The Reading Competencies and Practices of Non-Graduate Adults: Conditions and Principles for a Participatory Written Environment

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Secteur de la formation professionnelle et technique et de la formation continue

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Direction de l'éducation
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Research Report

LEADER – RESEARCH, DESIGN AND TEXT
Rachel Bélisle, Principal Researcher, Professor, Département d'orientation professionnelle, Équipe de recherche sur les transitions et l'apprentissage (ERTA), Université de Sherbrooke

CONTRIBUTOR - RESEARCH, DESIGN AND TEXT
Olivier Dezutter, Researcher, Professor, Département de pédagogie, Université de Sherbrooke

ASSISTANTS – RESEARCH AND TEXT
Dany Boulanger, Documentary Research Assistant, student in the master's degree program in social services, Université de Sherbrooke
Marie Sirois, Documentary Research Assistant, student in the master's degree program in career guidance, Université de Sherbrooke

CONTRIBUTOR – DOCUMENTARY RESEARCH
Marie Cardinal-Picard, C.O., student in the doctoral program in education, Université de Sherbrooke

COMPILATION OF OPINIONS FROM EXTERNAL READERS
Karine Bonneville, student in the master's degree program in guidance, Université de Sherbrooke

EXTERNAL READERS – PRELIMINARY VERSION
Sylvain Bourdon, Professor, Département d'orientation professionnelle, ERTA, Université de Sherbrooke
Diane Charest, Head of Service de recherche, Direction de la recherche des statistiques et des indicateurs, Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS)
Alain Cyr, Literacy consultant
Richard Darville, Professor, School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Carleton University (Ottawa)
Margot Désilets, Adult Education Consultant
Roch Hurtubise, Professor, Département de service social, Université de Sherbrooke
Martine Roy, Director, Virage Carrefour jeunesse-emploi Iberville/Saint-Jean
Sylvie Roy, Research and Adult Education Consultant, Education Consultant, Basic General Education for Adults, Commission scolaire Marguerite-Bourgeoys
Réginald Savard, Professor, Département d'orientation professionnelle, Université de Sherbrooke

OUR THANKS GO TO THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE, AS WELL AS TO OUR COORDINATORS AT MELS:
Andrée Racine, Direction de l'éducation des adultes et de l'action communautaire
Isabelle Coulombe, Project Manager

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Introduction

The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, commonly known as CONFINTEA V, held in Hamburg in 1997, highlighted the importance and urgency of creating a written environment that will not only encourage people with poor literacy skills to learn to read and write, but will also foster the ideals of peace, dialogue, democracy, justice, gender equity, and scientific, social and economic development (UNESCO 1997).[1] Three fundamental breaks occurred at the Conference: (1) a break with the linear vision in which literacy learning is regarded as a prerequisite for all other types of learning; (2) a shift from the fight against illiteracy to the promotion of educational projects focused on the lives of learners and communities; and (3) a form of reconciliation between the written and oral word.[2] Québec, as a member of the Canadian delegation, committed to:

> **Enriching the literacy environment: (a) by enhancing the use and retention of literacy through the production and dissemination of locally relevant, gender-sensitive and learner-generated print materials; (b) by collaborating actively with producers and publishers so that they adapt existing texts and materials to make them accessible and comprehensible to new readers (e.g. the press, legal documents, fiction, etc.); (c) by creating networks for the exchange and distribution of locally produced texts that directly reflect the knowledge and practices of communities (UNESCO 1997, Article 27).**

Article 27 of the Agenda for the Future uses the term *literacy environment*. In other UNESCO documents, however, the term "written environment" has also been used. In our view, the adjective "literacy" is not the best choice; we prefer the term "written environment," which we feel is more neutral than "literacy environment," with its inherent reference to literature and letters. The term "written," on the other hand, refers to the system of writing and to the spoken-written pairing, which is one of the meanings of "literacy." We therefore interpret Article 27 as expressing a desire to create a written environment that provides opportunities for motivation and reinforcement of adult learners' reading, writing and calculation competencies, regardless of whether they are involved in literacy activities. In 2005, almost eight years after this major conference, as preparations are underway for CONFINTEA VI to be held in 2009, it is relevant to wonder what has actually been done in Québec by governmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help create this type of environment.

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1. This standpoint, which can be linked to the standpoint of sustainable human development, is characteristic of much of UNESCO's work, in that it combines the notions of human development and sustainable development. Human development is based on the idea that "the well-being of individuals and communities is now seen as the ultimate purpose of development. Human development must of course incorporate economic concerns, but these must be accompanied by ecological, social, cultural and ethical dimensions;" sustainable development is "development that will meet the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs;" and sustainable human development places the human dimension at the centre of sustainable development (Canadian Commission for UNESCO 2001: Fact Sheet 2).
2. This is a central analysis from the conference on the learning of writing in academic societies—analyses of plurality, held (in French) during the 2002 ACFAS Conference. For details of the conference program and the collective book supervised by Rachel Bélisle and Sylvain Bourdon, published in 2006 by Presses de l'Université Laval, please see: erta.educ.usherbrooke.ca.

The research project described in this report was based on this interpretation of Article 27, and extends the concern to all non-graduate adults, examining their reading and writing practices outside literacy activities. Non-graduate adults were selected to become the research population as a result of the findings from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)[3] which revealed, first, that most of this group have lower levels of literacy (Levels 1 and 2), and second, that the literacy skills of young non-graduate adults, even those who were classified as Level 3 in the survey, are more likely to decline over the years, among other things due to the types of jobs they hold. Very little research has been done on the writing competencies or skills of non-graduate adults in non-educational situations; our project focused primarily on reading competencies and skills and on writing practices requiring reading skills.

Our goal was to devise a conceptual framework that can be used to understand the links between reading practices and the maintenance of reading abilities among non-graduate adults. The framework was intended to support actions aimed at introducing reading practices conducive to the maintenance of reading abilities. As the project progressed, however, we felt it would be more appropriate to identify links between motivation and reinforcement of competencies requiring reading abilities. We will come back to this point in the section on the research problem.

Our model-based qualitative research (Collerette 1996) is based on findings from empirical research published mostly in the last five years, and on theoretical work relating to the focus of our study. To limit the body of work taken into consideration, we selected empirical research which focused on environments that encouraged the use of reading competencies by non-graduate adults in post-literacy, social integration, school-to-work transition and career guidance. We are fully aware, however, that other environments may also foster this type of use.

The project was carried out in response to a request from the Direction de la formation générale des adultes (DFGA) at the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS), and falls within the first and second structural orientations from the Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002a: 6), the first being "to provide basic education for adults" and the second, "to maintain and continually upgrade adults' competencies" (*Ibid.*).[4] In other words, to ensure that all Quebeckers receive basic education, the Government encourages them to go back to school and also to take part in non-formal educational activities and informal learning. The "formal, non-formal, informal" trio of adjectives is commonly found in UNESCO texts (Canadian Commission UNESCO 1997), and appears increasingly in the broader area of recognition of learning and competencies (Bjørnåvold 2001). A number of researchers have also used it to examine the components of lifelong learning (Bélisle 2004a and 2004b; Bourdon and Bélisle 2005; Lavoie, Lévesque, Aubin-Horth, Roy and Roy, 2004; Werquin 2002). Although there is no overall consensus on the interpretation of these three terms, it is generally agreed that "formal" activities are organized by the educational community, that "non-formal" activities are structured activities taking place outside schools, and that "informal" learning takes place through action, with no specific learning goal. With regard to the learning of reading in non-formal situations and informal

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3. This report was written before the initial results from the second International Survey were published in 2005.
4. However, the research project is not directly affected by any of the measures from the Action Plan for Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002b).

reinforcement of reading skills, our original intention was always to establish a connection with the third Government orientation, "to acknowledge prior learning and competencies through official recognition" (Gouvernement du Québec 2002: 6).

If we accept that adults with lower levels of literacy have reading practices outside formal education and literacy initiatives, then we can also find collective ways of supporting those practices in order to help the adults maintain their reading skills or, to use the terms we identified as being most appropriate during the project, to foster the mobilization and reinforcement of their reading-related competencies.

The purpose of this document is therefore to stimulate thinking and debate about the links that can and cannot be drawn between the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies, social writing practices and the creation of participatory written environments. The suggested actions emerging from the model proposed in this report have been set out in a separate paper that will be used by the DFGA as a discussion tool. This report is divided into three chapters. The first sets out the problem of relating the mobilization of reading competencies to social reading practices. The first section of Chapter 1 draws a distinction between "reading skills" as examined in the first International Adult Literacy Survey, and "reading competencies." The second section examines the "competency-based model" used by the employment and educational communities, and the third presents some current teaching models that help us to understand the different components of reading. In the fourth section, we take a closer look at the relationship with the written word, while the fifth section examines the dilemma faced by various communities when they must ask non-graduate adults to read. The sixth section presents various concepts that can be used to analyze literacy practices, and the seventh presents the results of empirical sociological research on the literacy practices of non-graduate adults. The eighth and last section reviews the importance of looking beyond the individual aspect of literacy practices to consider the power issues underlying all social practices.

The second chapter presents the proposed conceptual framework for collective consideration of the link between the mobilization of reading competencies by non-graduate adults and the social literacy practices in which they take part. Throughout the research, the direction of the conceptual framework was altered to bring it closer to the standpoint taken by Québec's basic adult education curriculum reform. As presented here, the conceptual framework focuses on the notion of reading competency rather than reading skill. This change of terminology reflects a conceptual change, in that the notion of competency used here includes a significant contextual aspect, whereas the notion of skill is generally based on the idea that it can be maintained regardless of context. To avoid being limited by an "academic" model of reading, the chapter therefore suggests that the research, while maintaining a critical distance, should be founded on the competency-based logic that is so popular in the modern workplace and that has also been an inherent factor in so many educational reforms. The chapter clarifies and compares a number of concepts that we believe are important in defining the type of environment that is conducive to reading and the mobilization of reading competencies by non-graduate adults

The third chapter refers to Article 27 of the Agenda for the Future, adopted in 2007, and focuses on the different aspects of the proposal to collectively create and moderate participatory written environments, and their compatibility or incompatibility with Article 27.

The report also contains a bibliography listing the numerous reference documents used to prepare this research report, along with an appendix on the initial consultations relating to our proposed models.

The report therefore marks the end of a phase in which several different models of the reading learning process and literacy practices were compared. The first version of the report was sent to a group of approximately 10 external readers from a wide variety of adult education and training sectors.[5] We thank them for their careful work which, among other things, allowed us to make choices in order to clarify certain aspects of the text and of the proposed explanatory and intervention models. In many cases, their critical enthusiasm for the idea of instituting a collective approach to encourage the mobilization of reading competencies by non-graduate adults in the various literacy practices in their respective sectors, and in Québec society as a whole, encouraged us to improve our proposals by incorporating their suggestions. Their comments led us to structure this report in a way that will allow it to support reflection and debate. We have been able to separate the objectives of the report from the original objectives of the research project, and have restructured the document in order to make it easier to read. In addition, the readers' comments led us to formulate a clearer definition of the limitations of both the report and the research project itself.

The research that led to this report was fairly limited in terms of time, resources and scope. Our intention was not to produce an exhaustive profile of the reading or writing practices of non-graduate adults, or a list of the actions already taken in the literacy field and other sectors of Québec society to mobilize or reinforce the reading competencies of non-graduate adults. We did not consider completeness to be a realistic goal, nor did we want to produce a summary document. Instead, our aim was to examine a limited number of empirical studies in order to understand the reading practices of non-graduate adults outside literacy and formal educational activities.

Another significant limitation is the fact that our research focused on reading and not on literacy in general. Because reading and writing activities are often closely connected, and given that empirical research generally considers both these aspects together, much of our work has focused on literacy practices without making a distinction between reading and writing. However, when considering the mobilization of competencies, we focused on research into reading, because the distinction between reading and writing is more common in this case. As a result, the conceptual framework is more concerned with reading. Subsequent research will be done to improve the framework, particularly by including writing competencies; this will be more logical, if the intention is to adopt a participatory approach to reading and writing. At this stage, however, we are thinking more in terms of a "work in progress," and the proposals made in Chapter 3 reflect this.

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5. These individuals have all been named on the credits page. In the appendix, we review the comments made on four aspects that generated a broader range of reactions from the readers.

A further limitation is the choice of the three sectors for our literature review of past empirical research, and for proposed action. The sectors ultimately selected were post-literacy, social and professional insertion, and career guidance. We also took a brief look at the field of literacy and reading instruction when considering the use of real-life texts. These areas were chosen on the basis of methodological realism and a desire to ensure that the research reflected the concerns of actors in the literacy process. The choice of the insertion and guidance sectors reflected a need for the work to contribute to the principal researcher's field of study at the Univeristé de Sherbrooke. It does not incorporate any value judgments relating to the importance of sustained reading practices throughout the literacy process, in basic education and in the non-formal educational activities organized by entities such as museums, libraries and health institutions.

1. Problem situation: Skills, competencies and practices

This first chapter presents the problem of establishing a relationship between the mobilization of reading competencies and social reading practices. As mentioned earlier, we originally addressed the issue from the standpoint of reading skills, basing our approach on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which found that the people who scored best on the tests were those who said they had reading activities at work and elsewhere. Our problem situation was originally based on this initial observation, but we quickly shifted our focus to concentrate on competencies.

1.1 Maintaining reading skills

The IALS was an economy-focused survey based on the idea that economic globalization, technological change, and shifts in employment and the organization of work required additional professional competencies including those involving reading. The survey was divided into three cycles and the final report was published in 2000 (OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000). The first IALS cycle, in which Canada was involved, took place in 1994. The report presents the data collected by 21 countries, all members of the OECD, which were involved in one of the three data collection cycles in the period from 1994 to 1998. The IALS methodology was a combination of household surveys of adults aged 16 and over, along with one-hour reading comprehension tests. The tests used "educational assessment techniques" (*Ibid.*: xi) and included "six easy test items designed to identify very low-literate individuals" (*Ibid.*: 107). People who successfully completed at least two of these items took the main test. The documents used for the tests included a variety of content, examples of which can be found in the Canadian report (Statistics Canada 1996). As for the household survey, it focused on "the respondent's demographic characteristics, family background, labour force status, reading habits at work and at home, adult education and training, and self-reports on literacy proficiency" (OECD and Statistics Canada 2000: 107).

Literacy is closely linked to information processing, and what tends to be tested most is the comprehension of texts through reading rather than, for example, comprehension through writing. In the international report, the authors define literacy as a particular capacity and mode of behaviour, and "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community—to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential (*Ibid.*: x). The Canadian definition of literacy goes beyond the notion of reading skill to encompass information processing as well (Statistics Canada 1996: 11). The authors of the Canadian report note that if a person cannot read and process information, all other learning becomes a waste of both time and money, which tends to limit the economic success of the people concerned, as well as their chances in life (*Ibid.*).

