

Measuring Learning Progress in Literacy and Essentials Skills: Recommendations for Literacy Stakeholders and Government

Audrey Gardner and Candace Witkowskyj

Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures Project

Audrey Gardner, Adult Literacy Research Institute, Bow Valley College
Candace Witkowskyj, Adult Literacy Research Institute, Bow Valley College

Literacy and Essentials Skills: Learner Progression Measures Project.

The Government of Alberta ministries of Innovation and Advanced Education and Human Services provided funding for the Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures project. The views and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Alberta. The report is intended to encourage broad-based dialogue and engagement among the adult literacy and essential skills community to collectively advance program policy, design and service delivery.

Copyright © 2014 Bow Valley College
Bow Valley College
345 6th Avenue SE
Calgary AB T2G 4V1
Attn: Director, Learning Resource Services
email: copyright@bowvalleycollege.ca

These resources may be reprinted for educational non-commercial purposes without additional copyright permission. Full attribution to Bow Valley College must be maintained. Permission to reproduce for commercial purposes must be obtained in writing from Bow Valley College.



Project funded by



“That is how their progress should be measured: based on where they’re coming from and where they want to go.”

learner

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	7
The Project.....	8
Investment in Literacy and Essential Skills	9
Why Measure Learner Progress.....	11
Current Landscape of Measuring Progress in Literacy and Essential Skills in Alberta.....	15
Findings and Themes from the Interviews and Literature.....	17
Recommendations for Literacy and Essential Skills Learner Progression Measures.....	20
References.....	23

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations on the measurement of learner's progress in Literacy and Essentials Skills (LES) programs, policy and future literacy directions in Alberta.

This paper is the result of an extensive research project on learner progression measures in adult literacy and essential skills (LPM). The research project was conducted by the Adult Literacy Research Institute at Bow Valley College, Calgary. In addition to this paper the LPM project produced two reports:

1. *Measurement and Assessment in Adult Literacy and Essential Skills: A Critical Literature Review* (Jackson & Schaetti, 2013a)
2. *Findings on Learner Progression Measures from Literacy and Essential Skills Programs in Alberta* (Jackson & Schaetti, 2013b)

All three documents are available from <http://www.adultliteracyresearchinstitute.ca/>.

The LPM project was part of a larger initiative that aimed to bring together vital information to assist in the development of future literacy directions, policy and programs. An overarching Coordinating Advisory Committee, comprised of community, college and government stakeholders, led the province-wide initiative. The LPM Task Force Team worked closely with an allied project that focused on promising practices and connectivity across the LES systems in Alberta. Together we collaborated with multiple stakeholders and the Coordinating Advisory Committee. The intended outcome of this multi-level collaborative initiative was to impart capacity into the Alberta LES landscape through a process of concerted effort, open communication and cooperation.

The paper is organized in the following order: overview of the LPM project; alignment of government reports and research findings on the importance of investing in literacy and essentials skills; a description of various views on the purpose of measuring learner's progress in LES programs; and, recommendations.

Progression measures of learning need to be developed through a process of mapping the LES system to see what outcomes and indicators are common across the diverse and complex landscape, and what are specific to certain programs and locations. Measures must involve more than one way of assessing. As literacy practices (behaviour changes in relation to texts) are a frequent learning outcome expressed at the program level and will require adequate research and development of indicators and reporting methods. Standardized proficiency assessment methods and tools are available, but many are dated, limited in scope, expensive, and require trained

administrators. Ongoing dialogue among all stakeholders on the what, how and why measure progress is critical for long-term advancement of the LES field. This includes building capacity of the systems of programming, and programs to have professional skills and resources to conduct assessment. As assessment is linked to program quality, building knowledge and skills in the LES system on progress measures will assist all stages of program including, development, delivery and evaluation.

The Project

The LPM project was managed by the Adult Literacy Research Institute (ALRI), which promotes critical inquiry, applied research and innovation in the field of foundational learning. Its work centers on research that is grounded in practice, bringing people together to collaborate on projects and to share their knowledge and experience in research and practice in adult literacy. With its demonstrated expertise in leading significant collaborative research and development projects and its strong relationships with educational institutions, funding agencies, community-based organizations and Aboriginal communities the ALRI was uniquely placed to lead the project task force team.

The project Task Force Team was made up of a group of highly and diversely experienced LES practitioners and researchers.

- Lorene Anderson, Alberta Workforce Essential Skills Society
- Candice Jackson, Consultant-Researcher
- Sue Phillips, Further Education Society
- Audrey Gardner, ALRI, Bow Valley College
- Marnie Schaetti, Consultant-Researcher
- Candace Witkowskyj, ALRI Bow Valley College
- Penny Worden, Further Education Society

Team members have extensive experience working with learners, practitioners, and community and government stakeholders locally, provincially and from across the country. Together, the project's Task Force Team represented a broad cross-section of literacy and essential skills practice in Alberta.

The Team also worked with Dr. Augusto Legaspi from the BVC Applied Research and Evaluation Unit. He and his team, particularly Kaylee Ramage and Scott Henwood, provided invaluable training and logistical support. Throughout the project, the Task Force Team benefitted from the guidance and perspective of Dr. Steve Reder of the University of Portland. He ably shared his expertise in conducting research in the field of adult literacy, and explained theory of change and practice engagement theory.

The first phase of the project was an extensive literature review. Its intention was to find out what has been researched and written about learner progression measures, how progression measures are used, and what the policy implications are of using various measures for various purposes.

The second phase of the project involved interviewing fifty-eight stakeholders in the field of LES in Alberta. This included twenty-four learners, nineteen practitioners, eight administrators and seven funders and policy-makers. Interviews were conducted with stakeholders in community-based, essential skills, college, Aboriginal and family literacy programs in both rural and urban communities throughout Alberta, and with representatives from funding and government agencies. This paper brings together themes and findings from both the interviews and literature reviewed.

