

Globe & Mail

September 7, 2012

Literacy: Don't take it for granted.

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Literacy, if we need to be reminded, is the great enabler that allows individuals to unlock their potential. It's the basic skill set on which most other capabilities are built. As we celebrate International Literacy Day (proclaimed by UNESCO in 1965) this Saturday, we should also remember that literacy is a fundamental human right.

Make no mistake, Canada has a literacy challenge. Awareness of this fact is low because most think of literacy as a binary outcome – you're either literate or not. This is simply not true. Like all skills, there's a wide range of proficiency, from non-existent to almost complete mastery. Along this spectrum, one can assess the level of capability consistent with succeeding in a modern knowledge-based economy – in other words, the level of proficiency that correlates with markedly better employment and income outcomes.

The sad fact is that almost one in two Canadian adults falls short of the desired proficiency level in English or French, while close to three in five lack the desired level of numeracy skills. Literacy skills are more critical today than ever before, and they'll become even more vital in the future. Consider that stronger literacy skills make it more likely that youth will complete secondary school and go on to postsecondary education.

In labour markets, more proficient language and numeracy skills make it more likely that an individual will be employed, have a better paying job, avoid unemployment and experience a shorter duration of unemployment if such an unfortunate event does occur.

There are material gains from investment in literacy, not only to the economy but also to society. I challenge you to come up with a public policy challenge that higher literacy can't contribute to reducing.

Worried about rising income inequality or poverty? Higher literacy can help raise incomes for low-income Canadians by improving education outcomes and job prospects. Concerned about integration of newcomers? Strong communication skills in the official languages can help immigrants better convey the value of foreign work experience and education. Anxious about future shortages of skilled workers? Improved literacy allows workers to continue education and skills development. Higher literacy skills also contribute to more civic involvement, volunteering and other social actions. Competence in basic literacy is also a necessary condition to literacy in other areas, such as financial literacy. And stronger literacy skills correlate with better health outcomes.

The bottom line is that there are enormous benefits from improved literacy to individuals, businesses, the economy and society. One of the greatest challenges is that literacy is deeply underappreciated. Those with strong communication and numeracy skills take them for granted and can't imagine a world without them. Many of those with weak literacy skills don't recognize how they're being held back and the opportunities they're missing.

In today's ever-changing and skills-based economy, robust literacy is a must. So take a moment this Saturday to reflect on the value of your language and numeracy skills. Be self-reflective and ask whether

reading more or taking some classes could be beneficial. For those with well-honed skills, consider how you might support and promote stronger literacy skills in others – either through personal action, volunteering or donating to literacy organizations.