



## UNITE Local 459 Opens Its Doors to an Innovative 'Learning Experience'

ANN HANEY

In October of 1994, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) Local 459, in partnership with the Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee (WEMSC) supported a project called *Communication Barriers to Union Participation*. This project was to assess the communication skill needs of union stewards and members. The project highlighted the need for educational programs which would target the development of basic communication skills required in their roles as workers, union members and citizens. The results of this

member can come to learn or practice. *The Learning Experience Centre* is run by a committee which reports to the Joint Council of Local 459. The committee is composed of executive members as well as students from some of the classes and is responsible for making decisions and recommendations concerning the overall operation of the *Centre*.

*The Learning Experience Centre* focuses on the 'holistic' approach to teaching, one which allows workers to use what they are learning in whatever way they choose. It is the goal of the *Centre* to offer programs which will meet the needs of each

individual. This requires taking the whole person into account—as a worker, community member, and a member of a larger family unit. The program which the *Centre* has developed is not only geared towards workplace skills, but also towards developing the 'wellness' of each student. We all know that the way people feel about themselves and their surroundings directly affects the way they learn.

To target workplace needs, *The Learning Experience Centre*, with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat, has developed and implemented an integrated computer-based learning program whereby computers are used as primary tools in the teaching of literacy skills.

*The Learning Experience Centre's* intent is to integrate traditional teaching techniques with computer-based training. Computer skills are taught in context, with actual projects that are relevant to the lives of students. These may include writing a letter, an article or a newsletter. The

programs offered by the *Centre* are based on the needs of its membership and include English language, mathematics, reading comprehension, writing, attaining Canadian citizenship, and GED (General Educational Development) preparation. It is also the goal of the *Centre* to implement a family learning component where school age children will have a place to do their homework and participate in other learning activities. The *Centre* also hopes to introduce a computerized personal income tax return program into the curriculum next year.

Presently, *The Learning Experience Centre* runs six classes a week—Monday through Thursday evenings and all day Saturday



One of the many classes at the Learning Experience Centre.

project motivated UNITE Local 459 to submit a resolution at its Canadian conference outlining the need for the Union to sponsor literacy and English second language training. In addition to this resolution, UNITE implemented a National Literacy Secretariat funded research project, conducted by ABC Canada, called *Skills for Tomorrow*. Its purpose was to identify the education needs of its members across Canada. As a result of these initiatives, UNITE Local 459, again in partnership with WEMSC, pioneered the creation of *The Learning Experience Centre*.

*The Learning Experience Centre* is located adjacent to the UNITE Local 459 offices in downtown Winnipeg. The atmosphere is one of openness and friendliness; it is a place where any

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# Learning Centres Open at Molson and AltaSteel

KAREN BENNETT

There is more than one way to deliver training at a worksite, and Alberta Vocational College-Edmonton (AVC-E) has demonstrated this with two of its most recent programs. The College has helped Molson Breweries Edmonton and AltaSteel to open learning centres in their workplaces where employees, and even family members can go to refresh and add to their skills.

Molson Breweries Edmonton is a well established company that produces a wide variety of beers which are distributed to customers in Canada, the United States and other international markets. AltaSteel (formerly Stelco Steel Edmonton Works) is one of the larger producers of quality steel bars in North America. The company produces steel from recycled scrap metal, and has the capacity to produce 350,000 tons of steel per year. Both companies have a history of being pro-active in providing their employees with access to training, and also share some of the challenges involved in offering basic skills training. Both companies operate around the clock, with employees working a variety of shifts with a number of different crews. The employee profile of both companies is remarkably similar. Their workforces consists of long-time employees, primarily male, who may have spent their working life with the company and expect to remain with the company until retirement. Shift work, and the fact that these workers are experiencing a busy time of their lives with family commitments, makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to access traditional educational and training opportunities.

The process of setting up the learning centres was similar in both cases. Each company recognized that training needs to be the result of a partnership among stakeholders, and so a committee was formed with representation from both the union and management. A needs assessment was conducted to determine employee attitudes toward training and the kinds of training workers wanted. The needs assessment also served to raise awareness of education and training issues among employees. Support for the needs assessment was encouraging and workers were eager to share their opinions with the interviewers. As was to be expected, a common concern of workers was the difficulty of finding a way to meet so many different schedules, interests and needs.

For both AltaSteel and Molson Breweries, the best choice for a training delivery model was that of the drop-in learning centre.

Both companies renovated a room in the plant to be used as a learning centre. The two programs were kicked off with open houses which gave employees the opportunity to ask questions, sign up for seminars and enjoy some refreshments. Schedules were devised that allowed as many shift workers as possible to participate in the program, and have been monitored closely, with adjustments being made when necessary. There has been an overwhelming interest in computers and workers in both sites have attended seminars introducing them to DOS, Windows, Word and Excel. At AltaSteel there have been sessions on Communication, Doing Your Own Income Tax, Basic



*Molson employees in Edmonton now enjoy a comfortable on-site learning centre.*

Metallurgy, Effective Business Writing, Tips on Buying a Home Computer, and others. At Molson employees have worked on Note-Taking, English Pronunciation, and GED preparation. At both locations, workers have also dropped in for help with math and other basic skills. At Molson, 51% of the plant employees have participated in the program, for a total of 375 hours over the 15 week program delivery. At AltaSteel 60 different learners have participated for a total of 330 hours.

