FIGHTING ILLITERACY: THE SWEDISH WAY

Introduction

“At the current level of investment and with current programming, any improvements achieved are slower than the population growth nationally. If we keep doing what we are doing now, the number of people with low literacy in Canada will increase at the rate of about 100 000 a year.” — Satya Brink, director of Policy Research of Human Resources Skills Development Canada (“Demers’ story highlights challenges of literacy,” Toronto Star, November 17, 2005, A 27)

It may be hard to believe, but a wealthy country such as Canada has a shameful problem. Low levels of illiteracy plague many Canadians. Worse still, the problem appears to be growing.

By 2005, organizations whose purpose was to improve the literacy of adult Canadians had flat-lined. They had no more funding than they’d had 15 years earlier. That means they were not getting enough to assist illiterate adults in their efforts to overcome low literacy skills. The problem was not high profile enough to attract the attention of politicians—and the needed funding.

What may have grabbed everyone’s attention was the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). It showed that the level of illiteracy in Canada hadn’t budged at all—matching the level of investment. The levels were shocking: about 12 million Canadians 16 and older had low levels of literacy.

Few countries have done better, except Sweden. Since 1994, Sweden has lowered its functional illiteracy rate to 7.5 per cent (compared with Canada’s rate of 14.6 per cent). Sweden has the lowest illiteracy rate in the world. The trick? An educational system that welcomes and encourages people to improve their literacy and a government that provides the funding. Instead of volunteers, those providing the training are professionals. What’s more, people have the option—at any point in their lives—to take up literacy training provided by the government. No questions asked.

To Consider

1. Read the quotation at the top of this page.
   a) What does Satya Brink predict will happen in the future?
   b) What is the cause she cites?
   c) How would you solve the problem she identifies?

2. How could illiteracy affect your life and your society? Think of two possible impacts for each.

3. Considering just the information in this brief introduction to the topic of illiteracy, what are the main differences between the Canadian system for teaching literacy to adults and the Swedish system?

4. Which appears to be the better system? Support your position with facts.
1. What types of problems faced Lynda Richards because she was illiterate?

2. What percentage of Canadians cannot read the writing on simple bottles of medicine such as Aspirin? _____%

3. What percentage of Canadians cannot read a hazardous materials information sheet? _____%

4. What percentage of Canadians is considered to be semi-literate? _____%

5. What barriers did Lynda Richards face when she attempted to become literate?

6. a) What is Canada’s rate of functional literacy? _____%
   b) What is Sweden’s rate of functional literacy? _____%

7. What did Nayda Veeman discover about literacy programs in Sweden?

8. How many cabinet ministers are responsible for education in Sweden? _____

9. How has achieving literacy changed Lynda Richards’ life?

10. In your opinion how important is literacy in today’s world. Why?
Way back in 1985, hockey figure Jacques Demers was already a very optimistic individual, a person who didn’t fear challenge. He faced a very significant challenge most of his life—the challenge of illiteracy. As the quote in the sidebar reveals, he respects people who overcome bad breaks to create opportunity. First read about his story. Then decide if you think Demers fits his own definition of a “tryer.”

Begin by looking at the major events in his life.

Life:
• Born in Côte-des-Neiges, Montreal in 1944.
• Father, Emile, works as a butcher/janitor.
• Mother, Mignonne, dies of leukemia in 1960.
• Two years later, Demers’ father dies of a heart attack.
• Hockey-playing career ends when he breaks his leg during a Junior B game.
• Starts driving a Coca-Cola truck to support his brother and two younger sisters.
• Volunteers as a coach of Outremont, a Montreal junior league team.
• In 1972, becomes a scout for the Chicago Cougars (World Hockey Association).
• Becomes head coach within a year.
• Becomes coach of the Québec Nordiques in 1978.
• In 1983-1986, coaches for St. Louis Blues.
• From 1986 to 990, brings the Blues—a minor team — within a goal of the Stanley Cup finals.
• In 1990, becomes head coach of the Detroit Red Wings.
• In 1992, becomes coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs.
• In 1993, brings the Stanley Cup home for the Montreal Canadiens.
• In 1997, begins coaching for the Tampa Bay Lightning.
• Begins a new career as a sports commentator.
• In 2005, at 61 years of age, reveals his illiteracy, in an authorized biography.