Investment in Literacy and Essential Skills

The Government of Alberta's *Results Based Budgeting Report to Albertans* (2013) outlines a strategic process for a comprehensive review to improve program and service efficiency. The aim of this process aligns with the goals of the *Alberta Social Policy Framework*, and both are in accordance with the *Government of Alberta Strategic Plan, 2013-2016*.

All three guiding documents emphasize the significance of:

- Lifelong learning
- Equitable and affordable access to education
- Supports for people with disabilities
- Diversity and inclusion

which are very pertinent to adult literacy and essentials skills. Lifelong learning, equitable and affordable access to learning, and diversity and inclusion were noted as important by many LES stakeholders in the interviews and discussed in the literature.

These aspects were also highlighted in the Government of Alberta's *Living literacy: A literacy framework for Alberta's next generation economy, 2009 -2013*. It described literacy as:

Literacy is not just about reading and writing. While reading and writing provide the necessary foundation for learning, literacy is fundamentally about an individual's capacity to put his/her skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life. Literacy involves "reading the word and the world" in a variety of contexts. Individuals need literacy skills to obtain and use

information effectively, to act as informed players and to manage interactions in a variety of contexts whether the context is making decisions about health care, parenting, managing household finances, engaging in the political process or working. (Government of Alberta, 2009, p 2)

With knowledge gained from the Living Literacy Framework, literacy and essential skills are increasingly understood as significant factors in relation to quality of life for individuals and families (Alberta Social Policy Framework). Literacy levels are related to income levels, and the employability of Albertans is a priority. Employment and Social Development, Canada (formerly, HRSDC) describes essential skills as primarily workforce skills that “are used in every job and at different levels of complexity. They help people to find and get a job, as well as enable them to adapt and succeed in the workplace.” (ESDC, n.d.). There are nine essential skills: reading, writing, document use, numeracy computer use, thinking, oral communication, working with others, and, continuous learning Employment skills are a valuable asset for quality of life.

Interestingly, the term “essential skills,” which has become part of the discourse in LES programming, holds different meanings for the different stakeholders we interviewed. Government and other funders speak of essential skills as defined by the Government of Canada, linking it specifically to the context of the workplace. Practitioners in the consultation interviews used the term in two ways, both as a reference to the skills needed in the workplace and as a reference to skills needed in everyday life. They moved from one meaning to the other, depending on the context they were describing. Finally, learners spoke of skills but used the term essential skills when referring to a program that was called Essential Skills.

The connection between low LES and poverty and social discrimination is well established (Harwood, 2012; Norton, 1992; OECD, 2013). Low literacy is a social and economic problem for vulnerable populations, described in the Alberta Social Policy Framework as “Individuals or groups who – due to age, poor health, minority status, or their otherwise disempowered position in society – may be open to physical, emotional, financial, or psychological exploitation or deprivation” (2013, p. 26). The Social Policy Framework emphasizes a shift toward an integrated approach to more effectively and efficiently address challenges of growing social complexities such as increasing disparity, demographic changes, increasing cost of living, and changing technology. The intention for an integrated approach, and investment, in LES is to address these complex challenges for people with low LES in Alberta.

An integrated approach is guided by principles and values expressed in the above documents, namely collaboration, dignity, respectful of diversity, inclusion, excellence,

mutual responsibility and accountability. Similar values and perspectives were found in the literature review and interviews.

“I think if we can find a way to collaborate and understand the various roles of people who participate in and deliver the system of adult learning, we could make more progress as a broader province.” – practitioner

“The complexity of literacy and essential skills issues is going to require shared responsibility, partnership and a systematic approach.” – funding agency

“You feel like you’re learning new stuff and you feel like getting everything new every day. All that actually makes change in your life, and also in your friends’ lives because as you learn something you may go to teach someone else how to learn it. And that one may learn something from you or you may learn something from him. So actually, it makes a lot of change.”
– learner

The outcomes in the Alberta Social Policy Framework aligns with the intentions of LES programs, that as lifelong learners, adults feel safe and included, have secure and resilient income and employment, are active, engaged and healthy. Learning threads through all these outcomes, establishing and maintaining suitable and useful measures of progress is the challenge that we, in the LES field, are eager to address.

Why Measure Learner Progress

The purpose(s) for measuring learner progress is only one aspect of performance measurement in adult literacy and essential skills (Merrifield, 1999; Salomon, 2010). Compared to measuring population rates of adult literacy skills (Murray, 2005; OECD, 2011) and program quality standards (Merrifield, 1999), learner progression measures assess **learning** by adults in literacy and essential skills programs. Although interconnected with other aspects (population surveys, program quality standards) of assessment and evaluation, the focus of this paper is primarily on learners making progress in a diversity of programs and settings.

When selecting measurement methods and tools for adult literacy and essential skills assessment the first and most important step is to clarify the intention for assessment. Because there are many reasons to measure the progress of LES learners, it is important to identify the purpose(s) for assessment, and the reason(s) for selecting assessment methods and tools. Measurement methods and tools that identify and

organize information for funding and organizational accountability requirements may be different from methods and tools that identify and organize information for learners, and may be different again for program practices such as effective instruction. Such varied intentions, whether or not they are explicitly articulated, are central to any discussion of learner progression measures and the policy frameworks surrounding them (Derrick, Ecclestone & Merrifield, 2007; Lefebvre et al., 2006; Merrifield, 1999; St. Clair & Belzer, 2007; Vorhaus, 2000).

