**Literacy Issues and
Options for Action in Canada**

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation is condensed from a paper, prepared at the request of HRDC, entitled "Literacy and the Digital Divide: Options for Action in Canada." It represents the informed opinion of Dr. Kathryn Barker, FuturEd.[1] Dr. Barker had been charged with the task of presenting options for action, by the Government of Canada, to address the problems associated with adult literacy and use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). What follows is a brief discussion of pressing literacy policy issues, and some considered recommendations for policies and actions.

1. LITERACY ISSUES

Literacy -- the individual's ability to understand and use reading, writing and numeracy skills -- is *the* foundation for citizenship, lifelong learning and work in contemporary society. **Literacy demands are growing in number and complexity, and will *continue* to be a foundation to citizenship, lifelong learning and work in the future**.

The nature of active citizenship, lifelong learning and work are all changing, e.g., requiring more use of ICT, more individual responsibility, more demand for and access to choice, more use of information, more stress and constant change, different resources. **This means that conventional literacy is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for active participation in the life and work of the community of the future.** Emerging definitions of literacy include the ability to use ICT, cultural and scientific literacy, media and social literacy, lifestyle/health maintenance, global citizenship, "essential skills" and learning skills. **Democracy is dependent on active citizenship and literacy.**

In that context, literacy has been a policy preoccupation of the federal government for at least the past 14 or so years, i.e., in the lead-up to and celebration of the International Literacy Year, 1991. **However, the "illiteracy" statistics haven't changed in Canada.** Since measurement of literacy in Canada has been undertaken, there has been no improvement in the number of adults with adequate literacy skills, despite various endeavors, e.g.,
- a UN-declared Decade for Literacy, launched with great fanfare and hopes with International Literacy Year in 1991;
- the best efforts of the National Literacy Secretariat of HRDC;
- the public awareness efforts of, e.g., ABC Foundation and Frontier College;
- the charitable efforts of volunteer tutors and fund-raising organizers, e.g., the Celebrity Golf Tournaments;
- countless local and national workshops and conferences, pilot projects, and development activities.

The teaching of literacy falls within the context of "education" which, in Canada, is a provincial jurisdiction. **As the Canadian education system[2] currently operates, it does little or nothing to improve the adult literacy statistics; and in fact, continues to contribute to the problem.** The current Canadian education system does not provide long-term, stable, accountable literacy programs for adults. Nobody does. There is a total disconnect between adult literacy and early literacy education; and there are considerable opportunities to connect the two conceptually through, e.g., content

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area reading, portfolio assessment, and the development of learning records beginning in the elementary years.

We don't need more research before taking action. Established bodies of literature and research have demonstrated how to teach reading, writing and numeracy; how to teach adults; how people learn; problems and barriers to learning; special needs for special populations; how to train literacy workers. As well, we know exactly who is most likely to need literacy skills development, and the characteristics of those individuals. Most adults with literacy problems have personal and/or learning difficulties, low self-esteem and associated social problems. Adults with literacy problems are reported to have two thirds the income of other Canadians. They are twice as likely to be unemployed, and they are much more likely to receive some form of social assistance. And they typically belong to easily identified groups. Although these statements are sweeping generalizations, they can be substantiated through the many research documents available from Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Development Cooperation (OECD), and others. There will always be exceptions to each assertion, but that fact should not impede forward motion. **Too often in the past, the nay-sayers have taken the floor, and time has been devoted to debate rather than action. We know all we need to know to make sweeping changes; but the political will appears to be missing.** How do we do that?

2. OPTIONS FOR ACTION

The following seven different options for action are set out for consideration. They are not mutually exclusive; they simply start from a particular perspective.

2.1. Start from the Lessons Learned Study

Based solely on the formal evaluation reports available, which was a contract stipulation, FuturEd examined adult literacy policies, programs and practices in Canada and other industrialized economies over the past 10 years, and concluded that the following seven lessons were to be learned.

