Stories from the Field:
Professional Development for Adult Literacy Practitioners
(Volume 2)

Sandra Loschnig
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Introduction

Literacy is a fundamental human right and the foundation for lifelong learning. It is fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one’s health, one’s income, and one’s relationship with the world. (UNESCO statement on literacy)¹

In Stories from the Field: Professional Development for Adult Literacy Practitioners (Volume 2), we focus on adult literacy programs that are specifically designed to address the needs of marginalized adults in Bow Valley College and the Calgary region. This provides us with an opportunity to “lean in” to some of the non-formal, non-traditional adult literacy and essential skills learning settings that have been developed. In exploring program innovations, adaptations, and delivery methods, we hope to increase awareness of community connections, disability services, and the role of culture and language within programs serving non-traditional learners.

These stories are a continuation of the original Stories from the Field project,² a unique initiative of the Adult Literacy Research Institute.³ Stories from the Field takes a journalistic approach to professional development for adult literacy and essential skills practitioners exploring current issues, innovations, and challenges in teaching and learning. By practitioners we mean coordinators, volunteers, administrators, and instructors. Our first collection of articles was published in April 2014.

All the articles are posted locally (within Bow Valley College), provincially on the adult literacy and learning e-conferencing sites, and nationally on the Adult Literacy Research Institute blog and, until recently, the Copian website.⁴

Join us in exploring and celebrating the ongoing innovative work taking place in the adult literacy and essential skills field. We hope these stories spark conversations about teaching philosophies, instructional practices, diversity, and community inclusion.

² See the Adult Literacy Research Institute resources web page for the print version of Stories from the Field. http://centreforfoundationallearning.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/storiesapr30-web-2.pdf
³ The Adult Literacy Research Institute at Bow Valley College in Calgary, Alberta, promotes and conducts critical inquiry and applied research, and aims to inspire innovation in the field of foundational learning (adult literacy, basic education, upgrading, and essential skills.)
⁴ Because the Government of Canada recently withdrew funding, the Copian website is no longer available.
Radical Humanities 101: Engaging Marginalized Adults in Learning and Life

Artivism 101 project

Artivism 101 project humanities 101 students shaping questions of the heart, mind and soul through artistic and collaborative expression

“For me education is all about the possibility of transformation and capacity building, and is bound up in the meanings we have about ourselves. And for me, that’s found in the humanities through poetry, prose, drama, art, music, and classical studies.” Dr. Tara Hyland-Russell began our conversation with this statement about her work in the Humanities 101 program at St. Mary’s University College, an independent Catholic liberal arts university located on a historic site in Calgary, Alberta.

Humanities 101 is a unique university education program for marginalized adult learners adapted from the Clemente model pioneered by Earl Shorris, a journalist and social critic. Shorris believed that “access to the humanities addresses the power differential within society that regulates relative poverty and affluence and provides the reflective space and tools necessary to become fully engaged citizens, to join the viva active (the active life), a life based on action and choice, and to escape from lives of impoverishment” (Groen and Hyland-Russell 2010a, 19). In 1997, Shorris launched his first humanities course designed to reach socially and educationally disadvantaged non-traditional adult learners: the poor and disenfranchised in New York City (Groen and Hyland-Russell 2010a, 10). The course was named after the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in lower Manhattan, a place that provided counselling to poor people in their own language and in their own community (Groen and Hyland-Russell 2010a, 10).

Many different versions of the Clemente course developed since then, throughout Canada, Mexico, Australia, Korea, the United States, and Sudan (Groen and Hyland-Russell 2010a, 10). And although each was based on Shorris’s principles, many chose to build their models in unique ways.

1 According to its website, St. Mary’s students “are inspired to combine academics with a passionate commitment to ethics, social justice, and respect for diversity of opinion and belief.” Retrieved from http://stmu.ca/aboutUs/aboutUs.html
The Evolution of Calgary’s Humanities 101 Program

The Humanities 101 program in Calgary started out as Storefront 101. In 2003, Claire Dorian Chapman, a community social worker with the City of Calgary, was inspired by the success of a Humanities 101 program initiated at the University of British Columbia in 1998. She organized a pilot program in Calgary with the help of several collaborators: the Mustard Seed, a non-profit Christian humanitarian agency that provided services to the homeless and street people of Calgary; City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services; Athabasca University (AU); University of Calgary (UC); and Alberta Human Resources. Pilot funding was provided by Calgary Community Adult Learning Association (CCALA) (now Calgary Learns) (Groen and Hyland-Russell 2008, 153).

