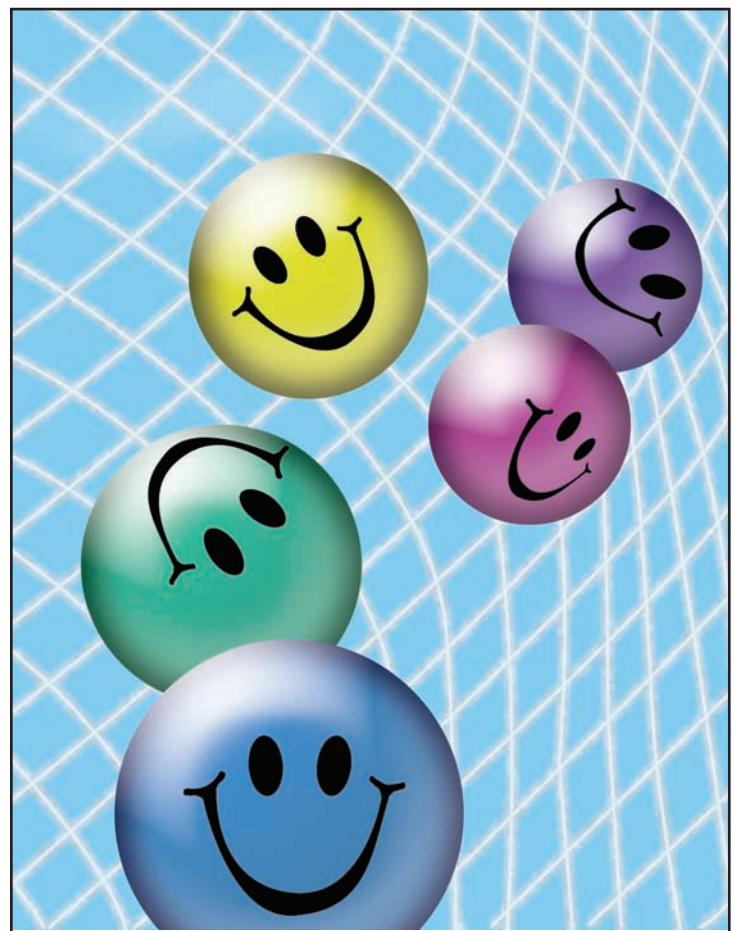


Catching Confidence in Adult Learners

Increased confidence is the most commonly reported difference that literacy learning makes to adults, according to research by Dr Janine Eldred of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in the UK. "Confidence is seen as the bedrock of all other achievements as it inspires learners to progress," says Dr Eldred. Adult learners often report an increase in confidence as an indicator of success even before they make significant gains in their classroom work. Raising confidence levels through literacy learning empowers adults in other areas of their lives so they are better able to voice their opinions, communicate more effectively with family and professionals, and become more involved in their communities. With increased confidence, learners develop a more positive self-image and feel more in control of their lives.

Identifying and documenting gains and achievements are a vital part of the learning process. Increased confidence in learners is a key outcome of literacy learning, but one that is often difficult to record because it is based on anecdotal evidence, not test scores. Through her research, Dr Eldred has defined 'Confidence', examined how it is nurtured in adult learners, and

suggests how practitioners can 'catch' changes in confidence during episodes of learning. A Catching Confidence tool was developed to record adult learners' perceptions of their own confidence levels in various situations.



Graphic © Literacy Nova Scotia

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In the report, confidence is defined as a belief in one's abilities to do something in a specific situation. This belief includes being accepted and on equal terms with others in that situation. Confidence depends on possessing the knowledge or skills to do something, believing that one can do it, and feeling comfortable about doing it.

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Literacy instructors and tutors play a crucial role in the development of learner confidence:

they must do more than simply praise the learners'



Dr Janine Eldred

achievements. As a literacy practitioner, our own level of confidence directly impacts how we act and relate to others. We must nurture confidence in ourselves in order to enhance it in others. It is vital that the instructor or tutor have effective listening and communication skills. Other factors that contribute to increased confidence in adult learners are social interaction, receiving

support when it's needed, being treated fairly, and a sense of belonging. Dr Eldred strongly emphasizes this last point: "A sense of belonging is important. Learners report that feeling they are not the only ones experiencing literacy challenges is important in building their confidence. This links strongly to a sense that literacy difficulties leads to stigmatization, avoidance of literacy situations and hiding the difficulties. So, the social aspect of being with others in a similar situation is vital."