What do people with very low literacy skills have trouble with? A major stumbling block is keeping track of and paying bills. And that is one of the few things that professional hockey coach Jacques Demers could not handle on his own. For many years, no one knew about Demers’ inability to read or write. The only way that his wife, Debbie, finally found out about it was that she was paying all the household bills and wanted to know why he never did so. The problem was simply that he could not read the bills.

Demers is the perfect example for demonstrating that illiteracy is not evidence of a lack of intelligence. Demers had a long and highly successful career as a coach in professional hockey. Perhaps the peak came in 1993, when he coached the Montreal Canadiens to a Stanley Cup win. Coaching a team involves tracking a good deal of information. It involves reviewing and authorizing contracts. It involves statistics, drill rosters, and pay slips. It is a testament to Demers’ intelligence and strategic abilities that he was able to avoid detection over a very long career. No one—not the
players, not his bosses, not even his friends—guessed at Demers’ handicap.

How did he do it? Like many people with poor literacy skills, Demers had a variety of strategies for avoiding detection. He would claim that he forgot his glasses, or that he was too busy. He would get assistant coaches to review contracts. He memorized complex statistics and player information.

Demers is a francophone. So when he went to the United States to work, he claimed that his English wasn’t good enough. When he came back to work in Canada, he claimed that his French had gotten rusty. He jumped through hoops—and it worked. The resourcefulness Demers demonstrated over the years is actually not that extraordinary. Most illiterate people use similar coping strategies. What is extraordinary about Demers is that he was so successful in his career. Most illiterate people do not aspire to develop their careers because they fear the extra challenges will attract attention—and ultimately detection. Demers, on the other hand became a very public figure, coaching five NHL teams and then becoming a sports commentator. Then, in 2005, with Demers’ approval, Mario Leclerc, an editor at the Journal de Montreal, wrote a biography: Jacques Demers: En Toutes Lettres (“Jacques Demers: From A to Z”). Leclerc reveals the extraordinary life that Demers led, beginning with a very difficult childhood, in which he, his mother, and siblings endured a tyrannical, abusive father. This stressful childhood caused such distraction that schoolwork became impossible. Only in 2005, after Demers felt secure enough in his career, was he finally able to admit to his condition in public. Why did he do it? He hopes to encourage others in a similar position to seek help, learn to read, and turn a bad break into an opportunity. Jacques Demers is currently working on improving his literacy. Most of his adult life, he could read at a Grade 3 level. By 2005, he could read at a Grade 7 level.

Activities
1. Create a timeline to highlight what you feel are the 10 most important dates in Jacques Demers’ life.

2. Choose one event that strikes you as most significant in Jacques Demers’ life. Explain why you chose the event you did.

3. Explain what is meant by the statement, “It almost takes more skill to hide a reading deficiency than it does to actually read a book!” Do you agree with that statement? Explain.

4. Do you know of any friends, acquaintances, or family members currently struggling with low literacy? What might you do to help them deal successfully with their problem?
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Illiteracy in Canada

If you suspect a problem, what do you do? A sensible approach would be to conduct an inquiry so that you can have facts and figures to help you assess if there is a problem, and, if so, the extent of the problem. That is exactly what Canada did. It conducted an international survey to get a clear idea about the extent of illiteracy among its citizens. The last survey had been the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey. In 2003, several agencies combined forces to measure the literacy level of Canadian citizens again. It was a joint project conducted by the Government of Canada, the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD). The study was called the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). More than 23,000 individual Canadians aged 16 and older took part in the Canadian portion of the test. Samples were taken from populations in all 10 provinces and all three territories. Not only could Canadian literacy be tested, it could be compared with the levels achieved by citizens of several other countries who took the same test.

What the IALSS Measured

The IALSS measured knowledge and skills in four areas related to literacy:

• Prose Literacy — measuring the ability to understand text (e.g., editorials, news stories, instruction manuals)
• Document Literacy — measuring the ability to understand text in various formats (e.g., job applications, transportation schedules, maps, tables)
• Numeracy — measuring the ability to use math skills in a variety of situations
• Problem solving — measuring the ability to plan and act with a goal in mind but without an immediately obvious way to accomplish the goal

How the IALSS Scored the Survey Results

Participants were rated on a scale from 0 to 500. This score was converted into the assignment of a level. Participants could achieve Level One (low literacy) through to Level Four (high literacy). The testers considered Level Three as the level needed to function in a developed society.