The IALS authors attempted to move away from binary logic—people who mastered the code (the "literate") and people who did not (the "illiterate")—and proposed instead to define literacy according to five "proficiency levels along a continuum" (*Ibid*: x).

Generally speaking, each of the five proficiency or literacy levels was based on what people were able to achieve (Statistics Canada 1996: 98). However, the lowest level (Level 1) was often

associated with what they were unable to do (e.g. "be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from information printed on the package" (OECD and Statistics Canada 2000: xi).[6] Below is a brief summary of the five levels.

1. Level 1 tasks required readers to locate a familiar piece of information in a text (e.g. dosage).

2. Level 2 tasks required readers to make simple inferences, compare information (e.g. choice of answers), locate information on a form, or carry out basic mathematical operations (addition and subtraction).

3. Level 3 tasks required readers to identify several pieces of information located in different parts of the text. In mathematics, for example, they were required to make inferences in order to select the appropriate operation.

4. Level 4 tasks were much more complex. Texts were longer and denser, contained more distracting information, and the information requested was more abstract. Readers were sometimes required to process conditional information.

5. Level 5 tasks required users to use specialized knowledge, process conditional information and make high-level inferences. The texts contained a large number of distracters.

Level 3 was considered the "suitable minimum for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society" (*Ibid.*: xi). The IALS authors associated this level with secondary school completion and college entry. They presented Levels 4 and 5 as describing respondents "who demonstrate command of higher-order information processing skills" (*Ibid.*: xi).

The IALS tests were built around three different aspects of literacy, namely prose literacy, document literacy and quantitative literacy.[7] The IALS results suggest a link between regular use of reading skills at work and home on the one hand, and the maintenance or improvement of those skills on the other. The results also show that adults' reading and writing skills are dependent on life experience as well as on formal learning (OECD and Statistics Canada 1995: 96). Everyday activities, professional activities and training that allow participants to practice their reading or writing skills can therefore foster literacy. According to the IALS report, people in employment are often called upon to read and write, at different levels depending on the country and sector of employment, but the unemployed are more at risk of diminishing reading skills. As the Canadian report points out, lack of reading practice is a problem for many unemployed people, because their reading skills are already relatively poor (Statistics Canada 1996: 53).

In the IALS, skill maintenance and skill acquisition go hand-in-hand, and the notion of maintenance infers the possibility of losing already acquired skills. In other words, people who had apparently acquired literacy skills at school could perform at a lower-than-expected level in the classification tests. The reverse was also observed, allowing the analysts to conclude that activities other than formal basic education had the effect of maintaining and improving reading skills. The third chapter of the final IALS report considers the variables that have a key impact on literacy levels, namely level of education, socio-economic background (including parents' level of education), age, participation in

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6. However, problems may have arisen from the documents used for these tests (Bélisle 1997a: 32).
7. The second survey in 2003 maintained the first two scales and added a numeracy/problem-solving scale as well. The first Canadian results were published on May 11, 2005 (Statistics Canada 2005).

the labour market (including opportunities for reading and writing at work), participation in structured training activities, reading books, use of a foreign language and involvement in volunteer activities. According to the 1996 IALS results for Canada, level of education had by far the greatest impact on literacy levels.[8]

With regard to the specific question of maintaining reading skills, the survey offered some general information on reading activities in the paid workplace and their impact on literacy levels. The links were found to be complex, and were related to the activities themselves, their variety and frequency, and the employers' requirements. The various types of texts associated in the IALS with reading in the workplace included reports, letters, diagrams, manuals, invoices and instructions. Better educated people with higher literacy levels had more opportunities to read texts and to use their reading skills than less educated people with lower literacy levels. The survey found that "adults at Level 1 have few opportunities to interact with literacy materials during a working week" (*Ibid.*: 40) and that the fact of having "little opportunity to practice skills at work increases the probability of being in Level 1" (*Ibid.*). In most countries, people with low skills were required to write less than once a week at work (*Ibid.*). However, the survey did not specify the complexity of the texts to be read, or the interactions in the reading situations.

In the study described in this report, the IALS data were used as secondary data to expand on specific elements. A Canadian study on this topic (Krahn and Lowe 1998) observed that reading skills and workplace requirements concerning the use of texts often go hand-in-hand. For example, workers with low literacy skills—often those who attended school for shorter periods—tended to have jobs with lower reading and information processing requirements. It was noted that where there was a lack of concordance in this respect among young adults, it was more likely to be in terms of surplus skills (over-qualification) than the reverse. However, the situation changed somewhat for the 26-35 age group, where the phenomenon of over-qualification was less frequent. Based on this, the authors confirmed the assumption that reading practice is a contributing factor to literacy.

According to the IALS final report, the labour market is a major lever for both the maintenance and development of reading skills (OECD and Statistics Canada 2000: 39):

> **Individuals who engage regularly in formal learning at work through activities such as reading, writing and calculation have more and better opportunities to maintain and enhance their foundation skills than people who do not use these skills regularly.**

Moreover, although the IALS questionnaire focused more on reading and writing in the workplace, the authors of the final report nevertheless noted the importance of considering everyday activities (*Ibid*: xiv):

> **Literacy skills are maintained and strengthened through regular use. While schooling provides an essential foundation, the evidence suggests that only through informal learning and the active use of literacy skills in daily**

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8. In 2005, the level of education of respondents was not as significant as in 1996, but the level of education of parents was more significant. There was also a slight drop in the number of adults classified at Level 1 (from 17% to 15%) (Statistics Canada 2005).

activities—both at home and at work—will higher levels of proficiency be attained. The creation of literacy-rich environments, in the workplace and more generally, can have lasting intergenerational effects.

Analysis of the IALS data reveals that the results obtained in the tests are positively linked to daily reading practice and negatively linked to the number of hours spent watching television.[9] The authors of the report point out that "if literacy skills are not used they will deteriorate" (*Ibid.*: 49).

A survey like the IALS is based on a specific conception of literacy skills, namely that they are technical skills independent of the context in which they are applied. According to the IALS authors, the test results reveal the skills of the people interviewed in their everyday activities at work, at school, at home and so on. This view is based on a conception of decontextualized learning associated with the cognitivist theories that formed the basis of the IALS survey (Hunter 2004a). This conception has been criticized by supporters of situated learning theories, the foundations of which are usually attributed to Jane Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), and by certain supporters of socio-constructivism, who regard context-related knowledge as playing a primary role in the performance of various tasks, including reading. Based on this standpoint, which we share,[10] the IALS results need to be put into perspective because of the reading context used in the survey situation.

The IALS provides information on respondents' proficiency in a test situation for which they were not prepared, which is not the same as a school test, and which, for most of the individuals concerned, was not representative of a real-life reading situation. These people were asked to read documents selected by others, and to answer questions in a context separate from other organizational, production or intervention tasks, and probably far removed from their everyday reading activities (Bélisle 2003: 57, free translation). Moreover, the IALS tests were based on written documents that were not necessarily part of the respondents' cultural and professional world,[11] composed among other things of the prior reading knowledge that is normally applied to understand a text.

Prior knowledge of a text's content reveals what scientists (Giasson 1990) refer to as the inherent "structures" that readers activate in reading situations. These "structures" encompass all prior knowledge of the language in general, the content addressed by the text, the author of the text and the communication situation in which the text is used. The model used to understand what happens in a given reading situation shows comprehension as an interaction between the reader, a text and a context (*Ibid.*). The more cohesive these three aspects are, the more effective the comprehension will be. In the case of the tests mentioned earlier, the context is *a priori* unfavourable. The texts chosen for the tests are unrelated to the respondents' reading intentions, and the actual testing may disturb the process.

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9. The traditional comparison between time spent reading and time spent watching the television needs to be reviewed, since modern television channels often broadcast images and text at the same time (e.g. telescript news scrolling along the bottom of the screen).
10. This is also the position underlying the educational reforms currently underway in Québec, including the basic adult education curriculum reform (Medzo and Ettayebi 2004).
11. If we take the example of the fact sheet on flower growing reproduced in the Canadian report (Statistics Canada 1996: 102), Rachel Bélisle (2003: 57) suggests that comprehension of this type of text is fostered by general knowledge of indoor plants, an activity she says is probably not very common in underprivileged communities or among men, who rank lower in terms of prose reading skills.

The importance ascribed to context in reading and in learning in general is characteristic of the socioconstructivist standpoint. Québec's basic adult education curriculum reform uses a vision of instruction and learning that incorporates socioconstructivism and the competency-based approach (Medzo and Ettayebi 2004: 55). The notion of competency includes attention to the context or situation, an aspect that is not present in the notion of skill, at least where skills are decontextualized, as is the case in the IALS. We therefore felt the notion of competency was more relevant than the notion of skill for an examination of reading competencies.

1.2 The competency-based approach

The competency-based approach can be defined as "a combination of a set of resources which, when coordinated together, allow a situation to be understood and responded to in a more or less relevant way" (Jonnaert, Lauwaers and Pesenti (1990), cited in Jonnaert and Masciotra (2004: 83), free translation). The notion of competency as it applies to reading, and indeed to other fields, is far from stable. For example, French-language reading experts speak of "competences à lire" (Giasson 2003), "compétences de lecture" (Dumortier 2002; Vanhulle and Dufays 2002) or even "compétences en lecture" (Dezutter and Vanrossomme 2001) or "compétences relatives à la lecture" (Besse 1995). Generally, however, the act of decoding or unscrambling a text, and the components of the reading activity, are referred to as "compétences de lecture" or "reading competencies" (Vanhulle and Dufays 2002).

According to Philippe Jonnaert and Domenico Masciotra (2004), the notion of situation lies on the frontier of socioconstructivism and competency. These two authors are university researchers, and both are involved in the basic adult education curriculum reform. In their view (2004: 76), "competency logic"[12] needs to be further theorized in order to guide the competency-based approach in formal education, so that it does not slip towards utilitarianism or a reductive vision based on the behaviouralist standpoint. Like these authors, we suggest that care is needed when using the notion of competency to approach the informal reading practices of non-graduate adults and their relationship to written texts.

In the field of non-formal education, the notion of competency is situated in the empowerment approach as described by William A. Ninacs (2003), among others. Competencies allow for individuals and groups to participate in and perform actions with a view to achieving sustainable human development. Empowerment can be associated with approaches such as the approach to non-formal education known as *Nos compétences fortes* ("our strong competencies"), introduced by the Institut canadien de l'éducation des adultes (ICEA)[13] (Bélisle 1995). The literacy and social/ professional insertion communities in Québec were all involved in preparing and testing this approach, and a number of organizations have since adopted it (Bélisle 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1999 and 2004b).

The notion of competency is also present in the guidance community, as witnessed by the success of the competency report, which is gradually replacing aptitude, interest and personality tests, the

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12. The labour market refers more to "competency logic", a term used by many participatory management analysts.
13. In 2003, this organization became known as the Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes (ICEA).

stability of which is being called into question in today's rapidly changing society (Guichard 2003). Here again, the notion of competency is far from stable, nor is it based on a clear standpoint. However, several studies are now underway to clarify the notion of competency in the career guidance field. For example, the work of Guy Le Boterf is often cited in this respect. Le Boterf draws an important distinction between a person's internal and external resources and the competencies he or she uses in a given situation. In Chapter 2, we will look at how his model can be adapted to reading situations and the reading resources available to non-graduate adults.

In the meantime, the next section examines the components of reading from a socioconstructivist standpoint.

1.3   Components of reading

As mentioned earlier, the basic model proposed by Jocelyne Giasson (1990 and 2003), and since used by a number of other researchers, associates reading comprehension with an interaction between reader, text and context. Each individual component is complex in and of itself, and their interaction increases that complexity. In teaching, the reading activity is also included in the interaction (Vanhulle and Dufays 2002) and can be treated as the fourth component of reading.

Figure 1 is adapted from the work of Sabine Vanhulle and Jean-Louis Dufays (2002), who used Jocelyne Giasson's work as a basis for their own model of understanding reading components. According to these authors, it is what the reader (relationship to knowledge, reading strategies, partialities, etc.) perceives as the text (content, structure, etc.) and the context (place, time, etc.) that will interact in the reading activity. The three aspects of the model interact closely. However, as the authors point out, the reader constitutes the truly active base since he or she integrates (or filters) the other two bases (*Ibid.*: 17).

In the model, the reader is a person who has an immediate and direct relationship with the text in a reading activity.[14] The authors regard reading strategies as reading competencies, and suggest that readers who are unable to make inferences about texts with a high implicit content (*Ibid.*: 16) will find themselves in a difficult position in the modern world. In this respect, the model is based on the premise of reader autonomy in the reading activity.

Again according to Vanhulle and Dufays, the reading activity can be broken down into four principal operations:

1) Preliminary orientation: Before reading, readers "pre-read" texts based on their relationship with the written word, the perceived content of the text and the reading context.

2) Modalization: Readers adopt a reading mode or psycho-cognitive posture that will have a significant impact on the construction of meaning (*Ibid.*: 22). For example, as readers read they invest a varying level of awareness of the issues.

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14. We use the term "reading activity" to refer to the act of reading by a reader. We will see later in this report that the concept of reading practice is broader, and includes people who may play a role without necessarily reading a text.

3) The meaning construction process: Two levels of reading are called upon, the first relating to the words and the second to the text as a whole. At each level, the act of reading requires the construction of assumptions on the meaning of the text, with areas of uncertainty deriving from the text itself or from the reader's prior knowledge. Readers construct their interpretation of a text through the reading activity.

4) Evaluation of the text: During the reading activity, readers evaluate what they are reading by means of different criteria that vary according to the reading activity. The reader's frame of mind, tastes, interests, initial motivation for reading the text, and the place and time of the reading are just some of many elements that play a role in the text evaluation process. As a result, the same text may be evaluated very differently by different readers, and even by the same reader, depending on the context in which it is read.

In this model of reading components, the notion of context includes available resources as well as the requirements of the request for reading. However, the model was designed for teachers who teach reading in a specific environment, namely schools in the mandatory education system, although it also includes a variety of reading contexts.

1. Problem situation: Skills, competencies and practices

Figure 1
Components of Reading

Reader

Knowledge of the world, relationship with the written word, frame of mind, etc.

Reading strategies

Partialities (plans, expectations, reasons for reading, etc.)

