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# Reaching for the Tipping Point in Literacy

**An invitational Pan-Canadian Roundtable  
February 4-5, 2008**

## **Executive Summary**

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### **Disclaimer**

The opinions and conclusions expressed in the document are those of the individuals who participated in the *Reaching for the Tipping Point on Literacy* event, and do not necessarily reflect the views of either the Canadian Council on Learning's Adult Learning Knowledge Centre or the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre.

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# Reaching for the Tipping Point in Literacy

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction

On February 4 and 5, 2008, the Work and Learning Knowledge Centre and the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre, initiatives of the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), organized an invitational, bilingual, pan-Canadian roundtable—*Reaching for the Tipping Point in Literacy*. More than 80 experts met in Ottawa for an informed and insightful dialogue about how to achieve improvements in the area of literacy. Participants included representatives from the literacy movement, community-based organizations, business, labour, policy-makers, and researchers.

Literacy is one of CCL's crosscutting themes and an area of significant expertise for both knowledge centres. CCL has adopted a broad definition of literacy that recognizes the reading, writing, and numeracy skills needed to cope with everyday tasks, thus enabling people to thrive in a knowledge economy. CCL's State of Learning report has laid out a clear path for action:

The Council firmly believes that Canada's literacy challenges will not be met without the active involvement of all sectors of society. While governments can provide leadership and resources, they cannot solve these problems on their own. The commitment and effort of families and individuals and of the private and non-governmental sectors are also required.

Each knowledge centre brings a valuable and unique perspective to the challenge of literacy, based on their collective experiences and resources. The arena of adult learning brings a community development and social equity perspective; workplace learning considers the impact on productivity and the greater social as well as economic inclusion of Canadians through work-related learning opportunities.

The 'tipping point' motif was used to describe the current situation—the literacy issue is on the brink of change. Starting with the premise that improving Canada's literacy record is a shared responsibility, the participants focussed on developing ideas to inform diverse sectors, encourage tangible actions and achieve progress. The emphasis was on reviewing the current state of literacy in Canada and on identifying effective actions.

The report on the roundtable presents the event's highlights and key findings which will contribute to an effective pan-Canadian response to a complex challenge.

## Key Outcomes and Conclusions

- The goal of full literacy for all Canadians has not been met. Nine million Canadians, 42% of the population (aged 16 to 65), are still below level 3, the minimum considered necessary to function effectively in a knowledge-based society.
- There was agreement that the International Adult Literacy and the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills surveys have served the literacy issue well and have assisted in putting literacy on the public agenda. However, the tendency to combine level 1 and level 2 of the literacy scales into one number (“42 %”) has resulted in considerable confusion. This number does not resonate with the Canadian public, who seem to find it hard to believe. In addition, it does not distinguish between the varying needs of people at the lower levels of literacy.
- The word ‘literacy’ itself may be misleading or may not convey the complexity of modern-day literacy. Some favoured linking literacy to a message of lifelong learning that would appeal to a broader group. Others argued for a focus on individuals with major literacy challenges.
- Advocates of literacy need an ‘elevator’ speech—a vehicle that expresses a clear and concise message about the main issues related to literacy.
- Crafting the message that “sticks” is a challenge—the message must be clear and concise. Participants proposed a variety of approaches, including:
  - ♦ using an alarmist message to convey a sense of crisis;
  - ♦ focussing on a doable task, such as raising the number of people at level 2 to level 3;
  - ♦ using economic arguments, e.g., gain in productivity, return on investment, increase in GDP;
  - ♦ linking literacy to issues of poverty, health, citizenship, and participation.
- Some participants favoured an approach that would see different messages crafted for different audiences, while others argued this would diffuse the message.
- Champions—influential people with visibility and credibility—are needed to spread the message.
- Suggestions were made for tool kits for employers, more success stories, and mechanisms to share information and knowledge.
- Participants called for an ongoing forum to keep the conversation going to develop an action plan that engages all sectors. A group of committed people could help lead the process by developing a multisectoral plan of action.
- Another meeting is needed to develop the message and communication methods and tools, with a communications expert to facilitate the session.

# Reaching for the Tipping Point – An Overview

**Presenter:** Bill Stirling, Vice-President, Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, Newfoundland and Labrador Division

Mr. Stirling outlined the concept of a tipping point based on Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.<sup>1</sup> The term used in the book was drawn:

“... from the world of epidemiology. It is the name given to that moment in an epidemic when a virus reaches critical mass. It is the boiling point. It's the moment on the graph when the line starts to shoot straight upwards.”

In a world of social epidemics, ideas, behaviours, and changes spread through a population much like a virus does. A few reach the “tipping point”—the moment when they are embraced by the population. Three factors are required to reach the tipping point:

1. **The Law of the Few**—suggests that a small number of highly connected people can have profound influence.
2. **The Stickiness Factor**—the nature of the message. In order to stick, a message must be memorable and spur someone to action. It has to be noticed and be able to cut through the clutter of today's world.
3. **The Power of Context**—how the message is communicated. It can have political, social, economic and community elements. In Canada, literacy is taken for granted. As a result, the message that literacy is a serious problem is simply not heard.

