



Community-Based Literacy in NE Edmonton Project Report

Introduction

The Community-Based Literacy in NE Edmonton (CBL) project was initiated in September 2006 to address needs and interests for adult literacy programming that had been identified in NE Edmonton through the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project.¹

The intention of the project was to “work with agencies to offer literacy courses in the short term, and to provide support for community agencies to apply to the ECALA [the community adult education association] for regular course funding to offer literacy courses on a longer-term basis.”

The CBL project provided opportunities to learn about partnering to offer literacy programming with community-based agencies. These learnings are described further in the report and reflected in the accompanying resource book.²

The CBL project was funded by the Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association. This document includes excerpts from the report to ECALA.

Written by Mary
Norton, 2008.

Widening Access for
Adult Literacies
Project.
[http://www.widening
accessforliteracies.ca](http://www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca)



¹ The Learning Centre Literacy Association sponsored the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project, in partnership with The Candora Society of Edmonton. The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources Development Canada, funded the project. The Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association funded several literacy classes that were offered through the project.

² (*Starting points*. Available at www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca)

Did your target learners participate in the project? If not, why?

The project aim was to serve 50 individuals in up to 5 locations in NE Edmonton. From September, 2006 to June, 2008, the CBL project served 183 adults in 4 locations. As anticipated, the majority of participants in the programs were women. The majority enrolled for personal growth and satisfaction; some enrolled to meet needs for work or training, and some joined to prepare for more structured learning programs.

In 2007-2008 the project also supported literacy learning opportunities programming in inner city agencies. These programs served 132 adults, the majority of whom attended one time only. Adults in these programs had a range of literacy challenges and abilities, and they attended for a range of reasons (e.g., interest, self-expression, to meet an immediate literacy or information need).

Did you achieve the goals, purposes and objectives of your project? Please provide details or documents regarding your accomplishments.

Following are the objectives of the project, with descriptions of achievements and some learnings/reflections related to each objective.

Objective One: To offer adult literacy programming in five community-based agencies.

As noted above, programming was offered in four agencies in NE Edmonton and three agencies in inner city Edmonton. Programming was also initiated at another agency, but was not continued due to low enrolment.

In 2007-2008 the project also supported literacy programming three inner city agencies. With the approval of the ECALA ED, these programs were initiated because of lower than anticipated response in NE Edmonton, and in response to needs and possibilities in inner city Edmonton.

Objective Two: To prepare and distribute materials to advertise the programs.

See Objective Three– Promotion.

Objective Three: To explore collaborative approaches to provide adult literacy programming in community-based agencies.

There were both challenges and possibilities to offering literacy programs with community agencies. Learnings from the project have been incorporated into a list of topics and questions to consider when planning/ partnering to offer literacy programs in community-based agencies. The list is included in the project resource book (see Objective Four).

Objective Four: To outline approaches and resources for ongoing literacy programming in participating and other agencies.

The project coordinator drafted a resource: *Starting points: Creating environments for literacy teaching and learning in community-based agencies*. The resource reflects discussions and conversations with facilitators and other staff who participated in project activities, and includes ideas and resources from them.

Objective Five: To provide support for participating agencies to apply to ECALA for regular course funding and to offer literacy programs after the project is completed.

Northeast Edmonton

CBL project funds supported literacy classes at three agencies in 2006. In 2007, The Learning Centre Literacy Association continued to partner with these agencies to offer classes, with the support of ECALA regular course funding. In the fall 2007, TLCLA provided two agencies with templates for course outlines and budgets and both agencies applied to ECALA for regular course funding to offer classes in 2008.

One of the agencies contracted a TLCLA facilitator for the classes offered in 2008, and the facilitator continued to use TLCLA books and other resources. As she had been facilitating the agency classes in 2006 and 2007, she did not need orientation or additional support to continue to facilitate. TLCLA staff met with the staff at the other agency who filled the facilitator role and offered to share materials and other supports.

The third agency decided not to apply for funding to offer literacy classes independently, given the number of classes that were being offered, and the lack of staff time/resources to coordinate classes. As a result, TLCLA applied for funds and continued to offer classes in partnership with the that agency at Abbottsfield Mall in 2008.

Classes at a school were initiated in the fall 2007 and continued with CBL project funding to June 2008. As the school is not eligible able to apply to ECALA for funding, TLCLA is offering classes this fall, 2008, with ECALA regular course funding. Participation in the school classes continue to be low (below six per session). Of the four participants in the current session, two also attend classes at Abbottsfield Mall, and one could attend there except for scheduling. Thus, the class will not likely be offered by TLCLA in 2009.

