

Conference
Final Report

the bottom line:

Productivity, Employment and Essential Skills

A western Canadian conference that brought together
business and labour to address the important link
between essential skills training and:

- ▶ Canadian skill shortages
- ▶ re-deployment of workers
- ▶ apprenticeship
- ▶ organizational change

November 1 (Evening) - November 3 (Noon), 2000
Sheraton Suites Eau Claire • Calgary, Alberta

Hosted by  WVestNet

Supported by the National Literacy Secretariat (HRDC)

the bottom line

Productivity, Employment and Essential Skills

Conference Final Report

WWESTNET - 2000

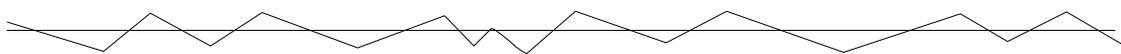
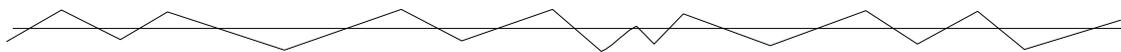


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Conference Program

Wednesday, November 1, 2000

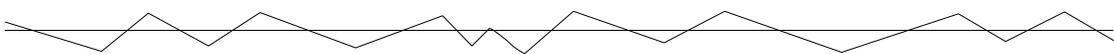
6:30 - 9:30 pm Conference Registration
 Official Conference Opening
 Western Theme Reception

Thursday, November 2, 2000

7:30 - 9:00 Gallery Breakfast and Displays
 Conference Registration
9:00 - 9:15 Welcome and Introductions
9:15 - 9:45 Keynote Speaker - Peter Calamai
9:45 - 10:15 Buzz Groups - Essential Skills
10:15 - 10:35 Refreshment Break
10:35 - 11:45 Keynote Speaker - Scott Murray
11:45 - 12:00 Break
12:00 - 1:00 Seated Lunch
1:00 - 1:45 Keynote Speaker - Dr. Tom Keenan
1:45 - 2:30 Keynote Speaker - Dr. John Bratton
2:30 - 3:00 Refreshment Break
3:00 - 4:00 Buzz Groups - *Bringing it Back Home*
4:00 - 4:15 Wrap-up
4:20 - 7:00 Tribute Reception - *Hats Off*

Friday, November 3, 2000

7:30 - 8:30 Gallery Breakfast and Displays
8:30 - 8:45 Greetings from Senator Fairbairn
8:45 - 10:00 Panel Discussion - *The Real World* with Karen Milani,
 Cynthia Selly, Jonas Sammons, Ron Townsend
10:00 - 10:15 Refreshment Break
10:15 - 10:30 Positioning the Issues
10:30 - 11:30 Round Tables - *Moving Forward*
11:30 - 12:00 Summing Up and Evaluation
12:00 - 1:15 Sandwich Buffet



Introduction



WWestnet Co-chair from Manitoba, Sue Turner, and Bow Valley College President, Sharon Carry, (back) open the conference.

This comparison with *Participation* can be instructive. The *Participation* campaign began in 1971, after it was revealed that the average 60 year old from Sweden was more physically fit than the average Canadian of thirty. It has taken thirty years to go from being a nation which was unconcerned about physical fitness as an issue; to the present general enthusiasm for jogging, mountain biking, rollerblading, and hiking. We may not all ‘participate’ as much as we should, but after thirty years of being told, we know that we *should* get active, get healthy. As the keynote address pointed out, this is the last step before making that ‘emotional commitment’ and actually doing something.

The goal of this fourth WWestnet conference was to have participants pause to ‘take stock’ of the progress made during the last ten years; then to look forward to the challenges facing the Canadian workforce in the new century. The conference evaluations indicate that most people thought the conference was worthwhile, with high ratings for organization and overall success.

We also hope that participants were able to productively share experiences and expertise. We believe that the conference demonstrated a real concern by businesses and labour organizations, not just to recognize the issues, but to do something about them.

Several times during the conference, the comparison between ‘physical fitness’ and ‘essential skills’ was mentioned, and the national *Participation* campaign was held up as a model for further efforts to increase the attention paid to low levels of essential skills in the workplace.



Sharon Carry delivers a welcome from Bow Valley College.

Now it is 2001, and Scott Murray has told us that the average Swede can read better and use documents more effectively than the average Canadian. From the IALS research, we can also make the connection between essential skills and earning power, just as an earlier generation made the connection between fitness, health and longevity.

Given the glacial rate at which public perceptions and attitudes change, the effort to bring essential skills to the forefront as primarily an issue of productivity, profitability, and employment still has a way to go. Peter Calamai scolded delegates at the conference for not doing enough; for failing to score the touchdown. But he has been on the road to change for a dozen years and has high expectations. He is also the first to admit that the ball is further down the field—we now have partnerships and programs to address the need for improved essential skills; instructional materials suited to workplace contexts; and a growing awareness of the need to do more. We also have another twenty years of effort if *Participaction* is our model for advocacy.

We hope that you left the conference with a better understanding of the issues, a vision of what can be done to better prepare western Canadian workers for the new millennium, and some concrete ideas for moving the essential skills agenda forward.

The Western Canada Workplace Essential Skills Training Network (WWestnet)

Judi Armstrong, CUPE

Lloyd Campbell, Syncrude Canada Ltd.

Rob Despina, Dunlop Standard Aerospace Ltd.

Carolyn Dieleman, Alberta Learning

Stacey Huget, Literacy B.C.

Jim Lippert, Highway Constructors Ltd.

Greg Maruca, UNITE Local 459

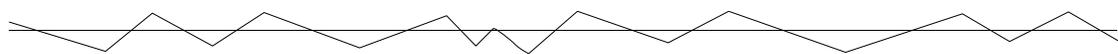
Irma Mohammed, BC Federation of Labour

Jonas Sammons, Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters

Nancy Steel, Bow Valley College

Ron Torgerson, Saskatchewan Federation of Labour WEST Program

Sue Turner, Workplace Education Manitoba



Keynote Address

The Three L's – Literacy and Lifelong Learning

Peter Calamai

You probably can't place the name, Edward Lorenz. He's hasn't been a contestant on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. Nor does he play in the NHL. And he certainly isn't running in the current federal election.

But if instead I ask whether you've ever heard of the Butterfly Effect, I'll bet there may be a glimmer of recognition. A butterfly flaps its wings somewhere like Brazil and stirs up a tornado in Alberta. It was back in 1972 that Lorenz, who was then a professor of meteorology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wondered if this sort of bizarre cause and effect actually happened in the world's atmosphere and was responsible in part for our weather.

The destructive butterfly flap was a powerful image for what's come to be called chaos science. Perhaps too powerful because it obscures what Lorenz was most trying to communicate. He wanted to get across two concepts and because I think they're concepts that are also relevant to what we're talking about at this conference, I'm going to spend just a minute on them.

After that, I'm going to skip lightly over the familiar ground of strategies for improving workplace essential skills, then make a sweeping judgment about how successful these strategies have been, point some accusatory fingers for why we haven't accomplished more and finally try to suggest how we might make more progress.

I keep saying "we" but that's a bit of a fraud. I'm only an onlooker, an observer of the literacy scene since 1986. But I haven't



been in the trenches actually doing it. So consider these comments as coming from an outsider, although one who tries to be reasonably well-informed.

Back to the flapping butterfly and chaos science. Professor Lorenz wanted to get across two fundamental ideas.

First, the state of the atmosphere at any one time is determined by a combination of factors. For our purposes here today, we don't need to understand those components in detail. But they're things like temperature, pressure and wind velocity and the radiation from the sun. They're expressed through rather complicated formulas covering all four dimensions – three for location and the fourth for time.

