

Family Literacy and the New Canadian: Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning: The Case of Literacy, Essential Skills and Language Learning in Canada

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Workshop Overview

This Workshop brought together a panel of language experts from across Canada that will outline the importance and value of heritage / international languages and illustrate how schools, academics, community organizations and government policies can assist in maintaining and developing the multiple literacies of all Canadians.

Organizer | Organisateur

Bernard Bouska, Canadian Languages Association

Khatoune Temisjian, Québec Heritage Languages Association / Association québécoise des langues d'origine

Participants

1. **Sarah Eaton**, University of Calgary - “Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning: The Case of Literacy, Essential Skills and Language Learning in Canada”
2. **Maria Makrakis**, TESOL International and International Languages Educators’ Association (ILEA), Ontario - “Language and Literacy for New Canadian Families”
3. **Constantine Ioannou**, Government of Ontario - “Ontario Schools and Communities Can Reflect the Languages of our Families”
4. **Khatoune Temisjian**, Québec Heritage Languages Association / Association québécoise des langues d’origine - “Literacy and Heritage/international Languages in Quebec: An Overview”
5. **Michael Embaie**, Southern Alberta Heritage Languages Association (SAHLA) - “Successful Implementation of Heritage / International Language Programs in Canada: Selected Strategies and Case-Studies”

Chair | Modérateur: Marisa Romilly, Society For The Advancement of International Languages (SAIL British Columbia)

Discussant | Commentateur: Bernard Bouska, Canadian Languages Association

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Abstract

This paper examines literacy and language learning across the lifespan within the context of immigrants in the Canadian context. It explores the process of improving literacy skills and acquiring second or third language skills through the systems of formal, non-formal and informal learning, as defined by the OECD. Volunteer literacy tutoring programs and heritage language programs in Canada are among the examples highlighted.

Introduction

I am the daughter of a Canadian father and an immigrant mother, both of whom had a grade ten education. They divorced when I was five years old. My mother was seven months pregnant with their fourth child. My father left the family home. My older siblings, who were in their teens, also left home. My mother knew she would be a single parent and with no family in Canada, no education and no job, my mother made a tough decision in order to get her life back on track. She decided to give up her fourth child for adoption at birth. Following his birth, she had to go to work. Like many immigrants who come to a new country, she leveraged the skills that she had in order to get her first job in Canada. She worked as a cleaner and a housekeeper.

With a desire to be a role model for me, the one child she had left in her care, she began taking part-time upgrading classes and, a few years later, she earned her General Equivalency Diploma (GED), which gave her the equivalent of a high-school education.

Despite her achievement, we lived under the poverty line. Proud and determined, once she had her GED in hand, she went from cleaning houses to working in a library, checking out books for patrons. This was a turning point in our lives because it was the first full-time position with a pension and medical that she had ever held.

Once she had secured this permanent job, she started looking for a way to give back, to help other immigrants integrate and succeed in Canadian culture. She turned a somewhat

perplexing passion and penchant for English grammar into an asset by becoming an English as a Second Language (ESL) literacy tutor.

She worked one-to-one with adult learners. In those days, one did not meet learners in a public place or an agency. Learning happened at the kitchen table, over a cup of tea. Lessons were taught and stories punctuated with laughter, and sometimes tears, were often the medium through which language and culture were acquired and shared.

Over the years, people from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Taiwan occupied a chair in the kitchen classroom. Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving dinners almost always included a guest from a faraway land, who knew little about Canadian holidays. We shared as much food and friendship as we did anything else. Truth be told, we learned as much from the learners as they every did from us.

These experiences became woven into the tapestry of my childhood. They nestled themselves into my heart, ultimately influencing my own career choices. I inherited my mother's slightly perturbing passion for grammar and language structures and went on to become a Spanish instructor at the post-secondary level.

Whenever I would sit at department meetings to discuss curriculum, programming or a new textbook, something always seemed to be a bit off. Somehow, we seemed to be missing something. That "something" kept nagging at me, ever present in the back of my mind, and it eventually formed the basis of this research.

