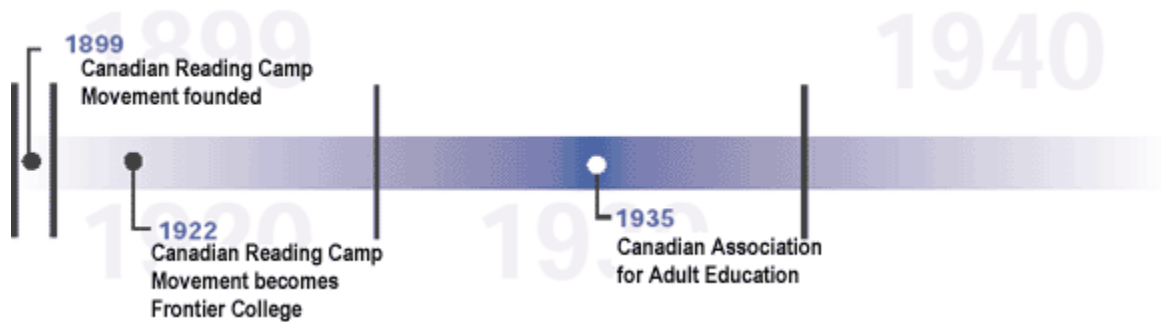


## Development of ABE/Literacy in Canada



## A Chronology

By Linda Shohet

### 1899-1930's

ABE was not significantly distinguished from other adult education initiatives, carried out through YMCAs and YWCAs, Mechanic's Institutes, churches, labour unions, farm organizations, traveling circuit lecturers and teachers, etc.

#### 1899

Canadian Reading Camp Movement founded.

#### 1922

Canadian Reading Camp Movement became Frontier College that sent university students to the wilderness to teach labourers, mostly lumberjacks and miners, how to read and write.

#### 1935

Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), the first national organization dedicated solely to the field of adult education, was founded as a clearinghouse to serve professionals in the field. It became a developer of educational programs with a focus on citizenship, dedicated to informing adults about political, social, and economic issues. It was the main source of adult education publications until the 1950s and nurtured some early researchers who separated out for study highschool-equivalent education (sometimes referred to as ABE) and pre-high-school-equivalent education (sometimes referred to as literacy education). CAAE helped create a number of other organizations devoted to adult learning and literacy, including the Canadian Commission for the Community College, founded in 1968, which later became the Association of Canadian Community Colleges; the Movement for Canadian Literacy, founded in 1977; and the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, founded in 1979. The CAAE's leadership role diminished in the late 1980s,

and the organization folded in the mid-1990s.

## 1960's

This decade was characterized by idealistic social consciousness and nationalist feeling in Canada and in Quebec, waves of immigration, and broad social reforms such as the “war on poverty.” Means of waging the “war on poverty” included expanded federal funding for technical and vocational education, which led to the exposure of under-education among adults.

### 1960

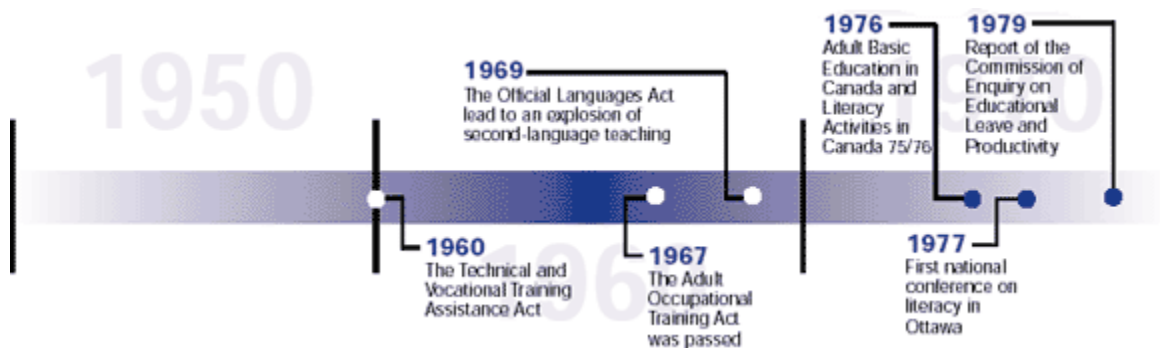
The Technical and Vocational Training Assistance Act authorized Ottawa to join the provinces in funding capital costs for vocational training facilities. Within six years, projects valued at more than \$1.5 billion provided 662 new schools and 439,952 student placements. Because of federal/provincial conflict over roles, and differences between Quebec and other provinces, this Act was the last federal investment in capital and operating costs for technical and vocational education. Many institutes of technology created through this Act were converted to community colleges.

