

LITERACY POLICY: GETTING CANADA READY FOR THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Glenn Pound



According to several international studies, Canada does well in the education field. Yet, says Glenn Pound from the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, a recent, comprehensive international survey shows that 42 percent of Canadians scored below a functional level of literacy, that this rate has not improved over the last 10 years, and that Canadian youth are actually faring worse. In this article, Pound reviews the numbers, the innovative work being done in various provinces to try and address the problem, and argues that in order to remedy the situation, "our strategies to deal with this issue will need to take a wider view of adult basic education and begin to see it as not just a labour market issue but also a social justice issue."

Plusieurs études internationales concluent à la réussite du Canada dans le domaine de l'éducation. Mais Glenn Pound, du Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, rappelle qu'une récente enquête mondiale classait 42 p. 100 des Canadiens au-dessous du niveau d'alphabétisation fonctionnelle, que ce taux n'a connu aucune amélioration en dix ans et que la situation est plus grave encore chez les jeunes. L'auteur analyse ici les données du problème, décrit les mesures novatrices adoptées par diverses provinces pour faire face à la situation et soutient que les stratégies visant à résoudre la question devront intégrer une vision élargie de l'éducation des adultes qui va au-delà du marché du travail pour en faire un enjeu de justice sociale.

Far too many Canadian adults are not being properly prepared for the knowledge economy. This has serious negative impacts not only on our prosperity, but on our entire social fabric. Education is a top policy priority for any country, and in Canada it is more or less a standing item on our national agenda, but it appears that we are emphasizing the wrong principles. An over-emphasis on labour market objectives has undermined the virtues of learning as an end in itself, so that many students are alienated, unmotivated, and are not finding their way on the road to lifelong learning.

This has resulted in what could be thought of as a human resources crisis. When we consider that 42 percent of Canadians are below what the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (2005) has determined to be a functional level of literacy, that the rates have not improved since the last survey more than ten years ago, and that our youth are actually faring worse, it would seem that we do indeed have a crisis on our hands. This suggests that our strategies to deal with the issue, based on a labour market approach, have not proven effective in remedying our adult education malaise, and that we need to review this approach.

You may wonder how 42 percent of Canadians could be functionally illiterate. Especially when common wisdom tells us that Canada is a leading nation of the information age with universal education for all. The shock and confusion may be due, in part, to the fact that literacy measures are often presented in a different context. That is, with other quality of life measure like gross domestic product and life expectancy at birth. In this way, the United Nations presents Brazil as having 88 percent literacy rates and Canada with 99 percent. The difference being that literacy measures like these are based on an arbitrary standard like the ability to sign a name, which does nothing to represent a population on the literacy continuum.

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS) is a far more comprehensive measure of adult literacy. It is a joint project of Statistics Canada, the US National Center for Education Statistics, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). A follow-up to the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), it is intended to provide empirical research on which policy decisions can be informed. The ALLS involved Canada, Bermuda, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, the United States and the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon, and tested

four domains of proficiency: prose, document, numeracy, and problem-solving.

The report, *Learning a Living: The First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* was released by Statistics Canada in May 2005. It reveals that Canada ranked roughly in the middle, slightly ahead of the United States on all four scales. It also shows that there is a decline in literacy scores among Canada's youth and a literacy gap between users and non-users of technology. Finally, it makes clear that Canada's scores have not improved significantly since 1994 when the IALS was conducted (see figure 1).

The ALLS, as the title of its report indicates — *Learning a Living and Earning Skills* — reflects an increased global concern with a labour market point of view on adult education policies. Internationally, there is a great deal of interest in workforce mobility and looking across cultural contexts to identify and measure an inventory of essential skills. In fact, the ALLS is part of a larger conceptual framework called DeSeCo (Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations), a project led by the Swiss national statistics office, with support from Canada and the US, and implemented under the OECD.

This is part of a global trend to map skill profiles to occupations in the work-

place so that every occupation can be fragmented into a detailed inventory of micro-skills. These skills inventories have their purpose, but attempts to extend them across a range of occupations can lead to artificial and decontextualized categories that have little relevance to real life. These categorizations are often unable to account for the creative and fluid ways that human skills and abilities overlap and reinforce each other in a learning environment, nor do they consider the wider social, psychological, and cultural context of the workplace.

This policy discourse, by its very nature, can require such a degree of abstraction that it becomes necessary to revisit the essentials. Rather than perceiving the economy as a tool for the people to exchange goods and services, the current policy framework for adult basic education looks at people as tools of the economy: an obvious case of switching the cart for the horse. Further, when we consider that society is a larger whole of which the economy is only a part, and that education is designed to prepare people for the economy but also for the larger society, then it should not be surprising that policies framed in this perspective have proven ineffective.