We interviewed Karen Blair, Executive Director of the Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton County to find out how her organization has implemented Dr Eldred's research. "We are very committed to doing a better job of capturing what learners actually achieve in their programs, rather than just what is easy to measure. Our board has a Performance Indicators Committee dedicated to this task. We piloted the Catching Confidence tool with all our classes, and are looking at other ways to measure success, particularly of the 'soft outcomes' which we've seen for years being achieved and being crucial to all other learning, but being difficult to measure."

LNS: According to Janine Eldred's report, increased confidence is the most commonly

reported difference that literacy learning makes to adult learners. Based on your experience, would you agree?

KB: A resounding YES from all staff. We have been saying this for years, recognizing that increased confidence is crucial to further learning both in the classroom and in the home, workplace and community. Without increased confidence being evident, we hesitate to recommend learners for further studies.

LNS: Dr Eldred's report says that the role of the instructor or tutor is central to the development of learners' confidence. How do the instructors or tutors in your programs inspire confidence in your learners? What are some good ways to do this?

KB: There are many practical ways to inspire confidence in learners. Here are some that we recommend:

- Create opportunities for your learners to be successful
- Verbally reinforce all the time
- Encourage learners to take risks and realize it's OK to make mistakes
- Have classes where you learn at your own pace and start lessons where they are able to succeed
- Flexibility in programs, e.g. it's OK to miss time, recognizing that learners have other commitments and concerns
- Put the onus on learners to take responsibility for their own learning and to be successful
- Have confidentiality agreements that both staff and learners sign, which builds trust and an environment for confidence to grow
- Be willing to forgive behavioral problems and overlook small infractions
- Invite learners to help other learners in the class (This is an excellent benefit of having multilevel classes)
- Use material that is interesting and relevant to learners' lives, e.g. develop a business plan for a chip wagon
- Give learners a voice, and allow and encourage them to express opinions in class

LNS: Increased confidence is considered a 'soft outcome' which is difficult to document. Have you been able to document or measure increased confidence in your learners?

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The Picture of Confidence: Sandra Morrison

Sandra Morrison attended classes at the Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton County, and then moved on to the Adult Learning Program at NSCC, where she graduated with honours in June 2011. She is presently enrolled in the Human Services Program at NSCC Marconi Campus. She would like to take Therapeutic Recreation next year. She has an interest in attending university, but that decision will depend on the employment situation.

LNS: *Many adult learners say that increased confidence is the most important outcome of their learning. Would you agree?*

SM: **Yes, definitely. For me going back to school wasn't something I thought I could ever do.** College was not for me. I felt I wasn't smart enough; I'd say to people, "No way could I go to college." Now I know I am smart enough. Belief that I was smart enough came gradually. I realized that school wasn't what I thought it would be. Once there and I saw the work and I jumped in, I realized that this was something I could do. I am working on a paper today and even the term "thesis" sends me into the horrors. I will see what I can do with it and will wait till I get my mark back. I know now that I can do it.

LNS: *How did your instructors or tutors in your programs inspire confidence in you? What did they do or say that was helpful to you?*

SM: **One of my teachers wrote me a reference letter and said the nicest things about me.** I had never read nice things like that about me before. I felt so encouraged. Two teachers were instrumental in putting me on the right track. They believed in me and told me that they did. At that time, they knew something I didn't. It was what kept me going.

LNS: *Did you notice that your confidence was increasing while you were improving your literacy and essential skills? What were the signs?*



Sandra Morrison

SM: **I started off in the general communications course rather than the academic level communications.** My teachers told me I should be in the academic course. I didn't want to move but after a while I saw that I could do it. They were right. I moved to academic communications. I did that for myself, not for the credit. It was a good choice for me. One of the signs for me was that I stayed with it and went back this year. I know that I can be successful at this. I hope to go to CBU (Cape Breton University). I never thought I could do something like that before.

