



Integrating Literacies

Adult participants in community programs or training courses may have difficulties with some of the literacy requirements of their program. Integrating literacies means addressing these difficulties and providing support for people to use and practice literacies while learning the program content. Integrating literacies is also way to reduce barriers and widen access to participation and learning.

Developing and sharing ways to integrate literacies into community programs was a key intention of the *Widening Access for Adult Literacies* project.¹ At the start of the project, the main approach was to introduce strategies to support reading and writing. This approach built on the idea that people often develop reading skills when they have opportunities to use and practice these skills. Strategies included using easy to read materials, brainstorming ideas before reading and paired reading.

During the *Widening Access* project, our understanding about integrating literacies broadened. We recognized that the idea of integrating literacies is itself embedded in particular approaches to teaching and learning, such as participatory practices and supporting various learning styles.

As well, we came to see the importance of integrating literacies into all aspects of a community agency's programs and services; we named this "Creating Literacy Friendly Environments." You can find information about Literacy Friendly Environments on the Widening Access for Adult Literacies website. In this introduction and the accompanying materials, we focus on integrating literacies into community learning programs.

Literacy

In Canada, literacy is often defined as the ability to read and interpret printed information, write, and do mathematical calculations to perform everyday tasks— at work, at home and in the community. In 2009, the Alberta government issued a provincial literacy strategy. It included the following guiding definition:

Developed by Michael Wallace, 2008.

Widening Access for Adult Literacies Project.
<http://www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca>



¹ The Widening Access for Adult Literacies project ran in northeast Edmonton, Alberta, from 2006 to 2009. The main intention of the project was to find ways to make it easier for adults with literacy challenges to access literacy programs and other community resources. The project was sponsored by The Learning Centre Literacy Association and The Candora Society of Edmonton. The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources Development Canada, provided funding.

... While reading and writing provide the necessary foundation for learning, literacy is fundamentally about an individual's capacity to put his/her skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life. Literacy involves "reading the word and the world" in a variety of contexts. Individuals need literacy skills to obtain and use information effectively, to act as informed players and to manage interactions in a variety of contexts whether the context is making decisions about health care, parenting, managing household finances, engaging in the political process or working.²

This definition recognizes that reading not only includes reading skills and strategies but that reading is carried out for various purposes and in various social contexts.³

Literacies

In the Widening Access project we used the term "literacies" to recognize that literacy is not only a set of cognitive skills or strategies. Literacies include a wide range of social and cultural practices that are associated with reading, writing and oral communication.

People read and write for meaning. They use their knowledge of a topic and of the situation to make sense as they read and write. Reading is affected by purposes and situations as well as the feelings and values associated with them.

Literacies also recognizes that reading and writing are social in the sense that people often help each other out and share what they are reading or writing: "What does this word mean?" "How about you read the instructions while I put the shelf together." "How do you spell....?"

And a literacies perspective values the range of reading and writing that are based in everyday activities and networks, as well as the traditionally more valued literacies associated with schools, workplaces, legal and medical, government and similar institutions. At the same time, literacies recognizes that institutional literacies are often more powerful than others.

Literacy statistics

The *International adult literacy survey (1994-98)* and the *International adult literacy and skills survey (2003)* measured literacy skills of adults in Canada and six other countries. The surveys used common tasks of varying difficulty to assess adults' literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills. The literacy tasks included reading prose and reading documents.

² Alberta Advanced Education and Technology. (2009). p. 2.

³ Definitions of literacy are now expanding to include "Essential Skills" such as oral communication, computer skills, the ability to work with others and continuous learning. For more information about Essential Skills go to: Human Resources and Skill Development Canada. Understanding Essential Skills. http://www.rhdcc-hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/understanding_es.shtml

From a literacies perspective, it is important to note that completing a task in the survey was not the same as completing an actual task in a real context. For example, reading instructions on an actual medicine bottle in your own home for a real purpose is different from reading similar instructions in the survey. Still, the survey results do show that many adults in Canada have challenges with literacy.

The survey developers used a 500-point scale to rate the complexity of reading tasks. This scale was divided into 5 levels of reading proficiency.⁴ In Canada, it is generally suggested that adults need skills at level three to “participate fully in the knowledge economy.”⁵ According to the 2003 survey, 42% of Canada’s working age population has reading skills below level three.

Some people who scored below level three may be able to read well enough to cope with everyday situations, but they may have difficulty with unfamiliar literacies or in new situations involving literacy. Integrating literacies can make it easier for people to manage when reading and writing is required.

Integrating literacies

Integrating literacies starts with supporting reading and writing in real situations that are meaningful to people. Integrating literacies is also known as “embedding literacies.” In some places, integrating or embedding literacies has to do with including literacy instruction in post secondary education and training courses. Some schools also aim to teach literacy across the curriculum. For instance, science and math teachers might teach literacy skills in relation to those topics. In the *Widening Access* project, we focussed mainly on integrating literacies in informal ways.

