

Monitoring and Assessment in Community-Based Adult Literacy Programs in British Columbia

Phase I:
Definition
and Selection
of Benchmarks

A Report to the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education



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Written by:

Leona Gadsby,
Director of Community and Adult Literacy, Literacy Now

Sandy Middleton,
Research Manager, Literacy BC

Cynthia Whitaker,
Executive Director, Literacy BC

Literacy BC is the provincial literacy organization that promotes and supports literacy and learning in British Columbia.

Contact:

601 – 510 West Hastings Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 1L8
Phone: 604-684-0624
Toll-free in BC: 1-888-READ-234
Fax: 604-684-8520
Email: info@literacy.bc.ca
www.literacy.bc.ca

LiteracyNow, a program of 2010 Legacies Now, is a community-based planning process, designed to address local literacy needs and priorities.

Contact:

Literacy Now
2010 Legacies Now
400 - 1095 West Pender Street
Vancouver, BC V6E 2M6
Phone: 778-327-5150
Toll Free: 1-866-427-2010
Fax: 778-327-5199
www.2010LegaciesNow.com

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Introduction

This project recommends a province-wide system for monitoring and assessing the progress of adults in community-based literacy programs. This is Phase I of a three-phased initiative for the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education. Phase I proposes a set of benchmarks and an approach to monitoring and assessment that is consistent with the values and philosophy of community-based adult literacy programming. Phase II will involve field-testing the proposed benchmarks and reporting system. Phase III, envisioned for late 2008, will involve full implementation.

Background

In 2003 the Government of British Columbia committed to making British Columbia “the most literate jurisdiction in North America” by 2010.

To achieve this goal, the province launched its Read Now strategy in January 2007. The strategy includes new investments in the Community Adult Literacy Program (CALP) which aims “to increase the literacy and numeracy levels of adult learners” through the provision of community-based adult literacy education.

Community-based literacy programs have a long history in British Columbia, but they lag behind other sectors in performance assessment, monitoring and reporting. To begin with, there are no common learning benchmarks or measurement standards for community-based literacy programs in British Columbia. This project was commissioned to help fill that gap.

In mandating this work, the province identified three priorities for a monitoring and assessment system for CALP programs:

- to document the number of learners who participate,
- to document the number of instructional or contact hours the learners receive, and
- to measure and document levels of skill in reading, writing and math gained through participation.

Current program reporting requirements provide information on the first two priorities. This project was designed to develop a system of benchmarks for measuring outcomes to meet the third objective.

We were encouraged to develop a monitoring and assessment system that could also help to identify barriers to learning for CALP learners. These barriers could then be addressed through the public policies and programs of the many ministries that are involved in the delivery of educational programs and services for adult learners. Information about the barriers learners experience can also inform the development of a coordinated inter-ministerial approach that addresses the full range of learners’ needs.

We were also asked to identify tools that could be used to assess progress on the benchmarks. From the outset, there was agreement that mandatory testing, one of the standard tools used for measuring the progress of learners, is not appropriate in the community literacy sector and that other tools would be needed.

As this project began, work was also getting underway in two other education sectors to develop benchmarks for their own adult literacy programs. It was agreed that the three delivery sectors – schools, community colleges, and community-based programs – should develop monitoring and assessment systems to suit their specific needs and mandates. Regular meetings have kept the three sectors informed of each other’s thinking. A later piece of work will look at how the sectors can be woven together.

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Our approach

The project was directed by co-chairs Cynthia Whitaker, Executive Director of Literacy BC, and Leona Gadsby, Director of Community and Adult Literacy, Literacy Now.

