

A Values-Based Approach

Excerpted from “Monitoring and Assessment in Community-Based Adult Literacy Programs in British Columbia, Phase 1 (Definition and Selection of Benchmarks): A Report to the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education” (2007).

At the root of a values-based approach is the philosophy that underpins community-based adult literacy programming. Underlying that philosophy are basic questions:

1. What does literacy mean? How do you know that someone is literate?
2. Who is the literacy learner? What are their characteristics as learners?
3. What distinguishes “community-based” programs from other kinds of programs?

The answers to these questions guide the design of a meaningful and sustainable approach to monitoring and assessing learner progress.

What does literacy mean? How do you know that a person is literate?

The concept of literacy is constantly evolving and definitions of literacy have changed over time from a school-based view of literacy as a discrete set of skills for reading and writing, to a functional view of literacy as the ability to accomplish tasks and participate in the world around us.

How literacy is defined influences the type of monitoring and assessment system that is created. If literacy is defined as a discrete set of non-contextualized skills, then it can be measured by performance on standardized tests for reading, writing and math. If we take a more complex and dynamic view of literacy – as enabling participation in social, economic, family, and community life – then how adults are able to use what they learn is the important measure.

The definition of literacy used by the Ministry of Advanced Education, and the definition we adopted that underpins our choice of domains and benchmarks, is the one proposed by the International Adult Literacy Survey: *“The ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”* (Jones 14).

This definition emphasizes the importance of the uses and applications of knowledge in the context of real life purposes and roles in the family, the workplace, the community, and society at large. A monitoring and assessment system based on this definition needs to indicate progress about a wide range of skills or competencies within a variety of life situations.

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What are the characteristics of the adult literacy learner?

What are learners' goals? What are their daily activities? What are their learning needs in order to participate in society? These questions led us to consider what learners value and to design a monitoring and assessment system of measurement that is congruent with their reasons for attending literacy programs – a learner-centred approach.

Adults with low literacy are among the most marginalized and vulnerable in the population. They face multiple barriers to participation in literacy education as a result of poverty, social exclusion or isolation, health and disability issues, experiences of trauma and abuse, and a host of other factors (ABC CANADA, Quigley, Long and Middleton). Indeed, there is a significant and longstanding gap between the numbers of people research tells us need literacy upgrading and those who actually participate in literacy programs. Only an estimated five to ten percent of persons with low skills ever enroll (ABC CANADA). Among those who do participate, persistence is an ongoing issue. Literacy learners typically move in and out of programs in accordance with their life circumstances and adult literacy programs typically experience low retention rates.

Adults are more likely to attend and remain in a program that is relevant to them and meets their learning requirements. Those who attend community-based literacy programs often have very specific life-related goals, for example, getting a driver's license, reading a recipe, learning to use a computer (Smythe). They may identify a need to finish high school and/or get some type of post-secondary certification, but they are usually a considerable distance from this goal. More immediate and pressing learning requirements take priority and tend to direct the learning activities of the individual. Emotional safety, fears about failure and being judged, and getting along with others are issues that often need to be addressed as part of the learning program.

These considerations about the individual learner led us to a system of benchmarks that are valued by and relevant to learners, as well as to practitioners and society at large, and that can be applied to multiple areas of life. The benchmarks do not assume a standardized curriculum but guide the way to learning based on learners' individual needs and interests.

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What distinguishes community-based programs from other kinds of literacy programs?

A monitoring and assessment system needs to fit with program delivery methodologies and philosophy, environments, and capacity. If the fit is not there, the system will be of little value to the practitioner and is not likely to be used effectively.

