Essential Skills and Lifelong Learning: Friend or Foe?

by **Robin Millar**

In recent years, the federal government has supported the development of Essential Skill Profiles and skills development in general. This focus has created a potential divide between the outcomes for community-based literacy and those outcomes linked entirely to skills development. These 'skills wars' are not new to the field of literacy. Over the years, there have been debates and discussions around a skills-based approach and a more holistic approach to literacy development. In this short article I will review some of those and raise some issues for further discussion with the field.

Background to the Essential Skills

In 1994, Human Resources Development Canada embarked on a research project to identify a range of skills needed by workers to adequately meet the requirements of the workplace. These Essential Skills include reading text, document use, writing, computer use, team work, thinking skills, numeracy, oral communications, and continuous learning. Much of the development of this research came out of the results of the International Adult Literacy Survey conducted in the early 90s across industrialized nations. The purpose of Essential Skills was to demonstrate to employers that skills, not credentials, were needed to make an effective workplace.

The Essential Skills research has compiled over 150 profiles for entry level jobs. These are linked to the national Occupational Codes and are available on the Essential Skills web site (www15.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/English/general/home_e.asp).

Lifelong learning and the human capital agenda

The other current discourse in government and academic circles is a commitment to framing learning as a lifelong pursuit, not just applicable to the time we spend in school. On the surface, this seems a commendable approach. In literacy, we are certainly committed to demonstrating the value of continuous learning for individuals, families, and communities. However, the current 'lifelong learning' agenda seems to continue to blame the victim for the success or failure of the Canadian economy. It seems to suggest that it is up to the individual to improve his or her skills. The argument is that human capital is developed by enhancing skills, not by improving the quality of life of individuals.

What's the problem?

The issue from a literacy worker perspective is that literacy learners do not just need and want skills development. As we have discussed over the years, literacy has a social as well as economic context. Literacy is practiced in the home, in the community and in the workplace within individual contexts and needs, and in light of time and other demands. Contrary to the media myths of the 1980s and 90s, very few non-readers give the wrong prescription drugs to their families. They find someone who can read sufficiently to help them accurately medicate their loved ones.

Literacy instruction focuses on providing the context for learning reading and writing. This includes past learning histories, schooling difficulties, when and how the individual dropped out of school, current needs and motivations. Effective literacy instruction focuses on the whole person, not just skill development.

Paul Freire, who worked to develop community approaches to reading development in Brazil, pointed out the differences between teaching as 'banking' and as 'problem posing.' He said that in the banking concept of education "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing." (Freire, p. 58). He described the teacher as the bank 'clerk' giving out deposits to students. The learner is a docile recipient of information. This attitude creates passive, adaptable beings who would accept that they are marginalized and should continue to be marginalized.

In the banking approach, programs set about pouring information into the learner's head. The learner has little input into the curricula, activities, or learning outcomes. In the problem posing approach to program development, on the other hand, the learner is actively involved in identifying learning outcomes,

clarifying learning needs and goals, and setting learning outcomes and agendas. In community-based literacy we attempt to work towards a problem-posing approach rather than a banking approach.

The problem-posing approach allows the curriculum to be negotiated between the learner and the instructor. Thus, the learner assumes control over much of the learning agenda. Assessment options are also negotiated and the aim of learning is to create an independent learner capable of coping with the literacy needs in her home, community or work life.

Reading is social and interactive and depends on life experience, motivation, and needs as much as on skill. Many literacy learners come out of difficult and complex family and community lives. Their reasons for coming back to literacy are as complicated as the reasons they left school in the first place. For example, many women in literacy come from a background of violence and abuse. Overcoming these past histories is as much an outcome of literacy participation as is improving reading and writing or other skills.
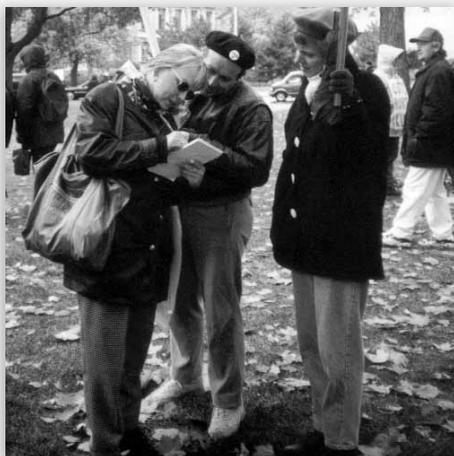
Skills agenda and literacy

