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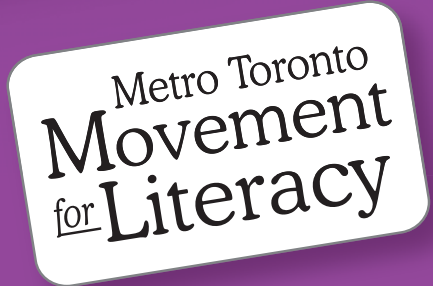
# Research Brief Series

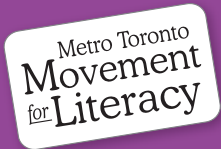
## The New Definition of Literacy

*First Volume in an Occasional Series*



Presented by





## UNESCO's Definitions of Adult Literacy:

### 1958

"A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement related to his/her everyday life" (UN, undated) although the meaning of "a short simple statement" was never specified (UNESCO, 2013).

### 1978

"A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and also for enabling him/her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own and the community's development" (UN, undated).

### 2003

"Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2013).

## The New Definition of Literacy

At the end of 2012, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) concluded the United Nations Literacy Decade in support of the Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2013). The initiative used the slogan "Literacy as Freedom," which highlights UNESCO's attempt to define literacy as a human right (UNESCO, 2013). The United Nations recognizes that "literacy is critical for promoting and communicating sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues" (UN, undated).

The importance of adult literacy to social and economic development is difficult to dispute. However, it is not always easy to understand what we mean by "adult literacy," as the answer seems to vary depending on by whom, for what purpose, and in which context the definition has been created.

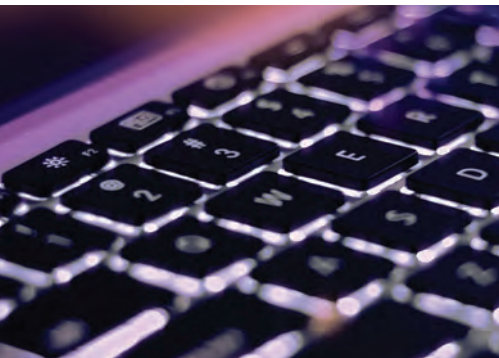
The implications of how to define adult literacy are far-reaching. The definition will inevitably reflect the philosophy behind the policy, funding and pedagogical approaches to literacy and basic skills education for adults. It will also frame the discussion about what literacy programs should be. Policy makers and program planners use their definitions to make critical decisions on funding, program design, and performance measures. This research paper examines how the definition of adult literacy has evolved over time and what is contributing to these changes. We will talk about the implications of these new definitions and the importance of being a part of the conversation when definitions are made. Finally, this paper will also include examples of how adult literacy is defined in comparable jurisdictions.

### "No Global Consensus"

While the importance of adult literacy is widely acknowledged, it is much more difficult to reach consensus on how it is defined, and therefore addressed in our political, social and economic context. The Second Global Report on Adult Learning and Education included adult literacy data from 114 countries and found "no global consensus" on the definition of literacy (UNESCO, 2013).

How adult literacy is defined and scoped depends highly on the language, the cultural context and the economic structure of each given jurisdiction. Historically, literacy has been thought of as a skill that is limited more or less to the ability to read and write, and that once attained, would remain static for life (UNESCO, 2013). However, as our economy shifts towards a complex knowledge-based system highly dependent on effective integration of digital resources and critical analysis of mass information, our definition of "literacy" will need to be reexamined and reworked to capture the complexity of basic and essential skills and competencies that are increasingly more critical to participating fully in all aspects of modern society.

*Literacy is like a continuum of how well we can negotiate with reading and writing in print or digital form.*



*Demonstrating how our world has changed, many jurisdictions now include digital technologies in their definitions of literacy.*

## Changing Times and Changing Needs

It is interesting to note how UNESCO's definitions of literacy have shifted from a focus on reading and writing to a more inclusive range of abilities as well as the linkages between the adult learner, their community and broader society.

This shift demonstrates the acknowledgement that literacy is a complex "basket" of skills and competencies, which serves to push jurisdictions towards providing a set of comprehensive learning opportunities that correspond to the range of skills necessary to participate fully in all aspects of modern life and work.