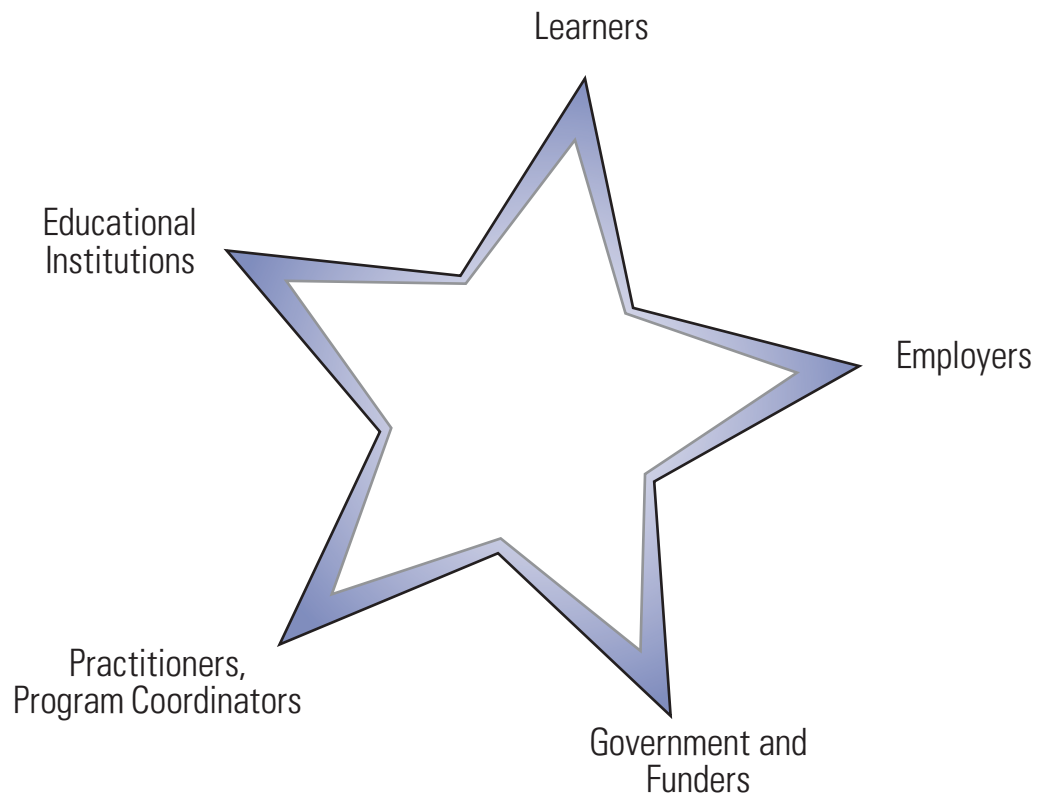
The co-chairs commissioned a small advisory committee of adult literacy professionals that includes several long-time practitioners in the community-based sector, a Regional Literacy Coordinator, a researcher, and a member of the provincial Fundamental Articulation Working Committee. (See Appendix A for a full list of the advisory committee members.) Dr. Pat Campbell of the University of Alberta, an expert in literacy assessment, was a member of the advisory committee and was also contracted to do work on the committee’s behalf. The advisory committee met twice, for two days in March 2007 and one and a half days in May 2007.

The committee made two key observations about the mandate. First, learner progress is a product of program support, services and practices and only one measure of program success. A thorough system would monitor the range of activities in community literacy programs, for example, the development of partnerships, the delivery of training and support for tutors, public awareness activities, and teaching practices, among others. Secondly, becoming an active and engaged participant in the learning process is a critically important step for many learners and one that needs to be included within the benchmarks.

We began our search for appropriate benchmarks by studying the work and experiences of several other jurisdictions. In Canada, we focused particularly on work done in the provinces of Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario. As well, we benefited from the work of several academics and experts in the field of education evaluation and performance measurement. In particular, we benefited from the research and counsel of Dr. Pat Campbell.

With access to this wealth of experience and knowledge, we made an early decision that we could learn – and borrow – from the best that exists and that it was not necessary to invent an entirely new system for British Columbia. As the benchmarks are refined through field-testing and implementation in communities, we have no doubt that a “made in BC” matrix will emerge.

Next, we identified assumptions and interests underlying the monitoring and assessment system we were tasked to develop. We envisioned a system that would engage and, indeed, inspire all stakeholders. We assumed that monitoring and assessment would be effective only if each of the stakeholders finds value in it. We used the visual of a star to identify learners, practitioners and program coordinators, government and funders, and other educational systems and employers as the primary stakeholders.



- Learners have an interest in monitoring and assessing their learning and should be full participants in the assessment process.
- Practitioners and programs have an interest in a system that facilitates teaching and learning and informs instruction and program development.
- Government has an interest in seeing the literacy of citizens increase and requires reliable ways to measure changes in literacy rates.

- Funders want to know how best to allocate resources and whether programs are achieving the desired results.
- Other educational systems and employers have an interest in reliable and credible information about learners' competencies and ability to learn.

From the outset, the committee was clear. No approach to assessing and reporting on the progress of adult learners could be successful if it did not evolve from the values and principles of community-based adult learning. We found ample support for this position in the literature and in the experiences and approaches of other governments. The critical importance of developing the appropriate benchmarks and tools is emphasized by our colleagues in Manitoba:

Good literacy provision depends on the alignment of instruction and evaluation with philosophy. To select appropriate evaluational and instructional tools and procedures, we need to have a clear understanding of the basic beliefs that define learner-centred, community-based, adult literacy programming. (Manitoba Advanced Education and Training, Creative Student Assessment 4)

Shared values also underlie the identification of competencies in the literacy measurement work of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

Insofar as competencies are needed to help accomplish collective goals, the selection of key competencies needs to some extent to be informed by an understanding of shared values. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation, The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies 7)

In the following section, we describe the source of a values-based approach to monitoring and assessment in community-based literacy programs.

