



LESSONS IN LEARNING

Raising the score: Promoting adult literacy in Canada

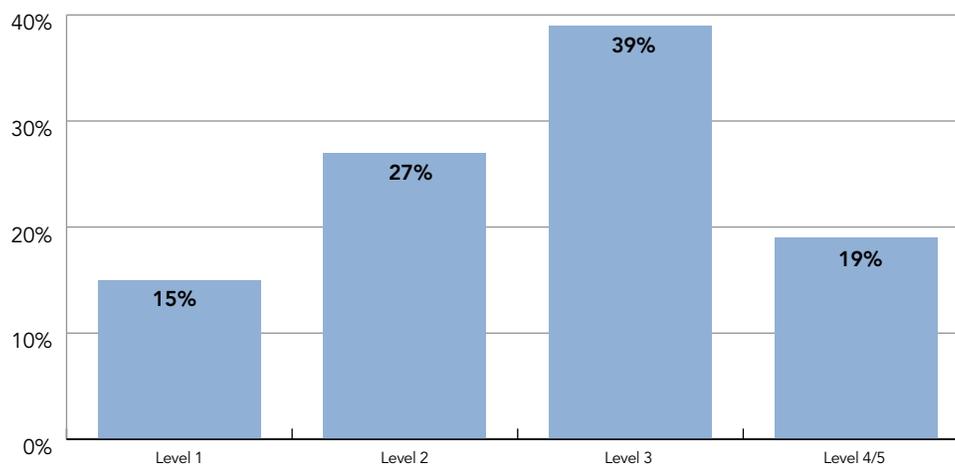
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The number of Canadian adults with low-level literacy skills remains too high.

According to the recent Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) survey completed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and Statistics Canada, forty-two percent of adult Canadians have literacy skills below the level necessary to succeed in today's society and economy.

Equally troubling, however, is the lack of substantial progress in adult literacy since the last such survey over a decade ago, despite the significant resources that all levels of government have committed to improving literacy. Ongoing rhetoric about the importance of continuous learning, lifelong learning, life-wide learning, up scaling, workplace training and essential skills from both business and government created an expectation that adult literacy would have risen significantly in the past decade. Yet it hasn't. The percent of Canadians at each prose skill level in 2003 is virtually no different than it was in 1994.

Figure 1:
Percent of Canadian population aged 16 to 65 at each prose literacy skill level, 2003



Source: Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2003

Two questions arise from this study: First, low scores – so what? And second, given that outcomes have not improved over the past decade, what new steps can we take to improve adult literacy over the next 10 years?

Low scores - so what?

Is there a need to be overly concerned about low literacy rates? A number of people argue no.

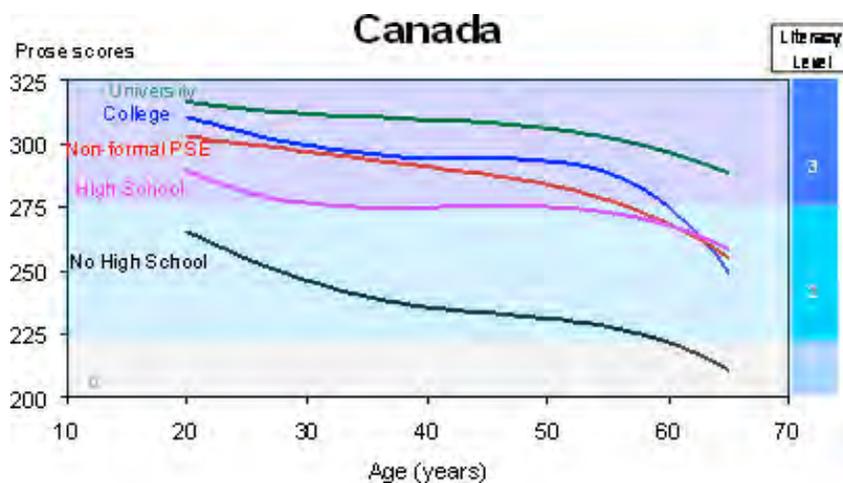
Visual and auditory communication skills often seem to be overtaking simple prose in our age of information technology. Furthermore, Canada's GDP per capita continues to be competitive with that in other developed countries – doesn't that

mean that we already have the skilled human resources we need? Finally, won't this deficit eventually self-correct through the progressive enhancement of literacy among aboriginal Canadians and among immigrants and their children, together with increased participation in post-secondary education?