The important thing about these formulas is that the mathematical bits inside them are all interconnected. So the temperature at one time and place in the atmosphere has a direct, but subtle, effect on the formula that

forecasts the pressure somewhere else in the atmosphere at a different time. Change one thing and the consequence is unpredictable. That was Lorenz's initial insight and a fundamental one – this dynamic interdependence among the components of a complex system. And you have to admit that it was a stroke of dramatic genius to illustrate this concept with the flapping of a butterfly's wings that changed air pressure minutely in one spot, eventually resulting in a violent storm half a world away.

But that powerful image obscured the professor's second point. Sure the atmospheric system was inherently chaotic but it could still be predicted. Why? To vastly oversimplify, because even such a dynamic, chaotic, non-linear system as the Earth's atmosphere conformed to the laws of statistical probability. That meant you could model the atmosphere with a computer program, run a whole bunch of "what-if" scenarios and look at what happened. What if we started with very cold initial conditions, what if ash spewed upwards by volcanic eruptions cut in half the radiation from the sun that reached the Earth's surface, what if humanity's activities doubled the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere? When you ran enough of these scenarios and enough variations, you'd have uncovered some general characteristics of the system that were highly probable, statistically speaking.

So for the next little while let's give free reign to our imaginations. Let's think of essential skills, productivity and employment as three variables in a dynamic, chaotic, non-linear system. And let's imagine that we're changing various "what-if" conditions like the strength of the commitment radiating from governments, and the ash raining down from the elites and the hot gases rising up from activity below. And then let's run these scenarios and variations for at least a decade.

Now you might call these starting conditions by different names. They could be sectoral partnerships or labour-management partnerships. And other variables could be called one-on-one peer tutoring, onsite classroom delivery, integrated curriculum strategies, one-on-one intervention strategies and so on.

What would our computer modelling produce from these inputs? There would definitely be some spots where the resulting atmosphere was benign, even welcoming. These welcoming conditions would produce a huge increase in essential skills programs and help some people keep jobs or get new, better ones. And these programs and the people who ran them would become much better networked as the exercise progressed. The substantial radiation from the central sun, something called the National Literacy Secretariat, might also spawn a large body of made-in-Canada literature and learning materials. And the ash and the hot air combined with this radiation could have transformed some regions to lush paradises and others to barren wastelands.

It's not safe to pile any more baggage on this donkey of an already overworked analogy. But I hope I've made the point. The interrelations among essential skills, productivity and employment may seem complex and utterly unpredictable but certainly no more so than the climate for the next three months, a forecast that the Meteorological Service of Canada is already routinely making.

In fact, 10 years ago some farsighted people had already painted a picture of what could and should be accomplished for literacy in the private sector by the year 2000. These representatives from organized labour, the corporate sector and the literacy field came together at a conference at Mont Ste-Marie Quebec. The goal of the meeting was to develop a private sector strategy for

literacy, by which they meant reading, writing and using numbers – the three core essential skills. Here, taken from the final report of the conference, are a few predictions, goals and hopes for the Year 2000.

Predictions

- The importance and scope of the literacy problem will be broadly understood and there will be growing awareness of the full range of solutions.
- Training trust funds will be a feature of the industrial relations landscape.
- Building in people the capacity to learn will be seen as essential for competitiveness

Goals

- The rate of functional illiteracy has been cut in half compared to 1990
- Five per cent of working time is devoted to training and development
- Literacy learners are eligible for UIC funding (we'd call it EI today)
- Federal transfers to the provinces that are earmarked for education must be spent on education as a condition of transfer

Hopes

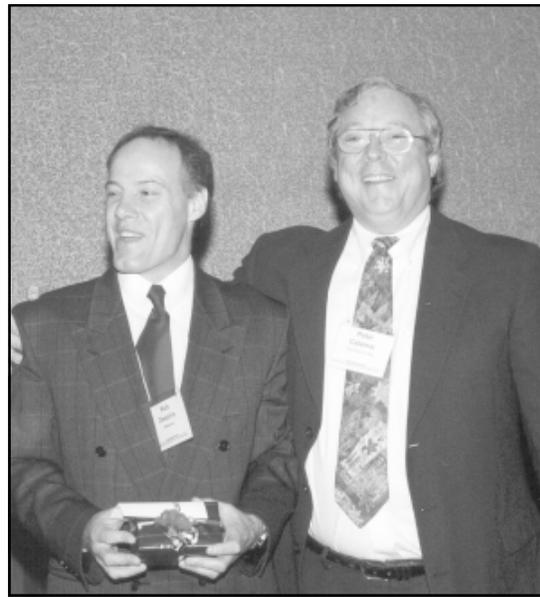
- Sufficient public and private resources will be channelled into literacy training so that all those who want to learn, can learn.
- Literacy training and management training will be seen as equal priorities
- Businesses will be under pressure from the corporate community to devote one per cent of gross revenues to literacy and training. Unions will institute a one-cent-an-hour check-off to finance literacy and basic skills development.

There's lots more. But I hope that's enough for you to agree with two observations. First, these were a far-sighted group of people; and second, we haven't come very far toward those predictions, goals and hopes.

Why? Let me go back to our imaginary computer model, the one that tried to describe the interplay between essential skills, productivity, employment and all those other variables. If we really had such a model, we could align it with what actually took place over the past 10 years. And then we could peer inside for an explanation of what went wrong.

I think what we'd find there are a lot of comfort zones spots where some actors are sitting out the action. If you're charitable, they're resting from the fray. To be candid, they've crawled into hidey holes where they can't be discovered or disturbed. Take the federal government for example. Its refuge is a constitution that gives provinces the responsibility for education. And to make sure their hidey hole couldn't be breached,

Continued on Page 39



Westnet member from Manitoba, Rob Despina (left) and Peter Calamai

The Implications for a Knowledge Society



Scott Murray from Statistics Canada.

Scott Murray expanded on the conference theme by reviewing Canada's performance on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the message it sends. As he stressed, we must work to fill the gaps if we are to compete with literacy-rich countries such as Germany and Sweden.

The present definition of literacy has evolved from that of a basic reading ability to include how adults actually *use* and process written information to function in society, a necessary skill in industrialized nations. IALS recognizes that everyone has some level of literacy proficiency, which may or may not be sufficient to meet daily demands. IALS measures literacy across language and culture by conducting parallel national studies in twenty countries, including Canada, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland and Sweden. IALS is thus the first *international* study to establish common assessment parameters on adult literacy.

Two in five Canadians aged 16 to 65 tested at prose literacy Levels 1 or at levels which are inadequate for many home and work situations. The results are similar for document literacy and quantitative literacy. Literacy in Canada varies by region. Generally, the Western provinces score better than the other regions, having fewer people at Level 1 and more people at Level 4/5. Much of the regional difference found in literacy ability is a reflection of differences in educational attainment. For example, someone in Nova Scotia with a post-secondary education is just as likely to perform at a high level as a person with a similar education in British Columbia.

A comparison of the literacy levels of the employed and the unemployed makes it clear that the two groups differ greatly in terms of their literacy skills. Only 12% of the employed are at prose Level 1, compared to 33% of the unemployed. There is a similar disproportion at Level 4/5: 9% of the unemployed are at Level 4/5, but *three times* as many of the employed (26%) are at this level.

The presence in the workplace of a significant number of people with literacy skills which may be considered inadequate (Levels 1 and 2) raises health and safety concerns, and relates to numerous other changes occurring in the workplace. For example, people with low literacy skills undergoing Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) training may not be receiving usable information.

There is a large "income bonus" for workers with high skills, and a corresponding income penalty for those with lower skills. Individuals with low literacy skills are much less likely to have high employment income than are those with high literacy skills. ♣

Labour Market Trends in the Global Economy

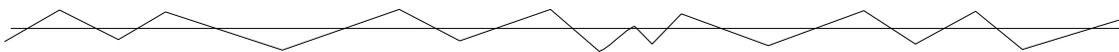


Dr. Tom Keenan, Dean of Continuing Education, University of Calgary.