Reading Activity

Construction of meaning

Modalization

Evaluation

Reader's perception of the text

Reader's perception of the context
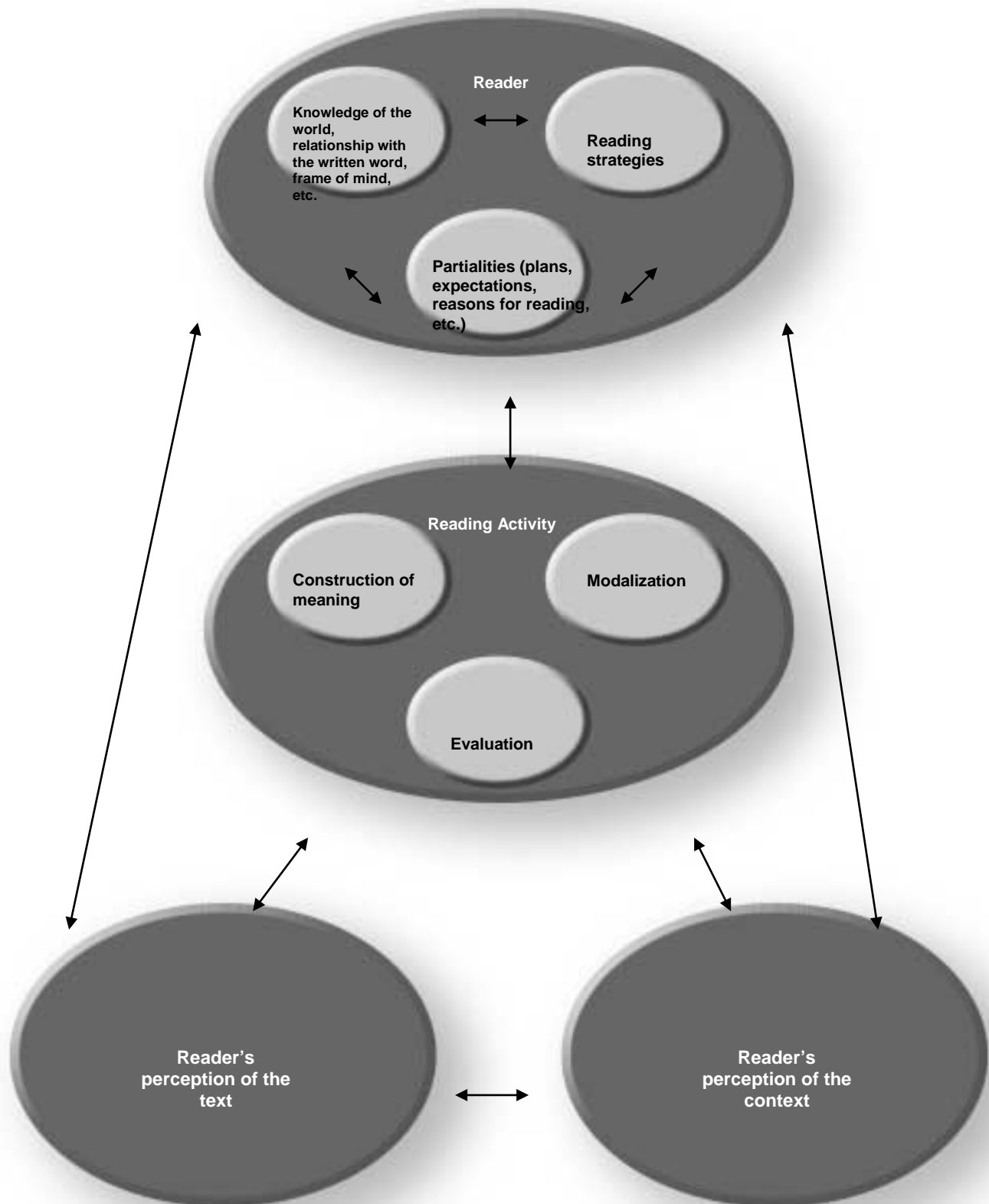
Source: Adapted from Vanhulle and Dufays (2002).

Among adults, there are many different contexts, types of readers and types of reading activities, and this increases the complexity of all the components of reading. In the case of formally learning to read at elementary school or later—for example, in a speed-reading or literacy course—tasks tend to focus on the act of reading (or re-reading). On the other hand, lifelong learning of the written word through non-formal and informal activities is much more diverse (Bélisle and Bourdon 2006). In many reading situations encountered by non-graduates, for example, reading is part of other activities (Bélisle 2003). The texts encountered by non-graduates often deal with complex subjects or are concerned with highly intense or highly complex human experiences; they may be poorly written; they may refer to other texts; they may be linked to action; and so on. Reading contexts, too, can vary significantly. For example, adults may read alone, with others, or among others; they may have chosen what they are reading, or be required to read a given text, or read during and for their work (paid or not), or for non-work-related purposes; and so on. Readers may or may not have a clear perception of the context in which they are reading and the broader cultural environment of their community or society. There are also many differences in readers' frames of mind when reading. For example, they may have different tastes, or use methods that may or may not be effective and so on.

In the next section of the report we will look in more detail at the reader's relationship with the written word and the ongoing learning process within which that relationship is built. These notions are of particular interest here, due to the emphasis on the reader's frame of mind and perceptions of reading in the socioconstructivist perspective.

1.4 Relationship with the written word

In the adult education field, author Jean-Marie Besse (1995) has helped disseminate the concept of relationship with the written word. In Québec, a major literacy action research project (Desmarais 2003) and the thesis of Rachel Bélisle (2003) were both based on Besse's work. Interest in the relationship with the written word is not confined to the field of adult education, but is also relevant to the renewal of French language teaching, with the shift from reading-based pedagogy to reader-based pedagogy (Van Cleeff 1998). The concept appears to be found more in the French-speaking research community than in its English-speaking counterpart.

Jean-Marie Besse highlights three major groups in the relationship with the written word, namely the emotional dimension, including attitudes towards the written word; the relational and social dimensions, including the contexts in which people use (or do not use) the written word; and the cognitive dimensions, including reading and writing proficiency, procedures and strategies. In the relationship with the written word, the subject[15] encounters the object, which is the written word: "The subject's presence is fundamental to the notion of the relationship with the written word" (Bélisle 2003: 59, free translation), a relationship that is closely bound to the "relationship with knowledge" (Charlot 1997). The relationship with the written word can be regarded as "a set of relationships with the written object and how it fits into the world, and how thoughts are structured, communicated and

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15. This is a concept of the sociology of the subject, which postulates that "the subject takes over the social in a specific form, including its position, interests, standards and the roles that are offered or imposed upon the subject. The subject is not distanced from the social, but is a singular being that takes over the social in a specific form, transposed into representations, behaviours, aspirations, practices and so on" (Charlot 1997: 47, free translation).

expressed" (Bélisle 2006). Assimilation of the written word is the "process of building the relationship with the written word" (*Ibid.*).

The concept of assimilation is ascribed to Jean-Marie Besse, who defines it as a linear process that (1995: 88, free translation):

> **Begins before school, […] is changed by contact with the educational institution, and then continues to develop during adult life through personal, professional, cultural and relationship activities, and according to the increasingly complex methods of using the written word in modern societies.**

Work done by a community literacy organization in Longueuil known as *La Boîte à lettres*, and by Danielle Desmarais (2003), suggests that reading and writing may be assimilated (or learned and developed) in different ways. However, there is no detailed explanation of the assimilation of reading in their document.

These authors do, however, qualify the notion of assimilation as proposed by Jean-Marie Besse (1995), extending it to include the assimilation of reading and writing. They define the process as follows (Desmarais 2003: 254, free translation):

> **A dynamic that occurs between a subject-actor and the written word (reading and writing). This dynamic takes the form of the person's interactions with other people in his or her environment, and these interactions, in turn, support a variety of reading and writing activities that vary at each stage of the person's life and are based on representations of the written word.**

The interactionist position on which this definition is based cannot be ignored here; the adults interviewed felt the relationship with others, which focused on the written word, played a significant role in the process.

This process is a complex one. Different dynamics, events, environments and significant people can slow it down, stop it or restart it. Some of the experiences that slowed down or stopped the process of assimilation of reading and writing among the people who took part in the *Boîte à lettres* research included difficult emotional, family and relationship experiences, exclusion and humiliation at school, academic failure and dropping out of school, and problems finding a job. According to the researchers, one of the factors that slow down assimilation of reading and writing is the fact that schools do not consider family culture in course content, thereby devaluing it, and this appears to have a significant impact. Assimilation is regenerated through opportunities to reinvest writing practice and rediscover the joy of learning, although this requires a commitment from the subject, a suitable environment, stimulating relationships and learning perceived by the subject as being relevant (*Ibid.*).

To our knowledge, Michèle Petit (2002) is the researcher who has examined the relationship with reading in most detail. More work has been done, mainly in the field of didactics, on the relationship with writing, for example by Christine Barré-de Miniac (2000), Olivier Dezutter and Francine Thyrion

(2001), and Marie-Claude Penloup (2000).[16] Michèle Petit illustrates a particular relationship with reading, the goal of which is to discover possible responses to the existential problems faced by human beings, "the intimate, singular experience of readers" (Petit 2002: 5, free translation). This approach has been echoed by a number of authors, including Abdelmalek Sayad (1995), who gives the example of Arab immigrant women who read in order to exist.

However, Sayad also notes the ongoing presence of the Other in existential questions, and although physically separate, the world is never absent from the intimacy of reading. Immigrant women read to find themselves, take part in social life and become free from the physical and mental isolation in which they find themselves in their new country (France in this case). Fabienne Soldini (1995) also situates the relationship with reading within the desire to break out of isolation; at least, this is what she observed in her interviews with French prisoners, namely that reading allowed them to achieve cognitive escape, gain an understanding of themselves and the world, and prepare for their release from prison.

Although empirical research focuses on the importance of the Other in the relationship with reading, or with writing, this relational and social aspect of the task appears to have been neglected by many social actors. In the next section, we look more closely at this issue, which seems to be linked to a discourse of avoidance of requests for reading (and writing) by non-graduate adults.

1.5   The dilemma regarding requests for reading

In her Ph.D. thesis, Rachel Bélisle (2003) notes that the facilitators from the community organizations studied for her research paid more attention to the emotional (e.g. like or dislike of reading) and cognitive (e.g. knowledge of codes, vocabulary) aspects of the relationship with the written word. The relational and social aspects of the written word were, to use her terms, a kind of "blind spot" (Bélisle, free translation). Although the written word may be perceived from a non-relational standpoint, research has shown that it is in fact woven from large numbers of relationships: at the time the relationship begins, in the everyday course of the relationship, and during transformation of the relationship. It shows that "project facilitators often perceive reading and writing activities as being in conflict with the relationship that is being built, in the group and via individual meetings, by words and verbal exchanges" (Bélisle 2005: 2, free translation). The fact that the relational and social aspects of the relationship with the written word were often ignored meant that the facilitators were unable to understand how the power issues underlying certain requests for reading could cause certain less educated young adults to withdraw from or reject the request.

This view reflects the standpoint taken by Mary Ellen Belfiore (2004), who noted that the power-related issues within reading situations are felt strongly by workers but are not felt at all by the supervisors or managers responsible for the request for reading; this latter group tends to believe that, if a job performance grid is not completed properly, the person must have trouble reading. This is a good illustration of the complexity of reading situations and the inherent power issues in which

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16. French sociology of reading has also addressed certain elements of the relationship to reading, although it has focused more on the social use and generally limits its analysis to the reading of books.

non-graduate adults may be involved. Here again, only the cognitive aspect of the relationship with the written word was addressed in the supervisors' comments.

It is reasonable to think that this is also the aspect of concern to the officers of various public agencies who, in 1996-1997, said they tended to limit or avoid requests for reading or writing in communications with adults who were less comfortable with the written word (Bélisle 1997a and 1997b). This trend, or at least the underlying discourse, is based among other things on the officers' desire to be accessible to the adults in question. It was also observed more recently in community social integration and job placement agencies (Bélisle 2003; Bernard 2004), and in a survey of "weak readers" in unstable employment attending the activities of public or community organizations in the Eastern Townships region of Québec (Hurtubise, Vatz-Laaroussi, Bourdon, Guérette and Rachédi, 2004).

Rachel Bélisle (2003) observed that avoidance also applied to some (but not all) reading and writing activities in community organizations dealing with young adults. For example, people were rarely asked to read to themselves, but reading out loud was common practice. There were also more requests for writing (e.g. résumés, testimonials, lists of things to do) than for reading. Bélisle proposed that the avoidance of reading and writing activities by social integration and job placement officers was based on their own relationship to the written word, which had a strong academic connotation.[17] Similarly, an action research project carried out in France revealed the importance of encouraging job placement officers working with young undereducated adults not to focus on the academic aspect when addressing the subject of reading and writing (Biarnès and Azoulay 1998).

According to the officers concerned, avoidance of reading and writing was a response to the resistance they encountered among some non-graduate adults[18] following requests for reading or writing (Bélisle 2003; Hurtubise et al. 2004; Bernard 2004). It was also found that the professional personnel were unaware of, or chose not to consider, the reading and writing practices of many undereducated adults.

Moreover, they did not consider the fact that the written word is present throughout our environment: on walls, in informal discussions, in meetings with professional staff, and so on (Bélisle 2003; Hurtubise et al. 2004).

Avoidance tended to focus more on formal requests with academic connotations.

The lack of commitment on the part of public and community organizations to the support and mobilization of competencies involving reading, particularly for comprehension and information processing, can probably be explained by the fact that many of the non-graduate adults with whom they are in contact (regardless of age) do not talk about their reading and writing difficulties. The IALS showed that many adults who were found, during testing, to have poor literacy skills had said, in the interview, that they felt their reading skills were sufficient for their everyday activities (OECD and

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17. Unlike teachers, these people have considerable flexibility when selecting their activities.
18. However, the officers observed that resistance to writing also occurred among graduates from every level of education, although less so than among non-graduates. The thesis written by Lahire (1993a), on social oral and written forms shows how some forms of social relationships can be used to resist dominant social forms, including the "academic form" (Vincent, Lahire and Thin 1994).

Statistics Canada 1995 and 2000; Statistics Canada 1996). Two recent studies in Québec also found that non-graduate adults were generally satisfied with their reading and writing skills, which they felt were sufficient to meet the demands of their personal and professional lives (Bélanger and Voyer 2004; Lavoie et al. 2004).

The next section examines the literacy practices of non-graduate adults, based on sociological research focusing on the social uses of literacy. The first subsection describes the conceptual tools, and subsequent subsections present some of the reading and writing practices of non-graduate adults and people considered to have poor reading skills.

1.6 Literacy practices

In the scientific literature, "reading practices" are not always addressed separately from other literacy practices, and they are not always developed to their fullest extent. The separation between reading and writing appears to be based more on an academic perception of learning or on specific cultural practices, particularly the reading of books.

There have been some specific studies of reading practices among non-graduate adults, but in many other studies the subjects' level of education is not specified. In this report we have concentrated on research into the practices of undereducated adults. We begin by describing some of the conceptual tools that have been used to examine reading practices.

1.6.1 Social practices

The term "reading practices" as it is used in the IALS refers to reading certain types of texts and to reading at certain intervals. The term is quite widely used and can be found in the field of reading didactics, among others. To avoid confusion, however, it may be more accurate in this case to use the term "reading activity." The concept of "reading practices," or the broader concept of "literacy practices," has formed the basis of many English-language and French-language ethnographic studies. It is more general, and includes the social practices that are directly or indirectly based on the written word in general, and reading in particular. Reading practices are therefore much broader than reading activities, as understood by Sabine Vanhulle and Jean-Louis Dufays (2002) (see section 1.3). The subject forming the core element of individual or group reading practices is not necessarily a reader who is in direct contact with a text. Research into the social practice of literacy therefore differs significantly from research into reading didactics, which focuses specifically on reading. For example, in social integration and job placement organizations, "structured written content may be memorized by the speaker in order to capture the attention of his or her listeners more easily. This is the case of the résumé in simulated interviews" (Bélisle 2003: 177, free translation).

