

Computers and Adult Literacy: Voices of literacy students in Ontario

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Canadian Council on Social Development
September 1999**

Acknowledgements

The CCSD would like to thank the Trillium Foundation for giving us a generous grant to complete this project. The views we express in this report are ours alone. They do not reflect how the Trillium Foundation feels about this subject.

We also wish to thank our Advisory Committee and all the literacy groups who took part in the project. They helped guide us in our work, from start to finish.

Our sincere thanks must also go to all the literacy students who filled out our surveys. This report is for you, so thank you!

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Introduction

More and more, computers are being used to help teach basic reading, writing and math skills. In Ontario, we know that computers and the Internet are part of many literacy programs. For example, at Alpha Ontario:

- Literacy students and their teachers can join on-line discussion groups.
- Teachers can exchange thoughts with other teachers on-line.
- Teachers can learn about new ways to teach literacy, by surfing the Internet.

How do computers improve basic adult education programs? Can computers help literacy students gain basic reading, writing and math skills? Teachers are often asked these questions. But what do literacy students think about computers?

That's what we wanted to know. So we asked YOU to give us your thoughts on these important questions.

This report is for you. It was written to tell YOU what we learned from you!

How we did the research

We asked literacy students in Ontario these 4 questions:

Do you have access to computers and the Internet?

How do you use computers and the Internet?

What do you like about using computers and the Internet?

What don't you like about using computers and the Internet?

Your answers to these questions are in this report.

To get your answers:

We held focus groups in 5 places in Ontario – 2 of the focus groups were for French speakers and 3 of the groups were for English speakers.

We sent surveys to many literacy programs across Ontario – 2 surveys were for literacy students and 1 survey was for teachers.

Most of you filled out a survey during an adult literacy class.

- Almost 3 out of 10 of these classes were set up by community groups.
- 3 out of 10 were held in a college.
- 2 out of 10 classes were offered by school boards.

Over 1,100 literacy students answered our surveys.

- 643 of you filled out a long survey that you got from your teachers or from the Internet.
- 460 of you filled out a shorter survey during a literacy class. More than 50 schools and literacy groups in Ontario passed out this short survey for us.

The rest of this report will tell you what we learned from hearing your answers.

Do you have access to computers and the Internet?

We wanted to know:

- How many of you are using computers and the Internet?
- Where do you use computers and where do you surf the Internet?
- Who teaches you about computers and the Internet?
- How many of you have your own computer?

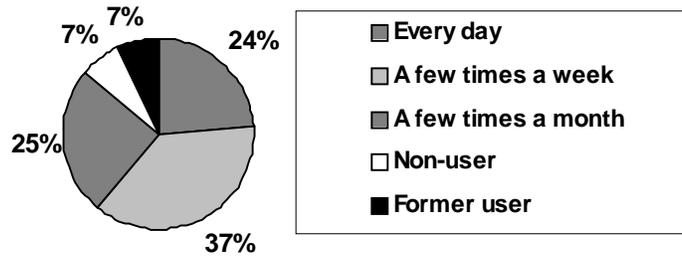
Here's what you told us:

- 9 out of 10 people use computers. Only 6 out of 10 use the Internet.
- Only a small number (less than 2 out of 10) want to find out how to get access to the Internet or to free e-mail.
- Most of you use computers at school, during class time.
- About 7 out of 10 learned about computers from their teachers.
- Only 3 out of 10 own a computer. Most of those who own a computer have kids under the age of 18.

How often do you use computers?

- About 2 out of 10 people use a computer every day.
- Almost 4 out of 10 use a computer a few times a week.
- About 2 out of 10 use a computer a few times a month.
- 7 % (less than 1 out of 10) do not use a computer.
- 7 % (less than 1 out of 10) used to use a computer, but have now stopped.

Computer use



Where do you use computers?

Most of you (about 7 out of 10) use computers at school. You use a computer during class or when you drop-in. Some students told us they get access to computers by signing up for time or by asking for permission.

