

Essential Skills and Change in Adult Education

An example from apprenticeship

by **Margerit Roger**

There are times when change in education seems to take forever, despite tremendous investment of energy, money and good will. And then there are times when change comes so quickly that it is difficult to keep up with the waves of activity. In Manitoba, and perhaps elsewhere, adult upgrading seems to be moving into this second camp. Over the last few years, shifts have started to appear in various corners of the adult education system: more workplace-focused teacher training workshops, new intake processes into employment and training, analysis of the relevance of curricula, integration of workplace documents into literacy instruction, new upgrading courses in colleges.

The catalyst? Essential Skills. Something about Essential Skills has captured the imagination of a broad spectrum of people and organizations in Manitoba. Ten to fifteen years ago it would have been difficult to imagine such widespread interest in adult literacy, ESL or workplace education. Largely because of Essential Skills, a growing number of people—whether in small, northern communities or in industry, labour, education and government—are talking seriously about what are, at their root, the learning needs of Manitoban adults.

There are justified concerns about the balance between Essential Skills and community-based literacy as a result of this focus on Essential Skills. A variety of other agendas are now competing with Essential Skills for attention, time and money. But with vigilance, the current emphasis on workplace-related learning will not end up permanently redirecting funding and support, but rather broadening the scope of adult learning in a sustainable way that

will also raise the profile of learning needs in non-work-related areas.

In fact, if those affected can continue to contribute to the overall vision for Essential Skills, it may be possible through ES projects to integrate adult learning into organizations that have previously failed to see the relevance of literacy work. It may also be possible to create and strengthen productive networks between groups who have not traditionally collaborated on educational initiatives for adults. So far, Essential Skills, in my experience, have been an effective catalyst for organizational and systemic change that nurtures progressive adult education principles and benefits working learners who may not otherwise have had access to or interest in upgrading.

So, what is powering the drive towards Essential Skills? Certainly, some of the interest is due to the national infrastructure and funding that has been put into place by the federal government. In Manitoba, strong provincial leadership in the area of Essential Skills has also been vital. And certainly, the pioneering work of the past decades in both workplace and community-based literacy and ESL has played a crucial role in paving the way for Essential Skills. It has also set the tone for Manitoba's approach to adult upgrading. But that alone would not suffice to explain the momentum that has gathered around Essential Skills—as a concept, as content and as a 'movement.'

In Manitoba, Essential Skills is showing up in an increasing number of education, training and employment efforts. A provincial framework has been developed to guide both coordinated and autonomous activities of different government departments, agencies and initiatives. The number of people and organizations that recognize the need for Essential Skills development is therefore growing exponentially.

Strategic partnerships are being formed across various stakeholder groups to determine ways of meeting those needs. There are more and more examples of unlikely partners finding common ground from which to support Essential Skills development.

This common ground is in part the result of HRSDC's conceptualization and packaging of Essential Skills. While literacy is often perceived as a 'deficit,' Essential Skills is presented as a specialization related to the world of work, which-for better or worse-plays a central role in the lives of most adults. Specific Essential Skills are gathered by researchers 'on the shop floor' by watching competent people perform their job tasks. The skills are hence quickly recognized as real, relevant and worthy of pride by anyone connected to the work, whether or not they already have a strong conviction about the importance of literacy skills.

Besides the immediate accessibility of Essential Skills as a concept, making it possible for people from very different backgrounds to discuss a shared issue, Essential Skills is less hierarchical and exclusive than academic approaches to adult upgrading. After all, Essential Skills are not just connected to jobs that require post-doctoral degrees; they are connected to all jobs and, indeed, any task. Instead of focusing on credentials then, which not all people have had the opportunity to earn, and which may have dubious currency or applicability, Essential Skills focuses on demonstrable skills, whether they were learned in a course or in a non-institutional setting like the workplace.

This in turn can neutralize some of the judgements commonly attached to a real or perceived lack of these skills, and supports the idea of access to lifelong learning. Someone could have a PhD, for example, but if they can't read blueprints, they'll need to learn that before building a house. Essential Skills upgrading can become a progressive, proactive act instead of a reactive action to 'fill a gap.' Such a paradigm shift might encourage more adults to improve their skills, regardless of their current proficiency levels, creating an environment that generally supports learning and

personal development.

In short, Essential Skills provides adult education with an acceptable and easily accessible 'product' that names an ongoing concern in clear, functional terms and underscores its relevance to the adult world of work and learning. The philosophical shift it embodies supports lifelong learning, and could help balance the perceived difference in worth between credentials and non-credentialed learning. More than anything, perhaps, it gives us a language to bring together different stakeholders to improve and expand learning opportunities for adults. Practitioners involved with the planning and implementation of Essential Skills initiatives then are not just manufacturing an education 'product'; they are creating a learning environment.



And an 'environment' is a complex chemistry of people, tasks, structures, processes and relationships. These inevitably experience change as new projects and programs get implemented, meaning that work with Essential Skills is also a matter of change management.

To illustrate, I can point to the impact of Essential Skills on the Apprenticeship Branch in which I work. Two years ago, Essential Skills was virtually unknown within the Branch. Branch staff had been acutely aware of low academic skills that could negatively affect an apprentice's success in technical training, but without a suitable trade-related assessment mechanism and without an appropriate way to remediate the required skills, technical training often became a matter of 'sink or swim' for apprentices.



Over the past two years, a variety of smaller pilot projects were implemented to begin to address the need for Essential Skills assessments and upgrading opportunities that suited the trades, both in content and in delivery format. Learner-friendly assessment tools were designed for specific trades. Alternative course formats and content were piloted. Interdisciplinary teacher teams were created. Intake processes were mapped and analyzed.

