

WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP PROJECT

ACC and partners take part in national pilot program

By DON MacMASTER

A unique new partnership between a rural community college, a national literacy center and an international manufacturing company is proving successful in Northeast Michigan.

Called the Workplace Partnership Project (WPP), it is funded by a grant from the United States Department of Education and is one of only two such pilot programs in Michigan and 80 throughout the country.

The partners, Alpena Community College, Penn State University and Besser Company, are linked in a research and development project to create a model for delivering meaningful instruction in the workplace.

The instructional team is from ACC; consultants and evaluators are from Penn State. And Besser Co. is committing release time to volunteer employees so they can take classes on site.

Feedback is positive

The first round of classes ended last month, and based on the feedback, the partnership is working.

According to Gordon Udell, who represents the shop workers at Besser, quality instruction is precisely what's needed during these tight economic times.

"You start making people feel better about themselves, you're going to have productivity increase," he said.

Instructors Janet Fulton (reading), Kendall Sumerix (math and trigonometry), and Don MacMaster (communications) worked with their students to customize course content. They used real-life situations employees face every day on the job. There are no textbooks; nothing is canned.

In the math class, for example, students worked on metric conversions, a skill necessary for reading product specifications obtained in a foreign market. In the trig class, students learned how to use scientific calculators to find sines, cosines and tangents. In the past, such key shop floor functions too often were left to department leaders to figure out.

In the reading class, speed and comprehension were

stressed. Techniques for scanning and skimming material for topic, main idea, and details were learned. Office workers and union reps, who waded through an enormous amount of paper work every day, found this class especially useful.

In the communications class, a camcorder, was used to allow students to see how others see them when they're trying to get a point across. Students worked on listening skills by working together on a final group project that incorporated the concepts of audience, delivery and message, as well as grammar, punctuation, spelling and transitions.

"I was a poor reader," said Udell. "I didn't know how poor I really was until I took this reading class."

He said that while he started out reading 157 words per minute, "in less than four weeks, I was up to 333 words per minute...And I didn't lose any comprehension."

Understanding adult learners

Rita Macy, WPP manager, came to ACC from Crowder College in southeast Missouri, where she had considerable experience in workplace education. She says that understanding the adult learner is critical to the success of any workplace program.

"The adult learner is a very honest learner," she explained. "They have a purpose for being there and they don't like to waste their time."

Macy believes instructors



BACK IN CLASS are (left to right) Roland Domke, Phil Kirschner, Tom LaCross and Mark Schultz, all Besser Company employees who signed up for a communications class offered through the Workplace Partnership Project (WPP). Alpena Community College was awarded a U.S. Department of Education grant to take part in a nationwide pilot program to create and implement successful work site classes. The second round of classes is winding up this month and feedback on the project has been extremely positive. The college's goal is to develop a work site program model that can be used throughout the state. (WPP photo)

need to be sensitive to doing things that are purposeful. They have to be just as honest with the students as the students are with them.

Ask what it is they need to learn and why they've come; ask how you can help the most and what will keep them coming back.

"We need to listen to what they have to say, then develop strategies...so we don't waste our time, either."

Macy points out it's important not to assume too much about adult learners, and

it's important not to generalize. Each learner is different. From an instructional standpoint, the surest way to failure is by not connecting with them as individuals.

"I am a community educator. I feel that to be a community educator, first you have to believe in community. You have to believe in working with all kinds of different people, and I think the kinds of people often neglected are the adult learners...they want to do some things with their lives that they didn't think they could do. This is one way of helping people zero in on their dreams."

The intent of WPP courses, according to Macy, is not to provide technical assistance soon to be out-dated, but to help employees become better communicators, independent thinkers, resourceful team players and competent problem solvers.

"Couple those skills with years of solid technical experience and you have a very valuable work force," she concluded.

The future of WPP, once the demonstration grant expires in October 1992, could spin toward Oscoda. The closure of Wurtsmith AFB and loss of its \$10 million-a-month payroll will have a severe impact on

the economy of the entire area.

Dr. Curt Davis, dean of instruction at ACC, says the challenge will be to develop a model and a delivery system which can be implemented with a minimum of adjustments at other area companies that want workplace classes.

For Davis, success may be measured by two things. One is to be able to have a positive impact on specific businesses and industries in ACC's five-county service area.

"The other would be if we could say that this model we've developed and perfected is now implemented at other community colleges across Michigan," he said.

"If the net results indicate the project helped to retain and maybe upgrade and maybe actually create job opportunities in our state, then that's the bottom line as far as I can see."

Meanwhile, the second round of WPP classes is nearing completion. Enthusiasm is running high and attendance is good. That was especially impressive during the last two weeks of November, considering that many of the students are avid deer hunters who sacrificed time in the woods to take advantage of a long-term learning opportunity.

Participants explain the value of WPP classes

Besser Company employees in the first Workplace Partnership Project communication class have personally benefitted from their participation. They understand the value of the project, and expressed that understanding as part of the final group project. Here are two excerpts:

"Communication is a key part of everyone's daily life. A person must have the ability to speak effectively as well as listen effectively. Organizing your thoughts, getting your point across, knowing what to say and how to say it are just a few things I learned. We all can talk, but we must communicate to survive." - Mark Schultz

"Communication is a part of life, like a skill is to one's trade. To gain knowledge in life, one has to learn how to communicate efficiently. It's unfortunate many people go through life, unable to enjoy the full advantages of communicating wisely." - Roland Domke