Essential Skills:
Essential Confusion?

by **Nancy Jackson**

Essential Skills is a term we hear more and more these days, especially from the federal government. It is a key part of the Workplace Skills Strategy announced in December 2004. . While some people are using this term to mean the same thing as 'workplace literacy,' others say it's not the same at all; there seems to be a lot of confusion. What is behind this new language? And what does it mean for the literacy field?

The website of the Government of Canada (see HRDC) describes Essential Skills as "the everyday skills [needed] to carry out a variety of life and work tasks." However, Essential Skills have all been developed to describe jobs. Since 1994, the government has produced more than 200 'profiles' defining Essential Skills for occupations requiring secondary school or less. The profiles don't focus on specific technical skills, but rather on general or generic skills that are said to apply across a range of jobs. Defining skills in this way is supposed to help increase flexibility for both individuals and employers, by showing how people might transfer their skills from one job to the next.

Nine Essential Skill areas have been defined: reading text, document use, numeracy, writing, oral communication, working with others, continuous learning, thinking skills and computer use. Just like in literacy, five levels of complexity are outlined in each of these areas. Three of these areas (reading text, document use, and numeracy) also have been developed into a workplace skills test called TOWES, currently being promoted through the college system in most provinces. Overall, these tools introduce a new and more standardized framework for programs that might formerly have been offered as workplace literacy. Depending on how these tools are used, they can be expected to standardize workplace learning by tying the content of learning to job profiles

defined by the government in consultation with employers (see HRDC).

Words like essential skills or 'generic skills' are becoming familiar not just in Canada, but also in other countries, like Great Britain, Australia and the United States. And in all these places, literacy workers are debating the meanings and implications of these developments. Some say that words like essential or generic skills are full of more hope than the word literacy, because individual learners are not embarrassed to be associated with them. But others say these frameworks are too narrow, because they focus only on jobs, not on the rest of life. They also focus specifically on employers' views of jobs, not the views of workers, unions, or educators. Nevertheless, in all these countries, governments continue to press forward with this agenda. What should we make of all this? What differences can we expect all this to make for literacy workers and learners?

Changing work, changing skills

I want to take a few steps back and focus on a broader picture of change that underlies this growing international interest in Essential Skills. These changes are so familiar in everyday life that it is easy to miss their significance in the big picture. I am referring to widespread changes in the nature of work itself: the organization of work, the tools and technology of work, the look, feel, and smell of work, the location of work, the hours of work, the demands of work, the opportunities at work, the chances of finding or keeping work, and the expectations about who we are at work (Cappelli et al, 1997).

A lot of books and articles have been written about all this over the last decade. But here I want to draw attention to just one profoundly important point: that is, how we have learned to expect constant, rapid

change as normal. In the world of work, nothing stays the same for long. Products change, markets change, customers or clients change, time lines change, machines change, materials change, tools change, management methods change, pay arrangements change, working practices change, supervision methods change, knowledge needed at work changes, skills needed at work change.

So whereas the young people of the past thought in terms of acquiring an 'occupation' for a lifetime, the youth of today are told to expect they will change occupations at least six times in their working life. The so-called 'enterprising' employee of today is supposed to be "happy to serve, but ready to go" (du Gay) when they are no longer needed by the employer. All this means that having work, and keeping work, is being reinvented in our time not just as a process of economic, technological and social change, but importantly as the necessity for ongoing personal 'retooling' as well.
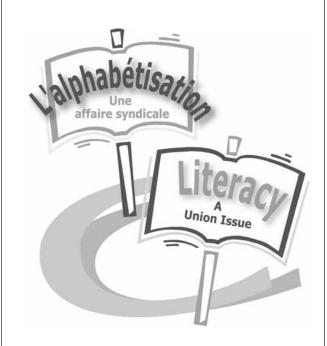
This constant demand for change translates into a popular understanding of 'learning' as a condition of economic survival. Corporations are told they must become a 'learning organization' to survive in a global market. Individuals are told we must 'learn' to get a job, keep up with our current jobs, or even to stay employable. This notion of constant change alters how we think about ourselves, our jobs, our hopes and plans for the future. If we pay attention, we can see how these ideas are slowly shifting the culture of our workplaces, our unions (if we are lucky enough to belong to one), our families and our communities.

