

A Model to Create a More Prepared and Effective Workforce through Essential Skills Training

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Abstract

This chapter defines Essential Skills (reading, writing, numeracy, document use, computer skills, working with others, teamwork, oral communication and thinking skills), describes an employer training model and pilot project, and then offers recommendations for applying lessons learned to incorporate Essential Skills into the academic environment to better prepare students for the workplace. A principle faculty member from City University of Seattle was hired independently to work on the pilot project

to develop a model for small businesses to embed essential workplace skills into workplace training. The project was supported by the Canadian federal government. The result of the project was a training model that can be adopted by any size business or organization to incorporate Essential Skills into training. The model was successful in the three organizations where it was piloted and the deliverables from the project included a website (found at www.westproject.ca), which is still live and contains training resources for small businesses and a printed resource guide. A link to the resource guide can be found at the same website.

Introduction to Essentials Skills

“Approximately 14 percent of U.S. adults can’t read. In 2003, the U.S. government tested 19,000 adults on their literacy skills in three areas—the ability to gather information from an article, understand a document, and do arithmetic using information from a document. In the first category—prose literacy—the percentage of adults lacking basic literacy was 14.5 percent” (NBC News, Education Nation, 2011, NAAL section, para. 1.) Similarly, “in Canada, 42 percent of Canadian adults between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five have low literacy skills” (Canadian Literacy Network, n.d., para. 1). The statistics are staggering and the low literacy skills affect the productivity in our workplaces and the ability of our adults to learn new skills, whether in the workplace or the classroom.

Through extensive research, the Government of Canada, along with other national and international agencies, identified and validated key literacy and Essential Skills. Earlier work in Canada, the United States, Australia, and Great Britain identified a set of skills that were used in virtually all occupations. These “Essential Skills” are used in nearly every job and throughout daily life in different ways and at varying levels of complexity. They provide the foundation for learning all other skills and enable people to evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change (HRSDC, 2013).

Essential Skills are not the technical skills required to competently perform a particular occupation; rather, they are the skills *applied* in all occupations. Essential Skills are **enabling skills** that help people perform the tasks required by their occupation and other activities of daily life (HRSDC, 2007).

The nine Essential Skills are used in different forms, at varying degrees of complexity, and are needed for learning, work, and life. Below is a description of each Essential Skill (as defined by HRSDC):

- **Reading:** understanding materials written in sentences or paragraphs;
- **Document Use:** finding, understanding, or entering information in various types of documents;
- **Numeracy:** using numbers and thinking in quantitative terms to complete tasks;
- **Writing:** communicating by arranging words, numbers, or symbols on paper or a computer screen;
- **Oral Communication:** using speech to exchange thoughts and information;
- **Working with Others:** interacting with others to complete tasks;
- **Thinking:** finding and evaluating information to make rational decisions or to organize work;
- **Computer Use:** using computers and other forms of technology; and
- **Continuous Learning:** participating in an ongoing process of improving skills and knowledge.

Employers invest in training when there is a hard business reason to do so, and because Essential Skills help workers to innovate and adapt to workplace change, organizations are becoming increasingly aware that they need to maximize the skills of their workforces, in order to compete and grow (HRSDC, 2011). Companies including Syncrude Canada Ltd, BHP Billiton Diamonds Inc., and Canada Bread Atlantic each participated in the Essential Skills initiatives to support employee skill development in an effort to improve business practices and implement solutions to address their business issues (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

- The kinds of outcomes that employers who invest in Essential Skills training tend to measure and manage include the following:
- Skill gains (Essential Skills, or firm-specific, job-specific or technical skills);
- Attitude change—for example, increased commitment to achieving individual, team, and organizational goals;

- Increased engagement in the workplace; and
- Knowledge acquisition and application—for example, enhanced employee understanding of the workplace.

Essential Skills Gaps:

The Relationship between Training and Employee Development

Deficits in Essential Skills limit the employees' ability to effectively complete their job tasks and their ability to effectively acquire new knowledge. "Too many people lack the required level of Essential Skills to fully participate and succeed in today's increasingly knowledge- and service-based economy. Investing in machinery and education is critical. Investing in Canadians' Essential Skills for living, learning and working is just as important but much less recognized or understood" (Lane & Hirsch, 2012, September 6, para. 4). When employees lack the skills needed to do the job, it affects the employers' abilities to meet customers' expectations and to achieve their business goals.

In recent years, there was greater emphasis on technical skills and a move away from valuing or investing in soft skills, such as communicating, working with others, thinking, and continuous learning. Although many employers continued to recognize the value of developing employees with these skills, the recession caused employers to cut expenses, and one of the first places to be cut is training and most often, soft skills training.

While delivering training is a powerful and effective way to increase employee commitment and loyalty, training must be directly related to an organization's goals and be specific to the workers' tasks to be successful. Employees need to believe that the skills gained from training will help them to accomplish their jobs. When this is achieved, a culture is created where employees develop their knowledge to benefit the organization and contribute to achieving the company's goals (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

Employee Training and Development Applied to Small Business

Due to the recent recession, new demographics in the workforce and rapidly changing technology, skills and creativity are extremely important to help companies grow and succeed. This reinforces the idea that workers need well-developed skills that are specific to their organization's needs and goals in order to do their jobs well, and a business faces the risk of not achieving its goals without a well-trained and qualified workforce. Larger organizations may be better equipped to attract the best workers because they are able to offer more comprehensive benefits programs and greater opportunities for career advancement, yet all organizations need to train and develop their workforces in order to meet their company goals. Small businesses may even have a greater need for training than larger organizations to mitigate this risk.

To a small business, its workforce is one of its most valuable assets. However, often, a small business has limited resources to invest in Human Resources programs, especially training, and they may even consider that training is dispensable in a situation where resources are tight. Companies with fewer than five hundred employees spend more per employee on training, but dedicate less time per employee than do larger organizations because it's more difficult for small companies to make use of training that's been developed for larger organizations due to applicability (Stillwagon, 2010). Further, the effect of a workforce lacking the Essential Skills may be more detrimental to a small business with limited resources than to a larger organization with ample resources.

While employee-training programs can be expensive for a small business, training should not be looked at as a cost; rather, it is a long-term investment toward the success and growth of the business. Investing in training develops a competent workforce with the Essential Skills required for productivity and innovation. It's important for small-business owners to foster and encourage skills development through an environment that supports career growth (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

A well-trained workforce is essential for the success of a small business.

