

Literacy Quesnel Society: "Skills Discovery"

Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills Project

Pilot Project Report | December 2023

Lauren Brooks-Cleator, Shawn de Raaf, & Patrick Wray

Quesnel, BC

DWLES Project Overview

Literacy Quesnel Society's "Skills Discovery" pilot project 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).

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 first phase of the project began in June 2019 and finished in June 2022. It included two components: background data collection and analysis and beta-test projects. Detailed implementation and outcomes findings of this phase of the project can be found in the [Second Annual Report](#) and the [Final Project Report](#), respectively.

The project received an extension to December 2023 to implement a second phase focused on pilot projects. The purpose of this phase of the research was to expand select organizations' beta-test projects into scalable and transferable pilot projects. Upon completion of the beta-test project phase of DWLES and receiving funding for a pilot phase, five literacy organizations were selected to continue for the pilot phase of the project. The organizations were selected based on their successes and lessons learned from the beta-test phase.

Literacy Quesnel's pilot project involved developing a new program – Skills Discovery – based on lessons learned from the original beta-test that led to expanding the reach of the programming to a new partner organization that supported curriculum development and participant recruitment. The following profile provides an overview of this new pilot, including the transition from the beta-test to pilot phase, program implementation, key findings, and promising practices.



Beta Test to Pilot Project

As part of the original beta-test phase of the DWLES project, Literacy Quesnel Society designed and delivered the Driver Education Preparation Project (DEPP). Quesnel has historically been a forest industry town; however, mill closures and industry slowdowns have led to a diversifying economy that has expanded to include education, healthcare, agriculture, mining, and tourism. Many adults who are not working, or who have been displaced from industry-based jobs, are interested in earning different levels of driving licenses as this can provide new job opportunities. However, their ability to successfully complete the driver's license knowledge (i.e., written) test can be hampered by their low literacy skills, comprehension skills, inexperience in writing tests, computer literacy, or a combination of these factors. Thus, DEPP was developed to help people learn the strategies and content to successfully complete their written driver's licence test.

The DEPP beta-test found that learners not only benefitted from learning how to pass their written driver's licence test, but that they also

benefitted more broadly by developing their Skills for Success (e.g., reading, communication, collaboration, and problem solving). It was also found that there was further opportunity to build learners' Skills for Success to enhance their employability. Further, the beta-test lead recognized that access to short, simple, and low-barrier training (such as what was provided through DEPP) that focused on Skills for Success and other job readiness skills was limited in Quesnel. Therefore, Literacy Quesnel engaged with the Work BC office in Quesnel to develop and deliver employment readiness training focusing on Skills for Success called the Skills Discovery program.

Program Implementation

During the planning stage of the Skills Discovery program, the pilot project lead met with project partners, including Work BC and the College of New Caledonia, to discuss program development, logistics, recruitment, and facilitation. The result was the development of a program that placed particular emphasis on identifying and communicating transferable skills, understanding personality characteristics



and their alignment with different types of jobs, career planning, writing resumes and cover letters, and interviewing. The program also included guest speakers, such as the College of New Caledonia, to discuss the different services and programs accessible through the College.

The program was held at the Work BC office in Quesnel, as they had sufficient space and technology to run the program and were more accessible by public transit than Literacy Quesnel's location. Work BC also played a large role in recruitment, with many employment counsellors referring their clients to the program. Almost all participants reported that they found out about the program from their Work BC employment counsellor.

The program was initially going to be six weeks long, but after further discussion and reflection on the learnings from DEPP, project partners felt that some displaced workers wanted access to training where they could build their skills in a short amount of time and then start looking for employment. Consequently, the Skills Discovery program was three weeks long and ran for four hours, five days per week.

Literacy Quesnel worked with a consultant to develop and deliver the Skills Discovery program. The consultant had substantial previous experience developing and delivering two- to three-day employment readiness workshops to Work BC clients and had extensive knowledge and connections within the Quesnel community. The Skills Discovery program was an opportunity for the facilitator to connect with learners over a longer period than the one-off workshops, as well as to tailor the curriculum to learners' unique experiences and needs as each cohort progressed.

At the beginning of the program, learners were given the Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA) to understand their workplace communications and numeracy levels. The assessment tool was provided through the partnership with the College of New Caledonia. For learners that needed additional literacy support as identified through CAMERA, Literacy Quesnel was able to provide one-on-one support through their Community Adult Literacy Program coordinator. Notably, some learners shared that they accessed this one-on-one support provided by Literacy Quesnel.

