
Innovating for literacy and skills: A Canadian partnership

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Abstract:

Canada has a strong tradition in adult literacy and basic skills. Twenty-two national and provincial organizations have roles across the community such as coordinating the actions of local services, sharing knowledge and expertise, developing new models and approaches for literacy and skills development, and providing information and documentation. Each national organization developed from different origins and, over the years, developed expertise in specific areas. Two of the national organizations, both libraries, have a long tradition of working in partnership, with each other and with other major actors. This paper presents their work, especially their work together within a recent partnership initiative.

Keywords: adult literacy, Canada, CDEACF, RESDAC, CLQ

1. Introduction

Two national Canadian libraries have a long tradition of working in partnership to develop adult literacy and basic skills. The first library is the *Centre de documentation sur l'éducation des adultes et la condition féminine* (CDEACF). Founded in 1983, the CDEACF is a French-language documentation centre which specializes in adult education, adult literacy and skills, and women's issues. It relies on a partnership model for developing its documentation collections. Each major theme in its collections is developed in collaboration with an expert partner or *depositing member*, who contributes both funds for purchasing documents and expertise for identifying trends and priorities within the subject area. While CDEACF offers a range of highly appreciated documentation services, one of its main strengths is in Web and digital services. There are approximately 30,000 titles of which 7500 documents are online in open access. CDEACF offers technical training via webinars and distance learning, plus services in information architecture, database development and information monitoring. Its website is extensive and its five monthly bulletins reach 4300 subscribers.

The second library in this partnership is *The Centre for Literacy* (CLQ), a national English-language resource centre for literacy learning and skills development. Describing itself as 'Canada's pre-eminent literacy organization, the Centre for Literacy supports best practices and informed policy development in literacy and essential skills by creating bridges between research, policy and practice' (Centre for

Literacy, 2014). For more than twenty years, CLQ has organized summer and fall Institutes with each one bringing together approximately a hundred researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from around the world to share knowledge and practices on topics linked to current trends in literacy.

The *Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences* (RESDAC), is another partner organization which represents francophone groups and associations dedicated to literacy in Canada. Over the last two years, RESDAC has invested time and effort to develop an evidence-based and integrated approach to skills development with low-literacy learners.

CDEACF has worked in partnership with these two organizations in various contexts for more than ten years. Since 2004, RESDAC and CDEACF have worked together to ensure the Canadian literacy sector is aware of French-language research. Some notable outcomes of this partnership include the creation of the COMPAS directory of education, literacy and skills research and researchers and in 2009, the first Canada-wide colloquium for French-language researchers in the area of literacy. CLQ and CDEACF have worked together primarily to defend the function of libraries and resource centres in the sector of literacy and skills development. Their collaboration in defining this role led to their designation in 2007 by Human resource and skills development Canada as centres of expertise on adult literacy and essential skills. Since 2012, the three organizations have sought a broader and more structured partnership in order to better combine their forces in a context of reduced funding.

2. A new partnership for a new context

In 2013, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), the main federal agency responsible for developing and funding the sector, proposed major changes to the structure of its program, and it was no longer possible for each organization to pursue its activities independently. The new context brought together the national organizations to explore new strategies for collaboration. In order to be funded, proposals were required to fulfill the four major functions of information, research, innovation, and relations.

Three national organizations joined forces to form the core of a broad partnership focusing on the continued development of services in minority-language contexts. As a country with two official languages, Canada has minority populations in each language. In 11 provinces and territories the minority population is French-speaking, while in Quebec it is the English-speaking population which is in the minority. The complete partnership will include 24 organizations and include the three national literacy organizations, the three co-leaders mentioned above, RESDAC's members (11 provincial and territorial organizations), other service providers and members with specific expertise. However this paper focuses on the three partners who are national literacy and skills organizations. The partners are represented below.

- CDEACF (2014) holds the lead role in the partnership for the *Information* function. It keeps the major actors informed on issues related to the development of literacy and skills, especially in minority-language contexts, and facilitates and coordinates the dissemination of and access to information, products, resources and best practices.¹
- CLQ holds the lead role in the partnership jointly with the Canadian Institute for Research on

1 The definitions for each function are translations of those given in RESDAC (2013).

Linguistic Minorities for the *Research* function. These organizations develop and support significant research initiatives and the dissemination of their results through a greater diversity and a greater number of actors.

