

Project Report

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

The Widening Access for Adult Literacies project¹ was initiated to identify, implement and assess approaches to widen access to literacies in northeast Edmonton. Approaches to widen access included working with community agencies to create literacy friendly environments, integrating support for literacies development into existing community programs and services, and offering adult literacy groups and tutoring in inviting, accessible locations. Key legacies of the project include increased awareness and activities to widen access for adults with literacy challenges, the opening of a Learning Centre literacy program in northeast Edmonton, the formation of the Northeast Edmonton Literacy Network to promote literacy friendly environments, and the formation of a Literacy and Learning Circle to promote and sustain activities to integrate supports for literacies in agency programs. As well, a range of resources to support widening access were developed and will be available for downloading from The Learning Centre Literacy Association website.

This report summarizes project activities from November 2005 to December 31, 2008, with some updates to April 2009. The accompanying evaluation report describes project outcomes and learnings.

Project term

The project was initiated in November 2005 and was due to be completed in July 2008. We requested and received permission to use unexpended funds to continue the project until December 2008. (We also received permission to use the balance of funds until December 2009, in order to sustain and strengthen aspects of the widening access approaches that had been initiated. Information about actions to sustain approaches in the long-term is included in section 6 in this report.)

Project staff

A project animator was hired in November 2005. She initiated project activities and resigned for personal reasons in June 2006. A second animator began work in August 2006 and continued throughout the project. Both animators were experienced in community development approaches, had worked in northeast Edmonton for a number of years, and were well respected for their work. Both quickly extended their knowledge about literacies and widening access, with the support and participation of the project coordinator. Their knowledge and experiences were important assets for the project.

In May 2007 a consultant was contracted to plan and facilitate workshops and consult with agency staff about integrating supports for literacies. He

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.

continued in this role throughout the project. The project animator was then able to focus on developing and maintaining community relations and promotion, coordinating intentional literacy programs and long-term planning. Another consultant was contracted for a short term to develop a communications plan for the animator and support staff to implement (see section 5.1). Facilitators were also contracted as needed to present workshops for agency staff and to facilitate literacy groups (see sections 5.3 and 5.6).

Project location and identity

The project was located with The Candora Society in a visible storefront space on the second floor of Abbottsfield Mall. This mall is community oriented, is on a number of bus routes, houses several community agencies and a public library branch, and includes a Discovery Centre that provides child minding while parents are in Candora Society-sponsored programs. As needed, the project animator was also able to access other space at Candora and other agencies in the mall (e.g., for workshops and literacy groups). Sharing space increased the project's visibility among the sharing agencies, contributed to day-to-day communication with agency staff, and meant that the project did not have to locate or rent space.

Following a consultation with staff at Candora, the animator realized that a more accessible name was needed to identify the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project. For purposes of communication, the project was named "Learning Connections" to reflect the idea of connecting people with learning opportunities.

In 2008 the project began to use a vacated rental space in the mall for meetings and classes, with the permission of the mall manager. As a result of project activities, The Learning Centre Literacy Association decided to rent this space and open a Learning Centre in September 2008. The project office relocated to that space, and activities started during the project continued and are continuing from there (see section 6).

Activities to meet project intentions

Project intentions are listed in Appendix 1. The first intention of the project was to widen access to adult literacies. Activities to address this intention are described under the following headings: Building relationships and raising awareness; Reducing barriers; Integrating support for literacies; and Partnering to offer literacy groups and tutoring. Activities and outcomes to maintain literacies access are described in section 6.

Building relationships and raising awareness

Activities to build relationships and raise awareness were related to each other and were fundamental to the project. Working from a participatory education stance, the animators met with agency networks and agency staff. They introduced the project, made presentations about literacies and provided project updates. They found out what agencies were already doing to support literacies and talked about resources and services the project could offer to enhance this support. These meetings also served to raise awareness about

the project and to identify agencies that were interested in participating with the project in one or more ways. Over the course of the project, the animators made 36 presentations at individual agencies, including to agency staff, agency participant groups, school staff and parent groups.

