

# Contextualized Curriculum for Workplace Education An Introductory Guide

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## Introduction

**Workplace education programs** usually offer basic skills classes to entry-level workers at their work sites, union hall or another central location. Classes can include English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and Adult Basic Education (ABE), which is reading, writing and computation below high school diploma level. Programs may also offer basic computer instruction or GED classes (high school equivalency). Teachers develop curricula that address workers' job-related English, writing, reading, communication or math needs, as well as their personal goals, for example participating more fully in community life or in their children's education.

Workers, unions, employers and teachers have many reasons for supporting workplace education. **Workers** may want to improve work-related skills, get a high school diploma, learn skills they feel they missed out on in school, take more control over their work and personal lives, or just gain confidence. **Unions** may want to give workers skills that can help them move into higher-level, higher-paying jobs, help workers deal with changing job requirements, protect workers' job security, teach workers about the union, or improve workers' abilities to advocate for themselves. **Employers** may want to increase productivity and efficiency, improve communication with customers or clients, reduce worker turnover, or improve worker morale. **Teachers** may want to help enrich workers' intellectual and personal lives, help workers deal with problems on the job, or prepare workers for higher-level classes or job training.

Workplace education happens in a **complex environment** with its own power dynamics, labor-management relations (if the worksite is unionized) and competing agendas. Workplace education providers need to learn about this environment and how to work within it to build an effective program. Educators should learn:

- Who are the workers and what is the work?
- What do workers, union and employer want from the program?
- What are the conflicts and common ground for what people want?
- Who has the power? How does this affect workers and the program?
- What do the union and employer need to know about adult education?
- What might put workers or the program at risk?
- What is the educator's role and its limitations?
- How can the educator advocate for workers and for a principled program?

## Advantages of workplace education

Workplace education classes are often **accessible** to those who can't attend community-based classes because of work schedules. Students often have **similar needs** or a common focus (communicating better with supervisors, learning math for a new production procedure). Teachers have the chance to create and **tailor curriculum** to one group of students. Teachers have access to **workplace and union materials** and themes to build concrete skills. Teachers and students have opportunities to **build skills** that may help workers advance in the workplace. Classes can help to build workers' knowledge and understanding of workplace structures and policies, the union contract, benefits and responsibilities, so that workers can better **advocate for themselves, perform more effectively in their current jobs, or move into higher-skilled positions.**

## Challenges of workplace education

Workplace education programs have **various key stakeholders**, including the employer, union (if the worksite is unionized), education provider, and workers themselves. These groups may all have **different goals** for the workplace education program. There may also be differing goals within each broad group, for example, top managers and front-line supervisors, union leaders and rank-and-file members, or native and non-native English-speaking workers. The education provider may have to facilitate finding common ground among stakeholders' goals. **Power dynamics** at the work site (labor-management or managers-supervisors) may affect how the education program gets implemented.

The workplace context also poses more potential **risks**. For example, doing lessons on workers' rights, the union contract, or workplace health and safety problems may put workers and the program at risk if management doesn't support such curriculum content. Assessment and evaluation also carry more risks in workplace education. For example, employers might want to tie student performance in class to promotions or lay offs, and not understand how doing so would undermine student confidentiality and trust in the program.

Stakeholders may have **unrealistic expectations** for what a workplace education program can accomplish. The employer or union may have no experience with important adult education principles (appropriate methodology, length of class cycles, student confidentiality) and it may be up to the provider to educate stakeholders about these things. Education providers may not be familiar with union or company procedures and cultures, and may need to educate themselves too.

Workplace programs may offer two or three classes, usually formed around students' work schedules, so classes may be more **multi-level** than in community-based

programs. Students' **workloads** may affect attendance (if the program is offered on paid release time), or supervisors may be reluctant to agree to **paid release time**. Teachers may find it challenging to turn complicated, dry work-related material (policy memos, union contract) into effective, participatory lessons.

### **Meeting the challenges**

Workplace education coordinators and teachers who are **flexible** will be able to deal with the ongoing logistical issues that programs may face. For example, teachers may arrive at the work site on a class day to find that their classroom space is being used for an important meeting. Class schedules may be interrupted so that students can work overtime to meet a production deadline. Education providers must be able to adapt to such logistical issues and still maintain a quality program. Coordinators and teachers must also **develop strong relationships** with the program's stakeholders, particularly students' supervisors and union representatives (if the work site is unionized). Good relationships will allow education providers to get the work site information and materials they need to develop effective contextualized curricula.

### **Workplace education principles**

Every workplace education program has a different context and goals, but all programs should be framed around these basic principles:

- Build on workers' strengths and skills (not their perceived deficiencies).
- Involve all stakeholders (including students/workers) in planning, implementing and evaluating the program.
- Accommodate and respect cultural, linguistic and racial diversity.
- Don't expect a quick fix. Addressing basic skills requires a long-term commitment.
- Don't expect the education program to fix workplace problems caused by factors beyond the scope of basic skills (like rocky labor-management relations, short-staffing or poor communication structures).
- Tailor the program to the worksite (and/or union) and its workers.
- Address the whole worker (as worker, family member and community member).
- Keep participation in the program voluntary.
- Assure confidentiality of assessment and evaluation results and class work.



## Curriculum development

Developing curriculum for workplace or union-based classes gives teachers **unique opportunities**. Students often share the same work or union-related skill needs, and teachers can create and tailor lessons to meet these needs. Teachers and students can make use of actual workplace and union materials, such as Material Safety Data Sheets, memos explaining new work procedures, and the union contract, to build concrete skills that help students in their current jobs or help them advance.

Curriculum development in workplace programs also poses **unique challenges**. Discussing delicate or “loaded” topics in class may pose risks to students or the program that wouldn’t exist in a community-based class. Also, while students may learn new skills in class, if they aren’t supported in using those new skills on the job, the program may have little impact on students’ abilities to work more effectively or seek advancement. In addition, while teachers can help students learn language and numeracy skills related to job tasks, new work procedures or workplace safety, it is not the teacher’s job to train workers – it is the employer’s. Teachers must be careful not to slip into a training role.

