

**EMPLOYABILITY, STANDARDS, AND STAND OUT 3E
IN THE ADULT AND YOUNG ADULT ESL CLASSROOM
BY ROB JENKINS**

The educational standards movement in the United States has greatly influenced Adult Education. Many of the recent new requirements attached to Adult Education can be traced back to developments over the past 25 years that have led to a focus on employability and accountability.

WIA or the *Workforce Investment Act* of 1998 was replaced in 2015 with WIOA or the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*. The implications of the change are far reaching for Adult Education in the United States. Although both reflect workforce preparation, the latter reflects a new commitment to find connections between the workforce and educational agencies. This has raised new questions about the level of workforce emphasis in Adult Education. ESL in Adult Education has relied heavily in most agencies on life-skill contexts. Different resources and textbooks have approached life skills in different ways. Of course employment is a life skill, but whether or not students are trained in skills beyond units dedicated to employment in textbooks is sometimes suspect.

In 1991, the *Secretaries Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)* issued a report containing specific standards that reflect the soft skills employers look for from employees. Soft skills are essential and are sometimes regarded as more important than the hard skills because they reflect attitudes and general abilities that not only help individuals get a job, but also help them keep a job and excel in jobs or careers. These skills include not only basic skills like communicating effectively, but also skills like making decisions, using technology, and effectively working in teams. It is obvious that these skills can be nurtured throughout a life-skill curriculum and not merely within the context of the workplace.

In 1999, the *National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)* offered additional standards that broadened the range from just workplace skills to include civic or community and family roles. These *Equipped for the Future (EFF)* standards are very similar to SCANS and many are nearly identical. Within the context of life-skill curricula, the standards could be addressed affectively and they provided needed clarification that standards like SCANS did not need to be relegated to a workplace unit in a textbook.

As technology and digital media exploded throughout the world at the turn of the century, the need to redefine life standards that could be reflected in curriculum also emerged. 21st Century Skills were soon identified which included much of what SCANS and EFF identified earlier but updated those skills to include digital literacy. Learners were quickly asked to address more and more demanding content and no longer could be satisfied in merely learning information. The focus on how students learn, accountability, and what students do with what they learn has overshadowed merely learning new information or in language learning memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules. This was first reflected in the K-12 system with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and later with Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) in higher education.

The sometimes controversial *Common Core* standards has been a recent development that promises to transform learning beyond what has been suggested before. Intended for K-12 programs, the original standards were designed and tested by teachers throughout the United States. The controversy seems to reside in the math standards and may be traced more to implementation than to the standards themselves. The English and the math standards share one basic characteristic. Each standard demands students become accountable for their own learning by incorporating critical thinking into the learning process. Students think deeper than the superficial meaning of those topics introduced to them. A new

For more information contact Rob Jenkins – robjenkins.esl@gmail.com

taxonomy that goes beyond Bloom's has been introduced. Webb's Depth of Knowledge or DOK will soon undoubtedly be referred to more often than the tried and true Bloom's.

Soon after *Common Core*, Susan Pimentel was commissioned to address the standards in the context of Adult Education. She developed a set of standards that are known as *College and Career Readiness* or CCRs. The same critical thinking theme plays throughout these important standards. Many states are now requiring adult schools to address these standards in their curricula. This emphasis on college and career includes increased rigor and complexity, critical thinking, and student accountability. New WIOA requirements align with the standards because whether preparing for academic classes or making career choices, the same skills are essential.

After CCR's the English Language Proficiency (ELP) standards for Adult Education were created, designed to connect to the CCR's but they purportedly are not as connected to different levels. The guiding principles include:

1. Adult ELLs have the potential to meet state-adopted challenging academic standards.
2. Adult ELLs represent a diverse population of learners.
3. Adult ELLs' funds of knowledge are a resource for their learning.
4. Social language has an important role in ELLs' English language acquisition process.
5. Three key instructional advances form the basis of state-adopted content standards for English language arts in AE that ELLs must access.
6. Adult ELLs must be able to successfully engage with a wide variety of informational texts.
7. Scaffolding is an essential tool to facilitate ELLs' acquisition of language and content.
8. ELLs with disabilities have specific instructional needs.
9. Multimedia technology aligned to the ELP Standards for AE should be integrated into instruction.
10. Academic language instruction should be incorporated into all content lessons, including mathematics and science.

