

We Ask Our Own Questions

On March 1, 2005 adult learners and literacy practitioners gathered at OISE's Festival of Literacies to explore, through collage, questions about adult learning and hopes for the future of adult learning in Canada.

During the event, we discussed how the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) defines adult learning needs. Findings from the 22 countries involved in the new IALSS will be released on May 11, 2005. In every country adults are surveyed using the same literacy test. The last survey included questions on subjects that some people may never have seen before. For example, it asked about taking care of the impatiens flower, and another question asked about fireworks in the Netherlands (Holland). So it did not test what people know and use day to day.

The main goals of the survey are to find out how well adults use printed information to function in society; how often and how many adults participate in adult education and training; the relationships between initial (elementary) school and adult education; and how knowing how to read or write relates to our economic or social conditions (Statistics Canada).

Canada participates in IALSS because governments and businesses are concerned about being able to compete economically with other countries. Officials think that when literacy levels are higher, the amount of money and products moving within and between countries will be greater. Some educators question this (Literacies Discussion). The reasons countries or people become richer are more complex than if adults improve their reading, writing and math skills.

In Canada many adults were identified as having difficulty reading because they did not answer all the questions correctly. However, when asked, these same adults said they do not have any problem because they are able to read, write and do math well enough for what they need to do every day.

Educators believe funders will look at IALSS data to decide how to spend money on adult education programs (Sussman). IALSS findings may send the wrong message, causing programs to focus on areas that are not of interest to adults. It is important that IALSS and the global economy are not the only guides for decision makers, but also the views of adult learners and literacy workers.

During the *We ask our own questions* event, we used collage to explore our hopes and desires for adult learning with themes such as nature, art, and community. We asked what the numbers will reveal and who counts in IALSS.

We are planning a celebration of learning on May 11th, 2005.

Arts Inquiry: Collage and other art forms such as drawing or taking photos can help us explore questions which are important to us. Asking questions using art may open new ways of thinking and learning. When we see how images or objects we create make us feel or react we may be moved to continue our search, or change directions. For more information go to OISE's Centre for Centre for Arts Informed Research, <http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch/airchome3.html>

Literacies. IALS *Literacies* discussion at http://www.literacyjournal.ca/Forumpages/forum1_f03.html.

Statistics Canada. International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey. Information retrieved Feb.25, 2005. [<http://stcwww.statcan.ca/english/sdds/4406.htm>]

Sussman, S. (2003). Between a rock and a hard place with literacy rate statistics. *Literacies*. Fall: 2. pp. 6-8. [<http://www.literacyjournal.ca/literacies/2-2003/focus/2/1.htm>]