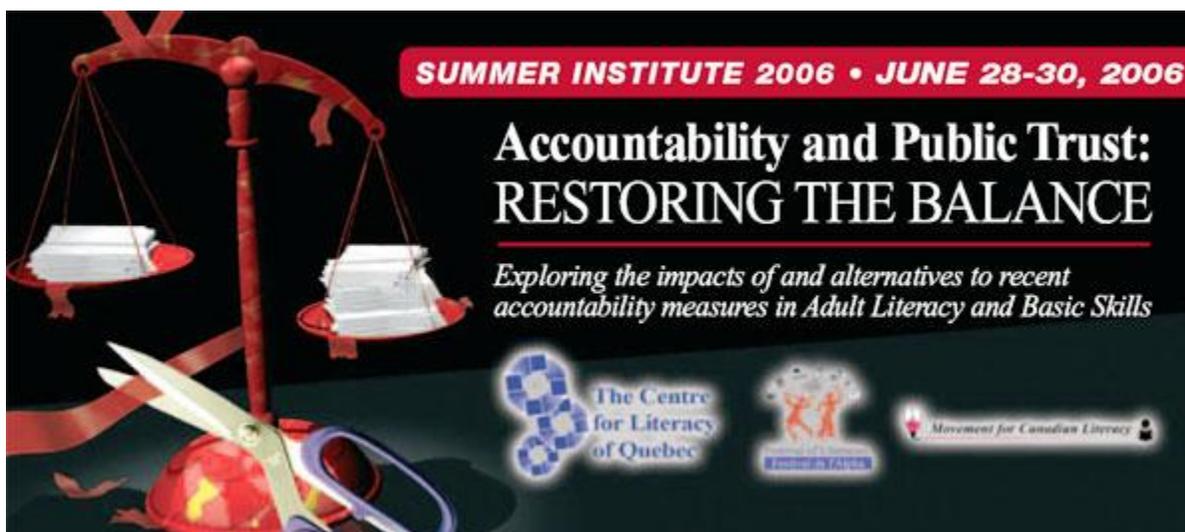


View the annotated bibliography [Accountability and the Public Trust: Restoring the Balance](#)



THE CONTEXT

A submission to the Canadian sponsorship inquiry in November 2005, endorsed by The Voluntary Sector Forum, responded to an invitation for public input on how to improve accountability in the Government of Canada. The submission highlighted the problems faced by the sector. Among them, they note recent practices have emphasized inputs and controls rather than results, and have focused on avoidance of risk that has produced "micro-scrutiny disproportionate to the dollars involved". The authors call for a recalibration of federal accountability structures that better balance the need for fiscal control and risk management with the need to measure results. They offer a series of detailed recommendations on how to achieve this balance.

In this context, the adult literacy field has been consolidating its efforts to create a ten-year plan of action with measurable outcomes. The time is appropriate to examine and document the impact of the accountability issue on this field, and to consider how the recommendations from the Voluntary Sector Forum and other alternatives might re-channel our energies toward achieving long-term outcomes. The culture of accountability is not a Canadian invention. It has a history in OECD countries; members of the European Union have been chafing under the increasing bureaucracy of project funding. In the United States, onerous reporting mechanisms have had serious impacts on the voluntary social sector. Before we consider alternatives, we have to understand how "global" policies of accountability have developed. In the 2002 BBC Reith Lecture series, Dr. Onora O'Neill, a philosopher and Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, traced the growth in the UK of a public culture of suspicion and distrust. She condemned "new conceptions of accountability, which superimposes managerial targets on bureaucratic process, burdening and even paralyzing many of those who have to comply". She examined and called into question the assumptions that underlie the prevailing sense of a crisis of trust, a sense shared well beyond the UK, and offered some new ways to consider the idea of public trust. Recent recommendations on re-balancing the scales of accountability take on added meaning in Dr. O'Neill's framework. We have invited Onora O'Neill to contribute to the 2006 Institute.

INSTITUTE FORMAT

The Institute is a collaborative event. Over three days, participants will present, respond, question, and synthesize current thinking about accountability measures implemented over the past decade by government and other funders and their impact on the adult literacy and basic skills field. This field will serve as an example of the larger voluntary sector. We will focus on issues and challenges related to accountability, examine recent efforts across the Canadian voluntary sector and similar efforts abroad to develop viable alternatives, and consider how some of these possibilities would apply in this field. We will consider ways of integrating alternative models into the long term vision for adult literacy.

To start the conversation, we send out a few short documents three weeks ahead. Other exchange is built around pertinent issues and problems identified by participants through a one-page response that we request before the Institute begins. Anyone who registers may become a presenter.

If you want to share information without making a presentation, we have tables for display materials, screens for posters and computer stations for online links.

If you prefer to listen, we invite you to respond to the issues we pose and to bring other topics or themes from your own experience. Part of each day is set aside to discuss and reflect on these questions, and to get feedback from colleagues.

TO THINK ABOUT:

- How much do you trust your public institutions? How do you measure that trust?
- How much does your community trust you and your organization? How do you know?
- How have various accountability requirements affected your program or personal work life in the past ten years? Consider issues of time, energy, creativity, innovation.
- How often do you experience conflict between the accountability measures of different funders?
- Have accountability requirements ever put you in an ethical dilemma?
- How can accountability measures be made less onerous?
- What would count as "evidence" of "results"?
- One component identified for effective public accountability by government is ongoing engagement with service partners. The adult literacy field had an exemplary model of engagement with government through the National Literacy Secretariat, but this has been threatened as a "common system" of accountability has been implemented. How can we sustain and share this model in a more flexible accountability framework?