

**Training the Rural Workforce:
Essential Skills Applications for
Rural Economic Development and Sustainability**

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for the

Public Policy Forum
National Symposium on Essential Skills

September 20, 2004

Essential Skills and the Rural Workplace

Much of rural Canada faces sustainability challenges. Volatility in the agricultural industry and the realities of competing in a knowledge-driven economy are two of the many challenges we rural Canadians must address if we wish to preserve our vibrant and strong rural communities. How can we best train our rural workforce to meet these challenges? This is a question we, as rural educational practitioners, have been asking ourselves for a number of years. In this paper, we address the issue of accessible essential skills training for the rural workforce. As such, we apply the Rural Lens (a strategic tool identified by the Canadian Rural Partnership) to essential skills practices in order to create a model for innovative essential skills applications that work within a rural framework. Using these ideas, we will demonstrate the need for programming that uses a rural-specific approach to develop and sustain a skilled rural workforce. We will also demonstrate that this type of training results in a sustainable, skilled workforce that in turn results in macroeconomic development for rural areas.

We are part of an educational team that works at the Taber Campus of the Lethbridge Community College (LCC). Taber is a rural community in Southern Alberta, and has a population of 7761.¹ Like many other rural areas, our community is driven largely by primary industries, especially by the agricultural and oil and gas sectors. Taber also has secondary industries focused in the food-processing sector, and tertiary industries that act as service support for the primary industries. For over 15 years, our campus has offered academic upgrading to adults in the Taber area. In recent years, budget cuts threatened program closure. Looking for sustainability, we called upon students, colleagues and other community stakeholders to help find a solution. These stakeholders took action, and demonstrated that it was important to keep educational opportunities alive in our community. We then sought ways to revitalize our campus. Thus began our search for an appropriate model for rural training.

We are familiar with the essential skills concepts through professional development activities such as participation in the annual Alberta Adult Literacy Association's Conference. In addition, Connie Gross participated in the Essential Skills Practitioner training offered by **Alberta Workforce Essential Skills (AWES)**. Suzanne Koersen attended a course on Employability Skills that provided a link between the essential skills profiles developed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and employability skills identified by the Conference Board of Canada. Through further research and our practitioner experiences, we realized the potential of essential skills training as a means of revitalizing our campus, and helping learners gain access to meaningful training opportunities in our community. Furthermore, as we worked with community stakeholders, we realized that essential skills training could play an intricate role in economic sustainability and growth. Therefore, we developed a process model for using essential skills training as a tool for workforce development. Initiatives based on this model will foster rural economic development and sustainability.

Essential skills concepts are part of an emerging field that is expanding rapidly. In order to discuss the implications of the Rural Lens on this dynamic field, it is important to clarify parameters for the term 'rural.' Many definitions for rural exist. We use a definition from Statistics Canada's Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin. This report suggests that it is important to use either a geographic or labour market perspective. As a labour market perspective is more significant for this paper, we follow Statistics Canada's suggestions that: "... a starting point or benchmark for understanding Canada's rural population ... would be the 'rural

¹ Alberta First.Com Website: <http://www.albertafirst.com/profiles/statspack/20473.html>

and small town definition'. This is the population living in towns and municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centers."²

Statistics Canada also suggests many people believe that 'rural' is actually more than just a geographic definition. Rural can also be considered a "social representation, a community of interest, a culture and way of life."³ As our experiences involve a community focus, we strongly support the suggestion that 'rural' is indeed a way of life. Therefore, when we discuss rural, we include the rural and small town definition, as well as the social and cultural perspective.

The **Rural Lens**, designed by the Canadian Rural Partnership and the Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada, is a tool that policy makers can use to ensure that rural economic and social factors are considered when designing policy. The Rural Lens suggests that the following questions be addressed: (a) "how is the initiative relevant to rural Canada," (b) "is the initiative designed to respond to priorities identified by rural Canadians," and (c) "how is the benefit to rural Canadians maximized."⁴

We apply the Rural Lens concepts by asking the first two of these questions. The 2003 report by the Canadian Rural Partnership – Rural Team Alberta identified the promotion of rural areas and more accessible education as two of the top 10 priorities. Their report stated, "Just under 80% of respondents felt that adult education and skills upgrading was important to the development of their community."⁵ Clearly, rural Albertans see training as a priority for community sustainability.

