

# the bottom line



Western Canada Workplace Essential Skills Training Network

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## Business and Labour Consider Literacy Survey

On November 4, a diverse group of business people and representatives from organized labour gathered in Calgary to consider the results of the Canadian section of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). Organized by WWESTNET, the day-long symposium featured presentations by the principal researchers for the IALS. Dr. Stanley Jones was a literacy consultant for both the Survey of Literacy Skills in Daily Activities (Statistics Canada, 1990) and the IALS (Statistics Canada, 1995). With colleagues from Educational Testing Service, he designed the survey test used. He was responsible for



*Dr. Albert Tuijnman, Education and Training Division, OECD, spoke about the results of the the international study.*

the analysis of the data for both the IALS report (*Literacy, Economy and Society*) and the IALS Canadian report (*Reading the Future*), and wrote the analysis chapters for both. Stan also designed the framework for Human Resource Development Canada's basic skills analysis project, a framework that is the basis for discussions of an international job skills survey. Dr. Albert Tuijnman is the Principal Administrator in the Education and Training Division of the OECD. Prior to joining the OECD, Albert was an associate professor at Stockholm and Trente Universities. He has expertise in a number of areas of study, including education economics and comparative education.

Delegates to the symposium were treated to a full day of presentations and round table discussions. To set the stage and provide a practical context for the discussions to follow, Mr. Al Shipton, Manager of Manufacturing Services at AltaSteel, spoke to the training needs of business, using the Job Effectiveness Training (JET) program at his company as an example of what can be done to address the need for basic skills training in the

steel industry. Greg Maruca, representing the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees, talked about the pressing need for workplace education among his union's membership, and about the programs operated by the union in response to that need. Finally, Brigid Hayes, Program Consultant with the National Literacy Secretariat, outlined the role of the Canadian government in supporting workplace training.



*Greg Maruca, manager of UNITE Local 459, discussed his union's workplace education programs.*

Dr. Tuijnman gave delegates an overview of the research and

summarized some of the more salient findings. He noted that the international perspective allows researchers to make the comparisons which, for example, show that education and training policies can affect literacy levels in a significant way. IALS provides better information about the quality and distribution of literacy skills in the countries studied than indirect measures such as years in school. He also indicated that the growing polarization between 'have' and 'have not,' a distinction increasingly related to basic workplace skills, should be of concern to all OECD members. Future labour adjustment will depend on the adequacy of workers' skills, but IALS reveals that many workers in declining industries do not have the skills to move to other employment. Dr. Stanley Jones focused on the Canadian section of the study and was able to identify key findings which will have implications for workplace literacy policy and practice. IALS data reveal strong connections between literacy skill, occupation and income.

Jim Page, Executive Secretary of the National Literacy Secretariat moderated the symposium. His concluding remarks summarized the day well; an edited version of his remarks follows on the inside pages of this newsletter. \*

# Challenging the Myths about Adult Literacy

JAMES E. PAGE

In this article, I want to discuss the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and its implications for Canadians. I will begin with two bold statements. The first of these is that IALS has already proven to be the most important study of literacy undertaken in Canada to date. The second is that as an international collaborative study, it will affect the way that other nations of the world think about literacy. As I said, these are bold statements. But the two IALS reports summarize bold studies. First came *Literacy, Economy and Society*, the international comparative report which was produced by the OECD and Statistics Canada and released in Paris, Bonn, Washington and Ottawa last December. It was followed in September by *Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*, released in Ottawa by Statistics Canada and the National Literacy Secretariat.

IALS is revolutionary because it demonstrates, again through the power of international comparisons, that literacy is 'policy amenable.' IALS offers a unique opportunity to compare and contrast the concrete effects of specific types of policy in six other nations as well as our own. By comparing and contrasting literacy policies in these countries, we get a better understanding of how public policy affects the acquisition of literacy skills. IALS is also revolutionary in its scope. This is not a study for statisticians or researchers. Rather, it speaks to every Canadian, not only those who care about this issue, but particularly to those who have ignored literacy in the past. IALS says to macro-economists, to senior policy makers, to politicians, to bureaucrats, to business people, and to the media that literacy matters more to individuals and to countries than anyone ever thought possible, certainly more than people have been willing to recognize until now.

