



## Saskatchewan Federation of Labour Wins Award for WEST Program

JANIS STONE

The Worker's Education for Skills Training (WEST) program was awarded the 1997 *Training for Excellence Award* in the category of Basic Skills Development. The Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB) gave the prize at an awards luncheon in Saskatoon in June. The *Training for Excellence Awards* are awarded annually to recognize the growing efforts to create workplace training programs and services that meet the needs of the individual and of industry.

The WEST program provides employees with learning opportunities in the workplace to increase their skills in reading, writing, mathematics and oral fluency. Working jointly with employers, the program uses workplace materials for learning and peer facilitators/instructors for program delivery. This provides cost-effective programs for both employers and employees. WEST operates under the principles of partnership in program, content and delivery, ensuring the transfer of learning to other aspects of participants' lives.

WEST is an initiative of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL); however, participating workplaces and workers do not have to be affiliated with SFL. Key features of the program include:

- establishing a joint union-management committee and operational guidelines for WEST in the specific workplace;
- recruiting and training facilitators from the workplace;
- identifying the specific needs of the employer, labour and learners;
- training in the workplace, usually during work time, in groups of 6-10 participants;
- identifying workplace resources; and,
- continually identifying and integrating the current needs of the learner into the curriculum.

Evaluation is on-going and the joint committee meets with the facilitator and the WEST coordinator on a monthly basis to receive reports on class operations and to relay any requests to the class. Individuals compile portfolios to use for monthly self-assessment sessions and the class performs a group evaluation which is forwarded to the joint committee.

While accepting the award on behalf of the WEST program, Rick Hagel, course facilitator SGI Salvage talked of the benefits for the company and the participants and challenged other industry representatives, "If you don't have a literacy program in your workplace, why not?"

The SLFDB is a unique organization, a partnership made up of representatives from business, labour, education & training providers, women, First Nations, Metis, persons with disabilities, youth, low income people and agricultural workers. Board members are selected by their own constituencies. Other categories for awards presented are Promotion of Equity Participation, Educational Partnerships and Career Laddering.

For more information contact Janis Stone, Executive Director, SLFDB (305) 352-5999. \*



*Tower crane sightings have been relatively rare over the last few years in western Canada. This one, framed by fall foliage, was spotted in Vancouver recently. Thanks to Don Bonokoski at the BC Construction Industry H & S Council for sending us this digital image over the net.*

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# Manitoba Linkage Project Reveals General Lack of Awareness about Workplace Essential Skills

SANDI HOWELL

In 1995, Workplace Education Manitoba (WEM) undertook to ascertain where various stakeholder groups stood with respect to their awareness of, and ability to deal with, workplace related basic skills issues. For this purpose, WEM initiated the *Linkage Project* in December 1995 and hired project coordinator Sandi Howell. To narrow the scope of the task, different stakeholder groups throughout Manitoba were interviewed in six emerging economic sectors (as identified by the provincial government): Health Care Products; Environment; Aerospace; Agri-food Products; Tourism; and Information & Telecommunications.

For the purpose of the survey, basic skills were defined for participants as reading, writing, numeracy, oral communication, learning and problem-solving skills required to function in the workplace—from a very fundamental level to management level skills such as report writing and oral presentations to large groups. In the six sectors chosen, the opinions of 78 employer representatives, 121 employees and five union representatives were collected and the highlights of the results are presented in this article, the first of a series.

## Principle Findings of the Linkage Project

- Most employees, employers, employer associations and government departments lack awareness with respect to the nature and scope of workplace basic skills.
- Most employees and employers interviewed do not consider basic skills to be a workplace issue.
- 92% of all companies in Manitoba are small businesses (less than 50 employees). Funding policies are not flexible enough to accommodate lost revenue from production experienced by small business during employee training, making this issue a significant inhibitor to training implementation for them.
- Many employers can list the effects of basic skills deficiencies in the workplace such as mis-communication, but remain largely unaware of their effect on human resource issues such as resistance to change or absenteeism, and of the resulting detriment to business performance.
- Screening for basic skills proficiency at the employment entry level has been increasing steadily over the last five years. Many employers indicate an intent to increase screening in the near future, but lack an adequate system or tool for doing so.
- Of all shareholder groups interviewed, unions have the greatest awareness of the nature and scope of basic skills issues.

- Training characteristics and needs are often sector-specific and dependent on company size. In sectors where restrictive policies and funding tend to exist, both the focus and implementation of training are greatly inhibited.
- Workplace training programs are largely initiated by employers, who will do so only when they can clearly be shown to relate to company and/or job-specific needs.
- The issue of the short- and long-term evaluation of training and indicators of program success continue to be problematic, both from the perspective of different stakeholder groups and what constitutes success for them, and from the aspect of an adequate system of capturing gain. This continues to be a barrier to all training initiatives, as increasingly 'clear' justification is demanded.
- While participatory management strategies are reported to be in use, decisions about training are largely made by management. As clear evidence of the divergent perspectives of different stakeholder groups was found, questions arise as to the resulting value and effectiveness of workplace training.
- The objectives and evaluation criteria of each stakeholder group reflect their different needs and priorities. Because each stakeholder group's orientation toward training is shaped according to their perspective, successful training designers must address this factor during planning.
- Training expenditures are often described as costly or considered to be a scarce resource with the expectation that results will be high. However, in spite of this, little time is allotted to the administration or research of training programs as well as to their evaluation.

