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Functional Context Education (FCE) Part 1: New Interest in FCE Theory and Principles for Integrating Basic Skills and Work Skills

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Functional Context Education principles were first formulated in a 1987 book colleagues and I wrote entitled *Cast-off youth: Policy and Training Methods from the Military Experience* (Sticht et al, NY: Praeger). After examining fifty years of research in the military on how the services had been able to take young adults without any real work experience, many of whom were almost functionally illiterate, and rapidly train them to become competent workers in a wide variety of jobs, several principles for program design were formulated. These principles became the foundation for the federal government's 1988 National Workplace Literacy Program, which is now defunct. In the 1990s I gave several presentations on FCE for workplace literacy in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Following is an extract from a recent article at the online newspaper in the United Kingdom called the Independent at <http://education.independent.co.uk/further/story.jsp?story=449220>

This article reveals a renewed call in the United Kingdom for Functional Context Education in which basic skills (literacy) instruction is integrated (embedded) within vocational job training.

In the United States, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 proposed amendments for 2003 presently being considered by the U. S. Senate (S. 1627) calls under Title 1 for workplace programs that integrate basic language and vocational training and under Title 2 for workplace literacy programs. Free copies of a Functional Context Education report with illustrations of integrated basic skills and job and parenting skills programs can be found under Full Text Documents online at www.nald.ca searched by S for my last name.

Begin Abridged Quote From Independent:

" A shameful secret

Poor literacy and poor numeracy cause accidents and huge loss of revenue in the UK construction industry, reports Robert Nurden

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When Jordan Atanassov arrived in England from Bulgaria five years ago he spoke no English. He took a job as a construction labourer but, while working at London's Canary Wharf, he made use of an on-site adult-education course in literacy. He is now training to be a scaffolder. "I have taken a step up in the world - literally," he says. "I have a dangerous job, and I have to be able to read health-and-safety manuals - I couldn't before. It's also helped me to understand life in Britain and get on better with colleagues." Not every construction worker is as lucky as Jordan.

Few bosses are prepared to give adult education the time of day. And it's UK workers in their thirties and forties who are least likely to come clean about their poor literacy skills. Yet increasingly, it is being acknowledged that a hefty proportion of the defects and accidents within the sector - a bill that amounts to £1bn a year - are caused by poor reading, writing and maths. Not being able to add up or read signs, misinterpretation of architects' instructions, wrong orders, filling out time-sheets incorrectly and poor communication are all evidence of on-site incompetence.

Now research by the Workplace Basic Skills Network of Lancaster University, on behalf of the Black Country Learning and Skills Council, has unearthed further evidence of the deplorable state of the sector's basic skills levels. Findings suggest that construction workers' reading abilities can be so poor that they often have difficulty finding the site they are supposed to be working on. "One of the most alarming things to come to light," says Joy Evans, who is heading the research in the Black Country, "is that the macho culture prevalent in building means that men are afraid they will lose face if they admit that they have poor literacy and numeracy skills."...

...But two important initiatives are underway. The construction industry is moving towards a fully trained, qualified workforce, and the Government is pouring £1.6bn over the next three years into improving the basic-skills level of Britain's workforce. The Construction Industry Training Board has introduced a system that requires operatives to hold a card of competence, guaranteeing that they satisfy minimum professional standards. The route to that card - introduced after pressure by the Government and the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians to cut the number of accidents - is via a course called OSAT (On-Site Assessment and Training).

But there's a catch. The health-and-safety part of the test has to be taken on a PC, and uses polysyllabic words. This, according to Mr Sloane, is going to cause "massive problems". "Not only do many of these guys struggle with reading, they have no experience of using a computer. The whole initiative could be a disaster," he says.

Ms Evans is in no doubt as to what needs to be done. "Among many employers and teachers, the favoured solution is to assess literacy and numeracy skills at the beginning of a construction course, and to embed those basic skills into the vocational content at an early stage," she says."

End Quote From Independent.

My experience in examining numerous workplace literacy programs in different countries is that not only can such programs produce learning outcomes of benefit for both employers and employees on the job, they frequently also produce spin-off benefits such as increased reading to children, more effective communication in the schools and other establishments in the community, and better interactions with health providers, producing what I call "double duty dollars." (DDD). That is, the dollars invested in integrated adult basic skills and job skills programs return multiple dollars worth of value in areas beyond the mere improvement of skills and job performance.

It is interesting to see a renewed interest in Functional Context Education in vocational areas in the UK. Perhaps this will lead to "poly-productive pounds! (PPP)"