Dr. Tom Keenan painted a picture of what the future holds for the Canadian workplace and concluded that workers must have sound essential skills in order to be equipped to embrace the rapid rate of change in a knowledge based economy.

Specifically, Dr. Keenan analysed emerging market trends, such as the impact of technology, skill shortages and skill gaps, and global competition, and detailed the relationship between these trends and the use of essential skills by workers at every level in the Canadian economy.

The conference participants were left with the very clear message that essential skill development is an economic imperative, an employment imperative and a social responsibility if Canada is to remain competitive and prosper in the future that is unfolding. 🐼



Reshaping Work: The Human Equation

The information revolution has had several effects on work and employment. Information technology enables 'flatter' and 'leaner' organizations as internal communication improves. Increased investment in technology often forces, or makes possible, the redesign of jobs to fit the new way of doing business. The effect of 'hard technology' is often coupled with 'soft technologies' such as just-in-time manufacturing, work teams, statistical process control and total quality management. Together these changes have transformed all work to some extent; some work has been thoroughly changed.

The transformation of work has also altered the labour market. Learning, rather than seniority, is becoming the dominant predictor of workplace success. Out-sourcing and contract employment allow organizations to reduce costs while still maintaining business functions. For the individual worker, the favoured strategy for coping with workplace change is adult learning which ensures current knowledge and skills.

Work reorganization is a mixed blessing, and there is some speculation about whether the new economy is creating 'good jobs' or 'bad jobs.' The streamlining of corporate workforces can lead to layoffs, or for those with the appropriate skills, the opportunity for well-paid contract employment. Work reorganization and the introduction of new technology simplifies the content of some jobs; most people point to the 'burger' assembly line as an example of job simplification. On the other hand, some jobs are becoming much richer in terms of job responsibilities, the skills needed for the work, and the autonomy exercised by the worker. The transformation of lowly 'bank tellers' into more skilled 'customer service representatives' is one example.

Work in the future will demand more of workers. They can expect higher recruitment standards for positions in technologically complex workplaces where work roles may be interchangeable and accountability is high. Future workers will be expected to be flexible about work times and conditions as business intensifies its operations to run twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, perhaps across several continents. Maintaining work-life balance under these conditions will be a challenge. ♣



Carolyn Dieleman, WWestnet Co-chair from Alberta (left) and Dr. John Bratton, following his presentation.

Round Table

Bringing it Home

The following question was posed by the conference organizers:

What is the impact of essential skills in your workplace in terms of employment and productivity? (For example, they might want to consider the relationship between essential skills and issues such as skills shortages, technological change, health and safety, downsizing and re-deployment of workers, organizational restructuring etc.)

Points taken from recorders' notes:

“In cellular manufacturing teams, the worker with poor reading and writing skills has nowhere to hide. It seems obvious that as companies flatten the organizational structure, the general demand for essential skills will increase.”

“The just-in-time mentality of some businesses can be a real problem when the topic is the long-term development of present staff and planning for future skill requirements. While you may be able to ‘shut-down’ the plant and replace the technology; you can’t train the workers that quickly—especially when essential skills are lacking.”



Facing, left to right, Corrie Pawluk Michelle Marfait and Karen Bennett (listening to Bob Christie, who is turned away from the camera)

Bringing it Home - cont.



Conference delegates discuss the requirement for essential skills in the workplace.

“Again, (*example from the agrifood sector*) workers with poor skills can’t assume ‘team’ roles.”

“In the oil industry, there is a real shortage of trained tradespeople, but some potential workers can’t access the jobs because they lack essential skills. In the north the problem is more pressing.”

“One delegate noted that in the ‘modern’ office, everybody has so much more to read, so much e-mail, so much more ‘official’ information that ‘has to be read.’ In a sense, much work is becoming more skilled, everyone has to deal with more information - at all levels of the workforce.”

“The introduction of technology often ‘divides’ workers into *classes*.”

“Workers need a certain ‘comfort level’ with new technology before productivity will increase.”

“Low skill, high pay jobs are disappearing.”

“When new technology is introduced to cope with a downsizing of the workforce, one of the unintended consequences is the requirement for remaining employees to gain a new set of skills.”

Hats Off! Reception

The Hats Off! reception was a tribute to the many successful workforce essential skills programs and partnership projects in western Canada. The large 'Hats Off' board displayed the names of employers, unions, government departments and educational agencies involved in workforce essential skills training. The list, reproduced below, is a clear indication that a great deal is being done to improve essential skills in the workplace. Again, 'hats off' to all the participants in these education and training efforts.



Brigid Hayes represented the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada

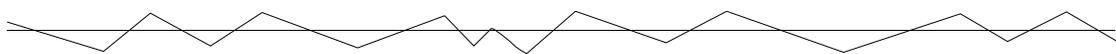
Partnerships

- Alta Steel * Steel Workers of America Local 5220
- Ancast Industries * United Steelworkers of America, Local 3239
- Boeing Canada Technology * Canadian Auto Workers Local 2169
- British Columbia Building Corporation * BC Government Employees Union
- Burnaby Hospital * Hospital Employees Union
- Canfor * Communication, Energy & Paperworkers Union, Local 400
- City of Calgary * Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 38
- City of Port Moody * Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 825 * International Association of Fire Fighters Local 2399
- City of Vancouver * Canadian Union of Public Employees Locals 1004 & 15
- Cominco Ltd. Trail Operations * United Steelworkers of America District 3
- Edmonton Pipe Trades, Journeyman and Apprenticeship Training * Boilermakers Apprenticeship & Employees Union
- Intercare Corporate Group * Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 82
- Joint Union Management Program (JUMP) * Forestry companies * Communication, Energy & Paperworkers Union * Pulp and Paperworkers of Canada
- Kensington Private Hospital * Hospital Employees Union *
- Molson Canada (Edmonton) * Canadian Auto Workers Local 284
- Molson's Canada * Brewers, Wineries and Distillers Union #300
- Northwood Pulp * Communication, Energy & Paperworkers Union
- Phillips and Temro Industries * USWA Local 7826

- Skeena Cellulose * Pulp & Paper Workers of Canada
- Slocan - Mackenzie Operations * Pulp and Paper Workers of Canada Local 18
- Slocan Forest Products * International Woodworkers Association
- Surrey Memorial Hospital * Canadian Union of Public Employees * Hospital Employees Union
- Syncrude Canada * Nova Chemicals * Iron Workers Local 720 * Operating Engineers Local 955 * Boilermakers Apprenticeship & Training Trust Fund * Edmonton Pipe Trades, Journeyman and Apprenticeship Training * Iron Workers Local 720 * Nova Chemicals Joffree 2000 Projects * Stone and Webster Construction * Westwood Community High School
- Taylor Manor * Hospital Employees Union
- Timbec * International Woodworkers Association
- University Of British Columbia * Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 2950 and Local 15
- Vancouver General Hospital * Canadian Union of Public Employees * Hospital Employees Union
- Weldwood * Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union
- Western Glove, Notre Dame * United Needleworkers and Industrial Textiles Employees, Local 459
- Western Glove, Princess and Logan sites * United Food & Commercial Workers Union Local 832
- Women's and Children's Health Centre * Canadian Union of Public Employees

Unions

Alberta Federation of Labour
 Boilermakers Apprenticeship & Training Trust Fund
 British Columbia Federation and Labour
 Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union
 Construction and General Workers' Union, Local 1111
 Edmonton Pipe Trades and Trust Fund
 International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers of America, Loc. 511
 Manitoba Federation of Labour
 Saskatchewan Federation of Labour
 Teamsters Canada, Local 979
 United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Loc. 343
 United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 2000
 United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 832
 United Needleworkers and Industrial Textile Employees, Loc. 459



Employers

A Stitch in Time	Assiniboia Downs	ATCO Structures
Athletes Wear	BHP Diamonds	Bristol Aerospace
CORCAN Industries	Dueck Poultry Farm	Ecco Manufacturing
Effective Personnel	El Molino Foods	Enmax
Evans Consoles Ltd.	GE Harris	Flint Engineering
Great West Life	Hespler Enterprises	Lafarge Canada Inc.
Lode King Industries	Loewen Windows	North West Company
Palliser Furniture (Man.)	Radisson Calgary Airport	Sanmina Canada
Syncrude Canada	Triple EEE	Twenty-Vic Management

Educators and Funders

These government agencies and education providers are pleased to work with our champions of learning:

Alberta Human Resources & Employment	Alberta Learning
Bow Valley College	Capilano College
Douglas College	Gary Pharness - Hastings Institute
Keyano College	Kwantlen Community College
Manitoba Education and Training	National Literacy Secretariat
Norquest College	Office of Learning Technologies
Open Learning Agency	Rocky Mountain SD #6
Red Deer College	Red River College
BC School District #91	SkillPlan
Vancouver Community College	



Brigid Hayes unveils the 'Hats Off' tribute board.

