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United for Literacy
Littératie Ensemble

LITERACY AND FUTURE-READY SKILLS:

**The Journey From Foundational Literacy
to New Opportunities for Adult Learners
in the Canadian Workforce**

**National Forum – Online
October 23, 2025 at 1 p.m. EST**

Discussion paper 2025

Introduction

Recently, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evaluated adult literacy skills across Canada. In December 2024, OECD released the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) results and report. The report asked,

“Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?”¹

The report looks at adult literacy and numeracy results across 31 countries. It shows some concerning trends in Canada’s literacy landscape.² For example, it reveals that **adult literacy in Canada is not always:**

CONSISTENT:

Literacy and numeracy results vary greatly between provinces and territories.



CONTINUOUS:

Even adults with high levels of education need to continue.....



COLLABORATIVE:

Adult literacy and numeracy skills are not always recognized or supported by employers.¹



Many adults still struggle with basic reading, writing, and math. Others need up-to-date, complex skills to thrive in our fast-paced, high-tech world. In a world of complicated financial, political, and social issues, people with stronger literacy skills are more likely to reach their full potential.² Reaching full potential means different things to different people. To some, it may mean moving up to a leadership role in their workplace. To others, it may mean having the confidence to apply for an academic or employment opportunity. Some may want stronger literacy skills to be able to help their kids with homework. Others may want strong literacy skills to engage more meaningfully with digital texts. No matter how you define success, strong literacy skills help adults across the country thrive.

About United for Literacy

United for Literacy's new strategic plan highlights that

- Literacy touches every aspect of our lives
- Literacy has a profound influence on our well-being
- Literacy is especially important in our tech-based, knowledge-rich society.

At United for Literacy our mission is that, each day, we transform lives and strengthen communities through literacy. ³ Over the 2024/2025 program year, United for Literacy worked with 1,365 volunteers and 489 program partners to support 39,521 people in over 500 communities.



Like many other literacy organizations, employers, and governments across Canada, we work with people from all kinds of backgrounds. Our programs work to support

- Newcomers to Canada
- Indigenous communities
- People living in rural areas urban areas
- People in precarious employment situations
- People who graduated from high school looking to upskill to achieve their goals
- People currently with very low-level literacy skills
- And many others!

Individualized Learning Needs

This paper is structured around best practices and actionable suggestions. However, it's important to note that every learner is unique. At United for Literacy, we follow a student-centered individualized learning (SCIL) philosophy. SCIL means that learners are active in deciding what and how they want to learn. We believe



Everyone has a right to learn



Every place can be a learning place

At the same time, we recognize that every learner has unique needs. People face different barriers to participation. We support adult learners of diverse backgrounds working on their future-ready skills.

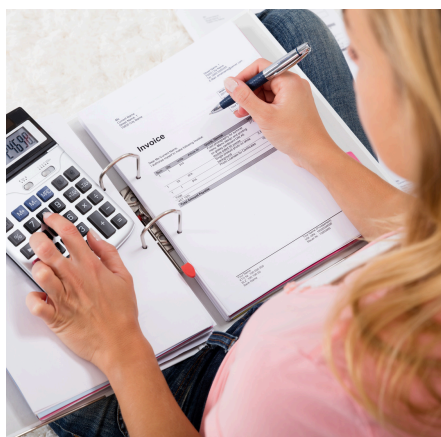
Future-Ready Skills

Future-ready skills mean

- The foundational literacy and numeracy skills that serve as stepping stone for learning
- The skills needed to remain relevant in the workforce, which may require re-skilling and upskilling.⁴

Areas where people might choose to re-skill or upskill include:

- Digital literacy
- Financial literacy
- Skilled-trades preparation



We all have a role to play in ensuring that people across Canada have future-ready skills. These are the skills need to achieve their goals and live satisfying and sustainable lives. The Government of Canada has released a list of **nine “Skills for Success” that adults need to thrive in society:**

- Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Communication ⁵
- Creativity & Innovation
- Digital
- Numeracy*
- Problem Solving
- Reading*
- Writing* ⁶

This discussion paper works to examine the conversation around adult literacy and future-ready skills in Canada. There are many ways to approach this topic. We seek to highlight three things that make adult learning impactful.

Adult learning must be :



It is important for stakeholders to make learning consistent, continuous, and collaborative. This will help people across Canada thrive now and in the future. Governments, employers, and literacy practitioners, and others can make an impact alone. Together we can reach more people and achieve greater success.

Discussion Questions

1. In a high-tech, fast-paced world, how do foundational literacy skills still matter?
2. How can governments, employers, and literacy practitioners best collaborate to support adult literacy and skill-building?
3. What is the different between lifelong learning and skill-building?
4. What are the next steps for adult literacy programming in Canada?

