning. LNS never gets involved in program delivery.

Currently, LNS is developing a strategic plan for workforce/workplace literacy and essential skills. One area that LNS will focus on in the future is knowledge exchange among employers, union representatives, literacy providers, employability agencies, and others. LNS also wants to include adult learners from workplace and workforce programs in more of its activities, such as the annual celebration of Adult Learners' Week. Another area for future work is partnership development with LAE. LNS recently played a role in supporting the place of workforce /workplace essential skills in the Adult Learning Act, which formalized in legislation the NSSAL. "We responded to the discussion paper and urged the department to include workforce/workplace literacy and essential skills in the new act and outlined strong reasons why the act should encompass lifelong learning in its broadest sense and not only enshrine one government initiative," says Downie.

Downie outlines some of the challenges LNS has in moving to a stronger focus on workplace literacy and essential skills. She notes that one key challenge is that people view LNS as only having a community-based focus. She adds that to address this challenge means LNS must better communicate with people in the workplace/workforce field what LNS does. Another challenge is that adult literacy and workplace literacy come under separate government divisions creating silos within government resulting in access issues for the field. Definitions can also appear problematic. Those in adult literacy tend to use the term "literacy", while those in workplace education use "essential skills."

## **A Conundrum: The Language of Literacy and Essential Skills**

The community-based and academic contexts and workplace education remain separate silos funded by different divisions of the same department in the provincial government. They use different conceptual frameworks. These separations and differences in philosophies often make it difficult for meaningful connections to happen within the Nova Scotia landscape. The waters are further muddied by the fact that the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) prefers the term "literacy and essential skills." This has led many literacy organizations to now use "literacy and essential skills" where "essential skills" is a synonym for literacy.<sup>9</sup>

The Nova Scotia workplace context includes a different conceptual framework from that of community-based literacy and academic context. For example, "literacy" is not used in the workplace context

<sup>9</sup> See 2010 Workforce/Workplace Feasibility Project *Final Report* prepared by Brigid Hayes for LNS

as it does not resonate with employers or workers and can be seen as a barrier to securing a commitment to programming in the workplace. In Nova Scotia the term “workplace education” was coined in the 80’s and continues to be used to refer to workplace literacy programming. Furthermore, WEI goes well beyond providing “literacy upgrading” at the workplace. A recent case study of the WEI indicated that it provides “the leadership and sophisticated human resource development services that small and medium sized business and non-profit organizations need to access if they are to be successful in workplace-based essential skills training.”<sup>10</sup>

OLES defines Essential Skills as a list of nine essential skills.<sup>11</sup> However in the Nova Scotia workplace context, essential skills as a preferred term is used more broadly in terms of an approach where upgrading is tailored to workplace occupations and the tasks that workers do within that occupation. “Essential skills” is a term that resonates better with employers and does not carry the stigma of the “L” word. This is particularly important to protect workers where having “literacy needs” could be viewed as a reason for firing or laying off these workers. However, essential skills as an approach is not without its problems. Because it is so broad, there is the potential to focus on the most highly skilled workers rather than those who could benefit from foundational skills.

In the community-based and academic education context, the term “adult literacy” is used in a broad inclusive way. Sometimes the term “workforce literacy” is used by those organizations assisting adults entering or re-entering the workplace. “Literacy is wherever it happens. It doesn’t matter what you call it as long as adults have easy access to developing the skills they need. Literacy is bigger than reading and writing in both the community and the workplace and LNS has consistently defined and promoted it in its broadest sense,” states Downie.

These dilemmas around terminology and concepts are not particular to Nova Scotia. Similar divisions and struggles can be found in the rest of Canada. These challenges have not been resolved and provide much food for thought in terms of how different players can work together to serve the literacy and essential skills needs of adult Nova Scotians, both employed and unemployed.

## The Call for Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills

The need for literacy and essential skills for adult Nova Scotians across the board is well articulated by prominent players in Nova

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> The nine Essential Skills are Reading Text, Document Use, Numeracy, Writing, Oral Communication, Computer Use, Working with Others, Thinking Skills and Continuous Learning



### Oral Communication

pertains primarily to the use of speech to give and exchange thoughts and information by workers in an occupational group.



**Computer Use** indicates the variety and complexity of computer use within the occupational group.



# Literacy is a means to empower working people to shape their lives individually and collectively.



## Working with Others

examines the extent to which employees work with others to carry out their tasks.

Types of Work Contexts:

- Work alone
- Work independently
- Work jointly with a partner or helper
- Work as a member of a team



**Thinking Skills** differentiates between five different types of cognitive functions.

However, these functions are interconnected.



Scotia and Atlantic Canada. Elizabeth Beale, President of the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC) in *The Literacy Challenge* calls for a shift in the policy arena where more prominence is given to literacy. Her broad focus for essential skills upgrading as part of a “training solution” includes opportunities inside and outside the workplace. She notes that jobs that require post-secondary education are on the rise while those that do not are decreasing rapidly; while at the same time at least 50% of adults in Atlantic Canada need more opportunities to participate in the economy. She describes this issue as one that affects both individuals in terms of their ability to participate in the economy and the survival and growth of workplaces. The APEC report also emphasizes the importance of literacy and essential skills in terms of companies being able to maintain their competitiveness. Beale’s remarks point to the importance of all players involved in literacy and essential skills working together to address the need which she describes as great.<sup>12</sup>

