

A Brief Overview of Literacy and Adult Basic Education in Canada 2001 With implications for UK adaptations where appropriate based on notes from a presentation by Linda Shohet, Ashridge Colloquium, January 2001

[In January 2001, prior to the launch of the new UK National Strategy on Adult Numeracy and Literacy, the Department for Employment and Education (DfEE) invited ten foreigners from the adult literacy field to meet for two days with the then-Minister of Lifelong Learning, Malcolm Wicks, and the DfEE Unit that had been created to implement the new strategy. Invitees were asked to give an outsider's perspective on the draft policy, to share an overview of the national policy or strategy in their own country, and to highlight some programs or policies related to pedagogy, teacher training, infrastructure/ICT and materials that might be adaptable to the context in the UK. Linda Shohet was the invitee from Canada. These notes were used to guide an on-line tour of selected Canadian web sites.]

Adult literacy and basic skills in Canada, insofar as it is an educational issue, falls exclusively under the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial governments as defined in The British North America Act of 1867 and maintained in the 1981 repatriated Canadian constitution. This jurisdictional right is jealously guarded; education systems are different in the ten provinces and three territories, with no federal department or direct role, although there are substantial transfer payments at the post-secondary level. Overall, although there are some provinces with a stronger commitment to adult literacy than others, there is general agreement among researchers that, until now, provision has been uneven and unsustainable in many parts of the country. The provinces with the strongest provision are Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. (geographical order, east to west). [See [NALD provincial sites](#) for overview.]

There has been a federal interest in adult literacy, however, since the mid-1970s, and in 1988, two years prior to International Literacy Year, the federal government created a National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) which has been instrumental in supporting literacy activities and developments across the country. The NLS was first housed in the Department of Secretary of State and Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, positioning literacy as a human rights and citizenship issue. While this was partly a response to the political reality of jurisdiction, it is a focus that has provided a philosophical underpinning. Currently, as in many other countries, the NLS is housed in Human Resources Development Canada and implicitly linked to labour market concerns. However, the social justice implications have not been entirely left aside.

The NLS is not mandated to create national curriculum or strategies; it is mandated to increase public awareness of the issue, develop materials, support research, improve coordination and information sharing, and improve access to programs. Through its funding mechanisms, in partnership with many literacy and non-literacy organizations, it has encouraged national and provincial organizations to carry out projects in all five categories of endeavour. The total amount of annual NLS funding is \$30 million CAN distributed among hundreds of programs. Almost all of it has been through project-based funding. This has created concern about long-term sustainability even for programs of excellence.

What has the NLS accomplished?

The NLS has supported the creation of an infrastructure of provincial/territorial coalitions of literacy organizations, of resource centres and of electronic links. It has funded the production of excellent learner and teacher training materials reflecting regional and community needs in a vast and diverse country. It has supported, in collaboration with Statistics Canada and the OECD, the IALS. While there has not been as much attention to the IALS in all participating countries, the NLS has promoted its dissemination widely and has used it to great effect in stimulating interest in the adult literacy issue in many federal government departments. In the absence of national standards, targets or reporting, IALS has been used as a means of comparing degrees of need and lobbying for increased provincial funding.

I have organized this overview to relate roughly to the categories of initiatives outlined in David Blunkett's statement. Given the hundreds of programs in the country and the many pockets of excellence, this selection is very limited. I have tried to choose Canadian programs/projects that might be adaptable to a UK context. Above all, I have highlighted quality programs that have enhanced policy or practice and that have engaged strong practitioner support

The descriptions are brief; all of them can be accessed on the web for further information:

Infrastructure and ICT:

The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD): www.nald.ca

This single-source, comprehensive, easily accessible database of adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada is revolutionizing practice. NALD has linked almost 6000 contacts in literacy, ABE, and ESOL, and connected them to other services and databases in North America and overseas. Almost every contact listed here can be accessed through NALD. It has organized all the information into clearly readable screens and shown visually how Canadian literacy and ABE is organized. Its front page can take you to Literacy Organizations, which in turn show national, provincial, international, and non-literacy organizations with related programs. It also has a full resource collection, full text documents on line, and learner materials. All are searchable and many are collected in categories (i.e. Family Literacy, Literacy and Health, Workplace). It has a full section on IALS linked to Statistics Canada. NALD has created and maintains web sites for more than 100 Canadian literacy or literacy-related organizations that would not have the financial or technical means to maintain their own sites. Given the coherence of the UK initiative, a NALD-like webbing could be invaluable.