Essential Skills and Academic Success

As an educator in the postsecondary sector, you may be asking yourself, “I don’t have any illiterate students in my classroom, do I?” Literacy gaps are often perceived as an inability to read or write and attributed to language barriers, socioeconomic status, or marginalized learners. Essential Skills include literacy skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy and are a complex mix of skills that an individual can use at work, at home, or in the community. These skills require maintenance and upgrading over the course of a career, regardless of the profession. Less than 40 percent of adults who have some secondary school education, but who have not graduated, have adequate literacy levels. Even some college and university graduates lack adequate literacy skills (Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters Ontario, 2008).

Engaging in Essential Skills development in the postsecondary classroom will not only better equip the graduate for employment but also will assist in the development of class-based skills designed to support and enhance learning and knowledge acquisition. Students need to have the nine Essential Skills: reading, writing, numeracy, oral communication, document use, computer skills, working with others, thinking, and continuous learning, to handle the demands of their chosen professions and complete the tasks expected in the academic environment. These are broad subject areas, and it can be insulting to suggest to a student that he or she isn’t able to read or do math, but the requirements can be reframed into areas of the skill that are specific and applicable to the tasks that each learner must perform (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013). For example, if students are expected to complete group presentations or create and present research, “working with others” and “oral communication” skills are an essential component to successfully complete the tasks expected. If nursing students are expected to learn medication administration practices, but are unable to compute accurate dosages, they may have “numeracy” gaps or have an inability to “use documents” effectively.

Each of the Essential Skills becomes vital to technical competence and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities of their program of study. Effective Essential Skills training and development programs must focus on the needs of the learners. *What additional skills do learners need*

to be more effective to complete their tasks? What specific skills are the learners expected to gain? What is the best way the students learn? Education is designed to develop and enhance students. Through strategic, well-planned Essential Skills initiatives, educators create a culture of development and lifelong learning. A culture of student development also ensures that the acquired knowledge and skills are put to use in the most productive way, which enables students to achieve their targeted learning and career goals.

Essential Skills Development in the Workplace—The Pilot Project:

Why is the Model Applicable to City University and Teaching in a University Environment?

While this pilot project was concerned with developing a training model that would assist small businesses to embed Essential Skills training into their workplace training, there are deficits in Essential Skills in the college and university classroom also. By adapting the W.E.S.T. training model to the classroom, we believe that improvements can be made in the level of soft skills and Essential Skills of our graduates, so they are more ready and capable for their careers.

Introduction to the Workplace Essential Skills Training (W.E.S.T.) Program

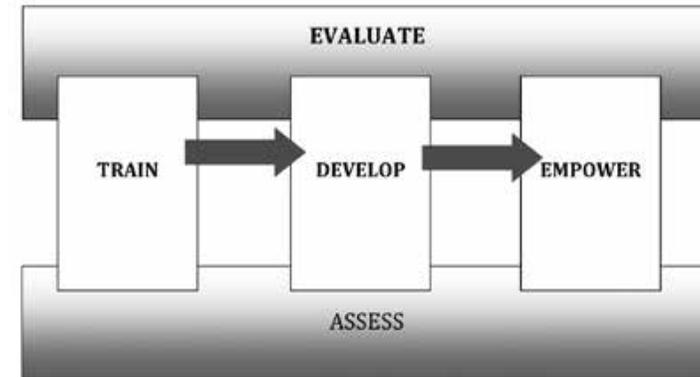
The Communities for Literacy project was established to address the need for sustainable, employment-based support for literacy and Essential Skills from a community perspective. The approach was designed to address both workforce shortages and skill deficiencies by supporting employers to incorporate Essential Skills development into the workplace so that individual employees could gain or maintain employment while simultaneously upgrading their literacy and Essential Skills (LES) (Sidhu, 2013).

Sources BC, in partnership with two local Chambers of Commerce and Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia, acquired funding from the government of Canada to work with local employers to help foster success with their business and human resources goals. The W.E.S.T. project provided free services including assessment and training support to selected employers in Cloverdale, South Surrey, and White Rock, British Columbia. Three small-business employers and over fifty-five employees participated in the project, and the objective of the program was to develop and test a training model to embed literacy and Essential Skills into workplace training (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013). The three small businesses included a computer consulting, support, and sales organization with multiple locations; a storage company with multiple locations; and a women's resources center with one location. These three businesses provided a broad spectrum of employees that included highly educated technical professionals, middle managers and clerical workers, warehouse staff, sales professionals, and some disadvantaged minorities with limited work skills. The Sources BC project team consisted of Dan Scott, Director of Community and Employment Services; Lovey Sidhu, an independent education and training consultant and W.E.S.T. Project Coordinator; and Carla Weaver, principal faculty at City University and an independent education and training consultant, who acted as a W.E.S.T. Training Facilitator.

The W.E.S.T. program evolved as an innovative Human Resources (HR) practice that was designed to provide focused training to employees to enhance workplace skills. The W.E.S.T. mission was to create new models for local businesses to embed Workplace Essential Skills into their training and development plans, models that not only trained and developed employees, but also empowered them to be more self-sufficient and productive. The program developed and adapted a number of resources for training employees and also for training the trainers to make clients self-sufficient. Resources were also created to assess the effectiveness of the training. All resources were made available to the community via a website and resource guide so that anyone could benefit from them.

Overview of the Model: Train-Develop-Empower

Fig. 1. *The Training Model*
(Source: Sidhu & Weaver, 2013)



Developing a Training Program That Delivers Results

Companies must consider what additional skills their employees need to be more effective in their jobs, what specific skills they will need in order for the organization to meet future goals, and the best methods for employees to learn the required skills. Each employee brings a different skill set and experience level, so his/her learning needs are specific and therefore, it is not effective to design training that is too broad (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

Framework Implemented for Training and Workplace Skill Development

The framework of the W.E.S.T. Training Model includes the following: (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013):

1. Conducting ongoing **ASSESS**ments
Determining needs related to identifying core workplace skills that require attention, defining the purpose of training, ensuring that training helps the company and department to achieve their goals, deciding

on how many and which employees will need training, deciding how to implement the training into daily workplace activities, and assessing employees' current skills levels in job-specific tasks and Essential Skills.