The Canadian Rural Partnership identified similar priorities in its report *Responding to Rural Canadians Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada*.⁶ This report identified the following as priorities: (a) "strengthen rural community capacity building, leadership and skills development," (b) "facilitate strategic partnerships... to facilitate rural community development," and (c) "work with ... governments to examine and pilot new ways to provide rural Canadians with access to education at a reasonable cost."⁷ Clearly, other rural Canadians also see training as a priority.

What role can this training play in economic development? To address this question, we look to the concept of a knowledge-based economy. The report *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canada's Innovation Strategy*, suggests, "Countries that succeed in the 21st century will be those with citizens who are creative, adaptable and skilled. ... By providing opportunities for all Canadians to learn and to develop their skills and abilities, we can achieve our commitment to economic growth and prosperity"⁸

When we look at training in the context of the knowledge-based economy, it is clear that we, as rural Canadians, need to continue upgrading our skills if we wish to promote economic sustainability and development. The skills needed for many occupations are changing rapidly.⁹ For example, today's truck driver or irrigation manager may need to know how to use global

² Beshiri, Roland, Ray D. Bollmna, Heather Clemenson, and Valerie du Plessis, Rural and Small Town Canada Analysis Bulletin *Definition of Rural* [Electronic version]. Statistics Canada Vol 3, No. 3 Nov. 2001 p. 12

³ Government of Canada. Statistics Canada, *Definitions of Rural*, p. 4

⁴ Government of Canada Canadian Rural Partnership, *Checklist of Rural Lens Considerations*, , 2003 http://www.rural.gc.ca/research/research_e.phtml#notes p. 2

⁵ Sorensen, Marianne, Canadian Rural Partnership, Rural Team Alberta, *Rural Priorities: Survey of Rural Albertans*, 2002, Government of Canada, p. 6. http://www.rural.gc.ca/team/ab/absurvey_e.phtml

⁶ Government of Canada Canadian Rural Partnership, *Checklist of Rural Lens Considerations*, , 2003 http://www.rural.gc.ca/checklist_e.phtml p. 2

⁷ Government of Canada Canadian Rural Partnerships, *Responding to Rural Canadians Federal Framework for Action in Rural Canada*, , 2001, p. 1.

⁸ Government of Canada Social Development Canada, *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians: Canada's Innovation Strategy*, 2004, p. 1.

⁹ *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians: Canada's Innovation Strategy*, p. 1.

positioning systems. The rural production worker may need to complete detailed safety checklists for record-keeping purposes. A farmer or farm manager needs a wide variety of highly specialized skills to keep the farm operating. On any given day, he or she may need to use the computer to access market information in order to hedge a canola crop, use complex math skills to calibrate a chemical sprayer, and write a memo regarding an environmental impact action plan. In short, very few rural occupations have remained untouched by our knowledge-driven society's demand for increased skills levels.

It is therefore evident from the aforementioned Rural Partnership report that accessible and affordable training opportunities are a priority for many rural Canadians. What is not yet clear is the level of awareness of essential skills concepts and their priority for rural Canadians. We have found little formal research that clearly identifies rural Canadians' perceptions of the value of essential skills. In addition, we believe that neither the rural workforce nor the rural employers have enough awareness of the exact language and concepts that form essential skills frameworks to identify them as a specific priority. In our experience, we have found that rural community stakeholders see a need for training, but still perceive training in terms of a traditional format that does not necessarily link essential skills with occupational skills. A recent discussion with Peter Lovering, General Manager of Chinook Community Futures Development Corporation, revealed that many stakeholders are not yet familiar with the specific language of essential skills. However, many understood the implications of the concepts. Peter Lovering pointed out the important link between micro-skills training and macro economic development when he stated:

Regarding essential skills, the importance of these skills cannot be overlooked. Too often, we concentrate on occupational skills and assume that everyone has sufficient skills to work in our society. Many people lack the skills that employers consider necessary in order to stay a productive employee. Many people are hired under the assumption that they can operate machinery, read manuals, write reports, etc. and are subsequently fired for not being able to complete what many consider easy tasks. The cost to the employee is that they have a firing on their employment record plus the damage to self-esteem. The cost to the employer is that they have to redo the hiring process and spent more time on the selection process. The cost to the government is the increase in draws on social program until persons lacking essential skills find alternative employment. Many employees lack the basic skills necessary for most jobs and cannot progress into meaningful employment. Even skills like dealing with people and basic customer service are rarely included in skills programs that may teach basic math and reading skills.¹⁰