Welcome from Senator Fairbairn

I am delighted to join you for this 4th WWestnet conference. It seems longer than a mere five years since we first met and my respect and admiration for this innovative group of advocates has just continued to grow, as have the friendships made in those early days. I want to start by assuring you that literacy—in all its aspects—remains the cause of my life and will forever be so. I cannot and will not walk away from an issue which places over 40 percent of our adults at risk every day of their lives because of an inability to cope with routine reading, writing and communicating tasks which most of us in this room take for granted.

Literacy IS an essential skill - I would say THE essential skill - that directly affects the bottom line - however you define it. I know that the work you will do together at this conference will strengthen the opportunities for Western Canadians in the fast-changing workplace of this new century.

The insights of speakers at the conference, in the context of the IALS findings, give us all a vivid understanding of the situation we face. The challenges ahead are broad-ranging and immediate. IALS told us bluntly that Canada's future competitiveness hinges on the degree to which we can raise literacy levels in our society, and our most vulnerable areas are in the family and in the workplace. The urgency for action is increased by the fact that our whole world is being pressured by a technological revolution that, if we are not careful, will carve an ever deeper division in our society based on the inequality of skills.

In Canada we no longer enjoy the luxury of a continuously growing workforce and, for some time yet, we will be counting on those who are in it now—facing the challenge of adapting quickly to the use of information technology we could not even have imagined ten years ago. Let there be no doubt, literacy is the rock on which we can build technological change. Without a literate workforce as the foundation for the future, we will be left behind in the worldwide workplace of tomorrow.

Our learning must be continuous and the opportunities to access that learning must be constant and inclusive. That is why, for instance the Syncrude Canada experience under the visionary leadership of Eric Newell and Lloyd Campbell, is such an important example that really served as a precedent. The respect and faith shown the employees and their potential capabilities by establishing an in-house program for workplace literacy is a worthy lesson not only in business acumen,



Greg Maruca welcomes Senator Joyce Fairbairn to the conference.

but in humanity. Syncrude could have hired offshore when technology quickly produced the opportunity to make the oil sands commercially viable in a big way. But, instead, that company gave its own workers a chance, both those who had come from across the country for a better job, and those from the aboriginal communities which surrounded the site.

And that spirit is being carried out today in other workplaces across the country—not as many or as fast as we would wish—but the progress is evident. We have come to recognize that companies, industries, products, technologies and jobs themselves can no longer depend upon the strengths and weaknesses of any one nation’s economic base to survive. National borders of the past are now wide open.

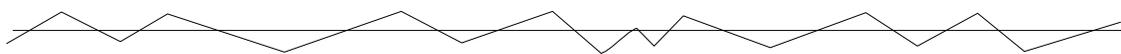
“We won’t be on the cutting edge of very much if several millions of our adult citizens are unable to take part fully in our national life.”

The Federal Government is making real progress in a steady and persistent way—forging partnerships with other governments, as well as undertaking ground-breaking initiatives with public and private sector organizations. The federal Office of Learning Technologies, for example, is working with business partners to expand opportunities for Canadians to plug into the new form of literacy in a computerized world. Canada has become the first country in the world to connect our schools and libraries to the world wide web through the initiative called SchoolNet and next year every classroom in the country will be hooked in. The program known as CanLearn is placing interactive learning and career planning tools directly in the hands of learners - an unprecedented learning and labour information hybrid. And, spurred on by the National Literacy Secretariat of which I am so proud, our federal government is also expanding its focus on literacy issues throughout its ministries and departments.

Added to these is a host of programs initiated the past few years on apprenticeship, mentoring, internship, upgrading, and training—geared to lead young people and workers into areas of the job market that do not hinge SOLELY on post-secondary education, but also on the critical infrastructure skills which underpin our national economy.

You know, it seems these days we hear nothing but talk about globalization, the information highway, the world wide web, and all that good stuff. We politicians talk a lot about Canada being a leader on the cutting edge of this new technology, propelling us into the 21st century. Well, we won’t be on the cutting edge of very much if several millions of our adult citizens are unable to take part fully in our national life. In this vast land with its small population we need to involve all our citizens. No one should have to sit on the sidelines for lack of learning opportunities anywhere in Canada.

We are not talking about special treatment. We are talking about a fair chance for people to develop to their utmost capacity—to be able to help others to share their hopes and dreams. Our world is far too precious to be simply a place where people cope. It must become a place where all individuals have that fair chance to participate and contribute and do a good job and earn a decent living for themselves and their families. And that, ultimately, is what you are doing here and in the days ahead. You are changing people’s lives. My advice? Keep right on going - never falter, never stop—and please know that this volunteer will be close at hand, marching beside you every step of the way. 🌱



Panel Presentation

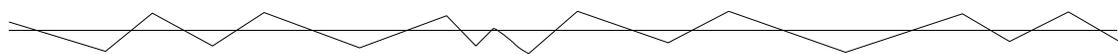
The panel presentation gave delegates an opportunity to hear about ‘real-life’ efforts to address essential skills deficits and develop needed workforce skills. Despite a diversity of contexts and challenges, all panellists spoke about the need for workers to have the appropriate skills for work. Critical to achieving this goal is the development of the underlying essential skills necessary for learning job skills and carrying out workplace skills.



Peter Calamai (far left) introduces the panel, (left to right) Karen Milani, Cynthia Selley, Jonas Sammons, and Ron Townsend

Karen Milani described how the North West Company addresses essential skills as part of that company’s management development program. Recruitment costs are high in the north and retaining managers who have been brought in from the south can be difficult. Efforts to develop local management talent have been aided by a careful analysis of the requirement for essential skills in the northern stores, and a determined effort to assist employees gain the skills they need to advance into management positions.

Ron Townsend highlighted the joint labour/management program which has been developed for apprentices in the pipe trades. Attention to essential skills has resulted in greater retention in apprenticeship programs and safer workplaces.

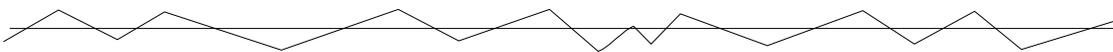


Cynthia Selley described work at the Winnipeg Boeing plant where global competition has been a fact of life since the plant opened. The ebb and flow of workers in response to contracts for aircraft parts creates a need to respond quickly to the demand for new skills and to build ‘streamlined’ training programs.

Jonas Sammons, representing the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, spoke of the need for improved skills in the Canadian manufacturing sector. A recent Management Survey asked members of the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters to identify employee skills in greatest need of improvement. ‘Problem solving’ topped the list, with 48% of respondents indicating a need for improvement among their respective workforces; 31% of companies said that the ‘communication skills’ of employees are weak; while 31% indicated that ‘interpersonal’ skills were lacking. Surprisingly, employee ‘literacy’ deficits were seen as a greater problem than lack of computer skills; 16% of companies reported that employees’ lack of literacy was a problem, while only 12% felt that computer skills were deficient.