• Level 1: People at this level have difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text.
• Level 2: People at this level have limited skills. They read, but do not read well. Canadians at this level can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out.
• Level 3: People at this level can read well but may have problems with more complex tasks. This level is considered by many countries to be the minimum skill level for successful participation in society.
• Level 4: People at this level have strong literacy skills, including a wide range of reading skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials. These Canadians can meet most reading demands and can handle new reading challenges.

Source: A Frontier College summary of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) 2003, at www.frontiercollege.ca/english/media/ialss03/fcialss03.pdf
How Did Canadians Fare?

As it turns out, Canada does have a problem. Forty-eight per cent of Canadian adults—about 12 million Canadians 16 and older—have low literacy. Twenty-eight per cent scored at Level Two while 20 per cent scored at Level One. These adults—nearly half the adult population—have trouble coping in their everyday lives because they cannot adequately interpret the world around them. How did Canada’s 15-year-old teens fare overall? They tied with four other countries for third place. Think about it—third place! Would you be satisfied with that in a world hockey championship? The problem is particularly bad for young people whose parents have not gone far in school themselves. Generally, females, anglophones, people with more books in the house, and people from wealthier families tended to do better. Across the country, Canadians in the West and Yukon tended to do better than the average. Aboriginals and immigrants tended to do worse than the average. What is more worrisome is that these numbers had stayed virtually unchanged since the 1994 survey.

Average proficiency score and percent of population at each proficiency level, Canada, population aged 16 and over (2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average proficiency score (out of 500)</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prose literacy</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numeracy</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


LEVEL 1
Demographics:
- 3.1 million
- 1.4 million were immigrants
- 54% were male and 46% female
- 60% were employed
- 12% were unemployed
Education:
- 50% had less than high school
- 30% had completed high school
- 20% had post-secondary education

LEVEL 2
Demographics:
- 5.8 million
- 1.2 million were immigrants
- 52% were male and 48% female
- 70% were employed
- 8% were unemployed
Education:
- 28% had less than high school
- 37% had completed high school
- 35% had post-secondary education

Source: A Frontier College summary of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) 2003, www.frontiercollege.ca/english/media/ialss03/fcialss03.pdf
Why Participate?

Literacy affects the long-term productivity of a country. People with low levels of literacy have a harder time than more literate citizens in finding and keeping a job. They also earn less money. The study found that 62 per cent of employed Canadians achieved Level Three, while 53 per cent of unemployed Canadians achieved Level One or Two. Workers at Level One and Two are also most at risk of losing their jobs when they are faced with either technological or organizational change.

The information above gives you a picture of what harm illiteracy can do to a person’s career. Illiteracy goes beyond career, however. It can harm our ability to live full lives—to read to our children, enjoy a book, try a new recipe, or plan a vacation. As a society, Canada wants all citizens to have an equal opportunity to thrive and be happy. As a society, we have an interest in working toward full literacy for everyone.

The first step in solving such a problem as illiteracy is recognizing the extent of the problem. The IALSS has helped Canada to do that.

Activities

1. Choose one set of data on the previous page.
   a) Choose an appropriate form of graph for presenting the statistics in the table.
   b) Create your graph or graphs of the data.
   c) Explain what patterns you see on your graph.
   d) Explain why you think the type of graph you used was a good or bad choice.

2. The IALSS found that a third of Canadian teens have low levels of literacy. Yet Canadians with medium to high literacy scores and who are high-intensity computer users are almost five times more likely to be among the 25 per cent of wage earners with the highest wages.
   a) Should this factor affect your desire to improve the literacy and computer skills of Canadian teens? Why?
   b) List five careers that require computer skills. List five careers that do not. Compare the lists. Explain any patterns you see.
   c) What other reasons besides employability would you have for wanting to improve your literacy and computer skills?
   d) Put yourself in the position of a teenager with no computer at home. What avenues do you have to develop your computer literacy skills?