This new environment has generated a lot of interest in how people actually do their work. For almost two decades, bookstores and business magazines have been full of ever-changing advice on how to re-organise and manage work for 'high performance,' particularly by bringing about continuous improvement in the way work is done. Whereas twenty years ago the business gurus said that improvement comes from investing in computers, today they say it comes from investing in people. Investing in people means taking charge–through training and other forms of performance monitoring–of how employees work together, how they communicate with each other, how they talk to the customer and the boss, and even how they think, look and feel about their work.

All this focus on job performance has brought the theory and practice of skills training to the attention of the business community, and, by extension, government policy makers, to an extent that would have been hard to imagine two decades ago. Skills development has become a pivotal point in public policy not just in Canada, but across the industrialized world, with the common message that the future welfare of employers, working people, and communities and nations is tied to a skills agenda.

Meanwhile, those with long experience in the training field will recognize that this terrain is more complex than it seems. The needs and interests of different stakeholders turn out to be quite different, sometimes conflicting. And across the board, the much-promised economic 'returns' on investment in skills training have usually turned out to be more

distant, long-term, even elusive, than stakeholders usually have in mind. (Green).

Generic skills: complex and contested terrain

In response to this complexity, national policy frameworks for skills development differ considerably in their details. But one commonality over nearly two decades is a growing focus on skills described as core, generic or essential. The great attraction of this idea for policy makers is the belief that these terms name skills that are 'transferable' between settings, thus contributing to a workforce that is flexible and adaptable. But, alas, these claims also turn out to involve more complexity than meets the eye.

For example, in Canada as elsewhere, policy makers often say that the attraction of generic/essential skills policies is that employers value them as reliable indicators of the performance capability of the workforce. But researchers in Australia are beginning to question this link. For instance, Waterhouse and Virgona (2002) at Workplace Learning Initiatives, an award-winning private training company, point out that the concepts associated with generic, essential, key or core skills may be actually more useful to policy makers than to employers or individuals. They are useful to policy makers specifically because they are an abstraction from reality, making it possible to do large-scale descriptions of a population **from a distance**. This makes them highly suitable for the needs and interests of high level policy makers, at a national and even transnational level. Their growing prominence in policy discourses around the world offers some weight to this proposition.

But importantly, the opposite is also true. What's useful 'from a distance' may not be useful from 'up close,' for precisely the same reasons: their abstract character. Indeed, on the basis of a decade of research and hands-on experience, these Australian researchers are arguing that for employers, learners and educators, who are all concerned with actual functional capacities in specific working environments, abstraction is not a good guide. On the contrary, they argue that the necessary basis of **both** successful workplace functioning **and** meaningful learning for individuals are increasingly being understood as an active process of "critical engagement, questioning [and] reflection..." embedded in practical activity (Waterhouse and Virgona; Waterhouse). They say,

> ...while it may be possible conceptually to abstract a generic label for a set of site-specific capacities with superficial

similarities (e.g., numeracy, literacy, problem solving, use of technology), at this level such entities are not the concrete or functional capacities that individuals actually use. They are meaningful only at a distance. (Stevenson pp. 2-3, cited in Waterhouse p. 3)

In addition, there may be similar problems with the notion of 'transferability,' which is also central to the popularity of generic or essential skills. Transfer of learning refers to how abilities acquired in one situation apply in other situations. Since today's workforce is said to be highly mobile, a common issue, then, for formal education and workplace training, including the policies that support and encourage them, is "how to ensure that the learning which occurs can be transferred or applied to new contexts." (Tennant p. 165)

But a growing body of research evidence shows that this popular belief in transferability may also be deeply flawed (Billett 2001). In brief, these researchers argue that while we recognize that people with all levels of skills and knowledge do indeed apply their understandings across settings in various ways, we misunderstand 'how' this occurs. The capacity for such 'transfer' is not a ready-made property of particular skills, even of those we call essential or generic. Rather, according to this research, the process of transfer is an active achievement of problem solving and interpretation on the part of an individual.

