



Canadian Labour and Business Centre
Centre syndical et patronal du Canada

340 rue MacLaren Street, Ottawa, ON K2P 0M6

Tel: 613-234-0505 Fax: 613-234-2482

NOTES FOR A PRESENTATION TO
Synergy: Essential Skills in the Workplace
2006 Workplace Practitioners' Institute
sponsored by AWENS

BRIGID HAYES

DIRECTOR, LABOUR
CANADIAN LABOUR AND BUSINESS CENTRE

FRIDAY, JUNE 2, 2006

Thank you for your kind introduction. It is a pleasure to be here with you all again...it has been a few years since I've attended an AWENS and project team meeting, so this is a great opportunity for me to renew old acquaintances and make new ones.

I've been asked to provide you with a national perspective on the issue of workplace literacy and essential skills. You've had the benefit this morning of hearing about the international adult literacy and life skills survey, so you have the hard data at hand. And, you were able to meet with Chris Holland who is a font of information about what is happening in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

What I would like to do during the time allotted to me is to give you some of my thoughts on the state of workplace literacy and essential skills in Canada, some of the challenges and opportunities that I see, and offer some ideas of what it all means to you folk who are working here in the Maritimes.

Before beginning however, I would like to let you know where I am coming from, a bit about myself, and about the organization I work for. This, I hope, will help you to situation my remarks in context.

For about 14 years, I worked for the National Literacy Secretariat where I developed the business/labour partnership program and became something of the 'go-to' person for workplace literacy. I am not an adult educator, but would say that I am more of a facilitator. There's nothing I like better than bringing people together. While I was at the NLS, I had the privilege of working with Canada's finest workplace literacy practitioners, with dedicated and inspired provincial government officials,

and with committed business and labour leaders. We were able to support innovative projects, sponsor symposiums on best practices, assessment and practitioner training, and build a Canada-wide network of best practice. One of my proudest accomplishments was working with provincial governments to create consortiums to promote workplace literacy, including the consortiums that are still in existence in Nova Scotia and PEI.

So, this background gives me a good perspective from a historical point of view. I've been around since the original Southam and LSUDA surveys in the late 1980s, and was part of the initial development of the Essential Skills framework in the early 1990s.

But there is another perspective which I bring to our conversation today. When I left the NLS, I joined the Canadian Labour and Business Centre. This organization is Canada's longest standing business and labour forum where issues related to the labour market and skills are discussed. It was a natural progression for me to move from working with business and labour on the issues of workplace literacy to these larger issues.

For me, partnership is not just a sentiment of the day. For me, it is a very real manifestation of the commitment of people from different backgrounds and perspectives that come together on areas of mutual concern. Those of you here today from project committees demonstrate that partnership. For me, partnership is a deliberative strategy that needs care and feeding. Not everything that goes by the word 'partnership' is that and I think we all need to protect what we value in our partnerships from those who would have partnership mean 'contracting out' or 'devolution'.

At the CLBC, we work hard at preserving the partnerships. We have business and labour in equal numbers on our board of directors, and the provinces and territories, the federal government along with educational organizations at the table.

I want to talk to you briefly about a new initiative we are running called the Workplace Partners Panel. We have created regional task forces to discuss the issue of the aging workforce and its implications for labour market and skills issues. Yes, this does very much affect each of you here today. In Atlantic Canada, we have a task force of business and labour leaders who have just recently hosted a series of deliberative dialogues. The Task Force had identified three key topics – optimizing our workforce, creating economic development opportunities and improving collaboration with the education and training system. We just met on Tuesday in Halifax to outline the key messages that the Atlantic Task Force will be bringing to the national Workplace Partners Panel later this month.

The reason I raise this, is not just because I would like to promote what we're doing, it is because all of us, whether we are business or labour representatives or workplace educators, will have to face the skills shortages that will arise when the baby boomers retire. Re-training existing workers, providing opportunities for new workers, creating opportunities for people to stay at home or to return are all part of the solution. But what makes the WPP different is that business and labour are leading the discussion and they are not prepared to hand over to the educators and governments the sole responsibility for responding to these issues.