Directory of Canadian Literacy Research: www.nald.ca/crd/start.htm

This directory lists all the research undertaken in Canada since 1994 with links to the original sites. It is a comprehensive listing which saves researchers time. NALD also houses a Directory of Family Literacy Programs.

Resources on line

Literacy resource centres across the country are collaborating in a sharing project intended to provide information and access to resource materials anywhere in Canada to anyone who needs them. The first of the small collections is now on-line from the Library Collection of Literacy Partners of Manitoba. Others will added throughout the coming year. The largest collection from Alphaplus Centre (Ontario) can be viewed at www.alphaplus.ca

Canadian Literacy Thesaurus (www.thesaurusalpha.org)

A project of the Canadian Library Association, this cataloguing tool allows libraries and resource centres to assign common codes to literacy materials. With subject headings in English and French, created by examining terminology used in the field, the thesaurus allows finely tuned cataloging that cannot be achieved by Library of Congress.

Alpharoute

This innovative on-line adult literacy learning service based at the Alphaplus Centre in Toronto provides curriculum, learner support through tutor-mentors, and is aligned to the Ontario Learning and Basic Skills Learning Outcomes in 5 levels. It has strong practitioner input, and may be of interest to both the Ufi group developing Learndirect and to the DfEE because of the linking of levels. Alpharoute, like Alphaplus, has an English, French, Native, Deaf, and ESL strand. Each community has been involved in developing materials appropriate for its own use.

The Centre for Literacy of Quebec (www.nald.ca/litcent.htm)

One of the resource centres, The Centre in Quebec also does teacher training and runs think-tanks every summer where about forty participants meet for three days to focus on a specific topic in adult literacy. Topics have been restricted to technology for the past seven years with television and adult literacy as the focus in 2000. There has been strong participation from the UK supported by the British Council.

CONNECT (www.nald.ca/connect.htm)

This newsletter for practitioners makes ICT accessible to teachers who are not familiar or comfortable with the new technologies. Written in clear language, it offers reports from the field, classroom activities, software reviews and learner evaluations of materials. It has been effective in meeting teachers where they are. Available in print and on-line.

Samaritan House learners evaluating software (<http://www.nald.ca/shouse/sam.htm>)

This community-based program in Manitoba has been having students evaluate software and share the reports on-line. An empowering model for both teachers and learners (the two are sometimes confounded here).

Community Access Points <http://www.ic.gc.ca/>

A project funded by Industry Canada to make internet access available to those who might be excluded, CAPS locate computers with internet connections in libraries, hospitals, community centres, churches, etc. While there have not been strong connections between CAPs and literacy programs in most sites, there is no reason why these access points could not be part of a strategy.

Office of Learning Technologies <http://olt-bta.hrhc.gc.ca/> A sister agency to the National Literacy Secretariat, located in the Learning and Literacy Directorate of Human Resources Development Canada, the OLT has a mandate to support innovative pilot projects that support the development of learning opportunities outside traditional institutional frameworks. They have funded several literacy projects involving technologies.

Family Literacy

This has been a major thrust of NLS funding in the past five years and has resulted in the creation of varied models across the country. Unlike the US, where a limited number of models have been supported, in Canada, the diversity of the regions has led to a broader range of provision from a limited Books for Babies model to intensive community models. The Directory on NALD offers descriptions and contacts for every one developed in the past several years.

Teacher training

The need for better training and the question of volunteer roles has been, and continues to be, contentious in many parts of Canada. The University of Manitoba and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education have developed courses and programs. St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia has recently advertised a new MA in adult basic education and literacy directed by long-time researcher and teacher, Allan Quigley. What Canada has excelled at is in creating volunteer-certification programs that are more comprehensive than the traditional 12-hour programs have been, and which attempt to translate good research into practice. Among the best of the volunteer tutor training models are:

STAPLE (www.nald.ca/province/alt/lca/staple/products.htm)

This three volume CD-ROM, also available on-line, builds on constructivist theories of reading and writing. Designed for teachers in Alberta, it is also extremely effective for volunteer tutors, and is being used across the country. Last year, we suggested that CTAD look at it as a possible model to be adapted for the UK on-line professional development support service through Ufl.

Nova Scotia Tutor Training

This is an outstanding volunteer training program of 30-hours duration that integrates reading, writing, numeracy, science, and life skills. After completing a practicum based on the training, a tutor can be certified by the NS Department of Education.