The Halifax Chamber of Commerce also promotes workplace learning. In *At Issue 2009*, the Chamber emphasizes that workplaces need to promote lifelong learning to address looming labour shortages in the province and new skills requirements particularly around technology.<sup>13</sup> At the national level, Rick Miner, in his presentation *People without Jobs, Jobs without People: Canada’s Labour Market Future*, outlines the need to address appropriate training to meet the looming skills shortage.<sup>14</sup> The Chamber stresses the need for ongoing essential skills development at the workplace after formal education so that employees can maintain and enhance their skills. *At Issue 2009* calls for employees to be lifelong learners and for workplace training to be part of the solution to address labour shortages. Labour shortages are also emphasized as a growing crisis by Jim McNiven in his paper, *The Developing Workforce Problem in Nova Scotia*.<sup>15</sup>

The Nova Scotia Federation of Labour also embraces literacy for working adults. Literacy is seen as a means to empower working people to shape their lives individually and collectively. *Lighting the Way with Workplace Education* sponsored by the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour is a labour-based literacy program with a focus on social justice and equity for working people.<sup>16</sup>

Marjorie Davison, Executive Director of Policy, Planning and Professional Services, LAE echoes this need. She emphasizes that workplace literacy education can give those workers in entry level

<sup>12</sup> See APEC Commentary 2008.

<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.halifaxchamber.com/files/81/PSP\\_Report\\_FINALWEB.pdf](http://www.halifaxchamber.com/files/81/PSP_Report_FINALWEB.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> See [http://www.on.literacy.ca/themes/olc/powerpoints/rick\\_miner.ppt#336,1,Slide 1](http://www.on.literacy.ca/themes/olc/powerpoints/rick_miner.ppt#336,1,Slide 1)

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.aims.ca/site/media/aims/WorkforceProblem.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> See Nova Scotia Federation of Labour web site at <http://www.nsf1.ns.ca/literacy.html>

positions a boost through programs that are tailored to the specific needs of the workplace. She indicates that workplace education opportunities through the province's WEI is a key business strategy in ensuring they have the workforce they need.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the need for workplace essential skills articulated by business, labour, and government and the success of WEI, there is a growing need for more participation by employers. However, managers in small and medium-sized enterprises may not be sold on the benefits in relation to the investment. Moreover, there is a need for more WEI field staff, more capacity building in organizations that have participated and more research on the conditions under which employers participate in these kinds of programs.<sup>18</sup>

## The Need for More Opportunities for Literacy and Essential Skills Upgrading

Downie sees a role for LNS in promoting workplace essential skills so more employers and employees are involved and committed to learning in the workplace. She also sees a role for LNS in connecting adult literacy and workplace/workforce literacy essential skills in the province so "at the end of the day there are more cross-overs between the two areas—more seamless and accessible pathways for adult upgrading".

Downie looks forward to LNS working in partnership with others to broaden its focus to support literacy and essential skills for those adults already in the workplace. She stresses the need to foster a learning culture in Nova Scotia workplaces wherever and whatever the need for learning is. The role of LNS can be bringing players together from adult literacy and workplace education to find out what they have in common and identify possible intersections for positive collaboration.

### Discussion Questions:

1. How can more Nova Scotia employers especially be encouraged to invest in the literacy and essential skill development of their employees?
2. How can issues around different conceptual frameworks of adult literacy and workplace initiatives be integrated or resolved for partnership purposes? Are there current examples?
3. What are the challenges and the opportunities for working together?
4. What role can LNS play in supporting workplace essential skills and bringing the different players together to promote a continuum of literacy and essential skills?

<sup>17</sup> See Nova Scotia: Open to the World at <http://opentotheworld.progressmedia.ca/%28S%28mm2u2445u5ee3a2pqexcwi55%29%29/viewerSelect.aspx?id=6&pageId=undefined&refid=80223&sessid=m2u2445u5ee3a2pqexcwi55&bhcp=1>

<sup>18</sup> See Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative 2009 at [http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/AdLKC/Reports09/NS\\_WEI\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/AdLKC/Reports09/NS_WEI_EN.pdf)



### Continuous Learning

examines the requirement for workers in an occupational group to participate in an ongoing process of acquiring skills and knowledge.



Continuous Learning tests the hypothesis that more and more jobs require continuous upgrading, and that all workers must continue learning in order to keep or to grow with their jobs. If this is true, then the following will become essential skills:

- knowing how to learn;
- understanding one's own learning style; and
- knowing how to gain access to a variety of materials, resources and learning opportunities.

Source: *Description of the Nine Essential Skills* [http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential\\_skills/general/understanding\\_es.shtml](http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/understanding_es.shtml)

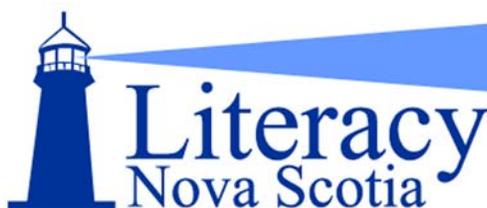
*We have always known that literacy is bigger than reading and writing.*

**Literacy is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family.**

It is often combined with other skills, such as thinking and problem solving, oral communication, numeracy, computer use, working in a team and continuous learning, to become the essential skill set needed to control our lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

**Our Mission: That every Nova Scotian have equal access to quality literacy education.**

Literacy Nova Scotia cares about literacy and essential skills learning opportunities being available wherever and whenever there is a need or interest. That means we support community sector programs and college and school board programs, as well as programs in workplaces. LNS supports the adult literacy field in the broadest sense. We have always known that literacy is bigger than reading and writing. We know that literacy is all those skills needed for accessing and using information that help us contribute to our communities, families and workplaces.



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