1. *Adult literacy programs benefit both individuals and society, but these benefits have not been fully realized due to insufficient levels of public interest and political support.*

2. *Experiences suggest how to design and deliver quality adult literacy programs, but conditions don't always exist to allow that to happen consistently or systematically.*

3. *While evidence suggests considerable advantages in using learning technologies in adult literacy programming, some question their effectiveness and appropriateness.*

4. *Adult literacy programs aimed at specific target groups appear to have better results, but such programs are not delivered consistently in an effective, efficient or equitable manner.*

5. *Barriers facing adults in need of literacy upgrading limit their capacity to enter and remain in literacy programs.*

6. *It is important that adult literacy learners have a say in policies and programs addressing their needs*
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7. *More systematic evaluation of adult literacy policies, programs and practices is needed to increase accountability and to improve the knowledge base in the field.*

The report, produced by Evaluation and Data Development of HRDC, went on to make three recommendations for future consideration. In addition to (1) creating one comprehensive, consensus-based description of best practice in literacy programs, by pulling together all that is known, to serve as a set of guidelines for planning and evaluation purposes; and (2) imbedding literacy policy in all social policy, the report recommended (3) that all seven lessons be addressed as challenges.

2.2. Focus on Federal Policy

Literacy is not a discrete policy area. The skills and resources required by individuals, the uses of literacy associated public policy problems can be and should be linked to all human resources, economic and social policy. Therefore, one option for the federal government is to focus on cross-policy fertilization -- imbedding literacy into all policies -- public health, crime and security, environment, heritage, economic development. One approach is to enhance existing policies, and a second is to create new policies.

2.2.1. Enhancing Existing Policy

Although they don't provide immediate results, several policy types have been used to bring about change, and the principles should be applied, in this context of literacy, to enhance existing federal government policies. Both the "Plain Language" policy and "Gender-based Analysis" are applied to most policy areas as a lense or filter in the decision-making process. The following are three new "lenses" to develop and apply.

One feasible plan is to develop a "Learning Analysis" policy and process that asks of each policy area: "What skills and knowledge, inherent in this policy area, do Canadians need to acquire and how will they be enabled to do so?"

A second feasible plan is to formally link the issues of literacy and ICT. It takes very little evidence to realize that those people with literacy challenges are probably the same people on the downslope of the Digital Divide. A complete paper on this link is available from FuturEd and/or HRDC.

A third plan is to imbed within the existing policies and programs for the disadvantaged -- women, First Nations, persons with disabilities, and visible minorities -- specific literacy programs and practices. What is most important here is that there be dedicated, long-term funding; grassroots implementation (subsidarity); and formal accountability through quality standards and evaluation.

2.2.2. Creating New Policy

Several policies have been implemented to bring about social and economic change, and again, the principles could be applied to develop new policies aimed at reducing adult literacy problems. For example, the Designated Equity Group policies have been aimed at improving circumstances for women, First Nations, persons with disabilities, and visible minorities. On the premise that there are deficits and disadvantages inherent in their positions -- gender, race, physical abilities and challenges, it is obvious that new, equally-important criteria should be applied to develop additional Equity-seeking Groups for the KBS (Knowledge-based Society):

- the poor (mostly children and single parents, youth living on the streets),
- the learning challenged or skill disadvantaged -- those without basic lifelong learning skills and resources, i.e., conventional and emerging literacies and the necessary tools,
- workers with limited skills for the KBE and an over-developed sense of entitlement (e.g., middle-aged men in resource-extraction and manufacturing industries and teachers).

It may be as simple as the "search and replace" function in word processing -- replace "persons with disabilities" with "persons without lifelong learning skills" and you have a new policy. Replace "women" with "the poor." Replace "visible minorities" with "children" or "unemployable industrial-age workers." It's the ability to use "carrots and sticks" -- both incentives and regulations inherent in formal policy and legislation to change behaviours and advantages -- that need to be tried in this context.