The results of the Linkage Project confirm what trainers often intuitively know; however, the depth and pervasiveness of the phenomenon is clearly a surprise. Additionally, the Linkage Project's results confirm portions of the IALS. One of the most striking results held in common is that there is an element of denial present, both in employers with respect to skill levels and their responsibilities toward the issue, and with employees who lack awareness as to their own skill levels.

A copy of the Linkage Project Report is available from Workplace Education Manitoba at 505-138 Portage Avenue E., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3C 0A1. WEM would like to acknowledge the financial support of the National Literacy Secretariat as well as the in-kind contributions from the employers, employees, employer associations, government departments, and unions who participated in the project. \*

## Plain Language Conference Highlights Ongoing Work

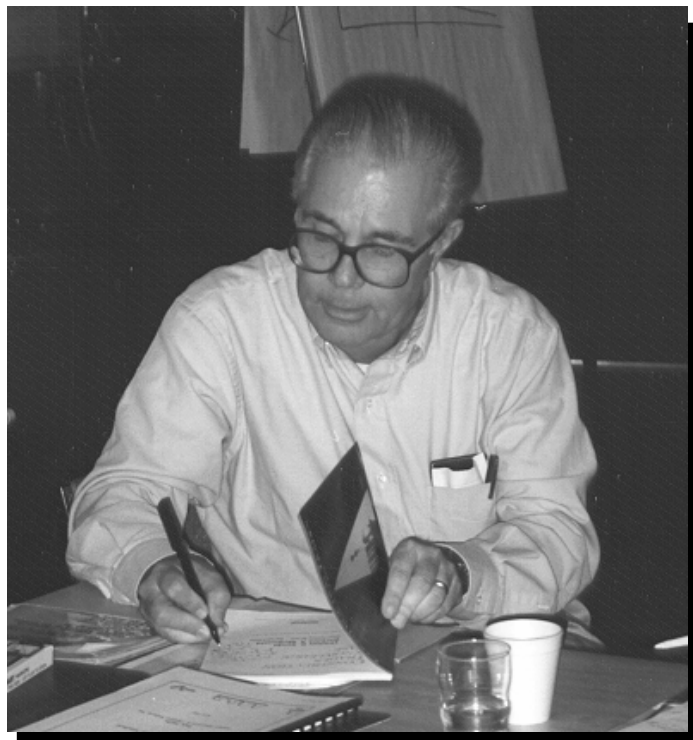
The gathering of plain language experts at last month's Calgary conference presented an opportunity to examine the continuing work of promoting and producing plain language documents. The event was organized by the Plain Language Consultants Network, an international affiliation of practitioners who work in an amazing variety of contexts. Readers will be glad to hear that conference delegates included representatives from several large insurance companies and a number of lawyers who draft federal and provincial legislation.

In response to the question "What ever happened to plain language?" conference organizer Janet Dean was able to point to the continuing efforts of her organization in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, South Africa and Australia. While the issue of plain language may catch the attention of the public only occasionally, the efforts of plain language proponents are gradually making inroads into the wastelands of legalese, bureaucratese, and confused prose of all types. Some of the conference sessions featured 'clear' success stories.

Susan Barylo, a plain language consultant with Alberta Agriculture, reviewed a form redesign project which has saved the department an estimated 3.4 million dollars over the last two years. She was hired by Alberta Agriculture as 'plain language forms coordinator.' Her job was to coordinate the review and revision of the 646 forms used to carry out the business of the department. She quickly went to work to identify the high-use forms which for one reason or another were troublesome. Badly-designed forms are prone to errors and often require considerable staff time to correct and verify. For example, she found that one form, the *Tree Nursery Order Form*, was incorrectly filled out by 40% of the people using it, and that staff needed to spend ten minutes on the phone to correct each form. A redesigned form with a lower error rate saved almost 20 days in staff time over the course of a year. She noted that other forms such as the *Livestock Manifest* are completed by nearly a million farmers and ranchers every year, and the potential cost savings from redesigning this one form are enormous.

The new South African Constitution is a plain language document designed to be read and understood by the widest possible audience in that country. Vancouver lawyer, Phil Knight, was instrumental in setting up the 'collaborative writing process' which produced this new constitution and spoke about the difficulties of ensuring that plain language principles were followed during the long and complex task of drafting the various sections. The impressive result of this constitution-making effort is drawing international interest.

A list of Internet resources for plain language can be found in the *Resources* section on the last page of this newsletter. It includes the address for Rapport, the newsletter of the Plain Language Consultants Network, and information about plain language training online. \*



*Dr. Thomas Sticht takes a break during the functional context education presentation at Alberta Vocational College - Calgary*

## Functional Context Education Explored

In early October, Dr. Tom Sticht facilitated a day long workshop for an group of fifty educators in Calgary. The event was one of two Canadian appearances by Dr. Sticht to be sponsored by the National Adult Literacy Database, the Centre for Literacy at Dawson College, and AVC - Calgary.

