Research Findings

Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures Project

Candice Jackson and Marnie Schaetti
Candice Jackson and Marnie Schaetti are researchers in the Literacy and Essentials Skills: Learner Progression Measures Project.

Audrey Gardner is the project lead and coordinator of the Adult Literacy Research Institute in the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning, Bow Valley College.

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
e-mail: 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
Table of Contents

Executive Summary ....................................................................................................................... 4
Introduction .................................................................................................................................. 6
Complexity and Simplicity ......................................................................................................... 15
Findings ..................................................................................................................................... 19
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 53
Appendix A: Recruitment Posters ........................................................................................... 56
Appendix B: Consent Forms ..................................................................................................... 59
Appendix C: Interview Questions ............................................................................................ 68
Appendix D: The Range of Assessment Tools Found in the Literature ............................... 72
References ................................................................................................................................. 79
Executive Summary

In a very general sense, I see progress as power over text, power over voice, power over learning, and power over their lives.

—*Dr. Pat Campbell

The Learner Progression Measures (LPM) project conducted extensive research on measures of learner progress in Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) to assist the Alberta Government Ministries of Advanced Education, Education, and Human Services with the development of future directions, policies, and programming. Through an extensive literature review and a total of fifty-eight interviews with Alberta LES learners, practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies, the LES:LPM project studied both the tools and resources that currently exist to measure learner progress and the contexts in which they are used.

We found out:

- **why** people measure progress and how they use the results. It depends on their role in the LES system and the accountability requirements of that role. One finding that we had not expected was the keen understanding that stakeholders had for the strictures placed on other stakeholders by their responsibilities and needs. This mutuality of understanding was a surprise because it had not shown up in the literature review.

- **what** it is people actually measure when they measure progress, that is, what indicators they use to determine that progress has been achieved. We found that stakeholders considered personal growth, the development of skills, increased capacity in the world, the achievement of goals, and external validation to be the most significant indicators of progress.

- **how** people measure progress, and what tools and methods they use to do it. We found that the tools and methods chosen depend on the context of the learning environment and the reason for measuring. Stakeholders noted the lack of tools for measuring anything more than straightforward and linear progress, even though LES learning requires more complex and flexible measurement.

*Dr. Pat Campbell is a leading researcher in adult literacy assessment and reading.*
All the funding agencies and most practitioners and administrators we interviewed were aware that Alberta’s LES system is under review. Based on the findings from the literature and the interviews with stakeholders, we suggest the following points be taken into account in any system renewal:

- Respect learners’ voices in the development of LES programming and their dignity and privacy in all assessment practices.
- Expand and clarify the definitions of learner success to recognize personal growth, which would be of special significance to Aboriginal learners. Include literacy practices in any progression measures and develop criteria for that purpose.
- Respect qualitative evidence.
- Recognize that employability cannot be the sole indicator of success.
- Develop new assessment tools that are flexible and relevant to practitioners and learners. When developing them, respect the work already being done in programs to measure progress.
- Take the capacity of LES programs into account, and clarify and expand the definition of program success.
- Work with all levels of the system. Acknowledge and encourage dialogue among learners, practitioners, bureaucrats, and politicians.
- The responsibility for increasing population literacy levels cannot rest on LES programs.
Introduction

I’ve said this project could be quite transformative because what we find out in the next eight months is going to impact ... what government is going to need to do and what stakeholders are going to need to do to make sure we are meeting the needs of Albertans. –Funding agency

The Project’s Purpose

The Learner Progression Measures (LPM) project aimed to conduct extensive research on measures of learner progress in Literacy and Essential Skills (LES) programs to assist the Alberta Government Ministries of Advanced Education, Education, and Human Services with the development of future directions, policies, and programming. Its secondary purpose was to use an animated collaborative approach to carry out the project’s objectives and activities by working with two integrated initiatives: the overarching coordinating advisory committee made up of community, college, and government stakeholders, and the aligned Effective Practices project. The intended outcome of this multilevel collaborative arrangement is to impart capacity to the Alberta LES system through concerted effort, open communication, and cooperation.

Like policy-makers in many jurisdictions, LES program funding agencies in Alberta confront differing expectations. On one hand they are aware that learners’ changes in LES programs are often difficult to measure, and on the other they need to find a means of measuring and then aggregating data on learner progress. The LES:LPM project attempted to bridge these two expectations by learning about the tools and resources that currently exist to measure learner progress and about the contexts in which they are used.

The Team

The Adult Literacy Research Institute (ALRI) at Bow Valley College (BVC) in Calgary led the project. The ALRI promotes critical inquiry, applied research, and innovation in the field of foundational learning. Its work centres 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. With its demonstrated expertise in leading significant collaborative research and development projects, and its strong relationships with educational institutions, community-based organizations, and Aboriginal communities involved in LES, the ALRI was uniquely placed to guide the project team.

The ALRI pulled together a group of highly and diversely experienced LES practitioners and researchers from partner organizations to serve as the project task force team. The task force team members were:
• Lorene Anderson, Alberta Workforce Essential Skills Society
• Sue Phillips, Further Education Society
• Penny Worden, Further Education Society
• Audrey Gardner, ALRI, LES:LPM Project Lead
• Candace Witkowskyj, ALRI Project Officer.

The ALRI hired Candice Jackson and Marnie Schaetti as co-researchers on the project. They brought many decades of experience in the LES field. Over the years, Candice and Marnie have worked as researchers, writers, coordinators of community-based adult literacy programs, and senior staff at provincial literacy organizations. They have been on both sides of funding requests, having applied for program funding and having sat at funding tables deciding which proposals to approve. They have met and worked closely with learners, practitioners, and community and government stakeholders from across the country. Together, the project’s task force team and researchers 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 group. He and his team, particularly Kaylee Ramage and Scott Henwood, provided invaluable training and logistical support for the interview phase of the project. 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 both his expertise in qualitative research and decades of experience in the field of adult literacy and essential skills.

The Process

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 resulting report, *Measurement and Assessment in Adult Literacy and Essential Skills: A Critical Literature Review* (Jackson and Schaetti 2013), is available from [www.centreforexcellenceinfoundationallearning.ca](http://www.centreforexcellenceinfoundationallearning.ca).

Using the findings from the literature review as a guide in the development of questions for stakeholder interviews here in Alberta, the second phase of the LES:LPM project involved direct consultations with a total of fifty-eight learners, practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies in the LES field. We made every effort to reach a wide variety of stakeholders. Interview participants represented community-based, workplace, college, Aboriginal, and family literacy programs in both rural and urban communities throughout Alberta. We used qualitative research processes to analyze the data we gathered.

Research design

The design for the consultation phase of the LES:LPM research was based on the Research in Practice methodology. In this paradigm, research is defined as “systematic inquiry done by people directly involved in literacy practice” (Norton 2008, 3). Everyone on the task force team is or has been directly involved in literacy practice and we brought all that experience with us as we embarked on this project.

The ALRI provided very valuable training sessions for team members. The first training took place in early January 2013. Members of the LES:LPM and the Effective Practices project teams came together for a one-day consultation with subject expert Dr. Stephen Reder who discussed his extensive research on measuring learner progress and provided advice on the overall LES:LPM project plan. He offered suggestions for the processes of data collection and analysis, and demonstrated effective interview techniques. We continued to seek his advice and perspective through the remainder of the project.

We used qualitative research practices to collect and analyze the data. More than that, we drew mainly on qualitative ways of thinking about research to design and prepare for the data collection process (Norton 2008). This approach of research in practice led us first to pay conscious attention to our role as researchers. We understood that our planning for, and collecting and analyzing the interview data would, to some degree, be shaped by our values and
assumptions, many of them hidden or deeply ingrained. The first strategy was therefore for the task force team members to examine our biases in our roles as researchers.

As part of the January training, Dr. Reder demonstrated how to use researcher bracketing interviews (Tufford 2010). These interviews, conducted subsequently by the ALRI’s Sandi Loschnig, allowed each team member to voice her hopes for the research, her approach to the work, and the reasons the work was important to her. The bracketing interview data were not included as part of the data analysis, but served as a foundation for self-reflection and for discussion during task force team meetings.

A second training event took place a month later. The BVC Applied Research and Evaluation Unit, led by Dr. Augusto Legaspi, provided LPM: LES team members with training in interview and research techniques. Through several hours of lecture, role play, and discussion, we developed a shared understanding of interview protocol and how to design effective questions. Following this session, we came together for another full day to review, revise, and finalize the proposed interview questions.

**Recruitment process**

Based on the project proposal, our intention was to interview a minimum of fifty people involved in the LES system in Alberta. They were to include learners, practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies, with at least half the interview participants being learners. The task force team recruited participants for the study by sending recruitment posters to our networks across the province. (See these posters in appendix A.) We also asked each recipient to pass the poster on to his or her own networks.

Throughout the recruitment process, the need to represent Alberta’s diversity was paramount. We wanted to represent the geographic diversity of programs in Alberta as much as possible by including both urban and rural perspectives, as well as those of funding agencies who have a province-wide view of LES. It was also important to interview people from as many different kinds of LES programs as possible. For example, we spoke to people who represented:

- community-based volunteer tutors;
- family literacy;
- workplace and workforce training;
- Aboriginal communities and learners; and
- colleges.

Specifically with regard to learners, we interviewed only those who were active in foundational LES programs, and sought to ensure that they represented the cultural, age, ability,
and gender variations among Alberta’s LES learners. Each learner interviewed received a
twenty-five-dollar gift certificate for their time.

It was very important that learners — and all other interviewees — felt comfortable with and
were fully informed about the interview process and their rights as voluntary participants. Each
participant signed an informed consent prior to the interview. (See appendix B for the consent
forms we used.) In particular, we made sure that the learners understood the consent form they
were signing, and that we explained the purpose and process of the interview. Whenever
possible, the practitioner who’d informed the learner about the project read the consent form out
loud and discussed it with the learner before the interview. In every case, the researchers also
confirmed the learners’ understanding and agreement prior to beginning the interview.

In all, we interviewed fifty-eight people: twenty-four learners, nineteen practitioners, eight
administrators, and seven funding agencies. The learners had been in their current programs for
an average of fifteen months and it was the first time in such a program for 54 percent of them.
Between them, the practitioners and administrators had worked in the field of literacy and
essential skills for 398 years. Practitioners had spent an average of eleven years in their current
programs and seventeen years in the field. Eighty-nine percent of them have regular, direct
contact with learners. Administrators had spent an average of nine years in their current
programs and sixteen years in the field; 63 percent of them have regular, direct contact with
learners. The funding agencies we spoke with included policy-makers — that is, people who
develop, recommend and analyze policy — as well as those who oversee direct granting.

**Data collection methods**

The task force team designed a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. This
allowed interviewers to probe into the responses and to gather as much data as possible by
moving back and forth between questions as needed. We asked for participants’ perceptions of
the meaning of progress, and for their experiences with assessment tools and methods, indicators
of progress, reporting mechanisms, and tracking and monitoring processes. We also gathered
information on their programs and the length of time each participant had been involved in a
program. We used a similar set of questions with all participants, although there were a limited
number of discrete questions for each group. During the interview phase, we frequently
discussed the data we were collecting as a way of determining the efficacy of the questions we
were asking (Norton 2008). (See appendix C for the interview questions.)

The researchers conducted fifty-six of the total fifty-eight interviews; the remaining two were
conducted by members of the task force team. Interviews were primarily conducted face to face,
although we did conduct fifteen by telephone. Because some learners have had negative
experiences in formal situations, including in interviews, we gave all learners the opportunity to
have a person of their choice present at the interview. Three learners brought a tutor or other
support person with them, primarily to have someone there whom they trusted, to help them
understand the questions and to remind them of things they might want to say. Interviews were
forty-five to sixty minutes long and, with participant consent, were electronically recorded. All
participants agreed to be recorded and the researchers also took notes.

To round out our understanding of how learner progress is measured in their programs,
learner and practitioner participants were invited to bring documents to the interview that are
used in their programs to track, assess, report, and represent progress. These included:

- examples of work that represented noteworthy accomplishments;
- logic models listing detailed outputs and outcomes;
- tracking sheets used to record learner goals and the progress made toward them;
- observation records used by volunteer tutors to note changes and progress; and
- participant surveys that include detailed descriptions of behavioural and attitudinal changes
  resulting from participation in the program.

Data analysis process

After each interview, we sent the completed audio files to BVC task force team members who
transcribed each interview. They then organized the data into participant groups: learners,
practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies. The grouped data were organized by
interview question, printed out, and distributed to the researchers, the ALRI project lead, and the
project officer for analysis.

We analyzed and discussed the data we were collecting during the interview phase as a way
of determining the efficacy of the questions we were asking (Norton 2008). Once the interviews
were completed, data analysis became the core focus of our work. To establish the data analysis
process, the two researchers, the project lead, and the project officer met over the course of three
days, working together through some of the data to consider and arrange the steps for data
analysis. Once we were clear on those steps, the researchers took over and completed the
analysis.
The process we followed used several overlapping and iterative levels of analysis. We read the data in detail and identified significant words and phrases, thus using a descriptive-interpretive approach. We followed a rhythm of working together, then alone, then together again:

1. *Working individually.* After the initial work together to establish the overall analysis process, the two researchers read through the remaining data individually, making note of words and phrases, and of particularly powerful or salient quotes. At this step, we were not reaching conclusion but simply noting what we found in all the participants’ responses to each question.

2. *Working together.* During this first iteration of close reading, we frequently discussed our individual notes on the data. We also did our best to clarify how our beliefs and identities influenced our perception of what we were reading and how we were reading it (Norton 2008). For example, some of the stories we heard evoked strong emotional responses in us — some of the challenges faced by interview participants reminded us of our own challenges as practitioners, and so on.

3. *Establishing a process for the next step.* Once we had each closely read through all the data individually, we collated the identified words and phrases and looked through them again. Just as we had at the very beginning of the analysis process, we read through the first few questions of this collated data together to clarify the next steps in the analysis.