While there are multiple approaches to measuring learning in LES programs, there is also varied perspectives on the meaning of literacy, essential skills and progress. Different perspectives influence differing rationals about why, what and how to measure. The LPM project found that LES and the measurement of learning therein is multifaceted and variant dependent on interrelated social, economic, cultural and political forces. From the literature review and the stakeholder interviews it was clear that there is a spectrum of viewpoints on literacy and measures:

- There are many stakeholders involved in selecting and implementing LES progression measures, and each brings a unique perspective.
- There are many reasons for measuring LES and many ways of using the results.
- There are many perspectives about what components are necessary to make LES measurement valid and valuable.
- Literacy itself is complex, as are the competencies and practices required for proficiency.

When faced with many diverging points of view, it can be tempting to choose one and make it “right” because simplifying anything makes it easier to grasp. The problem, obviously, is that simplifying things can be counterproductive. Although the idea of measuring progress may imply a linear concept of learning and skills gain, complexity theorists (Byrne, Capra, Cilliers, Luhmann & Thrift, noted in Walby, 2007) have shown that the systems in which people live and work, whether ecological or bureaucratic, are complex, adaptive, and created out of multiple interactions among many participants (Westell, 2007; see also Derrick, Ecclestone, & Merrifield, 2007; Hayes, 2005; Lefebvre et al., 2006). Change is constantly occurring. Brigid Hayes (2005) warns about the risks of simplifying LES by saying that,

Literacy and essential skills cannot be “sold” like Ivory soap – as a product that everyone must have. They are part of a complex set of requirements for individual, firm and national prosperity. They are also about being able to participate fully as a Canadian citizen. If we do not understand and respect that complexity, we take the risk of “overselling” the benefits of literacy. (p. 66)

The interviews and the literature review clearly demonstrated that both the issue and the context of learner progression measurement are very complex. The varying meanings assigned to the term “progress” lead to varying degrees of importance being tied to certain indicators of progress.

“Everyone has a different definition of what successful means.”

– learner

Merrifield, Coleman and McDonogh (2001) state that learners want to know – and also have the right to know – if they are making progress and what good quality work looks like. Funders and policy-makers use results from assessments for policy decisions, continuous program improvement, and accountability requirements within their organizations and agencies. Practitioners and administrators have multiple reasons for measuring progress, such as instructional planning, resource selection, and programming as well as accountability reporting to funders, community partners, and government. Critical in forming measurement frameworks then, is determining the purpose, methods and tools that can be linked across a multi-faceted and changing literacy and essential skills landscape balanced with specific assessment approaches that fit particular programs, locations and learners.

The following images represent important questions and considerations for measurement and assessment in LES. As measurement is interconnected with learning, learners and their lives the circles in the image (figure 1) overlap, intersect, and generally bump up against each other. The larger spheres present the key components: stakeholders, the issues surrounding exactly what is being measured, the kinds of measurement tools, and the recommendations from best practices. Smaller spheres of similar colours show the themes related to each component. See figure 2 for each component and related questions and considerations.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Current Landscape of Measuring Progress in Literacy and Essential Skills in Alberta

It is not uncommon to assume that the progression measures of learning typically have a linear idea of progress. The research clearly shows that literacy learning doesn't follow a linear path but is a much more messy, complicated, and sometimes invisible process. It is important to understand that there philosophical differences about the meaning of literacy and essentials skill, separately and together. Some definitions describe literacy as a discrete set of cognitive skills, which align closer with the concept of essential skills. Assessment based on international surveys such as the OECD – IALS and PIAAC are examples of this view of literacy.¹

The OECD IALS survey was a significant shift in measuring literacy skills. It moved away from looking at educational attainment as a measure to what the OECD called direct measures of adult literacy skills, specifically reading (prose and document) and numeracy with test items that reflect everyday real-life reading and numeracy tasks (Brewerton, 2004; Murray, 2005). The OECD survey's scale of proficiency and definition of literacy was written into policies and used for public awareness and to develop assessment resources for the field (George & Murray, 2012; Harwood, 2012; HRSDC, n.d.). This large-scale data source was viewed as a turning point in the adult literacy field at the same time essentials skills for workforce literacy was emerging (CCL, 2007b; Murray, 2005, Jackson, 2005). IALS and now PIAAC have come to play a central role in the Canadian LES landscape as both measures of human capital and frameworks for LES education (Harwood, 2012). The OECD international survey framework greatly informed policy direction in Alberta. The *Living literacy: A literacy framework for Alberta's next generation economy, 2009 -2013* was developed based on the results of the first two surveys. The third survey, PIAAC will provide more nuanced data on Albertans that will also inform policy direction.

Other definitions of literacy describe literacy as a social practice. This view encompasses all the domains of daily life: home, community, and workplace. Viewing literacy as social practices in the workplace examines how people use text as part of their work and considers their social and structural relations including skills, qualifications, performance, and communication (Black, 2012; Waterhouse & Virgona, 2005). Most adult literacy practitioners use a social-practices approach (Hamilton,

¹ OECD is the international Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development that commissioned the IALS- International Adult Literacy Survey in the mid 1990s, and subsequent surveys, ALL (Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey), and PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies).

2009). Literacy as social practice connects learning with changes in learners' self-esteem and confidence, social skills, self-identity, and self-determination as well increases in reading, writing, and numeracy skills.

Like the differing views of literacy, there are contrasting views of learners and their achievements. For example, seeing learners as "human capital" brings an *economic* value to knowledge and skills that individuals possess—LES in this framework are most often discussed relative to business and the workplace. From a human-capital perspective, LES are seen as one and the same thing: labour skills for labour-market outcomes. Social capital views capacity from a *social* perspective. It involves social connections and understandings between people, and the shared norms and values that enable people to work together, live together, and learn from one another (NWT Literacy Council, 2011; Tett & MacLachlan, 2007). These views are not simply either or, they are fully blended together in a knowledge-based society where communication is increasingly text-based. Alberta is described as a knowledge-economy society (Government of Alberta, 2009).

