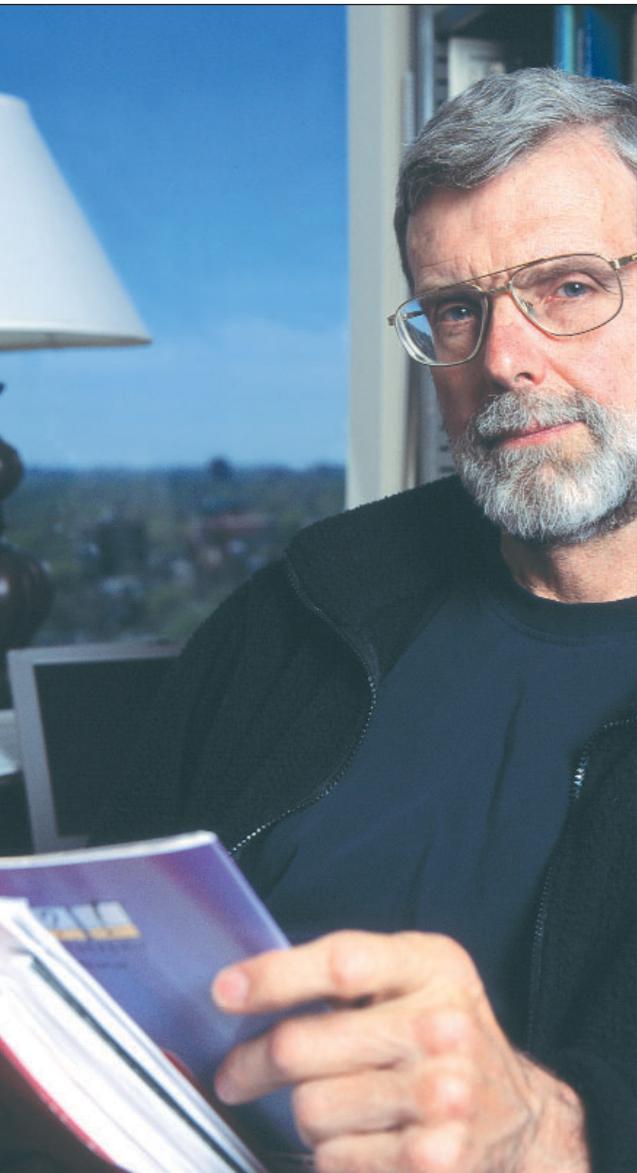


Knowledge gap?

What knowledge gap!

Canadians possess more job skills than they're given credit for

by Clare Demerse



Susan King

David Livingstone holds forth on skills and learning.

Canadians hear the same message over and over again: we're not keeping up. We need more skills, more education, or we'll be left out of the fast-paced global economy. The federal government made that case again this past February in a paper prepared by Human Resources Development Canada that pushes the need for more skills development and adult education in Canada.

You won't hear that message from University of Toronto professor David Livingstone. Dr. Livingstone, who heads the Centre for the Study of Education and Work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, thinks Canada's workforce has more than enough skills already – all it needs is the chance to use them.

Dr. Livingstone's 1999 book, *The Education-Jobs Gap*, argues that many workers in the world's top industrial nations are underemployed. They're doing repetitive and often part-time work when they have the skills and qualifications to do much more. Meanwhile, their exhausted bosses work overtime and struggle to keep up.

In 1996 Dr. Livingstone helped found the national research network called New Approaches to Lifelong Learning. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, it has more than 40 members. Most of them work on specific issues of equity in education, but the network's overall mandate is to study informal learning in Canada and identify the barriers to integrating this type of learning with formal education and certification programs.

His latest work in this area was published in April by the Canadian Policy Research Networks. Entitled *Working and Learning in the Information Age: A Profile of Canadians*, the report documents the participation of Canadians in informal learning and its relationship both to adult education and various forms of paid and unpaid work. The network's national survey shows that most adults spend a significant amount of time teaching themselves, outside of formal classes or courses, about whatever interests them.

That's a valuable resource Canada needs to recognize, says Dr. Livingstone. He recently spoke with freelance writer Clare Demerse.

What exactly is informal learning?

Dr. Livingstone: Informal learning is all of those types of intentional learning that we do outside of organized educational programs. It involves work-related learning of new technologies, computers, and health and safety issues. It also includes learning related to unpaid or volunteer work. Then there is general-interest learning that's related to hobbies and to health issues, which is probably the most common thing that people learn about.

These things are typically ignored, typically not valued very much, but serve as the base for virtually all adult learning. And we've documented in our national survey that, in 1998, Canadians were spending about 15 hours a week on average in informal learning activities, by their own reports. It's a lot of time. It's much more time than people spend on average in adult education courses.

Were you surprised by those results?