To create original work or union-related curricula, teachers often need extensive preparation time, and workplace programs must be able to support this with adequate paid prep time. Finally, when teachers create curriculum from work-related content, they must find out what students already know and build on their experiences. Students may have been in their jobs for years and do them well – they may need new skills not so much to do their current jobs more effectively, but to eventually advance to higher-skilled positions, or to learn new skills for reasons unrelated to work.

## Contextualized curriculum

To contextualize curriculum, teachers use **authentic materials, activities, interests, issues and needs from learners’ lives** to develop classroom instruction. Contextualized curriculum helps students learn language skills by teaching the skills using the authentic contexts in which students must use those skills in the real world.

Contextualizing curriculum is effective both for community-based and workplace classes. For example, students in a workplace education ESOL class can practice clarifying questions using actual situations they encounter with their supervisors. Students in a community-based ESOL class can learn how to respond to discriminatory behavior using scenarios based on their real experiences.

A good curriculum helps students learn, practice and evaluate specific skills and competencies, and contextualized lessons are effective tools for accomplishing this. An effective curriculum also elicits students’ experiences and knowledge, and affirms and

builds on them. Finally, it should create room for students to pose problems and issues and develop strategies together for addressing them.

For example, students in a beginner-level ESOL workplace class may need to learn how to request time off from their supervisors. A contextualized lesson can include activities that introduce vocabulary and language structures, help students to practice simple oral or written requests, and practice understanding the supervisor's response. But the lesson should also include activities that elicit students' current strategies for requesting time off (going to the supervisor with a bilingual co-worker, etc.), their knowledge of time-off policies, and their experiences with the system. In addition, the lesson should include activities that allow students to examine problems or issues with requesting time off. What if a supervisor always favors certain workers' requests and discounts others? What if a worker follows the correct procedure for requesting time off but has her/his request denied? Lessons should help students to create strategies for addressing such issues.

**The process for contextualizing curriculum** includes these steps:

1. Identify learners' needs, issues and themes.
2. Gather information and materials.
3. Create and teach lessons; practice skills in the classroom.
  - "Chunk" and sequence material.
  - Adapt authentic materials if needed.
4. Put new skills into action in the real world.
5. Reflect on and evaluate the contextualized lessons.
6. Revise and add new information or skills.

### **Identifying students' needs**

The first and most important step in the process of contextualizing curriculum is to identify students' needs, issues and themes. In workplace education, teachers and other program stakeholders can identify student needs in several ways:

#### **With program stakeholders:**

- a. Workplace needs analysis
- b. Program goals
- c. Stakeholder and Planning & Evaluation Team input

- d. Observation of workers and the work site
- e. Workplace and union documents

**With students in class:**

- a. Catalyst activities
- b. Asking students
- c. Student requests
- d. Work or union issues that surface spontaneously in class
- e. Published worker education materials

### Identifying students' needs with stakeholders

**a. Workplace needs analysis:** A workplace needs analysis is a systematic way of identifying a workplace's basic skills needs. A needs analysis should also identify other workplace needs and issues, not just those that might be addressed by an education program. A needs analysis gathers input from all stakeholders through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires or surveys, work site observations, and/or the collection of workplace documents.

A workplace needs analysis can build a strong case and provide direction and grounding for a basic skills education program. It will also uncover issues which might affect an education program, for example short staffing, lack of support from supervisors, or problems with communication channels. It can help determine how ready the employer and/or union are to start and support a program. By involving many people, a needs analysis can also build support for an education program among all levels of the workforce and union (if the worksite is unionized).

A needs analysis should involve talking to a cross section of the entire workforce, including **workers** (both those who might take classes and those who won't), **union** shop stewards and representatives (if the worksite is unionized), front-line **supervisors** and upper-level **managers**. Participants should represent the workforce diversity of gender, age, ethnicity and jobs. Participation should be **voluntary**. All information collected should be kept **confidential** and **anonymous**.

The needs analysis should not focus only on specific skills. Asking questions about communication, current training opportunities, and potential barriers will give a broader picture of the workplace and help uncover larger issues that the employer and union might have to address, issues that an education program alone will not solve.

Typically, the education provider conducts the needs analysis with input and direction from other stakeholders. The provider often produces a **needs analysis report**, which

usually includes key findings and recommendations. The report may provide teachers with themes and content to begin contextualizing curriculum.

The following sample needs analysis report shows how needs analysis findings could be used to begin developing contextualized curriculum:

### **Sample workplace needs analysis findings from a residential facility serving developmentally disabled adults**

#### **Worker demographics**

**Native country:** Of the 44 workers interviewed, 79% are non-native speakers of English. Of these, 77% are from Africa (almost half from Ghana, another half from Liberia, and a few from Nigeria, Kenya, Ivory Coast and Egypt). 14% are from the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico and 9% are from India. 54% have been in the U.S. for over 10 years; another 35% have been in the U.S. for 5 – 9 years. The high percentage of non-native speakers interviewed reflects the overall percentage of non-native workers at the facility, which according to managers interviewed is around 80% (the large majority being from Africa).

**Time on the job:** 45% of workers interviewed have worked at the facility for 2 years or less, and thus are relatively new to the job. Another 43% have worked at the facility for at least 6 years. This includes 18% that have worked at the facility for 10 years or more. Fairly equal numbers of day and evening shift workers, as well as a sampling of night shift workers, were interviewed.

**Educational background:** Overall, non-native workers interviewed have completed fairly high levels of education in their native countries, and native workers have also. 87% of workers interviewed have completed their high school diploma, and 52% of workers have completed at least some college courses. While most non-native workers interviewed completed their education in their native countries, several have completed college-level coursework in the United States.

#### **Basic skill needs of Mental Retardation Workers**

**Reading and writing:** Both Mental Retardation Workers (MRWs), their supervisors and the union rep named a wide variety of work responsibilities that involve fairly high levels of reading and writing, including: keeping daily health care checklists, records of food/drink intake and a brief synopsis for each client; reading progress notes and lengthy behavior plans for each client; writing incident and accident reports; recording behavior episodes; reading and maintaining folders for each client (containing all reports and notes); and understanding written information given during in-service trainings.