Research question

The main question I wanted to answer was: How do literacy and language learners in Canada really learn, in terms of context? By context, I mean a formal, non-formal or informal context, terms which will be explained shortly.

Assumptions

I began with some assumptions that are as much personal, as they are academic.

Assumption #1: Learning, no matter when or how it happens, is valuable.

Assumption #2: Learning is a lifelong process. It begins the day we are born and does not stop until the day we die.

Assumption #3: Everyone can learn. No matter what cognitive, scholastic or economic state in which one finds oneself, that person has the capacity to learn.

Definitions

I examined the notions of formal, non-formal and informal learning, as defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Then, I applied those definitions to language learning and literacy in Canada:

Formal learning

Formal learning is intentional, organized, structured and often arranged by institutions. There are learning objectives and expected outcomes. Guided by a curriculum, formal learning results in a piece of paper (such as a degree, a diploma or a certificate) that is officially recognized by governments, employers and other learning institutions. This is the most highly valued form of learning.

Teachers of formal learning programs are usually required to have some formal credentials, such as a teaching license or a bachelor of education degree.

In formal learning, a student's results are recorded. These records are kept and are often used to determine whether the student has successfully completed the formal learning program and whether he or she will receive official documentation recognizing that achievement (e.g. degree, diploma or certificate).

Non-formal learning

Non-formal learning may or may not be intentional or arranged by an institution. It is usually organized in some way, even if it is only loosely organized. Teachers may or may not

have formal training or credentials, but they almost always have more experience than the learner.

It is often considered less credible than formal learning. A record of the learner's progress may or may not be kept. Examples of non-formal learning would include adult education classes, heritage language classes, non-credit courses or community education programs.

Informal learning

Informal learning is need not be organized by an institution. There is no rigid curriculum. It is often thought of as experiential learning. Critics argue that informal learning lacks intention and clear objectives. Conversely, it is also the most spontaneous form of learning, as it is unhindered by prescriptive curricula or programming. Informal learning happens any time and any place.

An informal learning "teacher" may be a peer, an enthusiast, a family member, or simply someone who cares. An example of informal learning would be the literacy tutoring that happens between a volunteer tutor and a new immigrant, such as the example I gave earlier about my mother.

Learning through the lifespan

When we are born, we are immersed in an informal learning context. For example, in Canada, as in many other countries in the world, children learn the alphabet, their numbers and other basic literacy skills, in their home environment.

A person's first language is acquired in the informal learning context of the home. The teachers are the person's mother, father, grandparents, siblings and other relatives. We learn through songs, rhymes, games, play and repetition.

In Canada, children are often exposed to non-formal learning programs between the ages of three and five (though sometimes younger), when their parents enroll them in sports or dance programs, pre-kindergarten learning programs or programs within a faith-based community, such as Sunday school.

It is worth noting that many Canadians engage in non-formal learning continuously from childhood through to late adulthood in programs such as heritage language classes,

language immersion programs abroad, adult education classes and so forth. Programs such as the girl guides and boy scouts would also fall into the category of non-formal learning.

While none of these programs directly lead towards a degree or diploma, they provide valuable skills and learning that help to enrich an individual's experience and knowledge base in ways that are difficult to quantify. Friendships and the social connections that result from non-formal learning situations can also provide a strong support network to the learner. Those who benefit deeply from non-formal learning programs often believe deeply in the value of such programs, though they may find it hard to articulate why.

Around the age of six, at least in Canada, a person enters the realm of formal education. We spend anywhere from ten to twenty years in programs where the desired outcome is a diploma or degree.

In terms of language learning, formal language programs have traditionally been very prescriptive and designed for maximum ease of evaluation. Evaluation metrics are constructed in such a way that feedback is very clear, precise and quantifiable. The result is tests that focus on grammar rules, spelling and other criteria that are easy to grade, resulting in a percentage grade that is easy to calculate. In keeping with the parameters of formal education programs, test results are recorded by teachers and records of the students' progress is kept in a file.

Traditionally, formal second language programs have emphasized the written forms of the language, focussing on grammar and structure, precisely because these are the easiest aspects of language learning to test and quantify.