This is what partnership is about, and we had better be well skilled in creating and sustaining partnerships if we are to ensure the quality of life each of us expects.

As we know from the numbers, Atlantic Canada experiences lower levels of literacy than elsewhere in the country. This has not changed in almost twenty years. You all know the many reasons why change has not taken place – the lower levels of education of older Maritimers, the out-migration of the educated youth.

However, I myself prefer to focus not on the individuals themselves, but on the conditions within our society that do not support strong literacy skills. Here I am speaking about a culture that does not embrace lifelong learning, that considers education an individual investment, not a societal one, and that does not support the creation of literacy-rich jobs.

We can educate our young people and have them possess strong literacy skills once they leave school, but without a culture that allows them to use those skills, to hone those skills, to continue to learn, we will not change those literacy numbers.

This is where all of you come into the picture. You realize, whether you are an employer, a worker or a practitioner, that the workplace is one of the most important venues for the use of literacy skills. We all know about how workplaces are changing, about the need for improved skills and increased training. Unfortunately, despite the mountains of evidence, not every employer is willing or able to embrace work and learning. Some are too small to mount programs, others believe that the responsibility lies elsewhere, while others hope they can get by with

organizing work with a minimal demand for critical thinking or decision-making.

This is where workplace education programs come into play. They provide an easy way for employers and workers to upgrade. We've been doing these programs for years and without a doubt, they work.

But perhaps it is time to think about the 'next generation' of workplace programs. How can we grow this field?

However, before turning to the future, I want to address one other issue. You will, no doubt, have noticed that I am using the term 'workplace literacy', rather than Essential Skills. There are a few reasons for this. The first is that I'm not big on change and I've used workplace literacy for so many years now that I find it hard to get my tongue around 'essential skills'. But on a more serious note, I've been avoiding using that term unless I can be very clear with my audience about what I mean and don't mean by "Essential Skills".

I have always maintained that the notion of literacy and essential skills as a continuum was the most revolutionary contribution to adult literacy. We no longer saw literacy as an either/or scenario. With the development of the Essential Skills Framework, we were able to see how essential skills were used in every job, from the least complex to the CEO. Literacy and essential skills was moved out of the world of 'those people' and into a world of 'all of us'. All of us need to keep our skills honed and fine-tuned. All of us need to improve skills, to make sure we have the skills needed for the task at hand. Essential skills has helped us all in making the case that these skills are anything but 'basic'.

But let's not make literacy and essential skills levels the new grade levels. Remember that IALLS measures a continuum and people who are at, say a level 2, range from 200 to 299 – that's an awfully big span. Some people are near the top, while some are near the bottom, so it is not a matter of just moving people from level 2 to level 3. Moreover, people's ranking is based on what they can do 80% of the time – this means that they might reach the next highest level some of the time.

Workplace literacy programs were developed on a foundation of good practice. This good practice understood that workplaces are complex organizations, that literacy and essential skills are only two of a myriad of factors that affect performance and productivity. This is why practitioners do organizational needs assessments, to understand what are the various forces at play and to ensure that they do not 'oversell' the benefits of workplace education programs.

Workplaces are also complex in terms of the various players. Employers and labour do not have the same objectives. At times, the quest for profits can come at a cost in terms of jobs. Workers can fear that their livelihood might be threatened by literacy programs. This is why project teams are critical to successful workplace education programs. Project teams provide that safe, neutral ground where issues can be discussed and resolved.