A closer look at the impact of low prose literacy provides us with little reason to underestimate its importance.

Low literacy drives an inexorable logic: The ALL survey shows that the stronger the education foundation, the higher both the initial and the enduring level of literacy. For example, early school leavers already exhibit scores, as they enter the workforce, that put them below level 3 on the ALL, the level considered as minimal for addressing the demands of the information economy. For more information, see a full description of the levels.

Figure 2:
Prose literacy scores by education level in Canada, 2003



Source: Adult Literacy and Life-Skills Survey, 2003

The logic continues. People with low levels of literacy have more difficulty finding a job. Those who do find employment are much more likely to earn a lower income and are thus less likely to receive employer-funded training that would enhance their skill sets¹. (OECD, 2005)

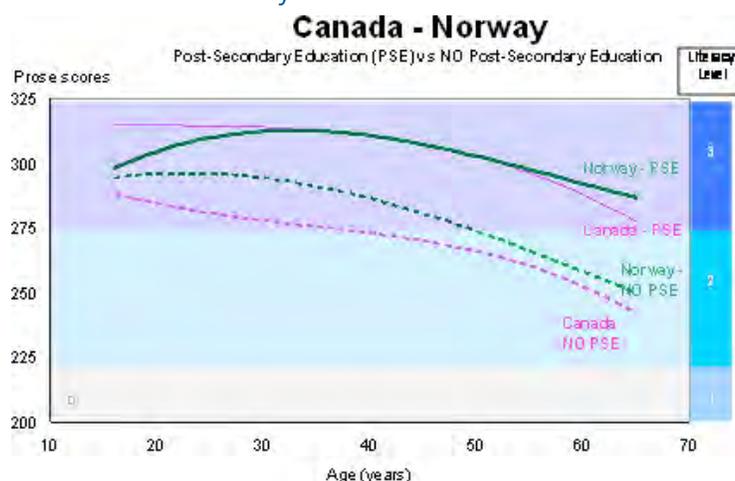
Economics and beyond: Literacy and numeracy are associated with individual and societal success in many areas². Statistics Canada estimates that a 1 percent increase in average literacy and numeracy skills would permanently raise GDP per capita by 1.5 percent³. High literacy is also related to a more inclusive society, greater workplace mobility and flexibility, safer communities, higher life expectancy, and enhanced civic participation and citizen engagement⁴.

So what? The data is clear: low adult literacy has significant repercussions for individuals, for the economy, and for society.

Useful directions for change in Canada

Governments have made substantial investments over the past decade, but these initiatives have not led to improved outcomes between 1994 and 2004.

Figure 3:
Prose literacy scores for those with and without Post-Secondary Education in Canada and Norway



Source: Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2003

In light of the aging populations in all developed countries, the ability to retain higher literacy skills will confer an enormous competitive advantage. In Norway, even adults without post-secondary education retain literacy skills until they are approximately 50 years old. In Canada the age is 40.

Many countries have higher levels of employer-sponsored education and training than Canada. According to *Education at a Glance 2005*, the latest OECD annual education report, 40 percent of Swedes, 39 percent of Danes, 37 percent of Americans and 36 percent of Finns undertook non-formal, job-related continuous education and training, compared with 25 percent of Canadians.⁵ The recent ALL study reported that 55 percent of Norwegians who participated in adult education and training received financial support from their employers, compared with 40 percent in Canada.⁶ Indeed the low level of employer-sponsored education and training is reflected in our general low participation in adult education and training.⁷

As discussed earlier, the ALL study demonstrates that low levels of literacy lead to a vicious circle: the workers most in need of upgraded literacy skills are the least likely to be offered training at work⁸. The less employees use reading, writing and numeracy skills at work, the less likely they are to be involved in employer-supported education and training. Thus, their literacy and numeracy skills continue to decline, making it ever more difficult to move forward.

Lessons and Conclusions: Now what?

Canadian levels of adult literacy are low relative to comparable countries, are not improving over time, have negative consequences for individuals and society, and are unlikely to be remedied by current approaches. What lessons or conclusions may we draw that might have implications for policy and practice in Canada?