Less than 1 out of 10 literacy students use a computer at work. This makes sense, since more than 5 out of 10 people who filled out our surveys are full-time students and 1 out of 10 is looking for work.

About 3 out of 10 people own a computer. These people use computers more often than those of you who do NOT own a computer. About 6 out of 10 people who use a computer every day also own a computer.

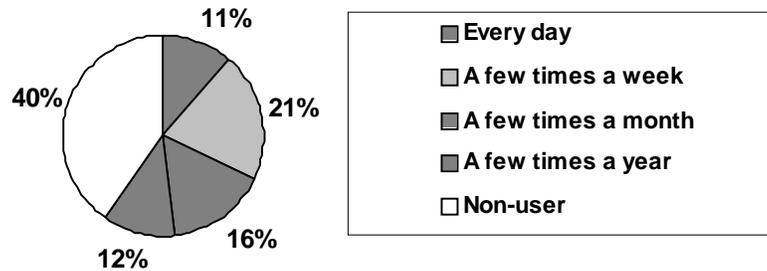
Students who are taking part in community college programs are more likely to have a computer at home. Based on our surveys, here is who owns computers:

- 4 out of 10 students taking classes at a community college
- 3 out of 10 students taking classes set up by their community
- 3 out of 10 students taking classes at a school board.

Students who do NOT own a computer say that a school is the place where they most often get to use one.

Even though the survey shows that MOST literacy students use computers, only half of the people who answered our surveys use the Internet. Only about 1 out of 10 use it every day.

Internet use



Where do you use the Internet?

- About 6 out of 10 students surf the Internet at school.
- About 2 out of 10 use the Internet at a public library.
- About 2 out of 10 use it at home.

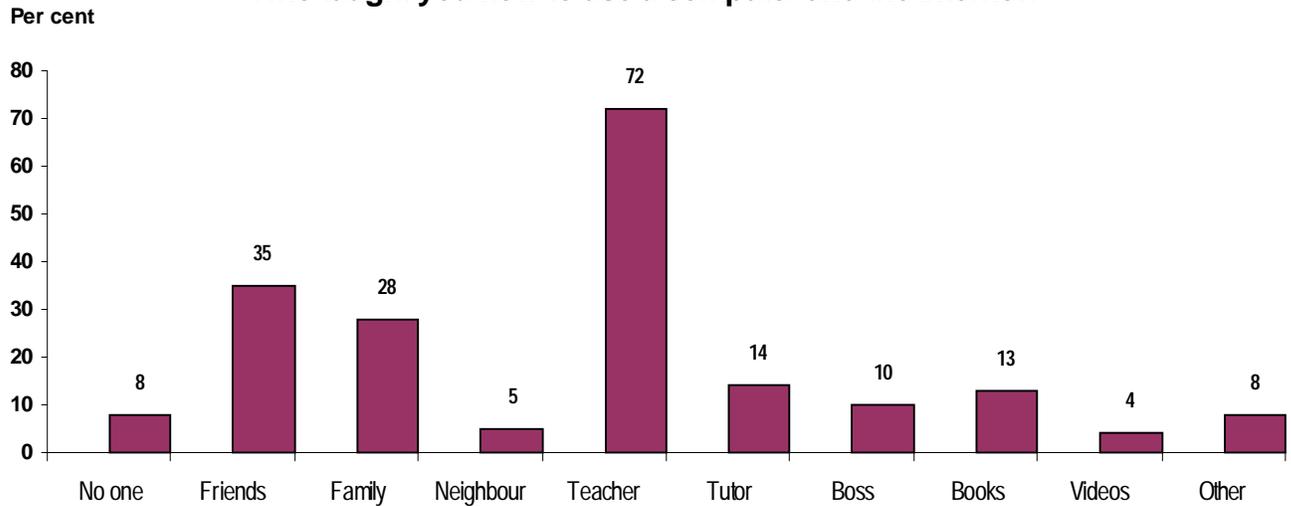
Students in community programs use the Internet less than students in college programs.