Furthermore, the success of this active transfer is also heavily influenced by what they call the 'climate' or 'culture' of transfer–which means the degree to which the new setting itself is hospitable to this work of problem solving and application. But importantly, in every case, the skill to be transferred must be adjusted or reinvented by the learner to fit the specifics of each new circumstance. This work of reinventing skill in a new context involves "re-shaping, re-application and adaptation (sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic) of established skills and understandings." (Waterhouse p. 7; Billet; Tennant)

Ultimately, these researchers reject the idea that "knowledge can in any way be general, abstract, or decontextualised." Instead, they argue that "even so-called general knowledge only has power in specific circumstances" and "abstract representations are meaningless unless they can be made specific to the

> We have learned to expect constant, rapid change as normal. In the world of work, nothing stays the same for long.

> ...the concepts associated with generic, essential, key or core skills may actually be more useful to policy makers than to employers or individuals

situation at hand..." (Lave and Wenger cited in Tennant p. 174). In this view, the potential for transfer is not achieved by "learners acquiring abstract knowledge and procedures which can be applied to many situations." (Tennant 1999:175) Instead, transfer is achieved when individuals use problem solving skills to make sense of how old information fits each new context.

In this view, the possibility of mastering new skills, as well as successfully transferring them to a new context, may actually be undermined if the skills and knowledge are defined as 'inherently transferable' and taught in a way that tries to make them abstract and decontextualised. Taken out of context, such skills and knowledge may actually be stripped of their meaning, not only for use in one setting but in every setting, and not only at work, but also in the rest of life. (Waterhouse; Waterhouse and Virgona)

These understandings of transfer as active and 'learning-based' stand in sharp contrast to notions of transferability that currently underlie the approach to generic or essential skills in use across the industrialised world. If these researchers are correct, they raise many compelling questions worthy of attention in further research.

Skills assessment or skills development

Another important and contested issue, about which there is much less research to draw on, is the way frameworks for essential skills are actually used by various stakeholders. It is often hard to separate the promise or potential of policies and tools from the practical reality–and thus the impact of how they are being used. Here I want to focus on the difference between using an essential skills framework for purposes of skills assessment and using it as the basis for skills development. These functions are sometimes connected and sometimes not; and sometimes they are used by entirely different stakeholders, for quite different purposes.

For example, in the realm of skills assessment, the demand is growing internationally for tools that claim to provide broad descriptions of 'skill levels' of national populations. Along these lines, policy makers across the developed and developing world are increasingly interested in assessment exercises such as PISA (the Programme for International Student

Assessment) of performance in school subjects and IALSS (the International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey). Governments increasingly see this kind of data as a condition of being 'open for business' in the global economy. It is part of attracting transnational corporate investment, and it is part of participating in trade agreements such as NAFTA and the WTO (see OECD). Thus, for policy makers, such assessment tools are 'must haves.'

But even domestic employers, operating in firms of all sizes, have growing reason to want assessment tools that are not immediately connected to skills development. For example, it is increasingly common, as part of the hiring process for both permanent and temporary workers, to use testing of existing skill levels (in addition to testing for attitudes, aptitudes and even for drug use) to inform hiring decisions. Indeed, this kind of assessment is done precisely to reduce the need for skills development (training), particularly among temporary employees.

For all these purposes, it is very important to know how well a framework, essential skills or any other, actually performs **as a tool of assessment**. But it may not matter how well it functions as the basis **for skills development**, per se. In these cases, at both

international and national levels, the desire for skills assessment is disconnected from the actual work or responsibility for skills development. Thus the stakeholders involved in these different domains might have very different ideas about the adequacy of any framework, since they are judging by very different yardsticks.

Meanwhile, for those stakeholders whose needs and interests are in skills development per se, an entirely different set of needs and judgments is likely to be relevant. In this domain, the track record of generic or essential skills frameworks in various international jurisdictions is also quite complex. Indeed, controversy seems to be the common thread.

