



WHAT NOW?

BUSTED: 11 enduring literacy myths

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Problem

Mention that there's a literacy problem and most people's eyes glaze over. "Everyone can read, so there can't be a problem!" This belief is one of Canada's most pervasive and enduring myths about literacy.

However, while virtually everyone can read, not everyone can read well enough to realize their full economic potential. And that's a problem for them, for their employers and for our country.

Solution

Almost half of the working-age population needs to improve not just their ability to read, but also their ability to understand and use what they have read to meet the demands of life and work. This is not an impossible goal – it can be done. But, some enduring myths about literacy keep us from understanding and tackling the problem. They can all be busted.

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MYTH 1

Everyone can read so there can't be a literacy problem

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Being literate isn't about whether or not you can read. It's about being able to understand and use what you have read to solve a range of real-world problems in daily life and work.¹ Most people can read and apply what they have read when the context is familiar. However, roughly half of people aged 16 to 65 can't use what they have read to solve problems when the content is new and the context unfamiliar.²

Meanwhile, an estimated 97 per cent of the jobs created since 1994 require people to apply what they read in unfamiliar documents to solve a range of problems, with ease, every day.³ An example of this is following the instructions in a memo from head office about how to help customers fix a glitch in a new product.

MYTH 2

More education means better literacy

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Generally, a person's literacy skills improve with more education – but they don't necessarily improve enough. Children gain different levels of reading skill while in school, and the gaps can widen over the course of their lives.⁴ Children who are not reading fluidly by the end of Grade 3 often struggle with reading all through school and may leave school early.⁵ Even high school and post-secondary graduates may not have adequate literacy levels.

A recent Ontario study showed that 25 per cent of students entering post-secondary had skills below the level needed to learn easily and efficiently; further, their skills didn't improve by the time they graduated.⁶ What's more, these youth had skills below the level required to perform well in over 90 per cent of jobs in the economy.

MYTH 3

The literacy skills built in school last a lifetime

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People build literacy skills beginning at home, then through school, then gain and lose them over the course of their lives depending on their activities.⁷ Some adults with little education find ways to become highly literate and others who are highly educated never reach advanced levels of literacy proficiency.

Much of the skill gain and loss in adults occurs in the workforce. People who work in jobs that demand the use of higher levels of skill tend to gain skill with time, and vice versa.⁸ However, individuals can continue to build and maintain skills throughout their lives if they practice.⁹

MYTH 4

Literacy and income aren't related the way technical skills and income are

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Research shows that even when people have the same technical skills proficiencies they can have higher incomes if they use higher levels of literacy skills at work.¹⁰

Further, having low literacy skills leads to lower income.¹¹

Levels of literacy affect wage rates and wage growth; the likelihood a person will be employed or become unemployed; the number of weeks worked in any given year; the number of times a person will be unemployed and the average length of unemployment throughout their career; the risk of experiencing a workplace illness or accident; and, the probability of promotion.

MYTH 5

Literacy doesn't affect health and well-being

BUSTED

Literacy has a profound impact on a range of health and social outcomes. Having higher literacy skills increases a person's probability of being in good health and reduces the likelihood of them getting a major disease such as cancer.¹² This is not just because people with higher literacy skills usually earn more money. It's also because they can better read, understand and use information about their health and how to maintain it.

Having higher literacy skills also increase a person's volunteering, voting and trust, and reduces the probability of them being socially disengaged.¹³

MYTH 6

Canada's literacy scores are high by international standards, so we don't have a problem

BUSTED

Canada has high average adult scores compared with other countries. However, other countries' scores cluster more tightly around their averages, while in Canada, there is large variation. This means there are more people at

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the lower end of the scale than other countries with similar average outcomes. This significant variation in skills causes inequality in a range of individual labour market, social and health outcomes. It's those with the lowest skill levels that feel the negative effects most keenly.

Moreover, Canada's average score is not rising as quickly as some of our trading partners, which makes us less competitive.¹⁴

MYTH 7

Literacy isn't a big enough issue to influence the economy

BUSTED

Improving average national literacy scores increases economic output.

Recent research has shown that a one per cent increase in average literacy scores leads, over time, to a three per cent increase in GDP per capita and a five per cent increase in labour productivity.¹⁵ In Canada that could mean another \$50 billion per year in GDP. This is double the impact found in an earlier study.¹⁶

The research also found that improving the literacy skills of people with the lowest literacy scores boosts the economy even more.

MYTH 8

Canada's literacy problem will disappear as less educated adults age out of the workforce

BUSTED

It's true, on average, that older Canadians had less education, so they had fewer opportunities to build skills in school than more educated, younger students.¹⁷ What's more, people tend to lose unused skills over time, so on average older people in the workforce do have lower skills than younger ones.