Mr. Stirling posed some questions for discussion: How do we identify and engage the ‘Few’? How do we create ‘Stickiness’? What message do we want to send? What is the ‘Context’? How do we set the context to present the message in a new light and with new urgency?

## **Literacy Data and Implications—what do we know?**

Presenter: Scott Murray, DataAngel

According to Mr. Murray, a unifying theme could be “helping Canadians realize their full economic potential through literacy.” He said that literacy is a tool needed to compete in the emerging global knowledge economy, a tool that 42% of adult Canadians do not fully possess. He proposed a negative message: “If we do not confront the issue, we will pay a serious economic price.”

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<sup>1</sup> Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point. How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company. 2000.

## **Literacy Policy — what do we know?**

Presenter: Dr. Allan Quigley, St. Francis Xavier University

Dr. Quigley's presentation asks the question *School vs. Tool: Challenging the Formula— How did we get to this state in Canada?* He said Canada has experienced erosion of the funding base for literacy and a narrowing of literacy vision. He believes it is necessary to add alternatives to regular schools. He cited examples that illustrate the possibility of reaching the tipping point if informal learning alternatives are a part of the solution. For example, Frontier College's abandonment of a traditional classroom; the Middle East's use of technology such as TV; Australia's investments in distance technology; utilizing Google and Wikipedia as tools that enhance literacy practice.

## **Provincial Perspectives—What is happening on the ground?**

**Nova Scotia Presenter:** Bobbi Boudreau, Director, Skills and Learning Branch, Province of Nova Scotia

The labour force of Nova Scotia is aging. This will create skills and labour shortages, exert upward pressure on wages, and create a need for succession management and knowledge transfer. Workers with lower literacy skills are less able to adapt to changing labour force requirements and skills expectations. The changing nature of work is also leading to an increase in under-employment and creating greater barriers for the unemployed. Employers are often unable to find the right people for the job. Addressing these issues requires considerable investment in retraining, skills upgrading, and lifelong learning. Nova Scotia has invested in the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning (NSSAL). NSSAL's mandate is to contribute to the social and economic development of Nova Scotians, to ensure that they have the skills, knowledge, and credentials for successful labour market transitions and to participate actively in the home, community, and workplace.

**Saskatchewan Presenter:** Dr. Margaret Lipp, Commissioner, Saskatchewan Literacy Commission

Literacy took a prominent role in Saskatchewan when the provincial government launched the Saskatchewan Literacy Commission (SLC) in 2005. Saskatchewan chose to define literacy as a comprehensive term encompassing multiple factors: information and communications literacy; numeracy; scientific and technological literacy; and personal/social/cultural literacy. Literacy is based on a holistic approach wherein all literacy development increases the competence of the whole person to contribute and participate in the social and economic life of the family, community, province, and society.

Volunteers are a key component within this model. Through community planning, the private and volunteer sectors have become more engaged in literacy activities and all resources are maximized—public, federal, provincial, and municipal resources become assets in the community.

### **An Analysis from a Change Management Perspective**

**Presenter:** Alan Kay, The Glasgow Group, Change Consultant, ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation board member

In Canada, the literacy problem lacks visibility. Governments tend to speak about the strengths of their educational systems, and this in turn may compel them to focus on other critical areas rather than literacy.

Mr. Kay emphasized three points:

- ✦ Have a clear purpose and a plan that works over time;
- ✦ Make it work for the learners;
- ✦ Gain the attention of the senior executives and supervisors. Show them how it will work and what outcomes will be measured.

### **An Analysis from a Communications Point of View**

**Presenter:** Fernan Carrière, La Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français

Mr. Carrière gave a brief perspective on the recent history of literacy policy and programs, and underlined that while recent events have made the sustainability of the literacy movement vulnerable, they have also brought a lot of attention to the literacy issue and allowed the movement to mobilize its key partners. He felt that what is still missing is the engagement of strategic sectors, such as the private sector, but he also noted that even here there are encouraging signs as demonstrated by the TD Bank's report on literacy.

Mr. Carrière drew participants' attention to the importance of clearly stating what the numbers mean in the communications effort required to reach the tipping point. He also underlined that there is a need to explain clearly to the public that Canada does not have a literacy problem, but rather a problem with poor reading skills, and that the cost associated with this issue is one that is borne by all members of society.

### **An analysis from a local point of view: reflections on how one community reached the tipping point**

**Presenter:** Michelle O'Brien, Project Coordinator, Town of Fort Erie Learning Community Project, Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA)

Ms O'Brien presented an example of reaching the 'tipping point'. Approximately six years ago, a group within the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) literacy project decided to explore the concept of creating a "learning community." This concept

had been seen in Europe and Australia, but this would be the first time it would be led by a municipal government. The town of Fort Erie, Ontario stepped forward and became the pilot learning community. Both the mayor and the advisory committee saw the creation of a centre for lifelong learning as a cornerstone for economic restoration and improved quality of life. Ms O'Brien credited the strength of partnerships, a long timeframe for the project, building on what was already there, and a common sense of what a learning community is for the success achieved to date.