LNS: *How has increased confidence affected other aspects of your life?*

SM: **School has been the change in my life.** After 30 years in retail it was time for me to go in a different direction. I feel good and going to school has done that for me. I like telling people that I am going to school. Years ago I would avoid the conversation about education. Now I am vocal. It feels good to me. I should have done this 20 years ago, but I couldn't. I didn't know such opportunities even existed. And cost would have been a factor. And I had home responsibilities. Now I am a free agent, it is my time. That is a good thing. 🙌



Paul Robson

Paul is a former student at the Valley Community Learning Association. He currently sits on Literacy Nova Scotia's Board of Directors as a Learner Representative, and served on the advisory committee for our Learners' Services Project. We asked Paul to share his experiences as an adult learner and to explain how his life has changed as a result of his learning, and how he stays motivated.



Paul Robson gives a presentation at an LNS conference in 2010

LNS: Why did you decide to enrol in an Adult Learning Program?

PR: I drove by Peter's place (Peter Gillis, Executive Director of the Valley Community Learning Association office in Kentville) often and wondered what they did there. One day, without really thinking about it, I stopped in. Peter shook my hand and I asked him if this was a place for me to improve my education. Peter started to tell me about the program but I stopped

him and asked him if there was a cost. Peter said there was no cost, so I told him to go on.

I told Peter my education was very low and when he gave me some tests he told me it would take a lot of time for me to get to the grade eight level I needed to take the truck driving course. I wanted to drive a truck, I have always wanted to drive a truck. But I couldn't read and write.

I got approved by Skills Development to do the program. I had three years to move from 0 education to grade eight so I could get into

Commercial Safety College. I started in the classroom for about a year but I was getting frustrated by the class. Peter helped me again. My second tutor, Jessica worked through the Air Brake Manual with me. She drew diagrams on the chalkboard and I learned all the parts of the system. I borrowed the laptop from Peter and he scanned in parts of the manual and I studied at home. All this took about a year with sessions two or three times a week.

I passed the air brake test! I was so proud of this. When you pass that air brake test, they mark your licence. I kept looking at the licence, to make sure it was real. I couldn't believe that I had done this for me.

Soon after that my tutor moved away but I was ready for Commercial Safety College. But there was one more test before I was accepted at the college, TOWES (*Test of Workplace Essential Skills*). That is a hard, three hour test. I was tutored again for a couple of months to get ready. I did the easy questions first, then worked on the hard questions. There were ten questions I didn't do. Three days after I wrote the test, I heard that I had passed.

LNS: What new skills have you acquired?

PR: I learned how to be in control, how to sit with other people. I was shy, it took me a while to become comfortable. Then one day, I started to participate and then you couldn't shut me up. I became confident.

LNS: What new activities do you enjoy now?

PR: I have been trying hard to get steady work since I got my licence. I was told I needed experience. Then I got a job on the highway. Today before you called, I worked a twelve hour day. I am absolutely happy! The pay is okay for someone like me starting off.

LNS: Does your future look different now?

PR: My life is different. I always wanted to be where I am now. It comes down to going after what I wanted. It took a long time and it was worth it. And I want to be able to tell other people that they can do this too. 🙌



An Interview with Kevin Landry

Kevin Landry works for the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal in eastern Nova Scotia. He has a passion for learning because he has seen firsthand what workplace learning programs can do. We interviewed him about his experiences.

LNS: Why did you get involved with the workplace education program? What was your motivation?

KL: In the late 90's, I was the education chairperson of local 1867 of CUPE. I looked after the education programs for members all across the province. I was contacted to be the liaison between the government and the union when they were setting up an education program for workers. I agreed to do so for two reasons. It was my responsibility as the education chairperson to help out but I also had a personal reason: I hadn't finished grade 12. It was a big disappointment to my mother and I felt that I had missed out on something I wanted to have. I had left school in the mid 70's to go to work and I never went back. My goal was to get the GED.

LNS: Why was the union and department interested in setting up a workplace education program?

KL: Actually, it was a nurse who saw the need and got things started. She had seen someone who had been off work due to an injury and did not return to work because he couldn't read the correspondence he received about returning to work. She wanted to make sure that something like that didn't happen to anyone else.

LNS: What are the most important skills you see developed as a result of participating in a workplace education program?

KL: Everyone in the programs set a goal and that is what they had to achieve. For some it

was writing a letter, for others it was reading a book or getting the GED. They all worked toward that goal. Some people in the program wanted to write letters to their grandchildren. At my workplace, I saw people who would ask someone else to complete their time card because they couldn't fill it in themselves. Many of the men in our workplace then were older, the average age being 55, and they had left school early because there were plenty of jobs back then. Everyone in the classes was committed to achieving their learning goals.

