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## ***VALUING LITERACY—RHETORIC OR REALITY?***

Nayda Veeman, Angela Ward, and Keith Walker. (2006). Detselig Enterprises Ltd., Calgary, Alberta, 132 pages.

*Valuing Literacy—Rhetoric or Reality?* resounds with a realistic, socially conscious assessment of the status of literacy education in Canada. It merits reading and discussion by the groups that the authors endeavour to address; that is, policy-makers at various levels of government, community decision-makers, and educators in both the K–12 public school system and adult education programs.

For days after reading this book, I was compelled to revisit my own experiences as an instructor/learning facilitator in adult basic education and academic upgrading since 1981. I think the authors have comprehensively depicted the literacy scene in Canada, so their book will likely have a revitalizing effect on many readers who have been involved in basic adult education during the decades preceding and following the International Year of Literacy in 1990, when literacy was much talked about across our nation.

The authors write in an accessible style. They have included personal stories of learners, which are interesting, yet similar to those I have heard in person through my work. The authors’ own profiles are written in plain English. If there is anything that presents a challenge in the reading, it is the vastness of the issues and learners’ circumstances that the authors touch upon. They take a historical and international view on literacy programs, political policy frameworks, and theories regarding learning. These sections of the book are rather complex and require careful reading.

The cover of *Valuing Literacy*, with its bright flags of Canada and Sweden, suggests that this book revolves upon a comparison of the two Western countries’ educational policies, and, to a great extent, it does—but be prepared to be taken on other international routes as well. I feel that the authors’ aim is to address the obstacles to learning for adults in Canada through highlighting what works best in Sweden, which has offered universal adult education to its citizens and scored higher than Canada in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The authors imply that we can learn from Sweden’s national policies, but they clearly indicate the need for Canadians to develop a unique national strategy.

They invite dialogue to instigate action, so that an increasing number of adults in Canada have opportunities to learn with others, not in isolation, and with the financial and community supports to do so for an unrestricted time. The authors emphasize changing our national mindset to normalize the idea of publicly funded adult education as a dignified right. However, they recognize some hurdles. The authors conclude that, in

Canada, policies favour “dreams of efficiency and liberty at the expense of dreams of equality and community” (p. 78). They point out that the Swedish government has made greater investments in public education for its people while emphasizing equality and community values. According to the authors, another dilemma in creating the political will to provide universal access to adult education is that the people who would benefit most tend to be non-participants in our electoral process. A third reality (in both Sweden and Canada) is that prospective students, particularly young school dropouts, sometimes choose to do other things rather than pursue education. The authors express an awareness of the dropout rates in both countries, pointing out that “dropout rates in Canada for adult basic education classes are comparable to those in Sweden and the reasons are similar: illness, job opportunities, family problems, and lack of interest” (p. 53). These are indeed common reasons that I have encountered consistently in my practice.

For example, in rural Alberta, high employment in the oil, service, and construction industries has had an impact on adults’ immediate choices. In 1997, when I first arrived at the northern Alberta campus where I work, we had more than 100 primarily Aboriginal adults enrolled in upgrading. This past year, we worked with fewer than 30 students. Coinciding with this trend, the recent changes in provincial funding rules adversely affect Aboriginal students living on-reserve. Currently, Aboriginal students can access Student Finance Board funding only if they reside off-reserve. This stipulation is all the more troublesome because of the lack of housing in the community, both on- and off-reserve. The authors deal with Aboriginal people’s literacy issues in several sections of *Valuing Literacy*. On this topic, though, I would like to see the National Indigenous Literacy Association listed with the other national literacy organizations on page 84.

The authors express the feeling that volunteer tutors are the primary deliverers of adult education in Canada. I do not know if this is so, but I do know that the colleges I have worked for do carry programs for adults who test below a Grade 5 reading level. The instructors are certified and have expertise in dealing with learning differences. One other positive aspect of adult basic education in Canada, which I believe has been left out by the authors, is the rich curriculum that has been developed since 1990. In this regard, I have listed several resources that I am aware of, which readers may wish to pursue following their reading of *Valuing Literacy*.

### **Suggested Related Readings and Curriculum Development Contacts**

*Beyond Collections Museums Project*, Henriette Kelker, project coordinator, Grass Roots Press, P.O. Box 52192, Edmonton, AB, T6G-2T5.

*Health Links Project* (2006 pilot), Audrey Gardner, project coordinator, Bow Valley College, 332 6th Avenue SE, Calgary, AB, T2G-4S6.

*Learning About Participatory Approaches in Adult Literacy Education* (2000), edited by Mary Norton and Grace Malicky, Learning at the Centre Press, 10116-105 Avenue, Edmonton, AB, T5J-0K2.

*Something to Think About—Please Think About This*, report on a national study of access to adult basic education programs and services in Canada (1998), by Susan Hoddinott, National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 5 Eddy Street, Room 10E10, Ottawa, ON, K1A-1K5.

Valerie Neaves, Adult Basic Education Coordinator, Northern Lakes College, 1201 Main Street SE, Slave Lake, AB, T0G-2A3.

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