According to its proponents, essential or generic skills are the 'enabling' skills needed for work, learning and other activities of daily life. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills, and thus they enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change. But according to the critics, these same essential or generic skills are said to be associated with a 'veritable galaxy' of soft, social, interactional skills, frequently indistinguishable from a 'wish list' of personal characteristics, behaviours, and attitudes desired by employers. They are also said to

offer a superficial and fragmented understanding of the nature of skills, and to 'water down' the idea of skills to accommodate a low tech, low skill, low wage economic path (see Payne).

From all sides of these debates, we can see that strategies for learning are ultimately inseparable from much larger questions about economic and social visions. Even if we call them essential, or generic, skills policies turn out not to be simple, universally acclaimed as a good thing, with the power to unite us across differences. Instead, they are another complex terrain of struggle, where everything is more complicated than it seems.

Whither Canadian research?

Heated debate on these and other issues amongst educators and policy makers has endured across international jurisdictions for more than two decades. Given this track record of controversy elsewhere, we can only hope that the Canadian government will tread carefully in approaching any national policy for skills development, based on notions of literacy, Essential Skills or any other concept.

One message seems clear from the controversies discussed above. That is, a bold and innovative

program of detailed, ethnographic research on the process and conditions of successful workplace learning and transfer would be very helpful to Canadian employers, workers and educators alike. But importantly, the research cited above suggests that the focus of these investigations would need to be less on individuals, treated as cognitive or behavioural units in isolation, and more on how people function in the context of workplace culture and relationships. Such research might include questions about how individuals are supported (or not) to learn in their jobs, how they create the time and conditions for learning, how to encourage mentoring relationships rather than competitive and blaming ones, and how workplaces can be made safer environments so that all individuals can take the risk of learning or applying something new.

Such a shift in focus would bring Canadian research on skills development into line not only with leading edge educational theory but also with contemporary theories of workplace management, both of which are increasingly focused on the centrality of workplace culture in shaping individual behaviour (including learning) at work. ■

THANKS

to all contributing editors for *Literacies* in 2005:

Evelyn Battell
Jenny Horsman
Nancy Jackson
Mike Kelly
Tamara Levine
Kate Nonesuch
Lynette Plett
Marion Small
Nancy Steel
Jean Connon Unda

SOURCES:

Billett, Stephen (2001). *Learning in the Workplace: Strategies for Effective Practice.* Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin.

Brown, Alan and Ewart Keep (1999). *Competing Perspectives On Workplace Learning And The Learning Organisation.* University of Warwick: Institute for Employment Research (IER).

Cappelli, Peter, Laurie Bassi, Harry Katz, David Knoke, Paul Osterman and Michael Useem (1997). *Change at Work.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

du Gay, Paul (1996). *Consumption and Identity at Work.* London: Sage Publications.

Green, Andy (1998). Core Skills, Key Skills, and General Culture: In Search of a Common Foundation for Vocational Education. *Evaluation and Research in Education* 12 (1), 23-43.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC). Essential Skills Homepage. Available at www15.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/English/general/es.asp (May 2005)

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (n.d.), Policy Brief. Service Providers on the Move: Labour Mobility and the WTO General Agreement on Trade in Services. Retrieved from www.oecd.org September 2004

Payne, John (2000). The Unbearable Lightness of Skill: The Changing Meaning of Skill in UK Policy Discourses and Some Implications for Education and Training. *Journal of Education Policy* 15 (3), 353-369.

Stevenson, John ed. (1996). *Learning in the Workplace: Tourism and Hospitality.* Gold Coast, Queensland: Centre for Learning and Work Research, Griffith University.

Tennant, Mark (1999). Is learning transferable? In David Boud and John Garrrick (eds.) *Understanding Learning at Work.* London: Routledge, pp. 165-179.

Waterhouse, Peter (2004). Some Personal Thoughts on Generic/ Employability Skills

Melbourne: [unpublished manuscript].

Waterhouse, Peter, and Crina Virgona (2002). *Transferability in the Flexible Workplace,* Leabrook: Australian National Training Authority, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).