From the outset, the committee was clear. No approach to assessing and reporting on the progress of adult learners could be successful if it did not evolve from the values and principles of community-based adult learning.

A Values-Based Approach

At the root of a values-based approach is the philosophy that underpins community-based adult literacy programming. Underlying that philosophy are basic questions:

1. What does literacy mean? How do you know that someone is literate?
2. Who is the literacy learner? What are their characteristics as learners?
3. What distinguishes “community-based” programs from other kinds of programs?

The answers to these questions guide the design of a meaningful and sustainable approach to monitoring and assessing learner progress.

What does literacy mean? How do you know that a person is literate?

The concept of literacy is constantly evolving and definitions of literacy have changed over time from a school-based view of literacy as a discrete set of skills for reading and writing, to a functional view of literacy as the ability to accomplish tasks and participate in the world around us.

How literacy is defined influences the type of monitoring and assessment system that is created. If literacy is defined as a discrete set of non-contextualized skills, then it can be measured by performance on standardized tests for reading, writing and math. If we take a more complex and dynamic view of literacy – as enabling participation in social, economic, family, and community life – then how adults are able to use what they learn is the important measure.

The definition of literacy used by the Ministry of Advanced Education, and the definition we adopted that underpins our choice of domains and benchmarks, is the one proposed by the International Adult Literacy Survey: *“The ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”* (Jones 14).

This definition emphasizes the importance of the uses and applications of knowledge in the context of real life purposes and roles in the family, the workplace, the community, and society at large. A monitoring and assessment system based on this definition needs to indicate progress about a wide range of skills or competencies within a variety of life situations.

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What are the characteristics of the adult literacy learner?

What are learners' goals? What are their daily activities? What are their learning needs in order to participate in society? These questions led us to consider what learners value and to design a monitoring and assessment system of measurement that is congruent with their reasons for attending literacy programs – a learner-centred approach.

Adults with low literacy are among the most marginalized and vulnerable in the population. They face multiple barriers to participation in literacy education as a result of poverty, social exclusion or isolation, health and disability issues, experiences of trauma and abuse, and a host of other factors (ABC CANADA, Quigley, Long and Middleton). Indeed, there is a significant and longstanding gap between the numbers of people research tells us need literacy upgrading and those who actually participate in literacy programs. Only an estimated five to ten percent of persons with low skills ever enroll (ABC CANADA). Among those who do participate, persistence is an ongoing issue. Literacy learners typically move in and out of programs in accordance with their life circumstances and adult literacy programs typically experience low retention rates.

Adults are more likely to attend and remain in a program that is relevant to them and meets their learning requirements. Those who attend community-based literacy programs often have very specific life-related goals, for example, getting a driver's license, reading a recipe, learning to use a computer (Smythe). They may identify a need to finish high school and/or get some type of post-secondary certification, but they are usually a considerable distance from this goal. More immediate and pressing learning requirements take priority and tend to direct the learning activities of the individual. Emotional safety, fears about failure and being judged, and getting along with others are issues that often need to be addressed as part of the learning program.

These considerations about the individual learner led us to a system of benchmarks that are valued by and relevant to learners, as well as to practitioners and society at large, and that can be applied to multiple areas of life. The benchmarks do not assume a standardized curriculum but guide the way to learning based on learners' individual needs and interests.

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What distinguishes community-based programs from other kinds of literacy programs?

A monitoring and assessment system needs to fit with program delivery methodologies and philosophy, environments, and capacity. If the fit is not there, the system will be of little value to the

practitioner and is not likely to be used effectively.

Adults who participate in literacy education often choose a community-based program as a deliberate alternative to more formal educational settings because of past negative school experiences. Research by Quigley demonstrates that “de-schooling” the image of adult literacy reaches adults who are eager to learn but resist schooling. Whether they are operated by schools, colleges or non-profit groups, community-based literacy programs present such a de-schooled image. Designed to offer safe and welcoming learning environments, they take place in a variety of settings including storefronts, community centres, libraries, urban parks, and other places where people gather in their community. There is no standard or common curriculum. Teaching and learning are centered on the learner’s own goals and context and learning materials are drawn from a wide variety of sources, including the reality of people’s lives and the issues and concerns that matter to them. A hallmark of community literacy is an integrated, asset-based approach to learning that builds on people’s knowledge, interests and social context rather than focusing on the skills they lack (Smythe). Sensitive to local realities and learner diversity, community literacy recognizes that there is no one type of learner and no single motive for participation.

The sector’s heavy reliance on volunteers and its lack of formal infrastructure also have implications for the type of monitoring and assessment system that should be used in community-based programs. For example, in most programs the face of the volunteer tutor is the face the learner most often sees. In many programs learners and tutors work together one-on-one with minimal supervision. Some programs also offer small group instruction. The number of instructional or contact hours is typically once a week for two hours.

