

Adult Literacy in Canada:
Lessons Learned
Dr. Kathryn Chang Barker
For HRDC

Setting the Stage...

Literacy is an essential skill for citizenship, work, and lifelong learning. In Canada, many adults do not have the level of literacy skills they need to participate in the community, the economy and in education or training. According to the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey, about 18% of working age Canadians have extreme difficulty with reading and another 26% have very limited skills.

There are problems, for individuals and for society, associated with low literacy skill levels -- problems that are personal, social, economic and political in nature.

- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Literacy problems may cost business and industry in terms of lost productivity, health and safety problems, training and retraining.

At the same time, some reading materials have become unnecessarily difficult. Technical information from institutions and industries is an example. The levels of literacy and formal education / training demands are increasing, particularly in the workplace. High-level literacy is an essential tool in the knowledge-based economy.

To address these issues, strategies have been developed. The evaluation of various literacy policies, programs and practices reveals a number of lessons to be learned.

Lessons Learned...

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

Where they exist, adult literacy programs can benefit both individuals and all of society: families, employers and industry, and education/training institutions. When adults take part in literacy programs, most acquire more literacy skills. In addition, the list of potential benefits for learners include improved self-confidence, better parenting, employment opportunities, and community leadership.

From family literacy programs, learners most often improve basic skills, self-esteem, problem solving, involvement in community affairs, parenting skills, family relationships, and their children's willingness to learn. Family literacy programs can improve nutrition and health problems, high school drop out rates, teen parenting, joblessness, welfare dependency and social alienation.

From workplace literacy programs, individuals increase basic skill levels, self-confidence and self-esteem, inter-personal and workplace communications, attitudes towards continuing education, job performance, and motivation. Employers and businesses benefit from more motivated and confident workers.

Knowing this, however, has not resulted in a coordinated plan to achieve these benefits. The public appears to accept literacy as a charitable cause but not an educational issue. Therefore, the current education and training system has not been modified to include adult literacy in a meaningful way.

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

The variety of adult literacy programs is almost limitless, with various combinations of paid and volunteer staff, formal and non-formal design, individual and group instruction, flexible and rigorous learning management. There is no "one way" to deliver literacy instruction, and variety in programs and approaches is important. The most effective instructional methods and learning environments are likely different for different kinds of learners.

In general, good practice in adult literacy programs includes trained instructors; a non-threatening learning environment; adult-oriented materials and approaches to teaching and evaluation; and flexible and individualized instruction. Good programs provide support services and links to other service providers. Instruction is focused on the interests of the learners. Programs that offer more than just reading and writing instruction appear to be most successful. The amount of time needed for skill improvement may be decreased by half when targeted programs use materials learners use in everyday work. Unfortunately, not all adults with low literacy skills have access to programs with these characteristics.

3. *Evidence suggests considerable advantages in using learning technologies in adult literacy programs, but there is room for improvement.*

There are many advantages to using computer software with adult students. The learners acquire basic computer skills. Computers give students the privacy they may desire, and they provide fast feedback for each student. Computers are prestigious for the programs and they attract more students.

However, there is no evidence that computers result in dramatic achievement gains, improved attitudes, increased self-esteem, individual content, control, or flexibility. Overall, no type of software has been shown to be particularly more advantageous.

The overall level of interest in using technology is reported to be high. However, studies report that cost, training, inappropriate instruction, and access are problems. Most programs do not have the funds to purchase the hardware and software needed to provide their students with adequate computer access. Much of the software lacks creativity and is geared towards children instead of adults. Staff and volunteers have limited knowledge and training in the use of

technology as a teaching tool. Therefore, consumer electronics and broadcast technologies are surprisingly underused in adult education.

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.*

Different program and teaching approaches are favoured for different learner groups; and targeted programs are the most appropriate and effective. Targeted programs are motivating because of a direct relevance to the learner's situation – for example, the promise of a job, a promotion or some other recognition. It has been concluded that the impact of literacy programs can be improved with better targeting, for example, for offenders, families, employed and unemployed workers, adult upgrading students, adults with learning disabilities, and others.