Al Shipton, Manager of Manufacturing Services at AltaSteel, and Randy Derksen, Manager of Human Resources at Molson are pleased with the outcomes of their respective programs, and plan for their continued operation. Both learning centres owe their success in part to the commitment, patience and flexibility of the joint Training Committees, as well as the persistence and hard work of the instructor/coordinators, Julie Salembier at Molson Breweries and Dawn Seabrook de Vargas at AltaSteel. The imagination and creativity of all of the stakeholders will guide the learning centres in their continuing evolution. \*

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# Alberta Power Orients ERIC Instructor Team

TAMARA TOPOLNISKY

ERIC (Effective Reading in Context) instructors traveled to Edmonton on December 4, 1996 for an orientation meeting hosted by Alberta Power. They met to learn more about the company and its plans for training in preparation for the delivery of workshops across the province.

The one day meeting began with an introduction to the company. This was followed by an overview of Alberta Power's three tier reading comprehension training plan for employees and an introduction to the ERIC assessment tools which will be used at Alberta Power. The afternoon consisted of presentations by the representatives from the three components of the training plan.

ERIC is the middle tier of Alberta Power's reading comprehension training plan which helps employees to learn reading strategies and move towards greater effectiveness and efficiency. Employees who do not require ERIC can consider a Power Reading program to improve their reading speed. Employees who require specialized assistance are referred to a reading specialist in Edmonton. This three tier program ensures that the reading needs of all employees are considered.

Alberta Power has been a leader in the ERIC program through extensive employee involvement. People in management and supervisory positions have volunteered to take the ERIC assessment, learn more about the program, and lead by example. Presentations are being made within the company to encourage employees to take part in ERIC, and to work toward reading effectiveness company-wide. Assessments are being scheduled in Edmonton and Red Deer, with other areas to follow.

Alberta Power's active approach and commitment to skills training have already resulted in successful implementation and satisfied employees. The participants of the pilot program completed in November of 1995 continue to be enthusiastic about sharing their experiences. Their comments include: "Anyone who has to review a lot of written material should take the ERIC Program, especially those who have to pass information on to others." "It helps you develop confidence in your ability to handle reading and writing assignments faster." and "I wish I had taken it five years ago."

The people making it happen at Alberta Power are Esther Hudson and Lucille Stephenson. Byron Norman from the Battle River Plant has also been a great supporter, by making scheduling changes seem simple. They have put considerable effort into the implementation of the program and are pleased with the results.

The ERIC instructors are Sandra Campbell, Fort McMurray; Marilyn Luft, Red Deer; Heather Rymut, Bonnyville; Susan Devins, Edmonton; and Tamara Topolnisky, Fort McMurray. All of the instructors agreed that learning about the company and having the opportunity to meet and share ideas for workplace specific instruction was extremely valuable.

Keyano College is the only licensed provider of the ERIC program developed by Syncrude Canada Ltd. in Fort McMurray

in 1988. ERIC continues to be delivered to companies including Imperial Oil in Cold Lake, Husky Oil in Lloydminster, and Alberta Power in partnership with local educational institutions such as Lakeland College and Red Deer College.

For information on this and other ERIC projects, contact Tamara Topolnisky, the ERIC Coordinator at 1-800-340-4592, or Lloyd Campbell at Syncrude Canada (403) 790-3616. \*

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## Budget '97 - Increased Support for Literacy

BONNIE CARPENTER

The 1997 Federal Budget offers some seven million dollars in additional financial support for efforts to improve adult literacy in Canada. With the guidance of Senator Joyce Fairburn, Minister with special responsibility for Literacy, the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) will use the additional funds to move forward in the areas of family and workplace literacy. 'Lifelong learning' will increasingly be the theme as the new millennium approaches.

The family is a key factor in supporting lifelong learning. When family members read with children, the reading and writing skills of all family members improve. The NLS will therefore increase its emphasis on promoting family literacy projects, supporting research, and funding the development of Canadian-made reading materials.

Many Canadian workers are finding that they need to improve and extend basic skills such as reading and writing if they are to succeed in the new global workplace. The NLS plans to support workplace literacy efforts in Canada by developing more Canadian-made workplace training materials; training specialized workplace literacy practitioners; developing pilot workplace programs; and developing new areas of research.

