

# Benchmarking Best Practices Benchmarking Best Practices

In Adult Learning Centres and Workplace Education

## SUMMARY REPORT

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## Preface

This research was conducted as part of a larger project funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada, to articulate workplace education programs with the Mature Student's Diploma offered by the Manitoba Department of Education through its Adult Learning Centres (ALC's). This report is a condensed version of the research project. For a copy of the full report, which can be downloaded on your computer, please visit the Centre for Education and Work web site at [www.cewca.org](http://www.cewca.org)

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## **Executive Summary**

The author of this report conducted a qualitative research study in 2001 and 2002 which benchmarked the teaching in adult high school programs. This study included participant observations and interviews with both teachers and students. Six teachers from both adult high school and workplace education participated. The study compared current principles in adult education with examples observed in classrooms and reported on by both students and teachers.

### *Background*

There is very little research that describes excellence in *teaching practice* in adult basic education programs. Some research around quality programming in workplace literacy, community-based literacy, and generic adult education does exist. However, what it means for individual teachers to deliver quality in teaching practice is rarely reported. In addition, the adult students themselves are not usually consulted about their definitions and experiences of best practices in teaching.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this research was to benchmark and provide examples of some best practices of teachers currently working in Adult Learning Centres (educational providers of adult high school curricula) and basic education in the workplace sites. Benchmarking best practices has emerged in the workplace as a way of ensuring quality in processes and practices. The methodology of a benchmarking study assesses quality of practice against current principles of a discipline (in this case, the principles of adult education). A benchmarking study can validate some of those principles and highlight the importance of others. At the same time, a benchmarking study provides authentic models against which practitioners may self-assess. It can demonstrate quality to those outside the field of adult secondary education through the provision of examples and can provide information on the needs of new or pre-service teachers for the purposes of designing professional development programs.

## *Findings*

The results of the study indicate that exemplars and models of quality teaching and learning exist in the adult learning system in Manitoba. In general, the adult learning centre teachers and the workplace education teachers observed for this study followed the principles of adult education closely, providing models of good practice of adult learning principles. Observations bore out the statements of students and the teachers' own self-evaluations of their practices.

This study also identified some new and emerging best practice principles. As well, the study also analyzed and compared the observations of workplace educators with a view to providing new insights for institutional adult education provision. Finally, students and experienced teachers were asked to make recommendations for pre-service and in-service professional development for teachers making the transition from traditional high school teaching to becoming adult educators.

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## Summary of Best Practice Principles

The best practice principles are a summary of all the principles including the new and emerging principles used in this study. It should be noted that these principles are not ordered in by preferences or rating. However, most teachers and learners emphasized the “respect for the learner as an adult.”

Good teachers:

- ★ Respect the learner as an adult
- ★ Help promote a learning environment/atmosphere that is safe and comfortable
- ★ Give clear instructions and expectations
- ★ Demonstrate specific personal qualities
- ★ Provide time for students to interact with one another
- ★ Ensure that class structure is flexible
- ★ Negotiate curriculum
- ★ Like teaching
- ★ Share themselves personally with adult learners
- ★ Are reflective
- ★ Self-evaluate and regularly change how they teach
- ★ Amend the curriculum: they respond to learners’ needs
- ★ Admit they can make mistakes
- ★ Are learners themselves

## **Background**

Very little research exists that measures quality in *teaching* in adult basic education. In addition, rarely are the adult students themselves consulted about quality in teaching. This research addresses these issues. Benchmarking best practices has emerged in the workplace to ensure quality. It has recently been applied to training in the workplace and has been used to identify quality practices in education (Flint, et. Al, 1999, Mancuso, 2001; Alstete, 1995). Benchmarking best practices assesses quality of practice against current principles of a discipline, in this case adult education. A benchmarking study provides authentic models for self-assessment, validates principles, and demonstrates quality to those outside the field. It provides information on the needs of new or pre-service teachers.

Since most of the teachers in Adult Learning Centres (ALC's) come from secondary school teaching environments, they may not be aware of adult learning principles and current adult education best practices. This research benchmarks best practices of experienced teachers currently working in Adult Learning Centres and basic education in the workplace sites, so that a professional development program can be developed for the specific needs and contexts of ALCs.

### *Methodology*

This research study was designed to observe current practices in three ALC's and two different workplace education programs with six different teachers, to conduct interviews with both students and teachers, and to provide a qualitative analysis of the results. Additional interviews were held with the training manager of a large manufacturing company and with the coordinator of a provincial workplace education program. The study provides evidence of current quality in teaching practices that can be the model for other validating research studies.