Key Findings

In total, 22 learners participated in the Skills Discovery program, with almost all learners fully completing the program. Learners ranged in age from 19–60+ years old, with most learners ranging in age from 30–39 years old. Eight learners self-identified as Indigenous and seven learners self-identified as having a disability.

Findings from the surveys, focus groups, and follow-up interviews indicate that the Skills Discovery program helped learners gain more clarity and confidence with their next steps to employment, take concrete steps towards employment, increase their social supports networks, and increase their understanding of their transferable skills.

Confidence in Next Steps

There were a number of reasons why learners had been out of the workforce, but most shared that it was due to being on medical leave, not finding a job after completing their education, or

taking on the role of a stay-at-home parent. Some learners described that it was challenging to find the motivation and confidence to figure out their ideal career path or take the next steps toward finding employment. To support learners' next steps, Skills Discovery helped them create and clarify their career goals and identify their strengths that aligned with these goals. Some learners already had a career path in mind, but were overwhelmed with how to work towards it, as described by the learner below:

“ Through this course, I've been able to take this big idea and make it smaller, more manageable and get to where I wanted. ”

Other learners knew that they wanted a meaningful career, but were unsure how to achieve it. As described by one learner, their participation in Skills Discovery helped them to identify a career path that aligns with their goals and strengths:

“ [After Skills Discovery] I'm now clear on where I want to go with my future... I'm a single parent and I've just been on assistance for a while. I'm just ready to move on and find the next step in life...[Before Skills Discovery] I was looking for a career and not just another regular part-time job...I just needed to get clarity on where the next step was, what I needed to do and figure out what was going to be better for me and a better fit for me, as far as having a sustainable career for me and my kids and doing something that's also what I would like to do. ”

Some learners described how having more clarity and understanding of their next steps increased their motivation and outlook on their futures. One learner noted:

“ I personally have become more excited about the future as opposed to feeling like I wasn't going anywhere. It was mundane. I had to stay home and heal, but it's sometimes hard to stay home and think about things. So it feels good to be clear on things. I changed in a way that I now know where I want to go and I'm excited about it. ”

Other learners described feeling more positive and less overwhelmed because they now know how to move forward toward employment. One learner described that this was particularly important as they were trying to get back into the workforce:

“ For somebody that's just getting back into the work field and everything, it's very overwhelming, so to have a program [like Skills Discovery] where it sets you up to better set yourself up for success, it takes away from the overwhelmingness of it and it sets you up for success and helps you find your path and what you want to do with it. ”

Taking Next Steps

At the start of the program, almost all learners were unemployed and looking for work and some were underemployed; however, as reported by program staff and in the follow-up interviews with learners, after completing Skills

Discovery, many learners had taken next steps to obtain employment. A few learners found employment and were waiting for their jobs to start, and many had applied and/or interviewed for jobs and were waiting to hear from employers.

After the training, at least one-third of learners were enrolled in further training either with Literacy Quesnel, Work BC, the College of New Caledonia, or another organization. For example, a few participants were registered for Work BC's Pathways to Employment program, which provides participants with job search skills, training in computer skills, and post-secondary training for certificates in fields such as construction, customer service, early childhood education, and security. On-the-job training and work placements with wage subsidies are also included in the program. Other learners described how they had plans to enrol in a college program and either work part-time or volunteer during their schooling.

Increased Social Supports

Learners also described how they developed an increased network of social supports through their participation in Skills Discovery. This support came from both the other learners and the program facilitator. Even though the program was only three weeks long, some learners developed strong friendships with other learners in the program and had plans to continue to connect after the end of the program. Some learners shared that they helped each other with transportation to the program and shared contacts and resources.

One learner spoke of how their strong connection with other learners in the group was

a result of their shared experience with being unemployed and trying to get back into the workforce:

“ The group was very trusting and uplifting. I could trust people – it's not always easy to be in a group like this, but we're all in a similar situation. ”

Another learner described how the learners all supported each other:

“ We walk alongside each other, and we build each other up. We have each other's backs. It's been a really empowering group. ”

The learners also highlighted the strong support provided by the Skills Discovery facilitator. During the focus groups, almost all learners shared their appreciation for the facilitator and the support the facilitator provided them. They felt that the welcoming, open, and comfortable space created by the facilitator helped to foster the relationships within the group. The following is an example of how a learner described some of the ways the facilitator helped the learners feel supported and comfortable in the program:

“ [The facilitator] was pretty great. It's easy learning with her. I never felt stupid. Everyone was accommodated and nothing was rushed. Everything went on our time. ”

Learners also mentioned that the facilitator offered to provide reference letters for the learners who completed the program and encouraged them to reach out or ask for support even once the program had ended. During one of the follow-up interviews, one learner spoke of how they appreciated that the facilitator

provided them with a reference letter that they used in a job application and also continued to keep in touch after the program and inform them of job openings.

