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## Keeping Up with the Changing Nature of Adult Literacy Education: An Interview with Virginia Wilson



ARTICLE BY **HELEN V. GILL**

During the past fifty years, adult literacy education across America has seen many changes. For example, it has evolved from small isolated volunteer acts of compassion involving learners and tutors to major public policy initiatives involving many people at various levels of society. Simultaneously, the definition of *literacy* has changed from being able to read at the third grade level (1930 Census) to continual upgrading of reading, writing, English language, numeracy, and workplace skills as needed to be an on-going productive member of society throughout life (1991 National Literacy Act). Such changes and their accompanying implications have had a major impact on Adult Literacy Education and its delivery at both the state and local levels. This article explores the impact that these changes have had and will have on adult literacy education programs of one state as seen through the lenses of a state literacy resource center director.

On November 7, 1996, I interviewed Virginia Watson in her office at the State Literacy Resource Center at Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. I asked her about her role in Adult Literacy Education in Michigan, changes she has observed during her tenure (1982 to present), and her predictions regarding the future of adult literacy education, its funding, and its assessment.

**GILL:** *How would you describe your position here at the State Resource Center?*

**WATSON:** I'm the director of the State Literacy Resource Center at Central Michigan University and also director of the Literacy Education Outreach Center at North Central Michigan College which is a community college in Petoskey. My position in both venues is to provide oversight, direction, and management to a comprehensive statewide program designed to promote adult literacy education in Michigan. We're involved with professional development, technology, teacher research, information resource coordination, and information dissemination. We deliver a wide range of services that help adult educators improve their practices. Currently, we are the single source for providing professional development to adult literacy educators statewide. Although there are smaller entities at other universities, we have been designated as the statewide source. We keep the pot stirred for literacy and adult education.

**GILL:** *How do you, as Center Director, do your job in the public policy arena?*

**WATSON:** Just as the Center has a mandate to build capacity for adult and literacy education programs, we also have a responsibility to educate and inform state and federal legislators about literacy issues, so that funding decisions are made which reflect the needs of the field. During the past four years, I have traveled to Washington on several occasions to give testimony to panels and to meet directly with the Michigan Congressional delegation. We keep them informed about adult education in the state, not asking or lobbying for money,



but framing literacy in terms of their interests whether that be welfare reform, immigration reform, or competitive workplaces. We also work with the National Institute for Literacy and other national coalitions to present a united front when we talk about literacy. We likewise respond to legislative requests for information about adult education in specific parts of Michigan.

**GILL:** *In relation to your job, how do you define adult literacy?*

**WATSON:** Very broadly. It's changed a lot in the last five years. We used to talk only about reading, but now, we talk about a wide range of things. We talk about numeracy and functional literacy in terms of being productive in the workplace. It's a changing definition. (For example) when I got into this business several years ago, promotion of adult literacy was viewed from a "poster kid" approach — pictures of grandmothers reading the Bible to kids, or mothers reading stories and helping with homework. That was a linear, simplistic view. It was very seductive because you could do all kinds of nice feel-good things.

Today, our concepts of what literacy is is much more sophisticated, and it's ultimately tied to large public policy initiatives such as Welfare Reform, Immigration Reform, and Global Economies. So, being more contextual, it's being defined in terms of a public policy context. This is fine because we (as adult educators) are forced to be relevant to what is going on in society and the world. But this can be a double-edged sword in that we have to be accountable in terms of those new contexts, too. Whether it's getting a job or being productive in industry, literacy needs may increase or change. Subsequently, it's difficult to know exactly what impact our professional development is having on actual teaching and learning. That's a long term proposition.

Everybody wants to know how many

illiterates live in my neighborhood. My response is that that's not even a good question. We must look at several indicators before we can make some reasonable assumptions that will lead us to believe that there are people who need help in a community. Yes, the definition has changed, and it's ever changing.

**GILL:** *Has the changing nature of literacy and its definition caused your job to become more sophisticated, more challenging, or broader?*

**WATSON:** Probably more challenging (in the area of professional development) because we've had to raise our level of expectations and because a lot more is being demanded of us. At the same time, we have a feeder system at the community level bringing in large numbers of people. Those trainers, teachers/tutors, and program directors have a different set of professional development needs than the trainers of adults who are employed and who need to improve their reading level from twelfth grade to fourteenth grade, or adults who must learn some new technical skills to keep their job.