LNS: Were there other spinoffs for you and the others?

KL: The programs made a difference at work, at home and in the community. A lot of the people in the programs had played 'follow the leader' instead of being the leader. They had the skills and practical knowledge to lead but lacked the confidence.

They needed the education to give them the confidence to participate. I think the spinoff was even greater at home and in their community. Don't get me wrong, it was important in the workplace too. But people in the community looked up to them. Their lives were better for taking part in the program. People who went through the program were more upbeat. I went to a lot of program closing events and saw their families and all their smiles! Those participants go home at night feeling so much better about their work.

LNS: 'Lifelong learning' is a term we use a lot now. Do you think it makes a difference?

KL: I believe that we learn something new every day. It helps us be open to new things, new ways of thinking. I think of the change in how we think about sports, like hockey for example. Years ago, a hockey player would take a hit, get up and keep on going. Today we talk about concussion and the long term affect.



Kevin Landry

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Interview with Kevin Landry, continued from page 5

I do classroom training now. I train snowplow operators and I learn a lot from the people in my classes.

LNS: What about the future? Are you different from five or ten years ago?

KL: I am not different as a person but I am a better communicator. This training has helped me be better in many ways. I have had two higher paying jobs since I finished the program. I am more confident. I learn from others too.

I have seen changes in others as well: confidence in their ability, willingness to learn more and get help when needed. I heard someone say that literacy isn't the problem, it's the solution. I have kept that in mind for a long time because I believe it's true.

People are requesting more upgrading now. We are negotiating with the Workplace Education Division for a new round of programs that will focus on computers and basic upgrading. Communication skills are very important in the workplace now.

As for myself, I worked for 35 years as a snowplow and equipment operator and then moved on to new jobs that I enjoy. I have a passion for helping because I have seen what these programs can do. 📌



Working Together for Literacy and Essential Skills Development

In the past year, Literacy Nova Scotia worked to build a strong strategy to use as a guide to support literacy and essential skills development wherever and whenever there was a need and interest, with the focus on removing barriers. The first step was a scan of the environment and a discussion paper followed which went to the stakeholders for input.

In the spring of 2011, LNS held a series of regional meetings where literacy and essential skills stakeholders met to identify ways to work together to strengthen opportunities for Nova Scotians to upgrade these skills inside and outside the workplace. They pointed out the gaps in literacy and essential skills delivery, identified roles for new and old partners and discussed how more Nova Scotia employers could be encouraged to invest in the literacy and essential skills development of their employees.

In May, LNS held a provincial forum, to enhance ways that literacy and essential skills (LES) stakeholders can work together to strengthen opportunities for Nova Scotians to upgrade these skills in and outside the workplace. The forum allowed participants who had attended the regional meetings and others drawn from the various literacy and essential skills sectors, the opportunity to hear how literacy and essential skills development affects labour markets, meet exemplary employers, hear about what others are doing, identify ways of responding to the issues and network with colleagues.

LNS invited those who would be affected by NS's labour market challenges and who would be concerned about enhancing productivity, improving workplace skills, and recruiting, training, and retaining workers. Over 40 attended. 📌



Paul Brinkhurst, FutureWorx Truro and Ann Marie Downie, Executive Director, Literacy Nova Scotia at our Roundtable discussion in Truro, March 2011.

If you use methods or tools, which ones do you use? Do you have thoughts about how this outcome could be better documented?

KB: We piloted the Catching Confidence tool with all our classes in 2010-2011, administering it to learners at program entry and exit, and occasionally at different points during the school year. We found this instrument while looking for some way to capture the ‘soft outcomes’ that we know are so important to what is achieved in our classes. This was triggered by a need for more accountability to one of our funders about what our programs actually accomplished. Initially, we used one of the Catching Confidence tools that had been used in the UK, but then made refinements that seemed to better suit our classes. We are using this tool again this year.

Comparison of confidence levels at the beginning of the 2010-11 academic year and either at program end or midterm as measured by this tool overwhelmingly document increases in confidence. Moreover, it appears increases in confidence ‘at school’ usually transfer to increases in confidence in other areas, such as at home, socially and in the community. This has implications for improved learner health and well-being outside of the classroom as well as in further formal learning opportunities.