Tutors receive training from the program but they have little or no access to other forms of training or professional development. Paid program coordinators and instructors also have minimal access to professional development. They typically work part-time and, unless they are attached to a college or school, are generally low-paid, receive poor benefits, and have little or no job security.

If the capacity of community-based literacy programs to deliver services is an issue, then their capacity to be accountable is also an issue (Merrifield). Community-based literacy programs normally have small budgets but multiple funding sources and accountability requirements. There is little capacity for centralized record keeping and limited overall capacity to collect, interpret and use data to monitor learner progress and improve practice. Added to this is the tendency for participants to leave programs without any notice. Unless assessment has been ongoing, it can be difficult to determine the participant’s progress at exit.

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Campbell found that time was one of the most critical capacity issues in assessment in adult basic education. Even if practitioners and tutors have opportunities to engage in professional development,

it is only effective if they have the time to practice, dialogue, and reflect upon their new knowledge. And assessment itself takes time. One practitioner describes the problem: *“I have one hour a week for eight weeks with a group of ESL learners – how much Japanese would you learn in that amount of time? I only get eight hours with this group; don’t make me lose one to assessment.”*

A monitoring and assessment system must align with the capacity and delivery mechanisms of the community-based literacy system. It must be simple and transparent to administer, to understand, and to use. It must take into account the environment and relevant inputs such as staffing, use of volunteers, and funding resources.

Even a simple and transparent system takes time, however. Further investments must be made in community-based literacy programs so that program coordinators/ practitioners/facilitators can spend more time with learners or tutor/learner pairs to conduct more thorough intake assessments, interpret learner progress, and gather and collate information. Initial and ongoing investments in the training and professional development of the people who implement and use the system need to be made. These investments in the capacity of community literacy programs speak to the issue of mutual or reciprocal accountability between programs and funders.

A values-based monitoring and assessment system for community-based literacy programs

The values-based approach yields clarity on the goal, context, and methods of community-based adult literacy programming:

- The goal of community-based literacy is to increase learners’ ability to understand and apply skills and knowledge in the context of participation in family, work, and community life;
- Community-based learners are often multi-barriered and need to be supported to reach their goals in their own way and at their own speed in a safe environment;
- Community-based learning implies an asset-based approach that builds on learners’ existing strengths and knowledge and encourages and emphasizes success and achievement, not failure or deficits;
- Limited capacity in the community-based sector requires simplicity, ease of use, realistic expectations, and investments in training/programming.

These characteristics demand an approach that is collaborative, encourages participation and interaction, engages learners in the assessment process, and collects information over time. The information collected needs to be useful and its value needs to be understood and appreciated so that it can be used to improve teaching and learning.

With the principles of a values-based approach in mind, the advisory committee turned its attention to the specifics of a monitoring and assessment system. As mentioned previously, we did not invent an entirely new system for BC but decided to borrow from some of the exemplary work that already exists. We also identified the need to facilitate future alignment with colleges and schools, Essential Skills and the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). In light of these considerations, we decided to use competencies as the basis of our system of benchmarks. Competencies include skills, as well as knowledge, attitudes and values. (Organization for Economic Co-operation, Definition and Selection of Key Competencies, Executive Summary 4).

In the next section, we describe a set of domains and benchmarks developed for this project – one that outlines key competencies based on the cognitive process model.

Domains and Benchmarks

Using a competency-based approach and the cognitive process model – and building on work by Dr. Pat Campbell¹ – we developed a set of domains and benchmarks, found in Appendices B and C. As the project continues and benefits from the insights and experience of more people, these domains and benchmarks will be modified based on their feedback. We also anticipate making future revisions in order to align our domains and benchmarks within the anticipated provincial framework (see “Need for integration/articulation to other sectors,” p. 17).

Key competencies involve a mobilization of cognitive and practical skills, creative abilities and other psychosocial resources such as attitudes, motivation and values. These competencies have value for a variety of stakeholder groups and are particularly important in terms of their capacity to support learning throughout life.

At the centre of the framework of key competencies is the ability of individuals to think for themselves as an expression of moral and intellectual maturity and to take responsibility for their learning and for their actions. (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Definition and Selection of Key Competencies, Executive Summary 8)

The cognitive process model was introduced at the turn of the previous century (Huey) and has been widely accepted among academics and practitioners for the past 30 years. Cognitive processes underlie the learning of essential competencies. These processes are required to read, write, listen, speak and use math. They are the operations – attending, reasoning and monitoring, for example – within the brain system that underlie each essential competency. The cognitive process model emphasizes the development of the person. Cognitive processes are usually inter-related.

