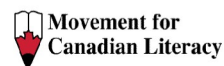


Proceedings Report
of the pan-Canadian Symposium

***Moving the Conversation Forward:
Adult Literacy and Accountability***

May 13-14, 2008
Montreal, QC



An invitational, pan-Canadian symposium was held May 13-14, 2008 in Montreal at the end of Year 1 of the project *Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in the Adult Literacy Field in Canada*. The symposium, *Moving the Conversation Forward*, brought together over 60 adult literacy practitioners, funders and other experts to learn about the findings from the field and literature reviews, and to formulate recommendations to help move the conversation about accountability forward in productive and meaningful ways.

Expected outcomes of the symposium

- Present the findings from Year 1 field and literature reviews to create a shared understanding of accountability issues and challenges.
- Provide an opportunity for funders and practitioners to begin to identify common ground about the purpose of various accountability measures and their impacts on adult literacy practice.
- Recommend concrete ways to sustain a dialogue between funders and practitioners to improve accountability systems and outcomes for Canada's adult literacy learners.

Design of the symposium

The symposium provided opportunities for participants to work together in small groups with changing membership during three sessions over the two days. A plenary after each small group meeting provided an opportunity to share the findings and contributions from the small groups while expanding on the topic of discussion. Each small group session was preceded by a presentation of preliminary findings from the field review interviews, the literature review, or a speaker. Speakers were Dr. Janine Eldred Associate Director the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) presenting on *Accountability and Adult Literacy in Britain* and Professor Gilles Paquet of the University of Ottawa speaking on *Intelligent Accountability*.¹

The discussion topics for the small group sessions were:

1. Defining accountability: Accountable for what? To whom?
2. Accountability today: what's working and not working?
3. Moving forward: Considering what is not working - what needs to change, what results are we looking for in making changes, and what steps can we take to sustain dialogue between funders and practitioners?

This report will synthesize and analyse the discussions on each of these topics and suggest how the symposium outcomes will inform the on-going work and goals of the Project in its second year. It is important to note that participants were not asked to reach consensus or agreement on the topics under discussion.

¹ Symposium materials can be found at:
<http://www.literacyandaccountability.ca/symposium.htm>

***Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability
in the Adult Literacy Field in Canada***

Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in the Adult Literacy Field in Canada is a two-year project funded by the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources Development Canada and sponsored by The Centre for Literacy of Quebec, Movement for Canadian Literacy, Literacy BC, and Research in Practice for Adult Literacy – BC (RiPAL-BC). The project provides an opportunity for funders and practitioners to examine the impact of accountability on the adult literacy field across the country and explore new ways of approaching it. The goals include:

- Gather information about what is currently happening in the field regarding accountability policy and practice.
- Synthesize and share research and published materials about accountability in the adult literacy literature in Canada and internationally.
- Identify and implement five innovative accountability models using an action research framework.
- Increase understanding among practitioners, policy makers, and funders of the impact of accountability on the field and options for improvement.

Connecting the Dots is divided into two phases. During Phase 1 (June 2007 – June 2008), project staffing was put in place, the literature review was conducted, and field research using a research in practice approach was conducted with providers and funders to learn the state of accountability practices within Canada.

Literature Review

The Project reviewed documents published since 1990 in the fields of adult literacy, education, and public administration, along with pertinent provincial and federal reports and documents. The research included literature from other OECD nations such as Britain and the United States. An informative, user-friendly report of the findings will be posted to the Project's website in October 2008.

Field Review

As part of the research-in-practice component of *Connecting the Dots*, field reviewers interviewed 106 adult literacy practitioners and 30 funders from across Canada to learn about the state of accountability practices in the adult literacy field. These interviews served as the basis for information presented confidentially at the symposium. A full report of the field review findings will be posted to the website in September 2008. Additionally, profiles detailing the adult literacy services of each province and territory and an overview of accountability practices will also be posted.