Essential Skills is not a panacea to be sold to employers. It cannot stand on its own, but must be embedded within good workplace education practice. The labour movement has cautioned against a narrow interpretation of essential skills, calling upon the federal government to work with it to situate essential skills within union principles and principles of adult education. For me, the notion of essential skills is a framework that needs to be used in conjunction with

the other tools that have been developed over the years, such as ONAs, project teams, and avoidance of standardized testing. Essential skills should not be about teaching each of the nine skills as discrete or separate skills, but rather a way for the practitioner to better understand the requirements faced by the worker. As Chris Holland so nicely put it, essential skills should be 'built in' not 'bolted on'.

As a term, essential skills does have a certain panache that the word literacy does not, and for that reason, I fully support its use in promoting workplace education. But I would caution against leaving an impression that essential skills are a set of skills that exist independent of the workplace context.

Moving forward in an integrated fashion will be a challenge. Having spent years working in government, I know how important it is to account for expenditures of public funds. However, having spent time in the literacy movement, I know how difficult this can be. It is especially difficult in terms of workplace education.

We know that good workplace education uses an integrated approach. Literacy and essential skills are embedded in tasks and activities and are not stand-alone subjects. Good practice means that you do not offer 'literacy' courses but rather communications skills, blueprint reading or how to become ISO ready. We need to search for ways to demonstrate the value of expenditures on workplace education, when the literacy and essential skills are embedded in an integrated approach.

We need to explore how we can ensure that every training program considers and acknowledges the literacy and essential skills element. Training on new pieces of equipment ought to have taken into

consideration the literacy and essential skills elements required to be successful at learning to use the new equipment.

As we move into future, I'd like to see workplace literacy and essential skills broadly accepted as common practice by not only the training and development community but also by the HR professional community. We need to figure out the role of literacy and essential skills in recruitment and retention and, then be prepared to offer advice and solutions to the HR community.

We ought to be thinking about the new and emerging workplace trends that can be tied to workplace education. In the early days, WHMIS was the number one reason employers gave for seeking assistance. Later on, there was SPC, ISO, and HACCP. These new work processes created new and different ways in which workers had to use their literacy and essential skills. The challenges faced by workers led many trainers to call in the workplace educators. We need to look at what is coming up – the 'new WHMIS' and be prepared.

As we move towards an aging society and an ever-changing workplace, workplace educators need to be ahead of the issues and ready to adapt and modify their programs and offerings. We need to ensure that workplace education is a full partner in an employee's learning plan.

But it is not just the workplace educators who bear responsibility for moving ahead. I firmly believe that we must find ways to continue to support and encourage business and labour to be and stayed involved. I am heartened by the call for more support for workplace literacy consortia that came out of the national committee that reported to Minister Bradshaw last fall – a recommendation that I hope the new government will heed. I am also heartened by our own research at the

CLBC that shows business and labour leaders believe that skills shortages can only be addressed in a collaborative fashion. Indeed, the recent findings by the Canadian Labour Congress that labour members of workplace education consortia expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the process, speaks to the power of partnership.

You have created something very special here in Nova Scotia, which of course was stolen by PEI! – and that something is an integrated approach to workplace education supported by business, labour, and government. You all need to know just how special this is. In this country, Manitoba and Quebec are the only other provinces that, like NS and PEI, support workplace literacy. In my own province of Ontario, government support exists only for workforce literacy.

So on those days when you might feel discouraged, just remember that you are engaged in a unique and innovative enterprise that is the envy of others across this country, and indeed internationally.

As practitioners and project team members, you are at the forefront of workplace change. You demonstrate best practice by forming partnerships to build strong programs.

Partnerships led by business and labour enable governments to be supportive, rather than heavy handed. These partnerships signal to workers and to other employers the potential in collaborative arrangements. Partnerships state that the skill levels of Canada's workforce are a concern for all stakeholders.

Much of what we now consider as good practice originated here in the Maritimes. You have set a standard for workplace education. The challenge will be to continue to harness the energy and enthusiasm of all

the workplace partners, to find new and innovative ways to address workplace literacy and essential skills, and to build on that body of good practice that has enabled learners to reach their goals.

Thank you very much for your consideration.