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Domains are categories of learning that can be measured. We decided on six domains to identify the learning and progress of adults attending community literacy programs:

1. Reading
2. Writing
3. Oral Communication

1- The domains and benchmarks we have developed are based on work by Dr. Pat Campbell who completed an Essential Competencies Framework for the Alberta Government nine years ago. Dr. Campbell’s work was grounded in theory and based on the results of a study with 344 ABE students across Canada. The research showed that students used cognitive processes across all levels. With her permission, we have modified Dr. Campbell’s work for our purposes.

4. Math
5. Participation (may be changed to Intra and/or Interpersonal Skills)
6. Information Technology

Benchmarks are leveled indicators used to measure progress toward competency. They should provide a sense of progression. Benchmarks need to be quantifiable, even if they are qualitative. They have been or are being developed for each of the domains.

The matrices we have developed indicate the domain, the cognitive process and, underneath, the benchmarked key competencies we would expect to see as the cognitive process develops. We decided to use four levels because the focus of community literacy in grade level terms is from grades one to nine. We also felt it important to break down progress at the beginning levels. The first three levels encompass learning up to the end of approximately IALSS level one and the whole set of matrices takes learners to approximately the end of IALSS level two, as we currently understand the IALSS relationship to grade levels.

The domains that are most developed at the time of this report are reading, writing, math, and oral communication. More work remains to be done to complete the participation and information technology domains.

Reading:

The reading matrix is based on the interactive model of reading in which meaning results from the interaction between the reader and the text. The interactive model has provided the major theoretical orientation to reading since the 1970s.

Writing:

In cognitive process theory, writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing (Flower and Hayes 365-387). This is a departure from the stage model of writing (pre-writing, writing, revising, editing) which emphasizes the growth of the written product, rather than the writer.

Math:

The math matrix is based on the mathematical reform initiative undertaken by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and adopted by the developers of the Western Canada Protocol/Alberta Program of studies in 1996². It outlines key themes in mathematics (statistics and probability, shape and space, patterns and relations, numbers) and the competencies associated with each of these. Many educators view mathematics as part of the suite of communication domains, contending that mathematics means communicating with numbers and using mathematics to communicate with society. The Adult Numeracy Network (formerly Adult Numeracy Practitioners Network, <http://www.>

2- For further information view online: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, <http://www.nctm.org/>; Western Canadian Protocol/Alberta Program of Studies, http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED400180&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_accno&accno=ED400180

literacynet.org/ann/ann.html) has researched the content themes and processes outlined by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the Massachusetts ABE Math Standards, to develop a framework for developing standards for adult numeracy. The Network observed that:

Math is language. Mathematical communication is an overarching process which includes understanding, expressing, and conveying ideas mathematically in order to reflect on and clarify one's thinking, to make convincing arguments, and to reach decisions. Effective workers must be able to interpret and communicate information and communicate ideas to justify positions. In the workplace, much of this information and many of these ideas are mathematical. (Marcus)

Oral communication:

The oral communication domain has changed considerably from Dr. Campbell's original – essential competencies specifically for ESL learners have been removed because the Canadian Language Benchmark system will likely be used for those learners. We anticipate that this domain can contain some of the key competencies employed in the OECD frameworks.

Participation:

The categories identified are group participation, goal setting, strategies for successful learning, and problem solving. These categories encompass the Essential Skills of engagement, thinking skills, learning skills, problem solving and decision making. Benchmarks for these categories have begun to be identified, but require more work. We are also still considering the name of this domain – intra or interpersonal skills might be more appropriate in the end.

The participation domain encompasses two of the three broad categories of key competencies identified by the DeSeCo Project – these two categories are 'interact in heterogeneous groups' and 'act autonomously (Organization for Economic Co-operation, Definition and Selection of Key Competencies, Executive Summary 4). They include competencies such as the ability to relate well with others, the ability to cooperate and the ability to form and conduct life plans and personal projects. This domain is critical according to both the IALSS and the DeSeCo researchers. It will take more time to thoughtfully identify further key benchmarks that can easily be used in community-based programs. We anticipate that the field-testing phase and further research will inform that work.

Information technology:

The information technology domain does not have any benchmarks yet, and requires more research into current frameworks and thinking about key competencies. There are currently two or three benchmarks in reading and writing that could be moved to the IT domain.

The Matrices:

Care has been taken not to make the matrices too complex nor the list of benchmarks too long. Practitioners will provide instruction in many skills leading up to each benchmark. Learning plans or curriculum can be designed to suit the goals of individual learners as they progress through each level.

The matrices have been laid out in two formats:

- By domain and cognitive process (Appendix B): Every level for each cognitive process within a particular domain is listed on one page.
- By level (Appendix C): The six domains at each level are listed side by side on one page.

We anticipate that the benchmarks can quite easily be translated into checklists, which will make it easier for practitioners to identify learner progress. This work will be done in Phase II of the project.