2.3. Focus on People: the Clients and Consumers

Here again there are two possible and complementary approaches. One is to focus on the adults with skills deficits as clients; the other is to focus on all citizens as consumers of government programs and services.

2.3.1. Target and Serve the Clients

In the knowledge that resources are finite, in the short-term, it is right and proper to **target those most in need**. Research has established that certain groups in society are more likely to have literacy deficits and less likely to use technology: the poor, some youth, women, First Nations peoples, those who are incarcerated. They should be the focus of immediate, meaningful attention. And others who are getting attention -- governmental subsidies and programs -- should be side-lined via triage: e.g., seniors and businesses who should be able to invest in their own viability.

Using the IALS measurements, between 18% and 44% of adult Canadians have limited or inadequate literacy skills. It is estimated that a similar number of adult Canadians do not have adequate technology skills. However, not all those individuals think they need to engage in either learning or using advanced skills. It is estimated that less than 6% of adults need literacy upgrading are engaged in programs, despite the fact that learning opportunities exist in some/most communities. First, there are considerable barriers making it difficult for adults to enroll in and attend a learning program. Then, there are additional barriers to completing a program, and for all programs, there is a significant

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drop-out rate. In addition, the quality of programs is highly variable and there is little accountability for program outcomes. Finally, there are few tangible incentives for adults to improve their literacy skills; although adults can and do acquire improved skills, it takes quite some time to achieve even minimal improvements, and "life" doesn't improve very much for most adult learners: they don't suddenly get great jobs, get accepted into college or university, get leadership opportunities.

If skill development programs are going to be offered, two things are necessary. The first is "the carrot".

- There must be real -- measurable, not imaginary -- incentives to elicit genuine personal motivation and commitment. The promise of "a better life" isn't enough.

- The well-understood barriers to engaging in and staying with learning opportunities must be removed or circumvented for adult learners. If the person needs glasses, get them glasses. Daycare? Eldercare? Work to meet the needs of the learning consumer!

- The quality of programs must be excellent, and providers must be accountable for learning. If learners don't make progress in a program, don't fund it. Give vouchers to adult learners and ensure that there is choice in learning options.

- The focus must be on the individuals acquisition of skills and knowledge, with a record of success kept to provide a link to the KBE through Human Resources Accounting (HRA) principles.

The second is "the stick."

- It must be recognized that literacy (conventional and/or emerging) is not only a right, but a responsibility of citizenship.

- If the "carrots" are in place, there must be sanctions for "non-compliance." Maybe you don't get your social assistance cheque or IE if you're not working to improve your literacy/ICT skills.

2.3.2. Provide Learning Consumer Confidence and Protection

The impasse between the provinces and the federal government regarding education can and should be overcome by shifting the focus to learners or consumers from the focus on providers. In fact, provision is the responsibility of the provinces, so let them carry on. There are more than enough consumer-oriented issues at the national level that the federal government could focus on, for example:

- standards for adult, workplace and family learning programs (literacy/ICT)
- interprovincial mobility of students through common curriculum standards so that young people are not "foreign students" in a different province
- interprovincial mobility of education workers through occupational standards for knowledge workers in the E/T industry
- international mobility of students and E/T workers to become global citizens

- sharing of best practices in teaching and learning
- addressing the learning deficits of the identified groups of disadvantaged Canadians
- promoting the assessment and recognition of informal and non-formal learning
- determining how to manage learning in the KBE
- new models of employment relations to remove the confrontational approach to change and decision-making in learning systems

To do this, it is necessary to reframe the concept of client to consumer and establish a service to provide consumer protection.

2.4. Focus on Formal Learning

Working with the ministries related to education, youth, women, and others, it is conceivable that the federal government could work to provide more formal learning opportunity and to modify public education system to accommodate adult learning needs. Each and all of the following concepts could be explored and implemented on a time-limited trial basis.

