



Creating Literacy Friendly Environments

Creating Literacy Friendly Environments was a key approach of the *Widening Access for Adult Literacies* project.¹ At the start of the project we explored ways to integrate support for literaciesⁱ into programs in community agencies, to promote clear language use, and to partner to offer literacy programs. "Creating Literacy Friendly Environments" includes these approaches along with other ways to recognize and address literacy challenges.

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.

From a "literacies" perspective, some adults who are not able to score well on literacy test may manage literacies in their social contexts. A literacies perspective also provides starting points for creating literacy friendly environments.

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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.

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.

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.² In Canada, it is generally suggested that adults need skills at level three to "participate fully in the knowledge economy."³ 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 can read well enough to cope with everyday situations, but they may have difficulty with unfamiliar literacies or in new situations involving literacy. Literacy friendly environments can make it easier for people to manage when reading and writing is required.

Literacy friendly environments

Creating literacy friendly environments starts with recognizing that some adults have difficulties with reading, writing and related social practices – particularly with "institutional" literacies and practices. It also starts with looking at your agency through the eyes of an adult who has literacy challenges. What might they see and experience in terms of agency *space, information, services and their own context?*

Space has to do with your agency's physical and social environment. This includes:

- the day-to-day working environment.
- the environment of programs and activities.
- the general atmosphere and impression created by the use of colour, furniture, signage, bulletin boards, entrance, reception, waiting areas, refreshments, etc.
- the psychological atmosphere — Does the environment feel safe, friendly, supportive, inclusive, and private?

² 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>

³ 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>

- the social environment — Are there places to meet, socialize, network, relax, share refreshments?
- the administrative environment — Is it formal, informal, complicated, officious, easy to navigate, inviting, literacy aware, attentive to individual needs?

Information refers to the print-based information your agency produces to advertise and inform people about your services. It also refers to oral communication in your agency.

Print based-information includes:

- Agency information — brochures, pamphlets, flyers, handbooks, newsletters, forms, questionnaires, contracts, reports, etc.
- Program resources — handouts, resource books, assignments, evaluation forms, overheads, PowerPoint presentations, etc.
- Other information — signs, logos, directories, websites, information on other agencies services, etc.

Oral communication includes the ways agency staff talk with and share information with people.

Policies and procedures affect how people access agency's services and programs. These include:

- Reception and intake procedures, client contracts, interviews and form completion procedures.
- Policies and procedures about literacy awareness and creating literacy friendly environments.

Context refers to clients'/participants' backgrounds, reasons for coming to the agency and previous experiences with agencies.

- *People's backgrounds* include race, age, gender, family, religion, cultural perspective, income, employment status, home ownership, health, mobility, educational attainment, first and additional languages.
- *Reasons for coming to an agency* include crisis, being new to the community, educational and welfare programs, job search, career development, socializing etc.
- *Past experiences* of agencies and related organizations may be positive or negative. People may have more or less confidence about coming to an agency and asking for help.

Working with agencies to create literacy friendly environments

Workshops

As noted, looking at an agency through the eyes of people with literacy challenges is an essential start to creating literacy friendly environments. With this in mind,

workshops about creating literacy friendly environments started with an *LFE walkabout*.

The first workshop was with staff from one agency. Agency staff walked through their building and looked for barriers for people with literacy challenges. They itemized a number of issues, including confusing front entrance signage, an overcrowded bulletin board and information flyers that were difficult to read. Project staff worked with this agency to rewrite flyers and brochures in clear language.

The next workshop included staff from a number of agencies. Three of the agencies made their offices available for LFE walkabouts. Before the workshop, Widening Access project staff took photos of these agencies' front entrances, meeting spaces, reception areas and bulletin boards. These photos were used later in the workshop.

During the walkabouts, participants looked for examples of how each agency supported or hindered a literacy friendly environment. The walkabout grounded discussions, reflection and agency goal setting during the rest of the workshop. The photos that were taken before the workshop supported the discussion, reflection and goal setting process.



This workshop generated interest in creating literacy friendly environments and some agency staff made important changes to their work practices. For example, staff from one of the agencies changed their bulletin board display to highlight the services they provide.

Literacy makeover

To showcase the value of becoming a "Literacy Friendly Environment" agency, Widening Access project staff looked for an agency that would make changes throughout the agency and be a model and motivator for other agencies.

The Candora Society of Edmonton participated in the first makeover. Candora is central to a collection of agencies and has a well-respected history of innovative community work. In addition, Candora was a partner in the Widening Access project and there was a positive, long-term working relationship between the project animator and Candora staff.

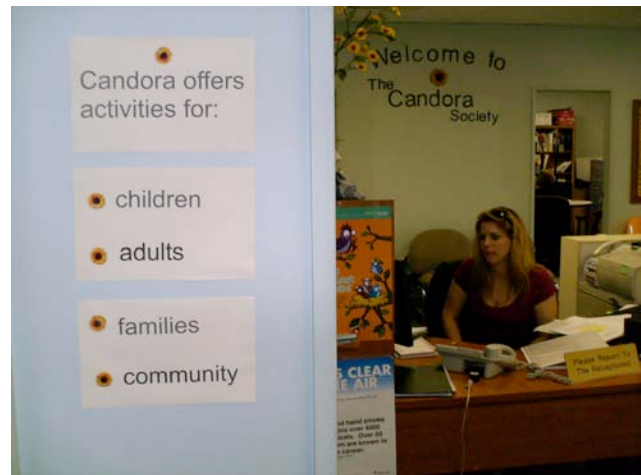
Project staff began with a number of exploratory meetings with Candora senior staff. Next they visited the agency's main office and mapped out and discussed areas for possible literacy makeover changes. These included:

- including clearer information at the front entrance.

- removing an overloaded brochure stand near the entrance.
- replacing the brochure stand with a wall mounted cork board to advertise current programs at Candora.
- rearranging some furniture at the front entrance.
- creating a small waiting area.
- changing some of the reception area signs.
- creating a large Welcome to Candora Society sign.
- ceating a binder of program brochures and flyers.

To start the change-making process, the project animator and a Candora staff member brought together some volunteers to make literacy friendly signs.

Project staff recorded the change process with before and after photos and solicited comments from Candora staff and clients on their view of the changes. Most comments were very positive and encouraging. Following a summer break, the process of making literacy friendly changes continued at Candora. Meanwhile other agencies began to show interest in the makeover idea.



Widening Access project resources

You can download LFE workshop resources from the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project website <http://www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca>

Other resources

Opening doors. A literacy audit tool kit for customer service excellence. Calgary, AB: Literacy Alberta. <http://www.literacyalberta.ca/opendoor.htm>