For each domain, a set of examples is provided that illustrate how the essential competencies within each level can be performed in occupational, personal, community and academic settings. In the reading domain, the difficulty of text anticipated at each level is described.

Tools

Benchmarks can be standardized but the tools for assessing progress along the benchmarks can and should be varied (Campbell). Different tools are appropriate in different settings and situations and we anticipate that a variety of tools will be used in the monitoring and assessment process.

The two people closest to the tool are the practitioner and the learner. In the context of a values-based approach, it is critically important that the tool be understood and valued by these two people in particular. It is also important that, whatever tools are used, the learner is included as an active participant in the process and the process is used to inform teaching and learning. The most effective tools are participatory and empowering, encouraging interaction. They support the relationship between the learner and practitioner and the roles of each within that relationship.

There are some common characteristics of tools that meet professional standards for reliable data. Key among these are:

- Reliability and credibility
- Unobtrusiveness
- Collects quantitative and qualitative information
- Grounded in authentic tasks
- Collects information about a broad range of performances and behaviours and over a length of time
- Capable of evaluating progress on specific learning goals

A good tool can also evaluate the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies and help practitioners set new instructional objectives. From the learner's perspective, a good tool can assist in setting new learning goals.

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Interviews, checklists, observations, records of predictions made, journals, and portfolio-based approaches are among the tools that could potentially be used and meet the criteria for effective evaluation. (See, among others, the Manitoba Creative Student Assessment Guide for similar observations.) Two of the tools developed by the *From the Ground Up*³ project that assess learner progress also have excellent potential to be used as tools in a variety of community literacy programs. (See Appendix D for a description of these tools.)

The value of simplicity and time efficiency led us to consider developing a checklist based on the benchmarks. The checklist would provide a relatively simple tool that could be used in collaboration

3- From the Ground Up is a project of RiPAL BC, in partnership with Literacy BC. It is funded by the Adult Learning, Literacy, and Essential Skills Program of the National Office of Literacy and Learning, and the BC Ministry of Advanced Education. Through the project, practitioners from five community literacy programs across the province have produced five unique sets of tools to measure a range of outcomes in community-based literacy work. These tools are available online as of fall 2007 at <http://ripal.literacy.bc.ca/fromthegroundup/>

with the learner.

Practitioners and volunteers will require assistance in identifying appropriate tools and training in how to use them. It will be important to research and identify helpful tools and to include training and support in their use as part of the overall assessment training for practitioners.

Resources for Implementation

A cohesive system of gathering, analyzing, and reporting information is required for a monitoring and assessment system to be effective. Initial and ongoing investments will need to be made in professional development and training, research, and integration to other systems.

Professional development

The importance of professional development within a monitoring and assessment system cannot be overemphasized. Campbell notes that the degree to which assessment can inform instruction depends on the qualifications and experience of the assessor and his/her ability to interpret assessments. She identifies a need not only for one-time professional development events such as workshops and in-services but also for access to ongoing training and support through methods such as mentoring and online discussions. The time to discuss, reflect on, and practice new processes and tools is also a critical element.

Our proposed approach is to develop a network of expertise and support that will meet the need for initial in-depth training and for ongoing support. Using a “train the trainer” philosophy, we recommend an approach that builds on the existing capacity at Literacy BC for providing training and professional development to community literacy practitioners, and the current infrastructure of regional literacy coordination for providing leadership in delivery at the local level. Regional Literacy Coordinators will assume overall responsibility for monitoring and assessment of community-based literacy programs within their regions. They will require training in understanding the goals, processes and tools of the system. They will need to be involved in developing and implementing appropriate training strategies for program coordinators and volunteer tutors in their regions. They will need to develop the knowledge and skills to act as resources for the system and as vital points of contact on a feedback loop of information between the provincial and local levels.

At the local level, program coordinators, instructors and volunteer tutors will actually implement the system. Program coordinators will need to train and support their instructors and volunteers to analyze learner goals in terms of the benchmarks; develop learning plans or curriculum that reach towards the benchmarks; recognize progress on the benchmarks; and keep records of the learner’s progress (along with other records such as attendance, hours, etc). Program coordinators will also need to organize the reporting system among their instructors and tutors and prepare the rollup of information for the funder.

The importance of professional development within a monitoring and assessment system cannot be overemphasized.

Literacy BC will have overall responsibility for designing and delivering ongoing professional development through training programs designed specifically for Regional Literacy Coordinators, CALP program coordinators, and community literacy practitioners. To initiate the new system, Literacy BC

will organize and deliver a four day professional development workshop with the Regional Literacy Coordinators in the fall of 2007. In collaboration with the Regional Literacy Coordinators, Literacy BC will also deliver two and a half days of training for community literacy program coordinators. Volunteer tutors will be trained locally by the program coordinators and the Regional Literacy Coordinators.