2. Creating job-related focused and specific **TRAINING**

Based on the assessment, confirming which core workplace skills require training, defining objectives and desired outcomes for the training, determining measures for how learners will demonstrate change, and developing training specific to the job.

3. **DEVELOP** employees to meet their future goals and **EVALUATE** training

Training should help to develop skills that will be helpful to employees to meet long-term organizational goals. Additionally, the training should include methods showing how to use the skills and help to increase the self-sufficiency and independence of workers by developing decision-making skills.

From a management point of view, training programs must be evaluated in order to measure their effectiveness and whether they produce the desired results from both employers' and employees' perspectives.

4. Developing a culture of **EMPOWERment**

When employees feel empowered, they actively participate in training and work effectively with each other to mentor and support each other. They also become more open to change, which includes adapting better to new policies, technology, and organizational changes, and employee retention rates improve.

A culture of lifelong learning and empowerment depends on strategic, well-planned training programs leading to empowerment.

Each step is described in more detail in the sections to follow. While the model is general in its description as it relates to content, this project

was concerned with embedding Essential Skills into training, so at each step, we were concerned with both meeting training needs for specific work tasks and also determining needs to target Essential Skills mastery within any training that was developed and delivered.

Step 1: Assess

Because small businesses are often understaffed or don't have HR departments to carry on employee assessments, training is implemented based on *assumptions* about what is needed, and thus, it may not meet the needs of the employee or lead to the achievement of the company's strategic goals. Without first assessing training needs, training may result in little or no change in employee behavior and may lead to employee complaints about training being "useless" or a "waste of time." A thorough assessment *before* training plans are developed and implemented is imperative for successful training and outcomes (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

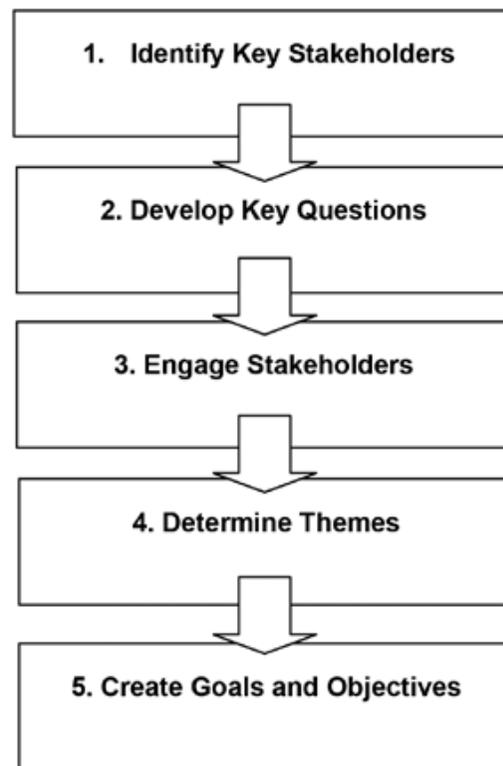
A **needs analysis**, an assessment method to determine the *need* for training, assists in identifying the main reasons for training, and identifies specific training goals. A comprehensive needs analysis requires time, energy, and resources to gather information, but the data collected is invaluable. By investing time before training begins, an organization can ensure that any training developed will be focused on specifically meeting the goals of the company and needs of the employees (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

Information collected in a needs analysis also provides an organization with data that can be used to:

- develop policies and procedures;
- measure employee satisfaction;
- identify gaps within the organization (in communication, information sharing, etc.);
- create or change job descriptions; and
- measure the success of training programs (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

The steps in a needs analysis are illustrated below:

Fig. 2. Steps to Conduct a Needs Analysis
(Source: Sidhu & Weaver, 2013)



1. Identify Key Stakeholders

A stakeholder is a “person, group, or organization that has a direct or indirect stake in an organization because it can affect or be affected by the organization’s actions, objectives and policies” (BusinessDictionary.com, 2012). A needs analysis involves all levels of the organization including frontline staff, managers, directors, and customers. By identifying two to three members from each stakeholder group, the needs analysis will provide the most comprehensive data.

This is an essential first step to ensure that training goals and objectives are aligned at all levels. Training programs that are developed on the basis of one stakeholder often miss key needs of the other parties resulting in poor training results (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

2. Develop Key Questions

The needs analysis involves asking a series of questions of the stakeholders to identify training needs. If the problem is not clear, then start by asking broad questions and narrowing in on more specific questions. Following are some examples of questions to start a needs assessment:

- What are the goals of the company/department?
- What does a well-organized department look like?
- Describe challenges, issues, and barriers surrounding the attainment of company/department goals.
- Describe specific job-related tasks for the various positions within the organization (Job Task Analysis). What are your responsibilities? What is your manager responsible for? What are the responsibilities of your coworkers and members in other departments?
- Describe specific areas of desired improvements within each department.
- What are the core workplace Essential Skills required to meet the goals? (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013, p. 24)

3. Engage Stakeholders

It can be challenging to find time to engage with stakeholders to obtain the needed information, but it is an important step because the data gathered will ensure that training contributes to achieving the goals of the organization.

Strategies to access stakeholders include:

- Creating small work groups to interview a few people at a time;
- Creating written surveys that people can complete on their own time;
- Contacting stakeholders by email or telephone;
- Being considerate of the time when stakeholders are most available to spend time providing the needed information;
- Offering incentives for participating; and
- Keeping meetings short and specific (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

4. Determine Themes

After meeting with the identified stakeholders, training designers can begin to identify themes that emerge from the information gathering, and then review the data and identify patterns, commonalities, things that are surprising, or new information. It is effective to focus on two to three key areas that were identified by most of the stakeholders.

5. Create Training Goals and Objectives

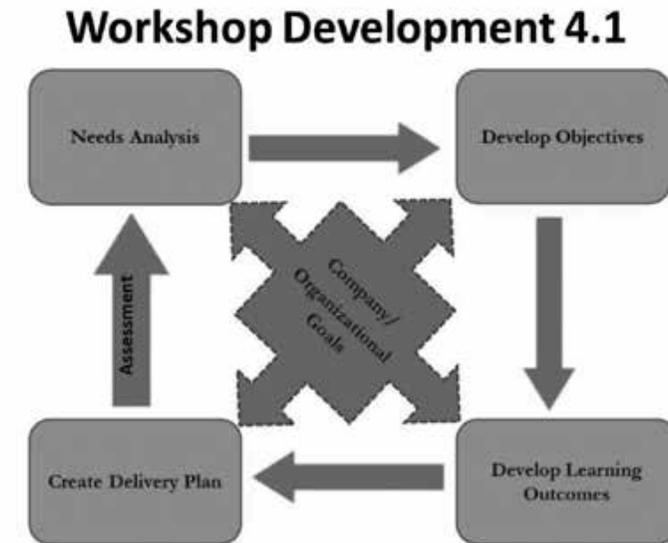
A crucial step in the development process is determining training goals and then communicating them throughout the organization. Goals should be specific and measurable. Training goals, objectives, and learning outcomes are all important elements of the training design process, and are also important in the evaluation phase of the training program.