All managers, supervisors and the union rep interviewed noted that, while MRWs are committed to providing excellent care for the facility's clients, many MRWs lack the reading and writing skills needed to perform reading / writing-related tasks well. They noted that MRWs often need help completing reports and this interferes with their work. In addition, managers and supervisors said that MRWs sometimes have trouble getting their point across in writing, and have difficulty describing clients' conditions and

behavior accurately in writing. Some MRWs appear afraid of writing and shy away from doing incident or accident reports. In some cases, they use incorrect grammar, spelling, sentence structure or vocabulary when writing reports. Several managers noted that some MRWs' vocabulary is limited. One manager noted that some MRWs need to learn basic medical vocabulary so they can use it in reports, instead of "street language," to describe problems with clients.

Some MRWs themselves expressed a lack of confidence in their writing skills on the job. Others said that they are interested in gaining better writing skills to be able to access higher-level positions (MRW 2, 3 or 4) or to be able to go back to school and place into community college programs for L.P.N. or R.N. degrees.

**Oral communication:** All MRWs, supervisors, managers and the union rep agreed that good oral communication is essential for MRWs' work. Job responsibilities involving oral communication include: Describing client behavior and incidents to other staff members; communicating to the next shift what went on during your shift; communicating effectively with clients and their families; understanding directions; and communicating what you don't understand to your supervisor or other staff members.

Managers and supervisors said that many non-native English-speaking MRWs have trouble communicating well at times. Some managers pointed out that some MRWs are too polite or timid to say when they don't understand information given to them (orally or in writing). According to managers, some MRW's have trouble understanding directions. Some MRWs communicate well orally, but others are sometimes difficult to understand.

Some MRWs noted that they need to learn to communicate better in spoken English so that they can describe clients and incidents better. Some MRWs expressed frustration at not being able to communicate as articulately and concisely as is needed for their work. Other MRWs, however, said that they are comfortable communicating orally on the job and did not see this as an issue. Still, many MRWs are interested in improving their spoken (and written) vocabulary and expression, in order to have higher skills in general.

From these needs analysis findings, teachers could glean an initial list of possible topics for a contextualized basic skills curriculum for the Mental Retardation Workers at this facility. When classes start, teachers could then elicit student input and ideas to discover which topics students need and want most, and what skills within those topics they need to improve. For example, under the topic of communication with residents' families, teachers could ask students describe past situations where their communication with residents' families was effective, past situations where communication was frustrating, and how they might handle the frustrating situations in the future. The teacher, eliciting students' help, could present key vocabulary and phrases for communicating well with families. Students could take turns role playing the MWR and family member roles, and critique each others' performances. Students who already communicate effectively with families could contribute their expertise and experience.

**b. Program goals:** Stakeholders should use the workplace needs analysis to establish initial program goals. Goals should reflect the main needs and concerns of all stakeholders, including managers and supervisors, workers, union representatives (if the worksite is unionized), the human resources or training department, etc., and find common ground among them. Teachers can use these broad goals to guide their curriculum development.

**Sample program goals for the residential facility:**

- MRWs will improve their writing skills (including spelling and grammar) as they relate to completing written reports on the job (incident and accident reports, descriptions of behavior episodes and maintenance of resident folders).
- MRWs will improve the general writing skills needed to place into higher-level positions or college-level programs.
- MRWs will improve the oral communication skills needed to interact effectively with residents and their families, co-workers, supervisors and union representatives.

**c. Stakeholders and Planning & Evaluation Teams:** Workplace education programs often use a **team-based approach** to program oversight by developing a Planning and Evaluation Team (PET). The PET oversees, implements and evaluates the workplace education program, and serves as its operational and governing body. The PET typically meets regularly throughout the life of the program, sometimes more frequently during program start up and less frequently once program details have been hammered out and the program has been running for awhile.

**PET roles** include conducting the needs analysis, developing program goals and policies, promoting the program, facilitating student recruitment and placement, scheduling classes, troubleshooting, shaping program content and curricula, and evaluating progress towards goals.

**PET members** typically include representatives from key program stakeholder groups, including managers, supervisors, workers/students, program coordinator, teachers / trainers, and union representatives (where the workforce is unionized). PET members should have the authority to establish program goals and make sure the program progresses toward those goals.

The PET can be a useful forum for **soliciting stakeholder ideas** for curriculum content. For example, say that teachers in the residential facility's workplace education program are creating contextualized curriculum to address the program's third goal: "MRWs will improve the oral communication skills needed to interact effectively with residents and their families, co-workers, supervisors and union representatives." At a PET meeting teachers could ask program stakeholders (including student representatives) to

identify which aspects of communication need to be addressed. Teachers could also ask stakeholders to consider which communication aspects might result from language skill issues and which might result from miscommunication or cultural differences. This type of discussion could inform the class's work on this topic.

Managers, supervisors, and union reps may sometimes miss meetings, or have only general ideas for curriculum content. In addition to asking at PET meetings, **other strategies** for getting curriculum input from stakeholders (other than students) might include:

- Ask the employer's trainers or human resources department for materials.
- Attend a union meeting and speak with union representatives there.
- Offer to stop by managers', supervisors or union reps' offices for quick check-ins.
- Convene a brief meeting during departments' regular meeting times.
- Come to an already-scheduled department meeting and solicit ideas briefly.
- Ask managers, supervisors and union reps to fill out a brief survey.

**Student participation on the PET is important.** Ideally, at least one student from each of the workplace education program's classes should serve on the PET and represent students' interests, needs and concerns. While PETs often do have student representatives, students may sometimes feel reluctant to voice certain needs and concerns, either because of language barriers or because supervisors and managers are present. In addition to soliciting student input into curriculum development at PET meetings themselves, program coordinators and teachers can brainstorm ideas in class before the PET meeting, record them and give them to student reps to present.

**d. Observation of workers and the work site:** Teachers or the program coordinator may have the chance to tour and observe the work site during the needs analysis or program start up. While observation probably won't yield detailed information on workers' skill needs, it can give teachers a feel for students' general working conditions. Do students work on a noisy production line where supervisors and workers alike must shout to be heard? Do students work alone or in a team? Where is important work or union-related information posted? Some employers, for example the residential facility above, may not allow observation to protect resident or client privacy.

