Learning Capacities in the Community and Workplace: An Action Research Project

By Priti Shah

I started by contacting approximately ten non-profit organizations that run literacy and training programs. Three organizations expressed interest around participating in the project; SUCCESS, the literacy department at Douglas College; and the Community Skills Centre. SUCCESS is a twenty year old non-profit agency that serves the multicultural community. They provide programs in employment training, ESL, Interpretation, literacy, settlement and integration and counselling. Douglas College and Community Skills Centre are operated by Vancouver Community College, offer many courses and programs and also serve a very diverse population. In total, I interviewed thirteen literacy students from the two institutions and an additional fourteen students at SUCCESS.

At SUCCESS, there were fourteen students in The Building Services Workers Program, twelve were immigrants and had resided in Canada for five to ten years and two were Canadian born. The immigrant students had, on average, a low to intermediate level of English proficiency. Their previous work experience was in areas like export, tourism, carpentry, gardening, retail, production, and factory operation. Although they considered this program their only option and a stepping stone to other opportunities, the program did not capitalize on their prior skills, knowledge or experience.

I was able to create a very open and comfortable environment in the class. When I explained that the project goals, the SKP and the concept of transferable skills, they expressed excitement about filling out the SKP. In addition to being eager about participating in the project, the participants raised questions on the process of recognition and validation from employers. This a very critical issues that needs more focus. The students were open about sharing information but since their language fluency was low, the terminology in the SKP was difficult to understand. It took four hours and a lot of assistance to complete the forms. The concept of informal learning was quite foreign and the students were not able to connect with the potential value of the SKP. I recommend that individuals who have low English fluency should complete the entire SKP and the interview as a one to one session. This would be more productive for the interviewee and for the project.

Facing the challenge of trying to ensure continual funding and more restrictive eligibility criteria, many community based training programs are compelled to work with people who are the cream of the crop, those with higher levels of skills and experience. Many of these students are placed in jobs which deskill their abilities and eventually they lose the motivation to pursue jobs that interest them or jobs that capitalize on their skills.
and knowledge. The other interesting observation was that in spite of my repeatedly emphasizing that “your skills and learnings from your country are valid and you can write about it in the SKP”, many only wrote about work and programs they were involved in Canada and ignored any learning that occurred in their home countries. One possible explanation for this is that the individuals have internalized the constant rejections they experienced in the Canadian workplace. Since employers demand that workers have Canadian experience, immigrants have come to believe that only experience in Canada matters.

After this experience I realized that if we did more focus groups or interviews with the immigrant groups it would be necessary to make changes to the current SKP form.

The immigrant population who speak English as a second language has a vast range of skills and experiences from their home countries and the revised SKP captures some of that, but only touches the surface. It would be essential to translate the SKP into different languages or to use an interpreter. An addition of settlement and adjustment under major events with culturally appropriate questions would help in identifying survival skills, values and emotional trauma people experience. If the skills were identified and documented, the SKP could boost their self esteem. Since the notion of transferable skills was new to the people in my group, it needs to be explained with examples which are culturally appropriate. I would also stress that it is important to enter into a conversation with employers on transferrable skills. Students tend to believe that the whole exercise of identifying transferrable skills is meaningless without the recognition of employers.

For the next group of interviews I decided that the best method to tap into the students’ informal learning is to conduct individual face to face interviews. I met with literacy students from Douglas College and Community Skills Centre and in total, I interviewed thirteen students. The Douglas College students functioned at a very low literacy level, all were on social assistance and a high number had special needs. The majority of them were Canadian born and from the Caucasian culture aside from two first nations students. The learners at the Community Skills Centre were primarily Caucasian and Canadian born; many with special needs. The age range was also very broad. I found many similar themes emerging from my work with these programs to those that arose in the work with the participants at the SUCCESS program. Overall I found the following themes in the work with the SKP and the interviews.

1. Self confidence and access to information is a necessary tool. In all the groups I found that self-confidence was important to the students in order for them to move forward in work or further study. The people I worked with face major barriers such as cultural and settlement issues, poverty, racism, foreign credential recognition issues, and poor English skills. The systemic racism encountered by ethnic communities led to an internalization of low self-esteem. In addition, gender, race, marital, and class play a significant role in learning.
2. Language relating to personal skills and occupation are very important. If they do not have the language for their learning that skill, the learning is not valid. This relates to the comment that people felt that their previous knowledge and skills were not relevant to a Canadian context if they were not fluent in English. ESL students said that their learning was accelerated when it connected to prior skills and experiences.

3. The need for employer recognition and validation. As I already noted, students felt strongly that without some systemic approach to recognizing and validating their prior knowledge and experience, the exercise was not useful. They also thought that formal qualifications should not be required if one can do the job well.

4. The difficulty of translating survival skills into employability skills. The other observation I made was since other cultures are more holistic than the North American culture and the threshold for tolerance is much higher therefore, immigrants are less likely to critique their survival skills in order to identify the actual learning that has taken place. There is no conscious awareness that there are many skills that arise from surviving and overcoming a traumatic or stressful experience and these skills are transferrable to the workplace.

5. A supportive environment was helpful in promoting learning. There was a preference for classroom training in Canada as there were supports provided. The students told me that having access to information was critical to their learning and that access was facilitated through the structured program environment. In order to continue their education and pursue their dreams, the individuals said they needed counseling, family support and courage. Some students connected an encouragement to reading during childhood as important in establishing an affinity towards reading and learning. A high percentage of interviewees appreciated programs like Job Clubs or transition programs because they provide support and the facts in a blunt and honest manner. Individuals like learning what they need at their own pace and the opportunity to learn in different ways and styles. This was especially significant for older workers with low literacy levels who, affected by downsizing and restructuring, are returning to the classroom.

6. Adults face numerous obstacles upon returning to the classroom. These include time, multiple responsibilities, limited finances, and general frustration. In addition, if an instructor publicized his/her values that contradicted a student’s value system, the student was affected negatively.

7. Learning disabilities and social and emotional problems at home were often not recognized in school. This caused many individuals to lose interest in learning, lower self esteem, turn their feelings inward and not participate or to leave school and give up on learning.

8. Multiple skills sets. Individuals tended to have skills and expertise in three to four different fields which they had learned from a friend, family member, on the job, or a combination of the three