Early on, I thought you could do it all in one fell swoop. I'm not convinced anymore that you can. I think that while you must have a broad vision of lifelong learning in terms of professional development, you must meet the individual agendas of the volunteer community-based agencies whether it's a cooperative extension service program, a public school program, or a community college adult learning center program. That's very difficult to do. For example in setting up conferences, our experience has shown us that if we combine university, community college, and K-12 interests with the strictly grass roots community based program, everyone thinks we're dumbing down their material to make it palatable for the community-based agencies. Conversely, if we don't adjust the



readability and understandability level, community-based people say that 'this is all high falutin university stuff that doesn't apply to me. It's elitist and removed.' Now I'm back to seeing that while we must have a broad vision in terms of how we approach professional development, we have to be very specific, or everybody goes away angry and disappointed.

**GILL:** *What did you mean when you said that we have to have a broader vision of life long learning in terms of adult literacy and professional development?*

**WATSON:** The whole point is everybody is somewhere on a literacy continuum whether its a community-based program, a workplace program or some other kind of program. Nobody is at the dead end (completely literate or illiterate), and nobody plateaus out. All people are engaged in lifelong learning. I truly believe that nobody is ever done with learning. But, having said that, we must respect people's wishes to get off the continuum if they so choose. Second, we have to continue to provide support to the volunteer communities because dollars are not flowing there. The bulk of the resources are going to training programs that have definite outcomes in terms of getting a job and staying employed. Third, we must not lose sight of the fact that historically, adult literacy programs are very much grounded in community grass-roots. There are dozens of programs going on in this state that are not a part of the huge adult literacy network. They need to be respected and nurtured. Fourth, we must create a sense of urgency in these groups to improve their practice and to strive for higher standards in professional development. Otherwise, we will be promoting isolation. No program can afford to be 'an island unto its self' where both learners and staffs are isolat-

ed. We need to break down that isolation and help individuals connect with the larger community.

**GILL:** *Do you see a desire in some programs to continue this isolated behavior?*

**WATSON:** Sure you see it, not so much in the ones that are receiving outside funds because they have been forced to build collaborative models with funding sources and other partners in the community. In my view, the best programs are the ones that are a combination of a library system, a community-based agency, and a community school whether it's a K-12 or a community college. That's a real powerful triad.

When we started 10-12 years ago, there were a number of such programs in the state. I was ultimately responsible not only for professional development but also for community program development in 22 counties of northern lower Michigan and all of the upper peninsula. At that time, we had some programs who didn't even want to be on our mailing list. We did it wrong as I was sharing with you the other day. When we went in, we (figuratively) said 'we are the literacy people now, and we're going to show you how to do it right. Everything you've done before doesn't matter.'

We didn't really say that, but I'm sure that's how we came across. I don't blame some of those programs, especially the church-based programs and the totally volunteer programs who have been operating without the benefits of outside help, for saying 'Wait a minute!'

We were somewhat arrogant in the way that we handled the situation, but a lot has changed in the last few years. While we don't have as many of these pockets, they still do exist. And it is really important to understand that this is not just a rural issue. You can find those pockets in urban communities where programs have been running for a num-



ber of years in block clubs and churches. Therefore, I think that we have to be real smart. We need to listen and discover what is going on before we make any assumptions about what is or isn't there. Further, I think the political climate has almost decimated our field. So it's very hard to keep people energized and proud of the profession when it's been sliced and diced in a million different ways by public policy and ideology.

**GILL:** *What do you mean by decimated?*

**WATSON:** That professional development, for example, is not a priority. That current moves by jobs commissions and others is to get people trained in some way and get them on a job. There has not been an equal emphasis placed on providing support for teachers and trainers of those people. Rather, professional development budgets have routinely been redlined out of budgets. Even though we still have money for adult education, a perception has been created that the field is no longer important and that there is no more second chance learning. For example, we've heard from policy makers that 'either you get it in K-12 or you don't get it at all. We are not wasting a whole lot of time on people at the low end of the totem pole. We have to look at the people who are ready to go. We can get them off the welfare rolls and get them working.'