With the government focus on skills rather than on a broader definition of literacy, we end up with a potential 'rock and a hard place' position in literacy. To gain funding for programs, we often need to demonstrate improvement in skills (especially reading, document use, and numeracy). These are critical skills for workplace success. And, of course, many literacy learners do want to improve their potential for getting jobs, keeping jobs, or getting better jobs. We need to show them how their learning achievements relate to possibilities in the job market. However, many students have numerous roadblocks to overcome including past failure, negative schooling experiences, and a feeling that learning does not give them a sense of control over their lives. Some of these literacy students already have jobs and want further learning for personal reasons. Others may require literacy training as a preliminary step to developing other skills.

What do students want to learn?

In my research with adults returning to education I encountered many alternative reasons for returning to learning. Some students return for personal, emotional, or family reasons. All of these personal reasons are legitimate investments in human capital and provide rationale for the support of literacy programs that do not exclusively promote workplace skills development.

One student, Paula, returned "to make my Dad feel that one of his kids can actually get a Grade 12." Others, like Edith, want to be more capable when they help children with homework.

My kids are getting into the higher grades and I'm having a harder time compared to when I was in school. So, I'd like to learn some of what they're learning. When I seen some of it, it was harder. They'd come to me, so it got me to thinking.

Adults, as parents, do not want to appear inadequate in their children's eyes. So, upgrading for them will enable them to monitor their children's school experience, and it will also prove them capable of dealing with the challenges of homework.

For others, returning to school is an overt act to overcome the sense of shame and helplessness that were the result of past school experiences. Darlene declares, "I always wanted more for myself. Just to prove to my family that I can amount to something." Darlene is a single parent in her early twenties. When asked how her parents felt about her returning to school she said,

Darlene:	They didn't think I could do anything.
Robin:	So, they think it's a waste of time for you to go back to school?
Darlene:	They just don't believe that I can do anything.
Robin:	And?
Darlene:	I'm going to prove them wrong now.

Darlene has very personal reasons for returning and succeeding. She wants to demonstrate some control in the power dynamics of her family. She wants to "show them, to prove them wrong."

Other students are seeking personal validation in addition to career or job goals. Jim has been on disability and wants to get off it. George has had seasonal work and wants more out of life, although he doesn't know what. Greg wants to "bring some closure to, like, my secondary education, 'cause I

never finished high school the first time." He feels the inability to complete his education is a condemnation of his life, and him as a person. Carol says, "It's that every year that went by I got scarder and scarder and scarder. What if I'm gonna lose all my brains now?"

The purposes and learning needs of these adults include more than just developing skills. They include a need to feel connected to learning in a variety of ways and means. Learning is more complicated than just improving skills.

What are we losing in the skills agenda?

When we focus only on identifying and 'correcting' skills, we lose the complexities of learning and of coming to adult programming. As many literacy workers can testify, learners progress in more than reading and writing. If literacy programs are only to evaluate 'skills,' we become little more than production line evaluators of computerized learners. The best literacy programs provide support and guidance for insecure learners returning to learning. They offer alternatives of healing for negative school and life experiences. They offer a learning experience that reflects respect for them as human beings with adult needs and lives. They provide flexible and adaptable learning experiences for adults with families, with special learning needs, and for those in the workforce. They adapt curriculum to meet these needs and negotiate appropriate goals and outcomes for learning.

The skills agenda leaves out these realities of literacy programming. It excludes those most in need of literacy development from funding formulas and program options. The National Literacy Secretariat, which has raised the image of literacy for the broader community, is under threat. Continued funding for national organizations like the Movement for Canadian Literacy is precarious. The skills agenda threatens to absorb potential support for projects and programs targeted at the most fragile people in Canada. We need to work on some solutions so literacy is not lost in the funding battles ahead. ∎

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SOURCE:

Freire, Paolo (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Continuum Press.