As noted in section 3, a consultant was contracted mid-way through the project to develop a plan for regular promotional activities and distribution of promotional materials. This plan supported promotional work that the animators had initiated and continued to do. The animators arranged for 25 project displays at school open houses, resource fairs, in Abbottsfield Mall and at community agency events. Other communication and awareness activities included placing articles and free ads in community newspapers and newsletters, and distributing flyers at meetings and displays, through grocery and department stores, and by area landlords. An estimated 5000 flyers were distributed.

A key development for raising awareness was the involvement of three adult learners as ambassadors. They accompanied the project animator to a total of eight agency meetings and shared their literacy and learning stories. Comments from people who attended the meetings indicate that the ambassadors' presentations were key to raising awareness and understanding about literacy issues.

A related development was publishing a book of literacy and learning stories by the ambassadors and other adults who attended programs offered through the project. The book will be launched on May 7, 2009, as part of a literacy awareness and celebration event, and will be distributed as a resource to raise awareness.

Building relationships and raising awareness was also integrated into all project activities. As a result, 37 agencies participated in and contributed to the project in one or more ways, including attending workshops, referring learners, providing meeting space, and serving on the advisory group. A key legacy of building relationships is the Northeast Edmonton Literacy Network.

Formation of the network was in itself an important development in raising and sustaining awareness among member agencies and in northeast Edmonton. In the fall 2008 the network hosted an inter-agency event at Abbottsfield Mall to celebrate International Literacy Day and promote literacy awareness. A first anniversary celebration of the network is being held in conjunction with the book launch.

Reducing barriers

Barriers are related to *access to literacy programs* and *access to other programs and services* that require some skills and confidence with literacies. Barriers to access literacy programs, and project activities that addressed them, are described in section 5.6.

Barriers to accessing *agency resources and services* include printed information that is difficult to read, assumptions about people's abilities to read and write, and environments that may be unwelcoming for people with literacy challenges. Activities to address these barriers included workshops

and consultations about integrating support for literacies, clear communication, and creating literacy friendly environments. These activities are described in the next sections.

Integrating support for literacies

A key intention of the Widening Access project was to work with agencies to develop approaches and strategies to integrate support for literacies development into ongoing agency learning programs. Workshops to address this intention were introduced near the start of the project. A general workshop was held with Candora staff, and more specific workshops were held for Collective Kitchen facilitators and for facilitators of parenting groups. Initially, workshops focused on the idea of integrating supports and raising awareness about reading strategies that facilitators could readily introduce and support in their learning groups. The coordinator also developed a brochure of tips for integrating literacies support.

In the first year of the project, the idea of “integrating support for literacies development” was broadened to include a range of ways to support adults with literacy challenges who were participating in learning programs. Based on a survey of agency program facilitators, half-day workshops were offered about once a month on such topics as participatory approaches, learning styles, storytelling as way of teaching, learning disabilities, and facilitators’ roadmap. A total of 108 agency staff participated in the workshops, including individuals who attended more than one.

Based on response to the workshops, a Literacies Learning Day was planned, with a view to reaching a wider range of agency staff. The fall 2007 event would have included presentations about literacies and widening access and workshops on topics related to supporting adults with literacy challenges. However, the event was cancelled due to low registration. The animator consulted with potential participants and learned that most could not commit a full workday to attend.

Although response to the monthly workshops was positive, application of integrating literacies approaches in agency programs was lower than expected. As mentioned, a literacies consultant was contracted to continue to develop and facilitate workshops with a specific focus on integrating support for literacies, and in particular, to provide consultation and support for individual agencies.

Following initial consultations with six agencies, project staff decided to focus on working in depth with two to three agencies. Two agencies participated in this approach. A key learning is that agency staff may need release time, which requires funding, to re-develop programs and workshops in order to integrate literacies supports (see also section 6). As well, the concept of integrating literacies is relatively new; raising awareness and understanding about how to apply the concept is a long-term process.

