

Integrated Literacy Works! Making Workforce Development Efficient and Effective in Industrialized Nations

February 11, 2007

Tom Sticht
International Consultant in Adult Education

Throughout the industrialized nations of the world, which are fast becoming the informationalized nations of the world, there is an urgent need to up-skill the literacy, numeracy, and English language skills of what are increasingly becoming under-skilled workforces. International adult literacy surveys showing one- to two-fifths of a nation's workforce with lower than expected literacy, numeracy, or English language skills, and an emergent globalization of work being sent to lower wage nations have heightened the need for effective and efficient ways to help adults re-skill, up-skill, and cross-train as jobs shift globally and technologically.

One approach to improving the efficiency of basic skills and job skills training that is gaining in popularity in developed nations follows what I have called a Functional Context Education approach. In this approach, basic literacy, numeracy, and English language skills education is integrated into, or embedded in, or contextualized within, vocational education or job skills training. This approach is more efficient because it shortens the learners overall time required to be in education and training, and increases the amount of time that can be spent on a job providing productive activity in the marketplace and bringing home a paycheck. It does this because it removes the need to have learners spend time first raising their basic skills to some established level before they can enter into vocational education. Instead, the integrated approach makes it possible to both raise basic skills and learn vocational knowledge and skills at the same time.

In January 2007 I presented three speeches in the Dublin, Ireland area called Integrated Literacy Works! In one speech on 23 January at the National University of Ireland (NUI) at Maynooth I summarized a hundred years of professional wisdom using Functional Context Education to integrate literacy instruction with important skills training such as farming, banking, working, and parenting. Then I summarized four lines of scientific (quasi-experimental) research from the United States and United Kingdom that supports the integrated literacy approach to adult basic skills and vocational education.

The foregoing speech was followed by a two hour workshop in which I presented four case studies of Functional Context Education integrating literacy and vocational education, including methods, materials, evaluation, and outcomes. Cases included job training in a large organization, vocational English for English Language Learners (ELL/ESOL), integrated basic skills and electronics education, and examples of materials for integrating literacy and numeracy in five occupational education programs: Construction Trades, Automotive Industries, Electricity & Electronics, Office Technology, & Health Occupations.

Both the speech and the workshop at NUI Maynooth were especially relevant on 23 January because the university was celebrating the graduates of a unique certificate program in Integrated Literacy that was jointly sponsored with the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) in Ireland. NALA was the originator of the Integrated Literacy effort in

Ireland in which literacy, numeracy, and English language skills are taught integrated into vocational training.

The Integrated Literacy approach developed at NALA was picked-up by adult literacy educators in New Zealand, where a recent report on integrating literacy in other courses was developed. In a policy-oriented speech on 24 January for a group of policymakers and literacy education sponsors I spoke about the international efforts at integrated literacy in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In the UK Integrated Literacy is referred to as Embedded Literacy and I reviewed recent research showing that the greater the extent of embedding of literacy into vocational training, the greater the completion rates, achievements of qualifications, and other important outcomes for both literacy and vocational qualifications.

In the policy-oriented presentation I also reviewed the use of Functional Context Education with integrated/embedded/contextualized literacy and special subject matter content in job training in a large organization, vocational English for English Language Learners (ELL/ESOL), electronics education, and occupational education.

Implications were drawn for a policy and strategy on vocational and work-related education and training, based on Functional Context Education principles, including integrated literacy, numeracy, and English language education, which provide multiple returns to investments in adult literacy education. These "multiplier effects" of Functional Context Education go beyond the training in literacy, numeracy, English language and work/vocational skills and tend to return benefits in health, community activity, and, importantly, in parenting and grand-parenting that helps children with their school learning.

Ireland's NALA has produced a very important set of products for adult educators showing how to integrate literacy with vocational training, and it has pioneered a university level certificate program at a prestigious university for the professional development of adult educators who can work to integrate basic skills and jobs skills training. These activities provide a solid model for workforce development in our globalized world.

Given the increasing need for both basic skills and work-related skills in industrialized/informationalized nations, integrated literacy education provides a cost-beneficial approach for more rapidly advancing adults into the work they want and with the basic skills they need. In short, Integrated Literacy Works!

Online Resources:

For NALA's resources on integrating literacy go to www.nala.ie and click on Projects to find Integrating Literacy into Further Education and Vocational Training; under NALA's Publications search for Integrating Literacy Guidelines. For Functional Context Education reports go to www.nald.ca/fulltext/fce/cover.htm and see Functional Context Education: Making Learning Relevant in the 21st Century. Chapter 2 in this report provides information about integrated/embedded/contextualized literacy in six industrialized/informationalized nations. For integrated literacy in New Zealand go to www.workbase.org.nz and search publications for a guide to integrating literacy into other courses. For embedded literacy in the United Kingdom go to www.nrdc.org.uk.

Thomas G. Sticht
International Consultant in Adult Education
2062 Valley View Blvd.

El Cajon, CA 92019-2059
Tel/fax: (619) 444-9133
Email: tsticht@aznet.net