Step 2: Train

Through strategic, well-planned training programs, the W.E.S.T. approach was to create a culture of development and lifelong learning that contributes to achievement of strategic goals.

The following diagram illustrates the cornerstones of the W.E.S.T. training model. The needs analysis, which has already been discussed in detail, is followed by developing objectives and then identifying learning outcomes, which are used to create a delivery plan including the final lesson plan, which then serves as the design document for developing the training and selecting the delivery method. All of these elements are tied in to the company's organizational goals, and this is critical to creating training that aligns with a company's strategic plan (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

Fig. 3. Workshop Development
(Source: Sidhu & Weaver, 2013)



1. Connecting to the Needs Analysis

After a strategic effort has been made to assess needs before training, the next step is to create training programs that are job-related and specific with measurable outcomes that will change productivity and effectiveness for both employees and the organization as a whole.

Developing effective training is much easier when a needs assessment has been conducted. After interviewing employees and managers about what they believe will add to effectiveness and productivity, common threads can be identified, as well as the specific needs of each individual to determine how to address them through more targeted one-on-one or on-the-job training.

During the project, we always ensured that we described to our participants which Essential Skills were being addressed within the training by including this information in the learning objectives, learning outcomes, a special slide, note, or comment (e.g., document use, computer skills, etc.).

2. Developing Objectives

An objective is a statement of the intended general outcome of a unit or program, which describes a more global learning outcome.

Learning objectives describe the goals of the training, the main topics, and content. These objectives are closely tied to the company’s goals, mission statements, and strategic initiatives, and in the W.E.S.T. model, they also address specific Essential Skills (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

3. Developing Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes clearly articulate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that learners will gain from the workshop or class by specifying new behaviors that learners will acquire or develop. They begin with an action verb and describe something observable or measurable.

Learning outcomes should specify what learners should be able to do on the job as a result of the training. These things fall into three possible categories (domains):

- Thinking, knowledge (cognitive domain);
- Doing, skills (psychomotor domain);
- Feeling, attitudes (affective domain) (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956).

4. Creating the Lesson Plan

While the lesson plan serves as a guide for the lesson developer, it is also a road map for the instructor who will deliver the training. The key components of a lesson plan (title, duration, required materials, objectives, outcomes) ensure that the developed training meets the needs of the learners and fulfills the required objectives for the organization.

The lesson plan includes some basic information about the topic of the training and who it’s for (learner profile, the Essential Skills that will be addressed in the training, and the specific objectives of the lesson). It should contain a note about any resources that will be required by both instructor and learners, and provide guidance for instructors, such

as showing pictures or models, asking leading questions, or providing reviews of previous lessons that are relevant to continuing instruction on the topic. Lesson plans also include a detailed outline of the planned content and the time allotted for each section, as well as applied activities so that learners can practice their skills. A summary of the outcomes and related session questions concludes the lesson plan.

Prior to developing a lesson plan, it is important to establish the method used to deliver the lesson. Table 1 lists different types of delivery methods commonly used to conduct training. Each offers strengths and weaknesses; therefore, it is important to evaluate and identify the method that meets both the needs of the organization and the learners.

Table 1. *Delivery Methods*

Delivery Method	Description	Strengths	Weaknesses
Classroom/ Instructor- Led Training	An instructor teaches training in a classroom to a group of learners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The instructor is present to answer questions and offer alternative explanations when learners don’t understand the material. • It is interactive—learners and instructors can have interactive discussions and take part in group or individual activities to enhance learning. • The instructor may be an expert on the content of the material, and therefore provide greater opportunities for learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring an instructor and procuring a training facility can be costly. • Taking a group of workers away from their jobs all at the same time may negatively impact business. • Not all learners learn at the same pace, so modulating the pace of the training can be challenging to engage those who learn quickly while not leaving behind those who take longer to assimilate the content.

<p>Mentoring/ On-the-Job Training</p>	<p>An experienced coworker or supervisor coaches and provides on-the-job hands-on training to learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is generally conducted in a one-on-one situation or in small groups, so it can take place at a pace that is suited for the learner(s). • It is specific and on-the-job, so the training is targeted at the specific tasks that must be performed by workers on the job. • The mentor is experienced in the work tasks covered, so he/she can explain how the tasks should be completed, and then supervise the learners as they complete the tasks and offer immediate feedback. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentoring is more time-consuming and if there are many learners, it can take a long time to complete the training.
<p>E-Learning— Facilitated</p>	<p>An instructor oversees a classroom of learners as they work through a computer-based learning program.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners can ask questions of the instructor or each other, while completing hands-on training on the computer. • Less costly and resource intensive than pure instructor-led learning because there may be less development time on the part of the instructor if the e-learning is purchased from an outside vendor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the e-learning is not specifically developed for the learners' needs and work tasks, then it may not be as effective as customized training that targets the specific needs of the learners. • May be more challenging for learners who are not computer-literate.

<p>E-Learning— Self-Paced</p>	<p>Learners independently work through a self-paced computer-based training session without supervision. There may be an online help facility to assist learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners can complete training on their own schedule at their own pace. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be more challenging for workers who are less experienced with the computer or who do not learn well on their own.
<p>Blended Learning</p>	<p>A combination of instructor-led training in a classroom and self-paced e-learning, or one-on-one instructor guidance combined with e-learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines the advantages of instructor-led training, facilitated e-learning and self-paced e-learning. 	<p>It also combines many of the disadvantages.</p>
<p>Self-Paced Independent Learning</p>	<p>Learners have a self-paced training program, such as a workbook or self-study guide and they complete it on their own without instruction. It is not computer-based.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners can complete training on their own schedule at their own pace. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be more challenging for learners who do not learn well on their own. • It may be more difficult to monitor if and when learners have completed the training and/or they may procrastinate and not complete it in a timely manner.