However, between 2003 and 2011, even though some older, less educated adults left the workforce – and despite an increase in the average number of years of schooling for the workforce – the average literacy score of the whole working-age population didn't improve.¹⁸

This matters because technical advances are driving demand for literacy skills. People with the lowest literacy skills are the most likely to be left behind by the increased demands for skills in the workforce.

MYTH 9

It's immigrants who bring Canada's literacy rates down

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Immigrants, on average, have lower literacy skills than those born in Canada, but they are not the only ones. About 60 per cent of immigrants and 44 per cent of people who were born in Canada have skills below Level 3 – the level required to do well in over 90 per cent of jobs in the economy.¹⁹

Even though they may not be fluent in Canada's official languages, many recent immigrants are highly literate in their own language and have extensive technical skills. Continued improvement of their language skills will further increase both their quality of life and their contribution to the economy.

MYTH 10

It's too difficult and expensive to upgrade adult literacy skills

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Recent research supported by Employment and Social Development Canada has proven that literacy skill upgrading can be efficient, effective and provide consistent results at a reasonable cost. For example, the *Skilling Up* pilot generated an average five per cent gain on literacy test scores from roughly 20 hours of group workplace instruction.²⁰ This is enough to move many people with low literacy skills to the level needed for most jobs.

Another study showed that employers could earn a return on investment of as much as 24 per cent on a five per cent increase in their employees' literacy scores.²¹ If the quality instructional methods used in this pilot were scaled up, they would yield impressive returns on investment to the participants, to taxpayers and to the economy.

MYTH 11

If someone has low literacy skills, then it's their problem

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Canada's literacy problems hurt everyone. Individuals with low literacy have poorer labour market, social and health outcomes. Employers have poorer productivity, and ultimately less profit. And Canadians see reduced GDP, competitiveness, and standards of living, and increased social costs.²²

While individuals and their employers may have the best understanding of the need for skill upgrading, they may not know that low literacy skills are the root of a problem, nor understand what level of literacy skill their employees have or need to build. Further, they may not know where best to go for upgrading and how much it should cost.

Unfortunately, many employers do not see this type of training as their responsibility. They might worry that if they train their workers, those employees will leave for better jobs. These attitudes are a big part of the problem. The evidence is clear – workplace literacy training is one of the best ways to improve productivity and it doesn't cost the moon.

Conclusion and recommendations

The myths are busted. Literacy matters and it is likely to matter more than ever – to individuals, to society and to the economy.

Federal and provincial/territorial governments have the tools – information and financial incentives – to encourage more employers to invest in literacy training. They also have the means to improve literacy of post-secondary students, the unemployed and immigrants. These include:

- Requiring that post-secondary institutions assess the skills of incoming students and encourage those with poor levels of literacy to improve their skills as they begin their studies.

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- Assessing the skills of new immigrants and increasing supports to immigrant serving agencies to offer literacy upgrading along with their other services.
- Educating and incenting employers, workers and unions to include literacy upgrading as needed into workplace training opportunities.
- Expanding the federal-provincial Job Grants to encourage employers to include literacy upgrading for employees.
- Supporting industry sectors to build and implement competency frameworks that identify the levels of all skills and competencies required by the jobs in the economy – including literacy.
- Requiring the federally funded Labour Market Programs, offered in the provinces and territories to lower-skilled workers and those who are unemployed, to embed basic skills training as a mandatory program offering for clients, as needed.

¹ OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First results from the Survey of Adult Skills. Skills volume 1 (Eng) – full v12 – eBook (04 11 2013).pdf

² ibid

³ Lane, Janet and Murray, T. Scott. *Literacy Lost: Canada's basic skill shortfall*. Canada West Foundation December 2018

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⁸ Lane, Janet and Murray, T. Scott. *Literacy Lost: Canada's basic skill shortfall*. Canada West Foundation December 2018

⁹ Reder, Stephen. *Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning*. Portland State University, 2010

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¹² Murray, T. Scott and Shillington, R. *Understanding the link between literacy, health literacy and health*, DataAngel, 2012

¹³ CMEC. *The Health and Social Dimensions of Adult Skills in Canada: Findings from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)*. 2018

¹⁴ OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First results from the Survey of Adult Skills. Skills volume 1 (eng) – full v12 – eBook (04 11 2013).pdf

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¹⁷ Murray, T. Scott and Shillington, R. *The efficiency of Essential Skills markets in Alberta: Initial results from PIAAC*, DataAngel, 2014

¹⁸ CMEC. *Skills in Canada: first results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)*. 2013

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ Brennan, K. et al. *Social Finance Pilots on Essential Skills Training. Final Report*. SRDC. 2019

²¹ Gyarmati, David et al. *A Credible Test of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Training*. Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) August 2014.

²² *Skilling Up: a conditional training subsidy for Essential Skills upgrading*. SRDC, 2019

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