

Building the Right Partnerships

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I may serve on the boards of two national literacy organizations. And I may usually win the “most honest golfer” prize in the local PGI. But I’m not active in the actual delivery of literacy services. As far as public health services are concerned, I’ve been a “client” at several local clinics. But none of that qualifies me to talk about building partnerships to people who actually work in the fields of literacy and public health.

What may give me some insights is my day job. I’ve been a newspaper reporter for 40 years and almost all of those four decades has been spent observing and reporting on public policy in one form or another.

Watching that much public policy for that long a time would be enough to depress even the most optimistic personality. And by inclination and self-selection reporters don’t tend much towards being Pollyannas or even Dr. Pangloss. It is never, in a reporter’s eyes, the best of all possible worlds.

But even those of us who are calloused to news of fresh disaster sometimes get depressed by the latest wave. What disheartened me this month were reports about the high-school dropout rate that appeared in the Montreal Gazette on Oct. 7 and a Canadian Press story, in the Oct 11 Globe and Mail. The high-school graduation rate last year in Quebec was below two-thirds of eligible teenagers. That was the fifth consecutive year of declining graduation rates – or rising drop-out rates, if you prefer. In 1998, Three-quarters were graduating. The last time in recent memory that the graduation rate was as low as two-thirds was 1990.

The Canadian Press account added an Ontario dimension. It quoted a study earlier this year which said the provincial drop-out rate was rising to 25 per cent from 20

per cent. In both cases, these shifts were a reversal of a nation-wide trend over the past three decades toward lower drop-out rates.

What caused this? What did the educational experts tell the reporters at the Gazette and Canadian Press? This is the part that depressed me. They blamed the higher drop-out rate on the insistence of the provincial education ministries that high-school graduates meet minimal standards of literacy in French in Quebec and English in Ontario. By minimal, I mean what Statistics Canada has defined as Level Three, the level of skill in three “domains” of literacy that allows a person to mostly cope with the demands of daily life. Level Three skill would mean that an adult who came into a diabetes clinic at a community health centre would be able to read, understand and act upon the kind of written material about blood glucose levels and diet that’s common in such programs.

In Quebec the literacy standards were raised in the fall of 2002 when the education ministry changed the pass level for the Grade 11 French exam. Before it had been 60 per cent. Now it’s 50 per cent, but that’s for each of the exam’s three sections – written, oral and reading. And it’s not the oral section that’s causing the problems.

In Ontario, two things changed. Five years of high-school curriculum was squashed into four but that’s something which students manage to handle in all the other provinces. But at the same time, the education ministry introduced mandatory literacy tests in Grade 10. You can’t graduate from high school in Ontario now unless you can read and write at Level Three – the standard required for most entry-level jobs. That wasn’t always the case. The last literacy survey by the federal government found that one in five among young Canadians, people aged 20 to 25 who said they had completed secondary school, that 20 per cent of those recent high-school graduates fell below Level Three literacy. They were not ready for the work-force, and likely also not prepared to be active citizens either.

Back in 1987 in the Southam literacy survey, we'd come up with similar figures for recent high-school graduates aged 21 to 25. We classed one in seven of those as functionally illiterate, a term many people dislike. The reaction of the provincial ministers of education then was to denounce our results as journalistic sensationalism, and declare that there was nothing wrong with the literacy levels of Canadian high-school graduates. They found it much more difficult to denounce Statistics Canada as sensationalist but it still took Ontario more than 10 years after the first StatsCan results in 1990 to introduce mandatory literacy tests. And now people are complaining that such minimal literacy standards are so demanding that more and more students are dropping out.

I think that's sufficient to depress anyone who cares about literacy, citizenship and Canada's economic prosperity. All sorts of evidence shows that merely keeping the backsides of teenagers in seats in school longer is good for literacy. And there are reward systems that accomplish this work, like making a big deal out of high-school graduation and giving people choice for continuing other than university or community college.

Now this doesn't seem a difficult lesson to learn. After all, even a reporter managed to absorb it, so you'd think it would be a snap for really smart people like provincial politicians, middle-class parents and school board trustees. Yet those are the very people now making noise about the literacy standards being too tough in Ontario and Quebec. So if we have that sort of trouble making a fairly simple shift in just one practical area, what sort of chance is there for progress in actually changing the literacy culture in Canada?