(Source: Sidhu & Weaver, 2013, p. 32)

While each mode of training delivery has its pros and cons, each one is best suited for certain types of content and learner requirements, so it cannot be concluded that one mode is superior to others. Choosing the right training delivery method to meet the needs of the organization and the employees is critical.

Consider learner needs and expectations. Workers may have expectations about training methods, desired activities and topics, which should be considered when developing a training plan. If employees' expectations are not met, then the training may not meet an organization's objectives (Bacal & Associates, n.d.). For example, an older workforce, or workers who do not usually use a computer, may learn better from instructor-led training, as opposed to computer-based training. Alternatively, in a technology-based business, workers are highly computer-literate, and thus online delivery or other self-paced computer-based training may be the most effective mode of training. Skills such as typing or using software programs may be more effectively learned by hands-on-training than a lecture.

When training is specifically linked to organizational goals and learners' work tasks, learners are more engaged and the training yields better results to both the organization and the employees. Additionally, when workers are able to learn by performing the specific tasks that they need to perform on the job, they become more empowered to be self-sufficient. Skills learned in training programs must be easily transferred back to the real world by ensuring that the training is delivered when it's needed so that learners immediately apply their new skills (Brown, 2008).

Knowing how learners learn the best helps to build training that is more engaging. By considering whether they are visual learners, auditory learners, kinesthetic learners, or multimodal learners, training can be developed to suit the learning styles of the students. "For example, when learning a different language, some learners must see the words written and spelled in order to better assimilate the information (visual learners), whereas some learners must hear them spoken for the pronunciation to better learn the words (auditory learners). Some learners assimilate information better when they are able to have hands-on experience

(kinesthetic learners), while some learners are multimodal, preferring to see the information presented in a number of different modes for more effective learning. Do they need to practice with guidance? What is their current skill level? All of these factors should be considered while developing the training to ensure that employees will be most engaged in the sessions" (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013, p. 34).

Variety in the delivery modes also helps learners to stay more engaged in the training, so even within a single lesson, a combination of lecture, multimedia, and hands-on delivery will help learners to remain more interested. Variety will also increase chances of meeting the needs of learners with different learning styles (Bacal & Associates, n.d.).

Training Sustainability

A continuous learning plan ensures that learning outcomes are reinforced and new skills and concepts are introduced when appropriate, either for the same workers, for new workers, or for workers in other areas of the business (Brown, 2008). Developing sustainability plans is a critical component of ensuring that workplace training initiatives continue to provide learning opportunities beyond the initial training programs. Creating mentors and developing trainers are two methods that will support the momentum of training initiatives, and these are the approaches used in the W.E.S.T.

1. Mentorship:

Mentorship is a learning relationship between an experienced person, who is adept at the work skills that must be transferred, and a learner. A mentor takes on the responsibility of transferring skills to a learner by instructing, providing feedback, coaching, and encouraging the learner on the job (Canadian Construction Sector Council, 2009).

W.E.S.T. adopted the Six Steps to Mentorship, as outlined by the Canadian Construction Sector Council (2009):

1. **Identify the point of the lesson**—the mentor sets the tone for the training and describes the context in which the skill or task is completed;
2. **Link the lesson**—the mentor demonstrates how the skill or behavior is connected to the overall process in which it takes place;
3. **Demonstrate the skill**—the mentor demonstrates the skill or task so that the learner observes how it is done correctly;
4. **Provide opportunity for practice**—the mentor gives the learner an opportunity to practice the skill;
5. **Give feedback**—the mentor offers feedback to the learner after he or she practices the skill so that the learner knows how to improve. The feedback offers encouragement and makes suggestions to correct errors or improve performance; and
6. **Assess progress**—the mentor monitors the learner’s progress and decides when the learner is prepared to move on to the next task (Canadian Construction Sector Council, 2009).

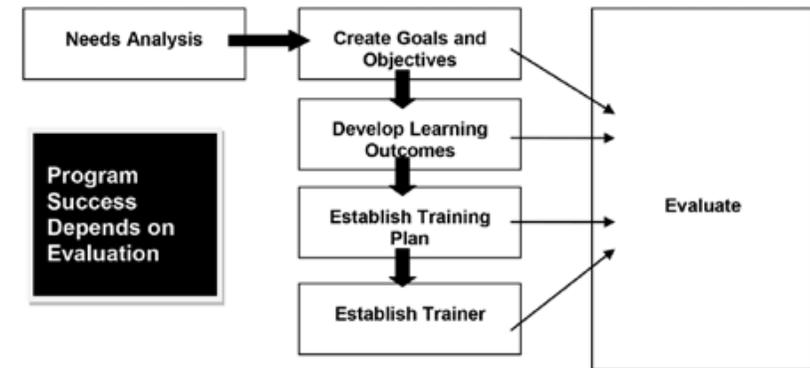
2. Train the Trainers

One of the primary intentions of developing trainers in the organization is to ensure consistency and quality in training. The goal is to ultimately benefit both workers and the organization by offering consistent and effective training that is linked to the strategy of the organization leading to improved performance and a happier, more qualified workforce.

Transferring training skills to team leaders and more experienced workers also reduces training costs because workers within the organization develop their skills to train those with less experience, thus reducing the need to invest in external training.

Step 3: Evaluate

Fig. 4. Evaluate for Program Success
(Source: Sidhu & Weaver, 2013, p. 39)



Evaluation of the training plays a vital role and is important at all stages of training to ensure ongoing program success. Information for evaluating the effectiveness of training is collected both formally and informally by talking to employees directly about their experience or by running focus groups to talk to several employees at once. Surveys with a series of specific questions about the training can also be conducted by email or telephone interviews. Evaluation is done to measure the success of training and its outcomes and to identify areas that may need further development (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

Evaluation should start at the needs analysis stage when organizations identify training goals and objectives, which are then measured during the evaluation stage.

Stages of Evaluations

Regardless of the stage of development, the one basic question to ask is:

Did we accomplish what we set out to do?

The W.E.S.T. approach to evaluation consisted of two parts:

1. Accurately identifying factor(s) to be measured, and
2. Determining the method to be used to measure the factor(s).

It is best to initiate the evaluation process at the training stage to gather the most specific information.

