

Literacy *in the* Workplace

Literacy in the workplace: a series of five fact sheets

1. Introduction: literacy is a right
2. Proven advantages: for workers, employers, governments
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Thank you to the Labour Education Centre for preparing these fact sheets, and to members of the Canadian Labour Congress Literacy Working Group for their contributions.

Best practices

Workplace literacy programs help workers participate more equitably at work, at home and in their communities. They help people develop new skills for a changing workplace. They give workers a chance to brush up on skills they have forgotten. They support those who were failed by the school system. They provide language learning opportunities for workers whose first language is not English or French.

Learning is a social process. The creation of a community of learners who can support and challenge each other distinguishes worker-centred literacy programs. Workplace programs that fully involve the union, use workers as peer tutors and are learner-centred are central to creating a safe, supportive learning community that encourages workers to articulate and pursue their learning goals.

Labour has been involved in workplace education programs in different parts of the country for many years. While the funding and therefore the sustainability of these programs have been precarious, we have learned a great deal.

Unions support workplace literacy programs that:

- enable workers to have more control over their lives and jobs
- build on what workers already know
- address the needs of the whole person, enriching learners' lives as individuals, workers, union members, family members and citizens
- open the door to further education and training
- reflect the diverse learning styles and needs of adult workers, sensitive to participants' gender, race, ethnicity and culture

"Attending the workplace program gave me a sense of accomplishment. I was elated and so proud of myself. I can't even describe the feelings I had."

– Learner, workplace program,
Cape Breton

"I learned so many skills that I haven't done before, like presentations, group communications, typing letters. Now I'm not afraid to touch the computer."

– Learner, workplace program,
Vancouver

- involve workers in setting their own educational goals and in making decisions that affect program design, content and planning
- seek to integrate literacy training with other aspects of workplace training
- are voluntary
- are open to all
- are accessible, scheduled at convenient times and places, with no fees
- include paid time to learn during working hours
- include replacement of workers when they are attending programs so that co-workers are not unduly burdened
- assure confidentiality for participants with no employer access to information about individual progress
- are accountable using individual and collective assessment and evaluation rather than learner testing

A worker-centred model of workplace literacy means...

- the union is an equal partner with management in decision-making
- union involvement is highly visible to learners
- there is a joint committee with co-chairs; the union co-chair is active and involved
- the joint committee oversees all aspects of the planning, program delivery and evaluation process
- the Terms of Reference for the joint committee as to how the program will operate are agreed to jointly. The terms reflect worker-centred education principles.

These key points are based on adult education principles and best practices. They are broadly supported and promoted within the adult education and literacy communities.

"This program was very useful. It guided me to my goal... I got my papers validated in Canada (for a Bachelor's degree earned in Mexico)."

– Learner, workplace program, Saskatoon

Workers "are moving on to other education and getting promotions. Most importantly, they want to be role models for their children. People say they feel so much better and that the program has opened the world for them."

– Union Coordinator, workplace program, Winnipeg

When to just say "no"

A badly-designed workplace literacy program can harm workers and their union. Unions do not believe that "any training is better than no training." Unions will reject programs in which:

- the design and approach undermine workers' employment rights and opportunities, or damage their self-respect and dignity
- the content and goals are imposed
- participation is not voluntary
- testing is used and individual results or progress are reported to the employer
- the union is not a full partner, able to protect its members' interests and union principles