Only about 3 out of 10 literacy students have a personal e-mail address. About 5 out of 10 have no e-mail address. Almost 2 out of 10 say they do not know where to sign up for free e-mail or where to get free access to the Internet. About 5% of you (less than 1 out of 10) share an e-mail address.

Where did you learn to use computers?

About 7 out of 10 people said they learned about computers from teachers in a classroom. Others said they learned from friends and family. Only about 1 out of 10 learned how to use a computer by reading books.

Who taught you how to use a computer and the Internet?



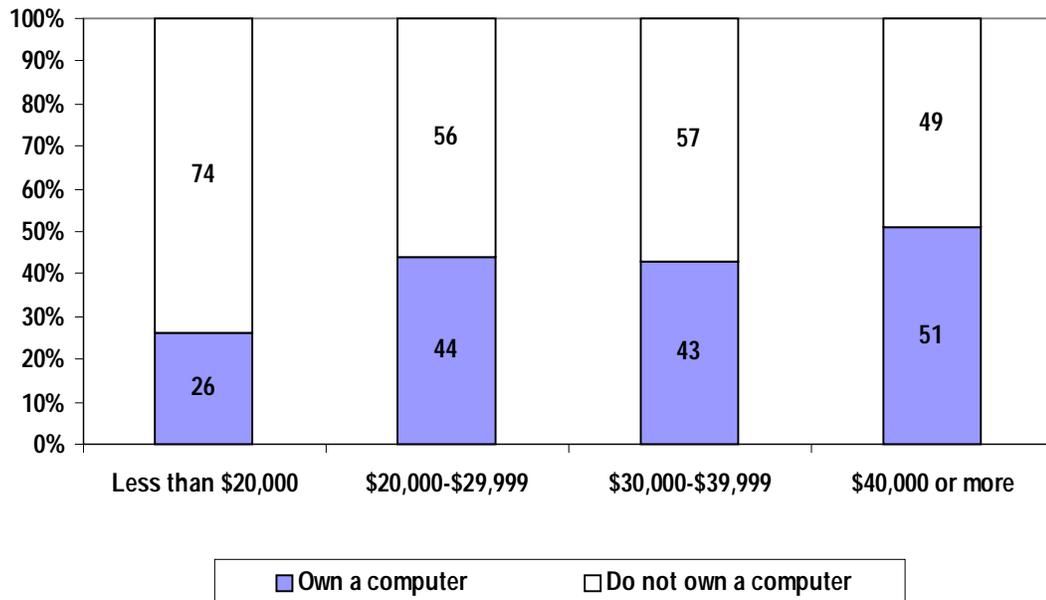
Who owns a computer?

Who is more likely to own a computer? Who is planning to buy one? Here is what you told us about owning AND planning to own a computer:

Men are more likely than women to own a computer. 4 out of 10 male students own a computer, and 3 out of 10 female students own one.

Students with a higher family income are more likely to own a computer. For those people whose family income is more than \$40,000 per year, about 5 out of 10 own a computer. Only about 2 out of 10 people with a family income less than \$20,000 a year own a computer.

Who owns a computer, by family income



Literacy students with children under 18 are a little more likely to own a computer than literacy students without children under 18. People with children under 18 are also more likely to WANT to buy a computer. For example, 1 out of 3 people with children under age 18 plan to buy a computer. Only 1 out of 4 people without children under 18 plan to buy one.

How do you use computers and the Internet?

Here are your answers to this question:

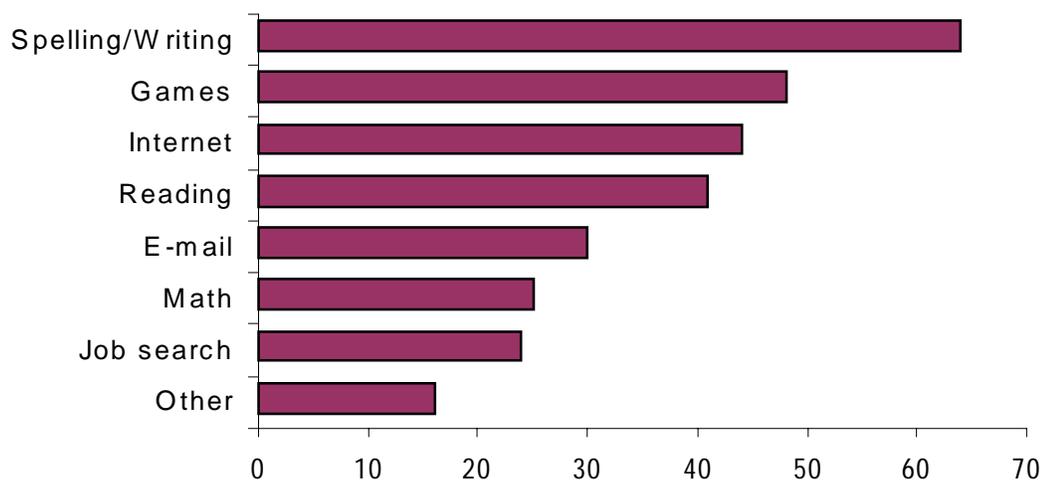
- Most of you use computers for writing, to check spelling and to get onto the Internet.
- Most of you use the Internet for job searches and to read newspapers.
- Very few people use the Internet for shopping or banking.
- Many students use computers and the Internet for fun (playing games) and for looking up information on subjects that interest them, like music, movies or books.

What do you use computers for?

Many of you like to use computers to write stories and do resumes. You told us that computers let you format your work so that it looks good. 6 out of 10 people say they use computers for spelling and writing. You told us that spell-check is one of the best things computers can offer literacy students. About 5 out of 10 people also use computers for fun – to play games.

Less than 3 out of 10 people use a computer to do math. You told us you were worried about making mistakes and not knowing what to do if you hit the wrong key by accident.

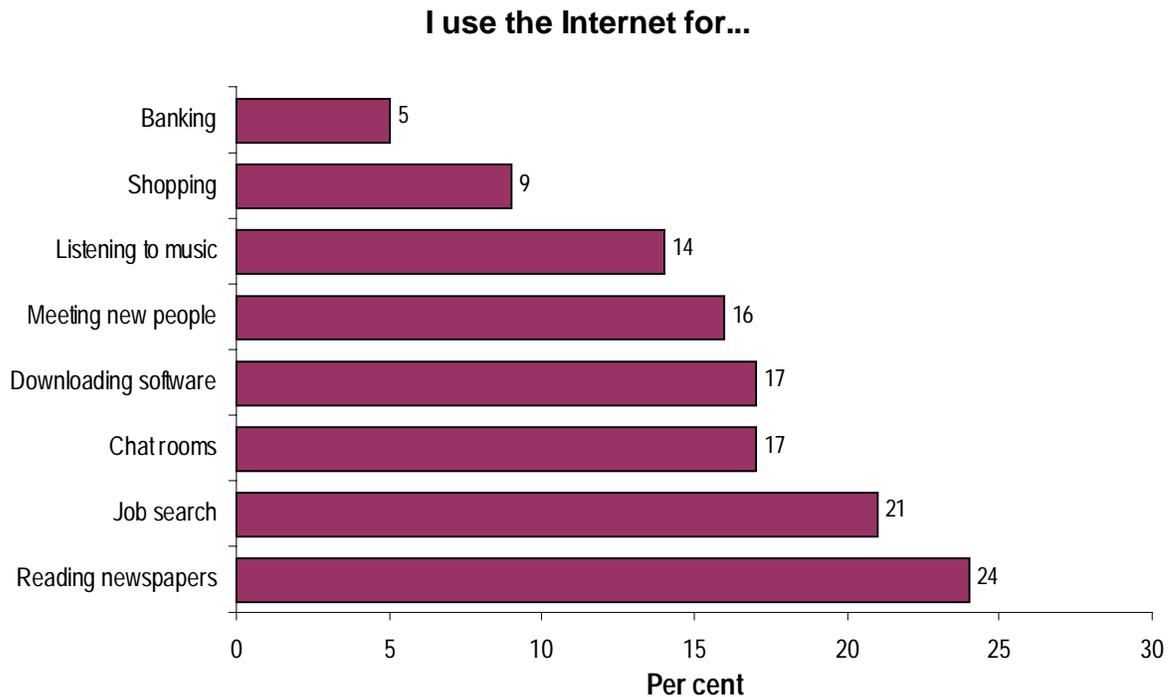
I use the computer for...