**e. Workplace and union documents:** The program coordinator and teachers can collect workplace and union documents during the needs analysis and program start up. Teachers can also ask students to bring documents to class. It's important to find out

how documents are actually used – spending class time on documents that no one actually uses wastes everyone’s time. Teachers should find out:

- Is the document current?
- Is the document relevant?
- How many students actually need and use the document?
- What do students already know about the information in the document?
- Where can the teacher and students find out what they need to know?

It’s also important for teachers to help students develop strategies for handling complicated workplace documents, including skimming, locating key information, and asking for help. In addition, teachers must often chunk and adapt documents, enlarge them, pull out key vocabulary, and create a variety of activities to make class work on documents accessible and engaging.

### Identifying students’ needs in class

**a. Catalyst activities:** teachers can use many different classroom activities as catalysts or ‘ways in’ to discovering student themes and issues. Teachers use these activities consciously to elicit students’ issues and concerns.

Catalyst activities are guided language activities that **encourage students to contribute their ideas, experiences and problems**. Catalyst activities serve the dual purpose of providing the structured language lessons that students need and triggering discussion which leads to the identification of student issues. They provide a window on students’ daily reality through a safe and familiar framework.

Catalyst activities may **take many forms**. They can be relatively formal activities like stories, grammar exercises or student research. Alternatively, they can be open-ended activities, with minimal teacher-directed guidance for students’ responses. The more structure, format and modeling the teacher provides, the more she/he shapes the way that students respond. Not giving too much guidance may result in surprising and interesting responses that lead in useful and important directions. (This explanation of catalyst activities is excerpted and adapted from Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making Meaning, Making Change*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.)

Examples of catalyst activities include stories (published or student-generated), brainstorming, structured discussion questions, student-to-student interviews, photographs, writing prompts, journals, grammar exercises, maps and graphics.

## Example of a catalyst activity

### Work site and students

This was a low-intermediate ESOL class at a large urban hospital whose non-management workers are represented by two unions. Students were non-native English speakers from China, the Azores and the Dominican Republic. The five women worked as hospital housekeepers and the three men as janitors. Students needed and wanted lots of speaking practice.

The hospital had just undergone a merger which united a city hospital and a university teaching hospital. Before the merger, the two hospitals had different cultures, schedules, union contracts and benefits. The merger created changes and lots of anxiety for workers from both “campuses.”

### Catalyst activity

The teacher used “Ramon Ramirez’s Story” from *Collaborations: English in Our Lives Beginning 2 Student Book* as a catalyst activity. (Weinstein-Shr, G. 1996. Heinle and Heinle, Boston, publisher.)

#### **Ramon Ramirez’s Story**

*I start work at 5:00 in the morning. I’m a morning person. I have to be! I cook steak, eggs, bacon, and pancakes for breakfast. I have to watch the food carefully. Pancakes have to cook just two minutes on each side. Bacon has to cook five minutes on each side.*

*In the summer, I get dizzy from the heat in the kitchen. There aren’t enough cooks here. That’s the biggest problem. Sometimes I work ten hours, with no break. Sometimes I get mad. I want to quit. It’s the same thing every day. The same thing over and over. It’s not an easy job.*

The teacher was hoping that this story would lead the class to talk more about students’ work issues and changes since the merger. The class read the story together and discussed the meaning of a few key words (“carefully,” “dizzy,”). The teacher checked students’ comprehension with oral questions (When does Ramon start work? What is his job? What are the difficult parts of his job? How does he feel about his job?) Students then practiced reading the story silently and out loud in pairs.

The teacher put up the words “stress” and “pressure” on the board and the class discussed their meanings. Then students discussed the following questions in pairs:

- What are the easy parts of your job?
- What are the difficult parts of your job?
- When do you feel stress or pressure at work? Explain.
- Is there more stress or pressure since July 1 [merger date]? Explain.
- What can you do about the stress and pressure at your job?

When students had finished discussing their answers orally, they wrote their answers onto a sheet. Then the teacher posted each question on flip chart paper. Students shared their answers and she recorded them on the flip chart.

## Discussion and writing on stress and pressure

The teacher typed up the flip chart questions and answers. Students read through them during the next class, with the teacher reading each section out loud as students listened, and then students each reading their own answers out loud.

Next, the teacher wrote up examples of typical ways to talk about stress and pressure and students read and practiced them out loud.

I feel stress when / because...  
My job is stressful when / because...  
I feel pressure when / because...  
My supervisor pressures me to...  
I feel relaxed when / because...

Together, the class came up with sample endings for each sentence and students copied them. Then the teacher gave everyone a worksheet with four sections: stress and pressure at work; stress and pressure outside of work; no stress, no pressure at work; no stress, no pressure outside of work. Students wrote original sentences in each section. They shared their answers and the teacher wrote them up onto flip chart paper. This generated more conversation about stress and pressure on the job.

## Grammar practice: have to

The teacher typed up students stress/pressure sentences and during the next class students read them out loud. She followed this with an explanation of using “have to” and wrote the structure and examples on the board. Students copied:

When		do you have to	talk to your supervisor?
Why			work overtime?
Where			work on weekends?
How much			talk to the union?

Then students practiced asking and answering questions with “have to” using simple cards. Each card had one of the phrases below, which were based on some of the issues students had raised in the previous class discussion. Pairs worked through the card pack, one asking and the other answering, and then switching roles. Then students worked individually to write sample questions and answers into their notebooks.

Speak with your supervisor  
Punch in  
Punch out  
Go to housekeeping meetings  
Use vacation time  
Work overtime  
Do extra work  
Fill out the application in English  
Speak English at work  
Write English at work  
Pay federal tax

Pay FICA  
Pay for health insurance  
Work on weekends  
Talk to the union  
Punch in before class

### **Before July 1 and now**

During the next class, to wrap up the discussion on stress, pressure and changes since the merger, and to use the language structures students had been practicing, the teacher posted two flip chart sheets, one each labeled “Before July 1” and “Now:”

#### Before July 1

I had to...  
I didn't have to...  
Everyone...  
We...