4. *Working individually.* Once we had established a working rhythm, we proceeded to work individually through the collated words and phrases, to begin identifying emerging themes, which we noted.

5. *Working together.* We then spent four intensive days working together with collated results of our individual work, bringing together the possible themes we had identified. We plastered the walls with post-it notes covered with bits of data, clustering them into categories and, from there, into overall themes. At this stage, we saw clear patterns emerging between and among the different groups of participants. As always, we recorded these detailed steps of analysis and interpretation, along with our reflections on the process.
6. **Working with the project lead.** When this phase was complete, we met with the project lead to discuss the identified patterns and themes.

7. **Working together as researchers.** The final step involved writing the report. This step of organizing the themes into findings and relating them to the findings from the literature review extended our analysis of the data (Norton 2008). It was at this point that the power of the gathered quotes from the participants became clear. We wanted to honour this power in some way so we agreed that the voices of the participants should make up the core of this report.

**Surprises**

As we entered into this collaborative, qualitative research project, we anticipated finding both challenges and gifts along the way, and we certainly did find both. There was a list of challenges. For the purposes of recruitment, we set up an administrative support system to contact participants and schedule interviews. The system, however, proved unwieldy and in the end the researchers and other task force team members made direct contact with people we thought might be interested in participating. We aimed for a representative sample of participants, working within the project’s budget and timelines. At times we found ourselves without enough of a particular stakeholder group, only to find that, by the time we put out the word to our networks, we ended up with more of that group than we could accommodate. It was a constant back-and-forth process of revising our tasks.

Three people who were not active in any LES program past or present applied for the interviews because of the $25 gift certificate. Some English language learners with advanced professional degrees expressed an interest in being interviewed but they could not be considered foundational learners. Therefore, part way through the recruitment stage, we refined the criteria
for selecting learner participants — they had to be currently active or recent participants in an LES program learning foundational skills.

We faced challenges with the data collection and analysis too. In spite of many hours spent as a team crafting the interview questions, once we began the interviews we discovered that some questions were unclear to participants while others were repetitive. We therefore prefaced some questions by explaining that we understood the question might be redundant and already answered, and we clarified questions as needed, especially with learners. In addition, because we did not build in the time to learn to use data-analysis software, we spent a long time doing the analysis — reading, reviewing, and pulling themes from the vast quantities of raw data using pens, markers, flip charts, and post-it notes. While it was time-consuming, this process allowed us to become intimately familiar with the data and reinforced our perception that the voices of the participants should be a direct part of this report.

In addition to challenges, this project brought us great gifts. We were impressed and humbled by all the participants’ commitment to the work they do. The funding agencies had clearly given a lot of thought to the challenges of measuring learner progress and they were well aware of the complexities involved. The practitioners and administrators demonstrated inspiring skill, expertise, innovation, and dedication in the face of many challenges (which they did not dwell on). The learners’ stories of change, transformation, and persistence gave meaning to the work we were doing, and we came away inspired by the positive impact of programs on learners’ lives.

The Report

This report integrates the information we gained from the literature review with the information we collected through participant interviews. The funding agencies we spoke with face the challenge of measuring learner progress in a way that allows data to be aggregated but that also honours individual progress. We now face the similar challenge of presenting the findings to you in a way that honours the cumulative and comparative information we’ve gathered as well as the individual voices of the people who shared their stories with us.

We use quotations from the interviews throughout the report. We hope the power of Alberta’s LES stakeholders’ voices will come through to you as clearly as it did to those of us who had the privilege to meet with them. None of the quotations are attributed because of our commitment to the interviewees that no names or identifying information would appear in the report. With the understanding that the spoken and written word differ, the quotes have been lightly edited to make them more easily understood in writing. Our intention was to allow the voices to shine through.
Through the interviews we collected extremely rich data. We have restricted the analysis to focus on the intent of the LES:LPM project’s research mandate, but the potential exists to garner more information from the data in ways that go beyond the scope of the original project.

The report is organized as follows:

- We look at the complexity — and simplicity — surrounding literacy and essential skills.
- We discuss the two primary ways of viewing progress: as a discrete set of cognitive skills and as personal growth.
- We examine the relevance of context and culture.
- We look at the current system of learner progression measurement.
- We look at recommendations for systems change.

**Complexity and Simplicity**

**About Complexity**

The interviews and the literature review clearly demonstrated that both the issue and the context of learner progression measurement are very complex. A first example of the issue’s complexity is that different stakeholder groups mean different things when they use common terminology. For example, the term *essential skills*, which has become part of the discourse in LES programming, holds different meanings for the different stakeholders we interviewed. Government funding agencies speak of essential skills as defined by the government of Canada, linking it specifically to the context of the workplace. Practitioners, by contrast, use the term both as a reference to the skills needed in the workplace and as a reference to the essential skills needed in everyday life. They moved from one meaning to the other, depending on the context they were describing. Finally, learners did not use the term *essential skills* at all unless they were referring to a program that specifically named essential skills.

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

“I think there are a number of things that I see as being progress. Things like giving them a voice that they never had before and hearing them actually express the voice. It’s the self-confidence that they have in themselves. It’s the idea that they are able to look for new learning. A lot of the participants I work with may never actually go out and get that job. They’re not there for workplace skills. They’re looking at the essential skills. They are looking at being able to get along, and at the networking that happens in a group as signs of success or progress.” (practitioner)
The perceptions of “progress” also differed from one group to the next. We will examine this in much more detail later because differences in perceptions of progress itself are clearly central to the challenge of determining how to measure it.

“We can’t bundle progress up into a nice pretty package. I think it’s probably because we can’t define it.” (funding agency)

Not surprisingly, the varying meanings assigned to “progress” lead to varying degrees of importance being tied to certain indicators of progress. This also adds to the complexity of finding a mutually agreeable way of measuring progress.

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

A third layer of complexity revealed by the interviews is that various stakeholders face very different accountability requirements. This too poses a challenge as we look for a way of measuring progress that is meaningful across the system.

“We’re interested in setting strategies that are going to move things provincially, but when you get down to the learner, it just becomes about them.” (funding agency)

“Learners’ goals are quite often different from those of the system itself, and certainly are not as outcome-oriented as we want them to be. I think as a society we want learners to have outcomes that are easily understood and that are going to reduce costs to the public purse, where I would venture to guess the majority of learners are just like me: What am I interested in? And what is going to help me to further my personal goals?” (funding agency)

“The challenge will be looking at how those personal goals can be articulated in a systemic view.” (funding agency)

Finally, stakeholders face complexity in the competing demands and multiple challenges of planning and delivering Alberta’s LES programs. Three kinds of challenges in particular were discussed by interviewees.

- The contextual challenges faced by programs working with foundational learners in a wide variety of settings.

  “When we’re talking barriers, we’re talking about a mountain of failure to climb.” (administrator)
“You can’t track literacy learners. They come and go; they’re hard to follow … And often they do just disappear. Or, rarely, someone sticks around for twenty-five years. Is that a measure of progress? Or does that serve some other kind of purpose? … What kind of metrics have to be developed in order to measure that? Is it an essential skills framework? Is it a PIAAC tool? Is it an assessment and a measurement tool? … Where does that all fit in? Because we just don’t know yet what that means.” (funding agency)

“Each one of us operates slightly different. We have quite a bit of autonomy in the tools that we use. Not that there’s not consistency in training and stuff, but there are individual community needs that need to be taken into consideration.” (practitioner)

• The cultural differences that practitioners encounter require both great flexibility and a willingness to innovate.

“The first time I tested her, her English was so limited that there wasn’t really much I could do except talk to her.” (practitioner)

“We don’t do a lot of testing because that’s something that’s really, really foreign to them because of their cultural background. They weren’t tested. It was all rote memory on slate … Even when we offered the GED, we had to offer a pre-GED. And when we offered the apprenticeship entrance exam, we’ve had to offer the pre-entrance class because they don’t have the background even to begin taking tests.” (administrator)

• The challenges of being accountable to institutional systems sometimes conflict with the need to be accountable to the learners served.

“They’re asking us to report on four outcomes: enhanced access and participation of adults in learning; increased literacy and essential foundational skills in adults; strengthened pathways and successful transitions for adult learners; and increased capacity and alignment of community learning providers with postsecondary institutions. So those are what they want us to report on now. The learner-driven success with

---

1 PIACC refers to the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, a skill survey by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
learners’ goals seems to have fallen between the cracks with those outcomes.” (funding agency)

The literature we reviewed spoke to similar challenges in balancing the needs of learners and other stakeholders, particularly policy-makers (Derrick, Ecclestone, and Merrifield 2007). At the system and policy level, governments have a legitimate need to increase the numbers of learners who earn certification (Looney 2008). Within the workplace, employers perceive work performance as the only assessment issue (Black 2012). Practitioners feel it’s necessary to adapt their programs to meet learners’ disparate individual needs, which go beyond increased literacy levels, yet they are concerned that such adaptations make learner progress difficult to measure (Crooks et al. 2008). And learners are often more likely to name their progress as increased self-confidence and autonomy or an increased ability to perform in real-life contexts, than as earning a qualification of some kind (Looney 2008). “Progression is a subjective and context-specific construction that is extremely difficult to define, measure and capture through the conventional paradigm” (Hearne 2011, 35).

About Simplicity

There is complexity in every aspect of learner progression measurement, and there are multiple perspectives on every issue related to it (Jackson and Schaetti 2013). But not all stakeholders thought of it in this way. Just as learners did not use the term essential skills, they never mentioned the word complex. To them, the definition of progress is really very simple. It is specific, not theoretical. It is about enhanced capacity in all aspects of life, about a being part of a stronger social network, about having a voice. It is about having a changed approach to the world, finding it easier to engage in Canadian culture, being hopeful about the future. It is about being able to apply the skills they’ve learned and using them at home, at work, and in the community.

“I have two boys. And before I started the program, I felt so scared when I wanted to go to the school to talk with the teacher. Oh my goodness, maybe they wouldn’t understand me. I felt uncomfortable. But now I feel better, and I go there. I can ask questions, I can go place to place. I think this has changed my life.” (learner)

In short, for learners, progress means changes in themselves and their activities in the broader context of everyday life more than changes in their reading and writing skills per se (Grieve 2007; Hagston and Tout 2007; Hearne 2011; Lefebvre, Belding, Brehaut, Dermer, et al. 2006). The people who work with learners see this clearly.

“We have to be realistic when we’re working with basic literacy learners or English language learners. We have to be realistic that changes may be small
and they might take a while. But that doesn’t mean that progress is not happening and that people’s lives are not changing in positive ways.” (practitioner)

“Sometimes it can be really subjective in terms of measuring progress. It could be that somebody actually has a residence that’s more stable. It could be that somebody addresses a physical issue or they gain a driver’s license or they gain some mode of transportation … And of course it can be measured on more of an outcomes basis too, where they’re actually employed and making an income. So we have that whole continuum.” (practitioner)

“They’re people, not just employees. We need to ask them questions about their lives … asking how any positive changes in their literacy development has affected them in their personal lives in positive ways. I think we need to know that and I think the government, or whoever the funders are, should be asking those questions too. Literacy development affects your self-confidence. It affects the self-confidence or the positive environment of family members—the environment in your home. Those personal issues shouldn’t be ignored. They’re critically important.” (practitioner)

As we analyzed the data from the LES:LPM interviews, it struck us as a core paradox that such a complex issue can be seen in such simple terms — and that such a simple issue can be made so complex.

In the analysis that follows, we risk both oversimplifying and complicating the definition of progress by grouping the interview data and the review of the literature into two categories. First, we look at progress as personal growth; second, we look at it as a change in skills.

Findings

What Progress Means

In the literature, we found sharply differing perspectives on the meaning of adult literacy and the purpose of literacy and essential skills education. The literature indicated that policy-makers had little regard for the importance of personal growth as an indicator of learner progression, whereas practitioners and learners find it has a central importance. This difference in perspective between policy-makers and other stakeholders is the single area where the findings from the literature differ from our discoveries from the interviews. In the interviews, we found that policy-makers were very aware of the value and importance of personal growth as an indicator of progress.
In fact, all stakeholders we interviewed saw progress in two ways: as personal growth and as changes in skills. The interview data show stakeholders in Alberta did not choose one kind of progress over another. Instead, they spoke of both kinds of progress as important and necessary components of learner progress.

**Progress means personal growth**

The literature and our discussions as a team show there are many different ways to describe the changes learners experience that are not easily quantified or standardized. In the literature review that we wrote recently, we decided to call these changes non-academic outcomes. We’d also seen them referred to as informal or non-formal outcomes, non-cognitive outcomes, whole-self learning, soft skills, social and emotional learning, and personal and interpersonal skills. By contrast, we saw the discrete cognitive skills referred to as essential skills, hard skills, and core competencies.

And then we spoke to learners. We weren’t surprised that they did not divide their learning into soft and hard skills, into informal learning and core competencies, into academic and non-academic outcomes. They did not distinguish between the two ends of the essential skills spectrum with decoding skills on one end and networking skills on the other. They described progress and success as their ability to feel and to be competent in the world, and they did not use academic achievement as a term of reference. They described progress as the ways they had grown as people. We have therefore decided to use the term “personal growth” to refer to this way of viewing progress.

Personal growth includes factors such as self-confidence, self-worth, independence, a changed attitude, stronger relationships, learning to learn, and the ability to handle challenges (NWT Literacy Council 2011; Westell 2005). In public policy, it’s usually taken for granted that only hard outcomes — as opposed to personal growth — are relevant and meaningful in measuring progress. Compared to further education, training, or employment outcomes, which are more institutionally valued than personal development, the more subtle, intangible outcomes are largely ignored (Hearne 2011).

