

INTRODUCTIONS

by Eric Willis

As I reflect on the Living Literacies experience and the papers from that conference reproduced in this book, I am reminded of a trip to Crete where among other things I had the opportunity to see the Phaistos Disc in Herakleion's Archaeological Museum. This small clay disc from the Minoan civilization is probably 3500 years old and inscribed on both sides with forty-five different pictures in a distinct and fascinating spiral pattern. To this day it is the only one of its kind ever discovered among all the archaeological relics of the Mediterranean and still fascinates scholars, who haven't yet been able to decipher and agree on its meaning. One is left to only imagine what the author of the disc was attempting to communicate and when or if we will ever be able to understand its message.

The tragedy of this lost literacy is a reminder of the timeliness of the Living Literacies project and conference held at York University, Toronto from November 14 to 15, 2002. Intended from the beginning to explore the how, what, and why of literacy, the conference was a huge success at stimulating discussion and debate about the potential meanings of literacy in Canada's advanced technological society of the twenty-first century. What follows here are the presentations from that conference. As captivated and excited as I was by the idea and intent of this conference during the planning stages, I am even more impressed by the range and quality of the presentations included in this book.

As the Master of Stong College here at York, I take pride in telling you that this conference and book are products of a committee of Fellows of the college that include Rob Bishop, Lara Ubaldi, B. W. Powe, and myself. As the prime mover for both, however, a special thanks goes out to B. W. Powe for the genesis and genius of the idea, the conviction to stay the course through the inevitable bumps and bruises that accompany an undertaking of this magnitude, and for the foresight to promote the significance of this issue.

As intriguing and mysterious as the Phaistos Disc might well be to scholars, its story also informs us of the importance of seeking to understand and illuminate literacy in its many forms. It is our hope that this publication will help in this process for the reader.

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

LIVING LITERACIES TEXT OF THE
NOVEMBER 14-16, 2002 CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY



The City is the Classroom

by John O'Leary

Taken from:

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

**Living Literacies Text of the
November 14-16, 2002 Conference**

PART ONE: ORIGINS AND FUTURITY

The City Is the Classroom

by John O'Leary

In mid-February, 1899, a young Methodist minister boarded a train in Toronto accompanied by six university students. Almost twenty hours later, the train stopped in the middle of the night along a lonely stretch of track just north of Georgian Bay. The minister and his company hopped off the train with their snowshoes, camping gear, and a large sled piled high with books. As the train pulled away, the small party, huddled close against the cold, turned into the bush and, using a compass and the moonlight to guide them, set out to find a logging camp near the town of Nairn Centre. When they arrived, just after dawn, the camp was empty. The loggers were already at work. By the time the men returned that evening they found something new in their rough settlement, a tent. But it was not just any tent. A large banner on the tent proclaimed:

Reading Tent: All Welcome

The minister, Alfred Fitzpatrick, and his university volunteers sat in the tent at tables piled high with poetry, history, mathematics, and philosophy texts.

"Welcome, men," Fitzpatrick said, "welcome to Frontier College."

Thus began one of Canada's boldest adventures in education. Fitzpatrick's mission was simple – education for all. Every Canadian, not just a privileged few, must have access to basic education and the opportunity to study at the university level. The university belonged everywhere, not just within the comfortable halls of the academy. Fitzpatrick wrote:

Bring education to the people, not the people to education. Not only primary but secondary and university education should be placed within the reach of all.

Note his emphasis – not most, not many, but *all*.

The founders of Frontier College believed in the power of education to improve the lives of all people, including the loggers, miners, and railway workers whose work produced the wealth that made it possible for Dalhousie, Laval, Queen's, the University of Toronto, and the University of Alberta to construct the massive neo-Victorian halls where a tiny number of privileged students were able to study and learn.

"Open up these halls!" cried Fitzpatrick, echoing Walt Whitman.

He went further, insisting that the rough cabins and bunkhouses of the Canadian north could also be adapted and refitted into classrooms where workers could meet and study at the end of their twelve- to fourteen- hour workdays. The teachers would be volunteer students and faculty members from the universities. And they would be *labourer-teachers* working in the bush and on the rails all day alongside their coworkers and then voluntarily teaching evenings and weekends. The workers would teach the students by day; the students would teach the workers by night.

Fitzpatrick knew from his years of preaching in these isolated camps that working people possessed intelligence, curiosity, and a desire to learn. But they lacked the opportunity to pursue these things, burdened by their work, by the strict class codes of the time and by the ignorance of most educators who felt education was exclusively for the professional class and that wider accessibility would dilute the value of education.