Section 1: Consistent

Adult Learning Must be Consistent

What does it mean to be consistent? Traditional definitions of consistency emphasize regularity and a lack of variation or change.⁷ Yet consistent learning might combine these elements with flexibility. Adult learners need to know that they can count on their tutors or instructors. At the same time, people may need fluidity for family or work commitments. So, when adult learners need to change their learning plans, a consistent educational opportunity must accommodate the change. This may mean adjusting the curriculum or rescheduling to ensure they can make it to work on time. Workability is necessary for the learner.

PIAAC 2023 includes Adaptive Problem Solving as one of its key skills. PIAAC defines Adaptive Problem Solving as "[t]he capacity to achieve one's goals in a dynamic situation."⁸ Consistent adult education provides this learning environment. It can help adults feel supported through dynamic situations so that they can develop the skills they need without feeling overburdened or discouraged.

What can we do?

Governments:

Governments can articulate clear learning goals. These learning goals can be applied regionally, provincially, or nationally. By defining learning needs, governments can create big-picture objectives that everyone can work towards. This helps to create consistency.

Example: The Government of Canada's Skills for Success Program is one example of clear learning goals. This national model provides literacy practitioners with specific objectives to work towards.

On the provincial level, New Brunswick runs the Workplace Essential Skills (WES) Program. It uses the nine Skills for Success to improve adult literacy and essential skills for the job market. WES also offers free training courses for adult residents of New Brunswick.⁹ As of 2022, New Brunswick Community Colleges (NBCC and CCNB) design and deliver these programs on behalf of the government. Local businesses and industry groups provide support. Courses are available in both English and French.¹⁰

Employers:

A recent report suggests that "[e]mployers play key roles by offering supplementary training to new and ongoing employees."¹¹ Such training helps to ensure staff retention by engaging employees. To see long-term benefits, employers should ensure that all learning opportunities are ongoing. They should also meet with staff on a regular basis to talk about what courses are available. Programs offered should have a consistent schedule that also allows for flexibility. Everyone benefits when staff have opportunities to maintain and build their skills.

Example: In the food service sector, McDonald's Canada offers the Archways to Opportunity. This program was first established in the U.S. and then extended to Canada. It supports the education and skill development of its restaurant employees. This includes both frontline crew members and restaurant managers.¹² The program provides several key learning opportunities:

- earn a high school diploma;
- improve English language skills;
- receive tuition aid for college or university courses.

McDonald's works in partnership with 31 Canadian universities and colleges to ease program delivery.¹³ Staff members have a chance to thrive. This contributes to a positive and productive workplace.¹⁴

Literacy practitioners:

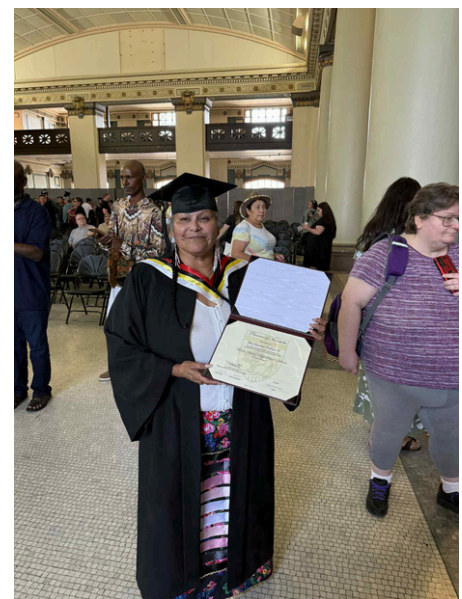
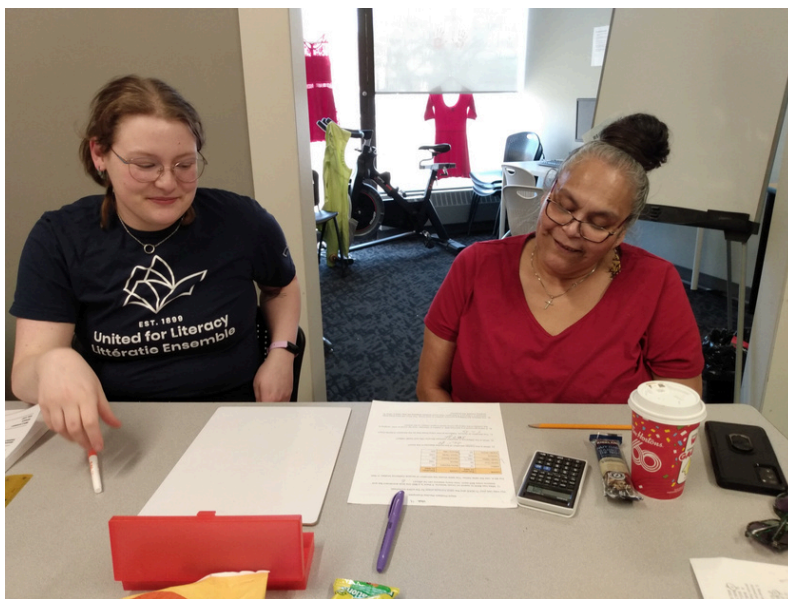
Much has been written on the importance of predictable and routine learning models for children.¹⁵ The model of a consistent education is equally important for adults. Providing literacy supports on a routine basis that learners can rely on is key so that people know what to expect and plan accordingly. For example, literacy practitioners might:

- Have learners meet with the same tutor/instructor each week
- Schedule learning sessions for the same day each week and the same time each day
- Use a strength-based teaching approach that builds upon prior lessons
- Maintain the same instructors and other staff to minimize program disruption¹⁶

This consistent support lets literacy practitioners help learners build skills and confidence over time while also recognizing that adult learners require some flexibility to meet their needs.

Example: Based in Prince Edward Island, the PEI Literacy Alliance is a consistent part of PEI literacy. The Alliance serves over 4,300 children, adults, and families in PEI each year.¹⁷ It offers free one-to-one tutoring for adults struggling with literacy. Learners meet with trained volunteers week after week to work on achieving their literacy goals. One learner met with a tutor twice a week for two years. They shared that they are “no longer afraid of a piece of paper with words on it and most of all, [they] enjoy reading very much.”¹⁸

At United for Literacy, the Learn Outside the Box program is a consistent experience for adult learners. Participants work towards finishing high school or achieving the high school equivalency credential. Based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Learn Outside the Box offers two options: a weekly session or a six-week intensive course. This lets people choose what works best for their schedules. No matter what they choose, learners know that Learn Outside the Box is a support they can count on.



Shoshanna joined United for Literacy's GED Intensive program in 2022. She later transitioned to adult education courses and proudly earned her high school diploma in 2025—now she's on to college.

Section 2: Continuous

Adult Learning Must be Continuous.

Adults who attended college, university, or vocational school tend to have higher literacy and numeracy skills than people who left school earlier.¹⁹ Yet high levels of education do not guarantee better skills.²⁰ The latest PIAAC results show that, in Canada, 10% of adults ages 25 to 65, with a university education, scored at the lowest level for literacy and numeracy.²¹ It is hard to pin down the cause of this decrease in skill. Yet continuous education helps adults maintain and improve their skills throughout their lives.

Adults at the lowest literacy levels may struggle to find ways to upgrade their skills throughout their lives. PIAAC results revealed that 19% of Canadian adults read at a Level 1 literacy level or below.²²



A Level 1 literacy level means that a person can read and work with only a brief text on a familiar topic.

When someone has literacy skills below Level 1, they may only be able to read short, simple sentences.²³ Socio-economic factors may make it hard for people to improve their reading and writing skills. For adult learners with low literacy, having continuous adult education opportunities is key. Learning does not end when an individual leaves school. It is necessary to provide opportunities for people to gain new skills, even if change is slow or does not occur in a linear fashion. People learn in different ways. It is important for practitioners to meet learners where they are. As well, evaluation should recognize that success or improvement doesn't look the same for everyone.



Governments, employers, and literacy practitioners must work together to provide adults with the flexible and high-impact opportunities they need to upgrade their literacy and numeracy skills.

What can we do?

Governments:

While upskilling is important, governments might also consider the value of lifelong learning when designing learning models. A recent article asked, "Why is lifelong learning more important than lifelong skilling?"²⁴ One reason relates to the challenges of predicting which workplace skills will be needed in the future."²⁵ It's useful to work to ensure that people have the practical skills to send an email. However, it is not a substitute for foundational literacy and numeracy. When a person can read with confidence, it makes information easier to understand. This opens doors to new ideas and opportunities. Governments must strive to support foundational lifelong learning across Canada.

Example: In Nova Scotia, the Workplace Education Initiative (WEI) works with Department of Labour and employers to help workers build basic skills on the job. Through WEI, companies host free on-site classes for their employees. These classes include reading, writing, math, or computer use. Beyond simply focusing on "upskilling," WEI helps learners improve their foundational skills. This sets them up for lifelong learning in the workplace, which means happier employees who do their jobs better.

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Employers:

Employers can provide their employees with regular "employer-sponsored training."²⁷ Employer-sponsored training is any educational activity provided by an employer to their staff "in a systemic and intentional way"²⁸. This is different than informal learning which can happen spontaneously at the workplace. Some categories of employer-sponsored trainings are:

- in-person courses
- online trainings
- on-the-job trainings²⁹

By providing intentional opportunities for learning on a consistent schedule, employers can ensure that their employees are keeping up with and improving their skills on a regular basis.