### 1967

The Adult Occupational Training Act was passed, focusing on unemployed and underemployed workers and on short-term retraining. It led to the development of the Canada Newstart Program, creating six private nonprofit corporations to promote “experimentation in methods which would motivate and train adults who were educationally disadvantaged” Without intending to, the program revealed that a number of Canadian adults were not educated enough to qualify for retraining. This put the need for adult basic education out in the open for the first time.

### 1969

The Official Languages Act lead to an explosion of second-language teaching across the country and further contributed to awareness of the large numbers of undereducated adults.



## Late 1960s/Early 1970s

Federal Basic Training and Skills Development (BTSD) and early Basic Job Readiness Training (BJRT) were developed to target adults who could be trained or retrained in short-term programs leading directly to jobs. BTSD was intended to provide the elementary and high school levels of education that were prerequisites for vocational training.

## 1970's

This decade was characterized by a retrenchment in spending on adult learning and literacy. Reviews of the BTSD and BJRT showed these programs were not meeting the anticipated goals of skills training, funds were restricted, and by the end of the decade "provision for the most undereducated adults had almost ceased to exist" (Thomas, 1983, 65). Simultaneously, a series of provincial reports and commissions highlighted the needs of illiterate and undereducated adults. Other national reports from various government committees (such as the Senate Committee on Poverty, 1971, and the Senate Finance Committee, 1976) raised the same concern in the context of other social issues. The first major study of illiteracy in Canada was written, and the first organization dedicated exclusively to adult learning and literacy was founded. A concern for literacy as a social justice issue was dominant among activists.

## 1970

First Laubach tutor training workshop offered in Canada. Laubach councils were set up across the country during the next decade.

## 1976

Adult Basic Education in Canada and Literacy Activities in Canada 1975/76, written by Audrey M. Thomas for World Literacy of Canada, provided the first detailed analysis of illiteracy in the country. It used census data on school grade completion to estimate the number of adults in need and collected all available data on provision across the country from federal and provincial sources and from numerous organizations of different types—government, research, and community-based.

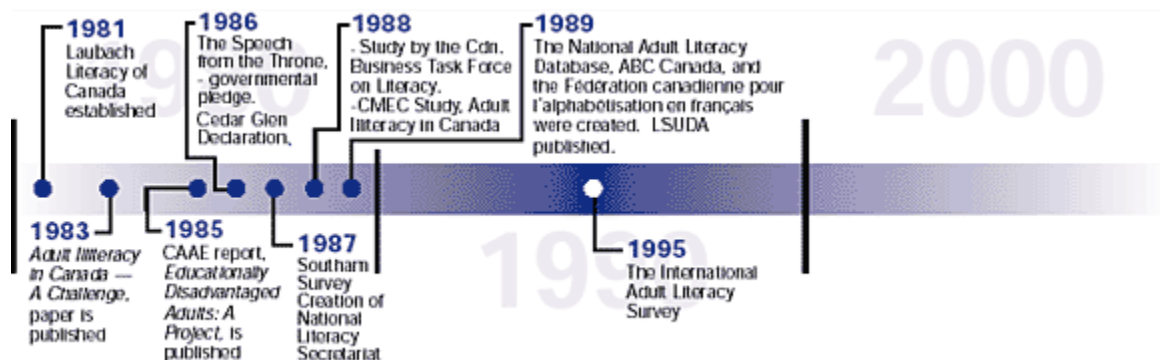
## 1977

First national conference on literacy, held in Ottawa, brought together key people in the field and led to the creation of the Movement for Canadian Literacy to advocate for the cause.

## 1979

Report of the Commission of Enquiry on Educational Leave and Productivity (for the Minister of Labour) included recommendations on adult illiteracy, calling for incentives and establishment of an adult literacy education fund that would offer grants to employers, trade unions, educational organizations, and individual workers to upgrade basic skills. While this fund did not materialize, the recommendations

contributed to setting the stage for a federal response to adult literacy.



## 1980's

Characterized by an increasing number of federal government department reports either mentioning or focusing on adult illiteracy as a social and economic issue. Provinces studied the issue, developed policies, and expanded provision of innovative services (in the community-based and institutional sectors), although there was little coordination within different provincial departments funding different types of services.

### 1981

Laubach Literacy of Canada was established to coordinate and represent the Laubach Reading Councils across the country.

### 1983

*Adult Illiteracy in Canada— A Challenge*, an occasional paper for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, written by Audrey Thomas, was released. The most comprehensive national assessment yet produced in Canada, it presented the problem in the context of world literacy and characterized the Canadian situation as one of undereducated adults. Thomas described provincial and federal activities as well as those in the volunteer sector and pointed out the fragmentation of services. The juxtaposition of data on labour force participation, educational attainment, and training activities was effective in making connections between the social justice and economic motives of literacy advocates. The paper also identified groups in need of specialized response; these included the incarcerated, indigenous people, the handicapped, immigrants, women, the elderly and school dropouts, thus emphasizing that adults with literacy problems were not a homogenous group.