Evaluate the Training Experience

While all aspects of training should be evaluated, a great way to begin the evaluation process is to collect data from participants about their training experience to learn about what worked, what didn't work, or how participants felt about the training. This information relates to the experience during the training session. It's also important to evaluate the trainer because the trainer needs to be skilled at both delivery and identifying the key outcomes of the session.

To effectively evaluate learning outcomes, the specific outcomes to be measured need to be identified. Learning outcomes describe learners' new behaviors after a learning experience by stating how the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that the learners will develop through the training will be demonstrated after training. It is important to identify the specific behavior that will be acquired as a result of training, as only the behavior we can see can be measured. Often outcomes are not explicitly stated, which limits the ability to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of the training. Keep this in mind: if you can't see it, you can't measure it!

Sometimes, a pre-assessment survey, a survey that participants complete before they begin the training, can also be implemented to invite learners to assess their skills and knowledge about both the subject matter and their Essential Skills before beginning training. After the training, they can determine whether they have improved knowledge on the topic. The instructor can also use this tool to initiate discussions with learners about progress or goals, and comment on areas that the learner should continue to develop (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

After the training is completed, educators can review the feedback collected and measure the outcomes to determine the effectiveness of training goals and objectives. Statements related to goals and objectives are often broad and address the overall targets.

Step 4: Develop and Empower

Successful employee development programs consider both the needs of the employees and the organization's goals. Empowerment is a process that enables employees to think, take action, take control, and make decisions in an autonomous way. The role of an employer is to remove barriers that prevent staff from acting empowered.

Creating a culture of lifelong learning and people development can result in a workforce that is eager to learn, easily adapts when presented with change and increases business flexibility. Research showed that empowerment enables employee behaviors and attitudes, and empowered employees are more satisfied and committed at work, more loyal and less stressed. The most critical behaviors affected by empowerment are performance, innovation, and organizational citizenship (Simmons, 2011). An effective method for attracting and retaining skilled workers is to consider adopting a culture of learning as a long-term commitment.

Employee empowerment is a strategy that fosters an environment in which people are dynamic, happy, and produce real results. A culture of empowerment reinforces accomplishments, employee contribution, and places value on the people who work within an organization. Leaders share organizational goals, company direction, and encourage staff to contribute to the company's vision. Staff empowerment creates an environment of trust; one in which the employees' intentions are trusted and where employers trust that staff will make the right decisions.

Empowered employees who embrace continuous learning are the foundation of a successful organization. Employers must truly recognize the power and benefits of employee empowerment. It's essential that employers take the time to learn about employee empowerment, and the principles and the practices that encourage empowerment. The next step is to trust employees; employers should believe that they will make the right decisions and provide opportunities for them to be involved in decision making, especially regarding their own jobs and careers. Employers provide the information and tools to ensure that employees are well equipped to make informed decisions and provide feedback, before, during, and after training. Communication is essential, and employers need to listen, learn, and provide leadership when employees need it. Finally, employees should be rewarded and recognized for engaging in empowered behaviors. Empowering employees has dramatic results.

W.E.S.T. Project Challenges and Outcomes

The goals of the W.E.S.T. project were:

- To increase community awareness and access to workplace training that embedded literacy and Essential Skills (Sidhu, 2013); and
- To increase capacity for workplace training that embeds literacy and Essential Skills within three communities in the region of Surrey, BC (Sidhu, 2013).

The project objectives were met by providing training with embedded Essential Skills to over fifty-five employees. While the overall project was considered to be highly successful and the developed model to have achieved its objectives, there were two main challenges that were encountered during the project:

1. The most unexpected challenge that occurred was **resistance to training**. Although we were able to create a training culture within the W.E.S.T. project that was inclusive, accessible, and supportive in nature, we were surprised to be met with resistance at both the management and employee levels. Management-level resistance often showed itself in passive-aggressive patterns, such as continually canceling training dates, inability to commit to training outcomes, and ongoing requests that seemed beyond the scope of the project. For employees, it can be embarrassing to self-identify their shortcomings in Essential Skills due to fears of job loss or possible limitations to future advancement (Sidhu, 2013).

As was anticipated, we were able to readily address resistance at the employee level with change efforts by preparing in advance and taking a proactive approach to ensuring confidentiality and building trust.

By conducting ongoing assessments, we were able to conclude that resistance to change can exist at all levels. Taking a proactive approach to assessing such possible resistance, at all levels, is critical for training implementation.

2. The **logistics of scheduling training** was another challenge and although expected, it significantly shifted training delivery plans.

Factors such as finding coverage for staff that participated in training, selecting times within a day to deliver training, finding champions to assist with delivery, locating training space, etc.—all affected our ability to deliver training according to a logical and timely schedule within the project plan. As a result—our “lesson learned” and a great success of the program—was creating a variety of delivery methods including:

- Classroom instructor-led training;
- E-learning—facilitated;
- E-learning—self-paced;
- Blended learning; and
- Self-paced independent learning (see Table 1)

Efforts within the project that will further contribute to capacity building, community awareness, and access include:

- Creation of a **website** with numerous training tools including lesson plans and slide presentations, assessment tools, Essential Skills resources, articles, and the final resource guide at www.westproject.ca. The W.E.S.T. website provides over forty Essential Skills tools including:
 - Lesson plans and slide presentations for various Essential Skills training workshops,
 - Assessment tools,
 - Evaluation tools, and
 - Essential Skills articles and resources (also provided in a CD along with the *Resource Guide*) (Sidhu, 2013).
- Creation of the final *Resource Guide for Small Businesses*

The *Resource Guide* is designed to:

- Describe “literacy” and “Essential Skills”;
- Bring focus to the fact that employees’ Essential Skills issues can affect a business’s productivity, effectiveness, adaptability, creativity, and success either positively or negatively;
- Help decision makers in an organization identify the business benefits and understand why addressing and improving

- employee Essential Skills can lead to improvements in daily operations and increased profitability; and
- Support managers of small businesses in assessing, developing, and delivering appropriate training to enhance the skills and effectiveness of their workers (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013).