In the above example, a person has had to read his or her résumé several times to memorize it, but did not read it during the simulated interview. The simulation was nevertheless based on a widespread social practice, that of "structuring one's oral performance in writing" (*Ibid.* 219, free translation).

David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998: 8) describe literacy practices as "cultural ways of using literacy." They examine the notion of literacy practices; in their view, such practices focus on the

connection between the reading or writing situation and the social structures in which that situation occurs.

Literacy practices, then, are cultural ways of using written language, and as such they cannot be studied solely through observable behaviours; the values, attitudes, feelings and relationships with reading and writing[19] must also be examined, along with the discourse on literacy events. These events involve reading and writing, but the written word is not necessarily an object of reading or writing, as in the above example. In societies based on the written culture—which is the case of most modern societies—many social practices are in fact based on reading or writing. Therefore, it is possible to construct and understand the literary practices of actors by encouraging them to comment on literacy-centred activities or events.

There are two main methodological trends in the research into literacy practices: (1) one using ethnographic methods, direct (and often participatory) observation and interviews (sometimes informal) with actors; and (2) one using fairly structured questionnaires. Between the two lies what is known as declarative research, with more open questions and interviews in the subjects' own environments.

Declarative research can sometimes miss reading practices because of the "legitimacy effect" or "when someone is asked what they are reading, their reaction is to wonder what they are reading that is worth declaring. In other words, can what they are reading be considered legitimate literature?" (Bourdieu and Chartier 1993: 274, free translation).[20]

There are many typologies to examine literacy practices, particularly among undereducated adults. Some of these typologies are presented below.

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19. This is what French-language research often associates with the relationship to the written word.
20. The legitimacy effect can also be generated by the fact that surveys usually document legitimate culture. For a critique of the indicators of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural legitimacy, see *La légitimité culturelle en questions* (Pelder and Ethis 2000).

The legitimate-regular axis

The legitimate-regular axis is used to situate practices in the social world. The most socially legitimate practices—at least in societies such as Québec and France, where research into social legitimacy is rooted—are often associated with a heritage that is conveyed and protected by institutions (Van Cleeff 1998). Regular practices involve entertainment, home life and the organization of work among others, and are often closely linked to action (e.g. preparing meals, shopping, incident reports, etc.).

Figure 2
Types of reading
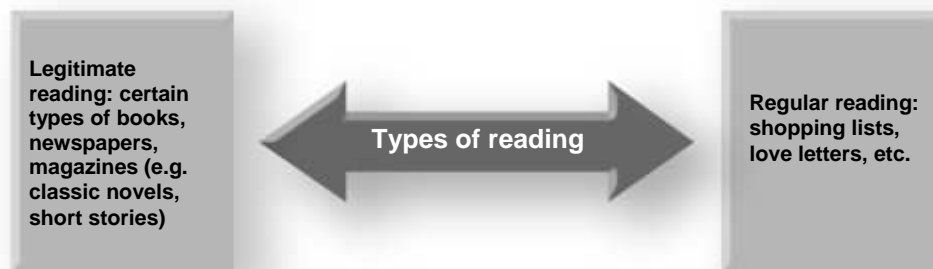
Regular reading practices can be compared to "goal-oriented" practices (i.e. those with a specific goal), whereas legitimate reading is less focused on a specific goal. Regular reading is immediate in nature (e.g. reading in order to cook), and its strongly contextual aspect plays a central role in the everyday lives of many people, although they may sometimes be unaware of it. The legitimate-regular axis is often associated with the types of documents read. Books usually fall under legitimate reading, but some books are more legitimate than others. Classification on this axis is highly dependent on the society being studied and its institutions.

The public-private axis

Jean-Marie Besse (1995) interprets the concept of legitimacy using an axis for the place in which the reading takes place—the public-private axis. Literacy practices in the public sphere (e.g. school, job, civic life) would therefore be classified as legitimate, and those in the private sphere (e.g. home life, private life) would be classified as regular. This standpoint has its limitations, however, in that there are many regular practices in public life, and in many cases, some highly legitimate practices in private life. The public-private axis is nevertheless useful for understanding some of the issues underlying reading and writing practices, and it is this axis that was selected to examine the reading practices of Eastern Townships residents with poor literacy skills (Hurtubise et al. 2004).

Figure 3
Localization of reading

| Public life:
School,
employment,
citizenship,
etc. | ← Place of reading → | Private life:
Home life,
private life,
family life,
etc. |

The distance-participation axis

There are several proposals to name the "frame of mind" of the reader which, according to Vanhulle and Dufays (2002: 22), will have a significant impact on the construction of meaning. The position may be related to the reader's "preliminary reading of the text" (*Ibid.*, free translation) or to his or her situation within heterogeneous socializing frameworks (Lahire 2004). At one end of the axis are the analytical readers who distance themselves both critically and emotionally from the text; when reading, for example, they are able to compare the text being read with other texts. At the other end of the axis are the more practical readers; in other words, those who seek an immediate meaning attached to their everyday concerns, which is composed of values, emotions or actions (Lahire 1993b). In this case, reading has a specific goal and the emotional aspect plays a key role. In working-class neighbourhoods readers tend to be more practical, and reading is more affective (*Ibid.*).

Figure 4
Frame of mind when reading

| Analytical,
political frame
of mind

Critical
distance from
text | ← Frame of mind in respect of reading → | Practical,
affective frame
of mind

Participation in
the text |

In the field of reading didactics, and in the case of literary texts, the distance-participation axis seems to be of greatest importance in the modalization process (Vanhulle and Dufays 2002). It can, for example, reflect the reading method selected by the reader: participation in the text, critical distance, and oscillation between distance and participation (*Ibid.*: 23).

Required reading/initiated reading axis

Another axis used to address this issue is based on the motivation behind the reading—in other words, the reading trigger as perceived by the reader. The terms used to refer to this tend to vary; for example "required reading" and "initiated reading" (Bélisle 2003), or "prescribed reading" and "independent reading" (Desmarais 2003). Other terms sometimes observed include "compulsory reading" and "optional reading." This axis is appropriate for understanding the power issues at work in reading situations. However, we do not feel it should be associated with the localization of reading, for example by postulating that the workplace or structured training activities involve prescribed reading, while personal life involves independent reading (*Ibid.*).

Some training institutions allow for independent practices and individual initiatives in reading and writing activities for young non-graduate adults (Bélisle 2003). Given the importance now ascribed to self-training (Bourdon and Bélisle 2005; Le Meur 1998), we feel it is wrong to suggest that there are no independent reading practices in structured formative activities in formal or non-formal education—nor is it possible to say that such training is composed exclusively of prescribed reading and writing activities.

Figure 5
The reading trigger
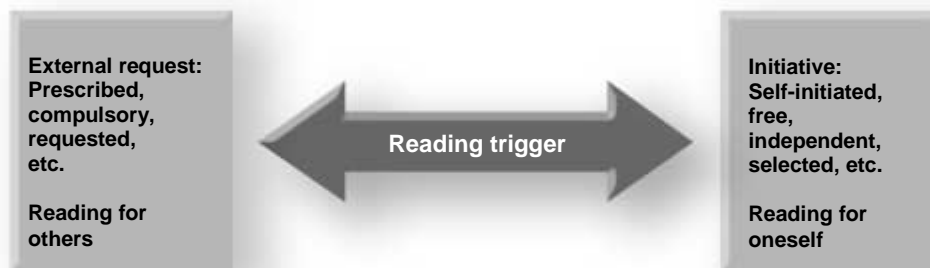
The above four axes can be used to understand reading practices: the type of reading within a given environment (legitimate-regular); the location in which the reading takes place (public-private); the reader's frame of mind in respect of the text or the reader's choice of reading method (distance-participation); and the reading trigger (obligation-initiative). We will come back to these four aspects in the conceptual framework, and will consider the possibility of including them in a diagram showing the relationship between reading practices and the mobilization or reinforcement of reading

competencies. For the time being, however, we will begin with a brief presentation of the findings from empirical studies that used these conceptual tools.

1.6.2   Reading at home and in community settings

In Québec, a team from the Université de Sherbrooke recently examined the reading practices of adults of different ages in underprivileged communities (Hurtubise et al. 2004). Their aim was to identify the reading practices of "weak readers," i.e. "a portion of the population whose basic reading skills are insufficient to meet the demands of their personal, social and professional lives" (*Ibid.*: 18, free translation). One of the study's goals was to "document how existing reading strategies fit into social insertion and participation strategies" (*Ibid.*: 11, free translation). More than 100 people were interviewed: 68 men and 36 women. Thirty percent of the respondents were between 16 and 30 years of age, and 64% had completed Secondary II or below.[21] At the time of the interviews, 17 people were engaged in a literacy activity and 42 had already completed one. The others (45) had never been involved in literacy activities.

The subjects were recruited, and sometimes interviewed, in a variety of locations, including a soup kitchen, temporary shelters and service organization waiting rooms (*Ibid.*: 40). By visiting various community and public organizations serving underprivileged adults, the researchers were able to see that literacy was ever-present, in the shape of menus, lists of rules, opening hours, activity announcements, newspapers, savings coupons, personal growth books, letters, and so on. Similarly, where the interviews took place in the subjects' homes, the interviewers noted the presence of written documents such as notes on the refrigerator, newspaper cuttings, religious books, recipe books and so on (Hurtubise et al 2004: 40).

The researchers found that the intensity of reading and writing practices among their subjects was "directly linked to periods of their lives. They tend to function in more informal spaces, and not only do they own books, but they are also proud to talk about them" (*Ibid.*: 59, free translation). The typology proposed by the researchers includes private literacy (love letters, personal diary, recipes, etc.), public literacy (newspapers, information leaflets and official documents) and public-aesthetic literacy (tags and graffiti).

Rachel Bélisle, in an ethnographic study of 41 young undereducated adults from community integration organizations (half of whom had not completed Secondary Cycle One), identified a number of reading-related activities observed in training and development situations by the subjects, during informal or semi-structured interviews. These were considered "regular" reading activities, rooted in everyday concerns or used as a means of escaping the mundane. The reading was part of the subjects' participation in the training project and the various related activities (e.g. video production, self-awareness activities, relationships with partners, awareness-raising activities), in the consumption of goods and services, in recreation, in communications with public authorities, in the subjects' love life, and so on. A variety of reading tools were used, including magazines, information sheets from CDs, leaflets, novels, comic books, practical guides, graffiti, posters, personal notes and so on. Bélisle observed that reading out loud was more common in training activities than silent

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21. The level of education of the subjects having completed Secondary III or higher was not stipulated in the section dealing with the subjects' profiles.

reading. The subjects' sense of their own literacy skill varied not only from one individual to the next, but also within the same individual, depending on the situation in which he or she was engaged (e.g. group atmosphere, type of text). Attitudes towards reading and writing therefore depended on the situations and interactions within which the request or initiative occurred. Moreover, an individual did not necessarily have the same attitude towards every reading request or initiative. Four attitudes were identified, namely goodwill, effort, withdrawal and rejection (Bélisle 2003). The study also identified a variety of issues underlying the reading requests and initiatives, including some relating to the plurality of logic used within the community organizations themselves.

1.6.3   Reading at work

The authors of a recent Canadian collective on "Literacies at Work" (Belfiore, Defoe, Folinsbee, Hunter and Jackson 2004) carried out their research in different workplaces, many of which were frequented by undereducated adults. Examples include a study of the place of literacy and literacy-related relationships in the work of labourers in a food industry (Belfiore 2004) and in the work of maids in a large hotel chain (Hunter 2004b). The studies identified a number of situations that required literacy and literacy strategies on the part of the workers, many of whom had little education.

In both cases, requests for reading and writing were often related to requests from government inspection agencies or certification requirements. Grids with checklists were common. Inherent in this particular practice was the risk of being blamed for an inappropriate action, and failure to complete the forms was also likely to result in blame and disciplinary action. In both workplaces, the researchers also identified a certain number of independent reading and writing practices, such as observations jotted down in a notebook or on a scrap of paper, which the person would re-read occasionally to improve his or her efficiency at work, for example by comparing different observations.

As this brief review shows, undereducated adults usually have regular reading practices that differ according to whether they take place in the public or private domain, based more on sensitivity and practical concerns and a preference for texts in which they could become involved (e.g. where they were able to identify with the story, apply practical advice or reflect on their own values, etc.). These individuals have to respond to a variety of requests for reading, but also initiate a certain number of practices of their own. The next section examines the collective effort to take these literacy practices into account and use them to mobilize and reinforce the adults' competencies.

1.7   Interventions in favour of reading in everyday life

In Québec, a number of researchers have examined the social environment associated with literacy. In the mid-1980s, for example, Vivian Labrie (1986, 1987) was probably the first to focus on what later became known as "the written environment frequented by undereducated adults" and their literacy practices. The environment may or may not be designed in a way that fosters reading and writing.

1.7.1   Real-life texts used to teach reading

In Québec and elsewhere, the way in which reading is taught in schools has changed considerably in recent years. In the spirit of socioconstructivism, the focus is now on interactions around reading, and readings relating to different social roles. Formal education is therefore moving closer to the type of reading practice most associated with family, professional and civic life. Teachers can use texts from the learners' real lives, texts that reflect social reading and writing practices at work and at home, in their communications with public authorities, and so on. In some cases, this approach can be combined with the theme-based approach, where the topic studied relates to a non-educational subject, which may or may not be identified by the group, based on their shared interests. Following a study of teaching materials in popular literacy, Serge Wagner made a number of recommendations. He felt that teaching materials needed to be rethought, since the documents used "were not sufficiently open to individual and social reading and writing practices" (Wagner 1996: 31, free translation).

Reading based on real life can focus on the adults' own needs. This approach is recommended for adult literacy in Québec, at least in the instructions given to trainers about "functional situations" (e.g. complete a form, write a short message, read a recipe) (Ministère de l'Éducation, Direction de la formation générale des adultes 1996: iv). However, we do not believe there is any empirical research showing the extent to which this approach has actually been put into practice by the literacy community,[22] how the needs of adults are identified, how the groups agree on the needs to be addressed, or how needs deriving more from the reader, the text or the context can be identified. The answers to these questions would enable us, collectively, to better identify the challenges of creating an environment conducive to reading for non-graduate adults.