By 2004, the other universities were less involved and St. Mary’s University College came on board as the accrediting institution. St. Mary’s program is the only program that gives students the choice to either get university credit or to audit the courses. This decision can be made part way through the courses.

Initially classes were held at a local church but they later moved to Alliance University College/Nazarene University (now Ambrose University) and weekly tutorials were at the Mustard Seed. Storefront 101 became Humanities 101 in 2009 and moved permanently to St. Mary’s University College campus. This decision was made after consulting with the students about their needs and preferences. As Tara explained, “We host it on St. Mary’s Campus and we do that quite deliberately. The research that Janet [Groen] and I did with students across three Canadian humanities programs said it was really important for them to physically step foot on the university campus—that symbolically it means a tremendous amount to be able to call themselves university students.” She added that when students come to the program, they are fully St. Mary’s students: they receive a student ID card and have access to the library, the fitness centre, and counselling services.

Defining Elements of Humanities 101

One of the principal goals of the program is to create social change. Tara explained:

We look at ourselves as an institution. What kind of barriers,
visible and invisible, do we have in place that keep learners away from learning or that impede their progress? We’re always looking at ourselves and what we can do, as well as the wider community. We’re trying to teach our students that they have more agency and they can make choices in their lives.

The program teaches literature, history, cultural studies, art history, music, and the classics. Tara talked about the curriculum and how it is presented:

Through a variety of texts and teachers, we look at different issues, different ideas. Two courses we are now repeating every year are Story and Meaning, and Different Stories, Different Meanings … So everything from creation stories to stories from around the world. Last term we did a whole unit on Aboriginal history in Canada. We looked at First Nations poetry and prose … I try to tailor the content to reach the students who are in the class. Last term we had a very ethnically diverse group of students from all over the world—students from Sudan, Dubai, and Nigeria. We try to bring in immigrant stories as well as First Nations stories. We try to honour all of those perspectives but also talk about some of the difficult questions. For example, in Canada what is the difference between a settler, a First Nations person, an immigrant? We talked about the colonial history of Canada and most students had no idea … they found that very moving and upsetting and we had some heated conversations. That’s when we did the smudging and the talking circles to bring everybody back into the community.

Another component of the program is taking the students to cultural events and public spaces, including live plays, art galleries, and museums. “We want the students to access culture because that’s what helps make us citizens and engages us in society. Again, most of the students have not gone to live theatre, or to the art gallery or to the museum. They are absolutely thrilled and very thoughtful about what they see. It is also about deliberately transgressing those spaces that have often been kept for the elite,” Tara explained.
An additional, vital element of the program is countering any physical barriers that might obstruct student participation. Tuition is free; textbooks, binders, pens, and paper are paid for; transit tickets are supplied. Childcare is covered if needed. Tara added, “We have a hot, nutritious meal before class twice a week. That’s important not just because people are hungry but also to form a community. So it’s really important that we all sit down around a table together and get to know each other as people.”

Students are required to read a lot, reflect on their reading, and do written assignments weekly. “For us that’s a really important part of the learning … that’s really where the transformation takes place,” Tara told me.

**Authenticity as Teachers and People**

Tara has been involved with the program since its beginning in 2003, initially teaching English literature. She recalls the first time she taught the Humanities 101 class:

That first night I stood in front of the class and I thought, oh dear, they’re terrified. And I thought I have to do something entirely different here than I’ve ever done before and so I started doing some oral storytelling. I’ve thought a tremendous amount about pedagogy since that moment and what I’ve learned in Storefront 101 and Humanities 101, I bring back to my degree courses here.

In that moment, Tara realized that the students needed to overcome their initial fears and feelings of isolation. They didn’t need the expert persona of a “professor” with its connotations of power and authority. They needed her to help them “find a way to inhabit the learning space comfortably and begin to participate in the active dialogic process that marks both learning and civic engagement” (Hyland-Russell and Groen 2013, 42-43.)