Inner City Edmonton

Offering drop-in learning with adults who frequent one of the agencies provided information and experience for TLCLA to apply for funds, in partnership with that agency, for a project to "Extend Literacy and Learning to Adults Living with Homelessness. This partnership project is opening doors to support more adult learners and for further partnering with the agency.

The response to the drop in writing program at another agency prompted TLCLA to continue to offer the program in the fall, 2008, and to apply for funds to continue it in 2009.

Objective Six: To contribute to assessment and planning to provide literacy programming in NE Edmonton.

Learnings from the CBL project helped to develop a plan to continue to provide literacy programming in NE Edmonton. Enrolment was consistently low in classes offered in the smaller agencies, and agencies varied in how much time and support their staff could provide for the literacy classes. Enrolments were consistently higher in the classes offered at Abbottsfield Mall with an agency located there. TLCLA staff was located at Abbottsfield Mall and could provide consistent promotion at community events, and provide support and response to adult learners, facilitators and volunteers who called or dropped in. Abbottsfield Mall is also accessible by bus from a number of locations, is open one evening a week, and could therefore draw from a larger population than the smaller agencies.

Following consultation with staff from community agencies, and consultation with the Boards of the Candora Society (partner in the Widening Access for Adult Literacies Project), The Learning Centre Literacy Association opened a self-contained Learning Centre in Abbottsfield Mall and committed to seek funding to maintain a Centre in this location. The opening of The Learning Centre in Abbottsfield builds in on the foundation laid, in good part, through the CBL project and regular course funding provided by ECALA.

Please describe any unexpected results that were achieved.

Enrolment in programs in the smaller agencies was lower than expected. Some learners who attended in the agencies also traveled to classes at Abbottsfield Mall. Although a number of adults who attend at Abbottsfield Mall said that they would not travel downtown to attend a program, it seems that it is possible to travel to the mall.

If ECALA funding was used for non-traditional teaching methods, describe the response of participants to this teaching method.

When the project was extended to inner city Edmonton, a writing group was initiated at one of the participating agencies. The original plan was to offer a writing group in a room next to the drop-in centre. When few people found their way to this room, the facilitator opted to set up a table in the drop-in. She used a coloured table cloth and large poster to designate the space. Over time, drop-in participants helped to clear the table that was used each week. The facilitator developed a series of writing prompt sheets that participants could pick up, take home and bring back as they chose. A number of participants said they wanted their writing to be included in a special issue of *The Writer* (a collection of stories by learners in The Learning Centre Literacy Association), which was distributed in June. Contributors very pleased to see their writing in print.

See Appendix B for a facilitator's report on the Open Learning program offered at downtown Learning Centre in collaboration with an inner city agency.

What are some responses from your intended audience, about your undertaking?

Appendix A includes an excerpt from an interim evaluation report (June, 2006), prepared by Barbara Sykes for the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project. Comments are from interviews with adult learners in literacy programs at three NE Edmonton sites. Comments were gathered from learners before the CBL project started, but some of these learners continued in the programs, and other learners would have similar comments.

Appendix A
Excerpts from interim evaluation report

By Barbara Sykes
(June 2006) for the Widening Access for Adult Literacies Project.

- Learning: New Knowledge and Skills

Participants indicate that they have learned more about reading, writing and spelling as a result of attending the programs.

I learned how to spell a little more. I learned more about writing.

I've learned some bigger words and I can make better sentences now. It's easier to talk to my kids.

I'd tell someone "as long as you listen you will pick up something. It happened to me".

It has a lot of value for us. Everyone thought it would be great for our families. And this is a relaxed atmosphere to learn in. (Agency staff)

- Personal Development

For some participants, an outcome has been personal awareness and growth. In some cases, this means learning more about themselves through writing or sharing their stories with other participants. Some participants referred to an increase in confidence or self-esteem as a result of attending the program.

You're learning more about your inner self – how interesting ideas come out.

It brought my self-esteem up higher.

- Making connections/creating relationships within the group

A recurring theme in the accounts of participants is the importance of meeting people and making connections. Simply getting out of the house and being with others made a difference for some participants. This speaks to the importance of social connections in addressing isolation. The program clearly offers opportunities for participants to meet new people, share stories of experience, and feel a sense of belonging.

I like it that the centre can put on stuff and I can come here and enjoy myself and meet so many good people.