Panel presenters (left to right), Karen Milani, the North West Company; Cynthia Selley, Boeing Canada Technology; Jonas Sammons, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters; and Ron Townsend, Training Coordinator for UA Local 488



Round Table

Moving Forward

Round table groups were challenged with the following question:

*Change can only occur if Canada embraces a culture of life-long learning—if Canadian workplaces undergo a fundamental cultural shift. Canadian workplaces must see training as an investment rather than as a drain on resources. **What do you think is needed to move this cultural shift forward?***

The following comments were selected from notes taken at each of the roundtables in response to the question:



Corrie Pawluk (left) and Wendell Wiebe discuss the question.

Change requires a cohesive effort by both labour and employers; we will not succeed if only one side is sitting at the table. This critical partnership needs to ensure that educational providers are responsive to workplace needs.

The federal government has a role to play—providing coordination, research studies such as IALS, and learning materials—but the approach must be community-based. Another suggestion

for federal involvement is a national database of instructional resources: assessment tools, curriculum, and other tools for workplace essential skills training.

The success of programs such as ‘*Participaction*’ demonstrates that citizens can be spurred to positive change. Perhaps it is time for a ‘*Make Time for Learning*’ campaign. The message needs to be taken to Rotary Clubs and Human Resource Associations—enough time has been spent speaking to those who are already convinced.

The development of essential skills must be linked to businesses’ bottom line, their return on investment, and the impact such development can have on employee retention, safety and profitability.

The links between high schools and business have to be strengthened and widened. Too many young people are ignorant about business and the possibilities for employment after school.

Moving Forward - cont.

Commitment to 'life-long learning' should be supported by an appropriate budget. At present too much activity is 'project-based.' Essential skills development needs to be framed in terms of long-term, sustainable programs.

Human resource specialists need to have a more prominent place in management in order to push the 'human capital' values at a corporate level. For example, limited essential skills add 'hidden costs' to HR functions such as recruitment, training and retention.

Government funding is often given to particular groups such as the unemployed or recent immigrants in response to political pressure. Workforce development needs a more overarching view of the place of these groups within the labour force.

The analysis tools needed to make a good business case for essential skills training are rudimentary. More work needs to be done to demonstrate to business that training is a good investment.

Essential skills training needs stable funding. Business and labour need to make funding part of the contract; governments can encourage training using individual and corporate tax provisions.

Some deficits in workplace essential skills are built into the school curriculum. The most recent research shows that the Imperial measuring system is still used by the majority of Canadian workers, and is critical to work in skilled trades such as carpentry and pipefitting; but it has not been taught in schools since the 1960s. Employers and schoolteachers need to communicate more.



A lively interchange flowed from differing views of how to move the essential skills agenda forward.

Summary

During the conference, it became very apparent that essential skills play a critical role in any organization's ability to remain competitive and achieve solid bottom-line results. In fact, it has been pointed out time and time again that Canada will not be able to meet the demands of the future without a well-trained and highly skilled workforce. This is Canada's challenge—our challenge.

The conference started with a look at essential skills and what has been done in the past to address this issue in Canada. Peter Calamai touched upon what has been happening in Canada over the past ten years and how far we have to go if we are to achieve our goals.

Then Scott Murray showed delegates where Canadians are today in terms of their essential skills proficiency levels. He also highlighted how Canadians compare to their counterparts in other countries and what implications this has for the Canadian economy and bottom lines.

Next, Dr. Tom Keenan gave delegates picture of where the global economy is headed and what the workplaces of the new millennium will look like. He also stressed the importance of a well-trained Canadian workforce and the vital role essential skills plays.

Dr. John Bratton put everything delegates had learned about workplace training into a human context. How will all of this impact the way people cope and the way workers deal with a rapidly changing work environment? How can well-honed essential skills be of benefit?

The panellists brought a 'real world' perspective to the issues by relating their experiences on the ground. They told us about their programs and the overwhelmingly positive effects they have had. The same theme was reinforced during the tribute event where delegates heard about successful projects and partnerships and the added value they bring to organizations.

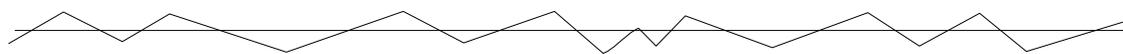
During the two days, delegates also had an opportunity to become familiar with the concept of workplace essential skills and how easily what we have learned can be forgotten if it is not reinforced through regular use. We also learned how training in specific workplace applications such as training for efficient document use can help workers to be more effective and productive.

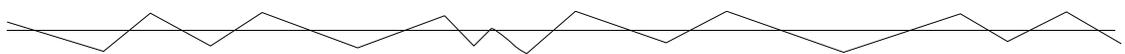
Lastly, delegates were able to discuss all that they learned from a 'big picture' or macro level. They were given an opportunity to explore important issues such as why Canada continues to overlook the importance of training at the workplace and what can be done to ensure Canada's workforce is skilled enough to meet the challenges of the 21st century.



So what, then, is the lesson for us in all of this? Conference participants heard about the positive results workplace partnerships and training endeavours can have, and how being pro-active can increase productivity and improve business success. And we applaud these efforts. While most of us can understand the strong link between training and organizational performance—in fact, many delegates have known this for a long time—what will it take to convince the country as a whole? In other words, how can we get business, labour and government to see that training and essential skills development must be valued? In Canada, we often pay lip service to the concept of life-long learning but, in reality, training is still most often viewed as a drain on resources rather than as a necessary investment. This will only change when there is shift in fundamental attitudes, that is, when Canadians understand that what was learned yesterday is no longer valid in the workplaces of today. But, how can we move this cultural shift forward and position the essential skills agenda so it is addressed by today's leaders? This is the challenge placed before you at the conference.

We hope you will continue to discuss these important workplace training issues long after the conference has ended and you have returned to your own community and your own workplace. 🍄



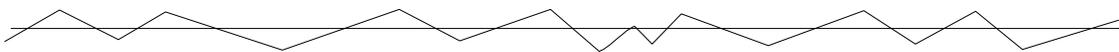


Appendices

Conference Evaluation

Contact List

Presenter's Biographies



Conference Evaluation

About half of the delegates to the conference took the time to fill out an evaluation form. The results of this evaluation will help us to better organize conferences in the future. Thanks to all who gave us feedback.

Conference Program, Facilities and Organization

Western Welcome Reception

- overall assessment (4.3)

Tribute Event Reception

- overall assessment (4.0)

Conference Organization

- overall assessment (4.7)

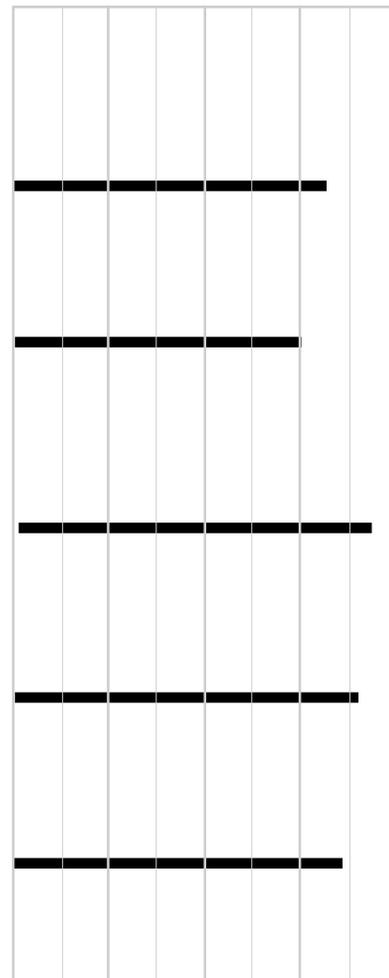
Conference Facilities

- overall assessment (4.6)

Conference Success

- overall assessment (4.4)

Average Evaluation Rating



Day I Sessions

What Can We Learn From the Last Ten Years?