In her past work Tara had practised storytelling, but hadn’t used it in her work at the university. Intuitively, she told the students about “a practice from Haiti that offers a model of belonging and dialogue as listeners are invited into a shared community space. In Haiti, when
people are gathered and someone wants to tell a story, they stand up and say ‘cric’. If the listeners want that particular storyteller to tell a story at the time they respond with ‘crac’. If the community doesn’t respond or the response is weak, the teller does not have permission to bring a story into that space” (Hyland-Russell and Groen 2013, 42). Tara explained to her class that without a “crac,” she did not have permission to tell them a story. “Would they like a tale? Cric,” she said. “Crac” the class replied enthusiastically and she began telling them the Haitian story called “The Magic Orange Tree.”

In doing this exercise with the students, Tara shifted the power dynamic within the class and began the slow process of gaining trust and building relationships with the students. “I see a lot of people who are afraid to learn or they have had negative experiences in learning. I think it’s possible to ignite that flame, that passion. But it takes a willingness to risk and to be vulnerable on the teacher’s part,” she said.

Characteristics of the Students

When students come in for an interview they fill out a questionnaire developed specifically for the program. The main criterion for entrance into the Humanities 101 program is low income. While the income levels are tied to the Low Income Cut Offs (LICO) established by Statistics Canada, there is some subjectivity involved in determining what’s considered low income. During the interview, people are asked how they think their experience fits into the program. Tara elaborated on the characteristics of most of the students in the program.

In general, the students who come to the program are all low income. They’ve experienced prior interrupted education, or negative experiences with education. Many of them have experiences with violence. Some have experiences with substance

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2 The tale and knowledge of the cric-crac practice were taken from Diane Wolkstein’s book *The Magic Orange Tree and Other Haitian Folk Tales*, which contains transcribed and translated tales gathered from oral Haitian storytellers, a source credited in class when Tara told the story.

3 The low income cut-offs (LICOs) are income thresholds below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter, and clothing than the average family. Retrieved from the Statistics Canada website http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75f0002m/2012002/lico-sfr-eng.htm
abuse or addictions. A number of them have experienced homelessness or unstable housing. They may also have a physical or mental illness or disability. An increasing number have experience with war, immigration, being refugees. They are referred from over 130 agencies and services in Calgary.

The students’ ages range between eighteen and sixty-three. People are also assessed on an individual basis for how they will fit into the dynamic of the class. The program requires that people not come to class under the influence. Tara stresses that “a main feature of the program is that it is a profoundly safe place.”

Innovations in Calgary’s Humanities 101 Program: “Making the Learning Come Alive”

The curriculum in Humanities 101 is always undergoing change to keep it fresh and current and instructors use innovative techniques to engage learners and make the learning come alive. Here are two innovations that stood out.

Keeping Cahiers

During the last ten years of her life, artist Frida Kahlo kept a journal of writings, observations, reflections, watercolour drawings, and sketches (Hyland-Russell 2013, 1). Tara read about this technique and wondered if “combining text and image in a reflective journaling assignment would contribute to students’ transformational learning processes” (ibid., 1). She developed a reflective journaling practice she calls keeping cahiers that she uses in her undergraduate classes, including Humanities 101:

Essentially every week or every other week, students need to give me a couple of pages of text and image. And I give them prompts now [questions to open up their thinking]… The students say that it absolutely helps them ruminate—it takes them places that they don’t go otherwise, and helps them really bring together strands of what they are learning. It also gives them a place to put their emotions and to record their emotional responses [to the learning].
In her study of the students’ perspectives on keeping cahiers, Hyland-Russell found that:

1) cahiers invited students to engage holistically with course material;
2) cahiers facilitated divergent and creative thinking;
3) cahiers aided deep learning through ownership of the process and content;
4) essential to student engagement with the cahiers was the instructor-student dialogue and situating the cahier as a safe, reflective place; and
5) central to the way cahiers function is their inclusion of images. (Hyland-Russell 2013, 6)

Artivism: Art as Activism

Last semester, Tara attended a conference in Regina on arts-based research for Aboriginal communities. At the conference she met Leslie Robinson, a scholar from Edmonton who has been working in Uganda with Ugandan youth for eight years doing art as activism—artivism. After Tara described this work to the class, they decided they wanted to do an artivism project. They skyped with Leslie Robinson. With the students gathered around in a horseshoe, Leslie led the conversation.