- RESDAC is the leader of the partnership and holds the lead role in the *Innovation* function. The role of this organization is to encourage, define, develop and promote projects, programs, and resources. RESDAC (2013) encourages the adoption of more efficient and effective approaches regarding issues of skills development in minority-language contexts; assists in the placement and maintenance of the delivery of programs and services suited to persons in minority-language contexts; and supports skills development within the organizations and for their workers (designers, trainers and managers).

The fourth function, *Relations*, is led by two workplace partners, the National Francophone Economic Development Network and the Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation, which focuses on the Quebec English-speaking community. In this context Relations means to create meaningful, comprehensive and efficient long-term relationships between organizations working within the learning system and in the labour market in order to facilitate the implementation of 1) strategic training and 2) strategic organizing of the workplace to encourage ongoing skills development.

3. An Initial Collaboration: Preparing for PIAAC

Although the partnership submitted to the national agency will, if accepted, be funded in mid-2014, the three national literacy partners (RESDAC, CDEACF and CLQ) began immediately to collaborate on existing projects. This paper presents the first such collaboration, around the *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)*. Workers in the field of adult literacy are doubtless familiar with the OECD assessments and *PIAAC* is the third in a series which included the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL). Canada's participation in PIAAC was important, with oversampling for several sectors of the population. Stakeholders from across the country including policy makers, provincial organizations, national organizations, and researchers, were all highly interested in the assessment and its results, which made it a perfect subject for the new partnership. Each of the functions of the partnership is relevant to the Canadian response to the assessment. All three national partners had been active at the time of the release of IALS and ALL and had experience disseminating results, framing reactions, and showcasing research, but this was the first occasion on which they would work closely together and in both languages.

4. Partnering to put information to work for literacy organizations

One of the objectives of the partners was to ensure that the Canadian community, both French and English-speaking, had a good grasp of PIAAC, the new measurements, its relation to previous OECD assessments and other approaches to measuring the literacy and skills of adults. In the fall of 2012, CDEACF began monitoring and disseminating information regarding PIAAC. In 2013, CDEACF created tools to help its users understand and appropriate the concepts related to the program. The first tool was a *special dossier* with background information and key documents, news and twitter feeds and a set of frequently asked questions (FAQ) that would help literacy and skills organizations respond to questions from media about literacy in general and about literacy and skills among francophones. The second tool was a new approach for CDEACF. For the first time, CDEACF went a step further in explaining the subject of a dossier, creating an *infographic* that put PIAAC into the context of the previous assessments and provided a synthesis of key issues.



Une réalisation du:



Diagram 1: Promotional image for the dossier and infographic on PIAAC sent to CDEACF's members and subscribers

Finally, as the release date for results approached, CDEACF worked with RESDAC to ensure that local and regional organizations across Canada would be ready to react when the PIAAC results were released. RESDAC held a series of telephone conferences with its members, in which CDEACF was invited to sit in. In this position of *embedded* librarian, CDEACF was able to better determine the information needs of RESDAC and its member organizations. At the same time, the member organizations learned about the tools CDEACF had developed. The partners produced a basic press release that could be adapted by each provincial, regional or local group and sent to the local media once the results were published.

Results

Each of these elements taken separately would have contributed, to some extent, to the ability of organizations to respond to PIAAC, but taken together, they were far more effective. The infographic gave long-time workers in literacy and basic skills the ability to understand the difference between PIAAC and previous studies within minutes. The key documents assisted in helping them to refine their understandings and the news feeds allowed them see what information was coming out about PIAAC, all around the world, even before the results came out. As a result, local and provincial organizations sent out their press releases in October when the results of PIAAC were published and the media were put into contact with well-informed and articulate spokespersons from the literacy and skills development organizations.