3. What programs exist in your school/community to help people achieve a high level of literacy? Be specific.
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The High Cost of Illiteracy

There is a high price to be paid, both personally and by society, for illiteracy. Consider the following points and the questions they raise.

• People with abundant knowledge of the rules of the road cannot get a drivers’ licence in this country if they can’t read. Why not?

• Adults who cannot read cannot share the joys of reading stories with their children. Nor can they read their children’s report cards, birthday invitations, or notifications of class trips. Helping with homework becomes impossible. What short- and long-term effects will this have?

• Adults with good literacy skills have a 60 per cent chance of getting a job within 16 weeks of unemployment. Adults with low literacy levels have only a 50 per cent chance after a year.

• What do people with low literacy miss out on by not being able to sit down with a good book, be it a murder mystery, hockey story, or the latest best-seller?

• What do they miss out on by not being able to read the subtitles on foreign films?

• The modern factory floor tends to contain more and more machinery. The more complex the machinery, the more complex are the manuals necessary for maintaining the machines and troubleshooting problems when the machines break down. What problems could result if workers are not literate enough to read the manuals?

• Combing the job ads requires a good deal of literacy, not only to identify the jobs that are available, but also to know what the minimum qualifications are. How else could a person with difficulty reading have problems related to finding possible jobs?

• Just travelling to a job interview could be a problem if you can’t read a map or address. What impression would you leave if you arrived late?

• People with low levels of literacy cannot pay their bills on time because they cannot read the date when the bill is due. What techniques could illiterate people employ to get their bills paid? Could they use a bank machine or the Internet?

• Countries with more adults with low literacy do not perform as well economically over the long term. What repercussions might this have after they retire?

• Increasingly, Canada’s economy is becoming a knowledge economy—one in which value is added through new ideas, software, and information. How can people lacking literacy skills participate in the knowledge economy?

• Can you further a career in the trades without literacy skills? Consider that a) virtually all trades are demanding higher skill levels, b) the computer is becoming an essential tool for running virtually any business, and c) you can’t get into trade school without a high-school diploma.

• Living in our society can be hazardous if you cannot read. Consider the problems associated with reading the labels of hazardous cleaning substances, medicine, and poisons such as chemical fertilizers or pesticides.
Activities

In a small group, read through the effects of illiteracy listed above. Discuss the statements and attempt to answer the questions. Then add to the list by brainstorming other effects of literacy on both individuals and society.

1. Consider the above effects related to illiteracy.
   a) Put an “I” beside effects that will affect the individual. Put an “S” beside the effects that will affect Canadian society as a whole. If you can’t decide, use both letters.
   b) Create a Venn diagram to illustrate the effects of illiteracy on individuals and on society.
   c) Write a paragraph to summarize what your Venn diagram revealed to you.

2. A C.D. Howe Institute report states that a one-per-cent increase in literacy could improve productivity by 2.5 per cent and gross domestic product by 1.5 per cent. Productivity is a measure of efficiency. It is usually measured in output per person-hour. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the value of the goods and services produced within a country in the course of a year.
   a) How could such a small difference in literacy rates improve productivity and the GDP so much?
   b) Should governments take action on this problem? Why or why not? Think about our governments’ responsibilities to both individual Canadian citizens and Canadian society.
   c) How could governments affect the rates of literacy in Canada?
   d) How will your personal level of literacy likely affect your future? Explain.

Notes:
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Technology and Literacy

If you’re like more than half of Canadian teenagers, you spend a part of every day instant messaging your friends over the Internet. Because typing out words and sentences in full takes time, teens use a kind of shorthand—acronyms, symbols, and shortened spellings. Experts have various views about how this shorthand affects students’ literacy levels in the long run.

On the one hand, these teens are participating in a form of written communication and they’re learning to do it fast. In a way, it’s like learning an offshoot of English. Teens simply express the same words in a different form.

On the other hand, there are drawbacks to the system. For one, teens may not be honing their skills at expressing themselves in written English. Will they remember to punctuate a sentence correctly if they are used to writing sentences without any punctuation at all? Some teachers find that essays are being handed in with odd short forms for words and confusing punctuation.