Recent studies, however, point to evidence that the softer essential skills, such as being able to communicate and work in teams, are as necessary for today’s economy as the more readily measured harder skills (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2007). Beyond such economic necessity, when we recognize learners’ emotional as well as cognitive changes, we emphasize their resilience and agency in bringing about changes in their lives (Tett and MacLachlan 2007). Since people with more agency develop more varied and useful learning strategies, working with learners on increasing agency and self-worth is a useful educational strategy. Barton (2009) therefore urges us to find ways to measure these non-academic outcomes so that programs with those impacts are valued appropriately.
Every learner we interviewed included personal growth when describing progress. It was the same with virtually every practitioner, administrator, and funding agency. The data make clear that personal growth is largely regarded as key to learner progress even though practitioners and funding agencies also acknowledged that it is difficult to measure.

The following elements of personal growth are the ones most frequently mentioned in the interviews, and they precisely echo those named across the literature. The stakeholders we spoke with not only described these various elements of personal growth but also discussed why they matter so much.

**Self-confidence**

Westell (2005) points to research that showed that self-image is central to progress. She reports that the most profound change for most learners was a massive increase in confidence, which in turn had a significant impact on learning achievements. Increases in self-confidence and self-esteem, the capacity to speak out and to set one’s direction in life, were mentioned over and over in the interviews.

“One of the things that we see as a huge theme through many of the programs, especially the lowest level literacy and English Language learning … is the importance of increasing confidence. Confidence to participate in class, confidence to use brand new skills or brand new learning … Confidence becomes the stepping stone to practising and then furthering skills.” (funding agency)

“You can hear it in their tone of voice, you can see it in the way they carry themselves, you can see it in the way that they will be more talkative or more open …. And I think that’s a hard thing to put a measure on. You can describe it, but it’s a hard thing to actually put a measure on.” (practitioner)

“I would describe progress as first finding your voice and building your confidence … So the progress is difficult to measure, but it is really visible to people working on the front line. Learners grow. From somebody who is quiet, ready only to listen and to attend class, and then perhaps not even to come on the regular days, they become active participants. They help you plan the program. They help you come up with the topics. And then the third step is when they become really very aware of their own needs, and then they often ask you for practical help and how to access other programs.” (practitioner)
“Now I’m stepping outside of my comfort zone and it’s very scary. But I’m doing it.” (learner)

“I feel different about who I am, I feel different about where I’m going, I feel different about how I feel about myself. I feel different. I don’t feel the same anymore.” (learner)

“Oh for sure, self-esteem-wise, it’s affected my family, my wife, and my son. To have good self-esteem, that’s a trait that you’ll pass to your son, right? That’s something you want to keep up.” (learner)

“Being able to get a job and being able to listen to what my boss says and then being able to do it without questioning my ability to do it.” (learner)

“I learned a lot of new things about other disabled people, speaking about themselves and speaking for themselves. And I’ve never done that in my life … I used to be frightened to speak for myself — I used to be frightened … but when I saw another person do that, the same age as me … I’d be looking at them, like okay. And I started doing that for myself — speaking up for myself.” (learner)

“Most people look at me going, ‘Yeah, right! Some crack-head wants to be an addictions counsellor.’ I’m thinking, you know what, I have thirty-five 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)

**Independence**

Increased independence and agency, including better coping skills and the ability to make good decisions, make a big difference in a learner’s daily life. Those daily small achievements build and reinforce confidence and the value of using new skills.

“I didn’t generally observe a great deal of big progress in reading and writing. It was more around people’s ability to negotiate a world that’s based on certain ways of communicating.” (practitioner)

“One of the women reported at the end of the program that she didn’t need her anti-depressants anymore. Because now she was feeling so good about herself because of her learning experience. Measure that! You don’t. But those are the stories that need to be told to the funding agencies.” (administrator)
“A true measure of learner progress is whether or not learners feel that they are able to manage better in their lives after coming to the program than they were before coming to the program. And that can be in a whole variety of ways. Perhaps they can read to their kids now and couldn’t before. Maybe they now have a driver’s license and struggled in getting it before working with a tutor. Maybe they were able to have a job promotion, or maybe they’re an English language learner who’s more comfortable having a conversation with someone in a grocery store … It’s huge — it’s a big area.” (practitioner)

“*It makes me feel like I’m actually doing something for myself that I can be proud of myself for. Actually doing something on my own — not having to ask other people to do something for me.*” (learner)

**Social connection**

The literature shows two different ways that learners are perceived. Seeing learners as “human capital” brings an economic value to the knowledge and skills that individuals possess. By contrast, discussing the “social capital” that learners possess brings a social perspective to skills and competencies. 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 and MacLachlan 2007).

This kind of increased social capital was very evident in the interview data. Participants spoke of many ways in which learning was tied to relationships and stronger social connections. Specifically they mentioned:

- Strengthened family bonds, especially having the ability to help one’s children

  “*My kids go to school and would say, ‘Mom, what does this mean?’ Before I couldn’t help them but now I can tell them what that means. So they won’t be stuck and I’m not stuck.”* (learner)

  “*I want to be able to be the person that’s going to be able to help my son.*” (learner)

- The support provided by good relationships inside and outside the classroom, and the power of being able to ask for and give help

  “*At first I thought when I came to school that I never can do it — I can never get my education up. But there was a lot of help from my instructors … Even my classmates … they help me. They make sure that I understand how to do it.*
And they show me one step, and as soon as I know what I’m doing, I don’t have to ask for help anymore, I just go ahead and do it.” (learner)

“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)

“Another young gentleman in our classroom — he’s more the slower learner … And he’s happy to be there. And he’s the type that will just say, ‘Can you help me?’ to whoever’s around him. ‘Do you know how to spell this word?’ He’s just that type of person. He kind of makes you feel good too because you’re helping somebody else. It makes you feel good about yourself — that you can sit there and help somebody else.” (learner)

“Progress has a lot do with increasing both skills and the understanding and confidence to tackle things, and to ask for help if you can’t do it on your own.” (practitioner)

- New ways of relating to the community at large and taking what you have learned outside the classroom

“By the time learners have been here for a year, they’re volunteering with us, they’re volunteering with other groups. They’ve become aware of themselves as global citizens and, if not as global citizens, at least as citizens of this city, and aware that they can give back and put in, rather than just take out … That’s really important, that’s something … nobody is really very interested in, yet to me it gives you a whole different perspective of the student as a citizen of the community. I think we don’t pay enough attention to that.” (practitioner)

“If positive changes can be made in the lives of one individual, it doesn’t mean that only that one individual benefits: his family benefits, his community benefits, people around him benefit. If we can help anybody improve their circumstances in any way and celebrate those positive changes with those individuals, then I think we’re doing our jobs.” (practitioner)

- The importance of external validation to a sense of success

“I have the desire to prove to everybody who told me that I couldn’t that I can.” (learner)
“And also with my kids, yeah, this is very important: They are so different from me … I almost cried [because my kids are very good students] … when they said, ‘Mama, something has changed, your English is better.’” (learner)

**Changed attitudes**

Changed attitudes toward life and toward learning were frequently mentioned in the interviews as indications of progress. Learners found greater hope and more sense of possibility, more trust, a greater willingness to take risks, and more self-awareness. Most importantly, they began to see themselves as people who could learn and that, in turn, helped to generate the persistence they needed to keep going in spite of multiple and complex barriers.

“My teacher, in a soft and gentle way, kept challenging me to open doors that I thought were long closed, locked, and never able to be opened. Now, all of a sudden, it’s bang, bang, bang, doors are opening sometimes faster than I can keep up with. Sometimes it’s scary. But that’s part of being challenged to change: getting out of that comfort zone.” (learner)

“If learners see themselves as progressing, sometimes that’s more important than a mark or a grade or a product at the end. Because if they see they can do it, they’ve accomplished something.” (practitioner)

“Three words: Yes you can. I always heard, no I can’t. I still struggle. I really struggle with no I can’t. But yes I can, and here I am doing it.” (learner)

“I feel like I’ve fallen through the cracks of the school system, and now I’m coming back, crawling up through that crack again and coming back out. I think I’m up to my shoulders now and my head’s out of the crack. I fell pretty deep into it, very early in life. And just to get my head up out of it and my shoulders above it is far greater than I ever thought. And I’m starting to get one arm out to start pushing a little harder. Because I refuse to stop before I’m completely out of that crack because I deserve to be out of that crack.” (learner)

**It’s both**

There are complex connections between demonstrable skills and the less visible feelings and self-image that make up personal growth. Each influences and has an impact on the other. LES learners must grow personally if they are to develop the hard skills that are easier to measure; in turn, developing hard skills boosts and sustains the personal growth that is more difficult to
measure. As we move to the analysis of the findings about hard skills, we urge the reader to keep in mind that such skills are inexorably linked to personal growth.

“What matters to me in terms of progress is going away with skills that you can use. And that doesn’t necessarily mean a computer, but even interpersonal skills. I guess soft skills are what they call those. Hard skills, soft skills: I think the more you have, the better you’re going to do at a job or just with people in general.” (Learner)

“If you learn something new, you say, I can do this. And you know that’s what you wanted to do. And you’re not afraid to do it. It gives you more confidence to do it.” (Learner)

Progress means changes in literacy and essential skills

In the literature and in the interviews, changes in literacy and essential skills are a key indicator of learner progress. When literacy is defined in the literature as a discrete set of skills it tends to be connected to individualism, to human capital outcomes, and to economic competitiveness in a globalized economy — one becomes literate for economic gains (Campbell 2007b; Druine and Wildermeersch 2000; Gadsby, Middleton, and Whitaker 2007; George and Murray 2012; Murray 2005; Reder 2011). This perspective also tends to argue that, as a set of decontextualized skills, literacy can be learned, transferred, and applied in the same way regardless of the social context because it is not bound to one context in particular (HRSDC n.d.).

Commercial, standardized assessment and international surveys such as IALS and PIAAC are prominent examples of this view of literacy.2 The Human Resources and Skills Development Canada Essentials Skills Framework was also designed within this perspective (HRSDC n.d.). Based on this understanding of literacy, adult literacy education and training are viewed as building skills for individual economic gains and national economic competitiveness (George and Murray 2012; Murray 2005).

The literature also shows that some researchers critique this perspective, arguing that thinking of literacy primarily as a tool of economic competitiveness connected to the workplace can lead to narrowed teaching of literacy and essential skills. Such teaching may be relevant to the workplace but still not provide students with sufficient ability to respond to the variety of

2 Commissioned by the International Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) was conducted in the mid-1990s, while the results of PIAAC (Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies) began to be publicized in late 2013. The OECD also commissioned other literacy surveys such as ALL (Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey).
challenges that adults face today (Druine and Wildermeersch 2000). In addition, the most serious barrier to skills development is often incorrectly perceived to be a lack of literacy and essential skills. In fact, it’s most often the “personal, psycho-social limitations on the capacities and orientations of workers as learners” (Salomon 2010, 22). Foundational learners need to perceive themselves as learners in order to learn. A narrowed teaching agenda that does not respond to such needs for personal growth may not actually serve the requirements of economic competitiveness.

The research findings lead us to agree with these criticisms. In the interviews we conducted, it was almost a given that increases in literacy and essential skills indicated progress. Funding agencies, practitioners, and administrators all spoke of the development of skills as being crucial to successful programming and to learner progress.

“You have to have improved reading and writing—that’s the basis of the program.” (practitioner)

The learners themselves, however, did not use the term skills when discussing their progress. Instead of that word, they described their skills. For the learners we interviewed skills are not theoretical constructs. They are context-specific measures of their capacity to act in the world. For example, English language learners see skill development as culturally based; developing skills is a way for them to fit into Canadian culture. Their context for the development of skills therefore leads them to see themselves as language learners, not literacy learners.

In addition to personal growth, which most people also spoke of as the development of “skills,” the stakeholders described skills in the ways one might expect. They spoke of improved reading, writing, math, and English language skills. They also said learners gained general knowledge and an introduction to new ideas, learned more about how society works, and developed job skills.

Interview participants tied the description of skills to a concrete activity or context. No one interviewed spoke of skills in a way that separated them from their use.

“It means I can read. I can write. I can talk better. I participate in things like I never did before.” (learner)

“It was often the kind of thing where there was just a subtle use of expressions, of transitions in speaking and writing. That may not seem very important to a layperson, but somebody who is asking for a covering letter, or somebody who’s expecting a resumé, or somebody who’s at an interview would notice,
because it shows advanced learning or sophistication in language use.”
(practitioner)

“A lot of it has to do with me remembering numbers. I write down a lot of numbers at work … I’ve got to go through to the computer, and walk from across the way, over to the book. To remember those numbers, I’d have to keep walking back and forth. I notice now that I just look at the machine, remember the numbers, walk to the book, and write them down. Before I was having to walk back and forth constantly.” (learner)

“Tim is a painter and he has to do a safety report after every project that they work on…³ He used to have to have the guy spell it out for him, kind of sneak away so nobody would know. They knew that he couldn’t read, but he was supposed to do it. And so he was writing away and one of the guys said, ‘Give it to me and I’ll do it for you.’ And Tim said, ‘No, no it’s okay.’ And the guy said, ‘No, no, really I’ll do it for you.’ And the other guy leaned around Tim and looked at the first person and said, ‘You know, he can do it himself now, he can read.’ And they all sort of just looked at him. He was so proud, he just about burst. And he had to come tell me about it. And his tutor told me about it. And his granddaughter told me about it.” (practitioner)

“I read Freud’s book. I spent more time in the dictionary than in the book. It’s quite a book!” (learner)

An individual or a systemic view

One significant difference we saw in the interview data between how learners described progress and how the rest of the stakeholders did was that learners always took a personal view of it. Many practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies, on the other hand, took a broader, more systemic perspective.

“Learners themselves define progress by how they meet their goals. So when I talk about their confidence, the attitude they have towards learning, and their motivation, they measure it very personally, which is different, I think, than how we measure it.” (practitioner)

The following chart summarizes the differences in perspective that we saw in the interviews — an individual view on one hand and systemic on the other.