This creates a perception that the (adult literacy education) profession doesn't matter anymore. Most of the employees are teachers who work half-time earning \$10 to \$12 an hour and sometimes working in less than desirable places. I have talked with teachers who have had to clean their classrooms wherever they are, clean the toilets, and then recruit students. Then, if they could get enough students, they'd be allowed to apply to be the teacher.

Our situation is almost analogous to

what's happened in the health care professions, particularly nursing. When I was growing up in the '50s, nursing programs in both hospitals and universities were very, very respected. Look at the nursing profession today in terms of how hospitals schedule nurses and how their positions are relegated to a different place than they were. As a result, nurses have a lesser status today. Like nursing, adult literacy is a less-than-valued profession which I can accept as long as people who are given the responsibility for working with people in this venue are given the support and professional development to do the job. Look also at what has happened at the university level. University after university has closed down its department of adult education.

**GILL:** *Going back to your earlier experience with community-based adult literacy programs, what kinds of program evaluation did you find?*

**WATSON:** None in terms of good qualitative or quantitative data. It was largely anecdotal, and that's pretty much the case across the country. It hinged on the success stories of learners. So, when this whole accountability thing really started to hit us a few years ago —outcomes in terms of jobs, getting off welfare, etc. — these programs were just up a creek. It was like implanting a foreign system. They were being asked to account for their programs in a way for which they weren't prepared. It's been painful. It's been real tough. And I think that early on (from the view of those demanding accountability), there was almost a total discounting of what that anecdotal data was all about. They (policy-makers) said, 'Okay, those are nice stories, but how do you put them on a graph?'

**GILL:** *How has the Center responded to this new emphasis on accountability?*

**WATSON:** It's been another interesting professional development challenge. As



far as we're concerned here at the Center, that's a whole new area we have to train people in. We have to make people comfortable looking at their programs, asking questions, collecting data, and analyzing. That's basically what research is. It's not mystical. Every thoughtful, reflective person does it all the time. In the past, programs weren't asked to do it, and funding sources didn't require it.

**GILL:** *Where do you see this accountability trend going? What will be its future role in community-based adult literacy programs that are externally funded?*

**WATSON:** I think that the (accountability) trend is not going to slow down. Many programs have been funded since the early '60s, but the recent political climate in terms of accountability is having a national effect for the first time. In the next 18 months, there will be national standards and outcomes for adult education and literacy programs. The federal government, the place from which most funding comes and will continue to come, will be offering a grant to fund a committee to identify standards of quality, practice and outcomes in the field. This will affect anybody who's working in collaboration with any of the funding streams whether it be through job training programs, social service programs, community based literacy programs or educational institutions such as universities, community colleges, or K-12 schools. Thus, anyone receiving governmental money will not be exempt.

**GILL:** *How do you think community providers are going to accept this?*

**WATSON:** I think they are going to accept it because they are already moving toward it. Many of them are getting into fairly sophisticated grantships with foundations and corporate givers. So, they're struggling and dealing with it all the time. Plus when you look at the educational levels of the community

directors and tutors, you find that most of them are highly educated retired teachers, professors, nurses, and corporate people. Well educated, good-at-heart people are attracted to these efforts. I don't see any slow down in this at all.

In terms of the big picture, I think we're going to be talking much more about lifelong learning. Adult basic education and community-based literacy education will be a part of that. I think that we will not only be involved with accountability of individual programs via national standards, but I think we're going to be talking about environmental conditions. What are those environments that are conducive to lifelong learning? Are those environments at a university level, a community level, or a K-12 classroom level? A large commission funded by the Kellogg Foundation in cooperation with the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning has convened to study this issue. This blue ribbon international consortium made up of visiting professors and others will be issue a report comparable to *A Nation at Risk* in December 1997. This report will act as a blue print for getting those environmental factors in place to sustain and support lifelong learning. This means that we as a State Literacy Resource Center must provide the support, training, professional development, or whatever it takes to make sure that the interests of community based agencies are represented and that they are given the tools to participate effectively as valid stakeholders in the educational community. That's what I see happening.



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**Note:** *Queries about the State Literacy Resource Center and its program can be directed by mail to Virginia Watson, State Literacy Resource Center, 219 Ronan Hall, Central Michigan University, Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859, by telephone at (517) 774-7691, by FAX at (517) 774-2181, or by e-mail to [vwatson@edcen.ehhs.cmich.edu](mailto:vwatson@edcen.ehhs.cmich.edu).*

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