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC) conducted by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines literacy in terms of three components (Statistics Canada et al., 2013, p.8):

1. Literacy – "ability to engage with written text"
2. Numeracy – "ability to engage with mathematical information"
3. Problem solving in technology-rich environments – "ability to use digital technology, community tools, and networks"

## Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments

Although the focus on digital skills is recent, the competency of problem solving was first included in OECD's conceptualization of literacy in 2003, and highlights the need for more complex skills sets to navigate through daily living with confidence (OECD & Statistics Canada, 2011).

This inclusion further crystallizes the concept put forth by UNESCO—that literacy is not simply a matter of reading and writing, but rather a matter of a more complex set of skills and competencies necessary to analyze critically and act appropriately on information.

The main implication of this shift is that adult literacy education programs need to see beyond the traditional curricula of reading, writing and numeracy, if they are to help their clients keep pace with the evolving skills demands of modern society.

## Digital Literacy

In the most recent PIAAC results, problem solving is specified to highlight the importance of using technologies to search for, understand and evaluate information; to communicate with others using digital tools; and to complete day-to-day tasks.

There are two challenges of note associated with digital literacy (Smythe, 2013):

- Despite PIAAC's definition, many government definitions have not yet included digital technologies.
- The inclusion of digital technologies in the definition results in a need to provide computers and other equipment for learners, which is a challenge as many programs are faced with funding constraints.

*The new definition of literacy means we need to be nimble and keep learners at the centre of literacy programs.*

## Takeaway Point: Be Part of the Conversation

Adult literacy is an important component of adult education because literacy serves as the foundation of all learning. This paper is intended to show that the definition of adult literacy is not something to be taken for granted since the definition could have deep implications on what gets included in adult literacy programs, what objectives adult literacy programs support and how adult literacy programs are delivered. The definition of adult literacy reflects the philosophy of adult learning and lifelong learning. The broad range of definitions available without a clear consensus goes a long way to demonstrating the importance of being part of the conversation when literacy is defined and working with all stakeholders to ensure that consideration goes into formulating a definition that puts adult learners first.

## Emphasis on Employment

Since the 1980s, the emphasis has shifted increasingly towards employment and away from social justice and democracy as the critical impetus for investing in literacy skills support initiatives. It is no secret that the nature of work has been changing at a dramatic rate and in unprecedented formats over the past few decades, primarily due to emerging technology, the pressures of productivity and legislative changes to health and safety standards. Pressure has increased on the modern worker to keep pace with these “skills-biased” developments through increased participation in education and training opportunities. Those who cannot keep pace are often left behind, to the detriment of their individual and our collective socioeconomic well-being. Given these unparalleled trends and the nature of our economic forecast, it is not surprising that the focus of government investments in literacy and basic skills training has also shifted to a more employment-focused approach. It is important, however, to remember that it has not always been this way.

In Canada, as early as 1899 when Frontier College started delivering literacy programs in reading camps in Ontario, literacy was seen as a foundational element of citizenship and social justice (Fernandez et al., 1999). Paulo Freire, one of the major educational philosophers in the 20th century, advocated that literacy must go beyond technical skills and bring awareness of human rights and learners’ own capacity for social change (Freire, 1970).

The policy shifts that emphasize connecting literacy to employment are consistent with changing attitudes about the broader purpose of education. Although better employment can no doubt improve the lives of many literacy learners, it remains important not to see learners simply as inputs to the economic engine. Achieving modern literacy goals continues to have many implications for adult learners beyond employment – it brings learners closer to achieving independence, improves their self-confidence and strengthens their connections to their families, communities and society at large.

## Implications of These Changes

Regardless of the driving forces behind these changes, few people would question the challenges literacy service providers face in this new environment. We can break this down into a few key components:

1. Despite different definitions that form policy and funding approaches, the fact remains that individual learners have different needs in their unique contexts. The changing definitions of literacy do not diminish the importance of addressing learners’ needs in a holistic manner.
2. While the definitions used may sometimes appear to conflict between government policies and learners’ needs, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Literacy learning is not a one-size-fits-all experience, but rather can and should be approached in an individualized, client-centred manner that responds to individual needs.



*Many jurisdictions, including Canada, emphasize the purpose of adult literacy for employment.*



## Canada

The Federal Government of Canada's definition of literacy is focused on employment and job training. Literacy and essential skills are defined as the abilities "needed for work, learning and life" and to "help people evolve with their jobs and adapt to workplace change" (ESDC, 2013).