Embedding Essential Skills Training and Development in College and University Programs to Better Prepare Graduates for the Workplace: Drawing from the W.E.S.T. Pilot Project

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, n.d.), in addition to a solid knowledge of the new grad's field, noted by earning a good GPA and participation in internships, employers are looking for grads who have a number of "soft" skills (NACE, 2012). During a recent City University Advisory Board meeting for the business degree programs, a list of skills that graduates need to master to land and keep a job were identified. Board members agreed that graduates must be competent in their major subject and also possess the necessary theory and knowledge to master the technical part of the job. Essential Skills that contribute to competency in technical skills include document use, numeracy, and computer skills.

According to a study of what corporations seek when they hire MBAs, "the three most desired capabilities are communication skills, interpersonal skills and initiative—all of which are elements of emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 2000, p. 13).

Examples of the skills that were identified by the City University Advisory Board are listening, a sense of humor, manners, social pleasantries, ability for small talk, acceptable social communications, respect for one another and their superiors, phone etiquette, and understanding office politics. *Soft skills* is a more encompassing term for required work skills that involve communication, working with others, continuous learning, and thinking. The Essential Skills include some literacy and technical skills as well as soft skills. In short, in addition to subject matter knowledge, graduates need the Essential Skills of communicating, working with others, thinking and continuous learning, and soft skills to be successful in the workplace.

According to a study of what corporations seek when they hire MBAs, "the three most desired capabilities are communication skills, interpersonal skills, and initiative—all of which are elements of emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 2000, p. 13).

We argue that Essential Skills development is critical and should be integrated into educational programs at the postsecondary level. As many students are expected to demonstrate competence in both technical knowledge and soft skills development, should postsecondary programming not foster such skill development?

The framework from the W.E.S.T. pilot project can be adapted to meet the needs of Essential Skills, including soft skills training in the classroom. Educators can create learning activities that integrate the required workplace Essential Skills to further prepare students for their careers. Teaching skills related to communications, working with others, and thinking and then encouraging continuous learning will better equip students to be prepared for the competitive workforce. Many instructors already foster and encourage these skills in their classrooms and some schools include special program orientation courses or tutorials to enhance and develop skills in their students to better prepare them for learning while at college or university, which of course, leads to graduates who are better prepared to enter the workforce.

Teaching Essential Skills: Adapting the Framework

Let's explore how the W.E.S.T. model can be adapted in an academic setting.

Step 1: ASSESS—Conduct Initial and Ongoing Assessments

A critical component of designing any skill development program is the needs analysis. Educators need to learn more about their students, including current skill levels, the skills required for future work, and the

skills required for academic course work. Learning about students, their needs, and their goals early in the learning journey will assist with knowledge and skill acquisition.

In a college or university setting, conducting a needs analysis should be done at both the admissions stage by assessing students' Essential Skills upon entry to the program, and assessment can also be done at an individual course level to determine needs specific to the course.

At the **admissions or program level**, needs analysis for program development can be conducted in a variety of methods:

- Conducting one-on-one information interviews with the students;
- Creating online surveys;
- Engaging in focus groups or small group discussions;
- Inviting students to interview each other;
- Inviting learners to conduct self-assessments of skill levels;
- Formal testing/assessments to determine skill levels (such as TEFOL for English language development or math assessments for numeracy development); or
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada offers several tools and resources for Essential Skills assessment.¹

Part of the needs analysis should also include a review of the particular skills students need to be successful in the workplace upon graduation. An educator may decide to select two to three core skills he or she believes are critical for workplace success. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada developed Essential Skills profiles for over 350 jobs outlining the top three Essential Skills of that profession.

Although teaching Essential Skills (or soft skills) may seem like a daunting task, especially in courses that are already content-heavy, at a **course level**, skills development can be achieved with small adaptations to activities that already exist in course work by starting with one of the two end goals in mind:

1. Conduct a needs analysis to determine *what skills need to be developed*.
2. Conduct a needs analysis on a *particular skill to assess skill gaps*.

Methods to assess students' skill levels at the course level might include:

- Creating activities and conducting observations from a "distance" (i.e., observing students as they participate in group activities)
- Reviewing past course assignments/exams/assessments (looking for trends/themes)

Case 1. Needs Analysis

Needs Analysis in Action

In a Practical Nursing program, the department head (DH) questioned the high failure rate in the Pharmacology course. After careful review of student exams, quizzes, and assignments, it was evident that most students were failing in the medication conversion tables. After further review, the DH realized students were unable to complete basic mathematical operations with fractions (multiplying, dividing, adding, and subtracting fractions).

As a result, the Pharmacology course integrated a numeracy section to teach basic operations with fractions.

At the individual course level, start with the course syllabus. What assessments, activities and tasks are expected of students? What are the learning outcomes? What skills do students require to successfully complete the course outcomes? What challenges have students presented in the past in completing the course requirements? This is an excellent way of initiating a skill development program. Draw on existing course requirements and identify the *specific tasks* required to complete the expected assessment. Take a look at the sample course assessment outline below:

Table 2. Sample Course Assessment

Course Assessment	Overall Course %	Required Essential Skills
Group Presentation	30	Working with Others Oral Communication Thinking Skills (plan and organize job tasks)

Final Essay	20	Thinking Skills (plan and organize job tasks, finding information, use critical thinking) Writing and Reading Skills Document Use Computer Use
Midterm Exam	20	Document Use Reading and Writing Skills
Final Exam	30	Document Use Reading and Writing Skills

Conduct a skills assessment. For the purpose of this discussion, let's explore the first assessment—group presentation (worth 30% of the final mark). Ask yourself:

- In the past, how often did you deal with group dynamic issues? Student complaints about peers? Personality conflicts?
- How often have you observed presentations and noticed that not all group members contributed during the presentation?
- Did students complain about the amount of time required to complete the task?

Regardless of the clear assignment expectations, grading rubrics, and ongoing instructor support, it is inevitable that educators will deal with ongoing Essential Skills gaps if such skills are not developed. To expect a student to engage in group tasks without teaching the core skills required to function within a group, educators will continually burden themselves with ongoing student challenges and students will continue to feel the strain of poor group functioning. Furthermore, employers will find themselves challenged with such dynamics in the workplace. Group work requires students to:

- Understand group dynamics including the stages of group formation
- Recognize and appreciate personality styles
- Demonstrate an ability to use and manage time effectively
- Implement priority management skills

- Identify and resolve problems including conflict management skills
- Demonstrate an ability to give and receive feedback effectively
- Plan and organize job tasks

Just as a nursing student needs to divide fractions to complete a medication conversion, students require each of the skills presented to complete a group presentation, yet such skills are often not taught in a classroom setting.