In literacy teaching, it would be appropriate to refer to real-life texts as being "authentic," as opposed to being created specifically for teaching purposes. The idea of authenticity is present in many studies of reading. However, the term can have a completely different meaning to that cited here, since it is sometimes used to refer to the reader's position in a given situation. According to Richard Darville (2001), authentic reading situations are those in which the people concerned are subjects in the reading situation—in other words, they are proactive rather than reactive to the situation. Darville points out that in today's world, where the printed word is omnipresent, people can be subjected to many restrictions as a result of the dominant use of the written word. Although a situation might be based on a real-life text, it would not necessarily induce authentic reading, because the reader might

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22. This is based on the classical distinction between prescribed work (the work that is required) and real work (the work that is actually done), first proposed by François Daniell and his colleagues (1983).

be less committed. For example, reading about a topic associated with home life would not necessarily be "authentic" reading because that topic may not have the same, specific meaning for different readers. If we refer back to the example mentioned in footnote 11, concerning flowers, the text in question is drawn from real life, but not necessarily from the real lives of the people taking the reading test.

Reading situations that are considered authentic can also be created even though the text used is not a real-life text. Rachel Bélisle gives some examples of this in her Ph.D. thesis, which was based on extensive participatory observations in integration organizations. The excerpt below presents some of these examples (Bélisle 2003: 218, free translation):

> **Once the collage activity was underway, I offered to read to the group, explaining that in tobacco factories, people were sometimes hired to read to the workers. I told them I'd chosen books from my own bookshelves that made me think of each individual in the class. I introduced each of the nine books by naming the person of whom it reminded me, and saying whether or not I'd read it, and if so, in what circumstances. I asked them if they wanted me to read to them while they were looking for photographs in the magazines. Anthony (18 years old, Life Skills and Work Skills Education) and Maud (20 years old, SSD) were both enthusiastic. Others just smiled, and Michel (29 years old, SSD) said, Why not? The two books I chose were both about fishing.** Mon œil gauche est plus fort que le droit **(Elisabeth Toussaint) and** L'increvable anarchisme **(Luis Mercier-Vega) from which I quickly chose an excerpt from Credo by Camillo Berneri (1936), who was assassinated in Barcelona in 1937: "May my heart never become dry, may it always continue to love human beings …" (p. 77). When I'd finished the page, someone said it was beautiful. Maud borrowed the book from me. Then they asked me to read the fishing story.**

Since the Hamburg Conference in 1997, scientific research has shown the impacts of including real-life reading activities and authentic reading situations in literacy sessions. For example, Sondra Cuban (2001) studied a group of women in a computer-assisted literacy program in a semi-rural area of Hawaii. All the women were interviewed five times, on subjects including their use of the mass media at school, at work and in their social lives. Generally, the results revealed the contribution of popular literature to the participants' everyday lives, particularly in the area of identity-building. Some of the study's findings echo new theories about electronic and print literacy technologies, which are regarded as complex social activities—i.e. as part of the social lives and everyday identities of the people concerned, and not separate from public and institutional activities. The study shows that popular literature can be a source of relaxation rather than an enforced, difficult activity.

Another study, carried out in the United States (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson and Soler, 2001), supports this view. Roughly 180 adults were interviewed at the beginning and at the end of their basic general education courses—literacy, family literacy, preparation for the *General Educational Development* (GED) tests, and English courses for non-English speakers—to assess their real-life literacy activities and texts. The results showed that students who participate in classes in which real-

life literacy activities and texts are used increase the frequency with which they read and write in their daily lives (Ibid.). The study also found that the lower the level of initial literacy, the greater the change during the literature activities. The authors explained this by the fact that these people were initially less likely to take part in non-academic reading and writing activities, but once they had developed the skills they needed to use non-academic texts, they continued to do so of their own initiative.

While the American study focused mainly on reading, the one carried out by *La Boîte à lettres* in Longueuil (Desmarais 2003) was concerned more with the reader/writer and his or her relationship to the written word. In this case, the literacy intervention was more a question of enriching the participants' representations of reading and writing, encouraging them to position themselves as subjects in their reading or writing activities, thereby leading them to make more use of reading in their everyday activities or training. Adults with a highly academic perception of literacy often began reading and writing at school, rather than during their early childhood at home (see Bélisle 2003 and Desmarais 2003). One potential way to foster reading is to dissolve this strictly academic connotation with reading.

This is the approach taken by recent work on post-literacy, which has focused more on the development of reading and writing support services in the "here and now" (at the time and place they are needed), and concentrates on real-life reading contexts. A brief summary is presented below.

1.7.2   Reading and writing support services

Post-literacy is better known and documented in southern countries. Originally, post-literacy was conceived as a phase in structured education following on from literacy. The materials used were similar to the teaching materials used in formal education, and training focused on the acquisition of skills that could be used outside the classroom. A research team led by Alan Rogers (Rogers, Maddox, Millican, Newell, Papen and Robinson-Pant 1999), in a research report produced by the British Ministry of International Development, identified the pitfalls of this type of approach to post-literacy. They found that literacy was designed as a process to acquire technical reading, writing and calculation skills, which took place in a typical school environment—in other words, with a teacher and texts to be read. Once the skills had been developed, it was assumed that they could be transferred to a variety of contexts—in other words, people needed to learn literacy first and apply it in practice afterwards.[23] The researchers pointed out that this model had not achieved its target of transferring learning, and ignored both current knowledge of adult education and the importance of what are considered authentic reading, writing and counting situations in the learning process.

The same team also proposed that economic and social development will occur not as a result of systematic teaching of the written code, but through the mobilization of competencies, regardless of type, in activities that have meaning for people. They suggest that it is vital to be aware of the adults' social literacy practices and the literacy materials they use in real life, and that it is through those practices in which the adults are already, or would like to become, involved in their community, that basic competencies will develop. The importance of learning in context is just as important for literacy

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23. Rogers et al. 1999: Part III, 1.

as for post-literacy: "If literacy is taught out of context, as a skill, and not introduced as a practice based on the existing practices of the participants, it will never find a useful place in people's lives" (*Ibid.*).

Alan Rogers and his colleagues reject the formula of post-literacy as a step that follows basic literacy, and propose instead providing adults who need it with a support service for their reading and writing activities, including the materials that they use in real-life situations within their community. They point out that this type of support, if it is to be effective, must be available when and where it is needed. The providers of this service would not necessarily need to be literacy practitioners; on the contrary, the team claims that the success of this type of program depends on "the selection of appropriate persons and their training and support to become facilitators/animators using adult education methods" (*Ibid.*, Part III, 28).

In the next section, we will examine a comparative study which shows that Sweden was ahead of Canada in the IALS. It reveals some of the factors that can help create a broader social environment conducive to the application of reading competencies.

1.7.3   Policies conducive to reading among under-educated adults: The case of Sweden

Some analyses of IALS data have pointed to interesting comparisons between the Canadian and Swedish results. While there were differences in literacy levels, "with Sweden having the highest average on all three scales" (OECD and Statistics Canada 1995: 13), there were two other notable observations. First, in Sweden, level of education was less of a predictor of literacy levels than in Canada, where it was the most significant predictor. And second, Sweden, along with Denmark, Finland and Norway, differed from the other countries in that parental education had a much lower impact on literacy levels. These countries were considered to be the most "successful in bolstering the literacy levels of their least advantaged citizens" (*Ibid.*: 33).

Nadya Veeman (2004), whose Ph.D. thesis examined the role of public policies and the environment in the differences between Canada and Sweden, wondered if the lifelong learning opportunities and public policies of the two countries would be helpful as a means of understanding the variations in the IALS results. Veeman's research considered both public policies, which she referred to as the "macro" level, and the prospects and learning opportunities of the adults themselves, which she referred to as the "micro" level (Veeman 2004: 8). She explicitly linked her work to "new literacy studies" suggesting that individuals define their own literacy and training needs according to their context and the surrounding culture (*Ibid.:* 75).

According to Veeman, learning motivations were similar across all countries, and included obtaining a better job, self-improvement and providing a better life for their family (*Ibid.*: 222). However, Sweden offered more learning opportunities for non-graduate adults, particularly in the form of study circles, whereas Canada tended to focus more on mass public information campaigns. Veeman pointed out that the Canadian approach was centred more on economic development, job-related training and individualized learning (in that people were encouraged to learn independently).

Sweden, on the other hand, focused on human development and encouraged a form of learning based on the adults' roles, rather than simply on the employment market. It also placed more emphasis on the responsibility of organizations and communities in the learning process. Veeman noted that Sweden rarely used the term "literacy" in its public documents, and that all adult participants, regardless of level, were referred to as "students"[24] rather than "learners." In Sweden, the term "adult education" encompasses a range of activities from pre-secondary to post-secondary level. Veeman described this approach as being inclusive, and pointed out that it did not stigmatize participants, as the Canadian approach tended to do (*Ibid.*: 215). Sweden's adult education policy aimed to diversify learning opportunities in formal contexts (overseen by municipalities) as well as in non-formal and informal contexts, so as to ensure that they were appropriate to individual needs and regional features, and that there was greater social cohesion. Informal education was encouraged, particularly by financial support for libraries and the media.

The next section briefly examines early work in Québec, which encouraged society to be more inclusive of adults considered to be illiterate (ICEA, RGPAQ and CEQ 1991), who later came to be known as "adults who are less comfortable with literacy" (Bélisle 1995, 1997a and 1997b).

1.7.4 Initiatives by public organizations and civic society

In 1990, the Institut canadien d'éducation des adultes (ICEA), the Regroupement des groupes populaires en alphabétisation du Québec (RGPAQ) and Centrale de l'enseignement du Québec (CEQ)[25] organized a forum on the subject of *A Society Without Barriers* (ICEA, RGPAQ and CEQ 1991). The forum, inspired to a large extent by CONFINTEA V, focused in particular on people who were "comfortable with reading, writing and counting and … the others" (*Ibid.*: 5, free translation). The forum launched the notion of "everyday literacy," which it associated with UNESCO's effort to create an environment conducive to social participation by under-educated adults. For forum participants, this meant providing students with opportunities to practise new literacy skills, allowing adults considered to be illiterate to maintain and develop their literacy and education learning through their everyday activities and helping them to become involved in local activities as well. The Forum proposal noted that schools and literacy organizations should not be the only ones to to shoulder the responsibility of helping adults to improve their reading and writing skills (*Ibid.*).

The political context in Québec was conducive to this since, in the wake of International Literacy Year in 1990, the province's Conseil du trésor adopted a directive stating that Québec's public agencies should "provide the illiterate client group with the necessary facilities and adaptations" (Conseil du trésor 1991, cited in Bélisle 1993, free translation). In 1992, the ICEA launched a survey of public agencies to see what had been done to make their services more accessible to adults who were less comfortable with literacy, and what they had done to contribute to everyday literacy (Bélisle 1993). The notion of everyday literacy is defined as follows (Vallée, Soucisse and Bélisle 1993, cited Bélisle 1993: Appendix 2, free translation):

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24. In English, the word "student" can refer to pupils or students in terms that do not correspond to the same status in educational institutions and society in general, and which do not have the same symbolic meaning. In Québec, the term "adults in training" used by the Mouvement québécois des adultes en formation (MQAF) includes all these different ranks. It would be necessary to check the Swedish language term used, and its symbolic reference, to see whether the term "student" is the correct one.
25. In 2000, this organization became known as the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ).

Everyday literacy involves adjusting regular activities rather than setting up new activities focusing specifically on literacy. It is through these everyday activities that people develop literacy.

A new survey was commissioned four years later, leading to a research report (Bélisle 1997b) and a guide "to foster the development of practices aimed at reducing the gap between Québec's public agencies and people who are less comfortable with literacy" (Bélisle 1997a: 7, free translation). The survey was based on telephone interviews with the leaders of roughly 20 public agencies and literacy facilitators, along with focus groups composed of adults engaged in literacy training. One of the survey's conclusions was that public literacy is still perceived as being the sole responsibility of the education network (Bélisle 1997b: 37).

A further observation was that the notion of everyday literacy had not made inroads among either the public services or the literacy organizations. In the latter case, the notion was still associated with post-literacy, while the public authority respondents did not understand how some of their projects, which had been designed to make services more accessible to adults who were less comfortable with literacy, could contribute to literacy. It is true that, of the 20 activities identified, only a handful required reading or writing (e.g. publication by the Musée de la civilisation of materials aimed specifically at adults undergoing literacy training). In addition, the public authorities manifested considerable interest in plain language, so that their texts were better tailored to the general public's reading skills and reading contexts. It is worth noting that the international movement for plain language in official documents was not concerned specifically with non-graduate adults, but was part of a strong trend in the 1990s towards better quality public services in general (Fernbach 1997). The 1996 survey did not, however, find any direct links between plain language in public documents and everyday literacy, since the phenomenon was too recent for the adult respondents to have noticed a difference. Moreover, the simple fact of using plain language in a text did not appear to be enough to generate more reading and social participation. For example, the adult respondents associated government forms with school exams, which often came with a connotation of failure, and "many people had the impression, when they filled out a form, that the Government was trying to find fault with them" (Bélisle 1997a: 40, free translation). In some early work by the Bibliothèque de Montréal on the *Collection pour tous*, the authors had already observed that texts considered harder to read from a drafting point of view were actually read enthusiastically by adults in literacy training (Drouin and Robichaud 1992). As we saw earlier, the same observation has also been made in the findings from more recent research into the reading practices and relationship with the written word of under-educated adults.

Although some people felt the work begun at the forum was promising in terms of enabling greater social participation by adults who were less comfortable with literacy (Wagner 1997), others felt it was misplaced precisely because it did not regard teaching and learning of the language code as being a prerequisite for the exercise of social rights (Gruda 1990).

The forum's work bore some similarities to CONFINTEA V and required the combined efforts of several different communities. Already, in some communities, steps were being taken to foster greater participation by under-educated adults in the democratic operation of organizations, which gave them a public voice and maintained participatory literacy practices. Examples would include the

many literacy practices of the *Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, involving large numbers of citizens from the poorer spheres of society.[26]

Roch Hurtubise and his team observed that, within a given region and within health, social service and integration organizations, "embryonic strategies exist, but it is difficult to mobilize the general public around a problem that is neither urgent nor a priority" (Hurtubise et al. 2004: 99, free translation). In the team's opinion, reading and writing could become "a cross-curricular issue for a community" (*Ibid.,* free translation). In addition, "social development projects would gain from including goals for reading and writing as a means of fostering individual and collective development and participation" (*Ibid*: 100, free translation).

As far as the youth employment agencies were concerned, some officers were aware of the role they could play in the literacy reconciliation process as a social practice, and a group of them, working as part of the Youth Solidarity project which became a program in 2003, set up a series of activities to foster reading and writing. At around the same time, research revealed that some community organizations (including those working with homeless youths) were asking the school boards to provide educational activities designed to develop basic skills such as reading and writing, using a flexible community-oriented format that would allow the activities to be built into everyday life.[27] Partnerships between literacy organizations, health agencies and social and professional integration organizations also appeared to be growing in number.

However, actions such as this on the part of government agencies and the civil society are still not widespread and have probably not received the kind of public recognition that would encourage further effort.

One of the reasons that may explain this lack of recognition may be the absence of any theoretical base for the actions taken. The next section of this report proposes the use of English language research as a means of understanding the issues relating to participation in society and in literacy practices by under-educated adults.