Differences can be noted when comparing the Federal Government's definition to the international definitions discussed. The Canadian Government's definition is more focused on the outcomes of literacy and essential skills as opposed to what literacy and essential skills actually entail. Unlike UNESCO and OECD, the Federal Government does not even mention reading, writing or numeracy. This approach points to literacy more as a means to an end (i.e., employment or better employment), rather than an end in itself that involves a lifelong learning journey towards independence, self-actualization and self-improvement. The lifelong learning approach is more common in definitions found in other jurisdictions.

In Ontario, adult literacy programs funded by Employment Ontario are designed to "help adults whose skills fall below the Grade 9 level" (MTCU, 2012), with the mandate to help learners get the training, skills and experience they need to achieve employment as well as connecting workers and employers (MTCU, 2013).

## United Kingdom

In September 2011, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) released its report of inquiry by a panel into adult literacy in England. The report used what it calls "a working definition" for adult literacy acknowledging that individual learners have a broad range of reasons and purposes for literacy, including personal fulfilment, community growth and economic advancement (NIACE, 2011). This working definition is as follows:

*Literacy is the ability to read and write, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, to use information and digital technologies, as individual family members, workers and citizens (p.4).*

This definition takes into account the growing dominance of digital technologies in our day-to-day lives, as well as the importance of literacy as part of citizenship rights and responsibilities.

## Australia

Australia is one of a handful of countries with a national strategy addressing adult literacy issues. The National Foundation Skills Strategy for Australia (SCOTese, 2011) uses the following definition:

- English language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) - listening, speaking, reading, writing, digital literacy and use of mathematical ideas; and
- employability skills such as collaboration, problem solving, self-management, learning and information and community technology skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life (p.2).

The National Strategy has a vision to create "a productive and inclusive Australia in which adults develop and maintain the foundation skills they need to participate confidently in the economy and meet the complex demands of modern life" (SCOTese, 2011; p.9).



## Singapore

Literacy is classified as foundational skills by the Singapore Workplace Development Agency (WDA). Part of the Ministry of Manpower, the WDA is responsible for supporting adult learning “to enhance the employability and competitiveness of our workforce” (Singapore WDA, 2012).

Foundational skills are defined as “a range of skills, knowledge and attributes that help every individual improve his/her employability. These skills enable workers to better adapt to new job demands and a changing work environment. Foundational skills are portable across all industries” (Singapore WDA, 2012).

The Government of Singapore also includes programs for workplace literacy and financial literacy under the umbrella of foundational skills (SMU, 2012). The government ties foundational skills to employability skills that are specific to the workplaces of the learners (IAL Singapore, 2010). The Institute for Financial Literacy (IFL), a partnership between government agencies and Singapore Polytechnic, provides free financial education programs to the public aiming to “develop core financial capabilities” (IFL, 2013).

## United States

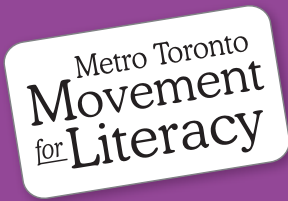
Unlike other jurisdictions described in this paper, the United States currently does not have any definition for literacy at the national level. This is in part the result of the closing of the National Institute for Literacy in 2010. The Institute was initially established in 1991 with the enactment of the National Literacy Act, which defined literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential” (National Literacy Act, Sec 3).

ProLiteracy is one of the major non-governmental organizations focused on adult literacy in the United States and internationally. Adult literacy is defined as basic skills and proficiency in English, mathematics and digital technologies in order to achieve goals such as gaining employment, getting off social assistance and sustaining an income (ProLiteracy, 2014).



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Established in 1978, the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) is a Canadian non-profit organization working to advance the issue of adult literacy. MTML is one of 16 regional networks in Ontario that supports and promotes the work of adult literacy and skills upgrading programs. With funding support from Employment Ontario and the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, MTML works with over 40 Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs operating at over 100 locations in the City of Toronto and York Region. MTML collaborates with programs and people to share knowledge, build awareness and promote the lifelong learning needed to participate fully in today's society.

## Research Brief Series: 2014-15

The Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy has launched the Research Paper Series to help bring relevant information to literacy service providers and other partners in Toronto and York Region. The goal is to link research to practice and build the capacity of literacy service providers and those interested in adult literacy issues.

Research literature on topics of interest to those in the field of adult literacy is presented periodically to enhance our understanding of learners, their needs and challenges, the current policy environment, and lessons learned from around the world.

## Learn More:

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