

Literacy Rising: When Numbers Don't Tell the Whole Story

It is all too easy to become cynical about adult literacy. Anyone looking at the statistics would surely be led to conclude that things are getting progressively worse for literacy, not better. In Canada, Audrey Thomas reported back in 1976 that 37.2% of the adult population over 15 years of age had less than a grade 9 education, according to the most recent census data at that time. Twenty-five years later, the *International Adult Literacy Survey* (IALS, 1996) tells us that 43% are functioning at the two lowest reading levels for documentation and prose. A virtual mirror image of events, the results of the 1975, *Adult Performance Level* (APL) tests in the U.S.A. shocked the nation with the finding that some 54% were functionally illiterate. In 1993, the U.S. *National Adult Literacy Survey* (NALS) found that some 51% were functioning at the two lowest levels. Then, helping confirm what Americans had already been told, the 1996 IALS again found that about 50% of the adult population was functioning in the lowest levels of literacy for prose, documents, and quantitative skills. Notwithstanding the various definitions and survey methods used in these reports, it certainly seems that a quarter of a century of literacy education has left us just about where we started. But, do the numbers tell the whole story?

What the reports cannot possibly show is the remarkable progress—yes, progress—that the field of literacy *education* is making in areas of both research and practice. Let's separate process from product for a moment. To begin, one of the most remarkable changes in this field, at least in my experience, is that the boundaries between researcher and practitioner have become beautifully blurred. Across Canada and the U.S. (as well as in the U.K. and Australia), more and more practitioners are becoming practitioner-researchers as they discover and share findings from their practice (Quigley, 2001b). Adult literacy is today's adult education leader in conducting critically reflective, practice-based, research (Quigley, 2001b). This is new to the field. Second, for the first time in literacy history, U.S. practitioners have become highly active in insisting on input to the legislative policies that are shaping their field using Listservs, such as the National Institute for Literacy Website (Quigley, 2001a). In Canada, again thanks to the Internet (and organizations such as Literacy B.C.), practitioners are engaging in dialogue among themselves, with academics, and with learners on a range of issues. Further, for the first time in Canadian literacy history, with the help of the National Literacy Secretariat, significant steps are being taken as Jenny Horsman and Tracy Westell conduct consultations on the efficacy of

beginning a literacy journal—a journal that will carry the work of researchers, practitioners, and practitioner-researchers beyond a single, dedicated issue, like this one.

Turning to this special issue, here is an example of the high level of project support that exists for literacy in Canada. Through the generous funding of the National Literacy Secretariat and the support of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, this issue allows us to look at some of our most basic questions we have in the literacy field—such as, What is literacy? And, How do we survey and assess the state of illiteracy? This issue adds to the knowledge base on some of the most exciting directions for literacy in North America. We have even opened a few brand new research doors here.

Mohamed Hremich raises important points in his editorial on literacy in the francophone community and, likewise, Thierry Karsenti brings a highly relevant discussion of technology and literacy in the Canadian francophone context. In her perspectives article, Eunice Askov challenges the conventional wisdom on how adult literacy has been defined and gives some realistic options for defining and measuring literacy education. Tom Sticht assesses the *International Adult Literacy Survey* and pushes the survey envelope by arguing for increased participant self-perception data in the future. Turning to the historical underpinnings of literacy in Canada, Marion Terry contributes a provocative piece, which is one of the very few articles ever written on the philosophical and historical roots of literacy education in our country. Maurice Taylor and Adrian Blunt make a major addition to literacy theory-building by drawing on Vygotskian instructional theory and they offer a new way of understanding literacy education with situated cognition theory. George Demetrian also adds to theory-building by reflecting on the contexts and the philosophical bases underlying different approaches to literacy education.

Turning the focus to the more immediate issues of practice and politics, Ralf St.Clair examines some of the critical issues found in Canadian vocational literacy. Mary Ann Corley and Juliana Taymans provide a close examination of several universal issues involved in learning disabilities and adult literacy. Susan Marie Rumann is among the few researchers who, with Jenny Horsman, have examined the issues facing low-literate women. In the book review section, we see a review of Jenny Horsman's ground-breaking book, *Too Scared to Learn*. We can only hope that, like Susan Marie and Jenny, by opening the door of gender issues more widely, more researchers

will be encouraged to focus attention on this critical area of literacy education.

The book reviews section includes six recent publications—both Canadian and international. These authors provide other, important glimpses into this burgeoning field of adult education. As I said at the outset, we *are* making progress as a field. The statistics may not say it, but the practitioners, the researchers, the literacy government workers, and the adult education professional associations are living proof of the commitment made and the advances resulting from their collective efforts.

Consider this very CJSAE issue. To make it a reality, we found ourselves asking some 45 reviewers to help referee the articles sent us. This includes about 30 who are not even members of the CJSAE editorial board of reviewers. The willingness of those in the literacy field to help with this project was truly remarkable. Likewise, the Antigonish Editorial Co-operative has put in countless additional hours to bring this issue to completion. All of this goes to attest to the fact that adult literacy *education* is rising: In its profile, in its advances, in its promise for a better future for those seeking to enhance their literacy skills. Numbers aside, these are exciting, optimistic times for literacy.

On a closing note, this journal will be moving to the University of British Columbia in January, 2002. This is the last issue to be under the auspices of St. Francis Xavier University. It has been an incredible journey. We take pride in what we have been able to do in the 4 short years it has been with us, and I speak for the entire editorial co-operative when I say we are deeply grateful for the help that so many have given us to make this undertaking a success. We are pleased to offer readers this special issue as our last publication and wish the new editors at UBC every success.

References

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