The experiences of our colleague Greg Peterson, the program coordinator for Industrial Trades and Technologies at LCC, reinforces our belief that rural employers see a need for training, but do not yet have enough information to make the clear link between essential skills training and economic development. He has made numerous employer visits in the past year in an effort to explore ways in which essential skills training can be used as a tool for rural development. Few employers were aware of training in terms of an essential skills framework. However, once basic essential skills concepts were explained to employers, they quickly understood the benefits of such training.¹¹

We conclude that essential skills based training is important in rural Canada. Before we can develop a model for promoting this type of training, the Rural Lens mandates the consideration of rural realities when delivering such programming. To do so, we need to develop opportunities for training the workforce to succeed in the workplace, rather than slating ourselves to only training at the workplace. We have found some exciting case studies of successful essential skills-based initiatives in rural Canada. For example, the Conference Board of Canada has highlighted the examples of BHP Billiton Diamonds' dynamic Workplace Learning Program, and the La Ronge Motor Hotel's Workplace Training Puzzle, as successful applications of workplace literacy

¹⁰ Peter Lovering, Electronic communication, September 13, 2004.

¹¹ Greg Peterson, Personal communication, September 16, 2004.

initiatives.¹² The success of these examples is encouraging for essential skills growth. Their workplace framework, however, does not match the rural reality of our region, nor others like ours. Their reality focuses on a workplace location that could provide accessible training for an existing pool of employees. Our reality is that we have few single employers who can provide affordable training at the work site. Instead, we need to focus on the development of initiatives that bring together all community stakeholders in an effort to provide affordable training for the workplace. Our case study shows the practicality of this approach, and enables us to further develop our model for an essential skills framework fostering rural economic development and sustainability.

Two years ago the Vauxhall Coalition, a group of community stakeholders in the rural community of Vauxhall, Alberta were determined to find a solution for sustainability for their area. The community has a population of approximately 1100 people and has a service area of 8500.¹³ The community's economy is driven by the primary industries of agriculture and oil and gas. The volatility of these industries has led stakeholders to search for new and innovative ways to maintain their rural community. They had two important expectations for training initiatives. First, they felt it was important that training opportunities take place in their community to increase accessibility for residents. Second, they expected that individuals who completed training would become active members of the local workforce, thereby driving economic development and sustainability.

How could a small rural community create such local training opportunities? Yes, it's a mammoth task, but not an unattainable one. The stakeholders soon determined that success could be achieved if a collection of partnerships were created. Thus partnerships were created with the Vauxhall Coalition, the Vauxhall High School, and Lethbridge Community College. Bringing these partners together was a natural fit. The community was seeking training, the high school was seeking utilization of their facility, and the college had a successful track record of providing trades training. The next step was to address the question of who would be trained.

In past years the community has seen huge growth in the Low German Mennonite (LGM) population. The population consists of informally skilled, hard-working individuals who have had few opportunities for formal academic and skills training. The LGM population struggles with a lack of consistent employment opportunities. Many are underemployed, or work as entry-level labourers in the agriculture sector.

At the time of the initiative, the local economy was, and still is, facing large trades shortages. The partners therefore determined that the creation of a pre-employment carpentry program would be a realistic first step. The next step was to find potential learners. Through a partnership established with the local Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) office, clientele was recruited for the program. However, the first stumbling block occurred when we recruited learners and found that the LGM learners had little formal academic training. How could these individuals reach the required theoretical skill levels considering their academic background?

Traditionally pre-employment carpentry is a 10-week program that allows participants to complete the first year of apprenticeship carpentry theory. We decided that we could extend the traditional program from 10 to 14 weeks, and that one day a week would be spent on essential numeracy and reading skills for the carpentry program. In addition, we created an evening class that focused on the numeracy skills required for first-year carpentry math. The class was offered two months prior to the beginning of the pre-carpentry program.

