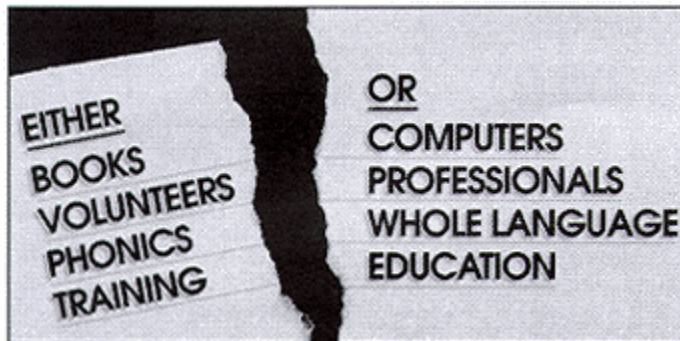


Getting past either/or



Information is not knowledge, and knowledge is not wisdom. Since they were severed from churches, schools have generally not been preoccupied with wisdom. But modern schools have been concerned with both information and knowledge, and have debated the relationship between the two and how they inform the philosophy of schooling. The best schools have moved beyond

information. The best literacy practices have moved beyond decoding and memorization to the making of meaning.

We have enormous amounts of information about schooling, about reading, about writing, about learning, about disabilities, about the differences between adults and children as learners, the list goes on. No one could live long enough to digest it all. Some knowledge has been created from this information, much of it complex and contradictory. We have not done much with the knowledge we have. Why?

One reason is that we don't want to know. In general, we don't want our beliefs challenged by knowledge, and when they are, beliefs still tend to win the day. Despite our passion for "higher order thinking," we still think more with our guts than with our heads.

This issue looks at some instances in the formal and informal adult literacy sectors where beliefs take precedence over practice and talk over action.

Cynthia Selfe, researcher and commentator on the connections between literacy and technology, gave a keynote address to the Conference on College

Composition and Communication in April in which she called on English teachers to examine their own belief systems about the nature of literacy and their embrace or rejection of technology. (p. 3) She used recent statistics from several US states of expenditures on adult literacy and on technology to show that, despite the rhetoric, relatively little has been allocated to the first, and that much of the avocation to technology has been diverted from other educational budgets such as libraries. Teachers seem to have created a choice for themselves of either"

humane text-bound literacy "or" machine-driven technological literacy. Governments have chosen to fund "either" books "or" computers.

Catherine Hambly, a new researcher, examined the beliefs and behaviour of literacy tutors in a volunteer program and found that their belief in good will took priority over training and support (p.4). Paul Jurmo, a longtime practitioner-critic of workplace basic skills education, presented the Winter Institute an analysis of the shortcomings of the current US system and a vision of an alternative (p. 11). For different reasons, neither the formal nor volunteer sector has produced consistent, verifiable outcomes in literacy and basic skills education. Yet, the debate on provision is always presented in terms of "either" the volunteers "or" the professionals.

What else do we need to know? We need to know how to use the information and resources we already possess. We need to know that project funding does not sustain provision. Nicki Askov spoke at the Winter Institute about trying to analyze the outcomes of \$130,100,000. of US Workplace Literacy Project funding, and finding reports packed in boxes, most of them insufficiently documented to provide a research base.

We criticize schools mercilessly based on test scores and dropout rates. Continual scrutiny is necessary, although much of the criticism leveled at schools is too broad and neglects the enormous successes as universal schooling has become the norm. We do need to find ways to stop losing up to one-third of high school students in some parts of the country. But today, the theme is "lifelong learning." In adult basic education, the student loss is closer to 90%.

We also need to know how to analyze expenditures on adult basic education at provincial and state levels, we need to know that federal support for research and awareness is a necessary framework, but that responsibility for ongoing provision happens close to home. When we accord adult education the same attention we pay to the regular school system, we will have achieved a victory.

Whose interests are served by not knowing? Governments who fund short-term or "feel-good" projects; groups and businesses who receive the short-term, "feel-good" funding; and the media who hype the "feel-good" stories. It frees them from making long-term commitments that don't play well on television.

When we can examine appropriate roles for volunteers and appropriate training for teachers and workplace educators, when we can see the new possibilities offered by technology and the challenges they present to formal institutions, when we can stop thinking in terms of "either/or, we will be closer to the vision of a coherent system of adult education in North America.

The real questions are: Do we want to know? Can we move beyond beliefs? [LS]

INSIDE	
3	To ponder
4	Behaviour and beliefs of volunteer literacy tutors
9	Winter Institute: Adult education in the workplace
	• Equipped for the Future
11	• New "systems" approach
14	In the classroom: Power Point and basic skills
17	Libraries in an electronic age
18	David Crystal on literacy
20	Reviews:
	• On class size
	• The Literacy Audit Kit
21	Conferences
24	Announcements
26	At The Centre