

# Learning from Research: A Review of the Literature

If a nation is to participate fully in today's global economy, its citizens must be literate. Without the necessary reading and writing skills, it becomes impossible for an individual to adequately cope with the demands of living and working in the twenty first century. Unfortunately, many people in our society today are lacking the necessary literacy skills to help them lead the successful, productive lives they desire. Statistics from research in both Canada and the USA indicate that within North America there are millions of citizens with low literacy skills. In Canada, forty-eight per cent of Canadian adults aged sixteen or over, around twelve million people, have low literacy. Within this twelve million, twenty per cent score at Level 1, the lowest proficiency level, and twenty eight per cent at Level 2. Looking specifically at Canadian youth, those aged sixteen to twenty five, over one third have Level 1 or Level 2 proficiency (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2005).

Closer to home, although the three western provinces fare better than other regions of Canada, four out of ten people still fall into the low literacy range of Level 1 and Level 2 (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2006). Numbers from the U.S. are no more encouraging: according to findings from the International Adult Literacy Survey, only half of the U.S. adult population actually reached Level 3 proficiency (Adult Education Facts, 2005). These statistics become even more disturbing when it is taken into account that a number of U.S. organisations have determined Level 3 literacy proficiency necessary as a minimum standard for success in today's labour market.

*One third of Canadians aged 16-25 do not have the literacy proficiency necessary to succeed in today's labour market.*

The statistics relating to immigrants also give serious cause for concern: about sixty per cent of immigrants in Canada have low literacy, compared to thirty seven per cent of native-born Canadians. Immigration is fundamental to the successful growth of Canada, and the future of the country will most certainly be influenced by the ability to

attract newcomers who can contribute positively to the nation's economic and social development (CIC, 2002).

Serious personal and economic implications exist relative to these low literacy levels. There are over two and a half million Canadians with low literacy who are either unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs, and these individuals are most at risk of losing their current jobs due to technological or organisational change (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2005). In addition, those with low literacy are about twice as likely to be unemployed than those with higher level literacy skills. Interestingly, a rise of just one per cent in literacy scores relative to the international average is associated with an eventual two and a half per cent relative rise in labour productivity, and a one and a half per cent rise in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2006).

Statistics from the United States, presented by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education within the U.S. Department of Education, show that an adult without a high school diploma earns forty two per cent less than an adult with a diploma; low literacy skills cost business and taxpayers twenty billion U.S. dollars annually in lost wages, profits and productivity; and fifty per cent of the chronically unemployed are not functionally literate. In addition, forty one to forty four per cent of adults who scored in Level 1 on National Adult Literacy Survey (1992) were living in poverty, compared with four to six per cent of those who scored in the highest level (Meeder, n.d.).

*There is a need for reform within every level of literacy instruction.*

The literacy demands that today's adolescents will face in the future will far exceed what has been required in the past. Since many of these learners do not have the skills necessary to successfully negotiate the "Information Age" economy awaiting them (Meltzer, Smith & Clark, 2001), there is clearly a need for reform within every level of literacy instruction. In addition, projections show that by 2020, eighty five per cent of jobs will require some level of post-high school education (Bottoms, 2002); something impossible for an adult with low literacy to successfully achieve. It is also important to remember that those who fail to attain a literacy level that allows them to function in and

successfully contribute to society do not just “fade away”; they are amongst those most likely to rely on social assistance programs, become involved with crime and violence, and be inclined towards alcoholism and suicide (Van Ngo, 2001).

If a person is literate they have the ability to not only become informed, but also to make informed decisions (Meltzer et al., 2001). These are vital components of living in today’s society and yet ones that elude so many with low literacy. Unfortunately, literacy learners, especially young adult literacy learners, face a multitude of barriers that can prevent them from becoming truly informed in the way that Meltzer et al. suggest. These barriers include issues related to employment, health, finance, legal matters, and family or personal problems; they can also include the bureaucracy within education, such as program fees, waiting lists and unsuitable scheduling of classes (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004). Less than ten per cent of people in Canada who could benefit from a literacy program actually register, and studies suggest that barriers such as those mentioned above contribute to this statistic (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2006).