Tara explained the process like this:

Everybody has to come to a consensus about the topic or theme. It took two and a half hours to come to consensus about the project and how we were going to go about it. We had just read Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*. One of the threads of the course was what is the meaning of our life? how do we make meaning? and how is that connected with our transformative learning journeys? So they came up with the prompt “Our Journeys of Transformation—What Ultimately Matters?” Everybody, even the most shy, had their chance to speak and they all agreed on the topic.

Following this process, Leslie Robinson travelled to Calgary to work with the class. They gathered art supplies and people made art pieces. Some did a “before and after” piece to show how they felt before they
came into the program and how they feel after. They took digital images of the final art and called it a digital quilt. This project was shared with the community at the end of the semester’s learning celebration. Tara explained that “one of the aims of artivism is to impact the community and try to create social change. Students were able to talk about their pieces in front of the audience, which included the board of governors and potential donors.”

**Student Success Stories**

Graduates from the program have moved on to postsecondary education, taking courses for audit, credit, and as part of university degree programs. Twelve students entered St. Mary’s, with two students graduating by October 2012 and two more close to completion. Some students have completed degrees at other postsecondary institutions. Other student successes include obtaining employment, working as a research assistant, volunteering, and having an increased capacity for decision making and civic engagement (Press Release, St. Mary’s University College).

In a previous *Story from the Field*, I spoke about the different ways of measuring success and student progress. “While learner success and growth can be measured in statistics, grades, or numbers, learners and the practitioners who work with them often measure success through the personal stories that describe changes in their lives” (Loschnig 2013). Such life changes are certainly evident at the end of the Humanities 101 course.

Recently, at the learning celebration held on 15 April 2014, I sat in the audience and watched as student after student came forward and spoke eloquently about how the course had changed their lives. Several spoke about Humanities 101 saving their lives. They described previously feeling worthless and suicidal, and how, through the course work and with the support of fellow students and instructors, they found themselves thinking about their worlds differently. One woman said quietly “I learned I can take part in the world—not just react to it.”
She was not alone. At the end of our conversation, Tara shared this story with me:

> At the learning celebration at the end of the last semester, a student came up on the stage to receive her certificate of completion. She walked up to the microphone and said “You know, when I first started this course the question for me was: to be or not to be. I was suicidal and this course saved my life.” She’s still struggling—she hasn’t got it all figured out, but she’s back for another course and she’s starting to figure out that she is strong and resilient and she can make choices.

By any measurement, formal or informal, the Humanities 101 program is an unqualified success.

**Program Sustainability**

Finding long-term funding to support the Humanities 101 program has been an ongoing challenge. Calgary’s program was on hiatus from 2011 to 2013 due to a lack of funding.

With the passionate support of St. Mary’s president, Dr. Gerry Turcotte, the university has made a commitment to keep the program running. In the fall of 2012, they embarked on a fundraising campaign called Friends of Humanities 101 to raise funds to relaunch the program in 2013. The university provides help on the development front with support in writing grants and expanding fundraising initiatives. To make the program sustainable in the long term, they have also given Tara teaching release, in recognition of the time she spends in the program, though she still volunteers a large part of her time.

Volunteers are an integral part of Humanities 101. Tutors who work with the students are all volunteers, mostly from within the student body and from the community, and faculty teaching the program all volunteer their time and expertise. “We actually have a lineup of faculty who want to teach and volunteer their time,” Tara told me during our conversation. “One of the other reasons the program thrives here is that our larger student body really values the program. They care about the students. We only have 700 or so students and they have committed to raising
over $5,000 a year to support Humanities 101.” In the past year alone, students raised over $13,000 and donated it all to Humanities 101.

With the university’s support and ongoing fundraising, Tara is optimistic that the program is at St. Mary’s to stay.

If you are interested in helping St. Mary’s continue to provide this essential programming, visit www.stmu.ca/HUM101 for more information and learn how to donate.

There is no doubt that the humanities courses offered for people living in poverty are radical. They seek to uncover and disrupt relations of power that surround and immobilize the poor while they enact a pedagogy that transforms not only the students but all participants in the learning community. To mark and name this radical education that is rooted in social justice, we have coined the term radical humanities.