In the fall 2008 members of the Northeast Edmonton Literacy Network began to organize and offer workshops related to supporting adults with literacy challenges. As well, in November 2008 the literacies consultant established a

Literacy and Learning Circle as a forum for agency program facilitators to meet on a regular basis and discuss a range of literacy issues affecting program design and delivery. Bringing people together regularly served as a reminder about ways to integrate literacies and provided opportunities for circle members to share ideas and approaches. Discussion topics included principles of adult learning, strategies to support individual learning, identifying and managing learning barriers, the impact of violence on learning, developing resources to support literacy skill development in programs, and assessing literacy skill levels. Staff from about seven agencies have attended circle meetings.

Clear communication

Soon after the project was initiated, Candora staff identified a need for learning about clear communication. The project animator and coordinator responded by providing a Clear Language workshop, and Candora staff developed and implemented a clear language policy for the agency. The animator provided additional workshops and informal consultations for staff in other agencies, and the coordinator prepared a brochure to promote clear communication.

When the literacies consultant was contracted, he further developed and facilitated workshops and consultation about clear communications. Offering these workshops provided a concrete entry point to widening access and reached a wider audience than the integrating Literacies workshops alone. Clear communication workshops were offered to people who produced newsletters for schools, for staff in community agencies and for editors of community league newsletters. Individual consultations were provided for at least 16 different agencies. Workshop evaluations were very positive and a number of participants provided examples of how they were applying clear language principles to producing their newsletters, brochures and flyers.

Creating literacy friendly environments

Midway through 2008 project staff began to use the term “creating literacy friendly environments” to include a range of ways to increase access for adults with literacy challenges – indeed for all adults. The term is now being used to include clear communication and integrating supports for literacies as well as additional approaches.

To introduce the concept, the literacies consultant facilitated agency “walkabouts” during which time agency staff identified barriers and ways to reduce them. He then worked with agencies on “literacy makeovers” – helping staff to make changes and plan how to maintain them. Examples of changes include: using clear communication throughout (forms, brochures, newsletters, bulletin boards); reducing clutter (e.g., on bulletin boards and brochure racks); creating a welcoming reception area; and offering help with any literacy related tasks. Seven consultations were held.

When the Northeast Edmonton Literacy Network was formed, network members decided on a purpose of “Creating literacy friendly environments in

northeast Edmonton." A committee of network members was formed to continue the work started through the project. They planned and offered workshops, began to develop criteria for agencies to be identified as "literacy friendly" and have plans to create a logo to post in agencies that meet these criteria. The network intentionally meets at different agencies each month, in order to highlight the idea of literacy friendly environments in the host agency. The network has offered three workshops for agency receptionists, recognizing the key role that receptionists can play in supporting adults with literacy challenges.

Partnering to offer literacy groups and tutoring

Generally recognized barriers to *accessing literacy programs* include distance and transportation costs, need for childcare, awareness, previous experiences with education, and confidence. Throughout the project, these types of barriers were addressed by providing learner-centred literacy programs in accessible locations, with childcare available as possible. Snacks were provided and bus fare was available for students as needed. Programs were widely advertised, as described in section 5.1.

To specifically address issues of awareness and previous experiences with education, the project proposed to offer "informal taster literacies activities" and to engage community members as ambassadors to help the animator connect with other community members and potential participants (see section 5.1). At the start of the project, the animator introduced taster activities such as card making workshops. The project office was opened on Thursday afternoons and evenings for people to drop by for help with filling in forms or to get information about literacy programs in the city. In the spring 2006 "Learning in the Mall" was initiated on Thursday evenings by offering a *Write your Way* and a *Breaking the Spell* workshop on Thursday evenings. Thursday evening programming continued throughout the project (see literacy groups).

Interest in participating in literacy programming grew more quickly than anticipated, in large part through the animator being present and visible in the community. Initially people were referred to The Learning Centre (down town) or to the Centre for Family Literacy, but as anticipated, the distance to down town was a barrier for most. By 2006 requests for literacy programming was sufficient to organize literacy groups and tutoring in northeast Edmonton.