#### Now

I have to  
I don't have to...  
etc.

Students gave oral examples, and then wrote a few sentences for both columns. Students shared their written sentences and the teacher wrote them up on the flip chart. Students copied all of the sentences.

Thus the initial catalyst activity (the story and questions) led to discussion and language work around stress and pressure. This work opened the door to more discussions during class about a few problems and misunderstandings caused by the merger. This led to the class inviting the union representative and a human resources representative to class to answer students' questions and clear up some confusion. Students prepared questions ahead of time.

**b. Asking students:** Sometimes asking students is the most direct and effective way to find out the work or union-related basic skills they need most. Other times, students (especially lower-level English speakers) may respond simply that they “need to learn English.” While this is true, it is too broad a goal to provide details for creating contextualized lessons. However, even if teachers get only general responses, they should still ask regularly, so that students will understand that the teacher wants and needs their input into curriculum content.

**c. Student requests:** Students in workplace education programs will often bring in questions or concerns about work or union-related material. If other students share similar concerns, the teacher and students can turn these questions into contextualized lessons. By paying attention to student requests and turning them into lessons (when appropriate), the teacher sends the message that she/he is open to hearing and responding to students' needs.

**d. Work or union issues that surface spontaneously in class:** Sometimes a particular work or union-related issue, unrelated to the topic at hand, will come up during class. If

the teacher listens carefully and helps students to discuss the issue constructively, it can become part of the contextualized curriculum and help students to address the issue. It's important for the teacher to draw out workers' experience and explore the issue; it may be something best dealt with on an individual basis or referred to a union representative (if the worksite is unionized).

Facilitating discussion of workers' issues and turning them into lessons, particularly lessons that encourage workers to analyze and strategize, can help students take on problems and also develop their skills. However, doing this kind of class work may bring **risks**, especially if the topic is delicate or controversial. Discussing and developing curriculum around hot-button issues depends on students trusting each other and the teacher. It's important for teachers to foster conditions that create trust, for example establishing ground rules that stress keeping classroom discussions **confidential**. Workers are unlikely to open up and talk about delicate topics if they fear that the teacher or classmates will reveal class discussions to supervisors or co-workers.

### **Example of a worker issue as curriculum**

#### **Work site and students**

This was a low-intermediate ESOL class at a large urban hospital whose non-management workers are represented by two unions. Students were non-native English speakers from China, the Azores and the Dominican Republic. All eight students worked as hospital housekeepers. Students needed and wanted lots of speaking practice.

Students received 50% paid release time to attend classes (a requirement of the grant that funded the classes). The class met twice a week from 2:30 – 4:30pm. Day-shift workers whose shift ended at 3:30pm came to class for the first hour on paid release time, and stayed for the second hour on their own time. Evening shift workers, whose shift started at 3:30pm, came to class for the first hour on their own time, and stayed for the second hour on paid release time. This meant that day-shift workers left their shift an hour early twice a week, and evening shift workers arrived an hour late twice a week. The Planning & Evaluation Team (PET) had established this schedule and informed departments of the release time requirement.

#### **How the issue emerged**

The workplace education program at this hospital was new. Classes had been running for about two months when, one Monday, a few of the day-shift students arrived very late. They explained angrily that their supervisor had kept them from coming to class. The teacher decided to put aside the activity the class had started and hear more about this problem. As the teacher and students asked questions, it became clear that the supervisor (who was new to the department) did not want workers to attend class.

The two students explained, "The supervisor says that you can go to class if you get your work done, but then he gives a lot of work and is always checking up on workers. If

we tell him that we will be late for class, he say, 'So What?' He won't sign time cards for us if we go to class." The class ended with this explanation.

## **Developing curriculum from the issue**

### **Discussion**

The teacher felt that it was important to address this issue in class – both to help students strategize about how to handle the problem, and to help students practice language for dealing with the problem. In the next class, she recalled the previous class's discussion and then wrote the following discussion questions on the board. Every student answered the questions individually as their classmates listened:

Who did you have to talk to about coming to English class?  
What did you say?  
What did your supervisor say?  
Was there a problem? What problem?

### **Creating dialogues**

Then the teacher explained that students would write dialogues representing the conversations they'd had with their supervisors about coming to class. She modeled a dialogue. Students worked individually to write their dialogues and then transcribe them on flip chart paper. The teacher helped students with grammar and spelling as they transcribed. Two of the dialogues were:

Student: Good morning. My English class starts September 13, every Monday and Wednesday 2:30 – 4:30pm.

Supervisor: O.K. No problem.

Student: When I go to my class I will tell my department Nurse Secretary. The Nurse Secretary must know where I am going. When the patient leaves [the room], the NS needs someone to clean the bed. The next patient comes. If I leave, the NS calls my supervisor. He sends someone to clean the room.

Student: I finished my area. I'm going to class.

Supervisor: Did you finish your area?

Student: Yes.

Supervisor: Come on. Check your area. Your area is not very clean.

Student: Look at the dusting. I did dusting today but I have too much work. The people working weekends don't do anything. I work too hard today.

Supervisor: Look at this – dirty, dirty, dirty.

### **Questions about dialogues**

In the next class the students posted their dialogues (on flip chart paper). The teacher had typed up the dialogues and gave everyone this dialogue sheet as well. Students took turns standing by their flip chart sheets and reading their dialogues for the class. Then the teacher asked students to think about what questions they wanted to ask their classmates about their dialogues and their supervisors' letting or not letting them go to class. Students wrote their questions (one for each dialogue) with help from each other and the teacher, and the teacher typed up the questions after class.

For the next class the teacher wrote up students' questions about each others' dialogues on flip chart paper and posted them. Everyone read the questions out loud together. Then students took turns asking each other their questions and answering. Questions included:

- Why does your supervisor give you too much work?
- What will you do the next time?
- What did you feel when your supervisor said, "No problem"?

