

ADULT LITERACY NOW!

Maurice C. Taylor (Ed.) (2001). Toronto: Irwin.

Adult Literacy Now! is an excellent update of current Canadian developments in literacy education. It builds on Maurice Taylor's previous publications in adult literacy in Canada. In the foreword, Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada, points out that through this book "the reader is given a careful look at one of society's hidden challenges ... creating a culture of literacy is vital to our success as a nation and to the individual's sense of worth" (p. vii).

The book begins with a foundational chapter by Audrey M. Thomas and ends with an epilogue by Maurice Taylor, in which he considers the new responsibilities of a field that has come of age. The contributions of 28 literacy practitioners portray the multidimensional aspects of literacy instruction and its impact, and the new conditions of responsibility as well as the areas of growth, new obligations, and challenges. Four contexts of adult literacy practice create the structure for the text: community-based literacy, workplace literacy, family literacy, and school-based literacy. These four contexts represent, according to Taylor, converging themes in adult literacy and learning; each intersects and complements another. Six chapters comprise each of the four themes—the first serves as a framing chapter, followed by four chapters outlining some problem, incident, or aspect of practice requiring examination; the final chapter in each theme (section) provides a synopsis.

To illustrate this format, the section on workplace literacy begins with an opening chapter by Adrian Blunt, who argues that concerns regarding the new global economy and shifts in social and economic policies have led to workplace literacy becoming a central element for literacy policy and practice. Exploring the changing conceptualizations of literacy, Blunt points to the uncertainty underlying Canada's literacy crisis: "Some critics argues that the fundamental problem with today's labour market is underemployment not undereducation...where do we stand?" (p. 98). Other chapters in this section explore how to develop a learning culture within business, labour concerns regarding literacy, the relationship between literacy and lifelong learning, and knowledge acquisition. The final chapter offers a synopsis and concludes with "workplace literacy programs, while still grappling with ideological issues, are becoming an accepted practice in business and industry, and must be broadly based and collaborative to address the needs of individual learners" (p. 166).

Taylor points out that the new responsibilities associated with adult literacy's "coming of age" can be met through at least three major efforts: collaborative partnerships, situated learning, and action research. I would add

international collaboration to the first point regarding partnerships. Recognizing literacy as situated learning means that adult learning should be understood only within the social world or context in which it occurs. Solving problems through action research maintains the links between practice and inquiry. All of these are goals worthy of achievement.

Over the years great strides have been made in the domain of adult literacy in Canada: increased public awareness, information sharing, improvement in access to literacy services, and the quality of programs enhanced through innovative learning materials. The text paints a very positive picture of literacy practice, suggesting that there are few major struggles. The picture, however, is not as rosy nor as consistent across Canada; these strides vary greatly from region to region. Little is mentioned in the text about the politics of funding, which has led to greatly reduced resources in some regions and significant restrictions in program offerings.

This book signals the recognition of a field of practice that is a central activity in adult education and training. It draws attention to the wide range of human needs that adult literacy serves. Also noted is the maturity and wisdom that now inform the field, reflecting a wealth of experience, expansion of knowledge, and growth of infrastructure that sustains the practice of adult literacy. This book can assist the reader to further understand that "professionalization in adult literacy depends on traditional scholarly knowledge and on the construction of new knowledge borne from practice" (p. x).

The nature of literacy educators' practice is best understood by examining their assumptions and practices. As Taylor points out "this process results in the capacity to imagine and explore alternatives to existing ways of thinking, leading to a new vision of the future" (p. ix). This scholarly publication will undoubtedly be of interest to researchers, practitioners, and students in the field of adult education, as well as those involved in improving adult literacy through research, teaching, and reflection.

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