You might ask why is it important for all members of a society to express themselves using the same grammatical, punctuation, and spelling conventions. The short answer is that we need to be able to understand each other. If we all follow the same conventions, then we can communicate easily, in written form, with English-speakers from all over the world.

Is it true that teens are sacrificing their abilities to write acceptable English? Perhaps not. “If anything, this tendency towards text messaging and these abbreviations, it’s a little bit like everybody has their own telegraph machine and is using their own version of the Morse code,” said Michael Hoechsmann, an education professor at McGill University (“Teens’ txt earns teachers’ tsk,” CBC News Online, March 21, 2005, www.cbc.ca/story/science/national/2005/03/21/text-message050321.html). In other words, some students are becoming adept at both texting and writing formal essays. If that’s the case, they may be becoming better communicators than their parents.

Have a look at the table below, which lists some of the common short forms being used on instant messaging today.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instant Message Code</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2morro</td>
<td>tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nite</td>
<td>tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4ever</td>
<td>forever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brb</td>
<td>be right back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>btw</td>
<td>by the way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cya</td>
<td>see you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g2g</td>
<td>got to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IM</td>
<td>instant message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kewl</td>
<td>cool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I8r</td>
<td>later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lol</td>
<td>laughing out loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>msg</td>
<td>message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n2m</td>
<td>nothing too much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neway</td>
<td>anyway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nm</td>
<td>nothing much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no1</td>
<td>no one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>np</td>
<td>no problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rents</td>
<td>parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rofl</td>
<td>rolling on floor laughing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sup</td>
<td>what’s up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thx</td>
<td>thanks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ttyl</td>
<td>talk to you later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Activities

1. Predict what would happen if people started writing “their own way” in newspapers, scientific journals, legal judgements, and business contracts.

2. Referring to the table above if necessary, translate the following fictional text message scenario:
   Teen 1: hey, sup?
   Teen 2: nm, u?
   Teen 1: n2m, wat r u doin 2nite?
   Teen 2: jus hangin out, IM me if your cumin
   Teen 1: brb, ask rents, btw thx 4 inviting me lol
   Teen 2: np, im busy 2morrow neways
   Teen 1: k, I g2g get ready, cy a
   Teen 2: yup, l8er, fone the cell
   Teen 1: kewl, ttyl

3. Think about whether or not developing communication skills other than reading or writing “normally” can improve literacy or not.
   a) Write a position paragraph communicating your opinion of the text-messaging phenomenon. Is it contributing to illiteracy or not? Use examples from your own experience, if possible, to support your argument.
   b) Translate the paragraph you wrote in Activity 3a into text messaging lingo.
   c) Write a brief note to a friend in text-messaging lingo.
   d) Translate your message into well-crafted English.
   e) What translation task was most difficult? What did this translation exercise tell you about the connection between text messaging and literacy?
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Activity

Here are five types of programs that aid people in improving their literacy. Different programs aim to solve different problems and are aimed at a variety of audiences.

• literacy programs in high schools — usually funded by school boards, usually taught by qualified teachers
• family literacy programs — assist families in transferring literacy skills from parents to children, usually funded by government agencies
• workplace literacy programs — assist workers in developing their literacy, to enable them to fulfil their employment obligations, usually funded by employers, unions, and governments
• adult-literacy programs — assist adults with low literacy, sometimes funded by government agencies, usually taught by volunteers
• remedial English classes in university or college — assist university or college students who somehow graduated from high school without basic literacy, funded by the post-secondary institution

Activity

Research the literacy programs that exist in your community.

1. Form a group of five students and review the five types of literacy programs listed above.

2. Together, brainstorm specific places that might have information about the various programs. You might consider your municipal offices, your school guidance office, a community centre, local university or college student services, or government social services offices.

3. Each group member can choose one literacy program to find out about. Conduct your research to find out
   • the name of the program
   • the purpose of the program
   • the clients of the program
   • the source of funding
   • the training of the teachers
   • whether the operators of the program have seen a rise or fall in literacy in the past 10 years
   • the operator’s opinion on obstacles to increasing the program’s efficiency

4. Report your findings to your group.

5. As a class, consider the different programs, and identify any “holes” in your community’s approach to literacy. Discuss if there is something more your community could be doing to address the needs of people with low literacy.