Frontier College proved these views were wrong. The bunkhouse classes filled rapidly, tents and reading camps were set up across the country, and, by the 1920s, Frontier College had been granted a charter, the right to grant university degrees to working people. Fitzpatrick and his determined teams of student volunteers had successfully connected the work camps to the academy.

One hundred and five years later, the frontiers still exist. They look different. The rail gangs and the logging camps have been replaced by the inner-city high-rise, the prison, and the homeless shelter; the loggers and miners have been replaced by cashiers and waitresses, burger flippers and migrant workers.

Canada has obviously come a long way since Fitzpatrick and his volunteers boarded the train for Nairn Centre: we have achieved a great deal in the pursuit of education for all. But there are still isolated people and places. There are still frontiers – frontiers of poverty, of despair, and of dispossession. And those are the places where Frontier College teaches today.

Our approach is to see the strengths and the intelligence that exist in these places in the same way the founders did more than a century ago.

The founders met loggers eager to study agriculture; we meet cab drivers eager to study literature. They turned log cabins into classrooms; we set up homework clubs for inner-city students in the MuchMusic studios. Fitzpatrick proved that every place is a learning place and that people can learn everywhere. What does that mean for today's Canada? How can we apply the same ingenuity that devised reading tents and teachers on horseback – another nineteenth-century Frontier invention – in order to teach workers in suburban strip malls?

Frontier College is a part of Living Literacies in order to get help in answering these questions. We want to expand the conversation about education. Teachers and literacy groups, ourselves included, see things in a certain way. But when you involve inventors, philosophers, authors, musicians, and poets in the conversation, you will get different responses. Our long partnership with the Chum-City group, for example, began almost 20 years ago when I asked Daniel Richler, then a MuchMusic VJ, about the link between rock music and literacy. Daniel took me with him on a visit to a suburban high school where he talked with the students about the references to Greek myths and Beat literature in contemporary music. That led to the first "Rock' n'Roll'n'Reading" video, broadcast nationally over MuchMusic, and a series of projects in support of turning teens on to the power of knowledge and ideas through the use of music and popular culture.

It is commonplace to note that we live in the knowledge and information age. But schools and teachers must acknowledge that one consequence of this is that, more than ever before, learning and teaching cannot be restricted to the conventional classroom.

In 1976, Marshall McLuhan wrote:

Most people in the community work mainly at exchanging knowledge and information with one another. This activity does not differ from the work done in schools. The work of the community has become a continuation of the work done in school; school work has become part of the work of the community. Since all the answers are available outside the classroom, it is a good strategy to put the questions outside the classroom. The city is the classroom!

The historic docklands of St. John's and Halifax, the former factories of Montreal and Toronto, and the vintage warehouses of Winnipeg and Calgary have been transformed into the labs and the offices where the knowledge economy, the learning society are being created. These enormous urban spaces where skilled but, by today's standards, barely literate stevedores, tradesmen, and teamsters once worked are now occupied by the knowledge workers of the high-tech sector. Sleek, brightly lit computer labs and microprocessors have displaced the massive machines and assembly lines of the last century.

These organizations deal in knowledge, innovation, ingenuity, creativity, and problem solving. The employees are highly educated, young, entrepreneurial, and unconventional. They think for a living.

Yet in all of these cities, within walking distances of these shiny labs and offices, you find dense, poor urban neighbourhoods – the contemporary frontiers.

In the same way the earliest Frontier College teachers turned camps into classrooms more than a hundred years ago, these high-tech labs and offices can be made into learning spaces for those people living in nearby inner-city high-rises. After-school homework programs, reading circles for children, and study circles, at all hours, for adults can be constructed in these places. The employees, people expert and enthusiastic about knowledge and ideas, become the teachers.

In order to organize this kind of new approach for literacy and learning, teachers cannot speak only to other teachers. Because the city is the classroom, teachers must seek solutions to our toughest problems in education, like dropouts and reluctant readers, from everyone in the community.

This is why Frontier College is part of Living Literacies. It is a way for us to continue pursuing that elusive dream of the founder, Fitzpatrick, who so eloquently wrote:

Education must be obtainable on the farm, in the bush, on the railway, and in the mine. We must educate the whole family wherever their work is, wherever they earn their living; teaching them how to earn and at the same time how to grow physically, intellectually, and spiritually to the full stature of their God-given potentialities. This is the real education. This is the place of the true university.

John O'Leary

John O'Leary has been involved in the Canadian literacy movement throughout his twenty-eight-year career as an educator. He joined Frontier College as a teacher in a prison literacy program in 1976 and went on to successfully establish literacy coalitions outside the educational field, with labour, business, non-profit, and non-government organizations.

Since being appointed the President of Frontier College in 1991, O'Leary has launched several innovative and wide-reaching programs, including a national initiative to organize literacy programs with volunteers from every university and college campus in Canada.