*Young adult literacy learners face a multitude of barriers to learning in addition to their low literacy skills.*

For many people, barriers to successful learning begin to appear early in their education. A learner in need of literacy instruction may be left to “drift through high school, faking their way through reading assignments” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). A large number of these students will find the demands of the classroom too great and decide to drop out of school all together. Roessingh and Kover (2002) have found that children born in Canada to immigrant parents and who speak their native language at home, or children who arrived in the country at an early age, often have difficulties developing the necessary literacy skills to compete academically with their native English speaking peers. As a result, it is common for ESL learners to drop out of the education system before finishing high school, with studies showing the dropout rate among young ESL learners considerably higher than that of their native English speaking peers (Watt & Roessingh, 2001).

The problems associated with drop out continue after high school. Canadian studies show that less than half of those who contact an organisation offering a literacy program actually enrol, and of those who enrol, around thirty per cent drop out (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2006). In the U.S., evaluations of various youth service initiatives found dropout rates at around thirty to fifty per cent (Higgins, 1992). Weber (2004) points out that programs serving learners who have already dropped out of school once often fail to prevent them from dropping out a second time. In many cases, problems arise because programs are simply unable to cope with the array and seriousness of issues confronting learners (Department of Labor, 1992).

In an attempt to help learners overcome the many barriers to learning that face them, programs need to incorporate a social support component. Research shows that learners respond positively when they are provided with not only academic, but also social support (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004). One example of social support is the provision of child care. This type of support can be the deciding factor between a female learner attending a program or not. Often male learners outnumber female learners as a direct consequence of the lack of available child care.

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Certain programs have recognised that if they were able to offer child care they would have more women enrolled in their classes (No longer for youth alone, 2004).

Support can also be given in the form of counselling. For example, reviewing the types and availability of financial aid with learners, and assisting in the completion of necessary documentation, can help calm learners' fears regarding the cost of their continuing education and give them the often vital financial support they need (Dann-Messier & Kampits, 2004). Weber (2004) comments on the necessity for programs to either offer sufficient support to address learners' academic and social needs themselves, or to have the means to connect learners to resources within the community.

Unfortunately, many programs are reluctant to develop a social service capacity and when they do, they often do not fully address the needs of learners. If a program places more importance on its schedule rather than its accessibility to learners, it limits

its own ability to reach out to learners (Porter, Cuban, Comings & Chase, 2005). Both instructors and administrators should endeavour to identify learners' particular barriers, develop relationships with community service providers, and ensure all available support networks are employed when the need arises. It may also be necessary for instructors to expand on their traditional role as educators and take on responsibilities more often connected with social workers or counsellors (Weber, 2004).

The approach taken in the classroom with this type of learner is a vital component to the success of any program. Learner engagement and motivation must become a fundamental element of instruction. If learners are to develop the necessary skills to competently use reading, writing, and speaking to learn, they need to be in environments which actively engage them (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004). Motivation and engagement play a key role in young adult learners' development of literacy skills (Meltzer et al., 2001; Meltzer & Hamann, 2004).

Equally, when students are not motivated to read and write, they do not use those skills to learn, and as a consequence are hindered in their development; this often leads to a "cycle of failure"

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(Meltzer et al., 2001). When learners are engaged in their learning, they are actively involved in a search for meaningful information. This is often because they see an immediate connection between what they are doing in the classroom and their lives outside, and making that connection can help bring success to the whole learning experience. To facilitate this, instructors need to know about learners' interests and incorporate these interests into lessons wherever possible (Learning Point Associates, 2005).

A learner-centred classroom is also a key component of a successful program. This type of classroom is organised in such a way as to maximise all learners' opportunities for success (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). If learners are active participants in the classroom this will improve not only learner engagement but also learner retention, and this will in turn have a positive effect on overall educational achievement (Weber, 2004). In addition, if learners understand the goal of their work, and feel that

they are, to a certain degree, in control over their learning, then they are more likely to persevere with tasks even when they feel challenged by what they are doing (Learning Point Associates, 2005).

In a learner-centred classroom, discussions are encouraged, the learners' background knowledge and experiences are honoured, and the instructor coaches and facilitates rather than lectures (Meltzer et al., 2001). Optimal learning environments such as this also take into account any disparity between the expectations of the program and the readiness of the learner, and make the necessary adjustments (Portnow, Popp, Broderick, Drago-Severson & Kegan, 1998).

Teaching in context is also very important. Research supports that when literacy skills are taught in context, rather than in isolation, learners are far more likely to be able to transfer the skills to other areas of their learning (Meltzer et al., 2001). There is also evidence that learning a second language is made easier when the content of the class is presented in a contextualised form, such as through thematic frameworks (Facella, Rampino & Shea, 2005). Within the classroom, instructors need to create ample opportunities for learners to practice material in various ways and contexts so that learners have the opportunity to properly assimilate what is being taught (Florez, 2001).