One-to-one tutoring

The project partnered with the Centre for Family Literacy to provide one-to-one tutoring for adults in northeast Edmonton who favoured that approach. Initially the project animator accompanied potential students to the Centre for Family Literacy (located down town) for initial assessment and matching with a tutor. Then arrangements were made for the Centre for Family Literacy student coordinator to come to northeast Edmonton to meet with prospective students. (The Centre for Family Literacy was reimbursed for time and travel from project funds.) However, recruiting volunteer tutors for northeast Edmonton was a challenge. In 2007, the project animator distributed posters and spoke to inter-agency meetings about the needs for tutors, with some positive results. From fall 2006 to spring 2008, 18 people met with the

student coordinator, 13 were matched and 6 student-tutor pairs met at Abbottsfield Mall. As planned, Centre for Family Literacy involvement in the project was completed in June, 2008.

Meanwhile, volunteer tutors were involved and continue to be involved in literacy groups. Tutors work with individuals within a group context and/or provide one-to-one tutoring.

Literacy groups

In 2006 four literacy groups were offered, once a week each, in partnership with three community agencies: The Candora Society, Unity Centre of Northeast Edmonton, and Amity House. The agencies provided meeting space and access to childcare, and The Learning Centre Literacy Association, with project funding, contracted facilitators and paid for childcare and transportation as needed. The agency and project staff worked together to promote the programs. Volunteers assisted group facilitators at some sites.

Based on learner response to the literacy groups, applications for funding to continue the groups in 2007 were successfully submitted to the Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association (ECALA). As well, The Learning Centre Literacy Association applied for and received ECALA funds to initiate additional literacy groups and to develop a guide for programming in community based agencies.

In fall 2007 project staff assisted the directors of Unity Centre and Amity House to apply directly to ECALA for funding for the literacy groups offered at their sites in 2008. This was a way to build capacity, with a view to groups continuing when the project was completed. The Candora Society decided to continue to partner with The Learning Centre Literacy Association to offer literacy groups in 2008. Thus The Learning Centre Literacy Association applied for a received funding from ECALA for those groups.

Meanwhile, in 2007 and 2008 literacy programming was introduced at three additional sites, including an elementary school. A small group did get underway at the school. However response at the other two sites was not sufficient to continue.

In 2008 the numbers of groups and enrolments in groups offered at Abbottsfield Mall continued to increase. The Thursday evening Learning in the Mall expanded to include two literacy groups and a number of tutors, and some other agencies offered learning programs at the same time. While adults attended a literacy group, their children could attend a homework club or go to the Candora Discovery Centre.

In fall 2008, as mentioned, The Learning Centre Literacy Association opened a Learning Centre in the mall to house groups and tutoring that was underway there. In 2009 the group that had been meeting at the school relocated to the mall site. Six literacy groups, funded by the Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association, are being offered at The Learning Centre at Abbottsfield Mall.

Reflection: The project initially offered literacy groups with agencies that served particular communities in northeast Edmonton. People enrolled in the

groups, but enrolments and participation was lower than anticipated. Challenges for offering literacy groups in small community agencies include identifying facilitators for once a week groups; allocating agency staff time for promotion and coordination; and having a smaller population to draw from.

The steady increase of enrollments at Abbottsfield Mall during the project may reflect how the mall is accessed by people from across northeast Edmonton and how the project animator was able to coordinate and support literacy groups offered at the mall.

Participation in literacy groups

From 2006 to 2008, 124 individuals registered in literacy groups offered through the project, with a number attending for more than one year. Between May 2007 and December 2008, 198 people inquired about the literacy programming.

Year	Number of program sites	Number of literacy classes	Number of sessions	Number of new registrants
2006	3	4	53	30
2007	4	6	156	49
2008*	2	4	114	45
Total				124

* Does not include programs started at two agencies that began to offer the literacy programs on their own.

Maintain literacies access

The Widening Access project was completed in December 2008, and adults in northeast Edmonton continue to have access to community based literacy programming and to literacy friendly services in community agencies. Continuing access results from project activities in general and from specific and responsive activities undertaken to maintain literacies access.

At the start of the project, an advisory group was formed to advise and provide feedback about project activities. With a view to long term planning, the group included a consultant from the Alberta government department responsible for literacy, the Executive Director of the Edmonton Community Adult Learning Council and a member of the Board of The Learning Centre Literacy Association. The Candora Society Director also attended advisory group meetings and reported regularly about the project to her board.