- quality of presentation (4.3)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.6)

Buzz Groups (Essential Skills)

- quality of presentation (4.0)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.6)

The Implications For A Knowledge Society

- quality of presentation (4.1)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.7)

Labour Market Trends In The Global Economy

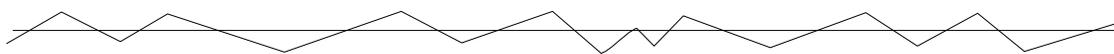
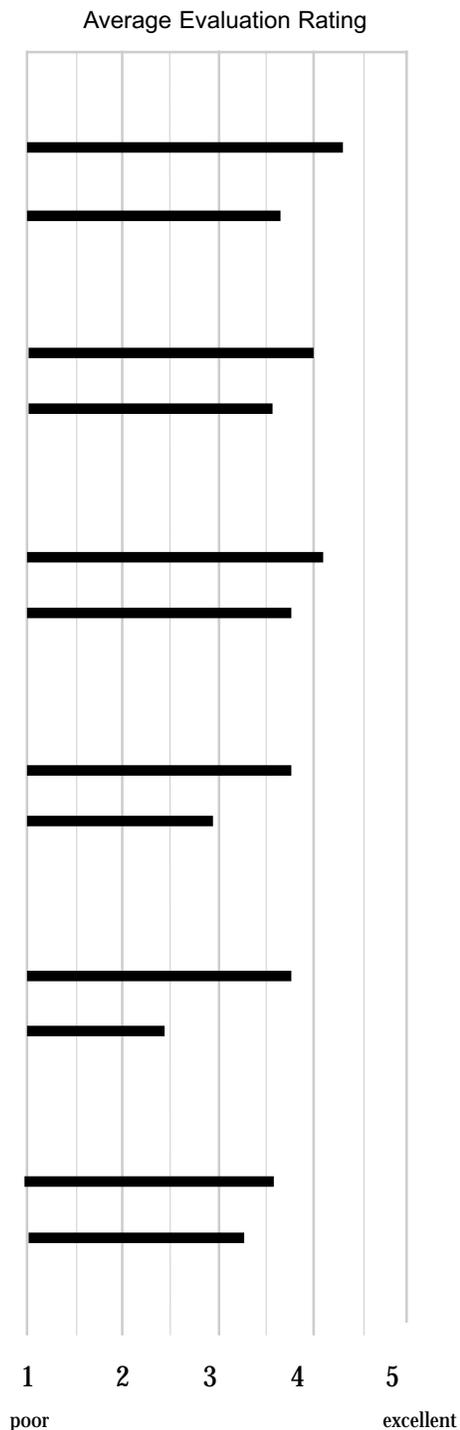
- quality of presentation (3.7)
- usefulness to you and your organization (2.9)

The Human Side Of The Equation

- quality of presentation (3.7)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.4)

Buzz Groups - Bringing It Home

- quality of presentation (3.6)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.3)



Day 2 Sessions

Essential Skills And Employee Training

- quality of presentation (4.3)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.6)

Essential Skills And Employee Re-deployment

- quality of presentation (3.8)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.0)

Essential Skills And Workplace Change

- quality of presentation (3.8)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.5)

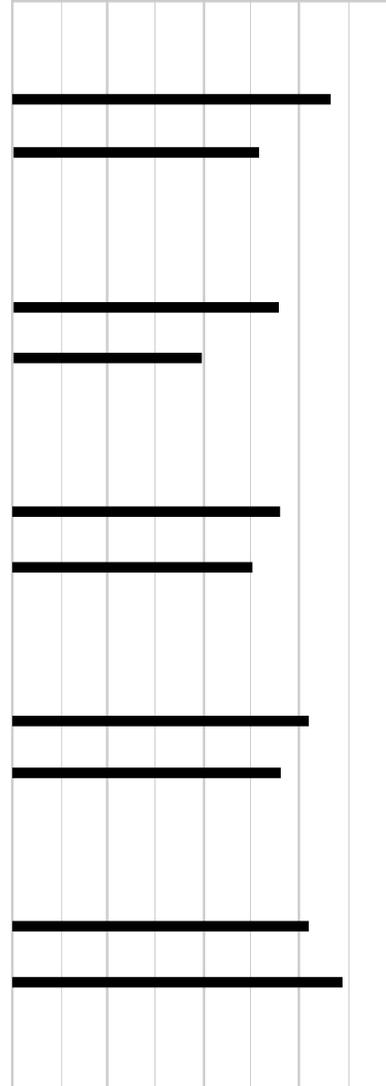
Essential Skills and Apprenticeship

- quality of presentation (4.1)
- usefulness to you and your organization (3.8)

Round Tables - Moving Forward

- quality of presentation (4.1)
- usefulness to you and your organization (4.4)

Average Evaluation Rating



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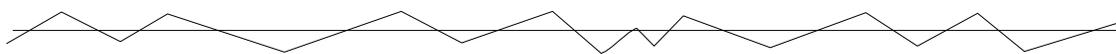
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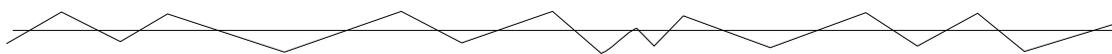
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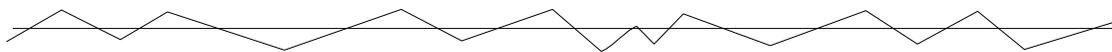
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Conference Presenters

Sharon Carry

Sharon has committed more than thirty years to the service of students in Alberta's post secondary system. Inspired in the '60s by her experience as a student leader, her career includes progressively more responsible positions at the University of Calgary, Mount Royal College, Olds College, and for the past three years as President of Bow Valley College. Before joining Bow Valley College, Sharon served as Vice President of Student and Support Services, Dean of Student Services, and Registrar at Olds. Her work in public and private post-secondary education has given her the opportunity to contribute to lifelong learning; both in the classroom and in numerous administrative and student services roles. Sharon is currently Vice Chair of the Council of Presidents of Colleges and Technical Institutes and has served as Chair of the Senior Business Officers and the Senior Student Services Officers.

Brigid Hayes

Brigid Hayes has been a Program Manager with the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), Human Resources Development Canada since 1989, responsible for the NLS partnerships with business and labour, and for workplace literacy. Prior to joining the NLS, Brigid was Director of the Voluntary Action Directorate, Department of the Secretary of State. Before entering the federal public service, Brigid worked for several years as a consultant in program and policy development with clients from the criminal justice field, women's organizations, aboriginal organizations, aboriginal women's organizations, and the voluntary sector.

Peter Calamai

Journalist Peter Calamai became formally involved in literacy in 1987 when he produced the first survey of adult literacy in Canada for the Southam newspapers. Honoured with numerous awards, the *Broken Words* survey prompted federal government action. Calamai's interest in words and publishing began, however, with editing a high school newspaper and has continued throughout a 30-year career as a newspaper correspondent and editor in Canada and abroad. In September 1999, Calamai revisited the national literacy scene, producing a report on progress over the past decade and the challenges ahead entitled *Literacy Matters* which appeared as a supplement to Saturday Night magazine.

Calamai is a director of ABC Canada and was chairman of the *Ottawa Citizen Literacy Foundation* and the chair of the inaugural Word on the Street festival in Ottawa in 1998. For his continuing work in literacy he has been honoured with the Literacy Partners of Quebec award (1994) and the Peter Gzowski Literacy Award (1996). Peter Calamai is currently the national science reporter for the Toronto Star, for whom he produced a major report on numeracy in September 2000.