Dr. Livingstone: Yes, I was. It was one thing to find a lot of active employment-related learning going on among working people in a number of union locals in the Toronto area, which was what stimulated our work originally. It was quite another to discover the extent of informal learning among groups that had been stereotyped as non-learners. That includes senior citizens, who, according to our study, are spending about 12 hours a week in informal

learning. It includes discouraged workers. It includes high school dropouts, who are very unsuccessful in getting into continuing education programs, but who continue in learning activities as extensively as anybody else. That, I think, has been the major revelation in this work.

What are educational institutions and employers missing when they don't look at prior learning?

Dr. Livingstone: They're missing some of the major and most passionate kinds of learning experiences that Canadian adults are involved in. People care about it most because they do it on their own terms and in their own time. It most directly reflects people's own interests. I think it's fair to say that mechanisms to recognize the value of prior learning are still severely underdeveloped in Canada.

Why do you think that is?

Dr. Livingstone: Basically we've got a system of schooling where people go through in a sequential way. If they haven't passed grade 11, they can't go into grade 12, in spite of the fact that they've been out of school for five to 10 years and have been learning a lot of other relevant information. That's not to deny the relevance of educational credentials, it's just to say that it's never the whole story for any learner.

Let's say I'm a computer worker who's really passionate about gardening. Why should my employer care?

Dr. Livingstone: I think there are two aspects to this. If I've hired a high school dropout, and my assumption is that he's basically not learning anymore, I'm probably going to be content to keep him in a routine job. But if I know that he's an avid gardener and he's got a deep knowledge about horticulture, about fertilization, about various environmental issues, I may look at him differently in terms of his intelligence level and his capacity to do a more complex job.

The second point is there are many instances of workers who are learning employment-related skills. We found a number of auto workers, line workers, who were becoming fairly sophisticated computer programmers, who had zero chance to apply those skills on the job. That's a missed opportunity for both sides.

The federal government released a discussion paper on skills and innovation in Canada's workforce in February. Is there anything missing from that report?

Dr. Livingstone: I think the report fails to recognize that we have a very highly educated population. Even the government's own prior task force on skills registered that we have no general shortage of skills. We do have shortages in some specializations, but what this report does is to generalize from a few shortages in the skilled trades and some other areas to the entire workforce, and that's just false.

The reality is, if you look closely at the actual requirements to do jobs today, in the vast majority of cases people have at least as much skill and education as they need, and in a growing number of cases they have more. With industrial workers, we find that 30 to 40 per cent are in jobs that don't require the amount of knowledge and skill that they have. Therefore, while more education is always a good thing, it will not solve the problem of the gap that we have right now between a highly educated workforce and the lower level of knowledge that's required in the existing job structure. Nor will just addressing tax rates and investment synergies, which is what the second part of the report focuses on. What we have to do is a substantial redesign of the workplace.

Do you think there are enough skilled jobs out there to match all the education that Canada has in its workforce?

Dr. Livingstone: No, not at all. And that's precisely the central problem that's being avoided by the report. I repeat: more education is always a good thing, but it will not resolve the competitiveness problem. I think Canada's economic position in the world can be enhanced through a fuller recognition of the knowledge and skills of its labour force, a recognition that we are world leaders in that regard. It's a matter of shifting our optic from blaming ourselves to celebrating the knowledge and skill base that we have and cooperating to use it more effectively.

How could a company or industry begin to take advantage of this untapped workers' knowledge?

Dr. Livingstone: The first and simplest thing to do is an inventory of workers' knowledge. Trade unions that we've done this with in a project on working-class learning strategies have been quite amazed by the array of skills that are available within their workforces.

And then how does this get reflected in terms of job?

Dr. Livingstone: You redesign jobs to allow people who are doing routine jobs to have more input in the planning and design of work, to use their creative skills. Workplace democratization would mean more consultation and decision-making roles for lower-level workers in the workforce. This goes beyond just trivial suggestion boxes.

The bottom line here is that the vast majority of people in the workforce are entirely capable of making those kinds of constructive and creative contributions. It's not to presume that everybody can do highly complex and highly skilled work; it's to say that most people can do more highly skilled and complex work than they are currently doing. And that takes some of the burden off professional and managerial employees, who are working long hours. We've got a polarizing workforce that has growing numbers of people working overtime, lots of overtime, and growing numbers of people who can't get full-time jobs who want them.

What would it take to democratize work in Canada?

Dr. Livingstone: It has to be a national initiative based on a public dialogue involving government, business, labour and the general public. And we need to have that dialogue urgently.

Is the government moving in the right direction with their new skills and innovation strategy?

Dr. Livingstone: I think they're going in the right direction by encouraging debate. I think we have the possibility, in the next year, to have a serious debate about alternatives. **AU=UA**