¹² Campbell, Alison, 2004, The Conference Board of Canada, Insights You Can Count On, Awards for Excellence in Workplace Literacy, Large Business Winner, 2003, *Mining for Performance Excellence at BHP Billiton Diamonds Inc. [Electronic Version]*

¹³ Town of Vauxhall Web site, www.town.vauxhall.ab.ca 2004

The pre-employment format required us to seek cooperation from the local apprenticeship office. Traditionally individuals are required to complete an apprenticeship entrance exam prior to entering the pre-employment trades program. However, we knew that the learners would have difficulty reaching this level of success prior to the essential skills training, but were confident that the participants would be able to achieve the required skills level closer to the conclusion of the program. We worked with the apprenticeship office to allow the learners to write the entrance exam at the completion of the program.

As the participants worked their way through the program, we witnessed that the specific essential skills training was guiding their learning in a very positive direction. By the end of the program we were pleased to see that our program goals had been met. All participants completed the program with a very high level of theoretical and skills knowledge. They all successfully completed the apprenticeship entrance exam, and their first-year theory and practical exams. Furthermore, the community of Vauxhall had achieved a level of success with their sustainability initiative. Shortly after the program ended, all of the participants from this program were hired and were working within the local trading area.

The Vauxhall Project was the action research that confirmed our beliefs on how to implement essential skills training within a rural community. The essential skill training was especially relevant because it linked directly with occupational training and experiences. Furthermore, the essential skills were linked to the participants' prior learning experiences. We used this experience as a practical base for our working model for using essential skills training as a tool for rural economic sustainability and development. We believe our model is dynamic model, and will evolve as we have more opportunities to implement it. We have identified the stages in this rural process as follows: (a) 'I'nitiative identification, (b) 'D'evelopment and implementation of 'E'ssential skills programming, and (c) 'A'ssessment of the initiative. We have termed this process the **Rural IDEA** for using essential skills as a means of fostering rural economic development and sustainability.

The first phase of our model focuses on the identification of a community-based goal or need. The purpose of this phase will be to develop a realistic strategy for addressing the goal or need. Community stakeholders may include any or all of the following: chambers of commerce, business and industry associations, government agencies, community colleges, rural further education and literacy associations, and other groups that are seeking both social and economic development. The group should also include representation from the workforce, and may include current and potential employees. At this point, an essential skills initiative task team may be called in to facilitate this process. This task team should consist of members appropriate to the specific issue. It most likely includes members who have experience in community and business liaison, project coordination, and essential skills curriculum.

In our Vauxhall case study, the Vauxhall Coalition, a community stakeholders group, brought forward an issue. However, this process does not always occur in rural communities. A single stakeholder may start an initiative by bringing an issue forward to an essential skills development team. We have also had success in following this approach. Recently, we were contacted by a local industry to discuss a specific skills training need. Murray Rochelle, a community representative who serves on our advisory committee, facilitated meetings with Greg Peterson and appropriate company representatives. These meetings took place in each company's workplace, allowing Greg to see the facility and establish a working relationship with each company. Murray's support linked the community, our college and the company. As a result of these meetings, we are now working on an initiative that will integrate essential skills concepts with power-engineering training. This initiative is supported by local industries that see a need for power engineers. We believe the success of this initiative is largely a result of the personal contact which rural employers often expect.

These experiences bring our discussion back to the Rural Lens question: “How is the benefit to rural Canadians maximized?” We believe that to maximize the benefit to rural Canadians, the model for essential skills awareness in a rural area must also involve personal contact with stakeholders, including business and industry leaders. Greg Peterson explains his approach as follows:

My first goal is to provide them [employers] with something that can help them succeed, and increase their employee’s performance. And that’s where the essential skills profile becomes crucial in the development of a performance solution. I can then bring these ideas back to the community stakeholders, and together we can identify a realistic initiative that is truly based on community economic development and sustainability.¹⁴

Once the essential skills initiative has been clearly linked to the economic and development goals of the stakeholders, we move into the second phase of our model—the development and implementation of a rural-based essential skills program. At this point we need to address two key program delivery questions: (a) how does the Rural Lens affect program delivery, and (b) how does it affect the creation and use of learning materials? The Rural Lens suggests that program planners must address rural delivery issues such as the following: (a) geographic factors such as distance, (b) the appropriateness of the delivery method, and (c) the partnering of stakeholders and the use of community-based organizations to maximize benefits and address the uniqueness of rural learning.¹⁵