5. *Adults in need of upgrading face barriers that make it difficult to enter or remain in literacy programs.*

For adults with low level literacy skills, there are barriers to getting started in programs and to completing them. A significant number of individuals who begin literacy programs do not complete their program of study and the number of learners who are unsuccessful for whatever reasons is high. Among the reasons given for “dropping out” of literacy programs are previously acquired negative attitudes toward learning, lack of motivation, work and family responsibilities, and elements of the program delivery such as inappropriate materials and/or lack of learner involvement. Other barriers are:

- ◆ a lack of appropriate, accessible education and training programs;
- ◆ lack of financial resources;
- ◆ lack of support systems including child care and transportation;
- ◆ unsuitable living conditions including poor health and nutrition, and inadequate housing;
- ◆ personal circumstances and attributes including stress and low-self esteem;
- ◆ issues of violence, abuse and addictions;
- ◆ need for eyeglasses or hearing aides;
- ◆ discrimination based on race, class, gender and ability levels.

Many of those adults who have low levels of literacy skill do not consider that they have a problem. Most do not attend adult literacy programs. Between 6% and 10% of those who could or should be in literacy programs actually enroll.

Literacy programs have enabled some to improve their literacy skills. However, programs to provide literacy instruction and skills upgrading have had mixed success. Problems with literacy programs include unstable funding, untrained personnel, and limited accountability. Suggestions made by program staff and researchers for improving programs include increasing the program funding, hiring more staff, expanding learner participation in guiding the program, arranging for good child care, and improving the assessment and documentation of learners' progress. Suggestions made by funders and sponsors include demonstrating accountability through evaluation. Paid and volunteer teaching / tutoring staff have unmet and ongoing learning needs.

6. *It is important that adult literacy learners have a say in policies and programs addressing their needs.*

To gain the benefits of adult literacy programs for individuals and for society, the barriers to participation and completion must be systematically removed and the acknowledged problems with programs must be addressed. To do this, an important strategy is to involve learners in decision-making about the programs and policies. A very small number of actual learners, with assistance from government and NGOs, have been able to advocate for themselves. The majority of students in literacy programs demonstrate a strong commitment to learning, a keen understanding of the issues that affect their lives, and a willingness to become involved in making positive choices for themselves and their families. To increase success rates, adult literacy strategies should focus on the customers and seek to meet their needs.

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.*

Consistent evaluation would contribute to the systematic planning, development and accountability of all types of adult literacy interventions in the future. Literacy policies, programs and practices have not been consistently evaluated; and assistance is needed with this for the future. Many critical issues do not appear to have been evaluated, such as provincial/territorial literacy education policies and programs; the actual effects or impacts of programs on learners; the means by which to encourage potential learners to join programs, i.e., the rewards to improved literacy skills for adults; or the effects and effectiveness of plain language initiatives.

Future Directions...

First, it is possible and necessary to create one comprehensive description of best practice in literacy programs by pulling together all that is known. This would include, for example, the preparation of teachers, materials used, learning technologies and learner involvement. A comprehensive, consensus-based set of guidelines for good practice could serve both planning and evaluation purposes, and begin to ensure equitable access to effective and efficient adult literacy programs for all Canadians.

Secondly, adult literacy must be imbedded in all social policies. Adults with low literacy skills have common characteristics including low literacy skill levels, low income, low social status, learning disabilities and other disadvantages. There are groups within Canadian society that have a greater incidence of low-level literacy skills among adults, for instance, First Nations, offenders, and people living in poverty. It is impossible to disentangle the multiple problems contributing to and stemming from low-level literacy. Future efforts should build on this knowledge and lead to effective targeted programs.

Third, the six lessons learned should be addressed as challenges. There are different roles for different levels of government, and a demonstrated need for continued federal intervention in literacy. It is important to realize that multiple systems are all serving the same client and these systems must be networked together.