Following the emphasis of College and Career Readiness came an additional framework called the *Employability Skills Framework*. This was developed to reflect common elements from different industries. It too looks very much like SCANS skills. The common language in SCANS, EFF, 21st Century, and now the Employability Skills Framework support the idea of a common thread.

It is important to understand this history in order to correctly address the new WIOA requirements. What is meant by employability skills? How can they be addressed? The chart below identifies the broad categories of SCANS, EFF, 21st Century Skills, and the Employability Skills Framework.

<u>SCANS</u>	<u>EFF</u>	<u>21st Century</u>	<u>Employability Skills Framework</u>
Basic Skills Thinking Skills Technology Interpersonal Skills Systems Personal Qualities Information Resources	Communication Decision Making Interpersonal Other Lifelong Learning	Life and Career Critical Thinking Technology/Media Information Other Creativity Collaboration	Communication Skills Critical Thinking Skills Technology Use Interpersonal Skills Systems Thinking Personal Qualities Information Use Resource Management Other Applied Academic Skills

In 2001, a major shift in how SCANS were addressed throughout the ESL curriculum was first introduced by a textbook series that provided a more complete approach to classroom instruction including well-structured lessons and clearly defined performance objectives. Stand Out: Standards-Based English correlated SCANS and EFF throughout the curriculum for the first time going beyond the workplace units of the series. Also included at the end of each unit were carefully crafted “team projects” which provided one to two day simulations that allowed students to communicate in ways they might participate in the workplace. In these project based/problem-based activities, students typically incorporate most of the SCANS, EFF, 21st Century Skills, and the Employability Skills Framework.

Also prevalent in all three editions of Stand Out and now clearly marked by bold red-faced text, are an abundance of critical thinking skills that not only provide opportunities for students to engage effectively, but also offer an answer to the College and Career Readiness standards. The Stand Out authors recognized that true critical thinking allows students to engage more realistically and learn more effectively even in the earliest edition.

Even before WIOA requirements demanded more workplace emphasis, Stand Out met them, not as an add-on, but as an integral part of the pedagogy and philosophy. These requirements include a soft-skill workplace emphasis through activities that allow students to work through problems and develop personal and interpersonal skills that are effective in the workplace while strengthening language and communication skills.

The newest edition of Stand Out (2016) with the new subtitle, Evidence-Based Learning for College and Career Readiness, also includes a new emphasis on digital literacy through an Online Workbook and digital literacy worksheets that offer instructors suggestions which provide for digital activities. The third edition has been developed to project a more academic presentation courtesy of National Geographic Learning and includes more rigor throughout but particularly in the new two-page reading spread in each unit that features National Geographic explorers.

In summary, there are several elements that can provide substantial workplace practice to students in the ESL classroom in nearly every lesson and page. All of which are found in the third edition of Stand Out. These include the following:

- an abundance of activities that engage students in critical thinking
- problem-based activities in most lessons
- team projects in each unit
- communicative open-ended activities throughout
- SCANS/EFF/21st Century, Employability Skills Framework activities in most activities
- Digital literacy in the Activity Bank online and the Online Workbook

Also included and highlighted in the Stand Out Lesson Planner are specific tasks that add to the Stand Out emphasis on the workplace. They include the following types of activity:

Collect and organize information

Perform basic computations.

Make decisions & solve problems

Apply technology to a task

Combine ideas and information

Manage money

In conclusion, employability or workplace skills play an important role in all editions of Stand Out and students who work through the curriculum with thoughtful teachers will experience many if not all of the soft skills they will need for success in the workplace.