### **Discussion about strategies**

Next, for the students who were having problems getting released for class, the teacher asked the class, "What could happen next?" Students suggested ideas, including telling the supervisor that managers had OK'd release time, contacting the union representative, going to a different supervisor, and asking the supervisor not to yell in the hall. When the topic first had surfaced, the teacher had told students she would bring the issue to the next PET meeting, which she did ( a week later). The teacher suggested inviting the union representative (who attending PET meetings) to visit the class.

### **Student interviews and union rep visit**

The teacher decided to use the upcoming union representative's visit to the class as an opportunity to do more language work and find out what students knew, and wanted to know, about their unions. During the next class, she asked students what questions they wanted to ask the union rep about release time for class, and any other issues. Students worked individually to formulate their questions. Then they shared questions and the teacher wrote them on the board, making corrections as necessary with the class's help. In addition to questions about release time, students had many questions about how the hospital's upcoming merger would affect their benefits and work schedules (the merger was to happen the following year).

The teacher had created a simple interview sheet of "Questions about Your Union" and had students interview each other in pairs. Students did the interviews orally in pairs and then help each other write down their answers. Interview questions were:

- What is your union?
- If you want information or help from your union, who do you talk to?
- Who is your union steward?
- Who is your union representative?
- Does your union have meetings? When are they?
- Do you go to union meetings? Why or why not?
- If you go to union meetings, do you speak? Why or why not?
- What more would you like to know about your union?
- What could your union do to help members more?

The union representative came to the following class and stayed for the whole two hours answering people's questions. He explained that the PET had discussed the release time issue and decided that the manager would speak to the supervisor who was not releasing students. He also answered students' questions about the merger. The supervisor did not hold students back from class after this.

## Grammar practice

Class work on the release time issue had involved lots of present and past tense question and answer formation. Preparing questions for the union rep's visit involved future tense question formation. This class work led to more practice on present, past and future question and answer formation. Practice included pair work with verb cards, work sheets and more dialogue creation.

**e. Published worker education materials:** There is a myriad of published workplace ESOL and ABE texts available from adult basic education publishers. Teachers can use these texts effectively as **springboards** to develop their own contextualized lessons tailored to students' specific needs. However, teachers must examine published workplace education texts carefully.

Many workplace basic skills texts available through major publishing companies are designed to teach groups of language competencies related to generic work situations. While some of these texts contain potentially useful worksheets, pictures, math problems or vocabulary, using them as-is might prove problematic. Some texts may portray workplace problems as caused only by workers' mistakes. They may present over-simplified (or even patronizing) solutions to workplace problems.

For example, a lesson might show a problem being solved by having a worker apologize for making a mistake. The text may not invite students to consider the many factors besides a worker's mistake that might cause workplace problems (understaffing, faulty equipment, poor supervision). Or the text might show a worker with a problem going to a benevolent supervisor who immediately fixes it. But what if a worker has a difficult relationship with a supervisor? Or what if the problem cannot be fixed easily?

Although many texts have gotten better over the years, some texts may still portray stereotypes, however subtly. For example, a text may show only minorities in entry-level positions. Also, many published workplace texts do not portray unionized worksites.

Finally, by necessity published workplace basic skills texts can only offer general workplace vocabulary, generic sample documents or theoretical scenarios. Teachers must work with students and other stakeholders to discover the specific vocabulary, documents or scenarios that students need for their specific situations, and not rely only on published texts.

## The Massachusetts Adult Basic Education Curriculum Frameworks

A **curriculum framework** offers a basic structure for how and what is taught in adult education programs. It does not contain lesson plans or scope and sequence charts, but it does describe the content areas and skills with which each program and teacher can design a curriculum that is relevant to the needs of her/his particular group of learners. Curriculum frameworks are meant to provide a guide to instruction at the local level.

The Massachusetts curriculum frameworks include core concepts, guiding principles, habits of mind, strands, standards, proficiency levels and benchmarks.

- **Core concepts** are articulations of the importance of the subject of a given framework to the lives of adult learners.
- **Guiding principles** are underlying tenets or assumptions that describe effective learning, teaching and assessment in a subject area.
- **Habits of mind** are dispositions, tendencies or practices that strengthen and support life-long learning.
- **Strands** are categories of knowledge within the study of a given discipline. A strand is also a cluster of learning standards in the content area organized around a central idea, concept or theme.
- **Standards** are what learners should know and be able to do within a specific content area or strand. Standards reflect the knowledge and skills of an academic discipline and reflect what the stakeholders of educational systems recognize as essential to be taught and learned. The standards provide a clear outline of content and skills so that programs can develop and align curriculum, instruction and assessments. Standards should not dictate pedagogy or teaching styles, nor prescribe class lessons or assignments.
- **Proficiency levels** portray what students at a particular level know and can do in relation to what is being measured (e.g. a learner can do “x” in the ESOL framework, reading strand, proficiency level 5). Proficiency levels should not be confused with a program’s own class design levels. Programs should, however, use proficiency levels to closely crosswalk with their program design class levels.
- **Benchmarks** are specific sets of skills learners need to develop and achieve in order to meet a more broadly-stated standard. They reference specific proficiency levels in terms that are **concrete** and **observable**, and serve as **checkpoints** to monitor learners’ progress toward meeting a standard.

There are MA Curriculum Frameworks for adult basic education in these areas:

- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)
- English Language Arts
- Mathematics and Numeracy
- History and the Social Sciences
- Science and Technology / Engineering
- Health

(This Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks information is excerpted and adapted from the *Massachusetts Adult Basic Education Framework for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)*, MA Department of Education – Adult and Community Learning Services, December 2005.)

### **Applying the curriculum frameworks**

Workplace education teachers can use the Curriculum Frameworks as a basis for developing contextualized curriculum. Here is an example using the ESOL Curriculum Frameworks.

### **The ESOL Curriculum Frameworks strands are:**

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing
- Intercultural knowledge and skills
- Navigating systems
- Developing strategies and resources for learning

The first four strands (listening, speaking, reading and writing) are embedded in the last three – teaching skills in these last three strands can provide the context for teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing skills at all levels. Each strand has its own set of standards, and students’ progress toward each standard can be measured by the standard’s set of benchmarks, according to students’ proficiency levels.