*Other: keyboarding and typing make up most of this category.

What do you use the Internet for?

Most of you told us that you use the Internet to read newspapers, search for a job, download software and take part in chat rooms. Very few of you use the Internet for banking or shopping.



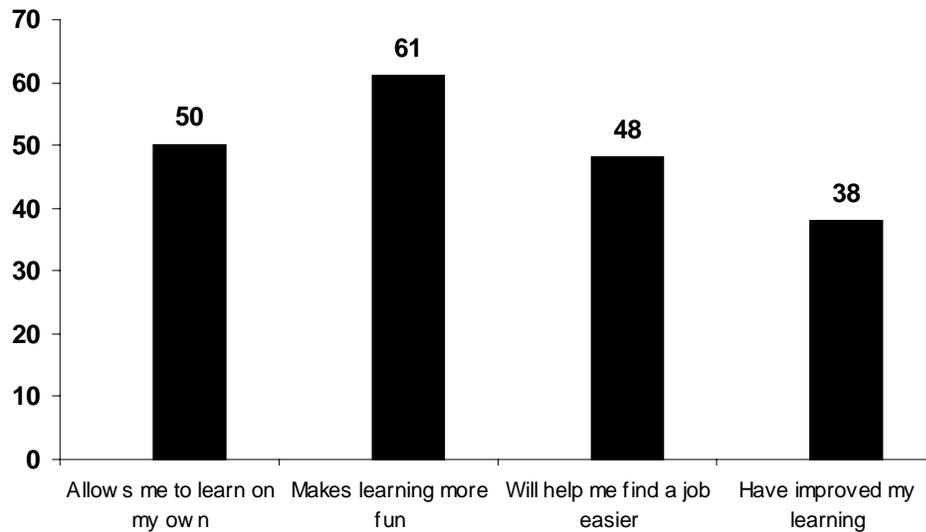
What do you like about using computers and the Internet?

Here's what you told us:

- You can learn at your own pace.
- You believe you will have an easier time finding a job if you have some computer knowledge.
- The Internet gives you useful information on a lot of topics – and the way you get the information can be fun!

What do you like about computers?

Per cent



Makes learning fun

6 out of 10 people said that computers make learning more fun. Nearly 4 out of 10 told us that computers have improved the way they learn because computer programs let them learn at their own pace. As one teacher said: “Students find it faster to use the computer than to write by hand.”

Here’s what you said:

“I like the way that computers let you learn different things. I can sit down by myself, relax, take it easy, and learn.”

“I can use them on my own, which is good for me. I can learn a lot that way.”

“You don’t have to slow down to look up words.”

Some of you think the best thing about computers is the Internet. Many of you use the Internet to help you do research for school projects.

Can help me find a job

Besides using computers to learn how to read and write, people told us they want to gain computer skills, for their own sake. Almost 5 out of 10 people think that having computer skills will help them find a job in the future. As one student said: “Even working in a grocery store today requires computer skills.”

Here's what you said:

“Oh yeah, you see a lot of people losing their jobs because they don't know computers.”

“With most of the jobs now you need to know computers. It is important to know how to use them.”

The Internet and e-mail make life more fun

You use the Internet to find out about things that have nothing to do with school work. For example, some of you search for recipes, listen to music, play games or order tickets. 3 out of 10 people want to use e-mail to practise reading and writing, as well as to stay in touch with friends.

Here's what you said:

“The best thing about computers is the Internet. Personally, I check my e-mail. I get a lot of information off the Internet for my school projects.”

“I like having access to such a huge network, without borders, where information comes from everywhere and goes everywhere.”

“I like the fact that the information is not censored and I can read about politics or history as it is.”

