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Connecting literacy, media and technology in the schools, community and workplace

## Whither literacy? Consolidating our resources

The literacy map is being redrawn as 2002 comes to a close, and the key word appears to be consolidation, in Canada and abroad. As the field matures and as governments move to invest more fully in adult education, the role of literacy and basic skills is being addressed more concretely, though still generally as the distant poor relation of the youth and post-secondary sectors.

For the Canadian literacy sector, this has been the most hopeful time we have ever lived.

When the 2001 Throne Speech singled out literacy as an issue of concern, everyone believed that a massive policy shift was imminent, perhaps bringing funding to build a sustainable system. That hope was dashed as the year wore itself out, and the complacency of North America was shattered by 9/11 and government shifted its energy to national security.

In 2002, however, the launch of Canada's federal Innovation and Learning Strategy found the literacy community ready. It constructed a coherent national response that has had political impact and raised hopes once again, this time with a difference. The six national organizations, lead by the Movement for Canadian Literacy, consulted across the country and developed a proposal for a national literacy strategy. Their representations in meetings with HRDC Minister Jane Stewart and at national workshops and consultations lead to literacy being identified as a specific target in the government's long term Innovation Strategy. Literacy organizations in this country have never before worked so collaboratively, and the skill with which they mobilized support from the grassroots was exemplary.



Consolidating  
knowledge: Numeracy  
Institute 2002

The proposal from the six nationals for a literacy strategy is printed on the Innovation web site<sup>1</sup>, and literacy is noted in the final summary of consultations on the Innovation Strategy published at year-end by Industry Canada and

Human Resources Development Canada. Nevertheless, we cannot help but notice that the phrase “aligning the learning system to meet labour market needs” turns up more frequently in the report than does reference to “literacy”, and the most specific reference to “literacy” falls under the “Goals and Proposed Actions” section for the Adult Labour Force. Under the further subheading “How the Government of Canada Could Contribute”, the last recommendation reads:

Encourage the participation of those facing barriers to labour market participation. Consider, in cooperation with provinces and territories and other partners, targeted skills development initiatives to help persons with disabilities, Aboriginal people, visible minorities, individuals with low levels of literacy or foundation skills, and others facing particular barriers to participation in the labour market. *Canadians Speak on Innovation and Learning: Canada’s Innovation Strategy*, p. 91

So while the literacy community has recommended a broad definition of literacy and proposed an agenda linked to issues of equity and social justice, the wording of the government document suggests that currently their agenda is much narrower and focused on the labour market. The federal bureaucracy is also in a state of churn. Officials in the Skills and Learning Secretariat, some of whom had only recently become knowledgeable about literacy, changed in 2002. The National Literacy Secretariat was reorganized, and lost some funding as well. Rumour suggests that if new funds become available for literacy, it may be under different funding arrangements than the current grants system. The literacy community will have its work defined in trying to negotiate the shifting and sometimes contradictory policy landscape in 2003.

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There are, however, some very positive trends within provincial literacy in Canada. In 2002, Quebec unveiled “Learning throughout Life,”<sup>2</sup> a comprehensive government policy on adult education and continuing education and training intended to create a culture of lifelong learning. It is without doubt the most thoughtful policy in this country and one that matches the best anywhere in the world.

It is broad, socially inclusive, and works across departments and sectors. As with all initiatives, until we know what resources will be allocated to the implementation, it is impossible to predict the impact. Still, Quebec has produced a blueprint for excellence and set the marker for other provinces in relation to adult education policy.

In November, members of the two large Alberta umbrella organizations, Alberta Association for Adult Literacy (AAAL) and Literacy Coordinators of Alberta (LCA) voted with 96% approval to join into one provincial organization called Literacy Alberta Society.

In the U.S., on October 1, the world's two largest adult volunteer literacy organizations merged. Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc. became ProLiteracy Worldwide, serving more than 350,000 adult new learners annually around the world with programs in 45 developing countries, and 1,450 adult volunteer literacy organizations in the U.S.

These examples reflect a much needed consolidation of resources that should be emulated in every province and state and at every level. There are currently too many organizations with overlapping mandates that are dissipating the limited energy and funding available in the sector by pulling in too many directions. The situation has often been fed by funders who have been unwilling to challenge the field. This new direction is a signal that the field itself has recognized the need to work together if larger goals are to be achieved. Funders should support these initiatives strongly.

On the world scene, the United Nations Literacy Decade begins on January 1, 2003, and runs until December 31, 2012. It grew out of the Education for All Framework for Action created in April 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. That Framework committed governments to achieving quality basic education for all by 2015 or earlier. It emphasized girls' education, and included a pledge from donor countries and institutions that "no country seriously committed to basic education will be thwarted in the achievement of this goal by lack of resources." Sadly, no previous UN decades have achieved their promise. With some of the new focus and consolidations, perhaps this one will move closer than previous efforts. Certainly in Canada, we have to maintain a united front to turn the new possibilities into policy realities that nourish continuing consolidation of our own efforts.

### ***In this issue***

The Centre is contributing to the new trend by helping to consolidate and disseminate knowledge in the field. This issue of *LACMF* offers reports from the 2002 Summer Institute on Adult Numeracy where a group of outstanding researchers and teachers synthesized some of the best of what is known and practiced. The section begins on p.11.

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1. See (<http://www.innovationstrategy.gc.ca> under Index – Reports - Canadian National Literacy Organizations)
  2. See [http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/REFORME/formation\\_con/Politique/politique\\_a.pdf](http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/REFORME/formation_con/Politique/politique_a.pdf)