Each teacher was visited in her/his classroom setting on three separate occasions from October 2001 to August 2002. Each session was three hours and included the observation of a range of teaching strategies including lecture, group work, labs, teacher/learner interactions, and lesson design. Students were observed

listening, taking notes, asking questions, interacting with one another, and doing individual work.

## **Description of Best Practice Principles**

All of the teachers in this study exhibited most, if not all, of the principles of good adult education practice. They understood and believed in the underpinning principles used as benchmarks. Evidence from their own teaching practice demonstrates that good teachers follow these principles either consciously or unconsciously. The study provides a sound beginning for other teachers to compare their own practice and to engage all teachers in an improved quality of delivery of adult basic education wherever the setting.

This study compared participant observations and teacher and student interviews with the following commonly accepted as principles of good practice in adult learning (MacKeracher, 1996). Interview questions were developed using the principles detailed below. Observational data was also collected keeping these principles in mind.

### *Respect for the learner as an adult*

Teachers demonstrate respectful interactions with students. Adult learners often experienced shame and blame in school and are anxious that these kind of interactions are not replicated in adult education. Teachers demonstrate active listening and positive responses to questions. They encourage students and regularly show care, concern and personal attention.

### *Help promote a learning environment/atmosphere that is safe and comfortable*

Quality teachers work with students to create a collaborative and cooperative learning atmosphere. When things are safe and comfortable, students feel they can take risks. They feel others in the program are friendly and that if they are absent, they are missed.

### *Give clear instructions and expectations*

Good teachers come to class well prepared. They explain new knowledge in plain language and provide time to learn new information, concepts, and terminology.

They maintain consistent deadlines and make good use of time. They speak clearly and make things interesting. Finally, they provide an opportunity for students to practice new information.

#### *Demonstrate specific personal qualities*

Good teachers have a sense of humour and are patient. They possess a variety of strategies and techniques for explaining new information. Most importantly, they are “warm demanders.” They have expectations and set boundaries so that students have a sense that someone cares about their progress.

#### *Provide time for students to interact with one another*

Good teachers promote group work and devise activities so that students can work together and encourage one another.

#### *Ensure that class structure is flexible*

Quality in teaching demands that assignments and exams are flexibly scheduled. Flexibility also includes an awareness and acknowledgement by the teacher that students have other obligations

#### *Negotiate curriculum*

- Noticing individual needs and individual differences
- Learning skills are taught and given practice

### **New Principles Emerging from the Data**

A number of new principles of good adult education practice have emerged from this study. Both teachers and students alike identified the following new principles as being important. All teachers in this study in the Adult Learning Centres, as well as the workplace educators, demonstrated these principles.

### *Good teachers like teaching*

All the teachers in this study liked teaching. They said it was more fun, more challenging, and provided them with a connection with their own learning and their profession. Students wanted their teachers to like their jobs and to be enthusiastic about their work. If teachers demonstrated this enthusiasm, students seemed more likely to go the extra mile to achieve their goals.

### *Good teachers share themselves personally with adult learners*

All the teachers in this study shared information about their lives, their families, and their histories with students. The purpose of the sharing was not only to demonstrate equality as an adult, but also to show human frailties and differences. Good teachers use stories of themselves, their families, their experiences to provide examples and analogies for learners. They shared their failures as well as their successes.

### *Good teachers are reflective*

The teachers in this study regularly reflected on their practice, their students, their courses. They never felt the lesson was perfect as it was, or that it didn't need re-examining. Teachers felt responsible for the quality and connection their teaching was making to the learning of their students.

### *Good teachers self-evaluate and regularly change how they teach*

Good teachers change what isn't working. For good teachers, it isn't enough that a lesson has been taught, that they've provided information, given assignments, corrected tests. Good teachers are interested in learning outcomes for their students. Good teachers will put in the extra time and energy to improve the quality of teaching practice. They believe in the value of their students and in their own role as a facilitator of that learning.

### *Good teachers amend the curriculum: they respond to learners' needs*

Since good teachers have the needs of their students as a foremost concern, they are willing to be flexible with the curriculum to respond to the needs of their learners. They don't expect to teach the same course the same way year after year. They expect they will need to amend, to re-design, to re-emphasize depending on the students and the particular group. Good teachers adapt curriculum: curriculum does not drive them or their students. They understand the importance of curriculum. But they do not work to the curriculum to the detriment of their students.