Topic: Defining accountability: Accountable for what? To whom?**When:** Tuesday morning, May 13, 2008**Process:** The morning began with a presentation of literature review findings on the topic. Highlights included:

- We did not find a large number of definitions of accountability. The literature seems to assume that the reader has a general understanding of what “accountability” means.
- This ‘general understanding’ is usually focused on “assigning blame and punishing wrong-doing” as the Treasury Board stated in 1998. Providing ‘value’ for ‘money’ is another common understanding of accountability.
- It is difficult to define accountability without also specifying “accountable for what?” and “to whom”.
- Two distinct approaches to accountability emerge in the literature:
 - The “economic-bureaucratic’ approach emphasizes results and performance with the accounting provided to an external stakeholder such as a legislative body or the taxpayers.
 - The ‘ethical professional’ approach emphasizes the means over the ends. In other words, the quality and quantity of the inputs received to perform a service (e.g. providing adult literacy services) carries as much significance as the “consensually defined ends or goals”.

The discussion of the field review findings indicated that many interviewees viewed accountability as encompassing multiple accountabilities including the need to be accountable to the learner, the community, the provider’s board of directors, and the literacy profession itself. Key words for interviewees included: commitment, agreement, demonstrating results, telling the story, and taking ownership.

Small group discussions

Mixed small groups of practitioners and funders were asked to examine a Canadian Treasury Board definition of accountability from 1998 and respond to several questions. The primary purpose of this exercise was to begin to identify areas of common ground and difference among participants about accountability in adult literacy.

“Accountability is a relationship based on the obligation to demonstrate and take responsibility for performance in light of agreed expectations.” (Office of the Auditor General & Treasury Board), 1998, *Current pressures*, ¶ 3, cited in the literature review)

a) *Does this definition reflect your notion of accountability today? Is anything missing? Does your group agree on the essential elements?*

b) *Identify the areas where your group shares common ground or has differences?*

Plenary

Participants were somewhat surprised that this 10 year-old definition appears to be less focused on “blame and punishment of wrong-doing” and is perhaps more progressive and encompassing than the working definitions and understandings of “accountability” that currently seem to guide many funders and practitioners across Canada.

Highlights of comments made during the plenary include:

- Add two words to the definition: *collaborative* relationship, based on a *mutual* obligation. What would change by adding the word “collaborative” – it implies sharing and equality. Is it realistic? Would it work in real life? There is the factor of “imposition” – we can talk about collaboration but overall expectations and measures are imposed (by funders).
- Our group spent a great deal of our time discussing the “agreed expectations” aspect of the definition. “Agreed expectations” can be a moving target.
- Funders need to have the knowledge about the realities facing our learners. Learning is not necessarily linear – other family and personal factors may impact learning. “Agreed expectations” must include the reality of the learners.
- Who is involved in the relationship and are those people the same as those who are obligated to show results or answer to?
- Who is obligated? What type of relationship? How do we measure performance? What kind of discussion takes place to align the elements of the definition?
- A definition of accountability is only as complete as a definition of literacy.
- Definition of performance – process that includes inputs/outputs and outcomes.
- Regarding the use of the word “expectations” – this does not translate as just benchmarks or agreement on outcomes; the mutual establishment of expectations is key.
- Timeframes: – political versus funding mandate versus community development timeframes are all different. We should add “over a specified timeframe”.
- Trust is important – we need to trust that both parties are as good as they can possibly be. Where does the power lie in our hands as practitioners? We should also consider the role of advocacy; it is very important. Why should we expect our policy makers to have the same experience or understanding as we do. It is contingent upon us to communicate our perspective and experiences.

- There is a disconnect between the language (re: expectations) of funder and the reality of service provider. There is also a disconnect between goals as enumerated by funder and service providers.

Topic: Accountability today: What's working and not working?

When: Tuesday afternoon, May 13, 2008

Process: The afternoon began with a presentation on the report of the *Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contribution Agreements*. This seminal work offers positive recommendations that are being vetted through a series of consultations across Canada by the Treasury Board Secretariat.² It served as a backdrop for discussion of the *Connecting the Dots* field review findings.

The field review gathered input from more 130 informants across Canada through individual interviews and focus groups. While policies and practices differ considerably, the review will not report at the level of specific jurisdictions. It has organized findings into a series of emergent themes to give a broad overview of the similarities as well as differences from one part of the country to another. This approach protects the confidentiality of informants. Field reviewers found a persistent fear among many informants that talking about this issue could jeopardize their funding or their jobs.