ThinkTV

This training program of five workshops for parents integrates media literacy and traditional literacy. Also developed by the NS Department of Education, it is the only resource of its type in Canada. It has been designed to be accessible to parents with low literacy.

Promotion

LEARN (www.abc-canada.org)

The closest thing to a national "campaign" in Canada is the LEARN line. ABC CANADA, a national organization working closely with the corporate sector, has negotiated with the YELLOW Pages publisher to put a LEARN listing in their books across the country. Each one has telephone referral numbers for providers in their region. Ads appear on TV and in newspapers and end with the message: Look under LEARN in your YELLOW PAGES.

Workplace

A number of excellent models have been developed in different provinces. Manitoba has created the Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee, a highly successful tripartite model involving government employers and unions in planning workplace literacy interventions. The Winnipeg branch of UNITE has developed a worker-based model that includes families and extends into weekends. In British Columbia, SKILLPLAN has addressed the needs of thousands of workers in the forestry industry. The Canadian Labour Congress has created models of peer-teaching for basic skills that have been effective in many workplaces.

Materials

Thousands of materials have been created in the past twelve years, many of them outstanding.

Aboriginal

Focused materials have been developed in the aboriginal communities where languages have been lost and English literacy remains low. Aboriginal centres are producing and publishing materials of high quality that draw on native learning traditions while supporting ability to work in the majority culture. A strong example of a native publishing house is Ningwakwi in Ontario.

Many materials can be accessed on NALD or found through a search.

Student materials

Many collections of student work have been produced and are regularly integrated into curriculum. NALD also has a button on its homepage entitled **Story of the Week**. Programs across the country are invited to submit a piece of student writing which is put up often with a vocal reading by the student. These are changed each week and the previous stories are archived and searchable by province, title, etc. Teachers have a constantly growing bank of stories by beginning writers who reflect their regional realities through their words.

Literacy across society

Many other government departments and NGOs have been sensitized to the issues of literacy as it impedes access to communication and interferes with full participation as a citizen. Initiatives in the health sectors, the cultural sector, justice, revenue, Corrections, and more reflect this wider understanding. A few examples will suffice:

Canadian Public Health Association (www.cpha.ca)

This organization has developed and sustained a literacy and health program that works in partnership with 27 health associations to raise awareness in the medical profession about the impacts of literacy on health and health care provision.

Health Canada www.hc-sc.gc.ca/

This department is funding several projects related to literacy through its Population Health Fund. One such project is a model Health Literacy Centre in a major Montreal hospital which will cater to the information needs of the lowest third of the population in terms of communication-low literacy, E/FSL, disabilities.

Canadian Museums Association (<http://www.museums.ca/>)

This organization has involved many museums across Canada working in partnership with literacy providers to make museums sites of learning for all.

Implications for the UK

These thumbnail sketches give only an inkling of the many effective models that have evolved in Canada over the last decade and a half. If there are lessons for the UK, they probably lie in the richness and diversity of models and the willingness to give some autonomy to practitioners and learners. Many Canadians look with envy at the coherence of the UK Strategy and at the implications of being able to create a "National" strategy. On the other hand, you might want to avoid the danger of nailing everything down so tightly that there is no space for those in the field to take any ownership. Without some sense of power to shape practice, teachers and learners can quickly become disaffected. Somewhere between the freewheeling Canadian "model" and a perfectly airtight model

seems to lie the best option.

Your "Pathfinders" offer superb opportunities to monitor and adapt. If there is any space to include some of these ideas, you might look at the NALD model of web-based connection, at Alparoute, and at some of the non-literacy initiatives in government and NGOs.

I must add that there are so many excellent models in your own country, not all of which are being acknowledged in the Strategy. While there is mention of Investors in People, it remains one of the most promising models for destigmatizing basic skills and locating it as the foundation of upgrading in a workplace. Regeneration projects (Waltham Forest) also offer an empowering means of reaching and motivating learners. Models such as the New Reading Disc and the Numbers Disc have been created with support from the BSA. Your researchers in community literacy (Hamilton, Barton) and workplace training network (Frank, et al). the ICT work in the schools and on disability (Abbott, BECTA) and media literacy work (Masterman, Buckingham, et al) all connect to your larger vision. I have been bringing these ideas back to Canada for years, and hope that they are recognized in their home country.

The world is watching your brilliant initiative with great anticipation.

Good luck

(if you want further information or a deeper analysis of anything mentioned here, I would be happy to provide them.)