**Small Group Discussions:**

*How should we package the issue of literacy? Are there major aspects of this issue that need to be better framed (e.g., in policy statements, communications)? How can we tell our story?*

The message content dominated discussions. Many felt that different versions of the message, each customized for different audiences, are needed. The points below emerged from the discussions.

- ♦ **Content of the message**—This was seen as crucial. There was a sense that one message, with sub-messages, was the most appropriate way to proceed.
- ♦ **Lifelong Learning**—There was a general sense that the literacy message should be linked to a message of lifelong learning.
- ♦ **Delivery of the message**—Different versions of the message, customized for different audiences, are needed.

*What can governments, employers, labour unions, social institutions, educators, learners, and other individuals do to facilitate reaching the tipping point? Are the existing partnerships among these communities sufficiently broad, inclusive, and effective to improve Canada's literacy record?*

The various sectors represented at the forum had specific ideas about how they can be involved in literacy.

**Employers:** are often absent from these events and discussions. There is a need for leadership 'from the top' of the business sector to engage employers better.

**Researchers:** felt that researchers and practitioners 'fail to communicate'. The research community could re-examine and learn from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the National Literacy Secretariat experience in order to be clear about objectives, and the value of the research work.

**Government:** needs to form partnerships. Literacy is a crosscutting issue and may not correspond to the way departments are structured and operate. Maintaining consistent policies is difficult when government re-organizations occur. Quebec's absence at national events is a cultural loss.

**Literacy coalitions:** may not link to their respective provincial and territorial governments. Establishing various linkages to government, business, and professional associations should be pursued diligently.

**Labour:** needs to find ways to tell learners' stories and connect literacy to labour issues such as training, and health and safety. Participation must be accessible (e.g., using clear language, bargaining training).

*What concrete actions can be taken by those of us who are at this roundtable to spread the word that literacy is an issue for many Canadians?*

- ✦ Create awareness and simplify message
- ✦ Public policy debate and dialogue
- ✦ Partnership building
- ✦ Improve/refine services

*Who are our target audiences? Do we need to rethink ways to engage them, and if so, how?*

- ✦ **Learners and general public:** need full participation in society.
- ✦ **Aboriginal people:** Improving Aboriginal literacy is essential to enable Aboriginal people to assert their place in a society in which they have had to face serious inequities.
- ✦ **Governments:** across all departments.
- ✦ **Employers:** the message must address their needs. Give small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) help and support.
- ✦ **Labour:** literacy is crucial to union participation.

*What tools do the various stakeholders need to assist in improving Canada's literacy standing?*

Participants felt that future steps should build on existing literacy strategies. The points listed below emerged from the small group discussions:

- ✦ A precise and clear message.
- ✦ A more cohesive and integrated literacy community.
- ✦ A dedicated "Literacy Champion".
- ✦ Further study and consultation.
- ✦ An online tool kit for businesses.
- ✦ Simple ways of telling stories.
- ✦ Mechanism to share information, expertise, best practices.
- ✦ Compare Canada to the best.

*How will we know when we are successful?*

- ✦ When objectives/milestones can demonstrate what literacy delivers.
- ✦ When literacy is an integral part of lifelong learning.

- ✦ When Canada has the highest literacy/numeracy levels in the world.
- ✦ When Canada has 'the right to learn' for employed and unemployed.
- ✦ When Canada has good working conditions for literacy providers.
- ✦ When the level of investment by governments and employers is sufficient to sustain an effective adult literacy system.
- ✦ When CEOs give literacy value as a contributor to competitiveness.

**Judith Maxwell, senior fellow, Canadian Policy Research Networks, was the keynote speaker at the evening session.**

The central thesis of Dr. Maxwell's presentation is that change occurs when "the stars are aligned." This happens when the context, the evidence and the actors converge. Dr. Maxwell believes that a window of opportunity for literacy will open within the next few years.

She stated that the literacy 'tipping point' will be reached when:

- ✦ Literacy is linked to the four challenges of labour shortages, weak productivity, inequality and social exclusion;
- ✦ A cost-benefit analysis is developed and best practices are documented;
- ✦ A vision of what can be achieved through investments in high-quality literacy programs captures the imagination of Canadians.

## **Closing**

In their closing remarks, Alex Stephens and Kathleen Flanagan, coordinators of the two knowledge centres, confirmed the continuing commitment of the knowledge centres to literacy. The role of the knowledge centres is to facilitate knowledge exchange and networking. In the weeks and months ahead, they will continue to exchange information across the various sectors and encourage all participants to follow up with their own sectors.

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