

Notes for an address to

The Power of Words

Provincial Literacy Conference

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by Peter Calamai

My involvement with literacy reminds me of the story about the young midshipman called before the promotions board of the British Admiralty. As he entered the room, the midshipman tripped on the lintel and toppled on the floor in front of the three examining officers.

“Well, at least I’ve fallen into good company,” he remarked.

He got the promotion.

Once again I’ve fallen into good company, but both times it was quite a fluke. The first, in 1987 with *Broken Words*, came about because someone at the Southam company called my bluff when I tried to weasel out of doing a report on literacy by saying that the necessary national survey would be too costly.

The second time, with *Literacy Matters* this September, happened because the publisher of The Toronto Star loaned me to ABC Canada without my even knowing it was happening.

While the origins of these two reports are similar their scale is far different – *Broken Words* took the better part of 10 months to report and write, while *Literacy Matters* was wrapped up in a frantic six weeks. There’s also a difference in wordage – more than 50,000 words as opposed to a mere 5,000 words.

The purposes of the two reports was also radically different. *Broken Words* was asking whether the literacy crisis was just exaggeration by literacy advocates. *Literacy Matters* was asking about Canada’s progress in dealing with what we know for sure is a huge problem.

There are at least three different ways to look at the state of literacy in Canada today and what progress has been made in 1990s.

- the statistical and quantitative approach
- the intuitive and qualitative
- the anecdotal and human

First, the statistical and quantitative. In the 1980s, the problem was not enough official statistics. Now it might be too many. We are downing in literacy statistics and various interpretations from two separate Statistics Canada studies: the “Adult Literacy in Canada” survey carried out in 90 and published 91 and the “International Adult Literacy Survey” done in 95 and published continuously since.

These statistics throw light on all sorts of arcane issues, such as the mismatch between literacy skill levels and the literacy demands of the job among machine operators (known as the 'Use it or Lose it' proposition.)

But this statistical oversupply means that certain key facts get buried. Such as:

- no improvement in national literacy levels for ages 16-69 between 1990 and 1995, although there should have been (better educated entering labour force, poorer leaving)
- one in five recent high-school graduates lack the literacy skills for entry-level jobs
- about ten per cent of people who supposedly need help getting it nationally. That's just my best guess. In 1987, my best guess was five per cent.

Even more revealing is what this plethora of statistics don't tell us.

- how much is each province spending on literacy programs per person for those who need help?
- how many people are being reached by some sort of program in each province?
- what percentage is this of the people who StatsCan says need help (i.e. below Level Three)?
- what is the success rate of different literacy programs, listed by the level of literacy of entrants into the program? Outcome measurements is the jargon.

These aren't easy figures to generate. First, there's defining what constitutes a literacy program, testing literacy learners, tracking people who attend programs, agreeing on how to define success and so on.

But the upshot of not having these figures is three-fold

1. Can't put real numbers on the degree of improvement in adult literacy this decade, unlike other causes competing for the public purse
2. Can't make the case for increased support on the basis that what's being done works
3. Can't answer the simple question – how long will it take and how much will it cost

All this has major implications for public accountability.

So much for the statistical and quantitative approach. However, intuitively everyone involved in literacy knows there's been lots of progress over the past decade. Some examples:

- an explosion of literacy groups across the country
- groups are much better connected than in 1987 – credit the National Adult Literacy Database
- the emergence of family literacy (Alberta a leader)
- much greater and meaningful involvement of learners
- the maturing of workplace literacy
- the flowering of imaginative and innovative programs, such as LAPS with Laureen MacKenzie, Elaine Cairns at Bow Valley in Calgary

- improved public awareness

I like to divert to talk about public awareness for a bit. In *Literacy Matters*, I wrote that “adult literacy never pops up unprompted when pollsters ask people to name the most pressing issues of the day, although education usually does.”

Some recent polling shows this is still the case. In September, 34 per cent of adult Canadians selected “health care” in an Angus Reid poll as the most urgent issue for their leaders to confront. People were allowed to name up to three such pressing issues.

Twenty per cent named immigration and refugees, the same proportion also selected education and the trio of taxes, tax reform or the GST. Jobs, and unemployment were tops with 18 per cent of those polled. And so on through national unity, the economy, the deficit, poverty and homelessness, defence, the environment (only 5 per cent) down to native issues at two per cent.

So adult education, lifelong learning, basic skills upgrading, literacy – all those terms together – didn’t get mentioned by even one per cent of Canadians as one of top three national issues.

However, the picture changes when people are asked specifically about literacy, according to polling that Decima did in 1990 for ABC Canada and repeated in 1999. Here are some highlights

- this year 35 per cent of Canadians rated the issue of literacy as a “very serious” problem. At the beginning of this decade, that figure was 29 per cent.
- this year 31 per cent said they had heard “a lot” about issue of literacy, compared to 26 per cent at beginning of decade.
- 32 per cent said inadequate reading and writing skills are “very serious problems” in the workplace, compared to 24 per cent

The conclusion: public understanding of literacy has improved, even if public awareness has not.

