Investing in ABET: More of a waste?
by Zerelde Uys

At a time in the South African training landscape where the concept ‘ABET’ elicits quite negative reactions, why would one bother to invest in yet another ABET programme?

Taking cognisance of the fact that Employers have not seen much of a return on ABET investment, and that learners do not seem to take full advantage of the opportunities judging to the high drop-out rates, one indeed needs to reflect on the sensibility of developing new product or embarking on new projects.

One fact remains though; Literacy levels in South Africa have not improved in the past decade. Enough evidence has been published on the dire state of Literacy and Numeracy levels of our school children, and it is certainly supported by the results of our ELSA (English Literacy Skills Assessment). ELSA is used in the corporate environment as placement guide in recruitment, learning programmes and as diagnostic tool to determine strengths and weaknesses. Listening to employers’ plight for suitably skilled employees (which are founded in the literacy levels of workplace lingua franca) the need for solutions providing trainable employees still remains high priority.

We consider one of the main purposes of the school to be the preparation of the learner to enter adult life as a responsible citizen - including the skills required to enter the workplace. One could spend a lot of energy blaming the system if we look at the coping abilities of our tertiary students and employees. At Kaleidoprax, we choose to rather spend the energy to find solutions for today’s challenges; which is one of the reasons why we chose to re-think the ABET Literacy landscape.

A good place to start in such a project is to examine past practice and critically evaluate the successes and the failures.

We do not believe in:

1. Training adult learners to sit for an examination to determine their competence;
2. Making training the problem of the provider and facilitator alone;
3. Facilitators automatically being quality practitioners with a teaching qualification and a set of learner workbooks in hand;
4. Sustainability of quality learning programmes through volunteer involvement or poorly remunerated practitioners.

We do believe that for an Adult Literacy learning programme to be successful (delivering competent learners who can communicate in the language of their workplace at the required level), five critical issues must be addressed:

1. The outcome of the learning programme must be directed at satisfying the need of the workplace by preparing the learner as suitable communicator in the workplace environment. The learner’s Literacy levels will only be raised if cognition and proficiency in English (thinking and speaking) is the focus of learning. In workplace learning programmes we no longer have the luxury of learning ‘about’ the language. At most, we need to equip employees with real work-life vocabulary and comprehension of the specific environment’s communication requirements. At
lower levels of ABET Literacy, we obviously need to start with foundational principles in acquiring an additional language, but it should be focused on application in life and the workplace - as the definition of functional literacy dictates.

2. The only way to successfully equip learners with skills to think and speak in English is an integrated approach. All four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) must be exercised by every learner in every contact session.

3. No more time for teaching adults like children - the same outcomes should be met, but methodology should be solidly founded in adult learning principles. Accelerated learning is an ideal approach to affect constructivism and we have built in lots of adult-realistic learning activities to get learner buy-in early on in the programme.

4. Classroom learning cannot be separated from workplace application. There simply is not enough time in contact sessions to deliver on the outcomes. Language learning must be driven beyond the classroom and the workplace should be invited into the learning experience. This requires the employer to enter into a ‘joint venture’ with the training provider, and not just ‘out-contract’ the learning process. Although we fully respect the primary focus of workplace to be Production, it is necessary to allow for collaborative efforts to benefit the cause of all stake-holders in the end. ‘Customisation’ of the learning should be the joint effort and will reward all.

5. Learning programme development and management should focus on the key role-player - The Facilitator. We have designed a learning experience with three key aspects added to the original (and very successful) learning material developed by Hough & Horne.

   • A Facilitator Guide not only provides guidelines on preparation and presentation of lessons, but comes with a resource kit of visual and creative learning aids to stimulate active adult learning. It includes tutorials for facilitators on specific aspects that we deem very important as foundational knowledge for the quality facilitator. (This desire to ensure quality learning has led to the opportunity to enrol facilitators in an RPL programme to be awarded the ABET Practitioner Diploma.)

   • An Assessment guide meeting the requirements of ETDQA approval policy leads the compilation of a portfolio of evidence throughout the learning programme to ensure credit awards on successful assessment whilst diagnosing learning issues and correcting in preparation for presenting best evidence.

   • Facilitators are best empowered in a two week Induction programme, including qualifying them as Assessors.

   • A Quality relationship for the duration of learning delivery is essential, and we have designed a quality assurance model where monthly contact between coach/moderator and facilitators will provide reports on progress to all stake-holders and drive the aims of NQF aligned learning programmes.

Kaleidoprax has been awarded programme approval for Hands-on English at ABET Literacy Level 1, 2 and 3 by the ETDQA. Credit awards are done through the quality assurance system of the SETA and do not require an IEB examination process. Kaleidoscope Human Resources (Pty)Ltd trading as The Kaleidoprax Institute has full accreditation status with ETDPSETA. No Umalusi accreditation is required for these ABET short courses.