³ This learner’s name has been changed to a pseudonym.
Differing Perspectives on Progress and Indicators of Progress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learners</th>
<th>Practitioners, Administrators, and Funding agencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Progress is the result of traditional, school-based, top-down, and formal instruction.</td>
<td>• The practitioner learns from students as much as they learn from the practitioner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Personal goals and small daily achievements indicate progress.</td>
<td>• Institutions do not recognize learner goals or anecdotes about learning — only academic achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have a sense of emotion and pride in achievements</td>
<td>• Are more detached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have high expectations and often don’t see their own progress</td>
<td>• See the bigger picture, and are realistic about the time and steps involved in achieving goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are concrete and specific, very pragmatic about their skill levels, though less so about their goals</td>
<td>• Recognize both the specific and the need to aggregate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus more on the product or tangible results than on the process, which can include attitude change</td>
<td>• Attach significance to changes in attitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Relevance of Context and Culture

The information we gathered from the LES:LPM interviews shows that, in addition to the importance of both kinds of progress, context and culture must always be considered when thinking of learner progression measures. The context in which the programs are located, the context of the learners’ lives and histories, and the learners’ cultures each have a great impact on progress.

The context of LES programs

In Alberta, the contexts for literacy and essential skills learning tend to be the community, postsecondary institutions, and the workplace. In the interviews, we often heard about the challenges that people responsible for LES programming face in the context of community-based programs.

“I find with my volunteer program, man, it is really hard to report evidence of progress because they’re not going to do too much. With three hours a week once a week, it’s just unrealistic to expect that they’re going to pick up a lot of skills in that time. And it’s hard, sometimes, for the learner to realize that. But
it’s the truth. And so it’s pretty hard to say I’m going to give them a standardized test at the beginning of every month because … there’s not going to be much growth in twelve hours of work.” (practitioner)

“I think we have to also consider the program: the quality of the program, the quality of the instruction, the quality of the training that went into it, the quality of the curriculum … So everything has to be considered, not just the actual learner progress.” (administrator)

The Northwest Territories Literacy Council (2011) studied the barriers to success that LES learners face. They include situational barriers such as conflicting responsibilities, housing and financial challenges, and lack of support; attitudinal barriers, including their own fear, low self-esteem, and lack of confidence; and academic barriers such as prior educational experiences. The NWT’s study focused on Aboriginal learners but the barriers they found are part of the contextual reality of LES learning in Alberta too.

“Until our clients have their basic needs met, nothing happens. If they’ve got housing, they’ve got food, they’ve got clothing, then their minds are ready to learn. And the complication we have is that I can be meeting with clients for awhile and then all of a sudden they have health concerns, they don’t have a stable place to live, they drop off the face of the earth. They might come back later, but it’s in-out, in-out. So what can define success for that population? And what services determine whether they succeed or not?” (practitioner)

“It’s not like I can provide a class and have people even half a day. It just doesn’t work … They’ve got full-time jobs. They’ve got a family. They’ve got children. They’ve got a mortgage. They’ve got car payments. They’ve got a lot of things in their lives that are important as well as these literacy needs.” (practitioner)

“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 NWT Literacy Council (2011) study shows that LES programs can remove some of these barriers by influencing skills acquisition, attitude changes, and the behaviours that result from having increased skills and changed attitudes.

“The reason adults come here … is that the classroom system has failed them. All they needed was some little extra attention, someone sitting one-on-one and just showing them how because they could not keep up with the speed of the class. So now … they are adults and they have other responsibilities … They can give two hours of commitment and not give up the other aspects of their lives. They’re not forced to run with us. They take their time … So this is big — this is what helps most of our students here learn. Because not everyone has a learning disability — it’s just that they needed that little extra help and that extra time. And that’s what we’re trying to offer here.” (practitioner)

“My teacher’s been nothing but encouraging to me. And it’s been kind of a shell shock to me to have somebody actually want me to learn instead of telling me that I can’t. It’s just opened up doors that have been so long closed to me because I had nobody to say, ‘Yeah, yes you can.’ It’s always been, ‘No you can’t.’” (learner)

“We want to break every barrier that we can to them succeeding and moving on to other learning.” (administrator)

Thus, for learners the context provided by LES programs tends to be very beneficial, in spite of the contextual challenges faced by practitioners and administrators. To continue offering such valuable programming, the realities of context need to be taken into account in planning and assessing programs and progression.

Cultural differences also influence the culture of LES classrooms, and practitioners require experience, skills, and grace to help learners bridge their differences.

“I’ll have people from South Sudan and North Sudan sitting right beside each other, and Muslim and Christian … You might have Aboriginal people and just low-income Canadians, mixed with people newly immigrated from different countries or coming from Nova Scotia or something like that. So we do try to build on those relationships without really pointing out the differences. We all have kids, we’re all trying to build this life, we all live here now.” (practitioner)


**Aboriginal learning**

Aboriginal communities approach learning completely differently than the rest of Canadian culture, and the issues of Eurocentric education and literacy are fairly well documented in the literature (Henry and Grandel 2011; Howard, Edge, and Watt 2012; Cooper 2006; George 2008; George and Murray 2012). George (2008) argued that the most important way to view success in Aboriginal cultures is through learners making qualitative changes in their lives and learning their purpose in life. The practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies we interviewed who work with Aboriginal learners understand these needs but described both contextual and cultural challenges in meeting them. They spoke with some urgency about the need to respond to the challenges effectively and soon.

“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)

“I think as a province, and even as a country, we are very tentative about what it means to get into the conversation around non-white ways of learning. I think we are, for example, uncomfortable looking at Aboriginal learning or non-traditional learning practices … I think we wear a hair shirt around the residential schools and the legacy of learning. I think that there is really good work being done right now about reframing what it means to look at other ways of learning and measures of Aboriginal learning. But I think as a province and a learning system, we’re unsure of stepping into some of those spaces and some of those conversations for fear of messing up more, or being criticized, or not being sure that we’re culturally competent enough to even start the conversation.” (funding agency)

**English language learning**

As we examined the research data and reflected on our experience as researchers, one issue that stood out is the number of learners working on English language learning (ELL) in literacy and essential skills programs. We recruited and interviewed twenty-four learners from both community and college programs; we did not seek out ELL learners in particular. Yet almost half of the learners we interviewed were ELL learners. Our background in community literacy reinforces our perception that ELL learners represent a significant number of learners in LES
programs. The ELL learners we interviewed did not perceive of themselves primarily as literacy learners; they thought of themselves as language learners. In the absence of full-fledged ELL programs, many community-based LES programs offer language training.

“We were just doing basic literacy English — reading and writing and oral speaking. But she was the kind of person who caught management’s eyes and … every time she got a promotion, she needed some more specific skills. So each time she came to … my program, because I am the only trick in town. I really do try to provide whatever is needed.” (practitioner)

“I just want to say thank you to the government, to whoever’s going to get this paper … for the support they give to these communities because we need it. We need it. We need teachers and people who actually care about immigrants because we don’t have many choices. And places like this give us a life with new hopes.” (learner)

Progression Measurement in Alberta

The LES:LPM interviews gathered a lot of information about the learner progression measures currently used in Alberta’s LES programs, as well as more broadly through the literature review. The data revealed the reasons stakeholders measure progress, the changes that indicate progress in learners, and the tools, resources, and methods used to measure it.

The purpose of measurement: Why are we measuring?

LEARNSERS

We did not ask learners directly why they should (or should not) have their progress measured. But from their descriptions of what progress means to them, it’s clear that no matter what their motivation for attending a program, LES learners want to know they are progressing. The literature agrees. Learners have a great interest in monitoring and assessing their learning (Brooks, Heath, and Pollard 2005; Crooks et al. 2008; Gadsby Middleton, and Whitaker 2007; Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities [MTCU] 2011). They both want and need to understand what they’ve achieved and what they still need to learn (Hagston and Tout 2007).

“There are a lot of things that I haven’t finished. But I know I will have them all finished by the time I’m totally done. It might take me another year to get them all done, but they will be all done.” (learner)

Merrifield, Coleman, and McDonogh (2001) say that learners want to know — and also have the right to know — whether they are making progress and what good quality work looks like.
They also have the right to know how and why they are being assessed, to understand how “progress” is determined, and to have such judgments made consistently and in relation to agreed-upon criteria (Gill 2008; Merrifield et al. 2001). In fact, learners should be allowed to define the criteria by which their work is assessed (Lefebvre et al. 2006; Merrifield et al. 2001).

We asked practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies directly about their purpose for collecting data about learner progression. Because of the requirements of their various roles, their reasons for wanting to have information about progression differ, as might be expected. We saw this in the literature as well.

**PRACTITIONERS AND ADMINISTRATORS**

As the literature reports, practitioners put a strong emphasis on using learner progression measures to support learning. They want to inform learners of their progress (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities [MTCU] 2011) because they feel accountable to their students (Crooks et al. 2008; Merrifield 1999). They use the information they gather to help them identify needs based on learners’ abilities and the gaps in their learning, and to demonstrate achievement to support learners’ self-esteem and confidence (Hagston and Tout 2007; Ontario MTCU 2011). They need effective measures of learner progress to inform instruction and adapt their programs to learners’ needs (Crooks et al. 2008; Grieve 2007). The literature also shows that, especially when instruction aligns well with learner needs, practitioners and administrators will also be able to use results for broader program planning and improvement purposes (Ontario MTCU 2011).

The progression measures administrators choose have to perform multiple functions, helping them ensure practitioner competence and allowing them to report learner outcomes to meet government requirements (Crooks et al. 2008). In addition, they need measurement tools that will help them plan their work more effectively, determine how many learners are at what levels, and what kinds of resources will meet learner needs (Merrifield et al. 2001).

The interviews echoed the reasons for progression measurement that we saw in the literature. Practitioners and administrators use the results of progression measures at three different levels of their work in programs.

- At the instructional level, they use progression measures to identify challenges and arising needs, to put into learner portfolios, and to support the work of instructors, tutors, and learners.

  “The primary purpose of measuring learner progress is to inform instruction, so it wouldn’t be used for accountability purposes. In the public school system, it
wouldn’t be used for report cards. It’s a very participatory process. It’s focusing on process, not product.” (administrator)

- At the strategic level, they use progression measures to adapt or change programs, to design new programming, and to set goals for the program as a whole.
- At the program management and accountability level, they use progression measures to report to funding agencies, community partners, and governing bodies; to track achievement of program outcomes; and to apply for funding.

**EMPLOYERS**

While we did not interview any employers as part of the LES:LPM project, we did interview practitioners in the field of workforce training and workplace essential skills. In the literature, we saw that employers use progression measures because they need to know whether potential participants in workplace training will be able to manage program or job requirements (Ontario MTCU 2011). Employers also point out that, in a knowledge society, people cannot use their hard-skill training effectively in the workplace unless they can also use such essential but often disregarded non-academic skills such as communicating and relating to others (Brewerton 2004). Employers are therefore very interested in having evaluations of workplace training incorporate measures that would capture such improvements in non-academic skills (Salomon 2010).

Regardless of the recognized value of these more personal skills, some participants pointed out that employers often want programs to focus on only the specific skills required for specific jobs without taking a broader and perhaps more valuable perspective.

“The [Canadian] job experience would maybe be different from where you come from, so this program actually … lets us know how a job can be. And not only just about how to go on the job site and work … They’re going to teach you how Canadian society works, and how work society can be, and what kind of language you might use there, and what kind of communication you might be able to use with co-workers after you are hired.” (learner)

“A lot of times, employers want to simply focus on the skill set that they feel the employees need for that particular job. I can understand that completely, but often times the students also want to improve generally, not necessarily related to the job. They want just to have some English that is not related to the workplace, simply to help them improve their vocabulary base, their reading skills, their scanning skills. So I think sometimes companies might be a little short sighted. They should look at the long term and think that, even if the English classes that we’re providing are not necessarily related to the position or the field or the company per se, we are still doing them a great benefit
because some of those people are going to be better communicators in the end because of those classes. I think they should look at that as well.” (practitioner)

“With the employers, you also have to look at change within the culture of the workplace. There’s no use putting someone through training and not changing anything about their job. People have to be able to use the skills they’ve been acquiring.” (administrator)

**FUNDING AGENCIES**

Across the literature there is consensus that learner progress measures are extremely important to policy-makers whose focus is absolutely on accountability. Policy-makers consider themselves accountable to taxpayers to show their tax dollars are well spent (Merrifield 1999); to other parts of government to demonstrate that programs are providing quality service (Ontario MTCU 2011) and generating changes during a prescribed funding period (Hagston and Tout 2007); and to learners to ensure that, at the end of the day, they are successful and aware of it (Crooks et al. 2008). In short, policy-makers need to show a return on investment by demonstrating measurable and comparable results (Grieve 2007).

The funding agencies we spoke with told us that they use information about learner progress:

- to make funding decisions, because their aim is to fund programs that show learner success;
- to see if programs are involved in a process of continuous improvement;
- to understand more about LES learning; and
- to report up the chain within their departments and ministries, and for annual reporting to Albertans.

When we asked funding agencies the purpose of learner progression measures, one of the most frequent answers and perhaps the most telling is that the whole system of progression measurement is under review. Hence the need for the LES:LPM project.

“We’re in the process of looking at our programs. We’re renewing our programs … So that’s kind of in flux for us. Right now we measure the number of learners and number of courses, and we report that through the annual report. That’s how it’s currently done, but we’re looking at a revision to that.” (funding agency)
Indicators of progress: What are we measuring?

What is particularly relevant to an LES system undergoing review is that the purpose of measurement dictates the indicators used to identify progress. Being conscious of the “why” of measurement will provide clarity on the “what” of measurement.