Research and continuous improvement

Research entails an openness to new ideas and enables continuous improvement. It is required for both short and long-term purposes. Both research in practice and more traditional academic approaches will be beneficial.

Research can support the long-term evolution of the system. A few years hence we will want to know the answers to questions such as: How has monitoring and assessment assisted learners in achieving their goals and increasing their literacy skills? How has it improved the quality of community-based literacy programming? Identifying data that best supports the improvement of practice; assessing the usefulness of data collection and reporting and investigating new processes and tools; tracking important measures that are too difficult to track by all programs on a regular basis; assessing community needs and investigating changes in participation rates at the local level are only a few of the research possibilities that would increase our understanding and knowledge in important ways.

Need for integration/articulation to other sectors

The province has established a committee to undertake the work of creating an integrated system for reporting on the progress of adult literacy learners in schools, colleges, and community programs. At a minimum, such a system would enable information about learner progress to be collected across the province, creating a comprehensive picture of adult literacy and how it is being addressed. In its more robust form, such a system could also support a portfolio approach to learning that would enable learners to have their achievements in one sector recognized in another, ultimately leading to certification.

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An integrated system does not require a single approach to monitoring and reporting. However, integration does require a conceptual framework that defines the philosophy by which each system finds its way to monitoring and assessment. The framework also defines the ways in which the individual delivery systems, working together, constitute a global system for addressing adult literacy.

individual delivery systems, working together, constitute a global system for addressing adult literacy. Such a framework contains common language, outcomes and key competencies but can encompass differences in domains, benchmarks and tools. It will require some time and careful thought to develop a framework, but there are already some good examples upon which to build, including the frameworks underlying the IALSS and Essential Skills, the DeSeCo project and, in the United States, Equipped for the Future.

At present, integration focuses on three sectors. We believe it is critical to bring workplace-based programs to the table. The task-based focus of Essential Skills, developed for workplace-based literacy, has particular relevance to community-based programs where many learners have very task-oriented learning goals (e.g., how to get a driver's license, how to care for a sick relative at home).

Proposed Implementation Process

Although the primary focus in this phase of our work was on identifying appropriate benchmarks for measuring the progress of learners, we were never far from thinking about how such a system could be implemented in our current highly decentralized, volunteer-dependent, community-based system. To that end, we have developed two implementation scenarios that are described and assessed below. Our sense is that the first scenario holds the most promise and should be investigated further through field-testing.

Scenario one: Individual learner reports maintained by programs

The benchmarks are translated into a simple checklist to be used by the instructor or tutor. The learner and instructor or tutor informally discuss the learner's goals. The instructor or tutor, working with the program coordinator as necessary, analyzes the learner's goals in relation to the benchmarks and identifies the benchmarks that will need to be mastered in order for the learner to achieve his/her goals. The instructor or tutor develops and delivers a curriculum to meet those benchmarks. The instructor or tutor assesses the learner's progress toward reaching the benchmarks using the simple checklist. The instructor or tutor keeps a record of this assessment for two purposes: discussion with the learner, and inclusion in program information that is submitted to the Regional Literacy Coordinator and forwarded to the funders.

Scenario One is relatively simple to administer. It requires the instructor or tutor, and the program coordinator to have the skills necessary to translate a learner's goals into the benchmark system and to identify and deliver appropriate curriculum to achieve the benchmarks. This scenario meets the needs of the learner, practitioner, and funder. However, because there are no credentials or centralized records, there is no portability and this scenario does not meet the needs of other educational institutions or employers, who would have to administer their own assessment on intake. Scenario One supports the current role of colleges and school districts as the credentialing bodies for adult upgrading and allows the community programs to continue to meet the flexible, purpose-driven and often short-term goals of adult learners.

Scenario two: Individual learner reports centrally maintained

Scenario Two is the same as Scenario One with one critical difference – the system offers portable credentials. The instructor or tutor maintains formal records on the progress of each learner and deposits these with a central records manager (possibly via the Regional Literacy Coordinator and possibly to be held as part of the college system records on other ABE students).

Scenario Two meets the needs of the learner, practitioner, and funder and it also meets the needs of other educational institutions and employers. However, it is not simple to administer and requires

coordination with colleges that doesn't currently exist. Privacy protocols would have to be developed and implemented. Instructors, tutors and coordinators would need to be more highly trained and qualified in assessing learner progress because their assessments would be transferable to other institutions and to employers. Finally, many adult learners are not interested in acquiring credentials and Scenario Two therefore may not be the most efficient.

Recommendations

1. A values-based approach

- a. The approach to benchmarking and assessment must be based on the well recognized and researched values and principles of effective community-based, adult learning.
- b. Literacy should be defined in practical terms. We are attracted to the definition adopted in the International Adult Literacy Survey as “the ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”
- c. Learner-centred assessments should provide useful information for all key stakeholders in the provision of community-based literacy education – learners, practitioners, government and funders, other educational institutions, and the labour market.