For let's be honest here among ourselves. There's really not all that much to show for all the efforts over the past 17 years. I'm not talking here about the many successful delivery programs run by literacy groups or the encouraging results from pilot program funded by the National Literacy Secretariat or the public

awareness campaigns by ABC Canada. Or the academic studies funded by the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network.

No, I'm talking about moving the needle on Canada's literacy gauge, about actually reducing the number of adults whose literacy skills fall below Level Three. Part of this judgment has to be subjective because rigorous evaluation is not common in the literacy field, even at the provincial and federal level. No national figures exist to allow anything like a rigorous tallying of literacy accounts. Here's one reason. Back in 1998 the Human Resources department attempted a formal evaluation of projects funded by the National Literacy Secretariat over the past 10 years. I was one of 13 people who served on a consultative panel which worked with the project's researcher, Kathryn Barker of FuturEd. Several other members of that panel are taking part in this conference.

Some of us were astonished to learn that there were almost no formal evaluations on the dozens of pilot projects across the country funded by \$250 million that National Literacy Secretariat had disbursed since it was created in 1988. No one had then – nor has now – trustworthy statistics on the number of learner-hours and grade-equivalent gains nationally, provincially, or by program. To anyone familiar with the field of public health, this lacuna of the literacy field must be perplexing. How can you have any realistic accountability without such continuing evaluation? How can you change paradigms, revise policies, reform systems or transform processes without agreed ways to manage performance, report results and track improvements?

One reason offered for this failing was the absence of agreed quality standards for literacy programming. I'd been told the same thing back in 1987 when I was working on my newspaper series. You might be excused for thinking that if people really wanted quality standards, 10 years would have been enough time to come up with some. The other key reason was that grants from the literacy secretariat did not include any earmarked amount to pay the extra costs of evaluation. It's

very hard to blame a cash-strapped literacy provider for putting every penny toward delivery of services. And the literacy secretariat has hardly been lavishly funded. In the latest round of government belt-tightening – just before declaring a \$7 billion surplus – the Martin government clawed back \$1 million from the secretariat’s allocation of \$30 million.

The result of all these factors is that we must use surrogate measures to figure out if the needle has moved on Canada’s national literacy gauge and – if so – in what direction.

First clue. In the five years that passed between the first and second national assessments administered by Statistics Canada there was no detectable improvement in literacy scores.

Second clue: In 1988 the best estimate was that fewer than two per cent of people with low literacy were getting help from any program. A decade later, the best estimate is five per cent.

Five per cent of 10 million adults who rate lower than Level Three literacy amounts to the literacy needle barely moving up. Don’t forget that we have no way of knowing how well that five per cent fared in those literacy programs, because that isn’t being measured. Even if 500,000 adults were moving on in a couple of years to Level Three literacy – or twice that many, 10 per cent – even if a million adults were moving on every couple of years, don’t forget that at the same time, one in five young people were being “graduated” from high school with literacy skills below that level. And if tougher literacy standards in the schools are boosting the drop-out rate, just imagine how that’s swelling the supply of new low-literates.

No, mathematically, the needle on Canada’s literacy gauge can’t be moving up. It must be dropping. And the fact that this is partly explained by rising standards is

hardly comforting. After all, the standards have risen because society is making more demands on citizen literacy. Think, for instance, of the numbers of sufferers from arthritic pain, many my age and older, who are struggling right now to understand what's happening with Vioxx and the other cox-2 inhibitors.

Third clue. Look at what's actually taking place with literacy providers at the local level. The most shocking statistic among all the literacy statistics is how few people with low skills are actually being helped by the panoply of programs out there from adult basic education in school boards to Word on the Street. Why so few?. The little research that had been done canvassed people who either completed a program, or enrolled and then dropped out. But what about those who get in touch with a local literacy program but never enter? In co-operation with Literacy BC, ABC Canada studied this question and produced a report four years ago. It was called "Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs" and there's a comprehensive and readable executive summary under the Research link on the ABC website (not the publications link, which is where you order the full report. www.abc-canada.org).