The NLS has identified literacy research, the electronic infrastructure and literacy learning materials as three support mechanisms which will strengthen the literacy community in Canada. Literacy research allows us to explore the cause of low literacy levels and to determine the barriers that prevent many from improving their skills. The NLS will therefore examine the nature of low literacy, the range of skills between Canadians, and the appropriate methods of addressing those needs. To strengthen the electronic infrastructure, the NLS will improve access to computer-based systems which will enhance learning, information-sharing, and communications. The NLS will support a variety of projects with the private sector, nonprofit organizations and other levels of government. Literacy learning materials are the tools needed to assist learners in developing and improving their ability to read and write. Since most current materials still focus on children and adolescents, the NLS will develop a new approach to the production of Canadian-made learning materials which are tailored to the individual needs and settings of a variety of learners.

With government support for literacy, more people will have a greater opportunity to experience 'lifelong learning.' \*

## UNITE - Cont. from p. 1

with a total of 70 students and many more on the waiting list. As well, every Friday is an 'open' day when members and their families are welcome to attend the *Centre* and use the computers. Students have their own computers, which are networked to all the other computers in the classroom and linked to a main server operated by the *Centre's* coordinator, Ann Haney. The *Centre* employs three instructors as well as three teaching assistants. At the *Centre*, students do not just sit in front of a computer—they work in co-operative groups helping each other learn. The *Centre's* philosophy is that *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*, and that is precisely what the *Centre* is all about—working together.

As with any initiative, *The Learning Experience Centre* is in its infancy stage but continues to grow rapidly. The enthusiasm of the students is overwhelming and they play the starring role. It is their commitment and dedication that really makes *The Learning Experience Centre* the exhilarating success it is to date. The *Centre* would also like to thank Greg Maruca, Manager of UNITE Local 459 and Sue Turner from the Manitoba Literacy and Continuing Education Branch, Manitoba Education and Training for their foresight in conceiving the idea for the *Centre* and their continuing involvement in its advancement. \*

## Resources

Taylor, M. (Ed.) (1997). *Workplace education: The changing landscape*. Toronto: Culture Concepts.

In *Workplace Education: The Changing Landscape*, Maurice Taylor gathers together 23 practical articles written by leading workplace education practitioners from across Canada. The collection is an interesting follow-up to the 1991 anthology *Basic Skills for the Workplace* which he co-edited with James Draper and Glenda Lewé. The list of contributors to the current volume contains many names which will be familiar to anyone who has followed the development of workplace education over the last ten years, and many who were contributors to the earlier anthology. Together, the two collections give an overview of workplace education as a maturing field of practice in Canada.

*The Changing Landscape* is divided into four sections. The first section explores the partnerships which characterize workplace education programs in Canada. The second section, 'Enhancing the Practice of Basic Skills Training,' contains some thoughtful chapters covering good practice, the training and support of instructors, and the evolving role of workplace learning programs. The third section is devoted to 'Sustaining Current Programs in the Field' and looks at the practicalities of offering training in the workplace context. The final section examines a number of evaluation and research issues, which range from profiling workplace basic skills to using a developmental portfolio to assess basic skills.

Maurice Taylor is an associate professor in the faculty of education at Ottawa University. He has worked in the field of

adult literacy and basic skills training with the business, community college, and university sectors over the last 20 years. He has many publications to his credit including *Literacy Task Analysis: A How-to Manual for Workplace Trainers* and *Basic Skills Training: A Launchpad for Success In the Workplace*.

*Workplace Education: The Changing Landscape* (440 pages, paperback, \$35.00) and many other titles of interest to adult educators and are available directly from the publisher: Culture Concepts, 5 Darlingbrook Crescent, Toronto, ON, M9A 3H4. Phone (416) 231-1692. For an overview of the company's catalog, visit its website at: <http://www3.sympatico.ca/cultureconcepts>.

Hautecoeur, Jean Paul (Ed.) (1996). *Alpha 96: Basic Education and Work*. Toronto: Culture Concepts.

This anthology is an examination of critical issues in basic education in the workplace. It promises to be "riveting reading and penetrating discussion for every CEO, manager, trainer and educator," and brings together articles by educators and activists who present a critical view of work and education. The dust jacket poses some intriguing questions:

- Is it coincidental that the literacy crisis has occurred in tandem with total quality and the reorganization of the workplace?
- Has total quality replaced Taylorism and Fordism as the organizing principles through which managers attempt to order, control and 'robotize' workers?
- Are today's managers rethinking the organization and its mission . . . or just slashing jobs to increase their own power?
- Are basic education training programs empowering workers to increase their skills and provide transferrable knowledge . . . or to increase corporate profits?
- Is workplace basic education marginalizing and alienating the workforce, by demeaning their accumulated skills and knowledge in favour of the corporate agenda for specialized technoskills?

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<http://acs.ucalgary.ca/~kmills/WWestNet>

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c/o Julian Evetts, #103, 1720-13<sup>th</sup> St. S.W., Calgary, AB, T2T 3P4, Phone (403) 541-1367. Fax (403) 541-1835

[jevetts@avc.calgary.ab.ca](mailto:jevetts@avc.calgary.ab.ca)