Workplace educators developed responses to curriculum even more flexibly than adult learning centre teachers. Nevertheless, both responded with energy and imagination depending on their student group.

Students are seen as an integral part of the course planning and evaluation process. As a consequence, students feel more attached to the program and believe it is responsive to their needs.

### *Good teachers admit they can make mistakes*

Good teachers do not expect to be experts in everything and are not afraid to make mistakes. Good teachers notice and "read" the class. They can tell when students do not comprehend the material. In those cases, they check it out with students. If confusion exists, they review the material in a different way.

These teachers view mistakes as a way to analyze learning patterns and to assess the effectiveness of learning. They do not view mistakes as "bad" or evidence of the incompetence of the learner. Rather, mistakes are part of the learning process.

### *Good teachers are learners themselves*

Since good teachers do not expect themselves to be experts in everything, they are also eager learners. All of the teachers who participated in this study were adult learners themselves. They completed their university degrees as adults and understand personally what it is to be an adult learner. Good teachers are always learning, not only about their subject matter or the content of what they are teaching, but

they are open to learning with and from their students. Teachers demonstrate their eagerness to learn by validating new knowledge, sharing what others have taught them, and valuing the experience of learning from each other.

## **Learning From Each Other**

One focus of this study was to explore what lessons teachers of the Mature Student's diploma can learn from workplace practitioners. In the workplace, all training has a performance outcome. Educators within the educational system often reject performance outcomes for more general learning outcomes. And they leave success or failure to the learner. For business, there can be no failure. People have to learn how to do things to a certain level of competence. Thus, the goals of learning in the workplace may be different than those of Adult Learning Centres. Even so, there are some lessons that can be learned from workplace educators.

Workplace educators work particularly well with identifying individual needs, learning styles, and learning difficulties. They possess, not just content background, but facility in learning strategies appropriate to the individual's needs. Although not the only factor in reducing program dropouts, it can certainly increase learner attachment and develop competence that is transferable to other situations.

### *Evaluation and Assessment*

Workplace educators can provide new language for assessment and evaluation. Workers are used to being assessed on the job. When they make mistakes, they know it costs the company. How well people translate learning to practical applications is always being assessed in the workplace.

Classroom teachers do not always know how to translate experiences in practical assessment in the workplace to developing critiquing and feedback skills. Workplace educators constantly work to help learners assess learning and evaluate its effect in the workplace. In this way, they don't wait to assess learning until a formal "test" or piece of work needs to be marked. They monitor it constantly.

### *Curriculum negotiation*

In Adult Learning Centres, much of the work in classroom settings is teacher-directed. A generally accepted tenet in adult education is that the adult learner wants and needs to be involved in the direction of learning. Some of the approaches and materials used by workplace educators could be incorporated into how adult educators in Adult Learning Centres develop a more individualized and self-directed approach to learning.

Good educators contextualize the learning. Sometimes the resources in Adult Learning Centres are adolescent based. Textbooks, reading resources, problem-solving examples are often targeted at the teenager. Workplace educators identify learning goals and develop curricula with multiple considerations. They identify workplace goals and needs (including performance outcomes). They identify personal learning needs for the students. Finally, they integrate these into a learning plan that accesses both formal learning materials and materials and resources from the workplace.

### *Flexible teaching and learning*

All adult educators are concerned about attendance and drop-outs. In some cases, it may be that the learning schedule is too tight for the demands of the learner. Workplace educators accept that the pace and tempo of learning are driven by the learner's agenda. So, it is not the curriculum that drives the learning, but rather the learner's capacity for absorbing new material and the learner's ability to apply new learning in the workplace context. This kind of approach to learning provides the learner with a practical relationship to the learning...something all adult learners want and expect from a learning situation. It is more difficult to link traditional academic outcomes with the context that adults can respond to.

### *Learner direction and control*

Teachers in Adult Learning Centres often control more of the learning than they

need to. Although they treat their students as adults and are not “controlling” in the conventional sense, they often do not allow students to design and lead the learning. Adult learners can direct more of their learning. Workplace educators expect students to drive the learning. In a sense, the workplace educator follows the lead of the student. This does not mean that the teacher is not prepared. Rather the teacher needs to be more prepared, so that a range of directions could be followed. In addition, the teacher must take a risk and let the learners control both the process and the outcomes.