- Second Chance Schools -- based on the European model, working with CMEC to modify the existing basic skills system
- On-line tutoring -- based on the BC distance education model, creating employment opportunities in rural and remote communities
- Paid / Volunteer Youth Literacy / ICT Corps -- on the Peace Corps model, enhancing the work of Frontier College
- Workplace Schools -- on the model of Labour Education, hold labour unions accountable to provide skills development for the KBE

In light of the fact that (1) federal finances are distributed to the provinces for adult learning (primarily post-secondary education) with no accountability measures, and (2) adult learning needs are not being met, it would be timely to create a ***Canada Learning Act***. The purpose of the Act would be to achieve the same five goals as the Canada Health Act, i.e., equitable access for all Canadians to programs that are effective and efficient.

2.5. Focus on The Future

We have a perfectly fine Industrial Age education system; we just don't need it any more. We need a Knowledge Age system that is:

1. a holistic and integrated system of inputs and resources, processes and practices, outputs and outcomes, with feedback loops and accountability mechanisms – rather than the fragmented elements that currently exist;

2. an open system, responding to the feedback loop and integrated with the external environment – rather than the existing closed "system;"

3. individualized, using current knowledge of how people learn and enabling technologies – rather than bureaucratic;

4. responsive to emerging and changing learning demands – rather than prescriptive about what needs to be learned;

5. cyclical, with continuous and open entrance and exit – rather than linear, age-based and time-based;

6. learner-enabling, i.e., ensuring that all learners are successful to the degree that they can be – rather than learner-screening;

7. globally-focused, taking into account the elements of global citizenship and international work opportunities – in addition to being a local concern;

8. promoting change – rather than maintaining the status quo;

9. an effective, efficient, innovative and accountable industry – rather than a costly, labour-intensive social agency;

10. consumer-oriented – rather than provider-based decision-making;

11. learning-focused – rather than credential or completion-focused.

In learning systems for the KBE, the role of teachers is as assessors and coaches, and they are paid as knowledge workers, i.e., for what they produce; learning -- formal, non-formal and informal -- is managed through an ELR and HRA; learning opportunities are not removed from society, but embedded within other social and economic agencies.

The easiest method is to form a formal Learning Partnership with the CMEC and together take national leadership to change learning systems. One means of doing that could be *Socrates Canada*. Recognizing the pivotal role of education in adapting to change and creating a positive future, the need to find common ground and work to move forward together, the EU established Socrates as an opportunity program -- an opportunity to acquire funding and expertise in the development of education innovation, equity and quality. Canada has the same needs.   Socrates Canada would not be age-based as the EU Socrates is, but a uniquely-Canadian set of programs aimed at achieving FuturEd's vision of a learning system in the future for the future.

2.6. Focus on Change

There is considerable talk about lifelong learning, but very little action from any level of government. Taking the approach that all Canadians, regardless of age, are consumers of lifelong learning products and services, available from the public and private sector, the role of the federal government is to promote access to quality lifelong learning products and services for the future. As has been stated earlier, both literacy and ICT are necessary, foundational tools for lifelong learning. In this context, it makes sense to:

- set firm, numerical goals, timeframes, and measure progress towards achieving them, e.g., improving literacy rates, according to IALS measurements, by 10% or 100% by the year 2010;

- reframe the issue: stop using the deficit model of skills acquisition -- what people *can't* do -- and institute an asset-building model -- identifying and building on what individuals know and can do;

- study and demonstrate Return on Investment and fiscal accountability.

3. NEXT STEPS

For the short and medium-term, the next steps can be undertaken under the auspices of existing federal government programs and policies.

