

Taking the Temperature:
A Consultation on Workforce and Workplace
Literacy with the LBS Field
Summary Report



October 2003

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I. Introduction

A. Stay Tuned In to Workplace Literacy: Developing a Practitioner Network

The consultation upon which this summary report is based was part of *Stay Tuned In to Workplace Literacy: Developing a Practitioner Network*, an Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) project to support the First Sites in workplace literacy development. The First Sites are five regional networks¹ that were chosen to pilot the province's workplace literacy strategy. They have been actively engaged in gaining knowledge, developing their skills and marketing workplace literacy over the last year. *Stay Tuned In to Workplace Literacy* was a follow-up to two previous OLC workplace projects *Raising the Profile of Workplace Literacy* and *Workplace Literacy Training*.

The consultation was to take a temperature reading with Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) funded agencies with respect to both workforce and workplace literacy. For the purposes of this consultation, **Workforce literacy** refers mainly to literacy development for employment-related goals. **Workplace literacy** focuses on fee-for-service literacy development for workers who are already employed.

B. Purpose of the Consultation

The purpose of the consultation was to check up on the status of workforce and workplace literacy with the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) field including: umbrella groups and sectoral networks, as well as regional networks and LBS agencies outside of the First Sites. The consultation focused on:

- where LBS agencies stand in their ability to deliver workforce literacy (i.e. to meet the employment-related literacy goals of their learners delivered with LBS funding)
- what kind of supports LBS agencies need in the future to deliver workforce literacy
- where the LBS field stands in terms of coordinating and delivering workplace literacy (fee-for-service arrangements)

¹ The five networks are: Literacy Link Niagara, Literacy Ontario Central South, Mid North Adult Learning Network, Project READ and QUILL.

- what supports/knowledge/orientation the field wants for workplace literacy
- how agencies, regional and sectoral networks, and umbrella groups can work together on mutual areas of concern with respect to workforce and workplace literacy

C. Methods of Collecting and Analyzing the Information

We collected information for the consultation from respondents in the following two ways:

- focus groups with members of OLC’s Advisory Roundtable
- individual telephone interviews

The 21 members of OLC’s Advisory Roundtable who participated in focus groups represented 15 regional networks, 4 sectoral networks and 2 learners.

We conducted 29 telephone interviews with representatives from the following groups:

- 7 regional literacy networks
- 7 LBS community-based agencies
- 6 LBS programs in boards of education
- 6 LBS programs in community colleges
- 3 umbrella organizations

The interview respondents were administrators, practitioners and people who worked in both roles. The breakdown is shown below:

Groups with totals	Administrators	Practitioners	Administrator-Practitioner
Networks (7)	7		
LBS community-based agencies (7)	2	4	1
LBS boards of education (6)	2	3	1
LBS community colleges (6)	1	3	2
Umbrella organizations (3)	3		
Totals	15	10	4

The OLC referred the researcher to 7 regional networks as the starting point. We began with the networks and asked them to direct us to agencies in their areas which would give us a range of experience. It is important to state that the data presents a sampling of the views of agencies throughout the province.

Participants were asked the same questions for both workforce and workplace literacy delivery. This summary report documents recurrent themes as indicated by respondents.

D. Strengths and Limitations of the Data

The interview data represent the opinions of people with a range of experience in workforce literacy. In almost all cases, the respondents had at least some experience with and knowledge of workforce literacy.

Not all interview respondents were able to answer the questions for *workplace* literacy. Four people did not answer any questions about workplace literacy because they had no experience or information about this literacy initiative. Eleven respondents answered only half the questions because they did not feel prepared to give opinions on the other topics.

II. Summary of Findings

This summary of the findings represents a number of consistent themes within and across sectors and streams regarding goals, delivery and supports for workforce and workplace literacy. Generally speaking, comments from the OLC Advisory Roundtable provide an accurate summary of the views of their constituencies as reported in the individual interviews.

The data from the consultation suggest that: MTCU's goals and understanding of workforce literacy need to be clarified for the field. Moreover, the delivery of workforce varies considerably based on setting, participants, geography and instructors. More time, resources and training are absolutely essential for workforce literacy to be a successful initiative.