All projects were small, responsive, and customized grassroots efforts that were carried out as teamwork



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with different stakeholders. Some of the projects involved Branch staff, while others connected the Branch to adult learning centres, labour training centres, First Nations communities or college-based upgrading programs across the province.

Each project and partnership brought to both the Branches and external bodies a growing awareness of trades-related Essential Skills. Within the Branch, Essential Skills became a familiar term and a regular topic at meetings. Promotional materials started to include information on Essential Skills. A number of staff positions were dedicated to Essential Skills. A steadily increasing number of Branch staff were asking to administer the assessments and looking for information to build new routes of referral to adult education agencies and training providers. This brought the Apprenticeship Branch into closer contact with the rest of the adult education community.

Partnering organizations involved in projects began to consider their own responses to Essential Skills needs. Trades instructors in pilot programs started to define 'readiness' for technical training in a different way. Labour trainers thought about how to make tutoring support more sustainable at the local union hall. Trades-related documents began to make their way into literacy classes, and adult learning centres added trades-related Essential Skills teaching materials to their resource libraries. A First Nations community in Manitoba's north began to develop an upgrading course to integrate hands-on experience and Essential Skills upgrading for lower-level learners seeking employment on construction projects.

Through small grassroots projects, then, constructive changes have taken place in the Apprenticeship Branch and the wider apprenticeship community. In all cases, Essential Skills caused discussions about different and better ways of providing adult education to apprentices who needed it. These discussions quite naturally led to actions in areas of need. Guided by a strategic vision (and not by an imposed, top-down template) trades-related Essential Skills initiatives have been piloted and then expanded.

This experience of change as an organic process led by grassroots activity is very powerful, and is reinforced by current thinking in organizational change and systems theory. Whereas older models of organizational change are based on a mechanistic model, newer thinking states that an organization is much more like an organism whose inner workings and dynamics are as necessary as its structural components. This would have important implications for practitioners working to see Essential Skills integrated into the world of adult education in a sustainable way.



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In the first view, in which organizations consist of pieces that can come apart, like an automobile, change is a matter of replacing one piece with another. Essential Skills would be seen as a cog that is to be installed. In the second view, change is a co-creative process that maintains the integrity of the existing system while allowing it to stretch, grow and adapt to change in response to both internal and external forces. In this framework, the implementation of Essential Skills would be seen as a cultural shift, which requires the participation of affected stakeholders.

Systems theory would support change as described in this second view, as would the experiences of the

Apprenticeship Branch. Systems theory grew in part out of a reaction against the reductionism taking place in science in the 1940s. Scientists had been prone to breaking everything down into component parts, searching for the smallest elements at the core of our existence. As a counterpoint, the biologist who proposed systems theory argued that even if you can take the bumblebee apart and reattach the pieces, it won't fly again. "Real systems are open to, and interact with, their environments, and...they can acquire qualitatively new properties through emergence, resulting in continual evolution." (Ludwig von Bertalanffy, as paraphrased on Principia Cybernetica Web <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/SYSTHEOR.html>.)

This evolution in adult education is necessary if we want to remain flexible and responsive to emergent needs, including the needs of working adults to keep pace with oft-quoted technological improvements and changes in the work environment.

And if Essential Skills work being done at the grassroots level can help the larger adult education system include more progressive, inclusive or alternative ways of thinking about adult learning needs, then the investment of time and resources in small, autonomous projects is also an investment in a broader and potentially more accessible system of adult education. ■

Essential Skills and Change

by **Aundrea Novakoski** and **Sylvia Provanski**

We are adult learning centre representatives who have been researching prior learning assessment options for trades people. We compiled a list of changes caused when Essential Skills (ES) was introduced. Here is our list.

- Using the ES criteria, individual skills are now compared using a system that puts everyone on the same or similar playing field. The 'literacy' model focus is more deficits based: it looks at what reading, writing and math skills a person is missing. A person is either literate, and has the basic skills, or is illiterate and is assumed to have none of the basic skills.
- ES focus is more positive, holistic: it focuses on what skills a person has, where they fit into the continuum and what skills need to be strengthened or added.
- An ES portfolio highlights an individual's strengths...put two portfolios side by side and each will be different, yet each person proudly presents what they do well.
- Lifelong learning...an essential skill, and the upsurge of adult learning, now makes it okay to go back to school, whereas in the past adults returning to school were embarrassed.
- Systemic changes in educational institutions have been small...mostly because the 'old guard' are reluctant to accept alternative ways of looking at how skills are assessed and measured...especially in the trades.
- Few employers are familiar with the term Essential Skills and how it relates to their workplace.

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Essential Skills as a map

by **Mike Brasseur**, Apprenticeship Training Coordinator

Essential Skills has provided a more focused approach to apprenticeship training in Manitoba. It has become a kind of 'map' for prerequisites in a specific trade or occupation. As a result, a higher level of success has been demonstrated by filling in the 'gaps' required for technical training in a trade. Here's a current example: an initiative at community-based carpentry training at Lake Manitoba First Nation. About twenty carpentry apprentices were assessed for trade-specific ES. An upgrading program was developed to reflect their needs. Because the upgrading was carpentry-related, it helped the students remain 'focused,' and provided for success as they undertook the technical part of their training. This group will be completing their apprenticeship training in 2006, becoming certified carpenters. All the apprentices in this group related their success to the ES support they had received.