The Alberta LES field has a range of stakeholders who each are looking at different areas of the landscape. Learners, for example, want clear measures of their progress. The challenge lies in balancing the learners' needs for measures of progress with those of other stakeholders, particularly policy-makers. Practitioners and program administrators are often caught between the need to report to funding bodies, their responsibilities to their communities, and their responsibilities to their practitioners and learners. By contrast, employers need to know whether potential participants in workplace training will be able to manage program or job requirements (Ontario MTCU, 2011). The picture of all kinds of people scattered across a diverse landscape, viewing and measuring learner's progress in all sorts of ways continues to be a fitting metaphor that first emerged in the LPM literature review.

Some stand on hillocks, others in slight depressions; some are fairly close to each other, others are scattered far apart. No matter what their location, every one of them is looking at the same point in the distance, trying to understand and identify it, and perhaps assuming everyone sees it in the same way. Because of the viewers' relative positions on the landscape the point appears somewhat different to each of them and, to add to the complexity of their perspectives, the point itself is constantly shifting, as is their relationship with each other in the changing landscape. They are learners, people in communities, all kinds of practitioners, program administrators, academics, employers, funders, provincial governments, federal governments, and international bodies such as UNESCO and the OECD. Some perspectives appear to wield more power than others. Some perspectives are barely visible. (Jackson & Schaetti, 2013a, p7)

All these perspectives and practices reflect shifting social and economic dynamics that frame the changing value and currency of literacy and essential skills over time and place(s) (Gadsby, Middleton, & Whitaker, 2007; Merrifield, Coleman, & McDonogh, 2001). Taking into consideration the multiple views, what was frequently found in the literature and interviews is that measurement of learning must take into account the complexities of adults lives, and that progress must be mutually understood and identified in the language of the learner, program, and funding agency.

Findings from the Interviews and Literature

This paper integrates the findings from the literature review with the findings from interviews with fifty-eight LES stakeholders (24 learners, 19 practitioners, 8 administrators, 7 funding agency representatives). The following themes emerged through an analytical process of bringing together what emerged from the literature and interview data.

A key theme that emerged from the interviews with funding agencies, program administrators and practitioners is; there is a shared awareness that Alberta's LES system is under review, that there is a desire for change, and that a significant challenge lies in how to aggregate multiple measures across the expansive range and diversity of LES programs.

“We’re talking about essential skills, family literacy, adult literacy, foundational skills, and I think and believe that what we are all working on is finding a common core story and good evidence-based ways to track the learner’s progress.” – practitioner

“I think for many learners in the community, it’s about essential skills for life. It’s about that work, learning and community involvement.” – funder

Another key theme that emerged from the interviews, particularly from learners, is that significant indicators of progress tend to be expressed as changes in attitude and behavior in relation with social contexts. Learners stated that doing more literacy practices (reading, writing, working with numbers, oral communication) and feeling more confident at work, home, and in relation with others is how they know they have improved.

“I go to the grocery store and I can read the labels, what they say and what they mean. . . . Nowadays everything has too many calories, or something you have to be careful about. And I can actually read the

labels and know what they mean. . . . And I can actually talk to the tellers [at the bank]. . . . Before I always just said, ‘I want to pay these bills,’ that’s all I said, but these days, I can actually talk to them, have a conversation. Before, I just stood there, and would wait until they were done, and then I got out.” – learner

Changes in literacy practices (how people engaged with text and numbers) was far more frequently reported by learners and extensively discussed in the literature than changes in literacy proficiency. In his longitudinal study Reder (2009) found that participation in programs leads to increased engagement in literacy practices and that engagement, in time, leads to gains in proficiency. Reder (2011) recommends further research on measures that focus on practices.

The changing landscape of LES in Alberta is seeing an expansion of workforce essential skills training, yet not as much training within the workplace for employees with lower literacy. We were unable to interview an employer in this project, however many learners with low literacy were gainfully employed.

“Right now I’m working as a cashier in a store. The people that I socialize with there, the customers there, they ask me things like what I’m doing . . . and I told them I’m taking that class. They encouraged me to keep going with my goal.” – learner

The landscape is also changing with more engagement of Aboriginal stakeholders, most noticeably in the area of family literacy, and more recently in skills development initiatives. Cooper (2006) points out for Aboriginal learners, and the programs they are in, it is important to support learning by balancing mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being. Literacy practitioners working with Aboriginal learners look for ways to honour all of the person.

“When I started, I thought to myself that I could never do it. I wanted to drop out a couple of times. . . . My husband’s been encouraging me, and I kept trying and trying, and finally I caught on. And now I’m feeling happy about myself because I didn’t drop out. . . . We did two projects here not long ago . . . about my culture, the Woodland Cree. I had to do research and do a lot of writing. . . . I asked my Elders about the life in the past and they told me and I just wrote it down. . . . One more year of upgrading I think and then I start doing my certificate for Social Worker.” – learner

Apparent, but not readily addressed in the current landscape was the issue of LES needs for adults with disabilities. Even though approximately 50% of adults with disabilities

experience literacy barriers (CLLN, 2013) and many learners with low level LES have disabilities the topic of measuring progress in relation to disability was not frequently mentioned in the literature or the stakeholder interviews. Upon further review of documents specifically on LES and disability, we found that there is a lack of LES programming with learning disability expertise or resources, particularly in the area of assessment (Literacy Link South Central, 2003). Insufficient initial assessment for adults with disabilities and low literacy is a barrier for entry to programs as well limited assessment tools and approaches to measure progress (Auld, 2007; Gardner, 2005).