(Groen and Hyland-Russell 2010b, 33)

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Integrating Foundational Learning: A Training and Mentoring Project for Community Organizations Working with Adult Learners
The Integrating Foundational Learning (IFL) project is an innovative training initiative designed to educate and mentor staff in community agencies on how to better integrate essential skills and literacy practices into their program activities.

In 2010, Calgary Learns identified a “specific need for training and mentoring of funded agency staff in two categories of funded programs: Community Issues and Employability Enhancement. These programs offer meaningful learning opportunities to adult learners and intuitively meet foundational learners at their skill levels” (Peters and Messaros 2011, 2). The result was the IFL project.

In our conversation, Calgary Learns Executive Director Nancy Purdy shared how the IFL project grew from an idea to a project entering its fourth year:

Many adults with literacy challenges don’t enroll in literacy programs. However, many are attracted to other community programs such as a parenting class, or an employment program at the drop-in centre because these programs will help them move forward. There are a number of programs in our community that are working with foundational learners.1 We realized that we really have to integrate literacy and essential skills into those programs when they naturally fit and help organizations realize they can enhance the learning of their program participants. This was the original start of the IFL project: to extend literacy beyond a [traditional] literacy program and help learners in a variety of programs. (interview with author)

1 “Foundational learning refers to the basic skills or competencies adults require to fully participate in life: the ability to participate as neighbours and citizens, have satisfying employment and prepare to pursue further learning” (Calgary Learns qtd. in Peters and Messaros 2011, 2).
Literacy Alberta delivered the first round of the project (funded by Calgary Learns) which ran from September 2010 to October 2011 and worked with seven agencies in the Calgary area. The second round (with funding from an anonymous donor) ran from July 2012 to December 2013. Terri Peters has been a project manager and facilitator for the project for the past three and a half years. She describes the focus of the project like this:

The IFL project is focused on working with adult learning organizations (not adult literacy programs) who are working with foundational learners. Its intent is to provide skills for staff (facilitators, coordinators, front-line workers) to understand their work differently in terms of literacy and essential skills. For most of them, their program delivery is content based. The learners are coming to learn information about a particular topic, for example the Multiple Sclerosis Society or the Canadian Mental Health Association Art of Friendship class or participating in a community kitchen program … We help the facilitators and coordinators to think beyond the content they’re delivering to what skills are embedded within the content. We move them from thinking about their programs as content and knowledge to thinking of them as content, knowledge, and skills.

Terri also spoke about the necessity of the project being learner centred, which in this case means organization centred. She says this about the learning process:

I see learning as transactional and transformational. Transactional in that the learner [in this case the organization] transacts with others to do the learning. The transaction is side

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2 Literacy Alberta is a provincial literacy organization providing support, resources, tools, and professional development for literacy practitioners, learners, tutors, and employers across Alberta. http://www.literacyalberta.ca/

3 The Canadian Mental Health Association’s Calgary Peer Options program provides group support where adults with a mental illness can increase their health and well-being by reducing isolation and building social skills. See http://calgary.cmha.ca/programs-and-services/peer-options/ for more information.
by side, not top down. Organizations learned from each other during the training. The transformational part comes from Paulo Freire’s work.⁴ The whole point of adult learning is for the learner/organization to use the information in ways that will transform their own lives.

The project activities include:

- Teaching organizations’ program facilitators what literacy and essential skills are;
- Observing the programs to see which literacy and essential skills they already include;
- In discussion with facilitators, deciding which literacy and essential skills would be best to teach to their learners;
- Teaching facilitators literacy and essential skills strategies they can embed into their current training/education;
- Mentors helping the facilitators embed the literacy and essential skills and reflect on their facilitation and the content they teach. (Peters and Messaros 2011, 3)

Community participants engage in four workshops: Introduction to Literacy and Essential Skills, Introduction to Learning Styles and Plain Language, Assessment and Evaluation, and Facilitation Techniques. In addition to offering extensive training for staff, the workshops also ensure that participants are carefully matched with mentors (adult learning and literacy specialists). This proved to be instrumental in helping organizations look at their practices. “An outside person can look at your program, ask you questions, and help you think about your program differently … The mentors for the IFL project were chosen not only because they had a literacy and adult learning background, but they also understood the program content and topics well,” Terri explained.