In addition to the above mentioned classroom approaches, the explicit teaching of strategies is also a key component to a successful program. Research indicates a relationship exists between adolescent literacy development and the frequent purposeful use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies (Meltzer et al., 2001). There also appears to be a connection between strategy use and motivation. Curtis (2002) notes that "intrinsic motivation seems to predict strategy use, and strategy use increases motivation".

Reading comprehension can be greatly enhanced through regular use of particular strategies before, during, and after reading (Meltzer et al., 2001). An important outcome of this approach is that learners who are better supported in their reading strategy use can go on to use reading to learn (Meltzer et al., 2001), a vital academic skill and yet one that often remains out of reach for literacy learners. Strategies can be

explicitly taught, and it is possible to teach those with low reading skills the strategies that better readers use (Meltzer & Hamann, 2005), thereby opening up a vast array of opportunities for even those reading at the most basic level.

Teaching reading is obviously a fundamental element of any literacy classroom. Studies show that time spent reading is positively correlated to learners' reading ability and with learners' engagement with reading (Curtis, 2002). In addition, if students have a purpose for reading, and they are in environments that encourage reading, it is likely they will become engaged readers (Meltzer et al., 2001). In this context, it is important to offer pleasure reading in addition to any prescribed texts. Pleasure reading can have the effect of being a "hook" into further reading and can encourage learners to feel that the program is "an oasis rather than a tax" on their time and energy (Cuban, 2001).

Both individual instructors and the program as a whole play an important role in encouraging learners to become more proficient readers. For example, instructors must ensure there is a plentiful supply and wide variety of reading material available to learners. They should expose learners to as many different and stimulating reading strategies as possible. And they should model their own reading habits to learners by bringing books to class with them and talking about what they are currently reading (Learning Point Associates, 2005). Programs must consider their instructional leadership, the background and experience of instructors, the types of learner assessment used, and the support services they offer as also being potential factors in the development of learners' reading skills (Alamprese, 2001).

A key approach in developing learners' skill sets is to offer project-based learning opportunities. Wrigley (1998) explains that project-based learning has much in common

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with participatory education, as it allows the curriculum to be developed in a way that directly relates to the lives of learners, and what is learned is used to help learners understand and negotiate their way in the world. She also points out that learners

involved in project-based learning often spend considerable amounts of time reading, editing, and commenting on their work, and that this motivation to produce quality work

is due in no small part to the fact that their audience is “real” rather than one within the classroom.

Project-based learning is not only an effective way of teaching, but also an excellent way to prepare learners for entry into the workforce. In the project-based classroom, learners have the opportunity to learn the skills associated with not only reading and writing, but also research, planning, brainstorming, and public speaking. Learners involved with a project tend to bond as a group, take on leadership roles, and learn the vital roles they can play within their communities (Johnson, 1998). In a society where employers are actively seeking employees who have people skills, teamwork skills, and problem-solving skills, project-based learning can be a valuable tool to help prepare learners for the twenty first century workplace (Wrigley, 1998). Although little research has been carried out with adult learners in project-based classes, there appears to be enough anecdotal evidence to support the view that project-based learning helps develop the skills necessary to succeed in high performing workplaces as highlighted by the U.S. Secretary of Labor’s Commission on Necessary Skills (SCANS) (Wrigley, 1998).

Learners often say that project-based learning gives them a greater awareness of their own abilities, confidence from being involved in a project from the start to a successful finish, and pride in gaining important knowledge along the way (Wrigley, 1998). Project-based learning has the potential to take learners into a world which might otherwise be closed to them. An example of this is given by Wrigley (1998) when she talks about a group of Cuban and Dominican women attending a program in New York who began to cook and share their food at lunch time as they could not afford the high prices charged by local restaurants. After some discussion and further research, this in-class project became a catering business for the wider community, with the women providing food for various social events. Obviously, not all project-based learning will have such dramatic results, but it always has the potential to give real-world meaning to what normally happens in the classroom (Gaer, 1998).

In the project-based classroom, the instructor becomes a resource, a facilitator, guiding learners as they decide the direction of their learning (Wrigley, 1998). As Gaer

(1998) comments, learners develop their skills through collaboration on a project that reaches out beyond the confines of the classroom. This creates not only excitement, but also a level of motivation not usually found in the traditional classroom. In Gaer's experience, project-based learning results in less teaching and more learning.

