

Project Proposal

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Widening Access for
Adult Literacies
Project.
[http://www.widening
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Introduction¹

Project Summary

Since the 1980s, federal and provincial government polices have supported a range of public awareness efforts and programs to encourage and help adults to develop literacy skills. However, despite the availability of programs and growing public awareness about adult literacy, only five-to-ten percent of adults who may have reading difficulties actually enroll in programs (Long, 2002).

Through a partnership between a community based social services agency and an adult literacy program, the proposed project intends to address issues of participation by researching, implementing and assessing approaches to widen access to literacies. Approaches include integrating support for literacies development into existing community programs and services, offering “taster” courses to invite adults into learning, and offering informal courses that support intentional literacies development.

Using community development and participatory education approaches, the project will draw from and build on research and practice about literacies, participation, reducing barriers, and creating environments for learning. The project learnings will be shared through a resource book and workshops.

Needs met by the project

The proposed project will contribute to addressing needs for research that “addresses the literacy needs of particular groups of people” and for identifying “ways to make literacy programs more accessible...” (National Literacy Secretariat, p. 2) The project also responds to a study of Alberta literacy programs that “recommended a flexible approach to programming, with services closed linked to other services in the community” (Bradley Wells Management Consulting, 2003), and to recommendations for reducing barriers to participation (Long, 2001; Lemay, 2004; *Violence and Learning: Taking Action*, 2004).

Although it will address research based recommendations about reducing barriers to participation, the proposed project is unique in addressing theory and research about literacies, known as the New Literacy Studies (Hamilton, 2000; Ewing, 2004), and the emerging possibilities this research offers for widening “points of access” for adults to develop and extend literacies. Points of access refer to the range of gathering places where people engage or might use literacies.

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. This report was prepared for and submitted to the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills.

Applying research about “literacies” in practice

The concept of “literacies” has to do with a shift from thinking about literacy as a set of cognitive skills, to recognizing literacy as including sociocultural practices associated with reading and writing (Hamilton, 2000). The later view recognizes and values the range of literacies 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.

“Everyday” literacies are learned informally in homes and communities to address needs and interests that arise. They include using reading and writing to organize or document life, for personal communication, private leisure, and making sense of information or situations (Hamilton, 2000). People engage in everyday literacies to get things done, rather than to develop literacy skills per se. A literacies approach also recognizes the importance and relationships of oral language and literacies development (Ewing, 2003; Norton, 2004).

Integrating support for literacies into community programs and services

Theory and research about literacies have provided a base for some programming in the UK and underpin Scottish government policy for adult literacies provision (*Adult Literacy and Numeracy*, 1999). In Canada, the New Literacy Studies provided a framework for the Calgary-based *Connecting literacy to communities* project, the purpose of which was “to work with communities...to develop literacy awareness, promotion and support, and to improve access to and the quality of existing services and programs (Gardner, 2003, p. 5). Although the project did result in offering some ad hoc adult literacies programs and activities, the main focus was on helping agencies to reduce barriers to accessing the agencies’ programs and services. The project coordinator suggested that the notion of integrating support for literacies development into agency programs could be a viable next step (Gardner, personal communication, March 17, 2005).

However, there appears to have been little documented research and practice about integrating *literacies* development into agency programs in Canada. A search of the Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English found only one report about integrating literacies into other programs, in this case, a computer course in a community learning centre (Hammett and Arliss, 2000).

Integrating support for literacies and inviting participation through “taster” activities

Although a desire to develop “school” literacies draws some adults to literacy programs, previous experiences with school literacies and education also keeps some people away (Long, 2002; *Attitudes to adult education in disadvantaged areas*, 2000; Quigley, 1997). Informal literacies activities such as personal and local history projects, creative

writing groups, book clubs, scribe services and discussion groups can support people to develop literacies. Such “taster” activities can also offer opportunities for adults to experience success in informal learning contexts, and can be a step to participating in a literacy program. Although there are descriptive and anecdotal articles about such approaches, there is little documented research about how such approaches support literacies development or encourage participation in programs.

Integrating literacies in literacy programs

Within learner-centred literacy programs, everyday literacies often provide contexts for teaching and learning skills for reading and writing. However, in this “teaching in context” approach, context generally refers to the print materials (texts) rather than to the social practices associated with the texts. Community-based literacy programs that draw together people with common interests offer possibilities for drawing in the social context and practices as well (Ewing, 2003). Such approaches also invite peer teaching and learning, and the involvement of people with diverse literacies and decoding / encoding skills. At the same time, they can provide a context for developing, practicing and maintaining literacy “skills,” as more conventionally understood, that can be applied in other contexts and to learning other literacies, including school and workplace literacies (Ewing, 2003). Again, there is little documentation about how people develop conventional skills through literacies approaches.

