

# *Measuring Success in Adult Literacy: Case studies in the assessment of learning*

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This project was conducted in the Fall of 2008 and Spring of 2009, supported by a Knowledge Mobilization grant from the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre of the Canadian Council on Learning. The aim was to compile what has been learned about building accountability systems in adult literacy in British Columbia, Ontario and Scotland in a form that would be accessible and appropriate for anybody interested in this issue.

There was considerable similarity of issues across the three jurisdictions despite the different situations. A common concern was the difficulty of capturing the diverse effects of adult literacy education in an easy to communicate measure. While the three jurisdictions are clearly at different stages of development in their accountability systems, they all bring vast amounts of expertise and imagination to bear on the problem.

The findings are presented in three sections: dealing with systemic issues, how accountability mechanisms should be designed, and working with data. The findings, wherever possible, reflect all three jurisdictions and represent common concerns around the dilemmas of accountability.

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## **Systemic Issues**

- Expected outcomes for adult literacy programs need to be laid out clearly.
- Lack of a systematic approach to accountability leaves adult literacy exposed.
- The wisdom, experience and values of the field cannot be overlooked.
- Any effective accountability mechanism has resource costs.

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## **Design of accountability**

- The IALS(S) constructs need to be approached with care.
- There is a need to differentiate outputs and outcomes.
- Accountability and assessment systems need both "looseness" and "tightness."

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## **Nature of data**

- Data used for accountability is not the same as data for learning.
  - The necessary tools are not yet developed.
  - Developing demonstrations of competency is a priority.
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## *Systemic issues*

### ***The expected outcomes for adult literacy programs need to be laid out clearly.***

Adult literacy education often has a huge number of expectations attached to it, such as engaging marginalized groups in education, providing language instruction to people who have moved beyond English as a Second Language, finding work for participants, or community development. While adult literacy programs may well be a gateway to many of these outcomes, they should not be held solely responsible for them.

### ***Lack of a systematic approach to accountability leaves adult literacy exposed.***

Since the development of outcomes based management in the public sector, any program that lacks a clear rationale and a well-developed logic model is in a vulnerable position. There is need for an accountability framework for literacy programs that represents the contributions of the field without setting up unrealistic expectations. Setting out an achievable set of goals and how programs can demonstrate that those goals have been achieved is essential.

### ***The wisdom, experience and values of the field cannot be overlooked.***

Adult literacy educators tend to be committed people with strong values, and a profoundly optimistic sense of human potential. Any accountability system has to acknowledge the wisdom, experience and values which have built up within the field of adult literacy. At the early stages of creating accountability approaches it means involving practitioners and learners in the design process; as they evolve it means ensuring that trust is maintained.

### ***Any effective accountability mechanism has resource costs.***

Any effective accountability system needs to have resources invested in it. In very broad terms, more detailed approaches tend to be more expensive, so collecting data that is not going to feed directly into decision-making can be a costly diversion for program activities. Taking accountability seriously means recognizing it as worthy of dedicated support.

## *The design of accountability*

### ***The IALS(S) constructs need to be approached with care.***

Over the last 15 years the approach to measuring literacy originally developed for the International Adult Literacy Survey of the mid-1990s has grown into a system. It has been refined and developed in a responsible and interesting way by those involved in the various projects over the intervening years. However, IALS approaches literacy in a very specific way, and it is important to be aware of what this approach can be used for, and where it is more problematic.

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***There is a need to differentiate outputs and outcomes.***

A key principle of assessment is not holding people accountable for things they have no power to change. In the case of adult literacy programs, this could include employment of participants, or whether they continue their education. Things that programs can be responsible for include a welcoming and effective induction process, and demonstrated achievement of learning objectives. The first examples are program outcomes, the second group of examples are program outputs.

***Accountability and assessment systems need both “looseness” and “tightness.”***

Some parts of an accountability system need to be tightly defined and laid out. An example is standardized data intended for comparison across a number of programs, or across sectors. Here it is worthwhile to ensure that there is a high level of consistency across the information. Other parts may be less important to frame tightly. An example is the order in which topics are covered, which can vary depending on the issues of the day in a given context.

*The nature of data*

***Data used for accountability is not the same as data for learning.***

This point is intended to underline the different uses of data, and the different forms data must take. Data collected for accountability reasons is unlikely to be much use for educational decisions, and vice versa. Among other factors, accountability data must, by definition, be summative, whereas data used to plan learning and teaching is formative. In addition, it is desirable that accountability data be quantifiable to some extent to make it easier to examine “the big picture,” whereas assessment of learners’ progress and direction setting is often better if it is individualized and authentic.

***The necessary tools are not yet developed.***

While there have been remarkable strides in assessment and accountability tools in recent years, the tools needed to understand the learning processes in adult literacy have not yet been created. There are some key ideas pointing the way. Benchmarks, demonstrations, and individual learning plans are important components, but they have not yet been built into an inclusive and reliable systematic approach.

***Demonstrations of competency are a priority.***

One key development in each jurisdiction would be a means to demonstrate competence in relation to self-defined goals. If the idea of learner-centeredness is taken seriously then the goals of learning will vary substantially, and this creates a significant challenge for consistent recording of progress. A well designed framework for demonstrations can accommodate individual learning goals while still providing consistent information.

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## *Conducting the case studies*

The case studies were compiled in late 2008 and early 2009. In each case study documentary evidence was brought together through interviews with key informants in an attempt to portray the way that accountability structures were playing out in each of the three jurisdictions.

It is clear that the case studies are far from inclusive, and there is a great deal more to be said. The intention was not to have the last word on these issues, but to capture a portrait of a moment in time, as a way to clarify what some of the key concerns and opportunities were at this stage in the development of adult literacy education. There is the potential for a great deal more work to be done.

The three jurisdictions were selected because of perceived differences between them in developmental stage and emphasis between them. It seemed as if Scotland would provide an opportunity to look at a radical social practices philosophy in action, Ontario would be more clearly skills based, and BC might be more open and community-oriented. These expectations were quickly dashed by the very significant overlap between the three cases in terms of the type of problems they were struggling with. The issues might manifest in different ways according to the context, but very similar dynamics seemed to be influencing policy and practice.

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