I said that IALS is revolutionary because it debunks myths and challenges conventional views about the importance of adult literacy. You have heard this folklore, but allow me to go over a few as a way to highlight some key IALS messages.

**Myth # 1: Immigration is one of the key contributors to literacy problems in Canada.** The IALS reports show that significant numbers of immigrants, in all seven IALS countries, are at the lowest two levels of literacy skill. However, Canada is unique in that more than 25% of our immigrant population tested at the highest literacy levels. This is due to our bimodal immigration policy. Attracting professionals and investors has meant that we have attracted some highly literate immigrants.

No other country in the survey has as many immigrants at the highest level of the IALS scale. The proportion of our immigrant population at the highest IALS level is greater than the proportion of the Canadian-born population at that same level. So immigrants raise the Canadian mean; they do not lower it.

**Myth # 2: You either read or you don't read; you are either literate or not.** When IALS refers to the 'lowest literacy level,' or level 1, it does not mean the absence of the ability to read. The study concludes that the overwhelming majority of Canadians can read. But it poses the question: "Can they can read well enough to deal with the range of difficulty found in tasks they encounter in their daily lives?"

The answer to that question is very important—and we have to get the message straight. The problem in Canada is not that there is a vast army of people who are completely illiterate, although there are some adults who are unable to read and they are a priority. But most people with literacy problems are people with poor literacy skills—IALS level 1, about 22% of the prose scale. Or they are able to read but not particularly well—IALS level 2, about 26% of adult Canadians. The majority of these people are not 'illiterate' in the commonly used sense of that term. And that is why, in Canada, we have focused on 'the literacy issue' rather than 'the illiteracy problem.' Many countries still focus on illiteracy.

More than simply the ability to read, then, IALS defines literacy in relation to a person's skills in doing common, everyday things. To deal with the demands of daily life, particularly in the workplace, just as LSUDA had done. But that is why it is very important to distinguish between IALS levels, and not to add them up. Each level tells us something quite different or discrete about the skills of persons at those levels.

**IALS shows that the workplace is the key to maintaining literacy skills and improving literacy competence. IALS puts it simply. When all else is taken into consideration, jobs cause literacy as much as they require it.**

**Myth # 3: Literacy is like riding a bicycle—once you've got it, you never lose it.** In fact, the study argues quite the opposite: "If you don't keep using your literacy skills, you will lose them." The report contends that the erosion of literacy skills is inevitable if not maintained through practice. For example, some sub-populations of Canadians who were included in the study—seniors or people on social assistance—were people who had experienced some longer-term detachment from the workplace. The longer away from work the more likely they would show signs of deterioration in literacy skill.

**Myth # 4: Literacy and education are the same thing.** In fact in some parts of Canada the attainment of Grade 12 is considered more than simply a proxy for literacy. It is, if you like, a 'literacy qualification.' While the study makes the link between education and literacy, it is not a definitive connection. Thirty percent, or one in three people tested, had literacy skills either above or below what their educational attainment would indicate. Some people with little formal schooling, the IALS discovered, can acquire quite sophisticated literacy skills outside of school through life experience or simply personal initiative. Others who have relatively high levels of educational attainment, however, did not do as well as expected on the IALS questionnaires. So education is important as a springboard for developing literacy skills, but it is not the sole determinant of a person's literacy. Literacy skills are obtained in a variety of different ways, some outside of the formal educational system.

**Myth # 5: "If I can hide it, my lack of literacy skills will not have an impact on my life."** *Reading the Future* notes many ways low literacy skills affect people. People with poorer literacy skills are more often unemployed than those with better skills. They earn less income than those with higher levels of skill.

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**Myth # 6: It doesn't matter what you read, so long as you read.** People with the highest literacy skills invariably had the greatest variety of reading materials in their homes. They use this variety of materials consistently.