Many of you think that computers are “the way of the world.” You would like to learn more about computers and the Internet. Many of you believe that computer skills will be necessary to your future success.

Here's what you said:

“Computers are the voice of the future, so it is necessary to know how they work, especially the Internet and e-mail.”

“Computers are the highway to the Year 2000.”

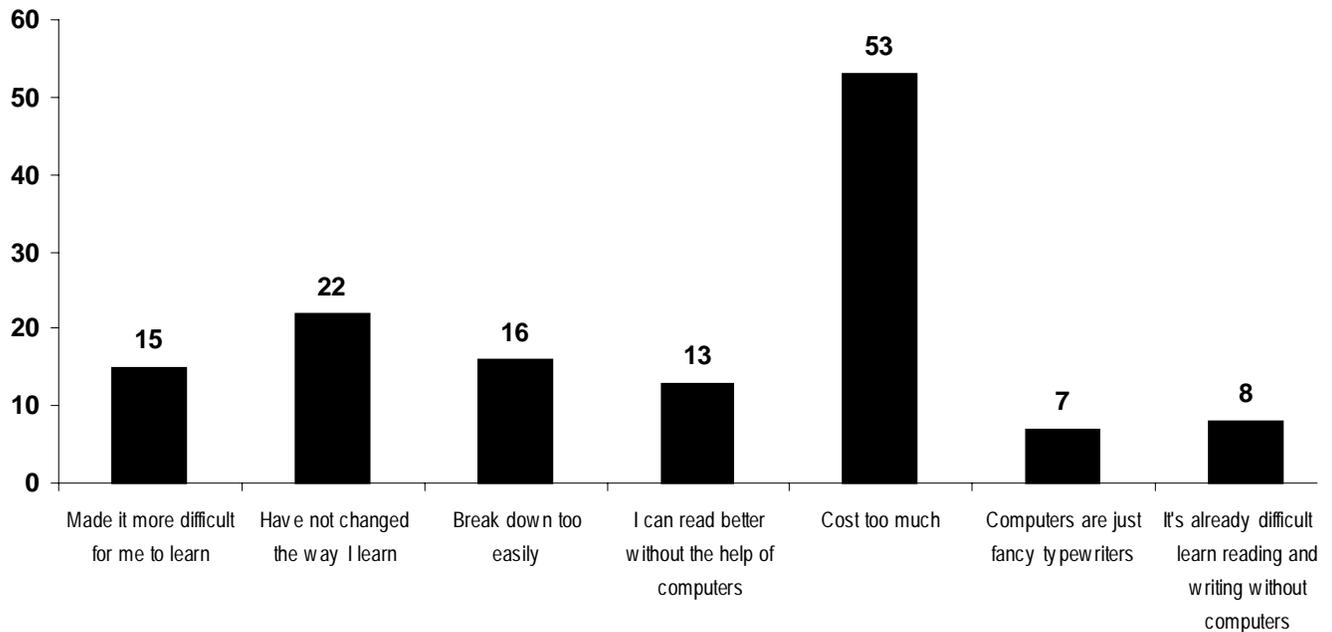
What don't you like about using computers and the Internet?

Here are the main things you did not like about computers and the Internet:

- Computers are expensive and they don't always work.
- People may use computers too much and neglect their fellow human beings.
- There are not enough good software programs for adult literacy students.

What don't you like about computers?

Per cent



Computers can be a real pain!

Almost 2 out of 10 people told us that computers break down too much. One person said: "I have 3 pet peeves: they are not static guard; they freeze; and there are power failures. You're just finishing your essay and all of a sudden, buzz, it's gone!"

Someone else said the instructions on how to use the computer are not clear enough. Most people want computer manuals to be written in plain English. As one student said: "Techies have their own jargon, but once it is explained in plain language, it's OK."

Here's what you said:

"I'm afraid it's going to blow up!"

"It can be confusing sometimes if you don't know enough about them."

"These machines scare me."