Transferable Skills

A primary focus of the Skills Discovery Program was helping learners to identify and describe their transferable skills. While some learners felt that the program was more of a refresher and appreciated the opportunity to review their skills, other learners described how they did not realize that they had transferable skills. The program helped them to identify these skills and communicate them in their job applications.

Some learners mentioned that Skills Discovery helped them to realize the value of their life experience. They were unaware that the skills that they developed through their life experiences were applicable to an employment situation and could be highlighted on job applications. One learner described how the program helped them to realize that they had many transferable skills:

“ It helped me realize the skills that I already have. I just didn't realize they'd be skills that would help me in a job. When I looked at the examples [of transferable skills], I realized I had a bunch of the skills. ”

Additionally, some learners noted that they had been out of work for many years and were a stay-at-home parent. The Skills Discovery program helped them to identify the skills they developed through their experience as a stay-at-home parent and how to communicate this in a job application.

For other learners, identifying their transferable skills opened up more employment opportunities that they did not think were possible. For one learner, identifying their transferable skills helped them to recognize the value in their past non-employment related experiences, which then led to further job possibilities that were not limited to past work experience:

“ I learned that I can use my real life skills more towards what I want to do. You don't just have to work based off of what we've already done in life. I've done a lot of service industry work, but I want to go onto something bigger and better, still in the service industry, but just different. I've figured out that I can use my life skills and build a career out of that, rather than just past experience with jobs. ”

Program Suggestions

Learners provided several suggestions for future iterations of Skills Discovery, including a slightly longer program, as well as additional program activities.

Learners appreciated that the program was short at only three weeks; however, many learners suggested that an additional informal fourth week would be helpful to facilitate a warm handoff. They described that this fourth week could be a drop-in format where learners could work independently, while also receiving guidance and support from the facilitator as they focused on writing resumes and cover letters, preparing for interviews, and communicating with potential employers.

Learners also suggested additional activities to include in the program, such as field trips to education and training institutes in Quesnel and additional guest speakers. Learners who suggested field trips felt that going to local colleges or training centres as a group would help learners know where to go to apply, who to talk to, and make it feel less overwhelming to apply. Learners identified that they could also benefit from additional guest speakers, such as Community Futures and a financial advisor.

Promising Practices from the Pilot Project

In addition to the promising practices from the original beta-test outlined in the [beta-test report](#), two main promising practices emerged from CLA's pilot project, which are described below.

1 Partnering with an employment services organization:

A significant shift from the beta-test to pilot phase for Literacy Quesnel was the addition of two partners – Work BC and the College of New Caledonia. The partners were involved in the initial discussions during the pilot development and supported curriculum development, participant recruitment, and program facilitation. Partnering with a well-established organization focused on employment services (i.e., Work BC) was shown to be of great benefit to Literacy Quesnel and the sustainability of Skills Discovery. In fact, at the completion of the pilot phase of DWLES, the Quesnel branch of Work BC agreed to take over the Skills Discovery program and include it as part of their suite of program offerings.

2 Offering a short program to learners:

Initially, Skills Discovery was going to be offered for six weeks. After initial discussions with program partners, it was decided to instead offer a short three-week program. This decision was made because there were other employment and skills-focused programs available in Quesnel that were a longer commitment. However, partners identified that these programs were not always a realistic option for some participants and thus, a shorter program may better suit learner needs. Based on discussions with learners, they appreciated the opportunity to participate in a short program for a variety of reasons:

- A shorter program was much less overwhelming to commit to than a multiple months-long program;
- It was less challenging to find childcare for only three weeks;
- Some learners were in the process of applying for jobs and needed an opportunity to build up their confidence and motivation to take next steps and apply; and
- Some learners had plans to enrol in a training program within the next few months, but were unsure how to do this and were not confident in their ability to obtain employment while they waited for their program to start.

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.