### 1985

A CAAE report, *Educationally Disadvantaged Adults: A Project*, contributed to the

pressure for government action on literacy.

## 1986

On October 1, in The Speech from the Throne, the federal government pledged to “work with the provinces, the private sector and the voluntary groups to develop resources to ensure that Canadians have access to the literacy skills that are the prerequisite for participation in our advanced economy.” The task of developing a national strategy within federal jurisdiction fell to the Department of the Secretary of State, which began a lengthy process of consultation with all potential stakeholders.

In December, meeting at a site called Cedar Glen, a coalition of national groups promoting literacy in the volunteer sector crafted a public policy statement. The Cedar Glen Declaration was published as an open letter to the prime minister and provincial and territorial premiers and leaders. It marked the beginning of a public awareness campaign and a new point in the literacy movement when national organizations could speak with common cause.

## 1987

The Southam newspaper chain commissioned a survey by the Creative Research Group, and published a series of articles on adult illiteracy in Canada. (The articles were reprinted in a monograph by Peter Calamai titled *Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadians Are Illiterate*. This was the first assessment in Canada to test literacy using “real tasks” rather than by extrapolating literacy levels from years of schooling. The Southam survey shocked the country and brought the issue to public attention. The National Literacy Secretariat was created to fund literacy initiatives.

## 1988

A study by the Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy estimated the annual cost to business of illiteracy in the workforce at \$4 billion and the cost to society at \$10 billion. The group hypothesized that many errors required work to be redone and that many accidents in the workplace resulting in loss of life or property could be attributable to illiteracy. Although the text contained a disclaimer about the accuracy of the estimates, very few people read the disclaimer; only the figures made headlines. Publicity about the costs of illiteracy, added to all the other discourse, contributed to a government decision to take action.

The Council of Ministers of Education responded to the 1986 Throne Speech by commissioning its own survey of literacy and ABE. Their report, *Adult Illiteracy in Canada*, published in February 1988, outlined provincial programs and policies where they existed (see Cairns, 1988). These descriptions were taken directly from provincial government documents. The analysis updated and expanded the themes of the 1976 and 1983 Thomas reports. Lifelong learning was a theme.

The Prime Minister announced a federal national literacy strategy with funding of \$110 million over five years.

## 1989

The National Adult Literacy Database, ABC Canada, and the Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français were created. The National Literacy Secretariat funded the national Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Life (LSUDA), a wellrespected and widely read report on literacy in Canada. This was the first official document not to use the word illiteracy.

## 1990's

An infrastructure was created to support literacy activities across Canada, including resource centres, electronic networks and communication systems, and provincial and territorial coalitions, all funded partially or entirely by the National Literacy Secretariat. The NLS, through funding more than 4,500 projects, supported the creation of teaching materials and increased support for academic and community-based research. While most provinces and territories increased spending on adult literacy education, provision of services to students remained inconsistent from one part of the country to another. (See Hoddinott, 1998) The decade ended with attempts to assess, consolidate, and share the best of what had been developed (See Barker, 1999), with repeated references to a future model of lifelong learning.

## 1994

The International Adult Literacy Survey, conducted by Statistics Canada in partnership with the OECD in seven countries, including Canada, provided an updated profile of literacy in Canada.

## 1997

The federal government increased the annual allocation of the NLS to \$30 million and targets the additional money to family literacy, workplace literacy, and new technology. The move was seen as a sign of continuing federal commitment, which some in the literacy field had feared might end at the close of the decade when the UNESCO International Decade of Literacy came to an end. Responsibility for training was devolved to the provinces, removing one of the potential mechanisms for directing federal funds into adult basic education.

## 1999-2000

Most provincial and territorial governments expanded policy statements on adult literacy or developed positions, if they did not already have one. However provision to learners did not increase in most parts of the country.

## 2001

January Speech from the Throne pledged an increased commitment to skills and learning with a specific mention of literacy:

Today, many Canadian adults lack the higher literacy skills needed in the new economy. The Government of Canada will invite the provinces and territories, along

with the private sector and voluntary organizations, to launch a national initiative with the goal of significantly increasing the proportion of adults with those higher-level skills.

Federal policy makers began to study the issue to deepen their understanding before defining how that commitment would be implemented. National literacy organizations and provincial umbrella groups mobilized to lobby for a more coherent “system” of ABE across the country. By the end of the year, no federal policy had been announced.

2002 To be continued....

**Adapted and updated, with permission, from “Adult Learning and Literacy in Canada,” by Linda Shohet in *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, Vol. 2, edited by John Comings, Barbara Garner, and Cristine Smith. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 2001. To order the Annual Review, see NCSALL web site. [www.gse.harvard.edu/~ncsall/publication.html](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ncsall/publication.html)**

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