

# A Policy Conversation About Workplace and Workforce Literacy Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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"This is a unique opportunity for those of us who are involved in workplace and workforce literacy to think about a number of key issues. We're not looking for consensus and we're not looking for recommendations on our future policies and programs. The National Literacy Secretariat wants to be an effective ally to help you get where you want to go.

Our past tense conversation will give us an opportunity to review developments to date. Our present tense conversation is an opportunity to reflect on where we are and the key questions we face. Our future tense conversation will give us an opportunity to suggest how Canada might position itself to advance literacy using new technology and related techniques."

James E. Page  
Director General  
National Literacy Secretariat

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### **On making workplace literacy work...**

In the past, the autoworkers pioneered paid education leave, with the employer paying for time off the job for adult basic education. It was union-controlled education and it worked very well. The underlying philosophy was to foster a love of learning. By putting workers in a friendlier environment, they hoped to instill a love of learning that would make the workers want to grow and participate more fully in society.

**Today**, there is a prevailing opinion that potential program participants won't find a program acceptable if it's not embedded or shrouded in something else. I don't believe that's true. You can take away the stigma of basic skills programming in other ways.

**In the future**, if we put more rules and obstacles in place, it will be harder to convince firms to undertake literacy training. If we insist that program coordinators must be certified in literacy training, we will probably close many doors, especially in small businesses.

- We would like to see the smaller business community and the non-union sector getting on-board through forums like this or through their chambers of commerce.

People out there have the same concerns as smaller employers in the non-union sector, and we have not done as good a job as we could in saying, "Come on, let's work together on this."

- Assigning a senior coordinator to a program could take away from the principle of joint union/management coordination. It has to be joint so that both sides are always developing the program.

In a workplace program, it is important to involve more than the people who are the easiest to involve; there are a lot of obstacles that people face depending on their gender, their living circumstances, their level of poverty, their ethnicity, language, and various other things. Any program should look at potential obstacles and make sure there is universal accessibility.

## **On workplace literacy and basic skills...**

**Today**, we value companies that emphasize quality. Little credit is given to companies that emphasize learning.

'Literacy' is a bad word among possible candidates in the workplace, so terms such as 'basic skills' or 'upgrading' should be used.

- By using the term 'essential skills,' we can stop relegating basic to the lower end. By saying 'essential,' we allow for an ever-increasing and evolving sense of what is required to be employed in a particular situation; that concept of basic is always going to change. We've seen it change over the past five years. We need to get out of the trap of saying, 'Oh it's basic, so it's got to be under Grade 8 or under Grade 3.'

Some computer packages called 'Literacy Training Packages' start with a high school education level, but are considered to be literacy programs.

People are under stress in the workplace because of the rate of technological change; literacy training helps people develop coping skills beyond basic literacy skills; it gives them a sense of themselves to help them deal with change and develop confidence. Although it starts in the workplace, the spinoffs benefit the employer, people's families and communities.

- The concept of basic skills is relative to a particular situation.
- Workplace literacy is a tool in learning to learn.
- Workplace literacy is a vehicle to help workers participate fully in the workforce and to improve democracy.
- The definition of basic training should include the concepts of portable skills and transferable skills.

In the future, workplace literacy has to be given equal status with all other forms of workplace training and integrated in the whole training spectrum, but learner needs and the training approach have to be different from other training.

We have to think not only of job training, but of career development. Is literacy something that we should be attentive to in the workplace, not solely because of its relationship to people's performance or productivity, but because of its ability to improve people's mobility and growth in the workplace, and their potential to contribute to that enterprise or to other enterprises?

For the workplace of the future, the literacy skill level will have to be higher.

## **On employability and basic skills...**

Today, given the current economic situation, a responsible employer is not one who can guarantee a job for life, but one who can guarantee employability.

- Literacy training is one way of helping people keep their jobs and remain employable. This establishes a link between the workforce and the workplace. Those in the workplace and those in the workforce whether employed or not must be able to maintain their employability.