1.8   Literacy from a democratic standpoint

According to Brian Street (2003), there are two principal models in the study of reading, reading and writing, literacy, the written word and the written culture, all of which are covered by the term "literacy." The first of these, known as the autonomous model of literacy, is the dominant model. It postulates that mastery of the written word is a technical skill that can be extended and transferred to a variety of situations. It is also the model that underlies the IALS. The second, the ideological model of literacy, focuses more on power structures and culture, and regards reading as being part of a set

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26. The Collectif's Web site www.pauvrete.qc.ca/sommaire.php3 illustrates this ongoing use of language to build a collective and public world while attempting to include people living in poverty. In an article published in the journal *Ethnologies*, Vivian Labrie (2004: 70) described a writing-related event extending from a "knowledge forum" to the National Assembly, in which a number of poor people played an active role.
27. A case study of one of these projects is presented in a research report dealing with adapted training and support services for under-educated 16- 24-year-olds (Bourdon and Bélisle, to be published). This research, commissioned by the DFGA, is part of one of the measures from the Government Plan of Action for Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002b), aimed at fostering an improvement in basic general education for young non-graduates from that age group.

of social practices (Street 2003). The information processing model, which Jocelyne Giasson (2003: 22) described in her survey of models in the field of literacy, can be associated with Street's first, dominant model, which postulates that learned strategies are applied gradually to different contexts, and that the reader can become fully autonomous in the reading activity. It forms part of the dominant trend of individualization in advanced modernity (Beck 2001). The second model proposed by Brian Street can be associated, at least in part, with certain applications of socioconstructivism, where the community aspect and cooperative work are meaningful. It forms part of an approach in which people contribute a variety of competencies to community and social life.

Richard Darville (2001), using Brian Street's analysis as his basis, noted that Canadian pro-literacy efforts were focused on human resource development—in other words, that the reading skills to be maintained and developed were those considered by decision-makers as being necessary for institutions to function properly. The established literacy level is based on the view that reading and writing require autonomous, non-contextual skills. This view is derived from skills theory, which itself is inspired by psychology.

This theory, says Darville, reached its summit in the IALS and was applied in public policies aimed at developing competitive capacity in global capitalism. Darville, from Ontario, notes the need for a theory of democratic literacy, based on but going beyond practice theory, which is used to study various forms of reading and writing, as well as literacy events. He points out that this particular theoretical approach sometimes limits literacy practices to the local level, and tends to underestimate not only the different types of social relationships that affect these practices, but also their power issues. He also notes that the work of Paulo Freire, who regarded literacy as a cultural action aimed at freeing the oppressed, could easily be deformed if the characteristic feature of fighting social injustice were not taken into account. The result of this was the emergence of literacy programs aimed at individual empowerment[28] (ignoring Freire's collective aspect), but within the dominant logic of literacy teaching. Darville believes that to rethink literacy from a democratic standpoint, we would have to go beyond the strictly individual or local aspect of literacy practices and acknowledge their inherent power issues. He also points out the importance, from a democratic standpoint, of setting up a dialogue with the people concerned about and within their use of literacy.

Bernard Lahire (1998), although not necessarily promoting a democratic standpoint or supporting the participatory approach in sociology (Lahire 2002), nevertheless emphasized the sociological duty to situate literacy within the different forms of social relationships and to include the inherent power issues. The empirical research cited above, which regarded literacy practices as social practices (Belfiore et al 2004; Bélisle 2003; Hurtubise et al 2004; Veeman 2004), included analyses based on this epistemological position.

As we have seen in this chapter, the central element of the problem of linking the mobilization of reading competences with social reading practices is the need to consider the characteristics of reading situations, including the power issues and limitations arising from the text, and the actors'

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28. Empowerment is characteristic of Paolo Freire's awareness approach, although today the term tends to be overused and is sometimes confused with accountability. Empowerment is an approach, a process and a purpose within which individuals and groups attempt to carve out a full and equal place on the social checkerboard (Ninacs 1995, cited Bernard 2004: 29).

relationship with the written word. In the next chapter, we will propose a conceptual framework and an explanatory model that focus on the power relationships inherent in reading situations, and which act as an interface between the notion of competency and the concept of social literacy practice. To address this issue, we will use Guy Le Boterf's (2002) relatively well-known conception of competency logic, in which power relationships are clearly identified in issues involving competent actions. The proposed model is developed using the ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner 1979) to situate literacy practices within an environment that also incorporates power issues. The model suggests that participation, whether in the reading activity itself (participation in the text), in situations requiring reading, or in the democratic life of organizations and of society, is conducive to the application and reinforcement of literacy competencies.

2. Conceptual framework: Acting competently within a participatory environment

In the spirit of the Hamburg Conference, within which this research is situated, we will try to show how to approach the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies from the standpoint of sustainable human development by deliberately distancing ourselves from models focused on economic growth and development. Initially, we planned to draw up an analysis framework that would take all literacy practices into account, since reading and writing are woven together in real life and in the everyday lives of non-graduate adults in particular.

However, given the short timeframe available to us, we decided to leave this aspect aside and focus solely on reading. The elements relating to writing practices and writing situations will therefore need to be incorporated during a later phase of the work. In the model proposed here, non-graduate adults are the subjects and holders of resources, with their own relationship to the written word, within a written environment that hosts a number of social reading practices. The model is built around Guy Le Boterf's notion of acting competently, and uses various aspects of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach.

2.1 Acting competently in reading practices

According to Guy Le Boterf (2002: 68), acting competently requires a set of tools composed of internal and external resources, which can be combined and applied together. He examined the notion of acting competently within complex situations, usually relating to paid work. We, however, suggest that there are also many complex situations outside paid work, and that reading competencies are also developed and used in a person's civic life, at school, at home and in one's personal life. According to Le Boterf, acting competently depends partly on the wealth of the environment and the potential for accessing resource networks (*Ibid.*). This particular notion of competency is particularly interesting within the context of our work, since it has already been developed using axes that exist in the analysis of reading practices, including the prescription/initiative axis.[29]

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29. Guy Le Boterf (2002: 13) usually speaks of *resources* in the plural and *competency* in the singular. However, he sometimes uses the plural word *competencies* as an equivalent term for *personal resources*. If we wanted our model to be typical of Le Boterf's approach, it would be more accurate to speak of *mobilization* and *consolidation of reading resources*.

This is illustrated in Figure 6 below.
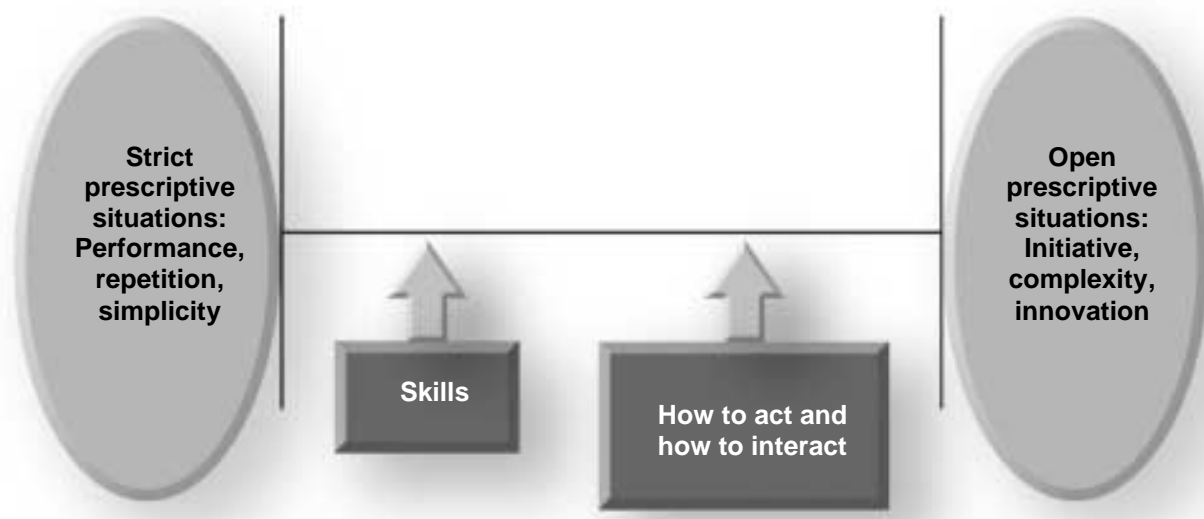
Source: Inspired by Le Boterf's Competency Cursor figure (2001:

We can therefore postulate that some reading practices are characterized more by "strict prescription" (Le Boterf 2001: 54): in other words, repetition, routine, the application of simple rules, performance instructions. Performance of these practices requires skill. At the other extremity, reading resources can be used in response to an open prescriptive situation involving unpredictability and requiring actors to overcome problems and react to complexity. In this case, the response involves knowing how to act[30] and interact.

According to Guy Le Boterf, knowing how to act, which is itself a component of "acting competently," is based partly on internal, or incorporated, resources. These involve general knowledge, specific knowledge of the environment, procedural knowledge, operational skills, experiential knowledge, relational skills, cognitive skills, aptitudes and qualities, physiological resources and emotional resources (Le Boterf 2002: 48).

The external resources required to act competently can vary, and they include more experienced people, professional networks, written documents, databanks, and so on. Thus, it is reasonable to think that an adult who is able to use the available external resources, for example by discussing his or her understanding of an Emploi-Québec leaflet with a brother or sister, is using a reading competency, since that person is able to highlight a point that he or she does not necessarily understand, and is able to take the initiative to obtain a better understanding. Acting competently in the field of reading does not always involve a reading activity in the educational sense. How the available resources are used also falls within the domain of reading competencies. We propose to

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[30] The original French uses the term "savoir-agir." This is sometimes translated as "set of behaviours" or "practical knowledge."

apply these internal and external resource analysis categories to the field of reading, in order to identify the range of resources that can be used to act competently in reading.

When subjects use reading competencies, they combine a variety of resources taken from Table 1. We postulate that non-graduate adults living in a written environment such as ours have access to varying amounts of reading-related resources. But does this written environment include situations conducive to the use of those resources and ongoing learning?

This point is extremely important, because according to competency logic, **if there are no appropriate situations, the individual or group cannot act competently**. The result obtained is related not to the resources themselves but to the combination of those resources with specific situations, comprising reading activities, constraints and power dynamics, which, taken together, allow the person to act competently.

Table 1
Reading resources

Guy Le Boterf's Categories (2002)	Corresponding Aspects in Reading
Internal or incorporated resources	
General knowledge	Codes, words, types of texts, different subjects, etc.
Specific knowledge of the environment	Habits, internal codes, etc.
Procedural knowledge	Reading methods or strategies (e.g. construction of meaning through comprehension and interpretation, textual evaluation)
Operational skills	Practical reading approaches mastered by the individual (e.g. the person is familiar with the different steps required to connect to the Internet)
Experiential knowledge and skills	Tacit knowledge, tricks of the trade, etc. (e.g. obtaining information without reading the text)
Relational skills	Dispositional resources such as the ability to forge contacts with people, which can be used, for example, to obtain help with more difficult reading tasks
Cognitive skills	Knowledge that can be used to create new information based on the comprehension and interpretation of the texts that have been read
Aptitudes and qualities	Personal characteristics that come into play when reading: sense of observation, initiative, etc.
Physiological resources	Resources relating to memory and physical fitness, which may help with concentration, etc.
Emotional resources	Emotions experienced when reading
External resources or resource networks	
Relational networks	Relatives and friends, professional staff, people with whom one can discuss one's concerns and solutions to problems, agencies that will provide support
Documentary networks	Documents that can be consulted (e.g. dictionary, directory, Web site)

We note that situations can inspire specific frames of mind not only in the reader but also among the other actors in reading situations, as a result of the cognitive and emotional aspects of the relationship to literacy. This can be an obstacle to the mobilization and reinforcement of competencies[31] or it can actually have the opposite effect. Figure 7 illustrates the reading process as a combination of resources, situations and results. The term "reading situations" is taken to include the reading activity itself (Vanhulle and Dufays 2002), during which the reader's perceptions interact with the text and reading context. However, reading situations, like reading practices, go beyond a simple interaction between reader, text and context.

Figure 7
Acting competently in reading
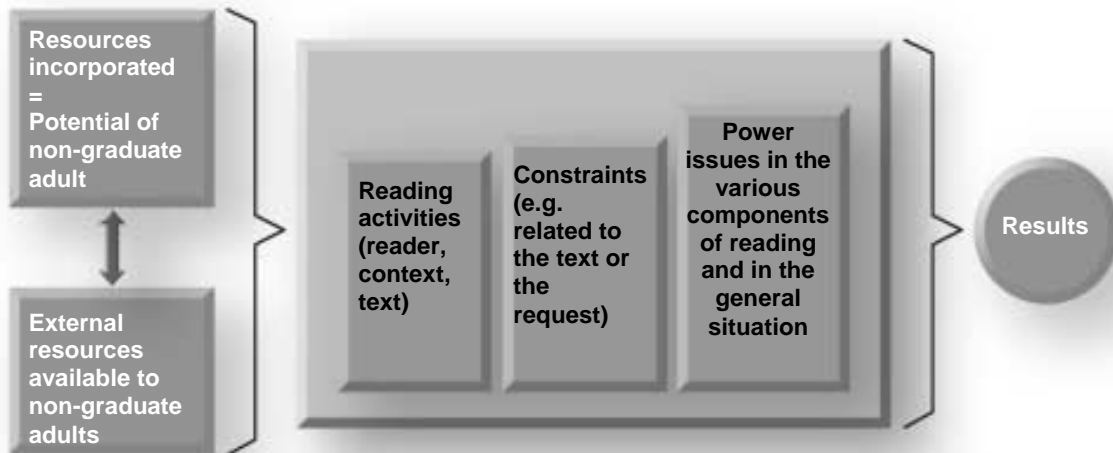
Source: Adapted from Le Boterf's (2002: 47) *Acting Competently* diagram.

Guy Le Boterf (2002: 120, free translation) postulates that "acting competently requires a person to not only know how to act, but also to want to act and to be able to act". The "knowing how to act" can be developed through a variety of learning opportunities (formal training, coaching, practice analysis, key meetings, etc.). The "wanting to act" is encouraged by an environment that fosters a positive self-image, recognition of one's strengths, and intrinsic or extrinsic incentives to act, etc. The "being able to act" is made possible by accessible resource networks, and a paid or unpaid organization of work within which power is delegated, thereby giving legitimacy to the mobilization and reinforcement of competencies, and so on.[32]

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31. On the subject of activating dispositions, or frames of mind, see Bernard Lahire (2002).
32. The three terms have been illustrated using examples from non-professional life, since all the examples given by Le Boterf are related to paid work.