Unlike the findings on workforce literacy, the experience with workplace literacy is minimal in LBS sectors and streams. The responses therefore were often short and simply stated in contrast to the more detailed and complex findings from their involvement in workforce literacy.

Four respondents representing all sectors did not participate in this part of the interview because they did not feel they were knowledgeable, or experienced in workplace literacy. Eleven respondents only answered half the questions.

A. Workforce Literacy

Where LBS Agencies Stand in Their Ability to Deliver Workforce Literacy

The findings indicate that the field is delivering workforce literacy in ways that range from minimal to extensive and that agencies are somewhat prepared to deliver workforce literacy. Some aspects of workforce literacy are working well and are benefiting learners, practitioners and agencies. Respondents point to successes in building learners' confidence and skills through job-focused curriculum, gathering authentic materials, developing LBS with job skills courses and more general work-oriented curriculum. In the community, workforce literacy has brought literacy practitioners in contact with employers and other non-profit organizations. Workforce literacy has also encouraged agencies to better market themselves.

However, there are a number of important challenges and barriers affecting the delivery of workforce literacy that respondents identified. These challenges include:

- an uncertainty and need for more clarity with respect to MTCU's goals and expectations for workforce literacy
- conflicting understandings of literacy, role definitions and responsibilities
- multiple priorities
- a lack of time, resources and training in workforce literacy

Practitioners who are delivering workforce literacy say they are uncertain about being "on the right track" and are not "sure if what they are doing is right" and are "worried about keeping up." Some practitioners experience a disconnection between what they are directed to do and what they believe they should do based on "the type of literacy

[learners] need and want.” In addition, some feel that the LBS structures within their own institutions or agencies work against them in the delivery of workforce literacy. In this respect, practitioners say “there is a disconnect between what programs are expected to do and what they can do.”

Some respondents are looking for more clarity around their roles and responsibilities in workforce literacy. They see the lines blurring between literacy and employment counselling. Practitioners also say that they are juggling too many different priorities which forces them to deal with issues around contact hours and volunteer time for course/materials development in workforce literacy. Many practitioners say they are heavily overloaded.

Finally, all respondents say they lack essential elements for success: paid time to research and prepare, appropriate and tested resources, and adequate training for a different emphasis and direction for literacy.

Kind of Supports Needed by LBS Agencies in the Future to Deliver Workforce Literacy

A consistent theme in the consultation is the need for more clarification from MTCU with respect to clear and consistent messages about a vision, goals, and expectations for workforce literacy.

Four main avenues for addressing key barriers and challenges are suggested:

- paid time for research and development
- institutional supports
- professional development opportunities
- resources for delivering workforce literacy

Respondents say they need more paid time to research, develop curriculum, and prepare materials. They also need more time for outreach to the community and business organizations in order to enact workforce literacy successfully. They suggest a designated workforce person to research, collect and develop materials, and assist practitioners with relating content to learners’ goals. They see professional development as crucial for practitioners to gain knowledge, understand goals and expectations, and

develop skills to deliver workforce literacy. Resources needed include quality demonstrations, contextualized materials, good practice in workforce literacy, and resources targeted to the Francophone, Deaf and Native streams.

B. Workplace Literacy

Where LBS Agencies Stand in Their Ability to Deliver Workplace Literacy

The findings on workplace literacy indicate that this area of literacy, as an LBS model, is generally not visible, not familiar and of minimal interest to most respondents. Where workplace literacy is visible, at the school boards and more frequently in the colleges, it is usually run through English as a Second Language (ESL) or corporate training departments.

Only two respondents from agencies say they have LBS workplace literacy programs. No respondents indicate that they are currently prepared to deliver workplace literacy through LBS. A few respondents say they think they could do it with adequate support. Roundtable members say a few agencies in their areas are currently prepared while most lack experience in this area.

Many respondents question the rationale for moving into workplace literacy, considering the time, expertise and support necessary to do it properly. In addition, they see difficulties with internal structures and with competition among agencies in regional network areas.