Job placement programs are upsetting. I talked to some learners on the board of the Saskatchewan Literacy Network. One individual spent two years in a job skills program that was judged a success because it managed to place him in an employment position at a local restaurant. But he couldn't read. He was a cook and he couldn't read the chits from the waitresses and waiters. He lost that job and he was right back at square one. What did that program do for that individual and for our society?

- In labour adjustment projects, one hot thing is job shadowing and job placement. We had a jointly-funded program with Canada Employment for the job placement segment of our labour adjustment program. We did a comparison study of the groups and found that those who were in the job placement segment have much lower employment levels than those who were in intensive full-time literacy training.
- Not all basic skills programs should be linked structurally to ongoing training and employment, but there should be basic skills programs, outside of the workplace, that are long enough and intense enough to help people develop foundational skills. In this way, if they become employed or take further training, they are equipped to cope with the situation. Too many basic skills programs are just part-time so people don't get the basis they need.

Pre-employment training is not workplace literacy. There is a perception, at least in some provinces, that they are one and the same and they say, 'Oh we're right in there with you.' They're not.

We need to think in terms of transitions: the transition into the workforce, the ability to maintain and grow in a job, evolve with that job, or indeed, find another job. With the notion of a mix of essential skills that give individuals the capacity to cope, we can set aside the distinction between employed and unemployed and talk about participation generally rather than the ability to have some adherence to the economic life of the community.

## **On teaching...**

Today, a lot of private trainers are going to Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC) and Canada Employment and saying, 'We can do literacy training and more.' People should be able to concentrate on literacy only. That doesn't mean that you have to leave out employment skills entirely.

- A private trainer will say, 'I can take someone from a Grade 4 level to a Grade 10 level in 16 weeks.' Then the next private trainer will say, 'I can meet your 16 weeks and do it in 14 and I'll also teach them Lotus 1-2-3.' Invariably, the person doesn't learn the basic skills or the skill being taught along with the basic skills.

Most organizations are in the business of producing something like widgets or oil, not the business of literacy development. They want professional people to do that.

- Organizations use trainers within the workplace for technical development, but not literacy development. It still has that barrier of mystery about it.

In British Columbia, we brought Grade 12 academic teachers into trades workplaces. They spent five days one day in each trade learning how the maths that they teach are applied in the workplace. There are some possibilities of linking K-to-12 teachers in workplace partnership programs.

- In British Columbia, instructors from the workplace met with teachers in the classroom to talk about what students need to know when they graduate. It was very effective to share information between two different types of teaching.

**In the future**, peer tutoring can be effective, but we need to examine the relationship between the volunteer and the peer tutor, the paid instructor, or the paid professional teacher. There is some cooperation and collaboration and some distance between the two approaches; we need to examine some of the concerns people have about peer tutoring and volunteer tutoring vis-à-vis professional instruction. In Quebec, for instance, there is a tax credit available for professional paid instruction, but not for peer instruction.

- Professional development for people who are coordinators of programs would be beneficial. If life-long learning is important, perhaps we ought to model it.
- We need to address our own professional development needs. How many practitioners and champions have invested the time and energy needed to understand the impact of new technologies on workplace literacy?

## **On partnerships...**

**Today**, we know that partnerships must be voluntary and based on trust and confidentiality.

**In the future**, it will be important to have a discriminating sense of where a partnership may be appropriate. After identifying goals, instead of imposing an idea of a one-size-fits-all partnership, we have to engage consciously and intentionally in partnerships that will help achieve our goals.

- We need to acknowledge the tensions in partnerships and name them, not sweep them under the rug or pretend there is a consensus when there isn't. If we take into account the partners' different interests and goals, our solutions and ways of working will be realistic and much more effective.
- Each partnership program must be unique and designed only for the partner's needs; others' issues may not be relevant.

We need to ask what we can do on our own, or in partnership with a specific group, company, or organization, to deliver programs that will benefit somebody. How can we all collaborate more effectively in broader partnerships?