Developing a vision and plan

In May 2007 the project hosted a visioning workshop with people from agencies and organizations in the project area. The main purpose of the workshop was to find out if there was interest in sustaining supports for literacies in northeast Edmonton beyond the project. Twenty-five (25) people attended the workshop, including adult learners from project literacy groups. Participants developed ideas for continuing to widen access, including:

sharing, linking literacies and other community-based agencies, building capacity, central support, sustainability and broadened involvement.

A follow-up meeting was held in June 2007, with about 12 people attending. People identified resources and approaches to continue to widen access in the areas of clear communication, integrating support for literacies, and offering literacy groups. They advocated collaboration among agencies and discussed approaches to coordination. It was recognized that an agency would need to take the lead regarding coordination and applying for and managing funding.

In the winter 2008 project staff reviewed suggestions from the visioning workshop and follow-up meeting, with a view to organizing another planning meeting. This review led to a meeting of agency staff about forming a literacy network. Those who attended expressed interest in forming an action-oriented network to advocate for literacy friendly environments. The Literacy Network of Northeast Edmonton began to meet in April 2008, met monthly (except during the summer) and continues to meet. Seventeen (17) agencies are members, with regular attendance from thirteen.

Maintaining a literacies presence /hub

Meanwhile, The Learning Centre Literacy Association Board of directors reviewed project developments and decided to offer to provide leadership to continue project activities, depending on response from project partners. Candora Society Board members supported the idea of TLCLA taking the lead and supported a continuing relationship with the Association and literacies work. At a spring 2008 meeting The Learning Centre Literacy Association Board passed a motion to provide leadership to support literacies work in northeast Edmonton, to rent the space in the mall that the project had begun to use, and to open a Learning Centre in that space.

Maintaining literacy programming

In the fall 2008, a proposal for funding for literacy programming in northeast Edmonton was submitted to Alberta Advanced Education. Funding for two years was approved effective March 31, 2009. With this funding, The Learning Centre Literacy Association will be able to continue to rent space for The Learning Centre at the mall and to pay the animator's salary and other expenses, with a view to increasing the number of learners served at the mall site. Project funds, carried forward from 2008, were used to pay expenses from January to March.

Maintaining support to create literacy friendly environments and integrate literacies

In summer 2008 a proposal for funding to sustain some aspects of project activities was unsuccessfully submitted to the Alberta Wild Rose Foundation. The Learning Centre Literacy Association has since submitted a proposal to the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills to further develop approaches to Integrate Support for Literacies. The proposed project builds on learnings from the Widening Access project.

Meanwhile, as described in section 5, the Literacy Network of Northeast Edmonton is taking a role to offer workshops and other activities to raise awareness and create and sustain literacy friendly environments. As also described, a Literacy and Learning Circle was initiated to continue to support agency staff to integrate literacies into their programs.

Drawing from remaining project funds, the literacies consultant will continue to provide support and mentoring for network and learning circles activities during 2009, with a view to network members and agencies continuing activities in the long term. The Learning Centre at the mall will also provide a base for these activities.

Sharing project learnings and resources

Project learnings and resources have been shared beyond northeast Edmonton through presentations and workshops at three literacy conferences, regional meetings of literacy coordinators, and at community learning network meetings. Project staff also shared ideas and experiences with Literacy Alberta staff who were developing a Literacy Audit kit.

As a result of growing awareness, the project received requests from organizations outside the project area for workshops/consultation. These organizations were provided with information about consultants whom they might contract directly.

Resources that were developed through the project are being edited and will be posted on The Learning Centre Literacy Association website (tlcla.ca). They include a project overview, workshop leaders' guides, participant guides and handouts, and a guide about offering literacy programs in community based agencies.

Project staff decided to share the resources through the website, rather than print them, because of their length and quantity and so that they can be easily updated, accessed and revised by anyone who want to adopt the approaches. Notices about the resources will be sent by email to literacy programs and organizations across Canada.

Project expenses

A statement of project expenses to December 2008 is attached. As mentioned, The Learning Centre Literacy Association requested and was granted permission to use the balance of funds to help maintain project activities during 2009. Details about how these funds are being used will be sent to the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills and an updated financial report will be submitted by December 2009.

Appendix 1

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