In Canada, research bears this out and has shown various patterns of non-participation in current models of basic education programming. According to a national study, *Nonparticipation in Literacy and Upgrading Programs* (2002), only 5 to 10 percent of adults who require literacy and upgrading ever enrol in a program, and many of those who do, drop out. These patterns are often related to program design and policy factors that unwittingly represent barriers to participation. These include long waiting lists, the lack of a suitable program in their neighbourhood, lack of childcare services, inappropriate schedules, and/or teaching methodologies that may not be relevant to the lives and goals of adult literacy students.

In order to make programs more accessible to a larger number of learners, the adult education policies will need to

take a wider view of adult basic education and begin to see it as not just a labour market issue but also a social justice issue.

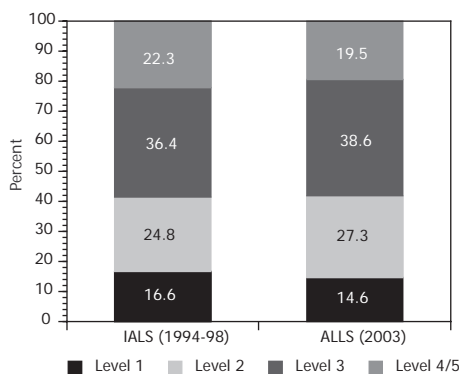
A body of recent research, collectively known as the "new literacy studies," has shown that it is now possible to view literacy learning through the lens of social and cultural relationships, in a way that recognizes that adults with low literacy engage in informal learning practices in their homes, communities, and workplaces. This view has proven highly effective in several European countries and may be the key to increasing participation in Canada among adults with literacy needs who have not been able to access literacy programming and to speed the progress of those who are enrolled.

Literacy is a complex issue that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives (citizenship, health, labour, community, education) and, in Canada, it has been characterized by a lack of policy focus, or at best, a changing policy focus over the years. In provincial jurisdictions it was not unusual for adult basic education to have a somewhat transient status, shifting ministries every few years.

However, in the late 1980s, when Canada began to fully engage in the global economy, policy-makers on all fronts became preoccupied with productivity and competitiveness as never before. At around the same time, in 1988, the Canadian Business Task Force estimated that low levels of literacy were costing our society approximately \$10.7 billion annually. During this period, we were beginning to see the awesome implications of the communications revolution, which continues to change the way we deal with information and to redefine what we mean by literacy.

The basis for the strategy at that time was the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). Founded in 1987 on a five-year mandate from Human Resources and Development Canada, it was intended to coordinate the provinces, the voluntary sector and the private sector for the activities of International Literacy Year, proclaimed by the OECD in 1990. Many of

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF CANADIAN POPULATION (16 TO 65) AT EACH PROSE LITERACY LEVEL, IN THE IALS AND THE ALLS



Note: Differences at each level between the IALS and the ALLS are not statistically significant.
Source: ALLS, 2003; IALS, 1994, 1998.

our current policies and interventions are based in studies and campaigns that were generated through the NLS. Since then their mandate has been extended and their funding increased significantly, but because of the arms-length relation to the provincial jurisdiction over education, they are prevented from directing any of their funds to actual teaching. Nonetheless, without the NLS, adult literacy initiatives in this country would be at a significant disadvantage. Despite this federal attention and investment, a 1992 study by the Canadian Association for Adult Education and the Centre for Policy Studies in Education found that governments at that time were not serious about creating a literate society, that mandates for literacy were seldom deeply entrenched and that policy discussions did not have clear goals or there was no consensus on the strategies for attaining them. That same year the federal Prosperity Secretariat commissioned a national study of the problems and issues from the perspective of those working in the field. This study found that adult illiteracy was a long-term, multi-faceted, national problem that required a long-term, multi-faceted, national solution.

The above use of the term illiteracy may indicate another reason why our strategies have been relatively ineffective, representing as it does the deficit-model perspective of adult literacy, which provided the theoretical orientation for much of the research and policy during the 1990s. This view emphasizes what people *can't* do, rather than what they *can* do, and suggests that literacy learners are passive recipients of knowledge rather than partners in the learning process. It also contributes to the view that there is an undifferentiated mass of people in need of help. This has a homogenizing effect that makes it difficult to properly appreciate the dimensions of the problem. Thus, the media, the public and the policy-makers often misunderstand the problem by placing it squarely on the shoulders of the individual, while overlooking the root and systemic causes.