Adults who participate in literacy education often choose a community-based program as a deliberate alternative to more formal educational settings because of past negative school experiences. Research by Quigley demonstrates that “de-schooling” the image of adult literacy reaches adults who are eager to learn but resist schooling. Whether they are operated by schools, colleges or non-profit groups, community-based literacy programs present such a de-schooled image. Designed to offer safe and welcoming learning environments, they take place in a variety of settings including storefronts, community centres, libraries, urban parks, and other places where people gather in their community. There is no standard or common curriculum. Teaching and learning are centered on the learner’s own goals and context and learning materials are drawn from a wide variety of sources, including the reality of people’s lives and the issues and concerns that matter to them. A hallmark of community literacy is an integrated, asset-based approach to learning that builds on people’s knowledge, interests and social context rather than focusing on the skills they lack (Smythe). Sensitive to local realities and learner diversity, community literacy recognizes that there is no one type of learner and no single motive for participation.

The sector’s heavy reliance on volunteers and its lack of formal infrastructure also have implications for the type of monitoring and assessment system that should be used in community-based programs. For example, in most programs the face of the volunteer tutor is the face the learner most often sees. In many programs learners and tutors work together one-on-one with minimal supervision. Some programs also offer small group instruction. The number of instructional or contact hours is typically once a week for two hours.

Tutors receive training from the program but they have little or no access to other forms of training or professional development. Paid program coordinators and instructors also have minimal access to professional development. They typically work part-time and, unless they are attached to a college or school, are generally low-paid, receive poor benefits, and have little or no job security.

If the capacity of community-based literacy programs to deliver services is an issue, then their capacity to be accountable is also an issue (Merrifield). Community-based literacy programs normally have small budgets but multiple funding sources and accountability requirements. There is little capacity for centralized record keeping and limited overall capacity to collect, interpret and use data to monitor learner progress and improve practice. Added to this is the tendency for participants to leave programs without any notice. Unless assessment has been ongoing, it can be difficult to determine the participant’s progress at exit.

Campbell found that time was one of the most critical capacity issues in assessment in adult basic education. Even if practitioners and tutors have opportunities to engage in professional development, it is only effective if they have the time to practice, dialogue, and reflect upon their new knowledge. And assessment itself takes time. One

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practitioner describes the problem: *"I have one hour a week for eight weeks with a group of ESL learners – how much Japanese would you learn in that amount of time? I only get eight hours with this group; don't make me lose one to assessment."*

A monitoring and assessment system must align with the capacity and delivery mechanisms of the community-based literacy system. It must be simple and transparent to administer, to understand, and to use. It must take into account the environment and relevant inputs such as staffing, use of volunteers, and funding resources.

Even a simple and transparent system takes time, however. Further investments must be made in community-based literacy programs so that program coordinators/ practitioners/facilitators can spend more time with learners or tutor/learner pairs to conduct more thorough intake assessments, interpret learner progress, and gather and collate information. Initial and ongoing investments in the training and professional development of the people who implement and use the system need to be made. These investments in the capacity of community literacy programs speak to the issue of mutual or reciprocal accountability between programs and funders.

A values-based monitoring and assessment system for community-based literacy programs

The values-based approach yields clarity on the goal, context, and methods of community-based adult literacy programming:

- The goal of community-based literacy is to increase learners' ability to understand and apply skills and knowledge in the context of participation in family, work, and community life;
- Community-based learners are often multi-barriered and need to be supported to reach their goals in their own way and at their own speed in a safe environment;
- Community-based learning implies an asset-based approach that builds on learners' existing strengths and knowledge and encourages and emphasizes success and achievement, not failure or deficits;
- Limited capacity in the community-based sector requires simplicity, ease of use, realistic expectations, and investments in training/programming.

These characteristics demand an approach that is collaborative, encourages participation and interaction, engages learners in the assessment process, and collects information over time. The information collected needs to be useful and its value needs to be understood and appreciated so that it can be used to improve teaching and learning.

With the principles of a values-based approach in mind, the advisory committee turned its attention to the specifics of a monitoring and assessment system. As mentioned previously, we did not invent an entirely new system for BC but decided to borrow from some of the exemplary work that already exists. We also identified the need to facilitate future alignment with colleges and schools, Essential Skills and the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS). In light of these considerations, we decided to use competencies as the basis of our system of benchmarks. Competencies include skills, as well as knowledge, attitudes and values. (Organization for Economic Co-operation, Definition and Selection of Key Competencies, Executive Summary 4).