PURPOSE OF MEASUREMENT AND SELECTION OF INDICATORS

The literature makes it very clear that different stakeholders have different purposes for measuring learner progress and that each requires different indicators of progress. For example, policy-makers need measureable and comparable results. This focus leads to a pressure on policy-makers to treat LES measurement as simple rather than complex, reducing LES to a discrete and fixed set of cognitive skills (Campbell 2007b; Guadalupe and Cardoso 2011; Hagston and Tout 2007). Because of such pressure, policy-makers tend to favour statistically reliable research (Salomon 2010). Although it’s understandable, such a reductionist approach creates complications. Skills are integral to literacy learning, but they lose their meaning when they’re pulled apart and looked at in discrete and de-contextualized ways (Ontario MTCU 2011). While not clearly stated in the literature, interview data with people in different roles in the LES field show that there is an awareness and understanding of the points of view of other stakeholders.

From the learners’ perspective, assessment has little meaning if there’s a mismatch between what is measured and what learners want and value (Grieve 2007). Practitioners are similarly concerned that statistical evidence provides only a fragmented picture of learner and program accomplishments (Crooks et al. 2008; Lefebvre et al. 2006). Any measure that assesses progress primarily in terms of skills can miss the progress learners make in real-life contexts and in their personal development (Lefebvre et al. 2006). It is for this reason that practitioners typically put their trust in qualitative indicators derived from practice (Salomon 2010). Most practitioners prefer measures that reflect their view of literacy as social, complex, and changing, and they sometimes perceive standardized tests with mandatory tasks as retrograde and unhelpful to learners (Hagston and Tout 2007). They want measures of progress that support learner-centred learning, are user-friendly, and meet the needs of a variety of learners (Connect Strategic Alliances 2011; Merrifield et al. 2001). Thus the literature shows differences between the measures that policy-makers and funding agencies need and those practitioners need as they each respond to their own accountability requirements.

“To be able to coordinate and align all our programs and services, we would look for something that would be systemic, provincial. But we don’t want to apply a standard that necessarily takes away from the purpose of the individual learner, as the individual progresses. So to be able to have some type of tool or
way to take a learner through a process that is meaningful to them and that
applies to their needs is probably the most important. But then to have it also
able to be utilized systemically would be ideal.” (funding agency)

“Increasing essential skills and a sense of personal agency and confidence in
setting one’s direction is what I look for in the kinds of things that we’re
funding. Not simply have they learned another skill, but are they able to take
what they know of that meta-cognitively in a direction that they find personally
meaningful?” (funding agency)

“The complexity is that it’s not just a reading level or a traditional view of
literacy with reading, writing, and numeracy. You have to figure out where
your social capital falls into that, what resources you have, what you need to
learn to be able to learn the next thing, how it impacts your life as an adult
learner. It’s very much around personal progression. It’s around confidence and
attitude.” (funding agency)

“I see lots of value in the numbers, but they need some context to flesh them
out a bit, give them some meaning … When I read reports, they’re just filled
with charts and graphs but I don’t see any voices in them. So I guess your
question is why are voices not counted. Is it that they’re not valued, or is it that
nobody’s thought to ask anybody? Is it that it’s more difficult research to do?
It’s harder, more time consuming, more costly? Certainly interviews are much
more labour-intensive methods of data collection than asking postsecondary
institutions to submit their numbers on time at the end of the year … And of
course we’ve had this long history of scientific research being more valued
than social science research.” (funding agency)

We saw how practitioners and administrators understand the funding agencies’ need for
simple, easily aggregated data, no matter how much they might think more complex, less easily
measured indicators are more relevant.

“From an officer’s perspective I can understand that if reports look the same
then they can really compare what’s in the outcomes, as opposed to if one is
different in length and shape from the other … I think it’s probably just so that
they’re standardized — they look the same, they feel the same.” (administrator)

“There was a point in time when we actually did submit samples of work from
students. And then I guess when they really standardized the reports and
whatnot, they really did not encourage that. And I understand — when you
want to file neatly in your cabinets, there’s no way to do students’ works.”  
(administrator)

“If they ask for satisfaction, I guess they’re trying to take the more personal approach. But they’re still wanting numbers; they’re still wanting a certain percentage. I think that’s because they have to report to their funding agency, and their funding agency needs numbers. So again, even though they’re trying to take it to the next level, it really goes back to the basics of ‘give us the number.’”  
(practitioner)

**INDICATORS NAMED BY ALBERTA STAKEHOLDERS**

We asked the learners we interviewed to tell us what it meant to do well, what changes they’d noticed in themselves, and what was easier for them now. We asked them how they felt about themselves, what reminded them of their successes, and how they would describe both their own improvement and that of others. That is, we asked them to name those changes that indicated progress.

We found that the following indicators mattered most to learners.

- The development of literacy and essential skills, which we described extensively when discussing what progress means
- Personal growth, also discussed earlier
- Enhanced capacity to act independently and effectively in their lives by applying the skills they’ve learned to everyday life, to engage the world, to continue learning, to work, to make choices, to affect the world around them.

“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)

“It helps my concentration — sticking to one thing. That’s something I did have a problem with before this program. I was all over the place.”  
(learner)

“I think it kind of smartens you up. With this sort of thing, it’s giving you encouragement in this direction, but now you’re starting to think, well, it’s time to get on with the other part of my life. Now, I want to start doing what I wasn’t doing before or stopped doing because I can see this is going somewhere … Your personal life may be something you put off, because when
you aren’t working for a while you don’t have the best feeling about yourself … But once you get moving, you start thinking I’ve got to start and get going. So I think it affects everything. You find when one thing works out, you’ll have a better attitude for other things.” (learner)

“You’re looking forward to getting a job and you won’t lose sales because of your accent.” (learner)

“I think learners define it based on how they now experience their environment. So if they do better at the grocery store, or they find they’re so excited to come and tell me that they were able to figure out really quickly how to make the change at the till, or they indicate to me that they’re managing better in English, or they’re managing reading the signs, or they went and took their driver’s test, they come back and say this is great because I was able to do these things. For me, what I see are very specific accomplishments.” (practitioner)

“I tell my tutors to keep their ears open when talking. Don’t just teach them math — ask them what they did during the week. That will you give you a sense of when and how they used math. For me, that is very important because sometimes they don’t realize they’re using it.” (practitioner)

“I know that three-quarters of a whole leaves you one quarter. So when I’m cutting up a pie, I know exactly how many quarters there are. Where before cutting a pie was just cutting a pie, now it has a mathematical equation to it. I can look at something as silly as cutting a pie and learn some mathematical things about pie.” (learner)

- The achievement of their goals

“Some people are clearer about their goals than other people are. But I get very few agency-referred clients, which means that most clients are coming to this program on their own. They’re coming because they want to improve in some way. Because they are coming on their own, they’re usually coming here with some idea of what they need. Most of them at least have some goals.” (practitioner)

“That is how their progress should be measured: based on where they’re coming from and where they want to go.” (learner)
“I think people set learning goals and accomplish them … You know: if they could write a complete sentence, if they can read with their children, if they can understand government documents.” (practitioner)

“It really depends on the learners … Some adults have very clear goals. They’re hard on themselves, they want to know and measure, and they want to see that things really are progressing … And they’ll be the first one to say, if it’s an English-as-a-second-language learner, I still can’t have a conversation with people in a party situation because they speak so fast and there are so many people. But six months prior they wouldn’t have even been able to engage in a conversation one-on-one and now are handling that really well. So they want to qualify it and say yes, I have made progress, here’s what I can do better — but I’m still working on lots of stuff.” (practitioner)

• External validation of their progress, including the results from tests, receiving certificates, and the fact that family, friends, and employers see them differently

“I want to review everything I’ve learned, and go into a job and be able to use these skills in the way that they’ve said. And it will show up in the job — that you’re professional, and they’ll look and think, ‘Yeah, we did hire the right person, and this is going to be a good fit for our company.’” (learner)

“A lot of learners want marks. They want to be tested so that they can see that they’ve gone from one percentage to another. They like to have that ability to see their improvement.” (administrator)

“I think they also measure it by some of the concrete pieces, like certificates, recognition, actual employment, credentials. You know there’s still an attitude in learning that it’s got to have a piece of paper, something that says you can do this.” (practitioner)

“It really feels good. I get comments all the time.” (learner)

Practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies saw each of these indicators as relevant and important as well. They perceived progress to be unique to learners and to context — and understood the challenges this poses for system-wide measurement. They also saw the learners’ ability to identify next steps and all the daily small achievements as notable and important.
INDICATORS NOT CURRENTLY CONSIDERED

Some of the indicators that practitioners, administrators, and funding agencies would like to have considered in the measurement of learner progression are not considered. We asked about those too. Practitioners and administrators told us that current reporting requirements do not take into account:

- the bigger picture or context of the learners’ lives;
- all ways of learning and measuring that aren’t part of the conventional educational system, including Aboriginal ways of knowing, informal learning, and most qualitative information such as anecdotes and portfolios; and
- the short-term impacts that influence learners’ lives.

Funding agencies also listed several specific indicators of progress that aren’t typically considered:

- the small, subtle changes that practitioners see;
- how learners take what they’ve learned in the classroom and use it outside the teaching environment— that is, the daily small achievements that build over time; and
- the learners’ own definitions of success.

“We can report on the soft skills, like those classic examples: someone comes in really kind of sloppily dressed and hunched over and wearing a hat and not speaking, and by the end of the semester they’re a changed person, obviously changed. We aren’t asked to report on that. Nobody seems to take that into account unless you have a really startling change.” (practitioner)

“It’s good that you go to school every day, but if you can bring your school experience outside … Learning and practice. Learning and practice. For adults, it’s learning and practice at the same time.” (learner)

All participants acknowledged that personal growth, while one of the most commonly mentioned indicators of progress, seems to rarely be required or requested in reports on learner progress. This includes everything from learners’ enhanced capacity in the world to their changed feelings about themselves, from their willingness to take risks to a sense of hope in the future, from greater independence to an expanded social support system. Personal growth also includes all the skills not on the decoding end of the essential skills spectrum — oral communication, working with others, critical thinking, and so on — because they become hard to measure.
Because personal growth is very difficult to measure, that was the most common reason stakeholders named for it not being taken into account when measuring learner progress.

“It’s just life experience, daily life experience … You need someone to be constantly monitoring the students … If you want to use it for measuring, it’s not practical.” (practitioner)

“Soft skills … that’s where we often see the real gains. But we’re never required to report on them because they’re hard to measure.” (administrator)

“When you start adding the qualitative to the quantitative, you get at the complexity of the issue.” (funding agency)

“Every time you measure one thing, you don’t measure another, and it affects the whole system.” (funding agency)

“Learner progression is certainly something that is very complex. It ideally involves a learner-centred approach to learning. For the province of Alberta, it involves finding a standard that will allow us to have some consistency between all of our stakeholders, because of course our literacy and essential skills programming is offered to a variety of stakeholders. We’ve got learners who are learning in the workplace, learners learning in postsecondary, learners learning from tutors in their communities, and we’ve also got a new group of learners who are learning from home.” (funding agency)

“We understand the complexity and that it isn’t always the same, depending on what community you’re in and what the needs of the community are. It gets interpreted: the perception of what it is we want is different in each community, but trying to apply a broad policy sweep on that at the same time gets to be a little bit complex.” (funding agency)

“Community capacity, I would say, is probably another factor, and the availability of supports and services. It’s not going to be consistent.” (funding agency)

**Tools and methods: How are we measuring?**

In this discussion of the current system for measuring the progress of LES learners, we have deliberately left the analysis of tools and methods until the end. This is a reflection of everything we learned in the LES:LPM project, both through the extensive literature review and through the fifty-eight interviews with Alberta stakeholders. The choice of *how* to measure rests entirely on
decisions about *why* the measurement is needed and *what* is being measured. The tools are the means to an end and ought not to be the term of reference that measurement depends upon.

“Some would argue that it doesn’t really matter, the tool that you use. What matters is what you are doing with that learner to get the progression.” (funding agency)

Practitioners and funding agencies alike talked about the current measurement requirements in Alberta as being in flux. In fact, several funding agencies said that programs are asked to use the systems and tools that work best for them and their learners. This points to the importance all the interviewed stakeholders placed on the LES:LPM project and the need to take action on its findings.

“At this point, because there isn’t a standard type of measurement, it’s pretty hard for us to ask for anything. I mean, every agency would have very different markers. So we accept whatever they say to us.” (funding agency)

**THE LINEAR OR COMPLEX PERSPECTIVE**

Many of the progression measures and tools outlined in the literature typically were designed with a linear view of progress. Yet both the literature and interviews show that LES learning doesn’t follow a linear path. It is a much messier and more complicated process. It is sometimes invisible or, at the very least, less easily defined. As we have seen, all the stakeholders we interviewed acknowledge the critical importance of this less obvious and more complex aspect of learning.

“When the learners have done certain things they’ll tell me about it afterwards. They’ll say, I did send an e-mail, or I did invite that person, and I did respond, and I am going to participate in the teacher field trip that they’re inviting us to. That was when I realized that … progress is measureable in ways that I cannot see but I can only glimpse from what they tell me.” (practitioner)

“*Read Forward* will not capture these subtle changes. So we need an additional tool. And I know that we have so many experts and so much knowledge in the province that to have that tool developed is just a matter of time.” (practitioner)

There is a mismatch between the importance ascribed to measuring the less linear type of progression and our ability to do so effectively. Stakeholders shared an understanding of the lack of effective tools and approaches.
“We collect data that we know we can get. We collect data that isn’t going to raise eyebrows. We collect data that we can analyze more easily.” (funding agency)

“We’ve found it handy to give them tests that have a score and a level … A lot of the funding agencies like that kind of information. It isn’t entirely meaningful, but it’s so concrete.” (practitioner)

“Is it going to be easy? Probably not. And certainly … the complexity is going to be a challenge … I’m not sure that we have really given a lot of thought to how we’re all measuring progress. And then ten years from now, how are we going to see whether or not we’ve really moved that goalpost in literacy? The international survey’s the only tool that Albertans are really looking at right now. We survey once every ten years. And we rely on the methodology used by the OECD. Is that what we should be doing?” (funding agency)

“There are lots of ways of measuring but … the idea is tiring. We would need more people, more time, more support … I don’t think you can get the full flavour by just a written test or even a questionnaire … So it really does come down to more time, more money to be able to do the follow-up and to provide next steps, and then to have those focus groups. And then to be able to say, ‘Okay, now you’re here. Where do you need to go from here?’ And then keep that measurement going.” (administrator)

The use of anecdotes is one example of the mismatch between what stakeholders consider to be legitimate indicators of progress and the tools available to record them. The interviews showed a common understanding of the value of stories — and of the challenge in how best to use them as a systemic measurement tool. For example, there are differing perspectives on how stories are told about learners in LES. It is implicitly understood that stories of success hold value; other stories, of learners who do not complete programs, or who enter and leave programs regularly, are not reported.