From his early investigations in the San Diego Ship Yards, to his more recent work on welfare-to-work programs, Dr. Sticht has consistently brought rigorous psychometric research to bear on the task of workforce training. Despite a reputation as a non-nonsense military trainer, Sticht's Calgary presentation revealed him to be a compassionate man who is concerned about the lives of the 'cast off youth' denied the opportunity for job training because of low literacy achievement. His own research has shown that people with lower levels of literacy can succeed in job-related training if functional context principles are followed.

In his presentation, Sticht explored the relationship between knowledge and skills, and emphasized the importance of background knowledge to both learning and skills development. The lack of a meaningful context for much school-based instruction, he concluded, means that many students do not have the foundation upon which to build new knowledge. "By and large, we still do not teach literacy in a very functional way," he was forced to concede when questioned about changes in the school system over the last 20 years.

Dr. Sticht has recently completed a series of guides for occupational learning which are available from McGraw-Hill (Glencoe Occupational Adult Learning Series). \*

# Needs Assessment Underway at XL Foods in Calgary

Alberta Vocational College - Calgary is currently conducting an essential skills needs assessment for XL Foods Ltd. at its Calgary production plants (XL Beef and XL Meats). The project is being carried out by Susan Keen, an English as a second language specialist, and Julie Lockhart, an adult education consultant. XL Foods has asked for the research project in anticipation of stiffer standards for quality control and increased use of technology in the production process. One new set of regulations known as the Hazard Analysis of Critical Control Points (HACCP) will define stringent new standards for quality assurance throughout the food industry. Under the HACCP regulations, employees will be required to understand, explain, and demonstrate strict standards of practice. For sound positioning in the future marketplace, XL Foods is preparing to meet the new standards well ahead of deadlines set by the government regulators. The company wants to ensure its employees develop the essential skills needed to deal with the changing technology and work standards, and to participate in the company's future growth. For more information about this project, contact Karen Hammond, WEST Coordinator at (403) 297-4776. E-mail [khammond@avc.calgary.ab.ca](mailto:khammond@avc.calgary.ab.ca) \*

## Coming Up

### Job Profiling - Essential Skills

October 22 - 24, 1997 in Vancouver

This three-day workshop will introduce participants to methodology for profiling essential skills and practical advice for adapting this methodology to particular applications. The workshop will be facilitated by three former researchers from the Essential Skills Research Project, Lynda Fownes, Glenda Lewe, and Carol MacLeod.

For more information, contact Lynda Fownes, SkillPlan, Phone (604) 436 - 1126 e-mail [skillplan@axionet.com](mailto:skillplan@axionet.com) \*

### Moving Forward: A Forum on Workplace Education

November 30 to December 2, 1997 in Toronto

Organized by the Workplace Education Centre at ABC Canada, this conference is an opportunity for individuals involved in workplace education to share ideas, explore issues, and enhance knowledge by getting the latest information available. The conference should provide a forum for debate on key policy and program issues that affect workplace education, and an opportunity for information sharing and exchange around different regional initiatives and program models. For further details, contact the Workplace Education Centre, ABC Canada, 1450 Don Mills Rd., Don Mills, ON. Ph: (416) 442-2292 \*

## Resources

### Plain Language on the World Wide Web

Plain Language Online Center  
<http://www.web.net/~raporter/>

Plain Language Online Training  
<http://www.web.net/~plain/PlainTrain>

Lawyers for Literacy  
<http://cba.org/abc/>  
<http://www.cle.bc.ca/literacy>

Plain English Network (US)  
<http://www.blm.gov/nhp/NPR/plaineng.html>

Rapport Plain Language Resources  
<http://rapport.bc.ca>

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Subject: (blank)  
Message: subscribe language-1

This listing was prepared by Plain Language Partners, Ltd.  
<http://plainlanguage.com> \*

### Canadian Lifelong Learning Newsletter

Published in Edmonton, *Canadian Lifelong Learning* is a newsletter devoted to promoting and celebrating adult learning. Issue five reports that learning is four times more popular than sex—judging by the results of an Alta Vista search for both topics. For more information about subscriptions and availability, contact The Learning Link, 400 First Edmonton Place, 10665 Jasper Ave. Edmonton, AB, T5J 3S9. Fax (403) 421-7159 E-mail - [tlink@connect.ab.ca](mailto:tlink@connect.ab.ca) \*

## WWestNet Home Page Moved to NALD

WWestNet's home page is now located at the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) website. Drop-in to pick up past issues of *the bottom line* and other WWestNet publications, and to find out about upcoming events. The new address is:

[www.nald.ca/wwestnet/index.html](http://www.nald.ca/wwestnet/index.html)

This newsletter is funded by Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development. Submissions to *the bottom line* should be sent to WWestNet:

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

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