

ADULT LITERACY AND TELEVISION: Has a familiar tool been overlooked?

From May 18 -20, 2000, thirty-six participants from around the world met at the 11th Annual Summer Institute of The Centre for Literacy to consider how television has been used in many countries to create public awareness and to teach literacy skills to adults. This Institute brought together some of the pioneers in the field to meet with practitioners and policy-makers, share their experiences, and explore directions for the future. To provide historical context, The Centre produced an annotated bibliography tracing the use of television in adult literacy from the 1960s to the present day (See Resources, p. 36). Finally, to involve participants in the experience of making television as well as talking about it, part of the Institute was taped at Bravo! Studios by Canadian Learning Television. To work with CLT and to benefit from some of the specialists attending Summit 2000, an international conference on Children, Youth and Media, the Institute was held in Toronto.

The premise behind the Institute

Television is a powerful medium. It is accessible around the world and across the socio-economic spectrum. The poorest home in North America usually has a television set, while 20% of Americans did not have a telephone in 1996. The 1995 [International Adult Literacy Survey \(IALS\)](#) confirmed that adults with limited literacy in the industrialized world watch more television than higher educated adults do. Critics immediately leaped to the conclusion that television was to blame for a low level of literacy. However, the researchers pointed out that it was more likely that this group uses television as their primary source of information because they find reading too difficult.

Most teachers of literacy have tended to see adult literacy and television as the enemy. But there is a growing understanding that the nature of literacy is changing, and that learning to read and write print is not enough. Words, image and sound are creating new literacies.

With this in mind, educators are challenged to find ways of using this medium to address the learning needs of adults at the basic skills levels. Since early teaching models in selected US states in the 1960s and the first national television initiatives in the mid-70's in Britain to reach this audience, many national campaigns and teaching programs have been developed around the world. They have all focused on print literacy. None of them has been sustained. What are the possibilities for the 21st century?

Participants at the Institute offered insights and argued from their own experience in creating television for adult basic skills, in using television, in having their students create video productions; a contingent from Ireland, where a massive national campaign got

underway this fall, turned heads in describing a return to an even older technology — radio—for both awareness-raising and instruction.

Thumbnail sketches of presentations:

- David Hargreaves, one of the designers of the original British adult literacy campaign in the 1970s, originator of BBC’s On the Move, and now an international consultant, opened the conversation by laying out the possibilities and challenges as he sees them. [p. 19]
- Europe Singh, Director of the Innovation Centre at the University for Industry (UK) which is developing multimedia for learning to reach undereducated adults in the British workforce, suggested “repurposing,” as an effective and efficient way of using television in an environment of merging media; this involves integrating segments of programs already created for other purposes into on-line curricula. [p. 23]
- Robert Kubey, writer/researcher on media education, from Rutgers University, offered some perspectives from his work on media literacy in the K-12 curriculum.
- Ellen Long, researcher with [ABC CANADA](#), shared findings from an impact study of the Yellow Pages LEARN media campaign, identifying some of the reasons for adult learners participating/not participating in adult basic education. [p. 34]
- Inez Bailey, Executive Director of [Ireland’s National Adult Literacy Alliance \(NALA\)](#), highlighted their experience using radio for basic skills teaching and described a new national awareness and teaching campaign being undertaken in the Fall of 2000. [p. 25]
- Maura Donnelly from the Adult Literacy Media Alliance (ALMA) described the pilot-projects of TV411 now being launched in the US, touching on its innovative approach and the challenges it poses to traditional learning and funding models. [p. 27]
- Cathy Coleman, of World Education/SABES (Boston), shared media production projects that she created with her students in local cable network studios.
- Mona Arsenault, a tutor from Montreal, explained how she capitalized on a student’s interest in hockey to teach an intellectually disabled adult to read and use [p. 32] numbers by watching taped games of Hockey Night in Canada. [p. 32]
- Sophia Wu, Associate Professor, College of Communication, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, used her research on TV-viewing habits of Taiwanese children to raise the issue of the critical role required of adults in mediating children’s viewing, a role not played very effectively even by highly literate parents. [p. 30]
- Pauline McNaughton, AlphaPlus Centre (Toronto) described the collaboration between AlphaPlus and TVOntario to produce “Falling Through the Cracks,” a video introducing the adult literacy issue to a broader audience.



- Ron Keast, President and CEO Access Television and Canadian Learning Television, gave a private broadcaster's perspective on the potential relationship between TV producers and adult educators.
- Beth Odem and Greg Bailey, from Literacy Action Atlanta, described their work as literacy teachers on live TV and on video for the Georgia Tech Lifelong Learning Network. Georgia Tech eventually lost its funding for this work, despite excellent evaluations, partly because the bottom line cost was considered too high.
- Millie Fazey, from Kentucky Educational Television (KET) gave an overview of the KET televised GED programming which has had continuing success in attracting adult basic learners.

From multi-million dollar investments to low-budget home-made interventions, these and other examples illustrated the complexity of the subject.

A high point of the three days was an afternoon's Colloquium filmed by Canadian Learning Television at Bravo! Studios and hosted by TV personality Daniel Richler. Three panels explored and argued about what television can offer the adult literacy community and about the challenges facing that community around the world. Can television teach? Can it only motivate? Do national campaigns work? What can teachers do with television? How do print and media literacy connect? What are appropriate roles for volunteers in literacy? How does culture affect viewer expectations of television? How do race, gender, and ethnicity make themselves felt in literacy classrooms and in television representations of adult learners? Do we stereotype learners? Do we patronize them? Issues that are often avoided or skirted were aired at the Colloquium. The tapes of that exchange have been edited, shown on Canadian Learning Television (in December 2000, to be repeated in February 2001), and made available for purchase.

The Summer Institute Televised Colloquium was funded by [The National Literacy Secretariat](#), and the Office of Learning Technologies, [Human Resources Development Canada](#)

Highlights of some presentations and materials are collected in this insert of LACMF with more available on our web site. www.nald.ca/litcent.htm

Television and adult literacy — The questions and issues posed

- How has television been used to create public awareness of adult literacy? Has it changed stereotypes? Reinforced old ones? Created new ones?
- How is television best used with adult basic skills students? As a motivator to create a sense of possibility? As a primary teaching tool? As a supplement to traditional instruction?
- Is television an effective medium for teaching reading and writing to adults? Why do discussions of media literacy happen only in schools? Have the strengths of the medium been used to the fullest?
- How do current models of adult basic learning take account of the potential of

merging technologies? Why is so much attention focused on computers and the Internet, and so little on a medium that is already accessible?

- Are literacy teachers open to, and able to use, television as a teaching tool? What is their role in the process?
- Who is interested in funding learning television for basic learners? How do they monitor "outcomes?"
- Who is best positioned to develop programming? The public broadcasting sector? The private? Community television? Partnerships?

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