Despite all the polling data, that was what I called the qualitative approach to looking at how far we’ve come in the past decade. Now for the anecdotal or human balance sheet.

We all feel that would be much more understanding of the literacy issue and much more support if only everyone heard the triumphs of people like Chris Nicoll, who spoke here tonight and who won the Flight of Freedom award from Canada Post.

His testimony makes three vital points that the emphasis on impersonal numbers misses entirely.

1. people who have trouble reading or writing can still be productive members of society, hold down jobs and contribute to the community.
2. it isn’t the fault of the people involved that they couldn’t pick up reading, or writing or numbers the first time around.

3. helping people with literacy usually changes a lot more in their lives than just the facility for reading and writing – things like self-esteem and aspirations.

Unfortunately we can't clone Chris and even if we could we can't get anywhere near enough people to listen to his message. During my crash update course this summer I think I got a hint why so many misconceptions still persist after a decade and why not enough people take an active hand.

We've been concentrating on literacy as a national issue.

The National Literacy Secretariat has spent \$250 million since 1988-89 on research and pilot projects and initiatives and networking and materials development and meetings.

Various bodies have created national awards, like the Flight for Freedom (since rebranded) and ABC's "Joyces" after Senator Joyce Fairbairn.

There are national champions, like Peter Gzowski and maybe soon John Ralston Saul who focused on literacy in a recent speech in Quebec. And there are the national studies and national advocacy groups.

But literacy isn't a national issue. Nor is it a provincial issue – even though lots of people tend to make it one by putting the blame on teachers or the provincial education systems.

Literacy is a local issue, with both a provincial and a national dimension. It won't go forward until we put it not on the national agenda, but on the local agenda. People have to say, our community won't accept this state of affairs any longer, as they have for issues like homelessness or battered women, both of which have dimensions that are provincial and national.

Traditionally we've heard that it's difficult to rally support for literacy because it's invisible, unlike people sleeping in cardboard boxes. But the tidal wave of statistics has changed public perception, as the Decima survey bears out.

So we need to enroll local champions who can rouse the community to take literacy action, of course with support from the provincial and federal levels of government.

Now let me dream a bit.

If we took literacy seriously in every community what would the picture look like at the end of the next decade

- All of society would take responsibility for literacy rather than leaving it to scattered, underfunded literacy groups. As a first step, this would mean that people who could never hope to have the same literacy ability as the general population wouldn't be left to fend from themselves:

1. All businesses, institutions and government would practice plain language and design.
 2. Community health centres would have videos about AIDS for people who never going to be able to handle that kind of reading.
 3. Supermarkets would be battling one another to display the shopping tip sheets prepared by the Consumers Association of Canada.
- The vocabulary would change – no longer would everything about literacy be expressed in economic terms, no longer would literacy be seen as really important only because of finding and keeping jobs.
 - Making knowledge accessible to all Canadians will be a reality, enshrined not in feeble legislative documents but in a national psyche nurtured from the community grassroots. A belief in the value of an educated population would guarantee that funding was available for everyone to finish high school, whenever they wanted to.
 - And for students, our schools would have the budgets to hire the teachers and aides needed to support kids with reading problems from junior kindergarten onwards. Resources and emphasis would gradually shift from remediation to prevention.
 - To help children in the home, leaders would arise in every community to create endowments for family literacy similar to the \$2.4 million raised in Halifax.
 - There would be literacy programs for and by aboriginals in every community, like the ones developed here in Edmonton. And there would be something like Winnipeg's Aboriginal Literacy Foundation everywhere too.
 - Literacy volunteers would be accorded the community recognition and standing their valuable work deserves.
 - Being a professional literacy worker or literacy co-ordinator would be thought of more as a career, rather than as a sacrifice.
 - People who need help would be beating down the doors of literacy programs because knowledge and learning would be so attractive, with the lead coming from prominent people in each community,
 - A constitutional amendment would outlaw, on pain of exile from Canada, all attempts by educators, school trustees, parents and professors to find the one perfect way to teach reading. People would stop thinking there is one right way and get on with using anything that worked.

Realistically, what are the chances of reaching this New Jerusalem? I think they're pretty good, IF

1. we provide those accountability numbers I spoke about at the very beginning – the output measures to show that literacy programs can do the job
2. we identify, recruit and convince a few key leaders in every community
3. we back them by outspoken public advocacy. The time is past for the cap-in- hand approach.

After all, unlike a lot of current fads, literacy really deserves to have the community behind it. But, to be blunt, it won't until the literacy movement graduates from supplication to advocacy.

Just think what could be accomplished if it did.