Scott Murray

Scott Murray was recently appointed to the post of Director General, Social and Institutional Statistics after spending roughly 23 years in the Special Surveys Division at Statistics Canada. Mr. Murray specialized in the design and conduct of large-scale ad hoc surveys to meet emerging public policy issues. His own work has included studies of volunteer international comparative work, childcare usage, longitudinal labour market activity and the assessment of adult skill. Mr. Murray holds an Honours BA in Business Administration from the University of Western Ontario and is overly fond of claret.

Tom Keenan

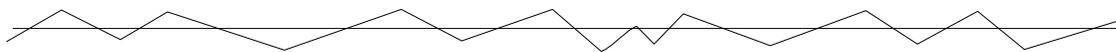
Dr. Tom Keenan has parallel careers as an award-winning university professor; Dean of the Faculty of Continuing Education at the University of Calgary; and broadcaster. He has appeared on *The Fifth Estate*, *Sunday Morning*, *As It Happens*, and many other programs, working to educate the public about technology and its implications. Currently, Dr. Keenan is the technology correspondent for the national CBC television program *Midday*, a weekly syndicated radio columnist on CBC's *Midday Express*, and a regular contributor to *Computerworld Canada*. Dr. Keenan received his BA, MSc, MA and EdD degrees from Columbia, and did additional study at Harvard.

John Bratton

Dr. John Bratton has taught organizational behaviour for over twenty years in Business Schools in England and Canada. He was the first Director of the University of Calgary's Workplace Learning Research Unit. He received his B.Sc. (Economics) from Hull University, his MA (Economics) from Leeds University, and his Ph.D. from the University of Manchester, England. His doctoral research focused on the impact of new technology on organizational design and behaviour. Dr. Bratton is the author of *Japanization at Work: Managerial Strategies for the 1990s* (1992), and co-author of *Human Resource Management: Theory and Practice* (Second Edition) (1999) published by MacMillan Business Press. He is also co-chair of the International Conference on Researching Work and Learning to be held at the University of Calgary, July 2001.

Senator Joyce Fairbairn

Senator Fairbairn was appointed to the Senate for the Province of Alberta in 1984. She has served on several committees, including the Special Senate Committee on Youth where she developed her commitment to raising awareness around literacy issues, and promoting increased literacy at home and in the workplace. She is a founding member of the Senate Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples. In 1993, Senator Fairbairn was appointed to the Privy Council and was the first woman to be named Leader of the Government in the Senate. She also became the first and only Minister with Special Responsibility for Literacy. Following her resignation of both positions, she was appointed Special Advisor for Literacy to the Minister of Human Resources.



Karen Milani

Karen Milani is a Certified Human Resource Professional with 15 years of experience gained in both the public and private sectors. She is currently the Vice-President of Human Resources with The North West Company, based out of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The North West Company, a food and general merchandise retailer in northern Canada, has over 4000 employees spread across the country. It is recognized as the largest private sector employer of Aboriginal people in Canada. Karen's focus is on North West's journey towards developing local Aboriginal candidates for store management positions.

Cynthia Selley

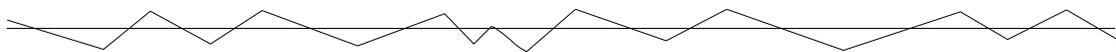
Cynthia Selley is the Human Resources Manager – Training and Development for Boeing Canada Technology, Winnipeg Division. After 28 years with the company, she has gained not only extensive knowledge of the manufacturing sector, but also an understanding of the kind of workforce that is required to meet the challenges of the Year 2000 and beyond. Cynthia's accomplishments include several years of experience continuously improving and developing workplace learning programs. In addition, she has been instrumental in developing partnerships with educational institutions, government and labour. She believes that both of these elements are key to ensuring growth and maintenance of an adequately retrained labour pool.

Jonas Sammons

Jonas Sammons, M.Ed '98, has an extensive international background in business, having been involved in business start-up and manufacturing in both Canada and the United States. Currently, he is serving as the Vice-President and General Manager for the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters. From 1991-1997 he served as the Director for the Centre for Entrepreneurship at the Faculty of Management, University of Manitoba. He has lectured in the MBA program, and has taught undergraduate courses in New Venture Analysis, Entrepreneurship and Marketing. For the past six years, Mr. Sammons has acted as a co-director for the summer Institute in Enterprise Education and Entrepreneurship.

Ron Townsend

Mr. Townsend is a certified Alberta Journeyman Steamfitter/Pipefitter, Plumber and Gasfitter. He has been involved with Apprenticeship and Journeyman training for more than 25 years, and is a graduate of the 5 year United Association Instructor Training Program including a number of university courses related to adult education. He taught pipe trades and related subjects at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology for five years. Currently, Ron is the Training Coordinator for Union Local 488 of the Plumbers and Pipefitters in Edmonton, a position he has held for the past 21 years.



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The Three L's – Literacy and Lifelong Learning

the feds eagerly handed over responsibility for the delivery of training as well.

And what are the consequences? See them for yourselves by reading the speech Finance Minister Paul Martin gave to the Toronto board of trade on Sept. 14. It was billed as the New Economy speech, the Liberal vision of how Canada and Canadians would prosper in the globalized, high-tech world. Mr. Martin uttered all the usual phrases about “investing in people” and “the real engine of growth is the human mind”. He talked about augmenting the traditional three R's of the school system with the new 3C's – that's Computation, Calculation and Communication. He thundered that our Grade 8 students ranking 14th in international math and science tests was a “flashing red light .. ignored at our peril.” The Finance Minister went on in his New Economy speech to propose some targets – Canada has to stand among the top five in international math and science tests, we have to double the time devoted to job-related instruction, we have to grab five per cent of all world e-commerce trade in 2003.

But it's not just numbers, Mr. Martin assured his listeners. “The purpose of these goals and objectives is not to put up better statistics. It is to lift up greater numbers of people; it is to raise living standards and widen the circle of opportunity.”

All very commendable. Except that the finance minister spoke for more than 30 minutes about widening “the circle of opportunity” and never once mentioned Canada's poor showing in the International Adult Literacy Survey. But he did at least mention literacy. Canada has to ensure that all children leaving Grade 8 are computer and Internet literate. Yesterday in Ottawa,

however, the Liberal Party of Canada – not to be confused with the federal government — announced its platform in the current election campaign. One of the few new sections in the platform was called lifelong learning. The core of that was something called Registered Individual Learning Accounts, which is supposed to double the number of people in the workforce receiving employment-related training in five years.

The federal government is far from being the only participant with a convenient blind spot. Raise literacy with much of Corporate Canada and within five seconds you'll be hearing how we must focus on improving the school system. It's a diversionary tactic, the equivalent of bits of aluminum chaff that bombers once threw out to befuddle enemy radar (nowadays it's called by the fancy name of electronic warfare counter-measures but the principle remains the same.)

Most businesses don't want to talk about adult literacy because their investments are so puny – either in direct delivery of workplace basic skills or in sponsorship for family and community literacy programs. Obviously, if you're attending this conference, this doesn't apply to your company. But you may have met some people who hide in this particular hole.

And what about the literacy field, those who deliver the training. In the first place, it isn't a field at all. There are no entry standards, anyone can hang out a “literacy practitioner” shingle (just as anyone used to be able to call themselves a journalist, I might add. Alas no longer. Nowadays it takes a Masters degree in Journalism just to make the cut as an intern at the Toronto Star.) There's essentially no accountability in the non-field of literacy delivery because there are no Canada-wide agreed ways of measuring the progress of individual learners in literacy training, no rigorous bench-

marks, little in the way of agreed outcome assessments. Rather than having to perform to measurable targets, practitioners talk about raising the self-esteem of learners. It's a very comfortable hidey hole.