Field review findings included:

What's working well:

- Providers agree on the need for accountability.
- Accountability demands have helped providers develop means to track outcomes and inputs, and provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their performance and results.
- Relationships between funders and providers are evolving and improving in most parts of the country, especially in regard to funders' knowledge about adult literacy and practitioner understanding of funders' needs.
- Relationships are respectful and responsive overall.

What could work better:

- The type of data requested has a quantitative focus. Too often "what is counted becomes what counts".
- Providers feel the need to do a better job of including their own and learners' "stories".
- Accountability procedures: The volume of data and level of detail requested can be overwhelming, more clarification is needed on the use

² For more information on the Independent Blue Ribbon Panel go to: <http://www.brp-gde.ca/en/>

and purpose of the data, and there are inconsistencies in administration of the procedures even within a province.

- Impact of accountability processes. A program's community mandate may differ from what it is asked to account for and a program may lack capacity to respond to accountability demands. Services for learners may be impacted when accountability processes do not measure or account for the types of support, and the time required, to meet learners' needs. Practitioners may believe that accountability demands conflict with their professional values. These conflicts, and any staff turnover that may result, could affect program quality.

Small group discussions

Mixed small groups of practitioners and funders discussed the presentations and responded to the questions below.

Accountability Today: What's Working and Not Working?

1. *What stands out for you in the findings of the Blue Ribbon Panel and the field reviews?*
2. *What's your own experience? Specifically,*
 - i. *What works and should be preserved?*
 - ii. *What does not work?*
 - iii. *If only two things could be addressed in the next two-three years, where do you think the focus should be? [Remember, at this stage, we are identifying the issues and problems – not the solutions (vet)]*

Plenary

The small group work and the large discussion generated a high level of energy. Participants were engaged not simply in identifying what isn't working but also in sharing what was working in their province/territory or literacy program. During the break at the end of the large group discussion, participants were told they could continue to identify "what's not working so well" by adding their ideas to flip chart pages on the wall. Fourteen participants took time from their break to do that.

What is working?

- Capacity to negotiate with the (p/t) program manager who oversees the program.

- We are increasingly reflecting the community's needs and accomplishments and the learners' outcomes via storytelling.
- Unintended consequences from the need to track data and respond to accountability demands included the following: forces us to ask what we are doing well, examine what works, and for the agency to really work towards common purpose, better infrastructure in place at an agency level, practitioners are becoming trained and aware of how to use data for their own purposes, and more tracking leads to the discovery of new areas of information or data to track, and maybe- now or someday- to report on.
- We are seeing improved leadership and working together of those in literacy.
- Annual renewals of funding for literacy providers who have a good track record (legacy program in SK); limited paperwork (NL).
- Commitment, passion, and engagement of all players.
- P/t governments increasingly working with literacy coalitions.

What's not working?

Over thirty suggestions were received from participants about how to address what is not working well regarding accountability in adult literacy. At the end of Tuesday, Project staff met with the symposium facilitator to consolidate the identified issues into three categories to use in an activity on the final morning. These were the identified categories and descriptors for each:

Design	Making a Case	Reporting/Metrics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ From rules to values ▪ Trust/transparency ▪ Valuing diversity of program design ▪ Flexibility/needs ▪ Short term/long term ▪ Literacy as "charity" vs. entrepreneurship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Engage political leadership ▪ Showcasing/telling stories ▪ Cost of illiteracy ▪ Engage general public, former learners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Simplification ▪ Quantitative/qualitative ▪ Collective measures of impact ▪ Less focus on IALS measurement

Participants were asked to recast the negative into the form of “How to” questions that could move the issue toward a positive solution. Selected examples from the plenary session illustrate how this was done in each category.

Design

- How to allow flexibility while abiding by terms of agreement as well as the community’s needs.
- How to negotiate reciprocal accountability processes while staying true to our respective values and goals.
- Input accountability – we need to talk about how inputs affect outcomes; maybe we can measure progress by what goes in (and this means not just the money).
- How to take “top down” policy criteria (e.g. essential skills) and make them fit the recipients’ local frameworks while satisfying both parties.

