

Literacy Education

Description

Current practitioners tend to define literacy in the context of its value to the individual – with a focus on personal, social and cultural contexts. As one observer, Robert Scholes, has put it, “Literacy is a personal, social, cultural, contextual, gender-related and constructive process whereby a particular individual builds meaning with a particular text depending on particular purposes for reading and writing. It is first and foremost an end in itself although it may serve as a means to other ends.”

However, many literacy practitioners assume and establish a link between classroom learning and community action, and recent work has made an effort to name these connections more explicitly. Adult learning and literacy programs can and should result in an increase in community driven and community based activities. Obviously, there is a link between functional literacy (including, linguistic, numeric, technological, vocational and economic) and individual economic self-reliance. Further, adult learning in literacy programs can be designed to meet a wide array of other social needs or goals in communities. The best literacy programs are aware of and work closely with other organizations and agencies to address the range of social issues that many marginalized people face (such as housing, daycare, transportation, etc.).

Existing programs continue to evolve when they are learner-centered and when the practitioners are themselves learners and innovators. While there are several program models that have been used in different communities, it is rare to find two that look exactly alike. Local adaptations are the norm. For example, within the framework of an intergenerational literacy approach, programs take place in a wide variety of settings (living rooms, church basements, libraries, public schools, community centres, etc.) and are developed to address a wide variety of goals, such as facilitating children’s entry into school, helping parents achieve their own academic goals, increasing participation of seniors in the community, and so on.

Moreover, adult learning programs can be health oriented, math oriented, culturally oriented, or family oriented, or have other orientations. They can utilize delivery models that are one-to-one, peer group, classroom - or all three. The upshot is that programs need to be based on the interests and needs of the learners, to approach each learner in a holistic fashion and to be located in areas that are accessible and safe for the learners. In fact, the location can make or break a program. Location must be based on the target population and their needs and life style, as opposed to the mere availability of space.

Benefits

The obvious benefits of adult learning programs include increased self-esteem, confidence and language skills. However, there are many, many additional benefits that have been identified by specific programs, such as generating peer group relationships and support, strengthening intergenerational connections, increasing community participation, increasing awareness of community services, supporting healthy families and establishing the skills and confidence for further education or employment. In some cases, neighbourhood based programs have provided the impetus for neighbourhood associations, daycare services, housing developments, crime prevention and other resident driven initiatives.

The benefits in most cases are long term, and require long term evaluation methods to track them. One program co-ordinator from the early 1990s commented that she was still seeing outcomes in individuals who participated in that program – as individuals continued to pursue their own learning and just seven years later were ready for a college program.

Major challenges

The recent focus on high literacy-handicap rates in Canada (as many as 38% of Canadians) may result in restricted literacy education that emphasizes skills rather than, more broadly, personal development. Indeed programs that have aimed explicitly to fit individuals into jobs have not met with as much long term success as those that are designed to develop the full spectrum of human potential.

Virtually all communities may find the very scope of literacy deficits to be overwhelming, and stigma often attends the need for adult learning. For rural communities special challenges may exist around organizational capacity and public awareness.

Two general challenges are linked to program funding. First, for their support, funders tend to want jobs as a deliverable. While this may be the long term goal of a program, it is not a realistic short term outcome in most cases and may, in fact, not be the primary goal. Second, the practice of short-term funding may raise expectations of learners, only to dash them just as the learners begin to develop the confidence and motivation to continue a learning process.

Some practical steps

1. Begin by establishing a working group or committee that will include all the stakeholders in your community and perhaps potential funders or other partners.
2. The next step is to conduct a needs assessment. You will likely have some hunches about priority target groups and the issues related to illiteracy. Use these to develop an extensive survey. Some of the publications listed below include specific frameworks and forms for

this purpose which can be used outright or modified to meet your needs. The survey should include a cross section of agencies, service groups, employers and educational institutions as well as potential learners.

3. Document your findings.
4. As you begin your community needs assessment, you should also begin a public awareness campaign. This can work to prepare those you will interview and to increase public awareness of and support for literacy work in your community. Once your program is ready to be implemented, your communication and public relations strategies will be essential to attracting learners.
5. After identifying specific literacy needs and interests, you will want to research successful programs and best practice approaches that fit with your local priorities. This will help you to design an approach that accomplishes your goals and is based on proven practice in the field.
6. You should develop a program proposal or business plan whether or not this is a requirement for funding. Your goals should have measurable outcomes and be based on a clearly articulated philosophical approach. You will want to include opportunities for evaluation and learning and changes as you implement the program. Remember that on-going innovation and adaptation is one of the features of successful programs.
7. Finally, as you begin the implementation phase you will want to be sure that staff and trained volunteers fit your approach to literacy.

Resource organizations & contacts

- Given the great scope of past work in this field, begin with your local resources (colleges, skills centres, etc.).
- Literacy BC, Linda Mitchell, Executive Director, 622 - 510 W. Hastings St. Vancouver, BC V6B 1L8. Tel. 800-663-1293; fax: 604-684-8520; email: literacy_bc@douglas.bc.c). Provides an extensive resource lending library and staff who can refer you to appropriate program contacts outside of your community.
- National Adult Literacy Database: www.nald.ca/data/data.htm.

Publications

The following three publications can be downloaded from the National Adult Literacy Database website (www.nald.ca).

- *Before You Start: Developing A Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy Programming*, Manitoba Education and Training. This manual provides a fairly comprehensive overview of the needs assessment process, considerations and survey forms.

Tools & Techniques

- *Building Strong and Effective Community Partnerships: A Manual for Literacy*, Family Literacy Action Group (FLAG) Alberta, (1995). This manual provides a good overview of family literacy and then focusses on community partnership development. Includes worksheets, sample partnership agreements, etc.
- Katherine Guillion, *Building The Fire: The Aboriginal Family Literacy Project* (Lakeland College & Lloydminster Native Friendship Centre, 1996). This project report provides a detailed program design manual that includes classroom layout, attendance records, daycare services, etc.

The following three publications are available through Literacy BC:

- Louie Ettling, Janet Isserlis, and Lee Weinstein, *By Invitation Only: A Literacy Model for Communities, Process Guide and Final Report* (1995). Case studies of the process from assessment to implementation in Squamish, Prince George and Vancouver.
- Wendy Watson and Barbara Bate, *Partnerships in Literacy: A Guide for Community Organization and Program Development*, (1991). Covers the development of a literacy organization from board structure to media relations and program implementation, including tutor training, material selection, etc.
- Janet Isserlis et al., *Community Literacy: An Intergenerational Perspective, A Process Guide* (1994). Describes several intergenerational models and program development including proposal samples from a variety of programs in BC.

The Economic Literacy Project: Seeking a Blueprint for America. a project of the Federal Reserve Bank in Minneapolis. A specific literacy focus on economics. See their website [woodrow.mpls.frb.fed.us/sylloge/econlit]. Site includes articles, sample quizzes, survey results, etc.