“I went through kindergarten and grade 1 and then was put in a special ed class. Eight years, the same teacher, the same curriculum, no advancement. . . . After that I was just transferred over to the high school and a two-year occupational course. No educational understanding of where I was going or what was expected of me. . . . And that was the end of my education. So how do I feel when I go to fill out a job application, and they ask, ‘What was the last grade you completed?’ You have to be honest. It was grade 1.” – learner

The need for improved LES programming for adults with disabilities is underscored as it relates to three of the four Alberta Social Policy Framework goals:

- Reduce inequality
- Project vulnerable people
- Create a person-centred system of high-quality services

The landscape is becoming more and more cultural and linguistically diverse, but the current LES programs do not have the capacity to best meet the complex learning needs of adults with low literacy and English as an additional language.

“I really want to get my English improved. But he said, ‘No, that’s your limit, your five-month ESL class. That’s it.’ Only five months? How much can you learn?” – learner

Finally, the growing gap between the rich and poor is readily apparent in LES programs. Issues of poverty and mental health impact vulnerable Albertans who struggle to access and complete programs.

“Most people look at me going, ‘Yeah, right! Some crack-head wants to be an addictions counselor.’ I’m thinking, you know what, I have 35 years of practical knowledge, I just don’t have a certificate on the wall. I might even know more about the addiction than you do.” – learner

The above findings and themes point to the complexities of people's lives and program capacities. This challenges the idea of common and consistent measurement practices. However, identifying common indicators of progress and establishing consistent and complimentary reporting processes are required for the development of future literacy directions, policy and programs.

In summary the themes and findings above are:

- Practitioners, administrators, funders and policy-makers share an awareness that Alberta's LES system is under review, that there is a *desire for change*, and that a significant challenge lies in how to aggregate multiple measures.
- Significant indicators of progress are expressed as changes in attitude and behavior (aspects of personal growth- confidence, social connections, independence), and self-reporting on skills improvement
- Expansion of workforce Essential Skills training, programming and policy
- More Aboriginal stakeholders at all levels in LES
- There continues to be high access and participation barriers for adults with mental health, physical, cognitive, and learning disabilities
- Increasing cultural and language diversity must be addressed in program design including assessment that accommodates multiple languages and cultures
- The income gap widening LES levels are connected to income levels

Recommendations for Literacy and Essential Skills Learner Progression Measures

Organized into sections we suggest that the recommendations below be viewed not as a sequential list of "shoulds", instead we invite all stakeholders to consider the connections between the recommendation statements:

Systems Mapping

Collaboration of stakeholders will determine key outcomes and progress indicators in specific literacy and essentials skills programs in order to identify common outcomes and indicators; and, particular outcomes and indicators for a certain learner group.

- Different levels of literacy
- Physical disabilities
- Workforce essentials skills
- Deaf and hard of hearing
- Academic upgrading

- Cognitive and developmental disabilities
- Cultural considerations
- Language considerations
- Mental health considerations
- Family literacy
- Conflict with the law; incarcerated
- Learning disabilities

Ensure outcomes and indicators do not create barriers for vulnerable Albertans. Build on the Promising Practices and Schematic project to compile measures in relation to type of program, learner population, and local (program) capacity.

Practices and Proficiencies

Demonstrations of progress of one's learning can occur through BOTH measures of increased literacy practices and improved literacy proficiency. Programs with more than one method of measuring progress will likely more accurately assess learning gains made by learners.

Expand the definitions of learner success. Determine the weight of indicators as per the specifics of the learner group and program purpose.

- Confidence, independence, social connection, changed attitudes and behaviours
- Test scores, course marks
- Honour what is significant to Aboriginal learners

Look to Aboriginal communities, and researchers and leaders in LES to develop measures that respect indigenous knowledge.

Accountability Requirements

Shared dialogue among stakeholders on measuring learning progress. Open conversations about why, what and how measuring learner progress will occur; and how results will be reported.

Program and System Capacity

High quality and accessible professional development opportunities for practitioners, administrators and funders in learner progression measures and assessment.

Affordable and easy to use measuring tools.

From: *Supporting Practice Engagement: Promising Practices for Literacy and Essential Skills Programs and Services in Alberta*

(Literacy Alberta, NorQuest College, 2013)

- Select assessment resources and processes used in your agency
- Train staff and volunteers in assessment approaches
- Share assessment information
- Involve learners in assessment processes
- Adapt assessment processes to the delivery context

Stages of Programming

1. **Developing** training and learning courses, programs and projects:

Identifying intended outcomes while developing the program, project, course, workshop, etc. is a perfect time to research and determine the type of measuring approach and select the tool(s) and resources you will use. Ask: How do the measures meet learner's goals and program and funder accountability?

2. **Delivering** training and learning courses, programs and projects:

Ensure that you and the learners understand when assessment of progress will occur and how it will be conducted (tests, exams, demonstrations). Teach learners the language of the assessment method, and how to prepare. If possible build in flexibility to adjust measuring practices and intended outcomes.

3. **Evaluating** training and learning courses, programs and projects:

Evaluate the effectiveness of the measuring approach and tools/resources. This is part of program quality management.