“Everyone wants to hear the stories, but nobody knows what to do with them once they have them.” (funding agency)

“In a way, those single stories tend to continue to narrow the definition of the adult learner. I mean, we don’t often hear about an organization reporting on a story where they failed someone. Or where someone struggled and struggled and then just disappeared … And yet we know that those stories are part of the landscape of adult learning. What we hear in our reports is the miraculous, life-
changing story. I’m absolutely grateful for that story, but it’s not the whole story of the experience of learners in those programs or those communities.” (funding agency)

The interviews show that practitioners rely heavily on observations and on learner self-reporting to understand what progress is being made. This poses a problem for a system of learner progression measurement if it values only quantifiable data. Self-reports are at the heart of literacy learning but measures that value quantifiable evidence cannot accommodate them. As stakeholders search for a balanced set of measures, we need to question the assumption that self-reports are skewed evidence. Both the LES:LPM literature review and the interviews indicate that numbers can only ever tell part of the story. The full picture of literacy and essential skills learning must include and value as evidence the unique and personal narratives of those it is supposed to serve:

“I learned so much, it’s crazy.” (learner)

“Before I thought I just can’t do it … I thought maybe I’m just not that smart. But now, I definitely feel better about myself in that all it took was a little bit of time and learning some of the foundations that I might have missed back when I was in school.” (learner)

“What happens to immigrants … eventually you feel like you are a reject: you don’t understand people, they don’t understand you … It’s sad. That’s how I felt. Now I feel like I can do everything I want. Because I know I can learn.” (learner)

“I really feel free now I know how to help myself. Before, I didn’t. It’s opened so many opportunities for me now because I don’t feel embarrassed not to be understood. If I’m not understood, fine, I will find out what to work on. Like I can ask what was wrong, I mean I feel free to ask, because I can change it … Now I have different options.” (learner)

“My attitude has changed. I actually now think of what I want to do. And if I have to write something down I can write it down with confidence.” (learner)

TOOLS, RESOURCES, AND METHODS NAMED

Merrifield and colleagues (2001) define assessment very simply by explaining that it tells us how well someone can do something. Because it is usually focused on particular areas and is time bound, assessment tells us only what we ask about at a given point in time and does not show us everything a person can do.
Practitioners and administrators gather both quantitative and qualitative assessment data. They use the information to place learners in programs and to assess their progress. As we have seen, all stakeholders agree that there are two components of progress — personal growth and the development of skills. There is agreement in the field that there are few adequate tools for measuring personal growth and, because practitioners recognize its importance, they have had to design in-house tools to measure changes in personal growth. When it comes to measuring skills, practitioners use a wide variety of tools: formal, published tools as well informal and locally designed ones. We also note that some practitioners measure progress with tools that have actually been designed as learning resources.

In the interviews, funding agencies, practitioners, and administrators named the following tools and methods specifically. They are able to use some of the resulting measurements for formal progression assessment by funding agencies, but others are not recognized as valid or valuable. Still, in the context of Alberta’s LES programs themselves, all of these are used to measure learner progression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools, resources, and methods named</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tools created in-house and used as part of the instructional process</td>
<td>Tutor reports, reading logs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools custom-designed for specific programs</td>
<td>Funding agency-provided tools, project-based learning assessments with rubrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anecdotes and stories</td>
<td>Gathered through interviews, guided discussions, conversation circles, video and audio recordings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal assessments of writing, reading, and spoken English</td>
<td>Informal reading inventories, learners’ journals, writing samples, conversations to explore knowledge of a particular topic, informal reading approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools centring on learner goals</td>
<td>Questionnaires, portfolios, student-tutor learning plans, service plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment of the program itself</td>
<td>Student evaluations, questionnaires, annual surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Published and formal tools and tests</td>
<td>Alberta Reading Benchmarks, apprenticeship exams, Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA), Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), Can-Do Lists from CLB, Challenger Series, CLB Summative Assessment Manual (SAM), ESL Rural Checklist, ESL Resource Package for Alberta Communities (ERPAC),</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Desire for Change

All the funding agencies and most practitioners and administrators we interviewed were aware that Alberta’s LES system is under review, so it’s hardly surprising that we received lots of comments about how to change the current way of doing things. The fundamental challenge is to honour individual progress — which all stakeholders recognize as the linchpin of an effective LES system — while gathering information that can be aggregated across the system.

“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)

“When we look to clean and organized ways of being able to think of something on a large scale, it almost has to be linear. But I don’t think that’s the case in literacy, especially when it comes to learners and the way things happen. So from a large-scale, systemic, program point of view, you need to be able to organize it or else your brain can’t handle it. So we try to block things into systems … Can we look at every single Albertan as an individual and somehow, from a government perspective, manage that tangibly? Probably not … So we are trying to find a happy medium or way to apply something on a provincial scale but then not losing the concept of what it is for an individual to learn and to learn through life and all that good stuff.” (funding agency)

Recommendations and best practices

The literature we reviewed recommended some best practices for learner progression measurement systems and frameworks. The interview data echo some of what was said in the literature and also add new points. The following analysis of the key findings about how best to develop an effective system is therefore structured around both the interview data and the literature review.
1. Respect the voice of learners in the development of LES programming (Harwood 2012). Respect the dignity and privacy of the learner in all assessment practices (Campbell 2007a).

“I think the primary focus should be on the learner … You look at the needs of the learner, and then the other pieces might fall into place.” (funding agency)
“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)

“We meet as a group of facilitators. We review the evaluation for each program and understand exactly why questions are asked. And if they’re asked and they’re not relevant, they’re removed from the evaluation … [The reason for asking the question] must be specific and be used.” (practitioner)

2. Expand and clarify the definitions and indicators of learner success

• to recognize personal growth (Barton 2009; Battell 2001; Brooks, Heath, and Pollard 2005; Hayes 2000; Merrifield et al., 2001);
• to honour what is significant to Aboriginal learners (George 2008);
• to include literacy practices rather than measuring only proficiencies, and develop a list of criteria for this purpose (Reder 2009); and
• to accept practitioners’ judgment of learner progress (Campbell 2007a).

“It’s kind of changed the paradigm of my thinking from ‘No, I can’t!’ to ‘What’s next?’” (learner)

“We need some way of measuring or reporting on progress that includes the impact on their daily lives … The old definition of literacy, the basic one, is the ability to read and write about things encountered in daily living in the community, at home, and at work. But I think the only one that’s measured or considered is anything to do with work. At home and in the community are not considered.” (practitioner)

“Many years after I’d been reporting to these funding agencies, they came out with a study. It was news to them that improved reading and writing were connected to self-confidence. And all of us working in the field, we didn’t realize that they didn’t know that. It was a light bulb moment for them. They had no idea that improved reading and writing was connected to self-confidence!” (practitioner)
“It’s finding that balance between the skills and the practices … and being able to really support the fact that some people are not likely to reach [IALS] level 4 for all kinds of reasons, including nowhere to practice being at level 4.” (practitioner)

3. Respect the value of qualitative evidence. Respect the value of self-reports from learners. Stakeholders understood but found little value in the focus on strictly quantitative methods of measuring progression.

“Right now the discourse is evidence-based with evidence-based research. And that, in assessment, translates into competency-based assessments. Standardized assessment and those kinds of assessments don’t measure the soft skills. It’s the qualitative in performance assessments that measure the soft skills, which is not being valued by the federal government.” (administrator)

“I just don’t think that it’s all about this rigidity … And the numbers! It’s about whether you are happy and if you feel healthy enough and well enough to step out of your house and go uptown and get some food for your family. Women need to be able to do that.” (administrator)

“It feels unbelievable … It gives you freedom in your life. Every time I come to class I learn something, and I think that this will go better next time. I really like it and I don’t like to skip one day.” (learner)

4. Employability cannot be the sole indicator of success. Stakeholders disagreed with government policy’s focus on an economic imperative.

“And perhaps the government’s focus may be on whether people are getting more jobs or improving their employability or going on to postsecondary education. For me, that is included. But when you work with basic literacy learners, sometimes those are just way too far from where they’re at. Progress needs to be measured in more ways than just that.” (practitioner)

“There is so much focus right now on being a contributing ‘member of society.’ And that contribution is only monetary — it doesn’t include capacity-building, doesn’t include the social aspect, doesn’t include that ripple effect.” (practitioner)
“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)

5. Develop new tools and methods of measurement that are relevant to practitioners and learners. Relevant tools and methods would:

- be flexible enough to respond to contextual realities;
- respect the work already being done within programs to measure learner progress;
- honour the commitment of all stakeholders to knowing whether or not learners are progressing;
- be user-friendly, culturally relevant, and diagnostic (Campbell 2006); and
- not be overly time consuming or financially draining (Hagston and Tout 2007).

“I just hope the policies that come out respect the reality of the situation, that each literacy program is different, unique to its area, and therefore the way progress is measured may also be unique … So therefore to implement rigid ways of reporting is not correct. It’s not going to work.” (practitioner)

“I think it’s going to be very difficult to have one learner progression measure. I suspect it’s going to be learner progression measures for each of our target groups.” (funding agency)

“I see that when there are really well-thought-through directions from funding agencies, ones that don’t ask people to jump through hoops but ask people to be more rigorous in defining and communicating what they want to do, you end up with something that is more sustainable within the organization as staff come and go. There’s a well-defined context within which you do the continual renewal of that program. That’s what I would like in key indicators. I’m not asking for something that’s going to nail people to the ground with certain things they must do.” (funding agency)

“In the last twenty years the people working in the field have been trying very hard to meet the needs. There needs to be respect given for the work that’s been done to date and an acknowledgement that the money hasn’t been there, the support hasn’t been there, it hasn’t been a sexy thing that people have been
paying attention to. I’m not saying that I have done it perfectly over the years, but there needs to be respect for what has happened. And so as this measurement goes forward … use it to build on what’s already there — what’s already been done … It sure would be nice to build it and make it the way it should be.” (administrator)

6. The capacity of LES programs must be taken into account. The definition of program success must be clarified and expanded. Program funding should not be tied exclusively to learner outputs for two reasons.

- First, learner output may be more a reflection of the conditions within which the learner or program is operating than an indicator of program quality (Crooks et al. 2008; Gadsby et al. 2007).
- Second, program excellence, and hence the ability to generate positive learner outputs, is tied to the professional development, training, and support available to practitioners, including training in a variety of assessment practices (Campbell 2006; Johnston and Costello 2009).

“You can’t measure learner progress and use it as an indictment of a particular program if the program has been starved of resources.” (administrator)

“Many of our clients have dreams of having education but then they can’t get the money. They can only be funded partially, and then they need to find a job. So I can be working with a client but then all of a sudden they’re not there, and they forget to phone in so you don’t know where they are. But then they’ve found a job. So having to work to get money is where it’s at. It’s very complex. It’s not just getting a learner to learn to read. They have other issues.” (practitioner)

“How are people going to measure progress if they hardly have time to do an intake assessment? They often don’t have the knowledge to do an intake assessment because they don’t have the funds or the time for professional development. You just have to look at the big picture when you’re asking programs to take on more services. I think capacity needs to be the first thing that the government should be looking at before it starts mandating that people have to measure student progress.” (administrator)

7. In the development of any system of measurement and in the development of measurement practices:
• acknowledge and encourage dialogue among learners, practitioners, bureaucrats, and politicians (Westell 2007);
• incorporate flexibility, encourage innovation, and strengthen infrastructure (Westell 2007); and
• encourage collaboration across government departments and ministries. Note how “softer” outcomes align with government priorities such as economic success and social inclusion (Hayes 2000; Merrifield et al. 2001).

“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 province.” (practitioner)

“We talk about how literacy and essential skills float across different ministries from health to justice to finance … I know it’s very complicated but I wish we could look at making those connections.” (practitioner)

“PIAAC is going to talk about wellness. How do you measure wellness? That’s going to be interesting. And that wellness piece is in the Alberta Social Policy Framework. So how is Alberta going to measure wellness? … Who’s going to be responsible for that?” (funding agency)

8. The responsibility for increasing population literacy levels cannot rest on LES programs. The need for literacy and essential skills is broader than the mandate of one ministry or department in government, and more complex than any single set of programs can respond to effectively.

“I’m very conscious that the PIAAC is going to come out this fall. And because it’s going to measure literacy, the first thing that is going to happen is that the gaze will turn to those organizations who have been tasked with the word literacy in their mandate. And people will say, ‘Wow—see—you failed.’ But the thing is … it’s a systemic problem and these are systemic questions and answers.” (funding agency)

“The complexity of literacy and essential skills issues is going to require shared responsibility, partnership, and a systematic approach. It’s going to be very complex and difficult to navigate.” (funding agency)
Conclusion

The Literacy and Essential Skills Learner Progression Measures project has generated a lot of information about how progress is measured in LES programs. The following conclusions are based on the interviews we conducted with fifty-eight Albertans who have a personal stake in Alberta’s LES system; on the review of close to a hundred books, journal articles, and reports; and on our experience in the field.