Respondents also see a need for clearer goals from MTCU with respect to workplace literacy. Several did not see any need for workplace literacy in their areas. Some feel that the goals of workplace literacy do not match up with the approach of most literacy practitioners. Across all sectors, many respondents say they do not have the time or money to organize such an initiative. They identify significant barriers including: the fee-for-service model, difficult marketing, LBS bureaucracy, institutional barriers, and the absence of necessary labour partners. Some respondents say it is difficult to market fee-for-service when employers can get LBS services for free. In addition, others say workplace literacy is a hard sell. Also, a few people felt that the LBS system is not suitable for workplace literacy delivery. Two people find that their institutional structures could not accommodate workplace literacy delivery. Finally, one network is

reluctant to go into unionized workplaces since labour has not been a continuing partner in the provincial process. Competition for business with the same employers among network agencies and within their own institutions is also cause for concern.

Kind of Supports Needed by the LBS Field in the Future to Deliver Workplace Literacy

Generally, respondents see workplace literacy as a voluntary endeavour for those networks or agencies interested and willing to take it on.

To assist networks or agencies that are interested, funding for professional development – to conduct organizational needs assessments and to hire or dedicate staff - is needed. Respondents also suggest that mentoring, partnerships within the literacy community and regional working groups would help support practitioners engaged in workplace literacy. Respondents offered that providing employer subsidies and having a referral phone line would also address the challenges.

C. The Future: Workforce and Workplace Literacy

Introduction

This last section addresses the idea of what respondents think is needed to move workforce and workplace literacy forward. This includes the role of MTCU, regional and sectoral networks, and umbrella groups.

A starting point is for MTCU to clarify its goals and expectations around both workforce and workplace literacy in a consistent manner across the LBS field. This needed clarification includes an agreement upon the difference between workforce and workplace literacy.

Respondents also identify the need for ongoing practitioner training suited to regions and sectors, resource development, available resource persons, and timely coordination of resources as critical to moving workforce literacy forward. However, practitioners need paid release time to attend training and to apply this training through the development and preparation of workforce materials. Respondents say that there are not adequate resources to support research, curriculum and materials development. People

in all sectors agree that these activities are all necessary supports for workforce literacy.²

Experience with workplace literacy is minimal in LBS sectors and streams. The responses to questions about workplace literacy, therefore, were often short and simply-stated in contrast to the more detailed and complex findings for workforce literacy. Respondents identify the challenges of funding, time, resources, practitioner training and selling literacy to employers. In addition, they say that lack of a firm rationale for workplace literacy, underdeveloped structures, and competition among agencies in regional network areas are barriers to the development of workplace literacy.

Regional Network Involvement in Workforce Literacy

Respondents indicated that there are many roles that the networks can play in workforce literacy including serving as the community contact, building partnerships, bringing stakeholders together, and promoting workforce literacy. Networks can also help agencies assess their capacity to deliver workforce literacy and provide opportunities for practitioners to discuss, share experience and information. Networks can also aid agencies by helping with organizing and coordinating workshops, forums and other types of training sessions and by being ready to answer questions from agencies and having information about what other programs are doing. In addition, respondents thought that networks could help by facilitating discussions at the literacy service planning meetings, collecting and developing materials, by organizing information on skills, jobs, resources and authentic materials, and by purchasing resources and making them available to agencies.

Regional Network Involvement in Workplace Literacy

Key points from the consultation indicate that regional networks should have the option to be involved voluntarily in workplace literacy, depending on their local community relationships.

² MTCU also acknowledges these as important factors to quality literacy delivery and supports these through the supports and services infrastructure and project funding.

Only half the respondents answered the question related to involvement. Networks see themselves as approaching employers to get information about interests and needs, coordinating or brokering contracts, offering training and support, and raising awareness in the community.

Sectoral Network Involvement in Workforce and Workplace Literacy

Key roles for sectoral networks include: working with MTCU to channel information to their sectors, coordinating and offering training and professional development to their sector, and identifying linkages with other partners outside of literacy.

Umbrella Group Involvement in Workforce Literacy

According to one umbrella group, key roles for umbrella groups can include collecting workforce materials, researching their own streams for key occupations, developing resources suitable for their group, and coordinating and developing practitioner training in workforce literacy.