References

- Alberta Employment and Immigration Workforce Planning Initiative, Alberta MLA Committee on the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Workforce Planning Initiative. (2010). *Connecting the dots: Aboriginal workforce and economic development in Alberta*. Edmonton: Alberta Employment and Immigration.
- Alberta Employment and Immigration Workforce Supports Division. (2010). *Adult literacy review*. Howard Research & Management Consulting Inc.
- Auld, B. (2000). *Literacy and Disability Study*. Calgary: Bow Valley College.
- Bailey, A. (2007). *Connecting the dots: Linking investment to business outcomes and the economy*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning.
- Barton, D. (2009). Researching adult learners' lives to understand engagement and progression in learning. *Literacy and Numeracy Studies*, 17(1), 51-62.
- Battell, E. (2001). *Naming the magic: Non-academic outcomes in basic literacy*. Vancouver: Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Advanced Education.
- Black, S. (2012, June). *Summer Institute 2012: Questions and answers with Stephen Black*. Retrieved from <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/node/1516>.
- Brewerton, M. (2004). *Reframing the essential skills: Implications of the OECD defining and selecting key competencies project – A background paper*. Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education.
- Brooks, G., Heath, K., & Pollard, A. (2005). *Assessing adult literacy and numeracy: A review of assessment instruments*. London, UK: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy.
- Campbell, P. (2006). *Student assessment in adult basic education: A Canadian snapshot*. Winnipeg: Centre for Education and Work. Retrieved from www.nald.ca/library/research/snape/snape.pdf.
- Campbell, P. (2007a). Key principles for accountability systems. In Campbell, P. (Ed.), *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 327-354). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.
- Campbell, P. (2007b). *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education*. Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.

- Canadian Apprenticeship Forum. (2007). *The link between essential skills and success in apprenticeship training: An analysis of selected essential skills initiatives in apprenticeship across Canada*. Ottawa: Government of Canada.
- Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2007a). *Canada's biggest economic challenge: Improving workplace learning*. Ottawa: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/Mar-15-07-Canada%27s-biggest.pdf>.
- Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2007b). *Unlocking Canada's potential: The state of workplace and adult literacy in Canada*. Ottawa: Author. Retrieved from www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/SOLR/2007/AdultENG19juin11h36FINALv6.pdf.
- Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). (2009). *The state of Aboriginal learning in Canada: A holistic approach to measuring success*. Ottawa: Author. Retrieved from www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/StateAboriginalLearning/SAL-FINALReport_EN.PDF.
- Canadian Literacy and Learning Network (CCLN) (2012). *Fact Sheet Literacy and Essential Skills Series: Disabilities*. Retrieved from http://en.copian.ca/library/learning/clln/fact_sheets/disabilities/disabilities.pdf.
- Centre for Literacy, Quebec. (2011). *Measures of success: Workplace literacy and essential skills-Background paper*. Montreal: Author.
- Centre for Literacy, Quebec (N.D). *Measures of Success: Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills – Overview and Selected Findings*. Retrieved from <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/projects/measures-success-workplace-literacy-and-essential-skills>.
- Circelli, M., Curtis, D., & Perkins, K. (2011). *Mapping adult literacy performance: Background paper*. Adelaide, Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. Retrieved from www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2463.html.
- Clark, I. (2012). Formative assessment: A systemic and artistic process of instruction for supporting school and lifelong learning. *Canadian Society for the Study of Education* 35(2), 24-40.
- Connect Strategic Alliances. (2011). *The SCALES Project, Phase one: Research report*. Retrieved from www.collegeconnect.on.ca/wp-content/uploads/SCALES-Research-Report-June-2011.pdf.

- Cooper, N.L. (2006). The transformative nature of culture-based literacy provision in Native literacy programs. MA thesis, OISE, University of Toronto.
- Crooks, S., Davies, P., Gardner, A., Grieve, K., Mollins, T., Niks, M., Tannenbaum, J., & Wright, B. (2008). *Voices from the field: Accountability in the adult literacy field in Canada*. Retrieved March 12, 2013 from <http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/>.
- Derrick, J. (2012). *Breaking the solitudes: Embedding literacy and essential skills in workplace learning*. Montreal: The Centre for Literacy of Quebec. Retrieved from http://www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/sites/default/files/Embed_LES_J_Derrick.pdf.
- Derrick, J., Ecclestone, K., & Gawn, J. (2007). A balancing act? The English and Welsh model of assessment in adult basic education. In Campbell, P. (Ed.), *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 287-323). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.
- Derrick, J., Ecclestone, K., & Gawn, J. (2008). Evaluating the “spirit” and “letter” of formative assessment in the learning culture of part-time adult literacy and numeracy classes. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13(2), 173-184.
- Derrick, J., Ecclestone, K., & Gawn, J. (2009). *Formative assessment in adult literacy, language and numeracy*. Leicester, UK: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Druine, N., & Wildemeersch, D. (2000). The vocational turn in adult literacy education and the impact of the International Adult Literacy Survey. *International Review of Education*, 46(5), 391-405.
- ESDC (n.d.) Essential Skills Definition. Government of Canada. Retrieved February 11, 2014 from <http://www.esdc.gc.ca/eng/jobs/les/definitions/index.shtml>.
- Fagan, W. (2007). Standardized referenced tests. In Campbell, P. (Ed.), *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 93-119). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.
- Faulk, J. (2011). Essential Skills through Safety and Health, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters. Presentation at Centre for Workplace Skills SMART Session, 12 April. Mississauga, Ontario. Retrieved 14 February 2013 from http://www.workplaceskills.ca/_uploads/media/gp2wsokl.pdf.
- Finlay, A., & Harrison, C. (1992). Measuring “success” in reading in adult basic education: A United Kingdom perspective. *Journal of Reading*, 36(3), 164-172.