Who will benefit from the project

Community agencies and literacy programs in Edmonton and elsewhere will benefit from project learnings which can be applied or adapted in their programs. Project learnings may also contribute to policy development for adult literacies provision.

The project will also benefit residents of northeast Edmonton by widening access to literacies in their community.

Project intentions

Widen access

Plan, implement and assess approaches to widen access for adults to develop and expand their use of literacies, and to increase their confidence in using literacies

Reduce barriers to participation

Build on research and practice to reduce barriers and enhance opportunities for adults to participate in learning

Integrate support for incidental literacies development into agency services

Plan, implement and assess approaches to integrate support for adults to extend and practice literacies into agency programs and services

Invite and provide for participation in intentional literacies learning

Plan, implement and assess approaches to integrate support for adults to practice and extend literacies through participation in informal taster literacies activities

Plan, implement and assess approaches to provide ongoing literacies programming to meet the needs and interests of adults in the community

Maintain literacies access

Develop and initiate a three year plan to maintain / further develop literacies support and programs, based on learnings from the project

Plan

Project context

The project will be based at The Candora Society of Edmonton, a community-based agency in northeast Edmonton. This area includes neighbourhoods with higher than average percentages of adult residents who may have difficulties with literacy. For instance, in the Beverly area of northeast Edmonton, 29% of women over aged 20 had less than grade nine education, compared to the provincial rate of 20% (Statistics Canada Census of Canada. 2001). A small survey of Candora staff indicated that adults who access the agency have required assistance filling in forms or looking up phone numbers and have difficulty completing written reports.

There are no adult literacy programs located in northeast Edmonton, as all four of Edmonton's community based literacy programs are based in the city centre. Although these programs are open to adults from any neighbourhood in the city, only one program reported serving adults from northeast Edmonton (Reitman, Onclin, Sandul, personal communications, March 16, 2005). This program provides volunteers, as possible, to work with northeast area residents, usually at a public library. This program is currently working to capacity.

As well as not having ready access to a literacy program, many residents of northeast Edmonton live with challenges that pose barriers to participation in adult learning programs, with low income being a primary issue. In an assessment of adult learning needs in Edmonton, northeast Edmonton was described as including "high density housing," "many families surviving on very low incomes", and a higher than city average percentage of single parent families (Lemay, 2004, p. 21). In 2001, the incidence of low income among residents in three northeast area communities was 22.4%, 33.8% and 51%, respectively compared to the

20% incidence in the city of Edmonton as a whole (Census of Canada, 2001).

At the same time, northeast Edmonton has a richness of cultural diversity, and a strong network of agencies committed to capacity building. These assets provide a fertile context for the project.

Project partners

Voluntary community-based organizations, such as Candora, that are well regarded and rooted in the communities they serve, are ideal sites from which to offer and extend organized adult learning opportunities. However, they typically do not have the time or background to develop adult literacy programs, or to access necessary funding. The project partnership will draw on the community development expertise of Candora, and on The Learning Centre Literacy Association's long term research and practice in community-based, participatory adult literacy programming.

Started in 1981, The Learning Centre Literacy Association is located in a community agency in central Edmonton and serves adults from nearby neighbourhoods and other parts of the city. Programs include one-to-one tutoring, small group learning and independent learning with tutor or facilitator support. The Centre has initiated and coordinated a number of innovative projects and practices that are relevant to the proposed project.²

The Candora Society of Edmonton was started in northeast Edmonton in 1989. Candora recognizes and provides opportunities for progressive learning about the issues that affect community members' lives, and by providing the opportunity for individual and collective action to address these issues. The agency is based on the second floor of a modest shopping centre, along with other community agencies, and with access to a public library on the main floor. Candora's programs and services include a collective kitchen, food bank, employment preparation and ESL classes. In 2004, 388 families attended programs and 3003 people dropped in to use Candora's services. Candora has also hosted family literacy programs offered by the Centre for Family Literacy, and has applied for funds to offer a family literacy program, with the support of the CFL. Activities of the proposed project will be coordinated with any family literacy activities that are offered.