I met new people and got to know them through their stories.

I enjoy coming here because it's closer to my home. Also, I can talk to others if I have problems. I'm more comfortable here than at

I'm meeting all of these wonderful people. It's more relaxed than the other things they do here.

It creates connections. People learn what they have in common. They can talk with each other and connect – get things off their minds (Agency staff)

- Enjoyment and stress release

Participants talked about the programs as offering an opportunity to have fun, to laugh, and to enjoy themselves. They took pleasure from the classes and looked forward to each week. It was evident that many participants were eager to resume the programs in the fall of 2006.

It's a stress reliever. You can laugh. It makes you feel better – increases your happiness.

For me, it's a pleasure to be here.

It's fun to express yourself. I really look forward to this.

- Difference in relationships outside the group

Some participants noted that their learning from the program had had a positive impact in their relationships with others, specifically with children, grandchildren and spouses.

For me it's been better. Now I read my granddaughter a story every night and she understands me better.

What Makes a Difference?

Some initial learning from participants suggests that a small group format in a familiar agency setting creates a positive learning environment. For participants in these programs, this was the only opportunity they had had in their community to be involved in literacy programs and there was excitement that such programs had become available to them. Also important is the learning climate created by the program facilitator. In particular, participants commented on being able to talk (or write) freely, knowing that they wouldn't be judged.

In a small group like this, you can get more out of it.

There aren't any other opportunities to do this (creative writing).

You can express yourself freely without condemnation.

I can express myself without being judged. It's nice to know that others are in the same boat as you.

Appendix B

Report on the Open Learning program By Michael Wallace

The Open Learning Space at the Learning Centre began in January 2008 as a regular Thursday afternoon session from 1.00 – 3.00 pm. The original idea was to provide a regular spot for drop-in clients at the [agency] Community Centre. Adults would have a space to get help and support with literacy-based tasks as well as access to the Learning Centre resources. Literacy tasks could include writing resumes, completing forms, setting up email accounts, reading and researching on the internet, reading newspapers, magazines and books, journal and creative writing, basic math tasks, etc.

We designed a flyer to distribute around the community centre, and a notice to place in the hallway outside the Learning Centre room, and gave intercom announcements through the building. These advertised free and friendly help and support with reading and writing tasks and the use of Learning Centre computers and other resources.

Four people dropped in on the opening session; two wanted help with resume writing and updating; one came to browse the books in the Learning Centre library and another wanted a space to do some creative writing. Over the next few weeks, as the Thursday afternoon open space became a regular time slot, the numbers of people 'dropping in' varied from four to eight at a time. Some of these 'drop ins' became regulars.

After the first month, it became clear that the majority of people coming were wanting to use one of the four Learning Centre computers for checking and sending email, writing and updating work resumes, checking and sending messages on You Tube and Facebook and internet research for jobs or general interest. A number of people came for help with basic computer literacy such as how to use the various features of Microsoft Word, how to start an email account, how to conduct internet research and navigate job search websites. To help with resume writing, I set up sample resumes on each computer desktop.

After the first month, we changed the emphasis of advertising the Open Space session to a focus on learning and developing basic computer skills. Participants were invited to “Get friendly, individual help to send emails, search the internet, find a job, write a resume, write a letter, use a mouse and keyboard, open and save files and so on.”

Occasionally people came to develop personal projects, transcribe handwritten stories to computer files, create a flyer for a community program, write a letter to an employer, friend or landlord, or just put thoughts down in their own journal file.

I saw my role, in the first instance, as about showing up on a regular weekly basis at a regular time slot, and letting people see that I was available and responsive to individual needs in a low-key manner. As mentioned, a number of people have returned on a regular basis and we have formed an ongoing relationship that has allowed a certain degree of skill development.

As awareness of the Open Space at the Learning Centre spread, more people came to access the computers to check email, Facebook and You Tube and for internet research and we needed to introduce guidelines for computer use to dissuade using the computers for game playing, listening to and downloading music files, etc. We give priority to people who wanted help and support for reading and writing tasks, especially during the Thursday afternoon timeslot.

Over the last five months approximately 30 people, 24 males and six females, dropped in for help. Some weeks have been quiet with only one or two attendees; other times have been quite busy with computer use in high demand.

Overall, I believe that the regular Open Space time has been a sort of low-key success story. Showing up on a regular basis, being available for help and support as and when requested seems to have been a successful approach. Using a learner-centred approach, responding to individual need, interest and learning style has worked best.