

“We need to feel **Valued** and **Respected** for the work that we do”:

Workplace educators speak out

by **Margan Dawson**

The Nova Scotia Department of Education, Skills and Learning Branch values education and skills development for workers. Their goals are to

- meet the skill needs of Nova Scotia’s labour market;
 - provide better labour market access and support to Nova Scotians; and
 - strengthen Nova Scotia’s system of lifelong learning opportunities.
- (www.ednet.ns.ca/pdfdocs/skills_learning/skills_action_plan06-07.pdf)

To help workers develop and upgrade their Essential Skills, the Department of Education initiated the Workplace Education Initiative 16 years ago. The program uses a partnership model that involves business, industry, labour, government and workplace educators in a team to support and deliver the Workplace Education program.

The process of developing a program is complex. Each project team takes the lead in a workplace program by creating a learning environment and encouraging workers to participate in learning and education opportunities at the work site. The skills-development coordinator with the Department of Education ensures that the model maintains its integrity.

Workplace educators design and deliver programs customized to the needs of workplaces across Nova Scotia and, in keeping with the model, build relationships and partnerships at all levels.

The Association of Workplace Educators of Nova Scotia (AWENS) supports our members. We partner with the Department of Education to certify



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instructors under the Workplace Education Instructor Certification program. AWENS also creates unity and support for workplace educators by

- providing a forum for promoting and advancing excellence in instructional practices;
- creating professional development opportunities;
- responding to trends in the field; and
- representing the interests of workplace educators.

In addition to the certification program and other professional development workshops, we hold a biennial Workplace Education Institute, which brings together the various partners—business, labour, educators and government—to learn, network, share resources and advance workplace education.

The role of the instructor

Workplace educators perform a wide range of roles, and they use adult education principles in their programs. They are flexible in the delivery of programs, ensuring they meet the needs of the worker and workplace. They customize programs to suit the needs of a range of sectors, from health care to manufacturing. They work with a wide range of partners.

Workplace educators come from diverse backgrounds, including business, training, trades and nursing, as well as having experience as community college instructors and administrators.

In preparing to deliver a program, an instructor must first read the organizational needs assessment, meet with the skills-development coordinator and project team, tour the work site, conduct individual meetings to determine learner goals, then design and deliver the programs. They must also participate in project team meetings and ongoing evaluation.

In this article, we will outline some of the challenges, and also the benefits, faced by workplace educators in Nova Scotia. We gathered information through interviews with educators who have various levels of experience in delivering programs within the Workplace Education Initiative. Participants were asked to respond to two questions: "What are the challenges of the work of workplace education?" and "Why do you continue to do the work despite the challenges?"



The challenges instructors face

Practitioners have different reasons for becoming workplace educators. Some chose the work because they want to eventually work full-time in the field of adult education. Others rely on workplace education as an important supplement to other income. Others are retired and the flexibility of workplace education is appealing. No matter their reason for doing the work, all face challenges.

Instructors are provided with the *Making It Work* instructor manual and instructor administration package, which are designed to support and assist instructors in developing and teaching workplace education programs. But they depend on the



workplace to provide the materials to customize the program. In unionized work sites, the union may supply books and materials; however, for the most part, instructors enter the workplace program with only what they have. Instructors often use their personal time and resources to develop customized materials, or purchase materials with their own money. Instructors and participants alike would benefit from a central resource library where they could research pertinent information.

Support on other levels would be beneficial as well, such as access to referrals for testing or guidance for participants who are having difficulties. In one circumstance, a worker who was unable to read wanted help and needed to be assessed, but there was no money for testing. Access to testing that isn't cost- or time-prohibitive would allow instructors to work more effectively with each individual.

Similarly, another instructor working in multi-level classrooms stated: "The biggest challenge is accommodating the needs of *all* the workers. Sometimes that is a tall order. I hate to see anyone left behind."

Instructors commented that finding suitable classroom space can be a challenge. When the space is inadequate for breakout groups or individual learning, or is poorly ventilated, the effectiveness of a program for both the instructor and participants is affected.

Instructors also expressed concern over the amount of unpaid time they donate:

I've had to ask myself how much personal time I am willing to give in order to keep doing the job well. I have to maintain a competence level to handle whatever type of program might be needed. Right now there is a demand for computer programs, but next it may be leadership, or then basic math. It's a challenge to have the required resources at our fingertips to deliver such a variety of programming, and to be able to maintain a level of competency in those subject areas.

They also felt that the time they spend on travel should be factored into contracts, as well as the time spent preparing for class: "It can take up a lot of time getting from one site to another."

Some instructors would like to have more feedback. One mentioned that "having no feedback on what I'm doing is hard. I'd also like to see some reward and recognition for what I do."

Why I do this work

The work of community-based literacy and workplace education is one of the most fulfilling and exciting experiences of my working career. I have found that at the core of each educator in this field is a deep sense of caring and dedication to the learner. As a community of educators, we build a strong sense of partnership by providing a foundation of support for one another and therefore our learners. We listen to each other, we talk about our experiences, we share resources and we are innovative because resources and funding can be scarce. We believe in and are drawn together by our vision of a well-educated community.

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Instructors felt their three greatest challenges were the irregular contracts, the lack of financial compensation for time actually spent working and the lack of any type of benefits package.

What keeps instructors in the field?

AWENS members agree that there are many rewards for this work. The material reward is that they are paid for doing a job well. However, there are many non-material rewards. Some examples of why educators keep doing the work:

- I continue because I feel that workplaces are the perfect place to provide much-needed programs to those who were missed in school, those who want to learn and don't have the time or money, or to those who just come in for the experience. Both the workers and the companies benefit. I feel that the Nova Scotia Workplace Education Initiative is one that works and does make a difference.
- Because I love the philosophy—the partnership model—that people who need this have access to programs. I get to see measurable improvement in every group in Essential Skills. Some workplaces have no education budget, so they are able to access learning for staff that they wouldn't otherwise be able to do. This feels morally right.
- Because I love the work. It's hugely satisfying—more than any other I've done. I enjoy meeting people and learning about different workspaces.

I get satisfaction from helping learners raise their level of education, advance in the workplace, improve their family life... I feel I can make a positive difference through workplace education. That feels good. I can also use my experience in facilitating a range of programs to get other work. And I prefer...to work part-time.

- It is the connection one makes with participants during the program that makes it all worthwhile. When I step outside long after class and see several participants hunched together in a truck working on a math problem, it gives me the drive to continue.

Conclusion

Workplace practitioners' perceptions and expectations may lead to frustration. At this point, their main concerns are that workplace education is part-time work; that the time and work that goes into a program needs to be appreciated; and that there are no benefits. As one instructor pointed out:

I need to feel valued and respected for what I do. I need fair pay. Since we are contract workers, I understand 'no benefits,' but we could receive other kinds of compensation.

AWENS is responsible for representing the interests of workplace educators. We are committed to continue doing so by building partnerships and focusing our attention on the future and on ways to address these challenges. ■

Margan Dawson has been a practitioner in the Nova Scotia Workplace Education program since 1999. Margan's background is business administration. She has owned and operated two small businesses and taught business programs in the New Brunswick community college system before entering the field of community-based literacy where she instructed academic upgrading programs for a number of years. Upon returning home to Nova Scotia eight years ago, she began teaching in the field of workplace education. Her current role is that of Executive Director for the Association of Workplace Educators of Nova Scotia (AWENS).

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