

Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy: "Workplace Skills in the Basin and Boundary"

Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Beta Test Report | February 2023

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The DWLES Project

Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy's "Workplace Skills in the Basin and Boundary" (WSBB) beta test was part of the Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills (DWLES) project, which was a collaborative project that was managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda) and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Learning Metrix.

The overall goal of the DWLES project was to better understand how literacy organizations can support hard-to-reach remote and rural communities by integrating literacy and essential skills (LES) and employment services for a range of displaced workers, with a particular focus on equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, newcomers, people with disabilities, and others. The project began in 2019 and beta-testing was done in 2021 and 2022.

The project began with 10 literacy organizations in British Columbia (BC) being selected to be part of the data collection phase of the project. This included a literature review, interviews with the BC literacy organizations, focus groups with key stakeholders, and a survey and interviews with displaced workers in each of the 10 communities.

Following the completion of this background research, 11 literacy organizations across Canada—including 7 from the earlier phase—were selected for the beta-test phase of the project, which included implementing and evaluating projects that integrated LES and employment services targeted for displaced workers in their communities.

The purpose of the beta-test phase was to uncover and disseminate evidence-based LES support, training models, and promising practices to inform development of programs and models to improve the employability of displaced workers across Canada. The beta-test projects can be viewed as trial or experimental interventions, and thus were intended to be small in terms of the numbers of learners, with the potential to be scaled up to a full pilot study if deemed successful.

The following report provides an overview of the WSBB beta test that was implemented by Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL).

Columbia Basin and Boundary, BC

The geography of the Columbia Basin and Boundary region in the southeastern corner of British Columbia is stunning and dynamic. The region consists of all the watersheds that flow into the Columbia River in Canada and operates in the unceded traditional territories of the Ktunaxa, Lheidli T'enneh, Secwépemc, Sinixt and Syilx Nations. These lands are home to many Indigenous peoples, including the Métis. The Basin and Boundary region is 87,000 km² and has a population of 180,000 people.

The area includes many small and mid-size towns, where local economies are mostly dependent on tourism, forestry, mining, and agriculture. It also includes bigger centres that have more robust economies that include the public sector, residential development and transportation. Local manufacturing primarily focuses on lumber and wood products, machinery, equipment, fabricating, and food and beverage products.

The Columbia Basin and Boundary region is populated with numerous small communities that have been affected by mill closures, a significant loss of tourism, and layoffs in the oil patch in Alberta as numerous residents are remote workers. For example, in 2015, the



Canfor sawmill in Canal Flats closed resulting in 74 workers unemployed. As Canfor was the town's main employer, this greatly affected the community both financially and socially.

CBAL is a recognized and valued non-profit organization in southeast BC in the Columbia Basin and Boundary region. The organization focuses on strengthening partnerships and connections in the region through community literacy and settlement programs that are offered at no cost to participants. There are 16 Community Literacy Outreach Coordinators who work in 77 communities throughout the region.

Workplace Skills in the Basin and Boundary

The WSBB beta-test project addressed the need for people who are unemployed or underemployed to upgrade their workplace and essential skills. The original plan for the beta test was to offer customized one-to-one support and in small groups, delivered both in-person and virtually. This part of the beta test ran from April to September 2021 with ten learners who received support. However, due to challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as with recruitment in general, the beta test was modified to focus specifically on Canadian newcomers.



Three workshops were offered to newcomers in November and December 2021 in a group format. They were held both in person and virtually with an option to attend each either during the day or in the evening. The workshops included the following topics: working with others, Canadian employment laws, and workplace communication. The workshops incorporated PowerPoint presentations, small group discussions, Q & A, and easy to understand material. Fourteen learners participated in the workshops.

Highlights from WSBB

There were several highlights that were identified by learners and staff about WSBB:

* Staff at other community-based organizations (e.g., employment services) were **keen to refer individuals to CBAL for the one-to-one supports**. Staff at these organizations identified learners who lacked LES skills and referred them to CBAL for tailored support.

* While the workshops were designed to be standalone learning opportunities, **most learners took part in all three workshops**. Learners shared that the three topics (i.e., working with others, Canadian employment laws, and workplace communication) were very relevant and beneficial to them and their learning needs.

Promising practices from WSBB

There were several promising practices that emerged from WSBB that strengthened learner engagement while supporting learners in their personal growth and building their LES and job search skills.



Offering one-to-one support tailored to learners' specific needs.

The first phase of CBAL's beta test provided learners with the opportunity to work towards their specific LES-related goals. Using an extensive intake form allowed CBAL staff to understand each learner's unique goals and needs and to create a customized plan with specific learning outcomes.



Providing supports to help learners access and participate in the beta test.

The workshops were offered virtually through Zoom, so learners were required to have access to a computer and internet in order to attend the WSBB workshops. Since some participants did not have personal access to these resources, learners were encouraged to access space and a computer at one of CBAL's offices, if needed.



Providing incentives to learners.

To support recruitment efforts and encourage participation, each learner who took part in all three workshops in phase two of the beta test were provided with a \$25 gift card. Lunch was also provided to those who participated in the workshops from a CBAL office.

What we learned from WSBB

1 Community-based programming requires an adaptable and flexible approach.

After designing and implementing the original beta test, CBAL identified that WSBB was not reaching the number of learners that were initially expected. While the initial idea of one-to-one support was still offered to learners if they were interested, the primary focus of the beta test shifted to offering workshops in a virtual, group format. Reflecting on participant rates and engagement allowed CBAL to adapt the programming as needed and respond to new opportunities for learner engagement.

2 Differences in the expected group of learners compared to the actual group of learners can spark ideas for new programming.

CBAL's initial beta test idea did not have a specific focus on supporting newcomers. However, at least half of the individuals who received one-to-one support in the first phase were newcomers, suggesting that there was a need to focus on this population of learners. As a result, CBAL adapted its approach, focusing on workplace skills that newcomers identified as being important for their employability.

Additional project information

This report is part of a series of 11 individual beta test reports developed for the DWLES project. To learn more about the DWLES project and to access project reports, please visit: decoda.ca/our-work/displaced-workers-landing.

