



LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA'S NORTH

In October 2013, the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), an initiative of the OECD, released its latest assessment of foundational skills of working-age adults around the world. The PIAAC statistics tell a story of a significant labour market challenge facing Canada's three northern territories.

As Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon experience rapid social and economic changes, including increased participation in resource extraction and globalized economies, northerners are seeking the literacy and essential skills (LES) development needed to access new opportunities and support thriving communities. Adult learning, after all, impacts individual and community well-being, along with personal and cultural identity, political self-determination, and economic development.

But, as the PIAAC results suggest, persistent low education and skill levels among both unemployed and already-employed adults and youth add up to an out-of-balance and under-performing labour market.

The challenge seems daunting, yet, as was made clear during the Made in the North Policy and Practices Exchange in October 2012, strategies are coming into focus. Made in the North was an unprecedented event that brought together some 140 adult educators, employers, policy makers, language experts, literacy practitioners, aboriginal and community leaders, and others working in the area of literacy and essential skills development in the three territories and Labrador. The Yukon Literacy Coalition, NWT Literacy Council, and Ilitaqsiniq-the Nunavut Literacy Council jointly organized the event, which was held in Yellowknife, NWT, from October 23 to 25, 2012.

Four key issues driving the LES agenda in the North emerged from this event.

- How to tap grass-roots innovation through non-formal community-based programs
- How to leverage innovative approaches developed by northern colleges
- How to use workplace-based learning as a model for building basic skills
- How to navigate multi-cultural and multi-lingual worlds and understand multiple literacies

Tapping grassroots innovation with non-formal community-based programs

Non-formal community-based programs take place outside of formal learning institutions. Many are culturally-rooted and involve “embedded” skills development, language revitalization, and personal development along with literacy and other skills.

Non-formal programs offer flexibility for participants to determine their own goals and evaluate their own progress and success. Activities are concrete with practical outcomes. As a recent assessment of one such program in Nunavut noted, all participants, whether “instructor” or “student,” have something to teach and something to learn. These programs recreate, in a more structured context, the informal, intergenerational, and situated learning characteristic of traditional knowledge transmission, though with their structure they provide a bridge to more formal learning. The value of these programs is reflected in strong public approval: while there are persistent difficulties in recruitment and retention for adult learning in many places in the North, non-formal, culturally-anchored programs, particularly in Nunavut, are multiplying, generally with waiting lists and high retention.

Inspired projects are popping up throughout the North. In NWT, the community of Behchoko, some 100 kilometres from Yellowknife, has come up with a non-formal community-based program of its own. The Tlich Imbe summer program offers secondary and post-secondary students traditional skills development, certified safety training, and employment skills. True to the community’s values and culture, it combines traditional activities, such as sewing, beading, hunting, and fishing, with workshops on first aid and GPS mapping that prepare participants for the working world.

And in Yukon, the Yukon Literacy Coalition in late 2011 piloted learning circles in a unique “community”: the Whitehorse Correctional Centre. The Linking Essential Skills to Life project involved student-centred learning circles without a formal hierarchy. Learners decided on which of nine essential skills they wanted to develop and chose a project with that skill in mind. Built into the program was peer-to-peer learning. By all accounts, the project was a great success.

The Miqqut Project

The Miqqut project was developed by Ilitaqsiq-Nunavut Literacy Council and piloted twice in Rankin Inlet. This initiative embedded literacy and language skill development in a traditional sewing skills sessions, in which participants made fur clothing. In the two pilots, five elders taught young women how to process caribou and seal skins, which part of the skin to use for what purpose, and how to make sinew from caribou tendons. In the second pilot, researchers also intentionally embedded contextualized literacy activities: participants documented the parts of the animals and different pattern pieces, and organized personal project portfolios that included the patterns, their notes on techniques, and other self-generated documents related. Time to journal and read were also integrated into the daily program. Miqqut was found to have enhanced participants’ ability and confidence in sharing and gaining information through oral and written communication and document use in both Inuktitut and English and supported greater job and school readiness.

MORE: www.ilitaqsiq.ca/miqqut-project

Leveraging innovative approaches by colleges

With help from the federal Northern Adult Basic Education Program (NABEP), the three territorial colleges — Aurora College, Yukon College, and Nunavut Arctic College — are expanding their reach in adult learning, literacy, and skills development.

NABEP was set up to prepare working age adults to either enter the workforce directly or to take vocational training before entering the workforce. Beginning in 2011-12, the Government of Canada committed to investing \$27 million over five years; territorial colleges will be able to decide how to best build capacity, such as hiring more instructors or developing educational resources.

In the case of Aurora College in NWT, NABEP funding will cover about 12 initiatives leading up to 2014-15. Aurora College already has 23 community learning centres scattered across the territory, all with adult basic education (ABE) and literacy programming. At Aurora, about 40 to 50 percent of programming relates to essential skills training. As well, the NWT Literacy Council is assisting Aurora College to develop short-term embedded literacy courses as part of NABEP.

Nunavut Arctic College is now increasing the number of bilingual educators and recruitment of elders. It is also developing, with support from Ilitaqsiniq–Nunavut Literacy Council, a more holistic ABE curriculum that is learner-centred and culturally-rooted.

In Nunavut and elsewhere in the North, integrating learning technology is the biggest challenge in adult basic education, mainly due to the lack of bandwidth and reliable connectivity as well as inadequate technical support. At Arctic College, students are now experimenting with iPads and online community-building sites on the NING platform.