The conclusions outline both what participants said about the current ways of measuring progress in Alberta, and what they said about the best ways to move forward to create a system that meets the needs of all stakeholders.

- The need—and the desire—to measure learner progress is shared across stakeholder groups.
- The persistence, commitment, and resilience of this system’s stakeholders are a great resource that should be tapped in developing any system in the future.
- Indeed, no single voice can possibly tell the whole story when working with a subject as complex as progression measures in a context as complex as the LES system. Including all of the voices and perspectives within the system will ensure the creation of a way to measure learner progress that is valid for everyone.
- Developing skills and personal growth are inextricably linked and equally necessary for foundational learners to make progress. Learners develop skills when they have the self-confidence to take risks and when they experience themselves as learners. They build self-confidence and experience themselves as learners when they develop skills that make a difference in their daily lives at work, at home, and in the community. Including both these components of progress offers the possibility of honouring the whole learner and giving a true indication of progress.
- Good work is already being done in measuring learner progress in Alberta’s LES programs. Not all of it is reported, in part because some of the tools and methods of measurement used are not valued as much as those that produce quantifiable data. If a new system of measuring progress is solely based on using quantitative tools than nothing will have changed.
- Good work is also being done in experimenting with measurement tools and frameworks around the world. It’s important to investigate them and learn from both their successes and failures.
- There are myriad indicators of progress. To fully measure progress, it’s important to find ways to include as many indicators as possible.
- The language of assessment, much like literacy and learning itself, is fluid and contextual. Any effective system of measurement will need to respond to and support the diversity of
program and learner contexts. This will include changing over time as contexts and needs change.

- Any measurement system rests on the capacity of programs to implement it. An effective and sustainable system will provide consistent and sufficient training, personnel, and resources to all LES programs.
- The responsibility for increasing population literacy levels is a systemic responsibility. It cannot rest on LES programs alone.

The Last Word

We are grateful for having had the chance to work on this project. We honour the value and importance of Alberta’s LES system and were inspired by the many examples of learner progression that we saw. But the final word goes to those with the most personal experience of LES learning— the learners themselves.

The learners we interviewed had this advice for fellow learners, and it occurs to us that they could just as well be speaking to those of us tasked with reviewing and redesigning the way progress is measured in Alberta:

“Be persistent.”

“Don’t be afraid.”

“Keep going.”

“Be courageous.”

“Make time to study.”

“Do your best.”
Appendix A: Recruitment Posters

Learner Recruitment Poster

Learner Progression Measures Research Project

Invitation to Participate

Would you like to be a part of a research project?

We are talking to learners in literacy programs and workplace Essential Skills training programs.

We want to answer this question: How do you know you are learning?

We are looking for people who are:

- 18 or older
- in a literacy or Essential Skills program
- wanting to be interviewed

How do you know when you are doing well at things like:

- reading, writing, or math
- working with others
- using computers, cell phones, or other machines
- other things?

Doing well can be:

- getting a good mark on a test
- being able to read to your children
- writing an e-mail
- adding up the cost of groceries
- being told you are doing a good job at work.
We want to hear what doing well means to you.

If you would like to be part of this study, contact us or ask someone in your program to contact us. We will give you a $25 gift certificate for being part of this study.

You can bring anyone to the interview with you.

If you want to help with our study, tell your program or call:

Candace Witkowskyj, Project Officer
cwitkowskyj@bowvalleycollege.ca
p. 403.355.4664
Centre of Excellence in Foundational Learning
Bow Valley College

Interviews will be conducted
In person or by phone
April 8 – June 15 2013

This project is funded by Government of Alberta
Learner Progression Measures Research Project

Invitation to Participate

The Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning at Bow Valley College is leading the Literacy and Essentials Skills: Learner Progression Measures research project. The primary purpose of the project is to conduct extensive research on measures of learner progress in literacy and Essential Skills (LES) in order to assist the Alberta Government Tri-Ministries with the development of future directions, policies, and programming for LES.

This research project hopes to learn more about how learners, employees, community organizations, community leaders and elders, and workplaces measure progress (improvement) in literacy and Essential Skills. We are seeking adults who work in or support community literacy and Essential Skills organizations, employees, and employers involved in providing program funding, policy development, institution administration, and workplace training to partake in a short interview about learner progression measures.

Your contribution to this study is important to build on our understanding of the ways in which learner progress is measured. We will ask questions about how you, your agency/institution/workplace, and your learners/employees measure progress. You are welcome to bring a support person with you at the time of your interview.

If you would like to participate or if you have more questions about this study, please contact:

Candace Witkowskyj, Project Officer
ewitkowskyj@bowvalleycollege.ca
p. 403.355.4664

Interviews will be conducted
In person or by phone
April 8 – June 15 2013

This project is funded by

Government of Alberta
Appendix B: Consent Forms

Learner Consent Form

Part one: Learner consent form

Read this part before the interview.

What is this research project about?

This project is called Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures. This means we want to find out how learners in programs like yours think about progress. We want to find out how getting better at learning is measured. We want to find out:

- What learners think they have learned.
- How they know they have learned.
- How their learning has changed their everyday life.

If you agree, we will record the interview. We will also take notes.

After the interview is over, we will read you the interview notes. This way you can change your answer and tell us more if you want.

What will happen to the interview notes?

We will use the notes to write a report. When the interviews are typed up on the computer, we will change your name and remove details that might identify you. That way, no one can tell who said what.

We can give you a copy of the report when it is done if you like.

The reports from each interview will go to a writer. The writer will read all the interviews to see what the people say about progress.

The writer will write a final report. We may also write a report for a journal or newsletter.

All the information will belong to Bow Valley College.

What will happen if I change my mind about being in the research project?

You can decide that you do not want to be a part of this project any time before your interview.
Even if we interview you, you can still change your mind. You will have 2 business days after the interview to change your mind.

After 2 business days, we will not be able to remove your interview from the study.

**This is how you can let us know if you change your mind:**

At the interview, we will tell you the last day you can change your mind. By this date you have to tell the interviewer or Candace Witkowskyj. We will also write it down for you.

To stop being part of this study, you have to call us by that date.

You can contact the person who interviewed you at _______________________________.

Maybe you do not want the person who interviewed you to know you changed your mind. Then you can contact Candace Witkowskyj. She works with the project too. Her phone number is 403-355-4664, e-mail: cwitkowskyj@bowvalleycollege.ca.

Tell Candace or your interviewer that you have changed your mind. Tell them you do not want to be part of the project by this date: ________________________________.

If you want to get in touch with us after that date, or if you have any questions, contact Candace. We will not be able to remove your information from the project because it is after the 2 business day deadline.

If you tell us by ____________ that you do not want to be part of the study, this is what we will do:

- We will not keep copies of any information you have told us. It will be destroyed. We will either shred it or delete it.
- We will not include any of the information you gave us in the project.
- If you have told Candace Witkowskyj that you have changed your mind, she will destroy your information. She will not tell your program that you changed your mind.

**Who will get the report?**

The report will go to the Government of Alberta. The Government of Alberta is funding this project.
It might also go to other learning programs. They also help us understand programs and learning better.

All data and the report will belong to Bow Valley College.

**Who will benefit from this project?**

This project may help people who work in programs like yours. It may give them a better understanding of learners.

This project may help government make better decisions.

It may help them to make better decisions about learning. This project may help learners. It may help them have more control over their learning.
Part two: Learner consent form.

We will review this and sign it at the interview.

Program: ______________________________
Interview Date: _________________________
I ________________________ agree to take part in a study.
I understand that ________________________________will do the interview and take notes.

I understand that during the interview I will be asked questions like:

Why I came to this program.
How fast I thought I would learn.
How I feel about my learning and successes.
How I can tell I’m improving.

I understand that:
The interview may be recorded.
The interviewer(s) may take notes.
My ideas or words may be used in a report.
The interviewer will read the notes to me at the end of this interview.
I can add more ideas or change my mind about what I have said.
My name will not be used in any reports.
I do not have to be a part of the interview.
I do not have to answer questions I do not want to.
I can leave at any time.
I can change my mind even after the interview. I have 2 business days after the interview has ended to change my mind. If I do change my mind, all my information will be destroyed.

If I want to change my mind, I have to contact my interviewer or Candace Witkowskyj, at 403-355-4664 or cwitkowskyj@bowvalleycollege.ca by this date _________________.

Candace will not tell my program I changed my mind.

This will not affect my program.

I will get a $25 gift certificate for being a part of this interview.
Learner Consent Check List

☐ I do
☐ I do not
    agree to be recorded.
☐ I do
☐ I do not
    agree to notes being taken.
☐ I do
☐ I do not
    want ________________________to use my ideas and words in a report.

☐ I do
☐ I do not
    want a copy of the final report (mail or e-mail)

________________________________________________________________

I understand what this study is about. I have been given a copy of this form. It has been read out loud to me.

Signature of participant: ____________________________ Date: ________________
Signature of interviewers: ___________________________ Date: ________________
Practitioner, Administrator and Funding agency Consent Form

Consent form for practitioners and stakeholders

Name of Researchers, Department, Telephone, and E-mail:

1. Marnie Schaetti, Co-Researcher, Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning, Bow Valley College
   Contact: marnie.schaetti@gmail.com or (403) 270-8617
2. Candice Jackson, Co-Researcher, Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning, Bow Valley College
   Contact: candicejcksn231@gmail.com or (780) 416-8208

Title of Project: Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures

Sponsor: The Government of Alberta Tri-Ministries

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information

Purpose of the Study:

The primary purpose of the Literacy and Essential Skills: Learner Progression Measures (LPM) project is to conduct extensive research on measures of learner progress in literacy and Essential Skills (LES) in order to assist the Alberta Government Tri-Ministries with the development of future directions, policies, and programming for LES.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

You will be asked to share and discuss your experiences and views with regard to learner progression measures. The discussion should take 60 to 90 minutes. Researchers will be taking notes during the discussion, as well as making an audio recording for accuracy. Any individuals present during your interview will be asked to keep identities of the participants and the information shared confidential.

Interview questions will include general impressions and observations of how learner progress is measured, your viewpoint of learner progress, and other considerations involving how learner progress is measured.
There is no right or wrong answer. In addition to offering your own insight, you are encouraged to share your perception of how learners assess their own progress. If you are asked a question that requires clarification, please feel free to ask your interviewer to give more information or repeat the question. You are also welcome to bring a person you trust to the interview with you if you prefer. This person has to agree to respect your confidentiality and not share what is said in the interview with others.

**What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

No personal identifying information will be collected in this study. The recording of the interview as well as any notes taken during the interview will be immediately transcribed and assigned a random number. Any identifying information will be removed at this time and your data will be combed several times to ensure no details remain that could be used to identify you. The information you provide will be treated confidentially by the research team and all participants shall be anonymous in the final report.

**Are There Risks or Benefits If I Participate?**

There are no reasonably foreseeable risks or harms to you as a result of your participation in this study, and no inconvenience other than the time you have taken to participate. There are also no direct benefits to you due to your participation in the discussion, but the findings can benefit current and future learners, employers, and literacy practice. We can provide support services through Bow Valley College’s counselling services if you would like. Please let us know if you would like this service and we will arrange this support for you. You are also welcome to bring a support person with you to your interview, however that person will have to agree to maintain your confidentiality. You will also have to consent to that person being present for the interview.

**What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

The information you provide will be accessible only to members of the LPM task force research team. Reports based on the research may include quotes from this discussion. However, no names of participants will be given in any reports or publications, and only general titles will be used (e.g., “employer”).

Please note that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time up until 2 business days after your interview takes place — or to refuse to participate altogether. At the time of your interview, your interviewer(s) will advise you of the date of your last opportunity to withdraw from the study. You are welcome to contact your interviewer(s) or, if you do not
want the person who interviewed you to know you have withdrawn from the study, you can contact Candace Witkowskyj, Project Officer of the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning at Bow Valley College (BVC). However, we strongly encourage your participation in this study and any information you provide is greatly appreciated. If you decide to withdraw during the discussion, the information you provide up to that point will not be used for the research.

No one except the LPM task force research team and a transcriber will be allowed to listen to the recording or see any resulting transcripts. Physical copies of the transcripts will be stored in a locked cabinet in the office of Audrey Gardner at BVC. Electronic files will be stored on a secure computer network drive accessible by the LPM task force research team only. The anonymous data will be stored for five years, after which time it will be permanently destroyed and/or erased.

**Signatures (Written Consent)**

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate in this research.

In no way does signing this document waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time up until 2 business days after your interview takes place. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. You will be provided with a copy of the final report if you request to be provided with one at the time of your interview.

**Participant’s Name: (please print)**

_____________________________________________________

Participant’s Signature: ______________________________________________________

Date: __________________

**Researcher’s Name: (please print)**

______________________________

Researcher’s Signature: ______________________________________________________

Date: __________________

**Consent to Audio Recording**

In order to ensure accuracy, all interviews will be recorded with participant permission. Your signature below indicates that you give consent to researchers to record your interview
and transcribe it for future use in this project. If participants do not wish to be recorded, interviewers will rely on handwritten notes which will be reviewed at the end of the interview to ensure accuracy. If you consent to your interview being recorded, please sign below.

**Participant’s Name: (please print)**

_____________________________________________________

Participant’s Signature ________________________________

Date: ____________

**Researcher’s Name: (please print)**

_____________________________________________________

Researcher’s Signature: ________________________________

Date: ____________

**Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact Candace Witkowskyj by telephone at 403-355-4664 or by e-mail at cwitkowskyj@bowvalleycollege.ca.