3.1. Immediate and Short-term Actions

Under the auspices of existing federal departments and programs, immediate actions for short-term plans should be to:

1. stop focusing on the problem and focus on solutions - stop telling the world how bad our literacy statistics are as it negatively impacts on foreign investment and economic growth

2. prioritize target groups, make direct connections to them at the grass roots level and provide specialized programs (and disregard some groups, i.e., business, seniors); remove and/or circumvent barriers for those groups: provide what each needs whether childcare or eldercare, transportation, eyeglasses or hearing aides, proper nutrition, personal and/or career counseling, motivation / incentives

3. establish quality standards for programs and hold providers accountable, standards that are based on existing knowledge of best practices but that allow flexibility; incorporate ROI principles and practices

4. get serious about making change

   - remove the charity status of literacy programs and endeavors

   - establish formal learning opportunities that are effective, efficient and equitably accessible to all Canadians

   - train instructors at universities and colleges, i.e., provide certification and appropriate compensation for literacy workers

   - change the approach to instruction from the deficit model to the enhancement model

   - set a target for improvement, and take stock regularly; give credit to the learners if the target is achieved, not to the politicians

   5. directly link literacy and ICT as policy and instructional issues, and find a new label to encompass them both

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- determine the reading skill levels needed to function on the Internet, as part of the next IALS

- look at "lessons learned" in ICT dissemination strategies, e.g., using recent PSE graduates to help small business, for innovative means of making change

- imbed the teaching of literacy and ICT skills in content areas that are meaningful to individuals (and, incidentally, federal government responsibilities): health and wellness, family, citizenship, business development, community advocacy

- develop measurement criteria for ICT skills and use them for designing programs, pre-instruction and post-instruction achievement criteria, additional IALS criteria, prior learning assessment for individuals, and an element of an Electronic Learning Record

6. change the language / terminology used from literacy to lifelong learning and skills improvement for the KBE; incorporate the principles of Human Capital Accounting

7. reward learners with computers and their own Electronic Learning Record

- lend computers to all learners

- using IALS measurements (traditional and emerging criteria) as a pre-test and post-test, give those computers to those who are able to make a skill improvement by one level, regardless of how long it takes

- help each individual to create an inventory of skills and knowledge, and teach them how to maintain the ELR

3.2 Immediate and Medium-term Actions

For the obvious positive optics, something new and daring is required. The following immediate actions should be initiated with long-term activities and implications:

- create a ***Consumer Protection Bureau For Learners***: advocate for each and all individual Canadians at all learning levels, but focus on those who are least advantaged

- create and implement a national lifelong learning policy and the ***Canada Learning Act***

- establish ***Socrates Canada***

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[1] These view are informed by the following relevant experience:
- 20 years experience working in the field of adult and workplace literacy
  - recent completion of the "Lessons Learned in Literacy" project for EDD/HRDC
  - Board membership on the Movement for Canadian Literacy
  - completion of various projects for the National Literacy Secretariat, e.g.,
    - a Guide to Work Skills Analysis,
    - a Guide to Return on Training Investment,
    - an exploration of the Electronic Learning Record
- considerable expertise with learning technologies and ICT
  - service on the Advisory Network of Experts to the OLT
  - undertaking of a study of virtual secondary schools in Canada (for SAEE)
  - undertaking of a project to generate quality standards for on-line education products and services (for OLT)
  - creation of the Consumer's Guides to Learning for CanLearn Interactive
- considerable understanding of HRDC policies and priorities
  - preparation of the policy rational for CanLearn Interactive
  - preparation of a framework for a national lifelong learning policy for HRDC
- extensive connections within Canada's education and training system, having:
  - worked with the Canadian Labour Force Development Board as Education Liaison
  - currently serving on the Board of the Canadian Education Association
  - worked with representatives of CMEC and Industry Canada on projects
  - an established reputation as an education futurist

[2] A word about "Canada's education and training system….It is difficult to use the term "Canada's education and training system" without being chastised, but the reality is that the design and delivery of publicly-funded education and training for children, youth and young adults is more similar between and among provinces, than it is different. There is a Canadian system but it is difficult to work with because there is no coordinated national/pan-Canadian leadership that views the system holistically.