Many of the community agencies involved in the Widening Access project provide educational programs. These include a range of parenting programs; employment, financial, health, hobby and computer skills programs; ESL, multi-cultural and family literacy programs; as well as programs that deal with personal issues such as anger management. All of these programs offer contexts to integrate literacies.

Working with agencies to integrate literacies

Workshops

To begin, Widening Access project staff developed and offered workshops about integrating literacies into specific agency programs such as Collective Kitchens and parenting programs. They also offered more general workshops about integrating literacies into programs.

All the workshops promoted a culture of participatory learning. In order to actively support adults with literacy challenges within a general program, it

⁴ A Frontier College summary of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) 2003. Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/frontier/ialss03/cover.htm>

⁵ International survey of reading skills. The Daily. Statistics Canada Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080109/dq080109a-eng.htm>

was important to affirm learning and facilitation methods that support a range of learning styles and learning abilities. With this in mind, and in response to agency staff's interests, project staff offered workshops on a range of topics about adult learning.

As well as a time to share ideas about integrating literacies, the workshops provided an opportunity to spread the word about Widening Access project activities and to increase literacy awareness. Many of these workshops attracted agency facilitators and they created a venue for networking, discussion and follow up meetings, including opportunities to discuss literacy as an issue in program advertising, planning and delivery.

The following general topics were addressed in the workshops about integrating literacies.

- Developing literacy awareness
- Identifying literacies that are used in programs
- Finding easy to read print resources to support programs
- Strategies to support reading and writing
- Developing program advertising, educational materials such as handouts and PowerPoint presentations and other resources in clear language
- Promoting and using participatory learning methods

Workshops about supporting adult learning included:

- Participatory learning
- Learning styles
- Learning across cultures
- Learning disabilities
- Storytelling as a way of teaching
- I wish I had a facilitator's roadmap

Learning Day

Based on the response to the workshops and in consultation with some workshop participants, project staff planned a Learning Day. The event was to include an opening presentation and sets of workshops about integrating literacies. However, registrations were very low so the event was not held. Through further consultation project staff learned that many agencies cannot release staff for a full day. The half day workshops seemed to be a better fit.

Consultations about integrating literacies

Over the course of the project, staff from several community agencies attended one or more workshops. Participants' response to the workshops was very positive. However, project staff learned that it was challenging for agency staff to allocate time to revising their programs to include support for literacies. Recognizing this, staff began to provide consultations and support for agency staff who wanted to integrate literacies into their programs.

One of the early project ideas was to meet with a group of agency staff and pick one program to look at in detail. A Widening Access project staff person

would then attend one or more program sessions and notice where literacies integration was already taking place. They could then discuss possible resources, provide practical suggestions and assist with materials that helped strengthen learning of these literacies. Agency facilitators might decide to continue on their own, or have help from Widening Access project staff.

Having concrete examples of literacy integration resources and materials to share was important, and it took some time to gather and create these materials. In response to agency needs, project staff developed a number of resources. These included handouts about:

- How to identify the literacy needs of a program
- Examples of literacy materials to use with general educational programs
- Information on where to access literacy resources
- Ideas on using the learning cycle and adult learning theory to support literacy development
- Suggestions for guest about making clear presentations
- Tips on reading aloud in book clubs and reading circles

Project staff incorporated these handouts into workshops and provided copies to agency educators. (Some of the handouts are available on the *Widening Access for Adult Literacies* website.)

Project staff also attended agency staff meetings to facilitate discussion about making program changes to support participants with literacy challenges. Discussions focused on questions such as:

- What does the term 'integrating literacies' mean to you?
- Where does literacy form a part of your program?
- What literacy skills do participants need to successfully complete your program?
- Do you have experience of people with literacy challenges attending one or more of your programs?
- What issues has this raised?
- What kind of support would you provide, if you identified a program participant as having literacy challenges?
- How do you support participants with differing learning styles and learning abilities in your program?
- What help and support would you like in developing literacy resources and materials for your program?

Challenges with integrating literacies

Although there is a heightened level of awareness of literacies as an issue in learning, we did not see a follow through on the development of specific program resources to support participants with literacy challenges. We recognized that agency program facilitators have full work loads and little time for program development. Towards the end of the Widening Access project, we applied for funding so that agency facilitators could have release time to work on integrating literacies. Unfortunately, we did not receive the funding. Such funding at the start of the project may have helped facilitators to take a more active role.

There was much wider agency response to using clear language and to creating literacy friendly environments than to integrating literacies into programs. It may be that these approaches are more concrete and readily adaptable. However, fruitful discussions and the dissemination of resources have been ongoing.

For further reading

Go to the [links](#) page on the Widening Access for Adult Literacies website.