

## **SHOP TALK # 12: Adult Education's Response to Rider 82 Moves Forward**

In response to a legislative mandate from the 79<sup>th</sup> State Legislative Session, Adult Education in Texas is engaged in developing demand-driven workplace literacy and basic skills curricula for adult learners. Curriculum development was preceded by a study that identified Texas industry clusters providing entry level as well as career advancement opportunities for adult learners. These industries are among those sectors identified by the Texas Workforce Commission as experiencing market growth in Texas.

Texas LEARNS initiated its response to Rider 82 by targeting the largest and hardest-to-serve segment of adult education's diverse learner population – those with very limited English language proficiency. During the fall of 2005, Texas LEARNS began negotiations with three educational institutions that had experienced success in responding to workforce-related needs in their local communities: El Paso Community College, Seguin ISD Adult Basic Education, and Trinity Valley Community College.

Each institution is utilizing a team approach to curriculum development by including instructors, curriculum developers, and individuals with experience in healthcare, manufacturing, and sales and service. Skills standards for each industry sector have been reviewed, and development teams have set out to determine how to address the standards in curricula targeting learners at low through high beginning ESL levels (levels 2 and 3 on the National Reporting System).

A soft launch of the curricular modules developed thus far took place in the summer of 2006, providing valuable feedback from adult learners, instructors, and partnering employers. A second soft launch is scheduled for the healthcare and manufacturing modules. Current plans are to pilot the curricular modules at five sites across the state early in 2007. Feedback to date includes the following:

- Designing curricula that balances the development of both English language skills and workforce-related skills is a formidable challenge; language learners require optimal opportunities to practice and improve their language skills while developing their work readiness.
- Real life scenarios woven into the curricula and, when possible, use of environmental print and equipment from employers, ensure a connection to the workplace and optimize opportunities for learners to apply what they learn.
- In addition to language skills development (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) curricular responses must include work-related math, an introduction to employment-related technology, and work readiness/ life skills such as safety, time management, the importance of quality assurance, and communication with co-workers and supervisors.
- Internships offered by employers in one soft launch provided not only valuable feedback from employers but critical support for and reinforcement of the learning taking place, including opportunities for potential employment.
- Internships also enabled learners to apply problem solving and critical thinking skills, and to identify additional topics and vocabulary for inclusion in curricular components such as student orientation and career exploration.
- While the initial intention was to target learners with minimal English language proficiency, development teams have confirmed that the topics and learning activities included in the curricula transcend proficiency levels. This is good news, and is being taken into consideration as additions

and revisions to the curricula are being made, since many programs provide instruction in multi-level instructional settings.

- While curricular efforts will provide a framework and guidance in instructional delivery, team members are also identifying commercial and non-commercial instructional materials local programs may use to supplement and extend instruction.

**During the course of writing modules, curriculum development team members have identified some of their own professional challenges:**

“Meeting with business and industry representatives upfront and throughout the curriculum development process is critical; their input / feedback is invaluable.”

“What were we thinking? Incorporating into contextualized English language and basic skills instruction the following components: career exploration; employment readiness/critical thinking/life skills; introductions to basic computer literacy and industry-related technology, terminology, equipment, and applications – not to mention integration with occupational skills training when partnerships make this feasible. Wow!”

“We bit off enough to choke the proverbial horse. Curriculum development is an evolving and complex process. Realistic timelines, respect for the development process, on-going communication and integrated team planning, editorial guidance, and work flow design are critical.”

“Having instructors involved in both development and instruction during the soft launch quickly sent us back to the drawing board. There is no substitute for learning first hand what does and doesn’t work. The soft launch brought clarity and perspective, and is helping us pinpoint areas in which we have been too ambitious or haven’t taken instruction far enough.”

“Maximum opportunities for learners to practice and for instructors to re-teach and reinforce are essential in language skills development. If a learner improves his or her work readiness skills but hasn’t improved his or her English communication skills, are we done?”

**What will make these curricular efforts unique and successful?** There are several principles critical to the success of workforce-related English language instruction:

1. Linkages between work-related English language instruction, post secondary technical training, and job sourcing are essential to meeting business partners’ needs and adult learners’ employment goals. This means closing the gap between adult education and technical training that leads to career opportunities, licensure, and certification in healthcare, manufacturing, and sales and service sectors. Such “bridge programs” are not currently funded.
2. Contextualized English language and basic skills instruction must be offered on a continuum, in an industry-related context, so that learners can continue to improve their proficiencies while engaged in occupational training or preparation for entry level employment. Employer-sponsored internships and local workforce development partners play critical roles in this continuum.
3. Professional development opportunities and technical assistance must be provided to program administrators and instructional staff implementing workforce-related initiatives.

Questions regarding Adult Education’s response to Rider 82 may be sent to Joanie Rethlake, State Director of Texas LEARNS.