If you would like a copy of the final report sent to you, please provide us with your address or e-mail: _______________________________________________________

This information is being collected under the authority of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. The information will be used to better understand how learners and associated agencies measure progress.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The interviewer has kept a copy of the consent form.
Appendix C: Interview Questions

Learner Interview Questions

Name:
Program:

1. a) How long have you been in this program?
   b) Is this your first time being in a program like this? If no, then ask “What other programs have you been in?” (Looking to determine their experiences and gather context)

2. What brought you here/why did you come? What did you hope to get out of this program? What’s been interesting/helpful for you so far? (Looking to identify their goals)

3. What does it mean to you to do well in your program? How does it feel to get better at stuff? How important is it to be successful in your program? Can you give me an example of this? (Looking to identify how they define success)

4. When you learn something new, do you notice a change in your life? What do you notice? If they say no, you can connect to previous answers. (Looking to identify their personal views of change)

5. Are there things that are easier now because you’ve been in this program (or training)? What are they? Do you remember the moment that you knew this was easier/not as hard? What happened to make you notice that difference? (Looking to identify indicators of progress)

6. So you’ve been in the program/taken training for _____ (state length of time). How do you feel about yourself? Is it the same or different than how you felt before the program started? Why do you think that is? Do you think this is because of the program? (Looking to identify if they see themselves differently or are aware of their progress)

7. Did you bring anything to talk about that represents improvement or success to you? Can you tell us more about this?

8. Are there any other things that remind you of your success? (Looking to identify additional items they considered bringing in case they only brought what they thought we would want to see)

10. What is the best way to describe learning progress for other adults? *(Looking to see comparisons of various forms of progress to standard forms of measurement, if this is applied)*

11. What is the best way someone can recognize what you’ve learned? *(Looking to identify what kinds of recognition is most valued)*

12. Do you have any more thoughts you would like to share?
Practitioner, Administrator and Funding agency Interview Questions

Name: 
Title: 
Program:

1. Can you please tell us about how you are involved with adult learners/employees in training?

2. How long have you been working with your agency? How long have you worked in the field of LES/workplace training?

3. How would you describe learner progress/improvement? Does anything else influence your perception of learner progress?

4. How do you think learners/trainees define progress? So that is quite different than/similar to how you described progress. Why do you think that is?

5. For practitioners and administrators: What evidence of progress are you required to report to your funding agency and/or superiors?

   For funding agencies: What evidence of progress do you require of your programs? And what do you report to superiors?

6. For practitioners and administrators: What are the methods or tools that you use to measure progress in your program or workplace, i.e., standardized tests, portfolios, performance reviews?

   For funding agencies: What methods/tools do you require programs to use/do you accept? (Looking to understand how they value forms of measurement)

7. a) Describe the different kinds of information that are included in reports of learner progress.

   b) From whom do you gather it?

   c) What do you do with that information?

8. Is there information that you are asked to gather whose purpose is unclear to you?
9. *For practitioners and administrators:* What kind of evidence of progress do you want to report that you currently are not reporting? Why?

*For funding agencies:* What kind of evidence of progress is not being reported?

10. a) In your view, what ways of measuring progress are not typically considered?  
    b) Why do you think that is?

11. Given your experience as a _____ (your title), what other factors should be considered when assessing learner and/or employee progress?

12. Do you have anything else you would like to share?
Appendix D: The Range of Assessment Tools Found in the Literature

The following tables (Jackson and Schaetti 2013) include a sample of the wide range of tools described in the literature. The tools are categorized as:

- diagnostic assessments
- standardized tests
- formative assessment measures
- practice-based, authentic, or practitioner-developed tools
- competency-based assessments.

Each category and tool is briefly described. The third column acknowledges the source or sources that mention the specific tool. We acknowledge that this information can be categorized in a number of different ways and some tools can be placed in more than one category. For example, standardized tests can be used for learner placement as well as diagnostic assessment. While all of these tools were described in the literature we reviewed, there may also be many useful tools that exist outside the scope of this review.

### Diagnostic Assessment (definition in Millar 2007)

- is a series of tasks that reflect the reading, writing, or spelling process and allow the instructor to engage in an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the learner’s strategies, strengths, and weaknesses.
- ideally includes an interview; an informal reading inventory (IRI) or oral reading sample; a free-writing sample; and word recognition, vocabulary, and spelling tests. (Note that many IRIs are constructed for children and are therefore not norm-referenced for adults).
- is particularly useful at intake because it provides information that can be used to plan and develop individualized learning programs or activities.
- is used by practitioners, instructors, and learners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Cited by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA)</td>
<td>Can be used as initial assessment and to monitor ongoing progress. Assesses learners working on tasks at lower levels (Sauve 2012)</td>
<td>Campbell 2006; Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bader Reading and Language Inventory (USA)</td>
<td>An example of an informal reading inventory</td>
<td>Millar in Campbell 2007b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tools</strong></td>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cited by</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Laubach Way to Reading Diagnostic Inventory (USA)</strong></td>
<td>Can be used with learners working on tasks at low levels. Uses real-life activities.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenger Placement Tool</strong></td>
<td>This tool is designed to help the instructor or tutor choose the appropriate book in the Challenger series for the learner.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnostic Literacy Assessment for Beginning Readers</strong></td>
<td>A standardized tool — a user-friendly assessment that is designed specifically to be used with adult beginning readers.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skillswise (UK)</strong></td>
<td>Standardized tool that captures lower-level literacy skills. Website has accompanying activities.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Read Forward</strong></td>
<td>Based on IALS: “focuses on feedback regarding assessment results and what strategies and learning need to take place to progress.”</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontario Skills Passport: Check-in Tool</strong></td>
<td>Informally assesses essential skills and work habits.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Standardized Tests** (definition in Millar 2007; Fagan 2007)

There are two types of standardized tests:

1) **Norm-referenced** in which, to have meaning, raw scores must be interpreted against the scores of others with similar demographic and social profiles (the norm sample). To make this possible, all learners must take the test in standard conditions.

2) **Criterion-referenced** in which, to overcome the criticism of test content not being relevant, an individual’s scores are compared to a content or skill in a particular curriculum area (the criterion) rather than to the scores of others.

- While the primary purpose is to provide information to facilitate placement in programs, standardized tests can also provide progress assessment and program evaluation functions.
- They sometimes provide general information regarding a student’s strengths and weaknesses, but more often they are rough measures for determining achievement levels in reading, writing, and math. These tests do not show how a student processes print and text or why a student has difficulty with word recognition or comprehension.
- They are reliable, easy to administer, and cost effective because they can be administered to large groups.
- Depending on the test’s purpose, standardized tests can be used by practitioners, learners, and policy-makers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Tools</strong></th>
<th><strong>Notes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cited by</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canadian Adult Achievement Test</strong></td>
<td>Measures functional levels in math, reading, and language. Can be used to determine</td>
<td>Campbell 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tool</td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Cited by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(CAAT)</td>
<td>readiness for literacy program, upgrading, and core skills development. Developed for Canadian context in English and French.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) (USA)</td>
<td>Assesses academic skills with many different levels of tests. Available as paper or on-line test. Can be used as diagnostic, formative, or summative evaluation.</td>
<td>Campbell 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE)</td>
<td>Measures functional abilities of adults. Can be used in a variety of contexts and accommodates the non-reader.</td>
<td>Campbell 2007b; Gill 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA)</td>
<td>Valid and reliable. Tests four essential skills. Practitioners must be trained to administer the tests. Training costs are involved.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Equivalency Diploma (GED)</td>
<td>Learners demonstrate high-school-level skills. Test fee $100. Learners receive a GED certificate if they successfully pass all five tests.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDQ (Prose, Document, and Quantitative)</td>
<td>An on-line assessment tool. Provides information on skill using written and printed information on prose, document, and qualitative scales. Can be used as diagnostic or summative tool. Cost $12 per test.</td>
<td>Rahbari n.d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Formative Assessment (definition in Clark 2012; Derrick, Ecclestone, and Gawn, 2009) | • supports a learning environment that is neither daunting nor pressured, and is tolerant of failure, experimentation, and inhibition.  
• is future regarding, and includes thorough and insightful commentary on progress to date and on how, in light of that progress, a student might improve. Therefore, it is particularly useful in situations where adult learners need information about the standard of their work and about the next steps to take without being judged.  
• is not prescriptive; there is no right way to measure.  
• assumes that teaching and learning are iterative—always changing for learners and educators, that success must be measured by teachers and learners, and that it is relative, measured differently by different people.  
• is used by instructors, tutors, and learners. |                                  |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Cited by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations, investigations, conversations,</td>
<td>Designed for a specific learning context. Requires professional development for practitioners since designing instruments can be</td>
<td>Derrick, Ecclestone, and Gawn 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>exhibitions, in-take and exit assessments</strong></td>
<td>time consuming.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catching Confidence (UK)</td>
<td>Self-assessment — captures the “soft skills” that support learning. Tutor manual provides ideas for related strategies.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Tools for Learning in a Group Setting: Rubrics and Spinners</td>
<td>Monitors learning in context as well as in a group setting. A unique tool in this respect.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve Opened Up: Exploring Learner Perspectives on Progress</td>
<td>Helps learners pinpoint gains in learning. Focuses on skills necessary for learning to occur.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Profile Self-Assessment Tool (LPSAT)</td>
<td>Helps learners understand the ways in which they learn. Designed for learners with learning challenges but adaptable for all learners.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Practice-Based Performance Assessment** (definition by Pinsent-Johnson 2007)

- evolved from a theoretical understanding of learning as a social process. Knowledge is seen to be formed by our active participation in various contexts, all of which include certain ways of doing, talking, thinking, and relating. Our understanding of the world is understood to be shaped by our ways of participating in it: whom we participate with, how we participate, the tools we use, and the role we have in the dynamics of power relationships.
- asks students to do something with their learning that reflects how new knowledge might be used in practice in a variety of contexts.
- is focused on collecting and demonstrating complex and cumulative knowledge, skills, and attitudes that reflect a student’s higher-order and critical thinking.
- is related directly to a student’s experiences and recent learning.
- is integrated seamlessly into learning and used to shape future learning.
- is dependent upon the learner’s active participation to establish goals and to choose appropriate assessment methods and performance criteria; is often a collaborative effort between student and teacher, student and other students, and student and people in the contexts in which the new literacy will be used.
- could prove to be a challenge to implement, depending on current accountability frameworks, reporting systems, and philosophies of literacy learning, though Pinsent-Johnson argues that it is ultimately more meaningful than either standardized or competency measures, and can have its place alongside other assessment approaches.
- is used by practitioners and learners.
**Purposeful Literacies Through Informal Learning Information Inventory**

Assesses learners’ engagement, feeling, and values related to informal learning or learning that occurs outside the literacy program.

**Workplace Informal Learning Matrix (WILM)**

On-line, free self-assessment that provides learners with information about essential skills needed on the job, as well as what informal learning is needed.

**Competency-Based Assessment** (definition in Geraci 2007)

- The drive to competency-based education came from the vocational and workplace training sectors. Competency-based assessments are frequently developed as part of accountability frameworks.
- Competencies, which refer to the skills and knowledge required to achieve a particular standard, outcome, or task, are usually set by a third party.
- It is designed to provide learners with opportunities to demonstrate their abilities by completing contextualized tasks. This means learners have the opportunity not simply to show that they possess skills, but that they are capable of employing those skills to complete a task for a particular purpose within a particular context, such as an everyday activity (shopping) or a workforce activity (reading an incident report).
- It tests learners within predefined areas that reflect programming content. Such tests may match program content competency for competency.
- This style of assessment is strongest when connected to the content of a learning program, which is in turn strongest when connected to students’ goals.
- It may be motivating to students who want confirmation that what they are learning is directly applicable to their goals.
- It’s used by workplace instructors, practitioners, and policy-makers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Cited by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purposeful Literacies Through Informal Learning Information Inventory</td>
<td>Assesses learners’ engagement, feeling, and values related to informal learning or learning that occurs outside the literacy program.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Informal Learning Matrix (WILM)</td>
<td>On-line, free self-assessment that provides learners with information about essential skills needed on the job, as well as what informal learning is needed.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS)</td>
<td>A competency-based assessment, its primary use is to measure a learner’s ability to interpret printed information in English from life skills content areas in North American settings. The questions are in multiple-choice format, which makes it difficult to simulate real-life situations. Administrators and</td>
<td>Geraci in Campbell 2007a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Coordinators need comprehensive training sessions; they can then teach individual classroom teachers. The cost may be prohibitive for small programs ($11K minimum just for the program plus $25 per student (Gorman and Ernst 2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES)</th>
<th>Assesses three essential skills using questions based on workplace materials. Can be used as a diagnostic tool to determine training needs (Harwood 2012).</th>
<th>Geraci 2007; Harwood 2012; Sauve 2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure Up</td>
<td>On-line or print-based essential-skills-focused tests. Can prepare learners to take tests such as TOWES.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario Skills Passport: Check-up Tool, Self-Assessment, and Facilitated Check-up Tool</td>
<td>On-line, tests essential skills and work habits. The Facilitated Check-up Tool allows for questions to be read to the learner.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing Life’s Work: Leisure and Home-Based Activity Identifier Tool</td>
<td>Recognizes skills used in hobbies and household activities that can be transferred to workplace.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FutureWorx: Employability Skills Assessment Tool</td>
<td>Assesses employability skills but from both the practitioner and the learner perspective. Designed to help track ongoing learning progress.</td>
<td>Sauve 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Language</td>
<td>These are a “template” to measure progress in speaking, reading, and writing</td>
<td>Harwood 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Non-Commercial Competency-Based Assessment Tools | Monitoring Tools for Learning in a Group Setting:  
1. Individual Learner in a Group Setting  
2. Emerging Peer Tutor in a Group Setting  
|---|---|---|---|
| Adult Goal Process Chart Monitoring Tool  
1. Adult Goal Progress Chart  
2. Data Collection for Adult Goal Progress Chart | The Adult Goal Progress Chart tool opens a dialogue with learners on the process of goal setting. The data collection tool monitors progress throughout the year. These tools were created for family literacy programs in the Fraser Valley, BC. | Gadsby, Middleton, and Whitaker 2007 |
References