Umbrella Group Involvement in Workplace Literacy

One umbrella group said that it could help ensure best practices in workplace literacy and look out for the interests of learners. Building relationships among major stakeholders (business and labour) and the province as well as relationships between the literacy field and those stakeholders could be another role for umbrella groups. In addition, umbrella groups could conduct consultations to provide government with information about where the field stands regarding workplace literacy, and play a role in marketing by being the contact point for employers, and coordinating training for practitioners.

III. Conclusion

LBS agencies are somewhat prepared to deliver workforce literacy, but require more clarity as to goals for and definitions of workforce literacy. They also require more financial support to handle multiple priorities, participate in professional development opportunities and build organizational capacity to deliver workforce literacy.

However, LBS infrastructure organizations and agencies are significantly less interested and prepared to deliver workplace literacy. For those organizations interested in developing workplace literacy, financial support for professional development, mentoring, employer subsidies, and having a referral phone line would address some of the challenges associated with delivering workplace literacy.

There are many ways in which regional networks, sectoral networks, and umbrella groups can work with agencies on mutual areas of concern with respect to workforce and workplace literacy. Regional networks can help agencies with workforce literacy by serving as the community contact, building partnerships, bringing stakeholders together, and promoting workforce literacy. Regional networks can also help agencies by sharing their experiences, providing administrative and organizational support, facilitating discussions, collecting and developing materials, organizing information, and by purchasing and sharing resources.

In terms of workplace literacy, regional networks can approach employers to get information about interests and needs, coordinating or brokering contracts, offering training and support, and raising awareness in the community. Key roles for sectoral networks in workplace and workforce literacy include: working with MTCU, coordinating and offering professional development, and identifying partner linkages. Key roles for umbrella groups in workforce literacy include: collecting materials, researching occupations, developing resources, and coordinating and developing training. Key roles for umbrella groups in workplace literacy include: helping ensure best practices, pursuing the interests of learners, building relationships between the literacy field and stakeholders, conducting consultations, as well as participating in marketing, and coordinating training.

Appendix:
Questions for the Consultation

OLC Consultation on Workforce and Workplace Literacy

Purpose of the Consultation:

To do a status check on workforce and workplace literacy with the LBS field (networks, sectors, umbrella groups, LBS agencies). Your responses are confidential and anonymous. Your responses are important as it is an opportunity to advise government through the OLC on these important issues.

OLC will analyze the results of the consultation and present the findings to MTCU and the literacy field in a report. The consultation will focus on:

- where LBS agencies stand in their ability to deliver workforce literacy (i.e. to meet the employment-related goals of their learners)
- what kind of supports LBS agencies need in the future to deliver workforce literacy
- where the LBS field stands in terms of coordinating and delivering workplace literacy (fee-for-service arrangements to deliver workplace literacy)
- what supports/knowledge/orientation/ the field would like with respect to workplace literacy
- how agencies, networks, sectors and umbrella groups can work together on mutual areas of concern with respect to workforce and workplace literacy

Instructions:

Your responses are confidential and anonymous. No names of people or organizations will be used in this report. We will send you a draft to give feedback on before the report is made final. Please answer the following questions.

Workforce Literacy

1. Are agencies in your area delivering workforce literacy?
2. How prepared are agencies in your area to deliver it? Why or why not?
3. What is working well in the delivery of workforce literacy?

4. What are the challenges and barriers agencies face in delivering workforce?
5. How could these challenges be addressed? (If you mention money, need to say how much and how it would be used.)
6. What involvement should networks, sectors, umbrella groups have in workforce literacy?

Workplace Literacy

1. Are agencies in your area delivering workplace literacy?
2. How prepared are agencies in your area to deliver it? Why or why not?
3. What is working well in the delivery of workplace literacy?
4. What are the challenges and barriers agencies face in delivering workplace literacy?
5. How could these challenges be addressed? (If you mention money, need to say how much and how it would be used.)
6. What involvement should networks, sectors, umbrella groups have in workplace literacy?