The work of both The Learning Centre and Candora is grounded in participatory approaches that focus on people's strengths and capacities. In 2003, Candora and The Learning Centre collaborated to provide a short-term reading and writing program for women involved in one of

² Projects included development of peer tutoring approaches (Norton, 1994; linking literacy and health education (Norton and Campbell, 1996; research about participatory approaches Norton, 2000; and research about ways to address impacts of violence on learning (*Violence and Learning: Taking Action*, 2004). As well, the Centre has informally explored ways to invite people into the program through informal literacies and related learning activities.

Candora's programs. This experience provided the catalyst for the current project imitative.

Supporters

The Centre for Family Literacy and the Penny McKee Branch of Edmonton Public Library have both offered to support the project through consultation and provision of meeting space, respectively. As well, there is a strong network of committed agencies and organizations in northeast Edmonton, which will provide one starting point for making connections with community residents.

Project personnel

A *project Animator* will be hired to implement Project activities, with the support of the *project Coordinators*. The part-time Coordinators' roles will be carried out by a designated staff person from each of The Learning Centre and The Candora Society. Job descriptions for project personnel are included in Appendix A.

Criteria for hiring a project Animator include 1) experience and skills in community development, 2) experience in or familiarity with northeast Edmonton communities, and 3) familiarity with literacies theory and approaches as envisioned in the project. Recruitment and hiring will also account for the diversity of race, culture, income, education and family structure in northeast Edmonton.

Orientation for the Animator will be planned collaboratively by the Animator and Coordinators, to meet the needs and interests of the Animator and the project (see Appendix B).

Other personnel will include:

- Administrative support (Centre and Candora staff will be designated to fill this role)
- Child care providers (Candora will designate /hire child care staff as needed)
- Project ambassadors (to be recruited from among community residents)
- Literacies consultants (to be contracted as needed to advise and assist, as needed regarding literacies integration, and regarding the project in general)
- Writer (to be contracted to write the project resource book)
- Project evaluator (to be contracted)

Research in practice stance

The project Animator and other staff will work from a research in practice "stance" as they implement project activities (Horsman and Norton, 1999). They will relate research to practice, document activities, reflect on and document reflections, and work collaboratively to share and extend learnings. Research in practice approaches will be coordinated with the project evaluation.

Project activities

The proposed project will be implemented over three years, from August 1, 2005, to July 31, 2008. This section describes activities in relation to project intentions. A schedule of activities is included in Appendix C.

Reduce barriers to participation

Although developing and assessing approaches to apply literacies theory to practice is a key focus of the proposed project, it will not be possible to carry out the project without also addressing research and recommendations for reducing barriers to participation (Long, 2001; Lemay, 2004; Malicky and Norman, 1994; McGiveney, 2002; Roussy and Hart, 2002; Horsman, 2000; Violence and learning: Taking action, 2004). Material and emotional barriers include work and family commitments, distance from programs, low confidence, need for child care, pace, time and relevance of program, lack of information about programs, and previous experiences with education. As well, mental and physical health issues, racial discrimination and experiences of violence can all affect participation

Recommendations to address material barriers will be woven throughout the project. These include:

Provide accessible, high quality childcare. Candora offers onsite, flexible childcare with qualified staff. The proposed project budget includes funds to extend the hours of childcare provided by Candora in order to support project objectives.

Mitigate the financial problems associated with participation. Funds to help project participants pay for transportation are included in the proposed project budget, along with funds to provide healthy snacks.

Approaches to address emotional barriers will also be woven throughout the project. These include:

Create environments to support learning for all. Research about addressing impacts of violence on learning has explored ways to create physically and emotionally safe learning environments that invite people to bring their whole selves to teaching and learning. Recommendations to create supportive environments will be drawn from such resources as Take on the challenge (Morrish, Horsman, and Hofer, 2002, and Violence and Learning: Taking Action, 2004).

Practice participatory approaches build on people's experiences, desires, knowledges, and ways of knowing. Participatory approaches are the foundation of both partner agencies and the project will draw from the experience and knowledge of the partners' staff and participants.

Promoting project activities will be ongoing to address the barrier of not having information about programs. It is important that promotional approaches clearly focus on people's capacities, rather than on deficits

(Montemayor, 1996) and that they value diverse literacies. Working with agencies and community residents, the proposed project will develop approaches to raising awareness about opportunities for literacies and related learning, as well as collect and distribute information about available programs and resources that support literacies. Agency newsletters and bulletin boards, community newspapers and radio, and word of mouth, will be used to advertise activities. The Project Ambassadors will play a key role in promotion.