And the media! They're even more hypocritical. A few times a year they 'discover' that Canada has a literacy problem, usually just around National Literacy Day. And their promotion departments sponsor programs to 'Reach Up to a Reader' or give annual awards to outstanding literacy programs in their circulation or broadcast area.

But cover the issue as if it was really newsworthy? That almost never happens. School boards can close skills upgrading courses, provinces withdraw the right to a high school education for adults and the OECD can issue literacy reports that show Canada falling further and further behind – and most of the media pay no attention. For reporters, literacy is a feel-good event where the station manager or newspaper publisher hands over a cheque. It's not real news. And that's a comfortable place to hide.

Now we come to organized labour. I'm reminded of Sir Walter Scott's line that "fine words butter no parsnips" (*The Legend of Montrose*). I've have visited excellent skills upgrading programs championed by trade unions in several provinces but often the talk of partnerships with management is more lip service than reality. And when it comes to contract negotiations, labour has a depressing tendency to let the perfect become the enemy of the possible by asking for the moon in essential skills training and not even winding up with the equivalent of the clapped out Russian MIR space station.

Now, is there anyone in the room who I haven't savaged?

There is a justification for this excess of candour. I'm trying to get at the reasons

why the literacy needle has barely budged over the past decade. I confess that gloomy verdict is mostly my subjective judgment. No national figures exist to allow a really rigorous tallying of literacy accounts. In fact, the National Literacy Secretariat can't (or won't) say how it has disbursed its millions on a province-by-province per capita basis. And no one has reliable statistics on the number of learner-hours and grade-equivalent gains nationally, provincially, or by program.

However 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. And in the late 1980s the best estimate was that fewer than two per cent of people with low literacy were getting help from any program. It must be the best, because I made it in *Broken Words*. A decade later, the best estimate is five per cent. And I made that one as well, in the *Literacy Matters* supplement in September last year.

Five per cent of 10 million adults who rate lower than Level Three literacy – the minimum acceptable according to StatsCan – amounts to the literacy needle barely moving from zero. Yet sometimes I hear people object that the nation's literacy status isn't all that dire if you eliminate all the immigrants and old folks who inflate the numbers. So consider only Canadian-born adults between the ages of 16 and 65, what you might call the workforce. Forty per cent of them are below Level Three in literacy, 15 per cent are at Level One. The needle hasn't moved much there either.

Why has moving the literacy needle proven so difficult? Why do so many groups seek out comfortable hidey-holes rather than deal with the issue?

When I produced the *Broken Words* study for the Southam newspapers back in 1987, I was sure that the answer lay in

increasing public awareness. Give the general public irrefutable evidence that many of citizens needed help with a skill so fundamental to enjoying a full life, and people would rise up and demand action from decision-makers. And for added measure the IALS study proved that literacy levels affected national competitiveness, economic prosperity, productivity and – eventually – the state of your wallet or pocket book.

But none of that did the trick and I didn't understand why. Until a couple of years ago when I stumbled across a book called *Coming to Public Judgment* by Daniel Yankelovich, who is one of the gurus of U.S. public opinion surveying. Yankelovich was focused on a quintessential American challenge of informed decision making in a participatory democracy, something that isn't as much of a preoccupation in Canada because our political system still sort of works.

To tackle this problem, Yankelovich drew upon his vast experience and extensive empirical research in tracking the progress of public policy issues over decades. He found that all these issues passed through seven identifiable stages before the public was agreed on a course of action that it would sanction the elite to implement.

Here are those stages:

1. Dawning awareness of the issue.
2. A growing sentiment to tackle the issue.

Together Yankelovich called these two consciousness raising because it's not enough that people are simply aware of an issue. They also must feel that it is important, that it applies in some way to their own lives and that something needs to be done about it.

In Canada, there is hard, take-it-to-the-bank evidence of a dawning awareness of

literacy and essential skills as an issue. In 1990 and 1999, Decima Research included some questions about literacy awareness on the company's omnibus polls. The results are modestly encouraging. Asked last year how much they had heard about literacy in Canada, 31 per cent of those surveyed choose "a lot" – the top of five levels offered by the Decima interviewers. Back in 1990 only 26 per cent had chosen a lot. That increase of five percentage points represents almost a million more Canadian adults who say they are aware of literacy as an issue.

There was an even bigger boost in awareness of workplace essential skills over the decade. Last year, 32 per cent of those surveyed said that inadequate reading and writing skills are a very serious problem in the workplace. In 1990, the proportion was 24 per cent. That amounts to almost an additional two million adult Canadians.

Unfortunately the Decima questions didn't probe the second stage of consciousness-raising – whether there was a growing sentiment to tackle the problem and an appreciation that it actually touched the lives of the people being interviewed. Here we have only indirect evidence from what are known as top-of-mind surveys. Most public opinion firms do these on a regular basis. The interviewer simply asks the person on the other end of the phone what they think is the most important issue requiring government attention. No list of potential answers are read (what the pollsters call an open-ended response) but the replies are grouped into categories. So, for instance, schooling, knowledge and skills would be clustered under the heading education.

In the past decade 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 education.

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 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. Only with the emergence of something known variously as civic or public journalism have a few media outlets become engaged.

But if the general public and media are mired at stage two, the groups represented in this room most obviously are not. So how do we account for the existence of those comfortable hidey holes. Let's look at the next three stages of Yankelovich's seven-stage progress to public judgment. These are:

3. Concern transforms into a consideration of choices.
4. The wishful thinking stage. Faced with unpalatable options, the public begins to think that maybe no action should be taken. (Saw this operate during the '80s and early '90s in Canada when public wanted the deficit tackled but didn't like the idea of cutting health care. The wishful thinking was that simply running a tighter ship would somehow take care of \$60 billion.)

5. Weighing the choices – a stage that sees personal values evoked and put to the test (such as the role of the state, the importance of shared societal values, the kind of desired society.)

I'd say that Stage Four, wishful thinking, is where most groups head for those comfortable hidey holes, although some might also be avoiding the weighing of choices in Stage Five. The danger is that most groups will want to avoid the mess of Stages Four and Five and leap to the final two stages:

- 6 Taking a stand intellectually.
- 7 Making an emotional resolution.

There's not much point spending a lot of time on these last two stages. Yankelovich devotes several chapters to examples of the public coming to such resolution. I can tell you that it's not simple and that the whole process – from initial awareness to final public judgment – almost always takes years and often decades.

That's good news actually. Perhaps we're not as far behind the curve in putting literacy on the public agenda in Canada as thought. But I fear we may have lost some of the initial enthusiasm because this turned out to be a problem that isn't going to be solved by a simple "war on literacy." As many of you already know, the concept of lifelong learning (of which literacy is an integral part), that concept challenges a lot of the values, beliefs and practices of current Canadian society, once you go beyond mere lip service. We may not be waging a war but we are engaged in a cultural revolution.

That revolution (or evolution if you prefer less violent language) can only take place with the informed consent and active support of the Canadian public. Even if you don't buy the seven stages of Yankelovich,

I think it's obvious that the public needs a lot of help to reach a judgment on literacy and lifelong learning – in our homes, our workplaces, our institutions and our society.

Some of this people mostly have to do on their own. That's because one of the biggest hurdles to changing an aspect of culture in a society is often not overt behaviour but the underlying individual attitudes – think about drinking-and-driving, or spousal abuse.

But a lot of the process of coming to public judgment can be helped by good leadership, by forceful champions, by

institutions that raise consciousness, ease the working-through phase and guide the public through that final resolution.

The people who will provide that leadership, those champions and those institutions are the kind of folk who are in those room. You've already gone farther along the path to judgment than anyone else. But before you and your institutions can lead, you've got to abandon your hidey holes, those comfort zones of self-doubt and self-delusion. Maybe today and tomorrow would be a good time to begin. 🐼

