

# Oral History:

## Rob Wedel on Workplace Literacy

**Sarah Evans and Rob Wedel are both workplace literacy instructors at Capilano College in North Vancouver, British Columbia. In August, Sarah interviewed Rob. The following is an excerpt of their talk.**

**Rob:** I initially thought [literacy] was just about reading and writing, but I've come to accept UNESCO's definition, which is to contribute effectively to your society's development. I think that is closer to what literacy means to me now and I think those words are really important because if you're not literate you can't supposedly—and I believe this to be true—that you can't effect positive change in your community. That's how I define literacy now. That ability to communicate. Communication is a word that covers a lot of territory. What does communication mean if you have a power-engineering certificate in a pulp mill or if you are talking medical terminology in a hospital? That's a different kind of literacy than what we normally call literacy. But this set of literacy skills is incredibly important to those learners if they want to effectively contribute. So that definition, in my mind, has become so wide, so encompassing of so many different skill sets. It is not the simple ABC stuff that I first thought literacy was all about.

**Sarah:** It really depends on the context.

**Rob:** Absolutely. Again, that definition includes development of the community. Well, that's a huge aspect of most people's lives. What's troubling is that a lot of people who aren't effectively contributing don't recognize that they are not. But that's another whole other issue.

**Sarah:** Even among people who are supposedly literate... So how did you make the move from prison literacy to workplace literacy?

**Rob:** As one of the athletes said in the current

Olympics, "None of our lives go in a straight line, we all get pushed this way or that depending on what we are dealing with." Capilano College had an opening to cover an English instructor in Sechelt [British Columbia], so I inquired about it, was interviewed and was offered a few sections of work. Then I started with Cap and then, after a couple of terms of partial work, they were able to offer me more and more work. After a year or two, I started to work with the SARAW [Speech Assisted Reading and Writing] program at Cap.

**Sarah:** That's a literacy program for physically challenged people right?



**Rob:** Yes. I also dabbled in a couple of different projects with the college that were out of the mainstream. Within a few years, we were contacted by Sylvia Sioufi from HEU [Hospital Employees' Union] and she wanted to set up a BEST-type program in the hospitals in British Columbia. This started an ongoing dialogue with Sylvia, Pat Hodgson [from Capilano College] and I, and we started to build a relationship of trust with Sylvia.

This initial dialogue with the union partner is one of the most critical components of workplace literacy programs. Through long discussions (before initiating the LEAP program, we had meetings with the JUMP Coordinators for a year and a half) around philosophical issues and possible delivery models, you begin to develop a strong sense of trust with your partners. You need to have this trust before you can create solid programs.

Through these discussions with Sylvia, Pat and I, we developed what's come to be termed as the hybrid model, which is an instructor and trained peer tutors working with learners in the workplace. We did a pilot program at VGH [Vancouver General Hospital], followed the next year by another pilot program at SMH [Surrey Memorial Hospital]. Then the HLAA [Healthcare Labour Adjustment Agency] took over the funding for these programs and provided some stability, and so we operated for a number of years under that funding source.

**Sarah:** What year was that first pilot at VGH?

**Rob:** '97, '98.

**Sarah:** The hybrid model—can you talk more about it?

**Rob:** Most literacy programs in the workplace or outside of the workplace evolve depending on the circumstances they encounter. The unions we worked with, including the HEU and those in the pulp and paper sector, wanted to embrace the peer tutors as the primary source of instruction. They thought that was critical to the program's success, and I've come to agree with them completely.

**Sarah:** Why?

**Rob:** Because, as our partners have said to me over and over again, people learn from their peers in the workplace whether it's job-related or otherwise. I had some trepidation about relying completely on the tutors, especially in the LEAP program where the instructor was not in the classroom, but I came to see how well it did work. And, yes, the training of the peer tutors is critical to get them philosophically on the same page around what peers can do and should do. Once they start to understand the philosophy of what we are trying to do, then they become much better tutors in that they allow the learners to really direct the learning. Then they just act as coaches and cheerleaders, and sometimes experts if they are being asked to do that.

The hybrid model. In earlier discussions with Sylvia, she recognized that there were other issues or other learning needs that tutors might not be able to meet, and she agreed, especially at a very culturally-diverse place like VGH, that it would probably work to have both the tutor and the teacher in the room.

## Glossary

**BEST:** Basic Education for Skills Training is an approach to worker-centred literacy developed by the Ontario Federation of Labour in the 1980s and adapted by unions throughout the country. Through BEST, co-workers were trained as course leaders to instruct literacy and basic skills training in their workplaces. In 1996, the Hospital Employees Union in British Columbia started adapting this model by adding a role for the college instructor in the classroom while maintaining the use of peer tutors.

**LEAP:** Learning and Education Assisted by Peers is an approach to worker-centred literacy developed in 1997 the British Columbia forestry industry. LEAP programs were run by trained peer tutors, with the college instructors as a distant resource.

**JUMP:** The Joint Union Management Program, which started in 1994 and ran until 1997, was a cooperative initiative of unions and employers in the British Columbia forestry industry, with funding from Forest Renewal British Columbia. The goal of JUMP was to advance the industry through investing in the workforce and creating a learning culture in pulp and paper. LEAP was one of many programs initiated under JUMP.

Even though the tutors would sometimes defer to the instructor (and that's not what we wanted to see), the model worked very well. And looking back, that was a very successful model, because the instructors who were involved in that hybrid model really believed in empowerment for the tutors, and they embraced that concept and strove to make it happen.

I think we learned in the pulp and paper sector that there wasn't as much need for the instructor to be in the room because their clientele wasn't as culturally diverse. Although, we had a hell of a surprise when we piloted the LEAP Program for one year at the Skeena Cellulose mill in Prince Rupert—we didn't realize, starting out, that we had a very diverse cultural population at that mill and probably 40-50 per cent of the group were English-as-a-second-language learners, and they could not deal with the open-ended LEAP delivery model. LEAP does not have structured grade levels, so it wasn't clear for them to see how they were achieving any of their goals. So we had a real problem with that program and it just about fizzled and died in that first year because we could not react fast enough to what the problems were there. People like Jim Dixon [Communications, Energy and Paperworkers' Union of Canada] and Rob Tukham [Pulp and Paper Workers of Canada], the literacy advocates for their unions, would probably agree with me at this point and say that we should have gone in with more of a health-care type hybrid model, where the instructor is actually in the classroom for a portion of the time.

**Sarah:** So when people talk nationally of the hybrid model in British Columbia, they are really talking about British Columbia's version of the BEST program, where there are peer instructors and an instructor in the room. When we talk about LEAP, it's actually not the hybrid model. LEAP is more like BEST originally was in Ontario with peer instructors being the only instructors in the room and the college instructor as a distant resource.

**Rob:** Yes.

**Sarah:** That's interesting. I always thought that the reason you went with the LEAP-style model in the pulp and paper mills was because the programs were in Prince George and [the Capilano College instructors] were in North Vancouver. I thought it was because of convenience and geography.

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