

**Integrated Career Skills / ESL Training Pilot:
Computer Repair Technician / ESL Program
Public Report - December 2003
Bow Valley College
Funding Provided by: Alberta Learning, Language Training Programs**

This Integrated Career Repair Technician/ESL Training Pilot was offered to assess the efficacy of the model to integrate technical skills with ESL to provide training leading to employment for immigrants wishing to pursue careers related to education and experience gained in their home countries. Specifically learners were to be provided the opportunity to acquire A+ Certification, improve their English language skills and obtain Canadian work experience leading to employment.

Program Objectives

- Pilot a model for delivering Integrated Training in a technical field as proposed by Alberta Human Resources and Employment.
- Develop the learners' contextualized English language skills related to computer repair employment opportunities. The learners will develop their English proficiency to the level they can successfully master the Computer Repair Technician training and function effectively in the workplace.
- Provide learners with the technical training to become A+ Certified Computer Technicians as recognized by the Computing Technology Industry Association. Graduates of the program will find work in various industries requiring computer repair technicians.

As proposed the Computer Repair – ESL Certificate Program was offered by Bow Valley College as a full-time, thirty-six week program from January 13 to September 26, 2003. A total of seventeen students were registered in the program. The first thirty-two weeks of the program covered the technical training, employability/ customer service skills and ESL instruction through lab and classroom based instruction followed by four weeks of work experience.

A thorough application and acceptance process was put in place to ensure that learners accepted into the program were qualified. The initial phase of the assessment process included a review of the applicant's Canadian Language Benchmarks and educational and employment background. Students also went through a Bow Valley College assessment phase. They wrote the TABE, a math test if necessary, and participated in a personal interview.

The program started on January 13th, and the first activity was a welcome and orientation to the Computer Repair - ESL program. At this time, students were presented with a program handbook that detailed, among other items, program learning outcomes, the grading scale, relevant college policies, performance expectations, and information on college services. They were also issued with a program description. The program consisted of the following courses:

- Program Related ESL (integrated throughout the program)
- Introduction to Computers / Keyboarding
- MS Word
- MS Excel
- MS Access
- MS Outlook
- MS PowerPoint
- Effective Use of the Internet
- Troubleshooting and Maintaining Computer Hardware
- Operating Environments: Windows
- Troubleshooting Windows Operating Systems
- Technical Client Care
- Computer Hardware
- Introduction to Networking
- Command Line Interfaces
- Interpersonal Communication Skills and Teamwork
- Career Advancement Skills
- Industry Field Placement

The final course of the program was the industry field placement. All students were found suitable placements. Employer comments were consistently positive and students were universally in agreement that the industry field placement was a valuable component of the program.

Students have been trained to A+ Certification standards and will be eligible to write the exams after the required period of employment in the industry has been completed.

Attendance in the program was excellent. Most students had 100% attendance in any given month.

Student feedback and an assessment of their satisfaction is always important information to collect. A perception check on progress of the program to date was carried out at the end of March to provide formative direction for the program staff. At that time the consensus was that the program was working well for all the students and comments regarding the instructors were all positive. Further perception checks were conducted in July and August. The ratings were universally positive and the comments were positive and helpful.

Evaluation of the Integrated Technical Career Skills / ESL Model as an effective and efficient approach to skills training for learners with a language barrier

The applicants to this program were typical of many immigrants in Calgary. They were either unemployed or underemployed. Their qualifications from their home countries would lead them to expect to be able to work in jobs that exceeded their current circumstances. A program such as this was highly attractive to these learners who wished to combine specific occupational training while at the same time getting the language support related to the training that they felt they needed in order to be successful.

In this pilot it was decided to integrate the ESL support for the duration of the program and provide one day a week of ESL related to the other courses that were in progress. This strategy was used in the belief that that specific ESL and employability skills are developed more fully when integrated with contextualized skill training. It was also felt that learner motivation would be better supported if the occupational skill training were commenced at the start of the program. An evaluation of the integration strategy used in this program in comparison with that used in another, which was offered simultaneously, where the ESL component was delivered at the start of the program was conducted.

As the ESL training in the Computer Repair - ESL Program was being offered on an ongoing basis, it was possible to tailor it to the current needs of the students and respond to particular issues or difficulties that were presented. There was regular consultation between technical, employability and ESL instructors to ensure that there was strong communication around needs, both to assist the ESL instructor in providing timely interventions and for the ESL instructor to assist the other instructors in strategies that might enhance their teaching of ESL learners. Hence the ESL instruction did not follow a predetermined course outline but was directly linked to what was being taught in the technical courses and responded to real time learning needs. It was of considerable value that the ESL instructor has a very strong and current technical background.

The evaluation that we conducted comparing providing ESL training at the start of the program with training offered throughout the program did not provide evidence to make a strong case for either strategy as a preference. It appeared that the method of ESL integration had little impact on the learner success in courses. The important piece was to provide ESL support. Learners expressed different views on how they would like to see ESL integrated into their program. Many learners did express gratitude for the opportunity to study in an ESL integrated program. Personal preference was clearly a strong factor here.

The benchmarks of the program participants ranged between CLB 6 - 8 upon entry and CLB 6 - 8 upon exit. Sixty per cent of learners did improve their CLB's in one strand over the duration of the program. It is our belief that the integrated approach that was taken was effective. All of the students who completed the program were successful and obtained a BVC certificate.

Anticipated recognition by Alberta Human Resources and Employment of the Integrated Technical Career Skills / ESL Model as an approved form of Integrated Training.

In the fall of 2003, Alberta Human Resources and Employment asked for proposals for Integrated Training Programs. At that time, the College submitted a very comprehensive proposal for a Computer Repair ESL Integrated Training program. The labor market information regarding employment prospects in the IT field were seen as favorable, and employment statistics for the past three Computer Technician Program cohorts also confirmed good employment prospects (CTC cohorts were used since there were no Computer Repair ESL statistics available as the students had not yet completed the program at the time of submission of the proposal). However, the proposal was rejected by AHRE in November 2003 on the grounds that employment prospects for the IT sector were not seen as favorable, and also that the Computer Repair occupational cluster fell into the NOC B category whereas Integrated Training was ideally intended for NOC C and D categories.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. The Program should be designated as an approved program through Skills Development so that students would be eligible for student grants.
2. The Program should be approved by EI so that support would continue while students are in the program.
3. Consideration should be given to determining the best start date; one that ensures the optimum time of year for the practicum portion of the program.
4. A Business Communication course should be added to the curriculum.

The format of integration of the ESL component throughout the program proved to be very effective and beneficial to the students. The program length of 36 weeks should be maintained.