We still face some challenges in making the tool more understandable for some of our learners who have great learning challenges. We also incorporated a ‘Learner Success’ section into our monthly instructor reports in order to document successes that were usually just reported verbally in the past. Broad success areas that came out of this included success in the classroom (e.g. increased confidence to tackle new skills; mastering presentations to the class; dealing with panic attacks) and success in the community (e.g. greater engagement, volunteering, improved work skills).

Learner reflection tools can also document an increase in confidence. These can be administered after a presentation, upon completion of a study unit, at the end of a term

or year, etc. The tools used include the Catching Confidence tool, reflection sheets or journals, annual end of year program evaluations done with all classes, and end of year self reflection sheet done in some classes.

At our recent staff meeting we asked ourselves how else we know learners have increased confidence. Both learners and instructors say learners have increased confidence, but how else is it demonstrated? We noted this is often seen in a change in body language, including holding your head up more, making eye contact, and even taking your coat off in the classroom. It can also be observed in increased speaking with classmates, entering class discussions, being able to speak up for yourself, and public speaking at events such as Literacy Action Week. Some of this is captured in our Learner Success sections of our monthly reports, but a more systematic approach to documentation could be valuable.

Another way staff know learners have increased confidence is when they help other learners in the classroom. This both demonstrates and builds their confidence, as their skills/talents/gifts are seen and acknowledged. Increased learner engagement in the community, such as when learners become volunteers or work at an election, is another area where confidence can be documented.

Dr Eldred agrees with all Karen’s suggestions for building learner confidence. “Good teaching and learning is at the heart of all this. I would add things like: respect and value each learner for what they know, do and achieve; be open-minded and interested in the learners; make learning fun, enjoyable and understandable! Celebrate small steps of achievement with each learner and with the group. Peer learning is powerful – quite a lot of research suggests this approach helps in both




Karen Blair, Executive Director of the Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton County

learning and self/formative assessment of what is gained and what needs to be worked on.

“Some folk say that regardless of what adults are learning, they gain confidence and I’d probably agree with that. We’ve only to reflect on our own learning to recognize it. However, adults learning literacy are more likely to have bigger learning hurdles to overcome; they have experienced difficulties and challenges in their school education and face more health, work and poverty challenges than the rest of the adult population. So, building their confidence in their abilities to learn, which then leads to other life changes, is a vital aspect of adult literacy teaching and learning.”

Dr Eldred is delighted that her research is being implemented by literacy practitioners in Nova Scotia. “Many thanks for your interest and for keeping in touch about this work. It’s very rewarding to know you’ve taken our ideas and developments, adapted and made them your own (just what we advocate) and that you’re working out your own routes forward to help build not only literacy skills, but confidence too.”

Download Dr Janine Eldred’s Catching Confidence research report and measuring tool here: <http://archive.niace.org.uk/Research/BasicSkills/Projects/Catching-confidence.htm>







Download the Adult Learning Association of Cape Breton County’s Catching Confidence measuring tool (modified by their staff for their learners):
<http://www.ns.literacy.ca/docs/CatchingC.pdf> 



Literacy is the ability to use printed information to function in society, at work and in the family. It is often combined with other skills, such as thinking and problem solving, oral communication, numeracy, computer use, working in a team and continuous learning, to become the essential skill set needed to control our lives, achieve our goals and develop our knowledge and potential.

Our Mission: That all Nova Scotians have equal access to quality literacy, essential skills, and lifelong learning opportunities. Literacy Nova Scotia cares about literacy and essential skills learning opportunities being available wherever and whenever there is a need or interest. That means we support community sector programs and college and school board programs, as well as programs in workplaces. LNS supports the adult literacy field in the broadest sense. We have always known that literacy is bigger than reading and writing. We know that literacy is all those skills needed for accessing and using information that help us contribute to our communities, families and workplaces.

How to reach us...

-  **Literacy Nova Scotia**
NSCC Truro Campus
Room 125, Forrester Hall
36 Arthur Street
Truro NS B2N 1X5
-  PO Box 1516
Truro, NS B2N 5V2
-  **902-897-2444**
1-800-255-5203 *Learn Line*
-  **902-897-4020** *fax*
-  **literacyns@nsc.ca**
-  **www.ns.literacy.ca**

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