## **On research and evaluation...**

**Up to now**, in evaluating workplace literacy and other HRDC and old EIC programs,

there has been a tendency to measure the immediate gain in annual income of people who participated in the program. Of course, generally there is none.

**Today**, we need to ask how we can resolve our existing problems. I don't know whether we have inventoried all the effective ways of reaching the people who need our help. I don't believe that we can import a whole lot of new ideas, nor do I believe that we should deny others' good ideas out of hand because we didn't invent them ourselves. We should cherry pick the best ideas no matter who thought of them or where in the world they come from. If they're better than something we are doing, we should know about them.

Underneath all of the interesting programs, there may not be a common interest or a common political perspective, but there is a common experience. It is important for this common experience to be expressed collectively, perhaps by establishing some national quality standards. If we don't allow good experiences to be made general enough for people to build on, people will have to start over at square one and make unnecessary mistakes. That does not push the field forward.

We need research and data because managers want to know about possible productivity gains and what literacy will mean for profits, for labour, and for the workforce. They also want to know what transportable skills will be developed.

- Evaluations are important to show how the programs are doing. They can also be a marketing tool if they can show that programs are effective across the spectrum. Evaluations should help people understand what they can expect from programs, instead of setting up false expectations.

We need to understand some of the differences between applied and pure research. We need to recognize that different audiences, such as industry, policy makers, workplace trainers and practitioners, need different kinds of information from the research results. That means that we need to use different kinds of research designs for certain kinds of research questions.

- Innovative research designs like participatory research and action research will help put into context those phenomena that cannot be depicted in terms of a number.
- To advance the field, we need baseline information and research and hard statistics.
- We have done a lot of applied research and there is a need to balance it out with pure research.

We identified two important types of needs assessments for the development of basic skills programs: the organizational needs assessment, and the individual needs assessment. For needs assessments to be effective, they have to be supported by workers and unions from the beginning.

- Prior-learning assessment must be seen as a real, concrete assessment of specific transferable skills rather than a self-esteem enhancer. We have more questions than answers about it: Is it just a stylish way of doing the same old thing, or is it a new way of respecting the lifelong learning process and fostering a true learning culture that is not always and only institutionally based?

When evaluating programs, we have to be sensitive to a whole range of goals. We expect these kinds of programs to teach people how to learn, but it is not easy to measure if and how new skills will contribute to life-long learning.

- We need to think about the time limits we place on evaluations; we evaluate people's skills on the last day that they are in the program rather than taking a long-term view of the program's effectiveness.

**In the future**, we should analyze where problems originate. Do folks need more help because they are coming into our country from a place where they have a lower economic status? Our school system serves many students well, but others may not be so well served. What are the reasons for that? Can anything be done about it?

- In British Columbia, and in Toronto and some other large cities where there is a lot of immigration from overseas, the language barrier is very evident and interferes with the learning process. Immigration authorities must recognize that the provinces need adequate funding for programs teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) so that they do not take away from other education programs. Schools need us to recognize that they have a very difficult role dealing with many social issues along with traditional education challenges.

If the National Literacy Secretariat does another inventory of workplace literacy programs, it should include government-sponsored programs and self-sustaining programs within companies, to allow for greater information sharing and to foster linkages between sectors.

- An updated inventory on workplace programs would also be useful; it should have in-depth information about the various kinds of programs, how well they do, whom they address and whether they have been evaluated. The inventory should also provide such information as, for example: What are the formats of the various programs? Who manages them? Do they include temporary workers? Are they delivered by education professionals? What are their teaching methods? What supplies are used? How many people are involved? How many hours are involved?
- It would be useful to have a bibliography of available materials. When we're working in the health care sector in Nova Scotia, we should be able to find out if somebody in British Columbia has developed a curriculum that we could use.