Of all literacy activities practiced on a daily or weekly basis, newspaper reading was the most common activity in all seven countries studied. The IALS research data show some correlation between the literacy skills of readers and the parts of the newspapers they read, Editorial pages and insight sections appealed to the higher skilled readers who, not surprisingly, tended to devour the whole of the paper. Lower skilled readers tended towards a mix of sports, the comics, ads, and some of the entertainment and lifestyle material, depending on their needs and tastes.

**Myth # 7: Literacy is developed at home.** This is not a myth when it applies to children. A child's ability to develop literacy skills at an early age depends on the home learning environment. For adults, however, the workplace, more than the home, affords more frequent opportunities to practice literacy skills. This gives employers a larger role to play in the development and maintenance of literacy skills of Canadians than previously assumed.

**Myth # 8: Since we are collectively better educated than our parents, the literacy rate in Canada must be getting higher. We must be winning the battle against illiteracy.** On this one, the research says both yes and no. Yes, our young people are better educated and they do stay in school longer (despite public perceptions to the contrary) and, yes, more people between the ages of 16 and 24 are in the higher literacy categories than ever before. But no, statistics show a surprising lack of change in the overall Canadian literacy rate since 1989. Why? Because low literacy levels are very common with people over 44 years of age.

Although young, more literate entrants to the labour force are replacing older, less-literate workers, the literacy rate of the adult population remains stubbornly flat. The report has no answer as to why this is so. The authors conclude that social and economic forces outside of formal education must be having profound effects on the literacy skills of the older cohorts. Obviously, this will be the subject for considerable further research.

IALS does allow us to speculate about some of the causal factors for this phenomenon. IALS shows that the workplace is the key to maintaining literacy skills and improving literacy

competence. IALS puts it simply. When all else is taken into consideration, 'jobs cause literacy as much as they require it.' The IALS also suggests that North American shop floors are less literacy-rich than those of some of our European competitors. Could the lack of literacy practice on the job be the key factor in the decline of skills of the older cohorts in the workforce?

**Myth # 9: It is a better investment to train the best and forget the rest.** Or, to put it another way, with scarce resources it makes the most sense to spend money on those best able to take advantage of development opportunities, those with sufficient literacy skills to be trainable. Perhaps this is more attitude than myth. Whatever it is, it is the wrong strategy, says the research. The provision of training opportunities to those already skilled is common among the seven nations studied. We ignore the literacy training needs of our whole labour force at our peril. Nor can we afford to neglect the deteriorating literacy skills of the short- and longer-term unemployed. As IALS says, the Canadian skill supply cannot be taken for granted if it is to meet the higher skill demands of global competition and economic expansion.

Those are some of the myths surrounding adult literacy. Let me now pose a different question. Why does IALS stress the economic importance of literacy so much? The simple answer is that the researchers who brought us IALS also brought us LSUDA, and they learned a bitter lesson from LSUDA. People who make key decisions in Canada—finance ministers, finance officials and business leaders—ignored the 1989 study. Literacy was not seen as an issue for the economy, so the pitch adopted for IALS is in the language of macro-economists. Macro-economists are powerful people these days. Politics is being driven by the bottom line. The authors of IALS have targeted that audience. IALS tells finance departments about the costs of low literacy—in terms of lost jobs, lower economic growth and weaker international competitiveness. As Senator Fairbairn often remarks, "this country will not be on the cutting edge of very much if we have a large percentage of our adult population with poor reading skills." Companies which require highly literate employees capable of reading and of being able to grasp the significance of information quickly, increasingly will have greater difficulty finding the people they need in order to be, and to remain, competitive. IALS says clearly to business that the literacy of their workers is an asset that must be nurtured as carefully as all other assets if Canada and Canadian-based enterprises are to be competitive.