### **Curriculum frameworks example**

Say that the stakeholders in the residential facility described above agree to offer a high-intermediate level ESOL class for Mental Retardation Workers. Keeping in mind their program's basic goals, teachers can use the ESOL Curriculum Frameworks to frame their curriculum development.

Teachers at the residential facility may choose to frame some of their curriculum around the “**navigating systems**” strand. In this case, the system is the workplace and the sub-systems within it. A particular sub-system that teachers might choose to focus on is the handling of incidents and accidents with residents (reporting, communicating with co-workers, supervisors and the family about incidents).

Given the workplace needs analysis findings, teachers might choose to develop curricula around the “**navigating systems**” strand's third standard: “English language learners will develop the skills needed to act within these systems to meet their needs.”

Teachers can then identify which of the four embedded strands (listening, speaking, reading and writing) they should focus on. In this case, in consultation with students and other stakeholders, teachers might choose to focus one series of lessons on the **reading** and **writing strands**, to be able to address the program's third goal: “Mental Retardation Workers will improve their writing skills (including spelling and grammar) as they relate to completing written reports on the job (incident and accident reports, descriptions of behavior episodes and maintenance of resident folders).”

Within the writing strand, teachers could then create lessons around incident and accident reports that addressed that strand's three standards. For example, the **writing strand's second standard** is: “English language learners will acquire vocabulary and apply knowledge of English language structure and mechanics in writing.” In this case, vocabulary might include the basic medical vocabulary mentioned in the needs analysis findings, vocabulary that would enable MRWs to describe incidents more accurately. And in this case, applying “knowledge of English language structure and mechanics” might include working on grammatical errors that make MRWs' reports difficult to understand.

If students in the residential facility are at a **proficiency level of SPL 5** (high intermediate), teachers and students could work toward the benchmarks for the writing strand's second standard in that level. For example, the class could frame some of its work on incident reports around the **second benchmark (W2.5b)**: “English language learners will use expanded vocabulary that includes abstract nouns, and some common idiomatic expressions.” Class work on incident reports would also help students progress toward the **fifth benchmark (W2.5e)**: “English language learners will apply conventional spelling rules (e.g. understand spelling options for long vowel sounds, double consonants with –ed or –ing, etc.).”

## Lesson Planning

### What is a lesson plan?

A lesson plan describes how learning is to be organized and facilitated in the classroom and documents specific plans for teaching. It is a written document composed of learning objectives that show alignment with the MA DOE ABE Curriculum Frameworks as well as descriptions of all assessments, instructional activities, needed materials and resources, and wrap-up/reflection activities for a particular class or series of classes. Lesson plans may take a variety of forms.

Lesson planning helps teachers to create and evaluate lessons more effectively. Lesson planning can:

- Help teachers to consider more carefully what they can and should accomplish in a class.
- Encourage teachers to think more deeply about students' specific needs.
- Help teachers to create documentation of their work that can be shared with new and veteran teachers, and program coordinators.
- Help teachers to get out of ruts by encouraging them to plan a variety of innovative activities.
- Prepare teachers to feel grounded, more confident, and able to foresee challenges and students' questions.
- Push teachers to be sure they know the content and understand how to apply and assess the skills to be taught.
- Provide a solid, accurate record of what actually happened in the lesson.

### Lesson plan components

The System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES) and the MA Department of Education/Adult & Community Learning Services (DOE/ACLS) have created a draft *Lesson Planning Resource Guide*, in which they lay out suggestions for a lesson plan's main components:

#### 1. Learning objectives

- Develop clear, measurable objectives to guide what will be taught, how learners will be evaluated.

- Communicate objectives to students at the beginning of class so purpose of the lesson is clear.
- Identify 1-3 objectives outlining what learners will be able to know/do as a result of the lesson.
- Reflect students' goals and assessed needs
- Align with the Massachusetts ABE Curriculum Frameworks, especially the standards and benchmarks.

## **2. Materials and Resources**

- Provide a range and variety of materials, including authentic materials to the extent possible (e.g., employment application, prescription for medicine, library card application).

## **3. Activities**

- Determine the steps of the activity and how long the activity(ies) will take.
- Create activities that are clear in focus, engaging and relate to learner interests.
- Use an introductory activity to get students engaged in the topic and connect to and assess their prior experience, and use that information to adjust the lesson if necessary.
- Manage "teacher talk" time so learners are active participants throughout the learning process.
- Make adjustments as needed for students' varied learning styles, learning issues/ disabilities, or learners that may have greater knowledge/skill than classmates.
- Use (and list) the Framework benchmark(s) to ensure the activity illuminates the learning objective.
- Though brief, add enough detail so other teachers at the program might be able to use the lesson.

## **4. Assessment**

- Use to plan and adjust for what will be taught in following lessons, and to provide feedback to learners.
- Must directly measure whether each learning objective was met, and/or how well it was met.
- Use a variety of assessment methods to capture learning, allow students with different learning styles to shine, and also so learners may monitor their own progress.

## **5. Wrap up and Reflection for Students and Teacher**

- Devise a way for learners to capture the high points (e.g., what is the goal for learners to take away from the lesson?)

- Provide opportunities for learners to actively monitor their own progress.
- Build in discussion time and ask learners to summarize what they learned or apply what they learned to other contexts in their life. Ask learners to evaluate the class or activities; ask for ideas for the next lesson. Make sure to allow time for students to process questions and their responses.
- Reflect on the lesson: what worked well? Did any positive unintended consequences occur, to remember for the next time the lesson is used/adapted? What should be changed in the lesson to be more effective? What to remember about specific learners' needs/goals/accommodations for future classes?

(This information is excerpted and adapted from the draft *SABES/ACLS Lesson Planning Resource Guide*, February 2008.)

Workplace education teachers can use this information as a guide when creating contextualized lessons for their students. See the sample lessons at the end of this document for examples of this.

## Multi-level classes

Many workplace ESOL and ABE classes are organized by students' shift or work schedules, and many workplace programs can offer only two or three classes. This means that most workplace classes are at least somewhat multi-level. While multi-level classes are not ideal, teachers can use a variety of strategies and activities to make sure that all students can participate and learn.