Example: Northern Vision Development (NVD) is a private real estate initiative across Yukon. United for Literacy is in a fee-for-service partnership with NVD to offer Workplace Literacy & Essential Skills training to employees. More than 150 of NVD's entry-level employees receive intensive and long-term (>3 months) essential skills support. Participants show improved performance in areas such as teamwork, communication, and customer service. The Government of Yukon funds this program.

Literacy practitioners:

Literacy organizations and practitioners must work together to ensure that learners of all ages can find the resources they need to be lifelong learners. While not every organization can support learners from early childhood to late adulthood, by working together, diverse literacy practitioners can ensure that learners are supported throughout their lives. For example, a child ages out of an after-school program. At that time, the program's staff facilitates transition to a mentorship program for young adults.

Example: In Alberta, the Centre for Family Literacy offers free adult tutoring in reading, writing, and math. It also provides family literacy programs that support adults and children working together. The Centre for Family Literacy encourages people to view learning as a lifelong journey that begins in childhood. They do this by inviting children and adults to learn together. ³⁰

Section 3: Collaborative

Adult learning must be collaborative.

While we all have a part to play in supporting adult learning, none of us can do it alone. It is essential that adult learning is collaborative. That means that instructors and learners work together to determine curriculum and the best ways to engage. As the University of British Columbia writes, "collaborative learning flips the script on traditional, transmission-based approaches to post-secondary education."³¹ This can be done through models like student-centered learning where learners are active in deciding what and how they want to learn. Collaborative learning also creates more dynamic classrooms where learners work together. It's interesting to note that the PIAAC results highlight that "British Columbia stands out as having moved from fourth place to first place" in terms of OECD performance, perhaps because of local commitments to collaborative learning!

Beyond the individual classroom, working together with other literacy organizations, corporations, and governments to create impactful adult learning programs can be a generative part of collaborative programming.

What can we do?

Governments:

It is important for governments to work with organizations to create adult literacy programming. Big-picture structures, such as Skills for Success, are necessary. Yet is also important for governments to work with on-the-ground organizations to make lasting impact.

Example: In British Columbia, the Community Adult Literacy Program (CALP) works with local colleges and community organizations to support community-based literacy programs for adults. The program focuses on reading, writing, math, computer use, and English as a Second Language (ESL) programming.

This program highlights collaboration in several ways:

- The BC government collaborates with local colleges and community organizations to run the program
- Learners work in pairs and groups to improve their future-ready skills
- Learners collaborate with trained volunteer teachers.

The program also provides free care for learners' children. This ensures that learners have the support needed to join the program and have attendance be sustainable! ³²

Employers:

Employers can encourage their employees to work together on new projects,. This provides opportunities to learn from each other in a collaborative way. Employers can also collaborate with literacy organizations to support their employees' learning needs.

Example: In the banking and finance industry, the Royal Bank of Canada (RBC) recognized that **all** employees benefit from improving their ability to read, interpret, and use data in their roles. To address this, RBC launched a free Data Literacy training program. ³³ The program was developed internally through collaboration with expert instructional designers. They created a curriculum that is accessible to non-technical employees. This example illustrates that workplace "literacy" extends beyond reading and writing. In a corporate setting, digital and data literacy programs ensure even highly educated employees continue to adapt and learn new skills.

Literacy practitioners:

Many literacy practitioners across Canada have a targeted approach to learning. This approach is based on reaching learners who need support with a specific skillset through one-to-one work. However, it is as important to consider how programming can be collaborative on many levels:

- Learner-learner collaboration encourages partnerships and teamwork among learners helps people become comfortable asking questions, sharing information, and learning together.
- Learner-tutor collaboration: partnerships where learners and tutors learn from each other is key for creating a positive and trustful learning environment.
- Organizational collaboration: working together with other like-minded organizations helps every literacy organization reach more learners, more meaningfully.

Example: Based in Québec, Co-Savoir (formerly CDÉACF) is a francophone digital repository. It provides a platform for resources created by literacy, education, and feminist communities. This allows knowledge and expertise to be shared across communities. Their resources include materials on literacy, adult education, and gender. ³⁴

Conclusion

We all have a role to play to address Canada's adult literacy crisis and ensure that adult learners have future-ready skills. By working together, governments, employers, and literacy practitioners can support literacy and numeracy programming that is consistent, continuous, and collaborative. This ensures that everyone has the literacy and numeracy tools they need to thrive as well as the additional workplace skills that open doors to more opportunity and greater knowledge. Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient populace that is ready to take on whatever the future holds.



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United for Literacy
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Your partner in learning.

To learn more visit **www.unitedforliteracy.ca**



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