In conclusion, let me quote from the final paragraph of IALS: "literacy is important: it rewards those who are proficient and penalizes those who are not. For the individual, literacy affects employment success, income and life chances; literacy is both enriching and empowering." (*Reading the Future*, p. 79). It is hard to disagree with this sentiment. The issue is how do we get this message out to all Canadians. How do we convince people to read this work carefully and to think through how it affects their families, their friends, their relatives, their colleagues at work and the very fabric of their communities? Was IALS worth the cost and the effort? You be the judge. \*

(James E. Page is the Executive Secretary of both the National Literacy Secretariat and the Office of Learning Technology. )

# Literacy: Use It or Lose It

In response to the release of the IALS data, Dr. Harvey Krahn from the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta is embarking on a research study to investigate the proposition that adult literacy skills are the result of individual life-style. Dr. Krahn intends to analyze IALS data and other studies to establish a relationship between occupational demand for literacy and demonstrated skill. This research arises from the observation that a history of employment in low skill jobs is associated with lower levels of adult literacy. The IALS data show that, given the same level of childhood education, a high skill career is associated with higher levels of literacy. Dr. Krahn suggests it is time to stop blaming childhood education for poor adult literacy skills.

Popular wisdom has always implied that low-skilled jobs result in workers with lower levels of skill. Adam Smith noted in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), "The man whose whole life is spent performing a few simple operations . . . has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention . . . He naturally



Dr. Krahn presented at the recent IALS Symposium in Calgary.

loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become." However, as late as 1992, the Economic Council of Canada was still blaming the public school system for the state of adult literacy when it commented: ". . . if these figures (results from the LSUDA study) do not improve, our school system will produce well over one million new functional illiterates over the next ten years." IALS, on the other hand, reveals that Adam Smith was right—adult competencies are the result of using literacy skills at work and in other adult contexts. Dr. Ivan Fellegi, Chief Statistician for Canada, cautiously notes that the IALS data are "at least suggestive of the hypothesis that regular use of acquired literacy might be a factor in its retention."

Dr. Krahn will use a variety of sources to investigate the 'use it or lose it' literacy hypothesis. First among these sources will be the IALS data, but data from sensory deprivation experiments, studies of school environment and IQ increases, and other research into aging, memory, and cognitive ability will also be used. This study should be of interest to educators in the school system and in the workplace, and to human resource development professionals. The results of the research will undoubtedly inform workplace literacy programs, job enlargement efforts, pay for skills initiatives, and life-long learning in all its guises. \*

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## Coming up

### Forum Planned for Yellowknife

A one day 'Workforce Education' forum is being planned for late February in Yellowknife. The forum will provide an opportunity for NWT employers, labour leaders, aboriginal and community organizations to develop a better appreciation and practical understanding of the potential for workplace education. WWESTNET will assist with the organization of the event and provide several of the guest speakers

The forum has several goals. Because workplace education is a relatively new concept to many employers and labour organizations in the NWT, the organizers would like to champion the need for, and benefits of, workplace education as well as to communicate practical 'how-to' information. Equally important is the promotion of partnerships as a necessary first step in the development of successful workplace education programs.

The forum will also profile some NWT workplace education programs. The *Learning in the Workplace* program running in Rankin Inlet is a community-based program. Linda Pemik, the community adult educator, and Jason Spensley, the facilitator for the program, have been invited to present the approach which they have developed to serve the needs of workers and employers in Rankin.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment announced its Workplace Education Strategy in November 1996. The overall goal of the strategy is to broaden literacy partnerships to include employers, labour and community organizations which provide the opportunity for workers to further develop their essential skills. The strategy has three objectives: to increase awareness about literacy in the workplace and the need for workplace education; to develop cooperative partnerships among employers, unions, educators and government in order to meet the basic education needs of workers; and, to develop and support a variety of workplace education projects across the NWT.

The Department is planning several activities to meet these objectives. A promotion and public awareness campaign will promote the need for, and benefits of, workplace education. An advisory group with representation from stakeholders will be formed to guide the Strategy and promote workplace education. The Department will also supply funding and program support to employers, unions, and community organizations undertaking workplace needs assessments or developing workplace education pilot projects. \*

Enquiries and submissions to *the bottom line* should be directed to the editor:

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