Adult learners want to see the relevance of the learning to their work and home lives. If they can't see this relationship, students will fall behind, drop out, or ignore what they feel is irrelevant. Teachers in Adult Learning Centres may also be aware of these needs but either because of time or feeling the curriculum is driving them, they do not make those connections as frequently as they might. Nor do they ask students to make those links on their own.

### *Priority/essential skills*

Teachers in Adult Learning Centres know that students come with Essential Skill needs. They try to accommodate these but are often frustrated because more supports are needed. Workplace educators accept that students will need supports in the acquisition of new learning habits, skills, and approaches. First, they help students identify those skill needs. Without this attention to specific learning strategies or skill development, workplace educators realize that unconscious barriers towards all learning will be raised. Students will feel they cannot make progress in anything until these skills are attended to.

Workplace educators provide regular review and assessment of the newly learned skills or strategies. They demonstrate the strategy in the context of the curriculum and don't assume learners will be able to make transfers to other contexts. So, they ask and track with the student how to make that transfer to their own working and/or learning situation.

The integration of these priority skills into the curriculum, no matter what the subject, must be part of the teaching expectations of all adult learning and, most particularly, of adults returning to learning.

### *Materials and resources*

Workplace educators use materials and resources directly from the workplace. These are authentic documents and sources for curriculum development. In particular, workplace educators know the value of document literacy. Too few resources in academic curricula help learners read and navigate documents. Documents include graphs, charts, schedulers, visuals, flow charts, etc. The skills needed for reading documents are different from those needed to read text.

Workplace educators regularly integrate both prose (text) and document reading into their instructional design. They use authentic documents that help the learners make the transfers that facilitate learning. When adult learners can link their learning to materials they use in their everyday lives, they will integrate learning more efficiently and effectively.

## **Teacher Training Recommendations**

Both teachers and students made recommendations about the possible needs and development for adult educators in Adult Learning Centres.

### *Facilitating Adult Education*

All teachers should have human development and adult development training. Potential new hires should be given an orientation, which addresses the needs of the adult learner and probabilities and assumptions. In particular, new teachers should be aware of the principles of adult learning and be prepared to apply them in their new teaching situations.

Students consistently commented on the importance of being treated as an adult. Many teachers have little or no background in adult learning and development. Teachers transferring from a school setting may not be aware of their own tendencies to “control” learners, to treat adult learners disrespectfully, or to allow challenges to their own expertise. This means that some teachers will need to consider appraising their

own teaching philosophy and make changes to this philosophy if it clashes with expectations of working with adult learners.

### *Dealing with attendance needs*

Teachers spoke of attendance as a major concern. So, imaginative approaches for identifying and rectifying retention problems are needed. Support, guidance and development at both a program level and at a professional development level is needed. Teachers need support in strategies to reduce dropouts and ways to keep learners connected in a meaningful way. Administrators and teachers need to know how expectations for graduation and retention of learners can and will affect their funding. Also, they need ways to help learners maintain their connection and attachment to the program.

### *Older adolescents*

Many adult learning centre programs also have older adolescents as part of their classroom composition. A number of both learners and teachers expressed concern about differences in attitudes, needs, and even classroom management when too many adolescents are part of the mix. Although ultimately the Adult Learning Centre must take responsibility for registration and composition of classes, certainly both administrator and teachers should have input into policy decisions around classroom composition.

### *Guidelines for recruitment of teachers*

Several teachers spoke of the underlying adult education principles that they use when teaching. Students commented that not all the teachers they encountered used these principles. It may be that the principles suggested in this study could become the basis for evaluation and recruitment of adult learning centre teaching staff. As well, these principles could be used to develop evaluation tools for assessment of current teachers in Adult Learning Centres.

### *Anti-racism training*

A number of Aboriginal students expressed concern that programs should have teaching and administrative staff sensitive to discrimination and racism issues. Most Aboriginal students have personal stories of racism in schooling either for themselves or their families. Professional development for Adult Learning Centre staff should confront these issues and needs and provide on-going training to facilitate anti-racism initiatives.

### *Integrate adult learning principles into program expectations*

Adult learner friendly institutions make clear not only learning outcomes but what learners can expect from teachers. The results of this study demonstrate that good teaching practices exist in both Adult Learning Centres and workplace education classes. Quality in teaching should become the norm for adults returning to school. Teachers need models and exemplars. We now have some examples. We have the principles, now we need to build a cadre of adult learning expertise with a focus on the Mature Student's Diploma.