Making a Case

- How is the research community working with adult literacy providers to find better ways to measure impacts of low literacy (employment, familial, criminal behaviour, etc.).
- How to bring the adult literacy service profile out of the church basement to a higher level without losing the informal nature and approaches that are needed by the most vulnerable learners.
- How to activate/integrate the passion/conviction (for adult literacy) of government officials within the confines of government.

Reporting/Metrics

- How to identify the common elements of reporting to multiple funders while not driving ourselves crazy and still meeting the accountability requirements. How to improve accountability while not increasing the burden on all players.
- How to develop the capacity to help us collect learners’ stories (qualitative and quantitative).

Topic: Moving forward: Considering what is not working - what needs to change, what results are we looking for in making changes, and what steps can we take to sustain dialogue between funders and practitioners?

When: Wednesday morning, May 14, 2008

Process: Participants were divided into small groups geographically (for practitioners) and by professional affiliation (funders, researchers/academics). The practitioner groups were: BC, West (AB, SK, MB), Ontario, Atlantic/QC and a final group for literacy coalition representatives. After Gilles Paquet's presentation on *Intelligent Accountability*, the small groups met.

Small group discussions

Groups were asked to respond to the questions below using the three categories that resulted from their work the day before on "what's not working?": Design, making a case, and reporting/metrics.

Moving Forward : What do YOU think needs to happen?

1. *What results are you looking for in addressing this issue? Three years from now, what would be different if it were successfully addressed?*
2. *What changes would have to be made in order to make progress?*
3. *How will we sustain dialogue between funders and practitioners about improving accountability systems and outcomes for Canada's*

Plenary

While the time at the end of the symposium did not allow for elaboration, the final plenary collected both specific suggestions related to the three categories of identified areas for change and more generic suggestions on ways to improve accountability processes and relationships between funders and providers.

They are summarized below.

Design	Making a Case	Reporting/Metrics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funders need to be willing to involve themselves in all new developments and changes. Share information with funders – literacy advocacy. Gain a better understanding of funders’ perspectives. Can we refine or refocus their needs? Do a purposeful analysis of how policy is made. How can both funders and practitioners influence that process? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to invest the time and energy. Use the same language. Use business language – we don’t have expenses, but investments. Communicate better – make the phone calls. Showcase successes, look for qualitative data to highlight. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow-up on meetings, send thank you’s and acknowledgments. Ask funders about potential flexibility in reporting. Link quantitative data and qualitative information to demonstrate success of literacy. Funders need to be clear about what results are expected and how best to report.

Themes Identified

A number of common themes were identified that will continue to inform the work of the Project as we develop and build the dialogue between funders and practitioners that was launched with this symposium.

Trust

Foremost among the themes identified was *trust*. Trust, or its opposite – mistrust – underlies the discussion about accountability on many levels.

- Public mistrust
As evidenced in the literature review, accountability expectations have grown out of a lack of trust by the public in the government’s ability to be responsible stewards of tax dollars. This perceived lack of trust has been fueled by media reports of alleged misspending of public funds.
- Funders
Government funders may feel caught in the middle between demands for increased accountability from ministers and the parliament and their relationships with service providers. While funders may trust providers to spend money wisely, their job and their own accountability is to

implement the accountability measures mandated in their jurisdiction. Providers often assume that funders' demands are founded on mistrust of their activities.

- Providers

Providers often feel distrusted, i.e. that most government accountability processes result from the *mistrust* of providers' abilities to deliver literacy services in an efficient, cost effective manner. While they may have a positive, trusting personal relationship with their government funder, the accountability processes and expectations too often reinforce a sense of mistrust.

Symposium participants identified a variety of ways to address the issue of trust (becoming more involved in the political process and communication are discussed further below). These include questioning and testing assumptions that the actors have about one another; increasing transparency of the accountability processes; using "teachable" moments to showcase the successes and efforts of literacy programs, especially in the realm of qualitative versus quantifiable data; and working to reconcile the different perspectives and views that providers and funders have about each other. This last point is a specific objective of *Connecting the Dots*.