At this stage, we believe it is important to review what we mean by "mobilization" and by "reinforcement" of reading competencies. Mobilization is a result of a combination of internal resources relating to the various components of reading (reader, text, context) in a specific situation whose characteristics impact the success of the mobilization process, thereby allowing the person to act competently. Reinforcement, which we preferred over the more inclusive term, "development," first requires that the individual, the social group or the broader environment should already have certain resources that the individual, either alone or with others, can use to achieve a variety of goals. The act of mobilizing competencies allows those competencies to be reinforced, as does training, whether structured or not. In addition, occasional support, retrospection and awareness of the competencies being mobilized will also help to ensure that reinforcement occurs in real-life situations.

The competency logic proposed by Guy Le Boterf examines competency development through training and professionalization (2002: 32, free translation):

> **Training serves to enrich and maintain the incorporated resource capital, and to allow for the combination and mobilization of resources (simulation, study of problems, alternation). Professionalization includes training, but adds in the organization of work situations, so that it is possible for the individual to learn to act competently.**

Guy Le Boterf associates professionalization with a navigation trail facilitated among other things by what he refers to as a map of professionalization opportunities (*Ibid.,* p. 183). Clearly, a map of opportunities for mobilization and reinforcement of the reading competencies of non-graduate adults through social literacy practices would be extremely complex. Specifically, it would have to take into account the four reading practice analysis axes presented in Chapter 1, namely (1) the type of reading within an environment (legitimate-regular), (2) the place at which the reading occurs (public-private), (3) the reader's frame of mind in relation to the text (distance-participation) and (4) the power dynamics and reading trigger (obligation-initiative). Clearly, the mapping process cannot be abstract or separated from context.

We also postulate that there are many opportunities to mobilize or reinforce the reading practices of non-graduate adults in social reading practices. Once outside the structured framework of reading education, actors would first have to stimulate reading practices rather than the mobilization or reinforcement of competencies. Such opportunities are similar to the opportunities for professionalization, but with some significant differences related, in particular, to the much less formal context of social literacy practices. Professionalization, on the other hand, is based on a broader approach to competency formalization, whereas what we now refer to as "participatory management"[33] tends to be characterized increasingly by competency management and a need for autonomy. What we propose is not to adopt the participatory management approach for reading practices, but instead to offer a shared language that will subsequently help to establish bridges between different learning locations. We have also emphasized the paradox generated by borrowing the notion of competency from the world of work in order to make a "positive reading" (Charlot 1997, free translation) of knowledge held by adults who are so often excluded from that world (Bélisle

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33. "Participatory management" usually involves flexibility on the part of the establishment and autonomy on the part of its personnel (Moncharte 2005). Participation is by no means a cure-all.

1999). Without supporting the idea of professionalizing the real-life experience and the various activities in personal, home and civic life, or promoting the formalization that often arises from professionalization, we can nevertheless propose different forms of distance and reflection (autobiographical stories of reading practices, self-recognition of competencies, recognition from peers, etc.) to support the mobilization and reinforcement of competencies. Retroactive activities such as these already exist in some locations that focus specifically on empowering non-graduate adults.

We also feel it is important to emphasize the following point, namely that the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies appear to be closely linked to literacy practices, since those practices can support the development of expertise, lead to manifestations of the desire to act, and develop the ability to act. However, informal and non-formal learning arising from participation in reading practices is the result of a personal commitment on the part of the reader that cannot be broken down into linear stages. Practices can certainly be directed by actors, in social activities with varying levels of domination, but their structure nevertheless needs to remain flexible and be closely tied into real-life activities.

These practices are situated within a written environment that seems to plays a major role in terms of resources; in other words, the resources that are incorporated through socialization and that characterize the relationship with the written word, as well as external resources. However, the environment also plays a crucial role in reading activities and activities involving reading, by providing learning opportunities (formal, non-formal and informal) and by allowing for the development of expertise. It is punctuated by separate action logics that may or may not foster the desire to act and the ability to act. The ecological approach can help in distinguishing the different levels of the written environment.

2.2   Rethinking the written environment[34]

As we pointed out earlier, Nadya Veeman (2004) examined the micro (individual) and macro (social) levels of literacy practices. However, we feel this division is insufficient to situate all the different and potentially conflicting levels of literacy practices that make up a written environment which may or may not be conducive to reading. We have decided instead to base our work on the ecological approach of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979: 21).

The ecological approach underlies many of the public policies and programs aimed at underprivileged adults, including the *Naître égaux, grandir en santé* (To be born equal; To grow up healthy) program. In the adult education field, this approach was used as a basis for the support program introduced to encourage 16- to 24-year-olds to go back to school (Tremblay 2004).

The approach stipulates that human behaviour must be understood within real-life settings. However, Urie Bronfenbrenner notes that his model's success since it was first published in 1979 has generated a new problem: "In place of too much research on development 'out of context,' we now

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34. We would like to thank Suzanne Garon, a professor and researcher in the field of social work at the Université de Sherbrooke, and a member of ERTA, for her critical comments on our interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's model.

have a surfeit of studies on 'context without development'" (Bronfenbrenner 1985, cited in 1995a: 616). Here, our intention is to point out the various levels or layers in the environment that have an impact on reading practices and competency mobilization, by situating them within an ecological model of human development.

The original model, published in 1979 by Urie Bronfenbrenner, places the person at the centre of four interacting systems, namely (1) the microsystem (the individual's immediate environment, where he or she has face-to-face interactions, plays a variety of roles and performs activities); (2) the mesosystem (the different parts of the individual's microsystem that work together); (3) the exosystem (the environments not necessarily used by the individual, but whose practices and decisions directly affect the individual and the environments that he or she does use); and (4) the macrosystem (the culture of the other three levels, i.e. beliefs, values, standards and ideologies). Urie Bronfenbrenner's model is progressive and has been further developed over the last 30 years. In 1989, the author (Elder 1995) added another system, which he called the chronosystem, which acknowledges the importance of time in human development. To prepare our own conceptual framework, we will use the four spatial systems and the temporal system.[35]

The ecological model of human development can help us to understand the relational and social aspects of the relationship with the written word as conceptualized by Jean-Marie Besse (1995), who identified three principal types of aspects (cognitive, emotional, relational/social).

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35. Our goal here is not to describe the model's development, but to use it as a loose basis for planning the individual's environment. A sixth system, the ontosystem, is often associated with the ecological approach. It represents what the individual already has, specifically his or her genetic aspects. We did not find any formal reference to this system in the examples of Urie Bronfenbrenner's work (1979, 1995a and 1995b) that we consulted.

Figure 8
The subject's written environment
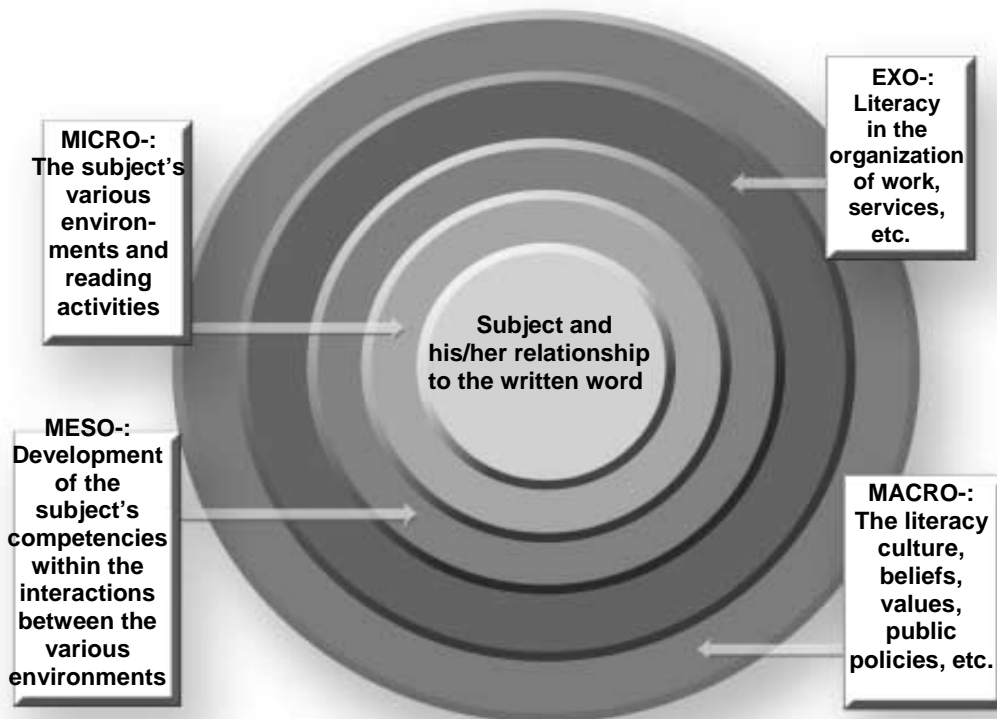
Figure 8 includes the four circles that can be used to characterize an individual's written environment.

Below are some avenues to help understand the model's potential for analyzing reading:

1) The microsystem includes the environments within which individuals play their social roles, with various literacy practices, action logics and power relationships. These environments may or may not be conducive to the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies among non-graduate adults. They include the family, the neighbourhood and certain other social environments in which roles are performed (relatives, workers, students, etc.) via direct relationships, and in which there are people of significance to the individual.

2) In the mesosystem, the environments interact within the individual's experience. The individual may or may not be aware of this. Connections can be forged between the literacy practices of the various environments, and the individual may face a different (compatible or incompatible) discourse on literacy in each environment. For example, there may be similarities or conflicts between the practices used and valued in the family and in the training environment. The

tensions experienced by the individual in such circumstances will be reflected in the development of his or her reading competencies.

3) The exosystem is composed of environments that are characterized by the presence of dominant forms of social relationships, in particular those involving literacy (written forms) to support the organization of work and the organization of public services and community life by institutions, companies and groups. The individual has no direct connection with these environments, but they nevertheless have the power to influence his or her life.

4) The macrosystem is composed of values, norms, beliefs and ideologies concerning reading and writing, conveyed by Québec society. It encompasses the various social policies that promote reading. Québec's culture of literacy affects the literacy-related culture of each environment, as well as the cultural influences that impact individuals. Culture permeates every layer of the model.

Reading situations may occur physically in very different environments, but the same reading situation may be connected to several of the model's layers (see the example in section 2.3 below). In addition to the spatial aspect of these four interrelated circles, the temporal aspect of the ecological approach also affects us in a variety of ways. Take for example the "lifelong learning" aspect, which could be taken to mean that it is possible to learn to read throughout one's life. However, many texts, including those produced by UNESCO, tend to suggest that one needs to know how to read and write in order to learn throughout life (Bélisle and Bourdon 2006). This overriding preponderance of certain competencies in so-called basic education was addressed carefully at CONFINTEA V, with participants agreeing that people engaged in a literacy process already have certain basic competencies for their development—for example, through the use of traditional local or Aboriginal knowledge (UNESCO 1997). The question of time also plays a fundamental role in building this knowledge (Bélisle 2004b). Time and reading are therefore intimately linked and affect the reader (e.g. his or her developmental history and its impact on the relationship with the written word), the text (e.g. verb tenses, a text's historical nature and date of publication) and the context (e.g. the time available for reading).[36]

In the next section of this report, we propose an explanatory model based on the notions discussed above. This model is by no means perfect and will be improved as a result of future discussion.

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36. Several authors have addressed the issue of time and literacy. Paul Ricoeur (1983) showed the importance of time in narrative. In addition, the temporalities of the present time (Boutinet 2004) are closely related to the narrative crisis (Laïdi 2000).

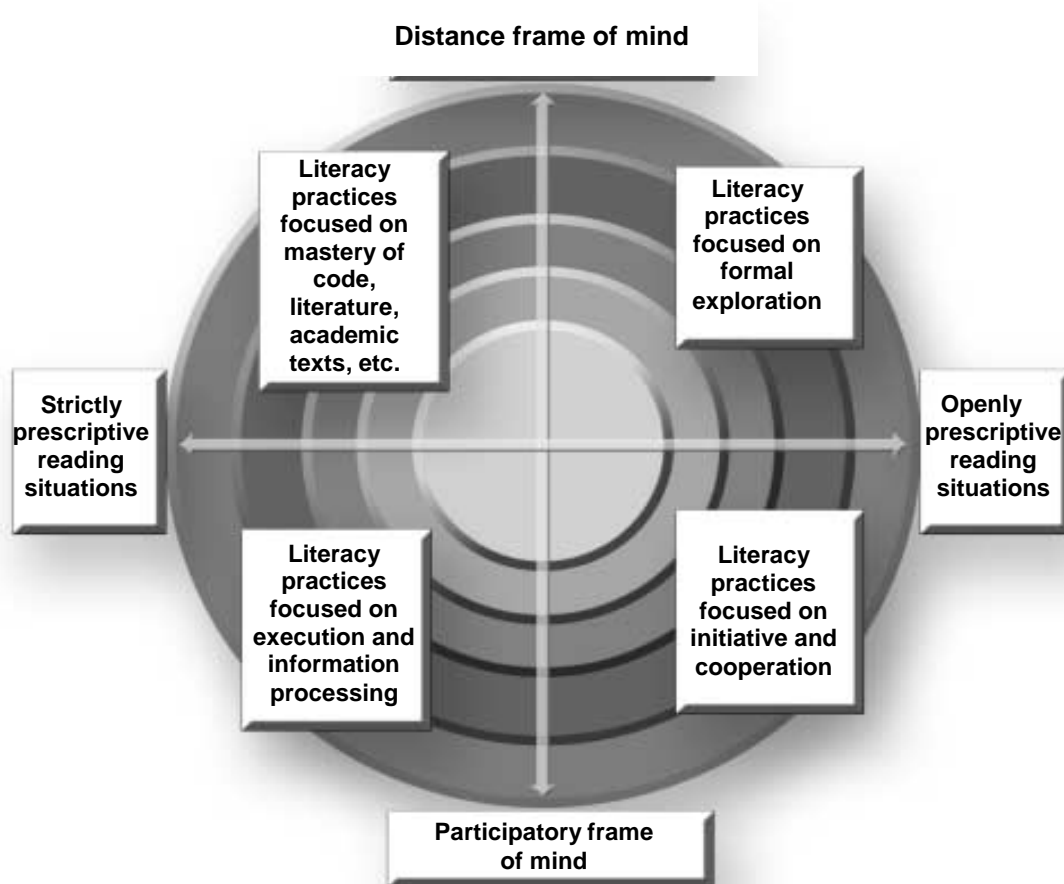## 2.3 Explanatory model of the written environment of non-graduate adults

As mentioned in the introduction to this report, one of our goals is to stimulate thinking and debate around the connections that may or may not be drawn between the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies and social literacy practices. Our conceptual framework is based on the idea that non-graduate adults live in a written environment permeated by a variety of diverse or plural practices, and possessing variable levels of reading-related resources. If the situation is not conducive, individuals and groups cannot act competently in the area of reading. Situations composed of activities, constraints and power relationships are key factors in determining the potential or absence of potential for acting competently.