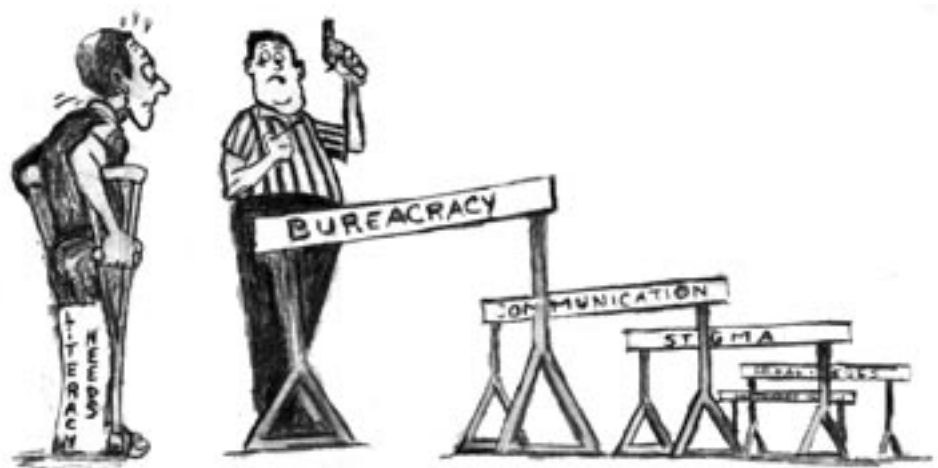
Today, researchers and educators have a different theoretical orientation. Rather than a dichotomous "have-or-have-not" view, literacy is now more accurately perceived as a continuum of skills. Instead of being seen as an ability that is developed during the early school years, it is viewed as an advancing set of skills, knowledge and strategies that individuals build on throughout their lives.

This view is well established at the policy level in many European countries, especially the Nordic countries, which, incidentally, scored the highest on the ALLS. For example, Norway performed the highest on all four scales. Sweden did not participate in the ALLS, but in the 1994 IALS they performed the highest in all categories. The progressive European commitment to these principles is well documented. For instance, 1996 was declared European Year of Lifelong Learning. That same year, two major papers (UNESCO's *Learning: The Treasure Within* and the OECD's *Lifelong Learning for All*) advocated a major shift in education policy and practice along the lines of a lifelong-learning paradigm.

We are still struggling to develop a coherent and effective strategic policy to address this problem, but

currently there are several exciting initiatives across the country at the front-line and the research levels. For instance, the Reading and Writing Centre in Duncan, British Columbia, is an upgrading program where adults who want to improve their reading, writing and math skills also take part in the running of the centre. This program operates on the assumption that literacy learning is a process of self-development. The tremendous success of this program affirms that being literate includes a range of knowledge and skills about getting along in the world that is wider than just the technical abilities to decode and encode written language.

Research funded through the National Literacy Secretariat also demonstrated the value of lifelong learning approaches and the positive implications for attracting and retaining students. For example, a recent project entitled *Informal Learning and Media Perceptions of Adults with Low Literacy Skills*, administered through the University of Ottawa and headed up by Maurice Taylor, investigated adult literacy learning from two perspectives: an insider's view of the informal learning practices of adult literacy learners, and the mainstream media. This research has contributed



Courtesy Glenn Pound

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to an understanding of the learning lives of adult literacy learners as family members, neighbours, volunteers, and employees, and finds that although they may not rely on traditional literacy methods in their life roles, they are engaged in everyday learning practices that need to be recognized and integrated at the policy level. Like most people, they are involved in self-directed learning projects such as domestic carpentry, family budgeting, and affordable housing. This research demonstrates that when adult literacy policies are aligned with potential students' life roles and existing learning practices, a gateway will be created that will increase participation in adult literacy programming.

A national project also funded by the NLS entitled *Identifying Inclusive Models of Lifelong Learning in Canada*, administered through the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy, was designed to study community-learning groups across Canada that are accessible to citizens of all levels of education and abilities to use written language. Although this research was just at the conclusion of the first year of a two and one-half year investigation at the time of writing, it is becoming clear that workers in the literacy field have much to learn from inclusive community groups. In addition to providing opportunities for learning, these groups provide opportunities for literacy learning, as fishers in Digby County, Nova Scotia, learn to read material about fisheries policy, and psychiatric survivors in Toronto's Parkdale community work together to understand and secure their legal rights. The research team on this project is also coming to realize that the approach to learning in Aboriginal circles, where the knowledge of all participants is respected equally, is one of Canada's most valuable contributions to adult learning and a model for the world.

In speaking with the project's facilitator, Guy Ewing, some interesting insights about communities of practice, and how these might be brought to bear on a national policy level, came to light. Ewing believes that the existing infrastructure at the community level is the most appropriate level at which to implement innovative opportunities around adult learning. He points out that there are many federal issues, like public health, human rights, the environment, citizenship, elections, etc., that people need to learn about regardless of their reading level. If each feder-

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al ministry were able to address lifelong learning as it pertains to its area and make those resources available at the community level, a community group that wanted to teach people about health, for instance, could find help at the federal level.