I've told you where to find the summary because I'm going to highlight only one finding. It's even more shocking than the five to 10 per and more depressing than the recent rise in high-school drop-out rates. Half of those who called a literacy program never enrolled. The leading reason was that they weren't called back. Think about it. Someone calls a sexually transmitted disease clinic for information – and they're not phoned back! Or the weight loss program at a community health centre. Or a well baby clinic. A diabetes management program.

And how does this feed into the question of where the needle is moving on Canada's literacy gauge? Because if you don't answer the calls of people seeking help then they'll stop calling. Here are some more shocking numbers, very preliminary, from a survey of how many prospective learners phoned into some two dozen literacy organizations across Canada last month. Eleven of the literacy

providers recorded NO calls. Not one call from a learner in the whole month of September. Some of these were in communities with substantial populations – such as Burlington and North Bay and the Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick – and others were in rural areas such as Taber in Alberta or the Prairie West Community College in Saskatchewan. The most calls were made to a program called Adult Basic Education which serves the Kent-Chatham area. It recorded 62. Next came the Literacy Partners of Manitoba with 35 calls followed by the Ottawa-Carleton Coalition for Literacy with 33 calls. Thirteen other organizations did not respond to the request for statistics.

As you've heard already from Senator Joyce Fairbairn among others, 48 per cent of adult Canadians had Level One or Level Two literacy when the most recent survey was done in 1996. So we're talking more than 10 million people who, in theory need help. Even just those at Level One would be more than 5 million with our current population. And 11 communities have NO calls from prospective learners in the whole month of September. I'd say the needle was not only moving backwards. It's spinning in reverse.

With that depressing preamble, I'm almost ready to talk about what can be done and what role there might be for partnerships.

But first, a few words about the failings of our current strategies. Initially most literacy campaigns followed the deficit model, meaning that we thought the answer lay in increasing public awareness about the issue. Give Canadians irrefutable evidence that many fellow citizens needed help with a skill so fundamental to enjoying a full life, and the people would rise up and demand action from decision-makers. For added measure the International Adult Literacy Survey proved that literacy levels affected national competitiveness, economic prosperity, productivity and – eventually – the state of your wallet or pocket book. Most recently two economists have used data from the IALS to calculate that every one per cent increase in the literacy skill of average working Canadians

would translate into a permanent increase in our GDP of about \$18 billion. What more ammunition could we ask for!

Yet none of this has done the trick. It's not that Canadians aren't more aware of the issue than before. In a survey by Decima in 1990, 29 per cent of a representative sample of Canadians agreed literacy was a "very serious problem." When the same question was repeated in 1999, that had grown to 35 per cent. But the deficit model does not go far enough. Greater public awareness is just the first stage of "coming to public judgment" about the literacy issue, a phrase I have borrowed from the title of a book written by Daniel Yankelovich, one of the gurus of U.S. public opinion surveying.

You must also have a growing sentiment to tackle the problem which will arise from an appreciation that it actually touches the lives of people generally. For evidence of this stage we look to what are known as top-of-mind surveys, which many public opinion firms do regularly. The interviewer simply asks what the respondent thinks is the most important issue requiring government attention. No list of potential answers are read and the replies are often collected into categories. Schooling, knowledge and skills, for example, would be clustered under the heading education.

In the past 15 years literacy has never made it on to the list as a subject in its own right, meaning that fewer than five per cent have ever named it as their top-of-mind issue. Several pollsters say they can't remember literacy ever being mentioned at all, even as a subcategory that would have been rolled into an education category.

An absence of evidence of a phenomena doesn't prove an absence of the phenomena. But it's difficult to believe that the Canadian public yet rates adult literacy as a problem that must be tackled. I suspect, without much empirical

evidence to back me up, that most Canadians aren't convinced the issue has any relevance for them. We know for certain that a majority of low-literate Canadians say their reading and writing abilities are quite sufficient for their daily lives and that they see no need to upgrade those skills.

I should add that the media seldom progress beyond the first stage of just simple public awareness, since traditionally they have seen that as their prime role. If they do, then the action is almost sure to be aimed at children, not adults, as with the Raise A Reader campaign of the CanWest news papers. That makes good commercial sense since people do see how poor literacy skills matter for their own children, if not for adults in general.

6 The growing sentiment to tackle an issue was just the second of the seven stages that Yankelovich found all public policy issues pass through before the public has agreed on a course of action that it would sanction the elite to implement.