Our explanatory model is designed along two axes, the first focusing on the person in the reading situation, and the second on the reading situation itself. The vertical axis covers the frames of mind of people in reading situations, whether they are actually reading (in the sense of "reading activity" as shown in Figure 1, Components of reading) or whether they are contributing in some way to the interactions around the act of reading. At the top is the "distance" frame of mind, and at the bottom is "participation." The horizontal axis is inspired by Figure 6, Reading situations. Both these axes are superimposed over circles representing the various systems in the subject's environment.

Our explanatory model reveals a variety of action logics applied by individuals and groups. We postulate that non-graduate adults live in a pluralist written environment, driven by different action logics, in which reading situations are composed of reading activities, a range of constraints, and power relationships. The action logics in this plural environment do not provide the same learning opportunities, nor do they necessarily allow for activities conducive to the development of a positive self-image, recognition of knowledge or delegation of power to legitimize the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies.

Guy Le Boterf designed his explanatory model of the shift from Taylorism (strictly prescriptive situations) to a knowledge-based economy (complex open situations) in the same way as most diagrams that are read from left to right. With regard to reading by non-graduate adults, the term "strict prescription" can be taken to refer to a certain model of education, one that is being called increasingly into question today, particularly with the competency-based approach to formal education. However, in paid work, for example, non-graduate adults find themselves in many "strictly prescriptive" reading situations. There is a similarity between the axis on reading triggers presented in Chapter 1 and the strict prescription—open prescription axis presented here. A somewhat strictly prescriptive situation may be chosen by the subject (e.g. a board game that requires reading within strictly prescriptive situations), while on the other hand, some openly prescriptive situations may be imposed on the subject (e.g. reading a greeting card that someone sends to us is more of a social obligation than a free choice).

Figure 9
Plurality of the written environment

Distance frame of mind

Literacy practices focused on mastery of code, literature, academic texts, etc.

Literacy practices focused on formal exploration

Strictly prescriptive reading situations

Openly prescriptive reading situations

Literacy practices focused on execution and information processing

Literacy practices focused on initiative and cooperation

Participatory frame of mind

The axis relating to the frame of mind of actors in reading situations (e.g. readers, people requesting reading, witnesses, etc.) is mostly concerned with distance and participation, which are particularly significant in formal, non-formal and informal learning of reading, and in literacy practices. Among other things, it reflects the importance of the subjective relationship with the written word maintained by individuals in social literacy practices, and the different reactions that actors from the same environment who have different frames of mind may experience within the same reading situation. Of the four analysis axes for reading practices presented in Chapter 1, the distance-participation axis is the one we feel is most important in linking practices to the mobilization and reinforcement of competencies.

With regard to the other analysis axes presented in Chapter 1, the public-private axis can be used in different layers of the ecological approach. It can also be linked to the post-modern distinction between policy and ethics, but we will leave the task of explaining this aspect to someone else.

As stipulated earlier, the legitimacy axis is directly related to social values. If it is to foster the mobilization and reinforcement of competencies, society and its various components must begin by questioning the legitimate literacy culture. We are currently in the midst of a legitimacy crisis in the academic world, which has tended to focus more on strict prescription, and which values distance over participation. It is because of the heritage left behind by this culture that many actors try to avoid placing undereducated adults in reading situations. This legitimate but less dominant literacy culture is associated in particular with literature and the power of literate people in society (top left quadrant). Today, it appears to have been replaced by a literacy culture focused on information processing and the power of mass communication in a world that is preoccupied by global economic development, growth and competition (lower left quadrant). Practices focused on formal exploration (upper right quadrant) are more marginal, and are concerned more with literary creation.

A more inclusive literacy culture would ascribe more value to initiative and cooperation around the reading activity, with a view to achieving sustainable human development (lower right quadrant). Social actors should perhaps think about giving greater legitimacy to literacy practices in the lower right quadrant. For many non-graduate adults, this may well be the quadrant in which it would truly be possible for them to mobilize and consolidate their reading competencies. The idea is not to limit them to environments characterized by this type of written environment, however, and exclude them from other environments such as the labour market. If they were able to mobilize and consolidate their reading competencies in a written environment focused on initiative and cooperation, with open reading situations that allow for participatory reading, they would gradually become more confident in their resources and be able to deal with more strictly prescriptive situations in which they would have true power.

Some situations are characterized more by initiative and cooperation in reading. An example would be those situations concerned with the adoption of activity reports in popular and community organizations whose democratic entities are run by non-graduate adults. Each environment has its own practice in this respect. Sylvie Bessette (2000) mentions the general assembly of a physical and mental health organization working with women who are uncomfortable with literacy. At the assembly, the activity report was presented in the form of a concept map, so that it was easier for participants to become involved and to understand, discuss and adopt it.

This example clearly illustrates one potential use of the ecological model's layers in the analysis of literacy practices. As we mentioned earlier, these layers can help in understanding the complexity of the written environment within which individuals and groups must function. In this particular reading situation, members are involved in an activity within an organization they frequent on a regular basis, and which, in some cases, plays a family role for them (micro level). The reading situation is the result of interactions between the practices of educational, family and association environments, and could also include environments such as the church or other places in which there are people of significance to the individuals concerned (meso level). The activity report in question is required by the State for the renewal of the organization's (modest) subsidies, but also serves the organization's

democratic process by providing time and space for dialogue between its members (exo level). The assembly is organized on the basis of certain values and beliefs, and an ideology that gives varying levels of weight to the experience of non-graduate adults (macro level). Lastly, the reading situation is based on a retroactive view of the organization's activities, and also on the subjective experience of participants. This retroactive view allows the group to establish common observations of the work and learning achieved during the year (chrono level).

The situation presented by Sylvie Bessette is a complex openly prescriptive situation that allows for initiative. Participants at the general assembly use their reading competencies. The situation is conducive to this because there are reading activities, the text and reading support reflect the internal and external resources of the participants, and the better-educated employees have consciously considered the power issues when selecting the method used to present the report. In addition, Bessette suggests that the assembly is perceived as a learning opportunity by many participants and employees, that the environment encourages a positive self-image and recognizes the strengths of the various actors, and that the way in which the assembly is organized legitimizes and allows not only for the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies, but also for oral communication, democracy and teamwork. This example is the exact opposite of the literacy avoidance technique mentioned in Chapter 1. It also shows how some practices can be situated simultaneously in several different layers of a person's written environment, and that the same situation can be both openly prescriptive and strictly prescriptive. It is an excellent example of the many different action logics present in the reading situations of community organizations (Bélisle, 2003).

Another characteristic of this situation is the fact that the members of the general assembly apply a participatory approach to the reading of the concept map. In other words, they can identify with the content, since it triggers personal memories. We postulate that open prescription alone is insufficient to foster the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies among non-graduate adults; the reading object, through its content and form, must also stimulate participation by readers and other actors in both the text and the context. This type of object allows non-graduate adults and novice readers to apply practical and sensitive approaches. The combination of an openly prescriptive situation and the opportunity to apply a participatory approach appears, in some ways, to act as the gateway to a literacy culture focused on initiative and cooperation.

We therefore propose to use the term "participatory written environment" to refer to the written environment best suited to a group whose dominant values are based on the potential for sustainable human development.

3. Toward a participatory written environment: Back to Article 27 of the Agenda for the future

In this chapter, we return to article 27 of the Agenda for the Future, on which our work was based. Our goal in doing this is to prepare for the next international conference on adult education, planned by UNESCO for 2009, by identifying the elements of our proposal that are consistent with, and separate from, the provisions of that article.

The proposal to foster a participatory written environment is consistent with the first section of article 27, "Enriching the literacy environment," which we interpreted earlier (see the introduction) as a desire to create a written environment that provides opportunities to mobilize and reinforce adults' reading, writing and counting competencies, regardless of whether or not they are engaged in literacy activities. However, our conclusions differ from the measures proposed by the Hamburg Conference, which were concerned solely with the text, and did not take into consideration the other components of reading, namely the context, the reader and the broader reading situation. These recommendations would probably support the mobilization of writing competencies, but are clearly insufficient to ensure the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies. In addition, it seems to us that they would foster the development of parallel activities bearing little relationship to real life and democratic life.

The three statements from section 27 are reproduced below, and connections are made with the findings from our own research.

(a) **By enhancing the use and retention of literacy through the production and dissemination of locally relevant, gender-sensitive and learner-generated print materials**

The idea behind this undertaking is probably to ensure that the print materials used have meaning for undereducated adults and are relevant to their concerns. However, just because a document is produced by a group of learners, it does not necessarily mean that other undereducated adults will read it and find meaning in it. Moreover, we postulate that, in today's highly international context, undereducated and non-graduate adults should have access to relevant texts of national and international interest, in both print and non-print forms. As we saw in previous chapters, however, thought needs to be given to the relationship with the text, individual and group participation in the text, and the significant dynamic human and social relationships that take place around the text, rather than just the text alone.

(b) **By collaborating actively with producers and publishers so that they adapt existing texts and materials to make them accessible and comprehensible to new readers (e.g. the press, legal documents, fiction, etc.)**

This undertaking may be interpreted as a desire to ensure that texts intended for the general public are adapted to take into account the fact that the general public includes new readers. This is certainly promising as an approach, but as shown earlier, it is clearly insufficient to ensure the

reading activity and reader participation in the text. This undertaking may also be interpreted as encouraging parallel plain language texts that would necessarily contain less information than the original texts, and that could be used as real-life texts in the literacy and post-literacy fields. Here, however, it is important to understand that, in producing texts that are different from those intended for the general population, we are producing texts about real-life topics and not real-life texts. Plain language texts, of which there are many in today's information-burdened society, may foster a supposedly "authentic" experience around a text, but they can also help sustain subjection or dependency. Plain language in a text can help remove certain limitations from within the reading situation, but it does not necessarily affect the power issues.

(c) By creating networks for the exchange and distribution of locally produced texts that directly reflect the knowledge and practices of communities

This undertaking is interesting, in that it suggests that it is possible to preserve written evidence of the knowledge and practices of local communities that underlie the presence of adults who have poor literacy skills and who are active in community life. It also opens the door to networking via the Internet, and to face-to-face meetings between undereducated people. However, it does not address the power issues inherent in the fact of giving written form to local or traditional knowledge that was not originally generated in writing. Such formalization cannot be undertaken without due consideration for the relationship to the written word maintained by the participating actors and for the underlying action logics. As we mentioned earlier, locally produced texts do not necessarily trigger a participatory approach among readers from another location. It is probably the processes underlying the production of these texts that will become sources of inspiration for groups in those other locations.

Unlike CONFINTEA V, we suggest focusing on the relationships that exist around reading and writing, and on the relationship with the written word, in order to foster participation in a variety of reading and writing situations.

Conclusion

Although the Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training does not address the subject of a written environment conducive to the mobilization and reinforcement of reading competencies for non-graduate adults, the current situation may nevertheless be favourable for the development of a combined approach and identification of the collective resources needed for such an approach. We believe the thinking process needs to continue and be extended in order to set up partnerships that would allow for the implementation of a new participatory approach to reading and writing, which would recognize and support a participatory written environment. The networking task initiated in this research report is undoubtedly only the first modest step in a long and arduous process.

In this report, we have adopted the competency-based logic that has characterized the reform of the adult education curriculum. However, this logic also introduces a certain number of ambiguities, among other things by using the term in both the singular and plural forms. Our conceptual framework has necessarily been affected by this. Moreover, it is by no means certain that the elements we have borrowed from this logic, which was originally conceived as a means of achieving economic growth in the knowledge economy, are always compatible with the goal of sustainable human development on which we have based our work here, in the wake of the recommendations made by CONFINTEA V. This point, which is of crucial importance for the construction of bridges between formal, non-formal and informal education, deserves to be examined and discussed in more depth by the people concerned.

With regard to the research plan, the project brought us face-to-face with the general problems experienced by those professors in Québec's universities who want to examine subjects connected with non-formal education, informal learning by adult students, and social literacy practices in departments that do not provide specific training in these areas. This situation generates a number of challenges in terms of hiring research assistants and linking teaching to research (and vice-versa). And yet, there is certainly no lack of need for research in the adult education sector. For example, we need to know more about the actual practices of school boards, in terms of applying the recommendations from the functional literacy guide. We also need to know more about the literacy practices of specific community organizations and professional groups working with significant numbers of non-graduate adults, and about how community organizations deal with the learning problems of the adults who take part in their activities. We hope this report, with all its imperfections, will help convince its readers that it is truly important for Québec and its institutions to have the means of carrying out and supporting in-depth research in the field of adult education.

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Appendix: Review of comments made by external readers

The comments made by external readers on a preliminary version of this report, sent out in the spring of 2005, confirmed that our research was able to inspire reflection and debate. The people we consulted all agreed that the document was interesting, and also that both the conceptual framework and the approach could be improved. Generally speaking, they were enthusiastic about our proposal to abandon the notion of "skills maintenance" in favour of the competency logic that permeates the adult education reform. However, competency logic is by no means a cure-all, and there may well be problems in applying the approach from the standpoint of sustainable human development.

Four elements of the preliminary report generated a broader range of reactions. The first of these was the target audience, the second was the material borrowed from reading education, the third was the preference given to "authentic" texts, and the fourth was the target sectors for the approach. We will address some of these elements below, indicating our choices and recommendations.

First point. Some people felt that the problem situation, the conceptual framework and the approach were concerned with written environments and adults with very low skill levels.[37] In other cases, they felt the document should explicitly state that the problem situation, conceptual framework and approach targeted the entire non-graduate adult population. These different views led us to clarify our target population, which is indeed the entire population of non-graduate adults.

However, we believe this point deserves to be discussed in more detail, to ensure that the social actors concerned are in agreement, and to use the Swedish experience as a basis for proposing an approach aimed at the entire population, rather than potentially stigmatizing non-graduate adults. One person suggested that it would also be possible to consider extending the approach to the entire population regardless of age, and we agree that this would be more consistent with the "learning throughout life" perspective. However, we have some reservations about this, due to the scope of the task. Instead, given the current state of knowledge, the collective awareness of the problem and the sociopolitical context in Québec, we prefer not to bite off more than we can chew, for fear of paralyzing the process altogether.

Second point. While some people expressed considerable interest in the components of reading (text, reader, context and reading activity), and felt this contribution cast light on the issues affecting reading by non-graduate adults, others questioned the relevance of our model, which they felt was too reductive or "academic" to clarify the relationship with the written word and reading competencies outside the formal framework or social literacy practices. In our view, the research into the teaching of reading is relevant, even if it took place in a classroom environment, as is research into the competency logic, which was carried out primarily in a workplace environment. Clearly—and this is the case for all research into non-formal or informal learning—these models should not be applied literally, but should be used instead as a basis for inspiration. We encountered a similar challenge

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37. In Québec, literacy activities are aimed mainly at adults who would be classified as Level 1 in the IALS.

when we turned to sociological research as a basis for our intervention model. Research into non-formal education and informal learning is still at too early a stage for us to have tailored models. We do not believe the explanatory model presented in this report is stable enough to leave a lasting mark, but it will certainly act as a trigger for awareness and discussion—and this is the important point—that will gradually lead to the development of a more consistent model in the future.