Other recommendations to increase access will be addressed through project activities. These recommendations, listed below, are discussed in sections that follow.

- Develop partnerships and collaboration to share resources, share information and invite a broader range of adult learners.
- Expand course locations to increase access and reduce barriers.
- Develop courses that are creative and flexible to engage individuals and groups who do not typically participate in organized adult learning.
- Develop strategies to increase adults' understanding of benefits to participating in adult learning.
- Offer taster courses in subjects of general interest, to invite people into learning and provide opportunities to experience success in learning.

Build connections and relationships

Developing relationships with Candora participants and community residents will be an essential activity throughout the project. Relationships provide a base for developing learning activities that respond to residents' interests. As relationships develop, residents may also be more likely to respond to project activities because they will know who is organizing and offering them. To address this intention, the project Animator, along with the project Ambassadors, will identify and attend community events and gathering places, in order to visit and "be" with people. Spending unstructured time with people is crucial to building relationships (Campbell, 1994; Freeman and Johnson, 2003; Norton, 2000).

Developing relationships with community agency staff is also an important project activity. Partners East End is a committed group of agencies' staff, politicians, police, school personnel and others who meet monthly to share information, identify issues and work together to address them. As a member of this group the Candora project Coordinator will be able to introduce the project and the Animator. Possibilities for introducing the project include holding a literacies awareness seminar or workshop at a Partners East End meeting and / or inviting PEE members to attend a workshop.

Integrate support for incidental literacies development into agency services

A key activity of the project is to develop and assess ways to integrate support for literacies development into agency programs and services. The Animator, in consultation with a literacies consultant, will participate in

Candora programs to begin to identify ways to integrate support for literacies. The Animator will suggest approaches and assist staff as needed to use and assess them. Resources such as *Learning for our health* (Norton and Campbell, 1996) which link literacies development with learning about a topic will provide starting points for integrating support for literacies “in the moment” in agency programs and services. It is anticipated that the resource book being published by the Weaving Literacy into Family and Community Life³ project (Smythe, 2005), will also offer suggestions for integration.

For some adults, informal literacies practice may be sufficient to extend skills and develop confidence to use them. As they gain confidence, some may see possibilities for participating in learning activities with a more intentional focus on literacies development.

Invite and provide for participation in intentional literacies learning

As the project Animator develops relationships with residents and agency staff, s/he will identify and respond to possibilities for organizing and offering informal literacies activities, such as those described in the section about needs. As well as addressing residents’ interests, organizing activities will address the importance of location, time, child care, advertising, promotion and facilitation.

Drop-in programs and programming for low numbers of participants will be one way to respond to residents’ interests in timely ways (Lemay, 2003). As well, programming can recognize that some adults may need short-term support to develop a literacies practice, such as resume writing, while others may be interested in longer-term learning.

The Animator will also identify and begin to address needs and interests for long term, regular literacy programming. S/he will draw from a range of models, including one-to-one tutoring and small group learning, and work with Edmonton area programs to provide programming. For example, should interests in tutoring be identified, the Animator will work with the Centre for Family Literacy to arrange for tutoring in the area.

Maintain literacies access

Approaches to integrate literacies into agency programs will be documented in the project resource book, so that Candora staff will continue to integrate literacies and be able to orient new staff to literacies approaches.

It is anticipated that the project timeframe will be sufficient to develop and assess approaches to meet residents’ interests and needs for regular, long term literacies programming. In the third year of the project, the Animator

³ In a conversation with NLS staff, it was determined that the proposed project could build on but would not duplicate the intentions of the *Weaving Literacies* project, which has a focus on family literacy. Although the current project would link with family literacy programming in the community, the focus will be on adult literacies access.

and Coordinators will prepare a three-year plan for ongoing programming, identify partners and resources, and apply for funding. Consulting with potential funders, such as Alberta Advanced Education, will be an important aspect of planning from the early stages of the project.

Project resource book and workshops

A writer will be contracted to create a resource book to share learnings from the project, with the involvement of the project Animator. Learnings from the project will also be shared through workshops at the Provincial Literacy Conference.

Advisory Group

An advisory group will include up to eight people who have experience and knowledge about literacies and / or community development and interest in the project. As possible, Candora participants or community residents who become involved in the project will also be invited and supported to participate in the Advisory Group. Meetings will be structured and facilitated to support authentic participation by all members.

The main purpose of the group will be to provide access to resources to support the project, to help project staff link with community residents, and to advise about issues that may arise in the project. The group will also provide advice about project directions and sustainability.