Step 2: TRAIN AND EVALUATE: Creating Task-Related and Specific Training, and Evaluating Effectively

Similar to the example of the nursing department head, it is important to create skill development programs that are directly connected to the specific tasks related to the skill. Teaching calculus or topics in numeracy that are not *directly connected* to the conversion chart in the Pharmacology course would not serve the students' needs. In fact, it would likely deter students from participating at all! Adults must be able to identify the reason for learning something. It must be applicable to their personal or professional lives if it is to be of any value (Barnes, 2005). As educators, in defining program objectives, we must make sure that the theories and concepts are relevant to the learners' needs.

Drawing from the data collected in the needs analysis will assist in creating specific, focus-based skills programs. Program directors can design program-wide orientation programs or credit courses that enhance essential skills by including training that teaches students how to work on teams, how to access and use documents in the library, how to use the online course platform, business writing courses, professionalism and ethics courses, organizational culture courses, etc. Instructors can use the information to create training objectives and determine learning outcomes for their specific courses. The information gathered will further assist educators in identifying the optimal delivery methodology—ensuring programs that are engaging and student-centered in their approaches.

Clearly communicating learning outcomes to students is an important step in skill development. The article "The Effects on Students of Pre-Announced Learning Objectives and Immediate Performance Feedback"

(Kothare, 1993) reports interesting research on the effect of being clear about learning outcomes—students will be more focused and their learning will be strengthened with clearly communicated outcomes.²

Case 2. *Specific and Task-Related Training*

Specific and Task-Related Training

A psychology instructor in a 100-level course decides to implement a group assignment valued at 30 percent of the overall course mark. The students are expected to write a paper and present their findings to the class in a presentation at the end of the term.

After explaining the details of the assignment, the instructor presents a thirty-minute lesson on team development. She outlines the various stages of team formation and connects the topic to the experience students will have as they work in their groups.

A few weeks later, the instructor engages in a class discussion about the stages of team formation. She invites the students to share their thoughts, challenges, and next steps to overcome the challenges. She may initiate a team contract so that students develop an agreement with each other about their roles, responsibilities, and desired outcomes for the team project.

At the end of the term, the instructor invites students to reflect on the stages of team formation and connects this discussion to a workplace setting, inviting students to discuss how their experience in their groups can be transferred to the workplace.

A similar application is to provide students with a peer evaluation form to complete after working on a group assignment. This allows students to give and receive feedback on their ability to work in a group. When this skill is tied to grading rubrics, it reinforces the importance of working well with others

Application: Skills Training in the Classroom

There are endless possibilities when it comes to skill development; the challenge is how to start and how much to integrate skill development into the classroom. Of course, skills-training integration (or embedding) will depend on the course, the instructor, the students, and the institution, but there are simple steps that educators can take to enhance skill development that might not be as intimidating as a skills development program. Reviewing the course syllabus is a great start, but here are some examples of simple applications:

- Creating classroom codes of conduct that outline professional expectations of the group, including appropriate interpersonal behaviors;
- Providing links or information that invite learners to learn more about group formation, personality styles, and working with others (or other topics);
- Creating team-building activities early in a course that are “fun and interactive” yet teach core group processing skills;
- Including active-listening workshops that include feedback;
- Modeling and demonstrating active-listening skills that include feedback skills;
- Clearly communicating the core skills required to successfully complete class assessments (prompting continuous learning and inviting students to seek support as needed);
- Engaging in reflective practice activities and ongoing student self-assessment;
- Providing a scaffold approach to writing assignments (invite students to submit parts of an overall essay to assess and offer feedback on writing skills);
- Teaching appropriate research skills (i.e., document use—provide a one-page article and invite students to identify and retrieve key information);
- Assigning journal article reviews to give students an opportunity to use documents, read and understand them;
- Including role playing (practicing skills);

- Incorporating and encouraging classroom or online discussions to practice oral or written communication and assimilation of ideas and concepts from class reading;
- Applying Bloom's taxonomy of learning domains to ensure that students practice all three domains (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor) to be able to improve their thinking Essential Skill (cognitive domain) and their interpersonal-emotional (soft) skills (affective domain), etc. (Bloom et al., 1956).

Step 3: EVALUATE—Evaluating Programs as an Integral Part of Program Development

Critical to any effective program is evaluation. Evaluation exists at every level and should be used to determine the effectiveness and effect on student performance, course expectations and requirements, and overall effectiveness of programs implemented. Just as presented in the pilot project, the question to ask is:

Did we accomplish what we set out to do?

Assessing student progress of skill development can be conducted in a variety of methods including:

- Pre- and post-assessments (conducted formally through tests or surveys or informally through observations);
- Student feedback indicating skill development;
- Comparisons based on historical data (i.e., are the classes able to work more effectively in groups compared to previous classes?);
- Grading rubrics for assignments that require students to demonstrate Essential Skills in their work, such as points for writing, grammar, spelling and punctuation, or computer skills (e.g., developing a graph or chart to demonstrate an idea or concept).

Step 4: EMPOWER—Educate and Empower

The student is the center of any skill development program. Creating, delivering, and initiating a skills program develops the whole

student—beyond technical skills training. It assists students in effectively completing course requirements and better prepares graduates for the workforce. Student skills development is a joint, ongoing effort of both the educator and the student. Similar to workplace training, consider the following factors when creating programs for skill development among students:

- Provide opportunities to put learning acquired during training into use in the actual class activities/assessments;
- Support students to use the skills acquired in training; give students a chance to demonstrate new skills;
- Encourage active student participation in decision making about training goals as a whole.

Conclusion

Creating a culture of lifelong learning and student development will contribute to a workforce that is competent in Essential Skills, eager to learn, adaptable to change, and responsive to business flexibility. Graduates who are competent in Essential Skills will be sought after by recruiters and will favorably influence the reputations of the universities from which they graduate (Sidhu & Weaver, 2013). The W.E.S.T. model that embeds Essential Skills in training and emphasizes Train, Develop, Evaluate, and Empower with ongoing assessment and continuous improvement can be adapted to an academic environment to achieve these results and better prepare students for the world beyond the doors of our classrooms.

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Endnotes

1. To learn more visit: www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/LES/tools_resources/tools.shtml.
2. To review the article visit: www.senecac.on.ca/quarterly/1993-vol01-num01-fall/kothare.html.