At Yukon College, the past five years has seen a growing shift in adult basic education, towards project-based learning: embedding numeracy, reading, and writing into projects. The shift has yielded promising results, as students are moving on with transferable and work-ready skills. An example is a trades-based project in which students built a prototype greenhouse through the Yukon Research Centre, an arm of Yukon College.

Dechinta: Bush University Centre for Research and Learning

Dechinta: Bush University Centre for Research and Learning is a northern-led initiative delivering land-based educational experiences such as hide preparation and academic courses such as northern land claims and governance, all accredited by University of Alberta. Led by northern leaders, elders, and professors, the programs are offered in a remote lodge accessible only by bush plane, snowmobile, or dog team. They provide students with a transformative learning experience that's truly Made in the North.

MORE: dechinta.ca/

Workplace-based learning as a model for building basic skills

Embedded learning involves integrating literacy and essential skills development into other learning and training activities, especially training *for* work and training *at* work. An example would be learning how to fill out an incident report to comply with health and safety regulations.

Workplace education is a collaborative process involving employers, workers, and, where appropriate, unions. It involves customized skills development that is determined by the goals of both the employer and the worker and is based on actual workplace tasks and materials. There is no cookie cutter approach: based on what is gleaned from an initial assessment, programs are shaped around the needs of the group and organization.

Workplace education is well established in many parts of southern Canada but has yet to be embraced widely in the North. The dispersal of workforces is a special challenge in the North, as employers often have a small number of workers in all or most communities across the territory. As well, many important workplace texts, such as policy manuals and employment standards, are available only in English. And written government materials relating to health and safety issues are often not written in plain language. These are significant barriers for many people in the North for whom English is a second language.

In Nunavut, Iltaqsinig-NLC conducted a series of workplace education pilot projects with a number of employers, including two in Rankin Inlet. As well, workshops and a made-in-Nunavut training manual will help embed essential skills in existing workplace programs, mentorships, and materials.

In NWT, there have been a number of workplace education success stories, notably with resource company BHP Billiton, Northern Transportation Company Limited, Tlicho Government, Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, and several small businesses. Some of the challenges include an insufficient number of trained workplace educators, insufficient funding, getting buy-in from employers, accessing remote communities, new technologies requiring new skills, and the existence of 11 official languages. A recurring issue has been the need to arrange for release time for education, job mentoring programs, and one-on-one programs to support workers.

Pan-northern View of Workforce/Workplace Education

Over the years, Iltaqsinig-Nunavut Literacy Council, NWT Literacy Council, and Yukon Literacy Coalition have produced research reports on workforce/workplace literacy and essential skills. The reports can be accessed online.

Improving Essential Skills for Work and Community: Workplace and Workforce Literacy

Nunavut Literacy Council and NWT Literacy Council, 2007

http://www.iltaqsinig.ca/sites/default/files/files/improving_essential_skills_for_work_and_community.pdf

Workforce and Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Final Report: Interests and Prospects in Yukon
Yukon Literacy Coalition, 2013

<http://www.yukonliteracy.ca/workplace.html>

Navigating multi-cultural and multi-lingual worlds

Elders from Gjoa Haven, Nunavut, describe literacy as the ability to “see our world and know what we are seeing.” Literacy is, indeed, about far more than the “three Rs” — it is central to our cultures and societies and includes the broad skill-set upon which all adults build their lives. As Nancy Jackson of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education said during the Made in the North forum, “In real life, literacies are always plural, complex, multi-faceted, and are always embedded in social and cultural activities.” Effective northern adult learning policies and practices must work from this expanded perspective.

For some time, academic researchers, working closely with communities around the world, have been arguing that literacy can involve many ways of knowing, in different settings, languages, cultural groups, and communities. This means that literacy cannot be learned or measured in standardized ways. But policy makers in Canada and internationally have been moving in the opposite direction. Emphasizing literacy as an economic resource, they are increasingly committed to standardizing meanings and measuring selected kinds of literate performance.

This gap between current theory and current directions in policy has practical implications both for practitioners and those inside government. Says Nancy Jackson, “If we mis-understand and mis-define the nature of the learning problems we are trying to fix, and apply solutions and then assessments that are based on this mis-diagnosis, then we quite predictably will see little or no results — no return — from our efforts and our investment. Fortunately, this does not mean that people aren't learning anything in literacy programs; they

regularly show us quite the contrary. But it means that the official tools being used to measure and report that learning are unable to capture what is actually being achieved. The result is considerable frustration on all sides.”

Living Literacies

What are the essential skills for living and working in Ulukhaktok, NWT, or Cambridge Bay, Nunavut? What are the living literacies of these communities? How do these skills and literacies sustain people in the present, connect them to the past, and ensure a future for this generation and beyond? These questions inspired a joint research project between the communities of Ulukhaktok and Cambridge Bay, the NWT Literacy Council, and the University of Lethbridge. The research team documented elders' stories, songs, and knowledge. Researchers studied old Inuinait clothing and tools stored at the British Museum in London for more than 150 years. They held workshops in the community to replicate items in the Museum collection. Team members speak of how “sleeping words” and skills are “woken up” through their research and community workshops.

MORE: www.nwt.literacy.ca/research_by_nwt.htm

About the Northern Alliance for Literacy and Essential Skills

The Northern Alliance for Literacy and Essential Skills (NALES) is a new research and capacity-building initiative of northern Canada's three territorial literacy organizations — Ilitagsiniq-Nunavut Literacy Council, NWT Literacy Council, and Yukon Literacy Coalition.

Established in the fall of 2013, NALES shares knowledge and resources, fosters local innovation and research, and supports a literacy and essential skills network across Canada's North. Its core purpose is to strengthen LES development to improve labour market outcomes in our northern communities.

Learn more: www.nales.ca