So what happens when the formal education is over? You have earned your diploma or degree and have entered the work force. At this point, the person returns to the non-formal and informal learning contexts such as Saturday morning heritage language classes, adult education programs, informal language exchanges over coffee at a café or over a cup of tea in someone's kitchen.

During retirement or the "golden years", as they are sometimes called, a person's participation in non-formal learning may decline, in favour of returning to an informal learning context, with a focus once again on family. At this stage of the lifespan, it is not uncommon for the individual to be driven by a desire to share his or her wisdom and experience with the next

generation, or perhaps two or three generations. An individual in an informal learning context is intrinsically motivated. Informal learning itself is often characterized by generous and selfless sharing and learning for the joy of it, without expectation of a formal reward.

The problem with lifelong learning

While the term “lifelong learning” is used extensively in the fields of adult education and literacy, the problem is that after a person leaves the formal learning context, we have no way of tracking or recording the learning or enrichment that occurs, despite the fact that at least two-thirds of our lives may not be spent in the formal learning context. As a society, we have become somewhat obsessed with quantifiable learning results. The assumption is that we cannot track, we cannot prove. The majority of learning that occurs during our lifetime, will never be quantified, tracked or recorded.

An example of what happens when informal learning is tracked

There is good news. Governments are beginning to recognize the need to capture, report on and value learning that happens in non-formal and informal contexts.

For example, in 2009 Alberta Advanced Education and Training reported that in 2008, 2000 adults were matched with a volunteer who tutored them with basic literacy skills. On average, each adult received 39 hours of tutoring. In other words, that is 78,000 hours of one-to-one volunteer literacy tutoring in one year, in one Canadian province.

Let us put this in perspective. On average, in Alberta children spend approximately 1000 hours per year in school. Collectively in Alberta then, adult literacy tutors contributed the equivalent of 78 years of learning, and it was conducted in an informal learning context.

The amount of time spent by adult literacy tutors and learners in Alberta in that one year was significant, particularly when that number is contextualized in terms of school years.

Such tracking does not happen often enough in non-formal and informal learning contexts, but it is extremely helpful when making a case in favour of continuing programs or applying for funding.

A comprehensive approach to language learning

In 2007, Archibald et al. conducted a study that revealed some key findings about language learning:

Finding #1: First language is not impeded in any way by studying additional languages.

The millions of Canadians who speak neither English nor French as a first language can rest assured that they can, and should, continue to study, learn and celebrate their first language.

Finding #2: Students who take second language programs in school spend approximately 95 hours per year in language classes. This is insufficient to achieve fluency.

I would add that children who only study languages in a formal school setting may never achieve fluency in that language. But if they supplement their schooling with non-formal learning and informal learning experiences, their chances of achieving fluency are much greater. Non-formal learning includes such things as immersion programs abroad, heritage language classes, community and adult education courses. Informal learning experiences include conversation clubs, social activities, informal tutoring and experiential learning. If a language student adds non-formal and informal learning to their overall approach, they are much more likely to achieve fluency, if for no other reason than they are exposed to the language for longer periods of time. Informal language learning can result in improved conversation skills, a deeper understanding of authentic language and an increase in practical and everyday vocabulary words.

Recommendations

An active approach to language learning that integrates formal, non-formal and informal approaches can significantly enhance the learner's overall language learning experience and fluency. This research has resulted in three major recommendations for language program administrators, government officials and educators:

Recommendation #1: Find ways to support and promote literacy and language learning that occurs outside formal institutions.

Recommendation #2: Create and take advantage of opportunities to report, celebrate and share learning that occurs in non-formal and informal contexts.

Recommendation #3: Increase the visibility, prestige and perceived value of language language learning in informal and non-formal contexts.

Every year in Canada, learners in coffee shops, in church basements, in community centres and in homes around kitchen tables improve their literacy and language skills. They laugh, they cry and they embrace all that it means to be a multicultural Canadian. Grandparents teach parents, who then teach children. We reach across cultures and through generations to share experiences, wisdom and learning in ways that we do not generally quantify though we know that we are enriched both as individuals and as communities as we learn in non-formal and informal ways.

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