1. "Use it or lose it"

The message, both from the ALL report and from Canadian experience is blunt and compelling: "use it or lose it". The advantages for Canadians who possess and maintain a reasonable literacy level are explained in part by their need to use literacy skills on the job, often complemented by access to ongoing education and training.

As a first step, therefore, we must learn from the success of those areas that offer adults an opportunity to "use it."

2. Improve workers' access to ongoing education and training

The decline in literacy among many Canadians occurs as they enter the workforce, the very period when they should be called upon to use and improve the skills in which they and their community have invested so much. Yet Canadian workers receive less financial support from their employers for ongoing learning in the workplace than do workers in countries such as Norway and Switzerland⁹.

Employers, unions, educators, governments and others must examine how other countries achieve better participation and results, and work together to improve workplace learning opportunities and strengthen adult literacy.

3. Support for key groups

In Canada, certain subsets of the overall population have, on average, low literacy levels. These include aboriginal Canadians, recent immigrants and persons with disabilities.

The 2005 OECD report *Promoting Adult Learning* emphasized that "an equitable distribution of skills across populations has a strong impact on overall economic performance... an important finding which helps justify policies to upgrade the skills of disadvantaged groups". Yet the provision of such support is fraught with challenges: many members of disadvantaged groups do not self-identify; others are intimidated by educational institutions. Perhaps most limiting of all are organizational factors, the paucity of adult learning resources and the absence in Canada of a coherent and cohesive system of adult learning.

4. Improve high-school graduation rates

The stronger the educational foundation, the higher both the initial and the enduring levels of literacy.

The policy lesson from this message is clear: Canada must markedly improve its high school graduation rates as a step towards improving adult literacy.

5. Build on our success with post-secondary education

Canada compares more favourably internationally in post-secondary education participation than it does in high school graduation. The protective effect of university or college education on the maintenance of literacy is so powerful that, even by age 65, Canadian university graduates remain above literacy level 3.

Again, the policy implication here is evident: Canada must continue to support high levels of participation in most forms of post-secondary education.

6. Community resources

The responsibility for declining literacy skills among working-age adults cannot be laid exclusively at the door of the workplace. Not all learning occurs for and at work. The social environment and adequacy of community resources must be considered as other key factors.

Policy makers should examine other countries' models and practices that support adult learning. Denmark, for example, has a system of folk schools for adult learners. Others commit to active promotion of learning communities, possess fully-developed regional learning centres, or promote the integration of public school resources with broader community learning networks.

7. A framework for policy coordination and coherence

The 2005 OECD report on Promoting Adult Learning argues that "the development of more coherent policy frameworks can also assist in enhancing adult learning investment and participation" and that "coordination with all stakeholders involved" is paramount.¹⁰ A significant lack of coordination in Canada is evident to OECD reviewers at many levels: between federal and provincial governments; between the public and private sectors; in the provision of information to learners; and in the absence of a national forum for adult education.¹¹

Policy implications point to a need for pan-Canadian coordination and coherence of policy and practice. The real question is how best to design and implement such a framework.

Next steps for Canadian adult literacy

A number of positive initiatives are already under way to address the challenge of adult literacy in Canada.

- The Canadian Council on Learning has established a Adult Learning Knowledge Centre in Atlantic Canada, and a Work and Learning Knowledge Centre in Ontario, each of which will become a national centre of reference for promising practices to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for adult learners.

- The Minister of State for Human Resources Development, with additional resources from the Literacy Secretariat, is working toward a long-term, pan-Canadian strategy for literacy and essential skills.
- The Council of the Federation and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, have declared literacy to be a pan-Canadian priority.

These efforts, among many others, will need to progress quickly from acknowledgement of our shortcomings and their consequences to determining how to move forward. This can be achieved both through learning from the experience of successful models and practices at home and abroad and by better coordination of Canadian initiatives in adult learning.

Lessons in Learning will continue to examine the challenge of adult literacy in future issues, including work-related training, and how to enhance the capacity of communities to improve adult literacy.

References

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- ⁴ Rychen, D.S., and Salganik, L.H. (eds.). Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-functioning Society. Hogrefe and Huber Publishers, Göttingen.
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- ¹⁰ Promoting Adult Learning. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005.
- ¹¹ Thematic Review on Adult Learning: Canada Country Note. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2002.