Computers make people lazy

Some of you do not believe that computers can help you with reading, writing and math. Others have a different opinion. About 5 out of 10 people want to know more about how computers can help them improve their skills.

Almost 4 out of 10 people said computers have improved the way they learn. About 2 out of 10 said computers have NOT changed the way they learn. About 1 out of 10 people said they can read better WITHOUT the help of computers.

Some of you think people get lazy and depend too much on computers. Features like spell-check may mean that people do not bother to look up words in a dictionary. If people rely on the computer's spelling and grammar checks, they may not work as hard to improve their own spelling and writing.

Here's what you said:

“Don't forget to use dictionaries or ask a human being for help.”

“People become mushrooms, staring at a screen.”

“Computers run everything. When they go down, it takes people forever to find the information they need.”

“People use them too much. They place too much importance on them.”

“Computers have taken jobs. You can memorize keys, and you don't have to read. Students from kindergarten to Grade 6 should use their brains and go back to basics that teach them how to think before they get on a computer.”

“Computers are useful, but they are also invasive. Little by little, they are taking over industries at the cost of many peoples' jobs. You only need one person to program a computer and it can do the work of 20 people.”

Computers cost too much

More than 5 out of 10 people said that computers cost too much money. This has a big impact, because nearly half of the people who took part in our survey have a family income of less than \$20,000 a year. Less than 1 out of 10 (7%) have a family income higher than \$40,000 per year. Many students cannot afford to buy a computer.

Buying the hardware is only part of the expense. A number of you told us that software costs too much, too.

Here's what you said:

“I feel that programs shouldn't cost so much. One day I was downloading a program from the Internet and it cost \$80 for a CD-ROM. \$80 or \$90 for a program is way too much!”

“The cost is what I don't like about computers. It's a choice: buy a computer or pay my rent.”

Too many choices but not enough software that works for me

The amount of information on the Internet can be too much to handle. Many of you said you found it hard to sift through the information to find what you were looking for. It also took a lot of time.

You told us that a lot of the software on the Internet that helps people learn is software for children. It is hard to find software that works for adults. This is most true for literacy students at higher levels. One literacy teacher said that students can feel insulted by the childish tone of some software programs. “There is a real need for more affordable software programs designed for an adult audience.” The fact is that even though this need exists, the market for it is not big enough.

Barriers to computer use

Although you may learn basic reading, writing and math skills using a computer, most of you also want to have more training on computers. You would like to be able to:

- learn basic computer skills
- learn more about computer hardware
- learn more about the Internet and other forms of communication
- learn more programs, such as word processing, Excel and business software.

These are the main reasons you do not have access to computers and computer training:

- Most of you do not own a computer. You must go to a school, a public library or somewhere else to use a computer. Even when you take a computer course, it may be hard to practise what you learned because you don't have access to a computer.
- Many of you would like to learn more about computers and the Internet but you do not know what kind of course to take.
- Taking a computer course can cost a lot of money, and you can't afford it.
- If you are French-speaking, you have a hard time finding courses in French.

Lack of access

Even though most of you have access to a computer at school, 3 out of 10 say there are not enough computers in the classroom. 2 out of 10 say there are not enough computers to share. Almost 2 out of 10 people say the computers in their school are out-of-date.

Some of you have a hard time using computers outside class hours. Public libraries often have a time limit of 1 hour or less for their computers