- Fletcher-Campbell, F., Soler, J., & Reid, G. (2009). *Approaching difficulties in literacy development: Assessment, pedagogy and programmes*. London, UK: Sage.
- Gadsby, L., Middleton, S., & Whitaker, C. (2007). *Monitoring and assessment in community-based adult literacy programs in British Columbia*. Vancouver: Literacy BC and Literacy Now.
- Gardner, A. (2005). *SARAW survey report*, Calgary: Bow Valley College.
- Gardner, A. (2012, May). Adult literacy measures and measuring literacies in the classroom. *Adult Education Research Conference, Pre-Conference Literacy Symposium*. SUNY Empire College, Saratoga Springs, New York.
- George, N.P. (2008). *Aboriginal adult literacy: Nourishing their learning spirits*. Saskatoon: Canadian Council on Learning's Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre. Retrieved from www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/ablkc/NourishingSpirits_LitReview_en.pdf.
- George, N., & Murray, S. (2012). *Strengthening adult literacy among indigenous populations in Canada and other OECD countries*. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002178/217867E.pdf>.
- Geraci, K. (2007). What does competence mean? Who decides? In Campbell, P. (Ed.), *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 47-67). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.
- Geraci, K., & Mazzulla, M. (2011). *Workforce essential skills: Putting literacy to work*. Toronto: PTP Adult Learning and Employment Programs.
- Giddings, D., Despina, R., & Maruca, G. (2005). *Measuring success – International comparisons and bottom lines*. Retrieved 7 February 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/success/cover.htm.
- Gill, S. (2008). Canadian and world research on assessment practices for adult learners. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 3(14), 281-294.
- Gorman, D., & Ernst, M.L. (2004). Test review: The Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) life skills reading tests. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 1(1), 73-84.

- Government of Alberta (2009). *Living literacy: A literacy framework for Alberta's next generation economy*. Retrieved 11 October 2012 from www.eae.alberta.ca/media/219400/living%20literacy.pdf
- Government of Alberta (2013). *Alberta's Social Policy Framework, February 2013*. Retrieved 26 November, 2013 from <http://socialpolicyframework.alberta.ca/files/documents/ahs-nonannotatedfrmwrkwebfinal.pdf>.
- Government of Alberta (2013). *Results Based Budgeting Report to Albertans*. Retrieved 16 January, 2014 from <http://www.finance.alberta.ca/business/budget/results-basedbudgeting/2013-1107-Results-based-Budgeting-Report-to-Albertans.pdf>.
- Government of Alberta (2013). *2013-2016 Government of Alberta Strategic Plan*. Retrieved 22 January, 2014 from <http://www.finance.alberta.ca/publications/budget/budget2013/goa-business-plan.pdf>
- Grieve, K. (2003). *Supporting learning, supporting change: A research project on self-management and self-direction (field report)*. Retrieved 12 February 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/olc/smsdfld/cover.htm
- Grieve, K. (2004). *Supporting literacy, supporting change: Program approaches to building self-awareness and self-direction (A report from the OLC working group)*. Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition.
- Grieve, K. (2007). Assessment for whom and for what? Stepping back to ask important questions about assessment. In Campbell, P. (Ed.), *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 251-285). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.
- Guadalupe, C. & Cardoso, M. (2011). Measuring the continuum of literacy skills among adults: Educational testing and the LAMP experience. *International Review of Education*, 57(1-2), 199- 217.
- Hagston J., & Tout, D. (2007). Assessment in Australia: A balancing act. In Campbell, P. (Ed.), *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 251-285). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.
- Hamilton, M. (2001). Privileged literacies: Policy, institutional process and the life of IALS. *Language and Education*, 15(2/3), 178-196.

- Hamilton, M. (2009). Putting words in their mouths: The alignment of identities with systems goals through the use of individualized learning plans. *British Educational Research Journal*, 35(2), 221-242.
- Harwood, C. (2012). *State of the literacy and essential skills field*. Ottawa: Canadian Literacy and Learning Network.
- Hayes, A. (2000). Standards and the measurement of learning outcomes of adult students in further education. In H. Jones & J. Mace (Eds.), *Outcomes of adult learning: Taking the debate forward*. London: FEDA.
- Hayes, B. (2005). Keynote Address. Measuring Success – International Comparisons and Bottom Lines. Retrieved 7 February 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/success/cover.htm.
- Hearne, L. (2011). The consideration of a constructive evaluation framework in adult guidance practice. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 20(3), 31-39.
- Henry, R. & Grandell, R. (2011). *Aboriginal adult literacy assessment tool – Executive Summary*. Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network.
- Howard, A., Edge, J., & Watt, D. (2012). *Understanding the value, challenges and opportunities of engaging Métis, Inuit, and First Nations workers*. Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada.
- Jackson, C. & Shaetti, M. (2013a). *Measurement and Assessment in Adult Literacy and Essential Skills: A Critical Literature Review*. Calgary: Bow Valley College.
- Jackson, C. & Schaetti, M. (2013b). *Findings on Learner Progression Measures from Literacy and Essential Skills Programs in Alberta*. Calgary: Bow Valley College.
- Jackson, K. (2005). Greetings from human resources skills development Canada. In *Measuring Success – International Comparisons and Bottom Lines*. Pp. 6–9. Retrieved 7 February 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/success/cover.htm.
- Johnston, J. & Barker, L. (Eds.). (2002). *Assessing the impact of technology in teaching and learning: A sourcebook for evaluators*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Institute for Social Research.