We should take a longer and broader view, and not just ask if individuals benefit from literacy programs; for workplaces, we should also ask, 'Is there a general trend for the enterprise to gain from having had these programs? Are these gains across the whole firm? Are they important?' With respect to quality management, literacy programs may improve such things as the response time to customers' complaints as well as worker productivity.

### **On building a network for workplace literacy...**

**Today**, the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) has e-mail. We once had a private conference among provincial coordinators on workplace literacy. But NALD's major feature is a bulletin board, so there is less chat and more emphasis on bulletin board services and postings of resources and information. In Ontario, NALD has a subscriber fee; for those not connected to the Internet, there are also on-line costs.

- It's the conference feature of CoSy that makes it most valuable to the field. It brings people together who might be coming from different directions, and builds a common sense of what we're engaged in.

**In the future**, we need a national network for workplace literacy, with practitioners,

labour people, business people and others under an umbrella organization.

- A national organization that relates only to literacy is not necessarily the solution. There can be national activities and national events where people can come together, but everyone involved in workplace literacy is connected to a local, provincial or national organization. We should use opportunities like this to develop ways that our organizations can strengthen workplace literacy programs.
- Further discussions of this type, on different topics, might be useful. It doesn't take a national organization to do that; it takes some specific plans, initiative and money. We should think of a modest level of infrastructure that would be appropriate for our situation and needs. Setting up something new could use up energy that we should be using elsewhere.

## **On defining literacy...**

**In the past**, there was a mistake made in trying to sell literacy concepts to employers by describing literacy and its benefits in economic terms. Early on we agreed that the social and economic perspectives of literacy should not be in competition. The two perspectives of literacy should be complementary.

**Today**, we need a clear definition of literacy so that we can talk to labour and industry about what is involved and make them part of it.

When I think about marketing, I think more of building ownership in literacy than of selling the concept.

- In the labour movement, we encourage participation by unions in workplace literacy, but we consider that as promoting involvement, not as selling a product.
- Marketing relates more to the relationship one gets pulled into in dealing with business. The term 'marketing' should not define what we do as educators.

**In the future**, literacy should not be extracted further from other aspects of people's day to day lives, but further embedded in it; the more we pull it out as a certified specialty, the more ghettoized it becomes. We have to think of ways to integrate it with people's roles in and beyond the workplace.

Literacy is not just a one-dimensional problem, but is many-faceted, evolving, changing, and growing more complex. We are going to be dealing with a lot of problems that are linked to literacy. Literacy will enable people to participate socially, culturally, politically and economically.

- In the Lower Mainland, there are huge numbers of ESL people folks coming in from overseas in our schools, our workplaces or in workplaces where their own languages are spoken. If we are going to assimilate them and allow them to be participating Canadians, we have to see ESL and literacy as similar. A lack of literacy skills and a lack of knowledge of the language of the community isolates people from each other, and from the workplace.

## **On the need for dialogue...**

**Today**, judging from their comments and ideas about literacy, some fairly senior people involved in training in the federal bureaucracy do not see the relationship between training and basic skills development. How can we ensure that literacy is better integrated into the thinking of the people who are changing training in this country?

- We need to have policy discussions around literacy issues in a variety of departments. Literacy should be treated as being related to health, the administration of justice, training and labour force development, and the social policy net. It should also be an intrinsic part of the government's agenda with respect to new technologies and the electronic highway. Part of the task of the National Literacy Secretariat is to infiltrate various parts of government to encourage an understanding and appreciation of literacy issues and their intrinsic importance to others' work.

The barriers stay up when we don't talk to each other and don't understand what others are doing. The barriers come down when we can sit down and listen to people and figure out their orientation and their perspectives. We sometimes reject what other people are doing because we only have part of the picture. If we have more conversations like this, at this level of sophistication, we can go further in figuring out where we can work together to move the field forward. If we don't talk, the field will stay as it is.

- In a survey, labour and business identified three areas of interest: gaining access to existing workplace programs; building co-operative partnerships between business, labour and educators; and getting information on successful programs.