Anticipated results and products

Anticipated results

- Integration of literacies into ongoing programs in a community agency and an understanding of ways to do this
- Increase in awareness about literacies among community organizations and residents and an understanding of ways to do this
- Participation in literacies learning by community residents
- A plan to sustain services and programs for literacies access in northeast Edmonton

Anticipated products:

- A resource book about approaches to widening access to adult literacies that can be used or adapted by community agencies and literacy programs

Evaluation

The main intention of the evaluation is to assess whether and how project intentions are met. As well the evaluator will work with project staff to assess and reflect on the outcomes of project activities, and to revise and plan activities accordingly. The Evaluator will develop a plan for formative and summative evaluation, which may include data collection (e.g., log, journal, document) by the Animator. The *CanFit* database, already in use at Candora will be used to document participation in project activities.

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Appendix A Project staff and role descriptions

Project Coordinators

Coordinating roles' will be divided as follows, and will be carried out in consultation between the co-coordinators.

Coordinator (The Learning Centre)

- Financial management
- Report to funders
- Contract and liaise with project staff (Animator, Evaluator, Consultants)
- Attend advisory committee meetings
- Coordinate publication of project documents
- Assist the project evaluator as needed and participate in the evaluation.
- Report to The Learning Centre Literacy Association Board regarding the project
- Supervision of project
- Inform Learning Centre staff and participants about relevant developments

Coordinator (The Candora Society of Edmonton)

- Provide day-to-day supervision and support for the project Animator
- Recruit advisory group members, arrange and facilitate meetings
- Inform and liaise with Candora staff regarding the project.
- Assist the project Evaluator as needed and participate in the Evaluation.
- Report to The Candora Society of Edmonton Board of Directors regarding the project

Project Animator

The Project animator will be mainly based at The Candora Society of Edmonton. Roles include:

- Meet with Candora staff to identify ways to integrate literacies support into programs
- With a literacies consultant, develop and facilitate integration workshops
- Provide support for staff regarding integration of literacies
- Document workshops and ongoing activities
- Become familiar with concepts of literacies and extending points of access
- Attend community interagency network meetings
- Develop resources to introduce the project.
- Attend community meetings and events

- Identify and develop relationships with community leaders
- Identify and involve project Ambassadors from among Candora participants and community residents. Provide support for their work.
- Organize and promote events to introduce adult learning.
- Promote r literacies learning activities and programs in the community.
- Organize and promote literacies activities / programming to respond to needs and interests that are identified.
- With literacies consultant, prepare report about the project process and outcomes

Project Ambassadors

Project ambassadors will include community members who live in the community, who are interested in adult learning, and who are interested in extending points of access for community members. Roles will include:

- Participate in workshops to extend their understanding of literacies and ways to support literacies development
- Participate in meetings to develop plans and resources to promote the project
- Accompany and support the project Animator in attending community meetings
- Meet one-to-one with community residents to identify needs, interests and possibilities for literacies learning

Literacies Consultant(s)

- Organizing and preparing for meetings
- Provide consultation regarding project implementation and links with resources.
- Provide support for project Animator to link with literacy programs and organizations.
- Provide consultation and support for project Animator to document and reflect on project process and activities
- Co-facilitate literacies integration workshops with the project Animator.
- Write / co-write project documents with the project Animator.
- Participate in the project evaluation.

Writer

- Write resource guide, in consultation with the project Animator

Project Evaluator

- Plan, implement and report on the project evaluation, in consultation with the project co-coordinators, animator and advisory committee.

Secretarial and administrative support

Secretarial and administrative staff duties will be shared by staff at The Edmonton Candora Society. Support staff will assist the co-coordinators and project animator in such areas as:

- Organizing and preparing for meetings
- Typing, photocopying and mailing
- Keeping statistics
- Payment of expenses and book keeping
- Telephone answering / reception in relation to the project

Child care staff

- Provide child care for parents attending project activities

Appendix B

Orientation for the Project Animator

- Tutor and participate in groups at The Learning Centre, to become familiar with approaches to literacies teaching and learning
- Participate in tutor training at the Centre for Family Literacy
- Become familiar with other literacy programs in Edmonton
- Participate in programs at Candora
- Attend agency network meetings in northeast Edmonton
- Visit relevant agencies and organizations
- Attend New Coordinator and / or other training offered by Literacy Alberta as possible
- Attend the Provincial Literacy Conference in Edmonton
- Read reports and publications related to the project intentions