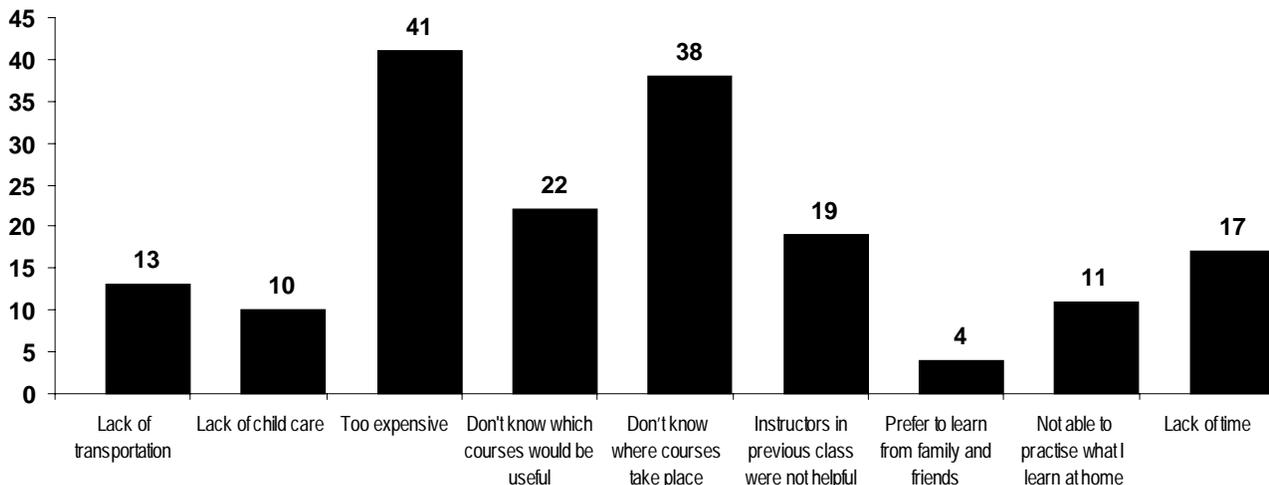
High cost

4 out of 10 people told us that computer courses cost too much money.

You also told us that you do not know where to go to find out about computer training courses. Even when you DO know where to go for a course, 2 out of 10 said they are not sure which course would be best to take.

Many of you simply do not have time to take computer training. Since almost 7 out of 10 people told us they do not have a computer at home, you do not think it is useful to learn computer programs if you cannot practise what you have learned.

Barriers to computer and internet training



A summary of what we learned from you

Computers are being used more and more in adult literacy programs. Teachers are often asked what they think about using computers to teach basic reading, writing and math skills. From the surveys you filled out, we learned what YOU think about computers. We also learned how you use them.

You told us how computers help you:

- Computers offer you new ways to learn to read and write.
- Using computers gives you a new skill.

- Knowing how to use computers can help you get a job.
- Computers are fun. Many of you like to play computer games. On the Internet, you can also find out about music and movies.

You also told us some of the concerns you have about computers:

- They cost a lot of money. Many of you can't afford to buy one.
- Many of you say that computers break down too often.
- You think that some people get lazy and start to depend on computers too much.
- French-speaking literacy students do not like the fact that most of the programs for computers are in English only. The result is they must learn to read and write in English as well as in their own language.

Here's what some French-speaking students told us:

“I wish the Windows operating system was bilingual. It would make it easier for Francophone students.” [Note: The Windows operating system comes in different languages, including French, but perhaps this literacy organization was unaware of this.]

“There is a great need for programs in French that are suitable for adult learners.”

“In some areas, training isn't offered in French, so we have to make do with what the literacy centres have available.”

Even though Ontario seems to be ahead of other provinces when it comes to using computers to teach literacy students, you told us about some problems you have with access to computers. Some of these problems are:

- a shortage of computers in some schools
- lack of up-to-date software
- lack of access to training programs
- lack of access to software designed for adults, not children.

You told us that learning to read and write are not the only reasons you like computers. You want to learn more about how computers work and what they can offer. This involves knowing more about:

- computer hardware
- the Internet
- new computer programs (or software).

Many of you told us you would like to learn more about how to use computers and the Internet, but you are not sure where to go for this kind of training. You feel that literacy programs could help you by:

telling you about the kinds of computer courses offered in your community
giving you advice on the kinds of courses that might be most useful to you.

You also said that it would help you if more software was designed for literacy students. To do this, software designers would need to consult with you. It would also be helpful to have more software programs in French.

In conclusion....

1. To get the most out of computers, more literacy students in Ontario need to know how to use them. It does not make sense to set up on-line discussion groups for literacy students if only a small number know how to use the Internet.
2. We still need to do a lot of research to find out how to make the best use of computers for adult basic education.