Political acumen

All participants recognized the importance of being engaged in the political process, championing literacy as an important aspect of social and economic progress, and learning how to use the current political system and climate to advocate for literacy services. They noted that accountability can play an important role in making this happen. Accountability requirements are not likely to disappear and, as already discussed, they have had positive unintended consequences for providers. Used well, they can help make the case for literacy successes, and they *can* be designed to include qualitative as well as quantitative indicators.

Funders recognized that they have a role to play in translating the needs and challenges experienced by the field back to senior government officials. Sometimes feeling "caught in the middle" between these officials and the practitioners, funders hope that the field realizes that resource constraints also influence the decisions of government when it comes to accountability. Funders stated in particular that the Office of the Auditor General "needs to be aware of the cost of accountability on the operations of government and how it impacts delivery."

Literacy providers recognize that they need to be more proactive to potential policy changes at the government level, and not just reactive. A general theme emerged by the end of the symposium that it is time for the literacy field to stop feeling "victimized" and to take charge of the conversation about the future of

literacy and the impact of accountability. This includes harnessing the power of their boards, showcasing success stories and the benefits of literacy in the local media and to government, and becoming an advocate for learners and literacy.

This also includes working to change the message and meaning of literacy, to join with government forces that view it as an economic development tool and help support that point of view while also broadening and expanding it.

Communication

Communication was another key theme that recurred throughout the symposium. Funders recognize the need to improve communication among themselves to share their challenges and successes related to accountability. They identified the need to be “out there” more often speaking with practitioners to hear their stories and concerns. They also acknowledged that they could better communicate the reasons behind many accountability expectations and reasons for changes. It was agreed that better communicating of funders’ sense of being “caught in the middle”, especially to the field, could improve understanding between all parties.

Providers also realized that communication is key – to the media, to current and former learners, to board members, and to the communities being served. There was much discussion about how to “share learners’ stories” in ways that both enhance and replace some of the more quantifiable data that is demanded. Another goal should be bringing boards “on board” so that they better understand accountability demands and are willing to advocate and educate about the important role that adult literacy has in the community.

Action Research Teams Guiding Principles

Symposium participants included members of the five action research teams selected to participate in the Project's second phase.³ Team members participated in a 1 ½ day training following the symposium. We launched that training and asked the team members to reflect on the proceedings of the symposium and identify "take-aways" to inform their accountability action research projects. These *Guiding Principles* are presented below.

Guiding Principles

1. Keep your research question simple.
2. Clarity is key when doing the action research – clarity about what, why, how. Don't forget that the purpose of the projects is to use data to improve practice.
3. Be realistic, not idealistic.
4. Don't forget the importance of stories.
5. Need to consider the use of both quantitative and qualitative data. We especially need to improve the use of qualitative data. (How can we demonstrate best practices in the use of qualitative data across the 5 projects?)
6. Relationships are important: negotiate them, improve them.
7. Frequent, clear communication is required: inter-team, intra-team and each team with its stakeholders.
8. How can we, as 5 projects, demonstrate double loop accountability practices? (i.e. When we get feedback from funder can we loop back to the funder to influence policy?).
9. Keep our eyes open for unintended consequences.

³ For more information on the Action Research Teams and their projects go to:
<http://www.literacyandaccountability.ca/innovate.htm>

What's Next?

Connecting the Dots is committed to maintain the energy and interest generated by the symposium. It will share reports and reviews as they are published, write articles for journals, newsletters and newspapers, and give presentations at conferences and meetings across the country. It will also participate in meetings and consultations with government agencies, where appropriate.

The main communication vehicle will be its website: www.literacyandaccountability.ca

On it, you will find:

1. Materials from the symposium (agenda, PowerPoint presentations, other documents).
2. Literature Review (to be posted October 2008). A number of documents will be developed from the literature review that was undertaken as part of the Project's first year. Our goal is to make these documents helpful to funders and providers alike.
3. Field Review Information (to be posted October, 2008). This will include a report on the input gathered by the field reviewers from the 130 informants among providers and funders.
4. Discussion Forum. An on-line discussion forum will provide website visitors the opportunity to discuss and debate with one another important issues and improvement efforts about accountability.
5. Action research teams updates. The website will be regularly updated with information from each of the five action research teams.
6. Featured interviews. Interviews will be posted to the website of people connected with the Project. We hope you will take the time to read and react to these interviews in the Discussion Forum.