**For the future**, there is a sense of urgency to sit down with the people who are designing training programs and discuss how the number of people who are being taught to read at the workplace can be significantly increased in the next five to 10 years.

### **On public policy...**

**Today**, there is a tendency in Canada, at the provincial and national levels, to talk about using taxes or punitive measures to promote literacy training. We should take this approach only as a last resort because whenever there are regulations, a lot of people find ways to sidestep them. We would probably have more success by providing positive incentives such as financial assistance or resources.

- In Quebec, there is now a project that asks employers to devote one percent of their wage bill to training. This is something we could consider. However, firms would much prefer to receive a training tax credit than to be faced with a new tax that would impose an even heavier tax burden on Canadian companies.
- Another coercive approach that has been proposed is: 'Your benefit will be "X" amount if you are in training; if you're not in training, it will be less than that.' Most educators know that coercing or compelling people to take training does not promote learning.

Government departments often don't understand the labour movement at all and some make no effort to make sure that people who work in the labour movement have some understanding of workplace literacy. So they may start at the wrong place, talk to the wrong people. They don't know exactly whom to contact; they get in touch with the union people through the employer rather than through the union. Those kinds of things cause problems right from the very beginning.

**In the future**, every major federal and provincial training initiative should contain a literacy component. At least 10 percent of the workforce is illiterate, so at least 10 percent of training funds should go to literacy. Otherwise, we are going to have a



growing gap between the skilled and the unskilled. A disproportionate number of unskilled workers are being displaced by changes in our economy, so there should be a greater emphasis on providing these people with skills that will enable them to get back into the workforce.

Literacy requirements, needs, and competencies are shifting. Workforce and workplace needs are also shifting, so we need to clarify our principles as we articulate our goals.

- We need a set of principles that are sufficiently abstract to be valuable across the board, and specifically concrete to be of real utility in program design.

When you separate workforce literacy from workplace literacy, there is a potential, with all the cutbacks in the provincial governments and elsewhere, that workforce literacy will be seen as a public sector responsibility and that workplace literacy will be put into the private sector, where industry and labour might be expected to fund their own programs. Then the literacy issue will really crash.

- In Toronto, the 2,800 workers who have just been laid off from the garment industry and the service sector are the face of the future workforce. They work in basements, they work as individual homeworkers and pieceworkers. There are also contract workers at higher levels who have no connection to a standard employer as we know it. Over the next five or 10 years, we must go beyond our current definition of workplace and workforce.

According to the new policy makers, there has been a dramatic value shift regarding future purposes. The policy seems to be driven toward more economic imperatives for learning. We should remind people that we don't have to get too pragmatic in our approach. Whatever practical things we do in the workplace, we must continue to emphasize more values than the economic imperatives. Our focus for learning is on the whole worker, the whole community, the whole society.

- If literacy is not funded below a certain level, some people will never get the foundational skills they desperately need. It's one thing to call it a right, it's another thing to provide the opportunity.
- Lower level literacy must still be included; we want a level playing field so that different businesses unionized, non-unionized and small business can all participate. Public policy should create a structure to make that possible and encourage it.
- We need to develop a complementary diversity rather than a competitive diversity, using public funds to create a range of opportunities for workers, to serve them better and to use resources better so that we're not competing with each other.

I would like to encourage the National Literacy Secretariat to maintain its principled flexibility in policy formulation. There is a difference between chaotic, ad hoc flexibility and principled flexibility. The flexibility should not be lost.

- We want some continuity in programming: We don't want to have a program up and running one year and gone the next. But the function of the National Literacy Secretariat is to seed new programs. If we have multi-year funding on a five-year model, and then an organization has to apply again, it will not come up with new programs in those five years unless it gets funding from somewhere else

We in the National Literacy Secretariat need to take away what we have heard here to think about how our policies and our approaches in this field ought to be shaped. If we

articulate a firm set of policies, we must come back to you and to others, to sound those out and make sure that we are on target.'

*James E. Page*

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