**Activities for the whole class**, especially at the beginning of the lesson, can help to create class unity and set the expectation that everyone will work together:

- Oral check-ins about students' work days or language needs that came up during the day.
- Visual media activities like video clips, photographs or maps, which all students will understand at some level.
- Tours of the work site to gather or review vocabulary related to the work site and work procedures.
- Language Experience Stories, where students discuss a topic and then create a story by providing contributing sentences that the teacher transcribes.
- Demonstrations of new vocabulary, scenarios or role plays.
- Photo stories, where students can add captions or dialogue at different levels.

**Activities for the whole class, performed at different levels**, allow all students to work together from a single source of information but complete tasks around it at their own levels:

- Recordings of dialogues or stories, where students identify varying levels of information or respond in different ways.
- Readings where students answer comprehension questions of varying difficulty, copy key vocabulary or sentences, or respond by writing their own story.
- Skimming or scanning tables, forms, the union contract, or Material Safety Data sheets for different levels of information.
- Team games.
- Class projects that include tasks of varying difficulty, for example compiling a newsletter or preparing for an end-of-cycle ceremony.

**Small group activities**, with small groups of equal or varying abilities, can allow all students to participate more fully.

- Sequencing of story sentences or photographs.
- Process writing.
- Small group discussions with report-backs to the whole class.

- Board or card games.
- Jigsaw groups, where each group is given a piece of the whole (part of a story, a chunk of information), and groups must pool their knowledge to reconstruct the whole.

**Pair work**, with pairs of equal or varying abilities, can give students effective one-on-one language practice.

- Information gap activities, where each pair partner has part of the information and together the pair must reconstruct the whole by questioning each other.
- Puzzles and games.
- Dialogues and role plays.
- Student-to-student interviews.
- Worksheets, questionnaires or checking homework.

(Some of this information is drawn from Bell, J. (2002). *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL*. Carlsbad, CA: Dominie Press.)

## Confidentiality

As with any educational setting, students in workplace education programs will learn more effectively and share their real needs and concerns only if they feel it is safe to do so. Workplace education programs should make sure that student assessments and class work are kept confidential. To ensure confidentiality, programs can set policies like these:

- **Keep all individual workers' assessments results and class work confidential.** Teachers or a program coordinator can keep confidential files, separate from the worksite and workers' job files. Neither the employer nor union should have access to classroom performance or assessment results.
- **Don't tie workers' progress in class to job performance in any way.** Assessment of students' progress must not influence job performance evaluations, or be connected in any way to decisions about layoffs, raises or job changes.
- **Agree on what information gets reported and how.** Programs should decide what information they will collect and who will receive it. For example, the teacher may give oral reports on general class progress during oversight committee meetings. She may submit attendance. All information should remain within the committee.
- **Report student assessment results in aggregate and anonymously.** Teachers should never report individual assessment results connected to students' names. Instead, teachers can report aggregate change. For example, 55% of students moved up two levels and 45% moved up one level.
- **Schedule classroom visits ahead of time.** Supervisors, union representatives or others wishing to visit classes should clear this ahead of time with the Planning & Evaluation Team and teacher. The teacher can talk with students about visits beforehand so they won't fear that supervisors or others will use the visit to check up on them.
- **Keep worker participation voluntary.** If workers are required to take classes, they may fear that their performance will affect their jobs in some way. This will affect their progress and the program's effectiveness.
- **Have the education provider conduct assessment and evaluation activities.** Managers or union officials should never conduct student assessments. They should participate in program evaluation activities (interviews, focus groups) but never conduct them.

- **Keep program evaluation information confidential.** Confidentiality during program evaluation processes will ensure more open and honest dialogue. Without confidentiality, people may keep ideas to themselves for fear of embarrassment or reprisals.
- **All stakeholders should agree on confidentiality policies.** Management and the union (if the worksite is unionized) should agree to all policies. Managers, union officials, workers and others involved with the program should know about the policies and understand how they are enforced.

(Portions of the Introduction, Curriculum Development, and Confidentiality sections of this guide are excerpted or adapted from Utech, J.L. (2004). *Workplace Educator Training: A Guide to Creating Worker-Centered Education Programs*. Boston: Massachusetts Worker Education Roundtable.)



assessment, contextualized learning, Biomedical and Pharmaceutical Engineering. INTRODUCTION. The Singapore Skills Framework was launched in 2014 by the Singapore government. It is intended primarily as a guide for postsecondary educators who are interested in establishing such efforts at their institutions. The following sections are included: (1) "Introduction"; (2) "Defining and Classifying Competency-Based Initiatives: The Guiding Framework"; (3) "Methodology for the Case Studies"; (4) "Principles of Strong Practice"; (5) "Concluding Observations"; (6) "Annotated Bibliography"; (7) "Case Study Abstracts"; and (8) eight appendixes containing the individual case studies on which the report is based. CURRICULAR CHOICE - COLLEGE COUNSELING PERSPECTIVE What Courses Should Be Taken for College?. 20 What Courses Are Desirable When Applying to Competitive Colleges? . After a close reading of the epic, a review of Trojan War myths and tales from The Iliad, and an introductory study of the Greek alphabet and language, students will critique works of secondary criticism, essays, poems, short stories, and works of art inspired by Homer and Greek mythology. In addition to The Odyssey, possible readings and art works include: Margaret Atwood's Penelopiad, the Coen brothers' film O Brother, Where Art Thou?, Ovid's poem Heroides, Book 3 of. Contextualizing Curriculum: Combining ABE/ELL and Technical Learning Objectives by Northeast Wisconsin Technical College is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License .... Contextualized curriculum for workplace education an introductory guide. Retrieved from [http://www.umass.edu/roundtable/projects/Integrated%20curr\\_guide%20p1.pdf](http://www.umass.edu/roundtable/projects/Integrated%20curr_guide%20p1.pdf). Why is it so important? The ability to build a learning community in the classroom The ability to transfer basic skills to real world learning Saves Time.