5. Partnering to share research and build expertise

PIAAC is the latest in a series of major surveys of literacy and skills that have supported further research in OECD countries since the 1990s. Given the importance of PIAAC to research, the *Research* function was unquestionably important in the partners' approach to the reception of the new survey in Canada. The partners were very interested in using the well-honed expertise of The Centre for Literacy to organize a Summer Institute on PIAAC. These Institutes are events that bring together a broad cross-section of researchers (university professors, government research analysts and consultants) as well as practitioners and partners from different sectors interested in deepening their knowledge on current

trends in literacy and skills development. The small number of participants (around 100), the pre-inscription survey, pre-readings and the structure of exchanges, create an environment conducive to sharing and co-creating knowledge and practices.

By creating a partnership between the three national organizations, the partners were able to create a wholly bilingual event. CLQ uses a steering committee to orient each Institute. The steering committee for the 2013 Summer Institute included the directors of CLQ, CDEACF and RESDAC; researchers from Canada, Britain and the USA; as well as representatives of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). Participating experts included researchers from the French *Agence nationale de lutte contre l'illettrisme* (ANLCI), representatives from OECD and from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC).

One of the contributions from CDEACF was the creation of French-language resources specifically for the Institute. Following the lead of The Centre for Literacy which prepares annotated bibliographies and background readings for every Institute, CDEACF prepared an annotated bibliography in French. The librarian also obtained permission to distribute several French-language articles to participants as pre-readings. RESDAC and CDEACF also made suggestions for guest speakers for panel sessions and encouraged practitioners from the French-language literacy and skills sector to participate in the Institute.

Results

The results of this collaboration were tangible. Since 1990, the English-speaking Canadian literacy community has had the opportunity to share and develop knowledge together each year on important trends. In 2013 the French-language community seized the opportunity to be involved for the very first time. Participation in the institute was strong. It was completely sold out and a waiting list was put into place a month before the event. Given the excellent reputation of CLQ's Institutes, it was not a surprise that participation was high, but the partners were especially pleased that 30% of the participants were Francophones. This was an excellent number for a first-time bilingual event.

Response to the institute has been exceptional. Participants from Québec, the Canadian west and even some of the international participants left positive comments on the coming together of ideas from the English-language and French-language communities. Interest in the topic and in the bilingual Institutes, is subsequently on the rise. An Institute organized by the same partners in the fall of 2013 attracted 140 participants, the largest number ever for such an event. According to the organizers at CLQ, the proportion of international participants has also increased.

The Institute also provided an opportunity to showcase the partners' accomplishments. CDEACF's dossier and infographic, which had already received a good response, were used by francophones preparing for the Institute. A poster of the infographic was displayed during the Institute, thus helping CDEACF to reach a wider audience. Authors of the OECD and Canadian PIAAC reports gave CDEACF useful feedback on the infographic and another partner offered to translate it into English. The Institute helped to build links as well. Links between policy-makers from several countries, the education and workplace sectors, and also between English- and French-speaking actors were established. The joint bilingual presentation by researchers Donald Lurette, and Steven Reder is a prime example of such partnerships. Donald is the author of much of the research leading to the development of skills models in minority-language contexts including the integrated model proposed by RESDAC; while Steven is the author of a longitudinal study evaluating learning among 100 high-school dropouts in the USA. Speakers also presented research carried out in workplaces and job sectors in different regions of Canada.

6. Conclusion and the future

Perhaps the most telling indication of the success of this collaborative effort is its continuation. The Centre for Literacy, CDEACF and RESDAC are currently planning their third Institute together and continue to explore different scenarios for continuing the partnership. RESDAC has become a *depositing member* of CDEACF, and committed to deposit all its publications and to develop its collection within CDEACF's broader collection. The partnership described in this paper was born of necessity as the changes to our supporting federal agency forced our organizations to change practices, and work more collaboratively. At the time of writing, the future remains uncertain for all 22 national and provincial organizations funded by OLES and the partnership project submitted in the call for proposals has not yet received a response. However, at the same time, the partnership between the three national organizations has made a difference. Their work is more complete when they consult one another and their partnership for the Institutes and for the communications around PIAAC has allowed the organizations to share their strengths more broadly and to reach more members of their respective communities.

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