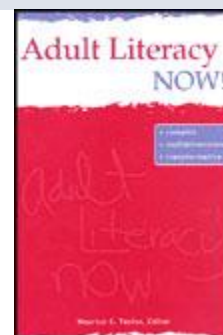


REVIEWS

Adult Literacy Now

Edited by Maurice C. Taylor. Toronto: Culture Concepts (imprint of Irwin Publishing), 2001. 348 pp. ISBN 0- 7725-2863-2.

reviewed by David Dillon, McGill University



Maurice Taylor (and the National Literacy Secretariat) chose the millennium to mark what he calls the coming of age, or the reaching maturity, of the field of adult literacy education in Canada. Since its simpler and humbler beginnings not all that long ago, the field has exploded in the last several decades in two ways. One is the rapidly increasing proliferation of services, programs, materials, approaches, and scholarship. The other is the increasingly multidimensional nature of adult literacy from traditional school-based literacy to today's community-based literacy, workplace literacy, and family literacy—to name just a few. Taylor's goal in this collection was to examine where we are now in regard to adult literacy in Canada; among the guiding questions were what historical developments have shaped the field's recent path, what critical issues confront the field today and what might be some promising ways forward. Taylor and his contributors succeed enormously well. In fact, the publication of this text was timely since the federal government's mention of literacy as a priority in last winter's Speech from the Throne provided the hope of a national literacy policy and an increased profile for literacy efforts in this country.

Adult Literacy Now has a unique structure and organization. The text focuses on four key perspectives on adult literacy today—community-based literacy, workplace literacy, family literacy, and school-based literacy—each comprising a major section of the book. Each section is organized in the same way. A “framing chapter” provides a broad overview of historical developments; fundamental theoretical, philosophical, and particularly ideological themes; and key issues faced by this aspect of the field. Each section then contains four chapters that examine more specific topics within that particular aspect of adult literacy. Each concludes with a brief “synopsis” that highlights the key themes and issues in the section. Finally, the entire text is bookended by an introductory chapter by Audrey Thomas and an epilogue by Taylor himself. The contributors to the volume represent a broad spectrum of expertise but also of positioning within the adult literacy field—academics, researchers, government civil servants, trainers and consultants from the world of private business, staff members from NGOs, ABE teachers, and labour union educators.

A further significant feature is that all the authors have been asked to engage in critical reflection on their topic. As Taylor himself explains,

But amid these many accomplishments [in adult literacy in Canada in recent decades], there has been little time for serious reflection. To help fill this void, all chapters in this book feature critical reflection on literacy development in Canada. As Brookfield (1991, 1995) points out, critical reflection involves the identification of a problem or incident

that represents some aspect of practice requiring examination and possible change. He believes that by identifying our own assumptions that underlie the beliefs and actions connected to this problem, we can better analyze the nature of our practice. This process results in the capacity to imagine and explore alternatives to existing ways of thinking. (p. ix)

This approach creates a multidimensional text not only through the four key aspects of adult literacy, but also through the viewpoints and perspectives of the contributors. The effect is almost kaleidoscopic, yet surprisingly powerful and coherent. The volume provides an excellent bird's eye view of each aspect in terms of both historical development and current issues and themes. My own experience with the section on workplace literacy is illustrative. It is the aspect of adult literacy with which I am least familiar, yet I came away feeling I had a good grasp of the basic developments, issues, and directions. This volume would serve as important reading for those who could benefit from this kind of "big picture" perspective— policy makers, civil servants, administrators, researchers, academics.

If there is a shortcoming in the volume, it is that it ultimately reflects the situation in English Canada only, and does not include French Canada in its analysis. Certainly readers can extrapolate many of the issues to French Canada, yet there are particular issues of a minority language situation that are unique. Unless those are included, a volume such as this cannot be said to be truly and completely Canadian.

Nevertheless, any reader finishing this volume would, I think, certainly feel that he or she had a good understanding of where adult literacy has come in Canada in the year 2001 and should be in a better position to contribute to the debate on the key issues in the field today. If that is the case, the volume has achieved the purpose it set for itself very well indeed.

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