2. The benchmark system

- a. The benchmarks should be based on the cognitive process model which focuses on the development of the individual learner in mastering the cognitive processes that underpin literacy.
- b. Benchmarks should be developed in six domains: reading, writing, oral communication, math, participation, and information technology. These six domains will not only track the literacy progress of individual learners, but will also facilitate integration with assessment systems in other sectors (e.g., the K-12 system, the college system, and research instruments like the IALSS).
- c. The benchmarks should be translated into a simple checklist that can be used by practitioners and tutors to monitor and record the progress of their learners. Assessment can collect quantitative information in a relatively unobtrusive and constructive way (the “light touch”).

3. Tools

- a. There should be no standardized testing or mandatory assessment tools. Practitioners should use the measurement tools that they, and learners, believe are most appropriate to their setting.
- b. Assessment should be ongoing and should include input measures as well as outcome measures.
- c. Assessment should be a collaborative process with learners and should provide learners with constructive and supportive feedback to continue their learning program.

4. Resources for implementation

- a. Professional development should be provided to everyone involved in the assessment of adult learners including volunteer tutors, program coordinators, and Regional Literacy Coordinators. Literacy BC should develop the training programs that are required and deliver them through a “train the trainer” approach beginning with the Regional Literacy Coordinators.
- b. Literacy BC should coordinate ongoing research to enable continuous improvement and the exchange of best practices in monitoring and assessing the progress of adult learners in community-based programs.
- c. Service standards should be developed to ensure that there is capacity across the province to maintain high standards in monitoring and assessment and record keeping. An assessment of existing infrastructure should be undertaken and a report should be prepared for the Ministry of Advanced Education on the capacity of existing infrastructure to meet the service standards requirements. AVED should fund the infrastructure adequately on an ongoing basis.

5. Implementation process

- a. Information on learner achievement should be fed back individually and confidentially to learners by their instructors.
- b. Information should also be provided to practitioners to enable them to assess their instructional practices. In addition, information should be reported back in summary form to the government and funders so that they can assess the overall progress being made and the effectiveness of their investments.
- c. At this time, the community-based system should not aspire to provide a formal education credential recognized by other educational institutions or employers; this would require a more elaborate and intrusive administrative structure and does not meet the needs of many community-based adult learners.

6. Integration

- a. It is neither necessary nor desirable to have a single set of benchmarks to assess learner progress in the various sectors providing literacy programs (community, K-12, college, and workplace). These sectors provide different kinds of learning for different kinds of learners. Their differences are their strengths.

- b. That said, each sector should be able to track its contribution to improving overall literacy levels in the province.
- c. A “behind the scenes” common framework that enables a comprehensive overview of improvements in provincial literacy levels that does not interfere with the delivery of high quality literacy services in each sector should be developed and maintained. For consideration:
 - i. Why is an integrated system desirable?
 - ii. What are the common factors across delivery systems?
 - iii. What do we mean by outcomes and by key competencies?
 - iv. What might an integrated system look like?
 - v. What frameworks currently exist?

Next Steps

Based on the preceding recommendations, we propose that Phase II of the project will require the following next steps:

- **Definition of roles:**

There is a need to define key roles in Phase II. For example, what is the role of the Ministry of Advanced Education in communicating about the project with the BC literacy field? What are the roles of Literacy BC and Literacy Now?

- **Validation of key concepts:**

In addition to the valuable input from our advisory committee, we have benefited from input from participants at the annual conference of the Adult Basic Education Association of BC and the Regional Literacy Coordinators, both in May 2007. In Phase II of this work, we will be undertaking further consultations on key concepts with practitioners in the field.

- **From domains and benchmarks to a checklist:**

The domains and benchmarks need to be translated into a simple checklist that practitioners and learners can use to assess progress. The checklist will suggest both qualitative and quantitative indicators to monitor progress.

- **Field-testing:**

There is an immediate need for field-testing the various components of the system. The coordinators, instructors and tutors who will be implementing and using the system should have the opportunity to try it out and to provide feedback about what works and what doesn't work. In order to ensure the field-testing provides useful data, it will be important to engage the testers in interactive discussion and reflection. The richest data come from the exchange of ideas. We propose that the field-testing process be supported by a facilitated online conference among all the field-testers, and ready individual access to the Regional Literacy Coordinators through phone calls and emails.

- **Development of training packages:**

Literacy BC will develop the content of the training for Regional Literacy Coordinators and CALP program holders for delivery beginning in late 2007.

- **Assessing the capacity and developing an implementation plan:**

We believe that the Ministry should initiate a thorough assessment of the capacity of the current infrastructure and, as part of a comprehensive implementation plan, develop a business plan for filling any gaps that are identified.