So there is some very innovative work being done in Canada, from the practitioners' perspective, as well as from the research perspective. But from a policy perspective, we are still relatively unorganized. The situation in 2005 is a patchwork of provincial policies across the country. Funding comes through

such a variety of different streams — sectors, ministries and departments, sometimes provincial and sometimes federal — that reporting is very fragmented, which makes it almost impossible to come up with accurate measurement or cost estimates. A federal commitment to a comprehensive, national adult literacy strategy would consolidate all the great work that has already been accomplished across the provinces and would be a source of badly needed resources.

The federal government has recently made some positive gestures toward increased investment in adult education through labour market development agreements with the provinces. Investment in this type of agreement is sorely lacking in all regions of Canada, but throwing money at adult education as a labour market issue does not get results. The ALLS is a testament to that and shows that this had done nothing to improve our literacy rates.

The literacy field in Toronto, long known for its learner-centred, progressive practices, is a model for an integrated, community-driven approach that federal strategies might apply to all regions across the country. Known for a strong community-based focus, Toronto has a variety of literacy programming, which is funded through the provincial Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. Students can access one-to-one, small groups and classrooms, depending on their needs. Providers include multi-service community centres, libraries, school boards, and colleges, which cooperate to serve their communities through our community planning process. For instance, the Toronto District School Board is highly integrated into the adult literacy community and is the largest single literacy provider in the country.

Having said that, we are not without our problems. Ontario is also subject to the labour market perspective on adult education, and integration

has come to mean integration with employment stakeholders. Through Ontario Works we have mandatory literacy testing, and many social service recipients are being coerced into literacy programming. Also, the system is drastically underfunded, and existing programming is reaching a small fraction of the adults who actually need help.

With so many adults having difficulty understanding the information required to function effectively in our knowledge-based society, and relatively few participating in the programs that have been traditionally designed to meet this imperative, the need for new approaches and policy revisions has never been more pressing. It is well documented that those with the highest levels of educational attainment have the most abundant opportunities for learning (i.e., reimbursement for professional development and tuition). It is also evident that those who lack even the most basic education and skills have the least access to the life-long learning resources that should enrich the lives of individuals, families, and communities. As the bar of achievement for most adult learners continues to rise, the prospects for those who are not served by traditional approaches continues to sink.

The research supporting increased investment in adult basic education is abundantly available from reliable sources. For instance, a recent OECD study showed that a 1 percent increase in adult literacy levels would generate a 1.5 percent *permanent* increase in the GDP per capita. In Canada, this would amount to about \$18 billion a year that could be re-invested in Canadians' priorities. New research from Statistics Canada (February 2005) also shows that investment in education is three times as important to economic growth over the long run as investment in physical capital such

as machinery and equipment. Another Statistics Canada study showed that educating the *least* educated has a greater impact on GDP than increasing the skills of those with higher literacy skills, and a recent report from the C.D. Howe Institute states that raising a country's literacy scores by 1 percent relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5 percent relative rise in productivity and a 1.5 percent rise in national income per person.

The same report goes on to state that "while much of the recent policy debate has focused on increased spending to improve public health

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care, not enough attention is being paid to the equally crucial goal of investing in the literacy and numeracy skills of Canada's population."

So it is well established that increased investment and attention is necessary, however, current policies and models are too heavily premised on human capital theory, which is basically an elaboration of the common sense notion that if you see education as an investment in someone's future than it is safe to assume there will be a return on that investment. These arguments are universally valid. They illustrate the effects, or the symptoms, of the problem wonderfully, but they do not address the causes of the problem, or the cure.

To properly address the problem it is necessary to switch from an economic perspective to a social perspective. It comes down to learning, and when people have these opportunities they will become more productive and engaged in our society. Training them in an isolated skill set necessary for an entry level job does not always do that. The entry-level door to the labour mar-

ket is often a revolving one, and many people end up where they started. This is not to say that adult basic education policies cannot have labour market/productivity goals and objectives, but to achieve these goals and objectives there is a need for inclusive policies that allow for more creative, flexible, innovative, and context/community-specific solutions.

Literacy is not a simple issue of reading and writing. It also involves social, cultural and functional codes that help us participate in our society. It means being aware of our rights and privileges as employees,

community members and citizens. The benefits are obvious, not only for the work force, but for the health of our families, the vitality of our communities, the productivity of our population and our spirit as a country.

The ALLS survey has shown that in Canada, the current policy practices have done little to improve Canada's literacy rates. If we want to see some positive results we need a comprehensive adult literacy strategy, which entails a shift in policy orientation so that learning and human development are considered as ends in themselves. The economic benefits of literacy learning are obvious; the question is how to make the learning happen. Economists can quantify the benefits of learning, but lets let the educators qualify how to make it happen.

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