- Johnston, P. & Costello, P. (2009). Principles for literacy assessment. In F. Fletcher-Campbell, J. Soler, & G. Reid (Eds.), *Approaching difficulties in literacy development: Assessment, pedagogy, and programmes* (pp. 145-162). London, UK: Sage.
- Larsen, A. (2008). *Literacy in the workplace: A series of five fact sheets*. Ottawa: Canadian Union of Public Employees. Retrieved from www.nald.ca/library/research/cupe/factsheets/factsheets.pdf
- Lavender, P. (2000). Learning outcomes: Towards a synthesis of progress. In H. Jones & J. Mace (Eds.), *Outcomes of adult learning: Taking the debate forward*. London: FEDA.
- Lefebvre, S., Belding, P., Brehaut, M., Dermer, S., Kaskens, A.-M., Lord, E., et al. (April 2006). "I've opened up": *Exploring learners' perspectives on progress – Level 1 and level 2 learners in community-based adult literacy programs*. Toronto: Parkdale Project Read.
- Literacy Alberta & NorQuest College. (2013). *Supporting Practice Engagement Promising Practices for Literacy and Essential Skills Programs and Services in Alberta*. Calgary: Literacy Alberta.
- Literacy Link South Central. (2003). *Learning Disabilities Training: A new approach*. London, Ont: Literacy Link South Central.
- Looney, J. (2008). *Teaching, learning and assessment for adults improving foundational skills*. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Max Bell Foundation (2006) *Literacy-for a life of learning: A collaborative process toward a proposed literacy policy for all Albertans*. Calgary: Max Bell Foundation.
- Merrifield, J. (1999). Performance accountability: For what? To whom? And how? *Focus on Basic*, 3(B). Retrieved from <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=362.html>.
- Merrifield, J., Coleman, U., & McDonogh, O. (2001). *Issues and opportunities in Assessment*. Dublin: National Adult Literacy Agency.
- Millar, R. (2007). Diagnostic assessment. In Campbell, P. (Ed.). *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 69-91). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.

- Murray, S. (2005). IALSS, IALS and PISA. In *Measuring Success – International Comparisons and Bottom Lines*. Pp. 10-29. Retrieved 7 February 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/success/cover.htm
- Niks, M., Allen, D., Davies, P., McRae D., & Nonesuch, K. (2003). *Dancing in the dark: How do adults with little formal education learn?* Nanaimo, BC: Malaspina University-College.
- Norton, M. (2001). Learning in the borderlands: Perspectives and possibilities in community-based learning. In M.C. Taylor (Ed.), *Adult literacy now!* (pp. 3-16). Toronto: Culture Concepts.
- Norton, M. (1992). Literacy, Welfare and Popular Education. In J.A. Draper & M.C. Taylor (Ed.), *Voices from the literacy field* (pp. 139-154). Toronto: Culture Concepts.
- Nurss, J. (1998). Functional context/outcomes-based literacy assessment. *South African Journal of Applied Language Studies*, 6(1), 37-41.
- NWT Literacy Council (2011). *“It feels so good inside!” Non-academic outcomes, barriers and success factors*. Retrieved 6 February 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/nwtlc/feels_good/feels_good.pdf.
- Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). (2011). *Ontario adult literacy curriculum framework: Foundations of assessment*. Toronto: Employment Ontario.
- OECD. (2013). *Skills outlook: First results from the survey of adult skills*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- OECD, (2011). *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*. Retrieved 26 April 2013 from www.issuu.com/literacyexpresscanada/docs/piaac-oecd_overview.
- OECD (2007). *Understanding the social outcomes of learning – Executive summary*. Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) at Retrieved 7 February 2013 from www.oecd.org/edu/cei/understandingthesocialoutcomesoflearning.htm#BM2.
- Pinsent-Johnson, C. (2007). Developing practice-based performance assessments. In P. Campbell (Ed.). *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 15-46). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.

- Quigley, A. (2001). Defining reality: The struggle for voice in adult literacy education. In M.C. Taylor (Ed.), *Adult literacy now!* (pp. 81-85). Toronto: Culture Concepts.
- Quigley, A. (2011, May). The importance of “unlearning.” Aboriginal literacy and the future of Aboriginal literacy in Canada. Panel presentation at the launch of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Assessment Tool. Saskatoon, SK.
- Rahbari, N. (n.d.). *Evaluation of a family literacy program: Upgrading for parents with preschoolers (UPP)*. Kingston, ON: Kingston Literacy & Skills. Retrieved 5 May 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/kls/build_fam_lit_es/build_fam_lit_es.pdf.
- Reder, S. (2009). Scaling up and moving in: Connecting social practice views to policies and programs in adult education. *Literacy & Numeracy Studies*, 17(1), 35-50.
- Reder, S. (2011). Some thoughts on IALS measurement validity, program impact and logic models for policy development. Paper Presentation at the *Fall Institute 2011: IALS – Its Meaning and Impact for Policy and Practice*. Banff, AB.
- Reisenberger, A. (2000). Encouraging adult achievement. In H. Jones & J. Mace (Eds.), *Outcomes of adult learning: Taking the debate forward*. London: FEDA.
- Salomon, M. (2009). *Workplace literacy: What works? And why?* Montreal: Centre for Literacy of Quebec.
- Salomon, M. (2010). *Measures of success – Workplace literacy and essential skills: Background paper*. Retrieved 7 February 2013 from www.nald.ca/library/research/cfl/measures/measures.pdf.
- Sauve, L. (2012). *Collective list of assessment tools*. Toronto: Prepared for LLSC and Quill.
- Social Research and Demonstration Corporation. (2013). *Measures of success: Workplace literacy and essential skills-Fact sheet*. Ottawa: Author.
- Sheehan-Holt, J.K., & Smith, M.C. (2000). Does basic skills education affect adults’ literacy proficiencies and reading practices? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35(2), 226-243.
- St. Clair, R. (2009). *The dilemmas of accountability: Exploring the issues of accountability in adult literacy through three case studies*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow and ABC Canada Literacy Foundation.

St. Clair, R. & Belzer, A. (2007). The challenges of consistency: National systems for assessment and accountability in adult literacy education. In P. Campbell (Ed.). *Measures of success: Assessment and accountability in adult basic education* (pp. 159-206). Edmonton: Grass Roots Press.