Rural areas typically face many barriers when accessing education. Barriers include distance, affordability, and lack of access to adequate technology programs, lack of program funding, available or qualified instructors and proper training facilities.¹⁶ Alternate delivery methods help overcome some of these barriers. Programming may take place on a full- or part-time basis, and can happen in the daytime, evening or on weekends. It may also take place by distance education, or a combination of distance and on-site programming. We caution, however, that if the alternative delivery method chosen involves the use of technology, programmers must consider the rural experience. Many rural homes do not have access to broadband Internet, and rely on dial-up access. Furthermore, many underprepared learners who are good candidates for essential skills-based training may also have limited computer skills, and are nervous about using technology. Again, program planners must remember to provide support to these participants as they learn how to use the technology.

Many other solutions exist, such as mobile classrooms, traveling instructors, and alternate locations. Our solution has been to create multi-level and multi-subject classrooms. For example, during our pre-employment programming experiment we shared math tutorial and learning support instruction with our existing upgrading and the pre-employment carpentry learners. This experience was not only a cost-effective way to share instruction of content, but also a way to add new dimensions to a learner’s experience. As we prepare for more programming, we plan to include multi-level, multi-subject classes whenever possible so that we can maximize resources and learning experiences.

However, as we plan for this type of programming, we are challenged by the lack of appropriate learning materials reflecting our rural reality. Although some excellent essential skills resources have been developed, many more are needed. We therefore see a strong need for research and development of rural-based essential skills learning materials that will enable us to offer multi-level programs aimed at training for the workplace, not training in the workplace.

Because we are suggesting that workforce training will not necessarily take place within a specific workplace, we recommend that rural businesses and industries should still play a role in making

¹⁴ Greg Peterson, Personal Communication, September 16, 2004.

¹⁵ Canadian Rural Partnership, Checklist of Rural Lens Considerations, 2003, p. 2.

¹⁶ Canadian Rural Partnership, Checklist of Rural Lens Considerations, 2003, p. 2.

training accessible and affordable. They can participate in the process in a variety of ways such as the following: (a) they can help employees or potential employees get training by paying for some or all of their tuition, (b) they can allow for some time off work or flex time to attend training, (c) they can provide work-experience placements, (d) they can offer authentic workplace materials or other learning resources, and (e) they can give input into curriculum.

All other stakeholders also have a role in ensuring the accessibility and affordability of training. In short, if communities work together and share resources, programs can be made more accessible and affordable. The idea that the learner who learns at home will stay at home reinforces the idea that community-based essential skills training is an important tool for rural community development and sustainability.

The third phase of our initiative involves assessment, a phase that flows through all parts of the process. Formative assessment should be included in all stages of the initiative, and involve input from the stakeholders. The purpose of this formative assessment is to ensure that the initiative is meeting the appropriate goals, and to identify any interventions that may be needed. In the early stages of the initiative, we should develop the most appropriate method of formative assessment, based on the rural-specific needs of the initiative. This method should ensure that we continue to receive input from the key stakeholders to make sure the initiative is meeting the appropriate goals. Upon completion of the program, a summative assessment should be conducted to determine immediate success of the program, and to make recommendations for future initiatives. In some cases, a long-term assessment will be required to track the initiative's impact on rural economic sustainability.

In order for the Rural IDEA process model to be effective, we recommend the following actions. First, apply the Rural Lens when developing initiatives that impact rural Canada. Second, consider essential skills initiatives as tools for rural economic development and sustainability. Third, create initiatives to increase awareness of essential skills for rural stakeholders. Fourth, generate rural stakeholder-based initiatives that result in accessible and affordable essentials skills training. Finally, develop initiatives that will increase the availability of essential skills learning materials reflecting rural realities.

A search for practical solutions to issues is typical of the rural way of life. Because we, as rural Canadians, often face issues such as access to appropriate resources and services, we have learned to work with what we have within our grasp. We live this reality daily. Coming from a rural agricultural background we have found this desire for practicality and innovation has helped us find solutions for our campus's sustainability. To do so, we have turned to our rural community for support. In typical rural fashion, our community has come through. Their support has helped us develop a model for rural essential skills training that can apply to many other rural communities across Canada. Rural stakeholders may not yet speak the language of the essential skills framework, but they are ready to hear it as they seek out solutions for economic sustainability and development.

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