Yet you don't have to accept Yankelovich's model holus-bolus in order to agree that changing the national culture concerning literacy in Canada has proven more difficult than many people expected. And even if there are fewer stages to the strategy or different ones, it should also be obvious that changing that culture is a process that needs a lot of partnerships, partnerships that must go far beyond simply people in the fields of literacy and public health working together.

I'm not going to provide you with an inventory of necessary partnerships or a roadmap of how to reach them. But because of my 40 years spent watching the messy making of public policy, I think I can offer some starting points:

1. The literacy movement has to forge a more meaningful partnership with its "clients" There's simply no excuse for not returning the phone calls of people seeking help if your whole raison d'etre is to provide such help. As

- well, the minimal requests for help turned up in the September survey is unlikely to impress any granting agency.
2. The literacy movement has to identify and court partners who can help it become accountable. No one is going to take seriously organizations that don't have a performance management, reporting and improvement system. If the ability or resources to develop such a system does not exist internally – and that seems to be the case – then seek out partners from places like financial institutions or accounting firms.
 3. Both the public health field and the literacy movement have to stop thinking that entrepreneurial is a dirty word. Of course, I realize that not all of you do. But I also know that some people in public health will figuratively cross over to the other side of the street to avoid talking with Big Pharma. And some literacy groups seem overly wary of the forest industry or the chains of low-cost optometrists – both natural partners.
 4. Both fields also need to be more inventive in forging partnerships. For years I've also heard the heads of local literacy groups complain that they are seldom invited to consultations with other leaders in their communities about issues where there is a literacy component, such as youth violence. Well, be entrepreneurial. Invite the other community leaders to a discussion which you stage. Get the lawyer on your board to make available her firm's board room. If you don't have a lawyer from a big firm as a director, keep asking until you find one willing to serve.

And right here at this conference you have the wonderful examples of inventive partnerships forged by Read To Me starting from a hospital in Halifax and Research Matters working from a university in Waterloo. Couldn't those serve as models in other communities?

5. Both public health and literacy should also shift the emphasis of their partnership efforts from the national stage to the local. It's no doubt heresy to speak this just before National Literacy Action Day but most of the literacy efforts I've witnessed here in Ottawa have wasted precious time and effort. Can you imagine what could have been accomplished in communities with the brain power and energy that went into supporting Jane Stewart's failure to produce a new federal policy on life-long learning? Federal MPs are going to pay a lot more attention to someone who has active partnerships with the natural leaders in their backyard, their electoral communities. Those are their election workers, their campaign contributors and eventually, their voters. And don't lose sight of the fact that cabinet ministers are MPs first.

About now I expect people have tuned out, thinking that I'm dreaming in technicolour. If you want proof that community partnerships really pay dividends, then take a look at two quite different campaigns, both successful.

How was reducing the deficit put on the public agenda, made a top-of-mind issue and then guided through those five additional stages in Daniel Yankelovich's model? Two advocacy organizations were primarily responsible, the Canada West Foundation and the Fraser Institute. Today we think of the Fraser Institute as having powerful allies in the leaders of federal and provincial political parties. But look back and you'll see that it first forged its partnerships at the community level. I was covering Western Canada in the late 70s for the Southam newspapers and I seriously under-estimated the eventual influence of both the Institute and the Foundation, because they were working primarily at the community level..

Less well known is the story behind a scientific facility which will officially open this Friday in Saskatoon called the Canadian Light Source. It's a \$174-million synchrotron, an enabling technology that acts like a real-time microscope for everything from the inside of a car engine while running to the knee joint of a live llama. If you had asked a decade ago, when the campaign to get a synchrotron in Canada began, people would have predicted it would be built in London, because the University of Western Ontario had the leading researchers in this and because it made more sense to locate such a facility near the largest concentration of potential users, which is certainly in southern Ontario not northern Saskatchewan.

Yet Saskatoon got the Canadian Light Source. Someday the detailed story will be told and I hope I'm the one who gets to tell it. Right now you'll simply have to take my word that it was the strength of community partnerships that won the day.

I fear that I'm beginning to sound like a Pollyanna or a Dr. Plangloss. But I do truly believe that matters can get better for literacy generally and for literacy and public health. And inventive, entrepreneurial partnerships are a promising way to make that happen.