The way in which instructors interact with the learners in their class is a vital component of any program. As noted by Cummins, "Culturally diverse students are empowered or disabled as a direct result of their interactions with educators in schools," (as cited in Meltzer & Hamann, 2005). Instructors have a responsibility to create a classroom where learners feel safe and supported, and where those with different backgrounds and perspectives feel welcome; this encourages participation and contributes to learner success (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004). This is especially relevant for those with low literacy skills, as many of them have had negative educational experiences in the past. Feeling cared for by instructors really matters to many learners, and the power of this should not be underestimated (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004). This need for instructor involvement with learners on a more personal level is backed by research, which indicates that one of the most important contributing factors to learner success in high school is a close connection with at least one adult who demonstrates a caring attitude combined with a concern for the learner's advancement (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005). The caring instructor who believes in their learners' ability to succeed can have a positive Pygmalion Effect on them, whereby believing in potential creates potential. If instructors show care and concern to learners as individuals, and make it clear that they are invested in their learners' progress, this may be reflected in the learners' levels of achievement (Learning Point Associates, 2005).

*Successful programs are flexible, student-focused, and tailored to the needs and competencies of the learners.*

Learners are also more likely to persist in their studies when they find themselves in an environment which clearly has high expectations for their learning (Tinto, 2003). Research has shown that in more successful schools, instructors have a collective belief that not only all learners have the ability to learn, but also that instructors can

make a difference in the process (Meltzer et al., 2001). For many learners with low literacy self-esteem, the motivation to read and write depends on their perception of whether the instructor believes in them or not, and whether they think the instructor will eventually give up on them (Meltzer & Hamann, 2004).

A study by Alberta Learning in 2001 determined the components necessary for successful high school programs for immigrant youth. Among these components were flexible and student-focused schools, and courses tailored to the needs and competencies of the learners (Alberta Learning, 2001). Although this report was concerned with high school programs, the same principles can be applied to programs for young adults who are no longer eligible to attend high school, as many of their basic educational needs and issues are the same.

Young adult ESL literacy learners face many challenges and barriers to their educational achievement, and as a result they need relevant, focused instruction and support. If this group of learners is to go on to complete their education and have an opportunity to reach their full potential in life, they also need help in transitioning from literacy instruction to the next level, once they are ready. Although there is a lack of data relating directly to the transition from ESL literacy to basic education, feedback from transition programs working at the post-secondary level suggests these programs are placing better prepared students into higher education classes, and as a result they are not only improving their educational prospects, but their immediate working situations as well (Lombardo, 2004). Research does show that the need for transition programs is

*Transition programs are needed for young adult ESL learners.*

particularly necessary for those who are part of a minority group, socially disadvantaged in some way, or whose parents did not go to college (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

If ESL literacy transition programs are to be successful there must be genuine collaboration between the ESL program and the programs to which the learners hope to transition into, whether that be at the same school or college; this includes the establishment of good relations and communication between staff dealing with transitioning learners and those in departments that handle matters such as finance and

admissions (Lombardo, 2004). The instructors' role is again important here as more learners successfully transition when their instructors take a proactive role in the transition process (Lombardo, 2004).

In conclusion, the statistics on literacy levels in Canada and the USA are undoubtedly shocking. Far too many people in North America lack the basic reading and writing skills necessary function successfully in today's labour market. As a consequence, millions of citizens are either unemployed or employed in low-paying jobs. Low literacy has a tangible effect on an individual's quality of life. Those with low literacy skills are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, or be involved in crime, than those with higher level literacy skills. Low literacy can also adversely affect the growth of a nation. In a country like Canada, the economic potential is enormous, but in order to release this potential all Canadians need to have the necessary literacy skills to fully contribute in the global economy (ABC Canada Literacy Foundation, 2005).

There is clearly an imminent need for improvement in literacy programming at every level. Ignoring this need has serious implications for the future of our nation. Research and practice have provided us with the elements of successful literacy programs, and it is imperative we now use this to make the necessary changes. For young adult literacy learners, the need for improved literacy programming is crucial. We must help these learners build their literacy skills so they can live and work productively as adults. As learners, they deserve the opportunity to be educated in such a way that allows them to go on to contribute fully to society. As a nation, it is essential that they do so. Our economic future depends upon the skills of today's adolescents, and we must waste no time in teaching these citizens of tomorrow the literacy skills they need for success in the workplace and in life.

*Through research and practice, the key elements of successful literacy programs have been identified. The crucial task now is for programs to incorporate all these elements.*

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