**Successes and Innovations in the IFL Project**

Programs and organizations incorporated the new learning into their programs in many different ways depending upon organizational capacity, staff experience, and programming needs. Terri said that “Up front, the

⁴ Paulo Freire, renowned Brazilian educator, theorist, and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*
one thing most of the programs took from the training was the education on learning styles and plain language. They began thinking carefully about how they speak and write so that it’s useful for the learners and isn’t full of jargon or words we assume learners will know.”

Other organizations used what they’d learned about plain language to help them analyze and improve their intake process.

We no longer rely completely on our written referral form. Our mentor has guided us with a literacy-conscious approach to ensure that our learners are able to complete the process successfully. We have a shorter, simpler form and combine that with a second stage conversational interview. Our mentor suggested we ask the more difficult questions orally rather than list them on the form. Because of this format, more people are invited to come in for a face-to-face intake, which allows assessment in a relaxed, informal environment. Writing sensitive material can be intimidating to some clients with limited literacy (reading and writing) skills. A small percentage of our learners speak and write English only as a second language. We want to be sensitive to our learners’ comfort in communicating. Receiving information through both mediums enables us to assess learners’ fit in our program. We can assess their skill level tactfully, eliminating
much anxiety. (Canadian Mental Health Association Peer Options program, qtd. in Peters and Messaros 2011, 6)

Some organizations redesigned their entire programs following their experience with the IFL project. For example, Momentum reshaped some of their start-up financial literacy and small business training.5 “They recognized a gap between one entry level program and the next program to which learners were being promoted. They also recognized that not enough time was spent developing the essential skills required to be successful in the programs and in the students’ small businesses. As a result, Momentum created three classes to replace the original two to better address the needs of the students and enhance their success in their businesses” (Peters and Messaros 2011, 5).

We knew we had an increase in participation from foundational learners in our programs. We knew our programs were struggling to meet their needs. The IFL project helped us identify the gaps in training and gave us the courage and the tools to redesign the programs. (Momentum staff qtd. in Peters and Messaros 2011, 5)

Whether they were experienced facilitators or new in their positions, working with local or national organizations, participants were able to incorporate new learning from the facilitation workshops. Terri says that for some programs, the content they deliver can’t be changed—it’s part of a national standard. However, they could change how they deliver the content. The IFL project gave them tools to deliver it differently, to be more aware of pausing, to ask learners questions, to talk to learners not only to deliver content, but to engage with learners.

Participants spoke about having “an increased understanding of the importance of formally or informally assessing learners in terms of Literacy and Essential Skills competencies before moving forward (to be able to gear their presentation)” (Gardner and Witkowskyj 2014, 8).

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5 Momentum works with low-income learners in the areas of financial literacy, small business development, micro loans, and money management. See http://www.momentum.org/home for their full range of services.
Non-profit staff also identified many benefits and positive outcomes for their learners after completing the IFL project, and attributed these to participation in the project. Namely (in their own words):

- Observed better and more stable employment and social connections
- Increased learner success (more learners passing!)
- More variety of resources to better suit different learning styles (i.e., PowerPoint for visual learners, activities for tactile learners)
- More interactive exercises so learners can practise interpersonal skills and benefit from group learning
- Even adding just a few additional strategies for enhancing foundational learning increased adults’ competency in navigating day-to-day activities (i.e., better time management, budgeting, etc.) (Gardner and Witkowskyj 2014, 11-13)

The IFL project has been offered twice and proven effective for a wide range of non-profit organizations and programs including:

**First Phase:** the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society, Calgary Workers’ Resource Centre, Canadian Mental Health Association (Peer Options Program), Deaf and Hard of Hearing Society (Family-Focused American Sign Language Program), Families Matter, Momentum, and SCOPE (Integrated Community Kitchen Program); and

**Second Phase:** CanLearn Society (Magic Carpet Ride and Learning Starts at Home programs), Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada (Support Services), Calgary Public Library (Digital Literacy and Community Learning Advocacy: Careers), Momentum (Business Basics, StartSmart, and Train-the-Trainer), SCOPE (Integrated Community Kitchen), the Drop-In Centre (Employment Services Training), and Youville Recovery Residence for Women (New Beginnings Group Residential Program).

**Mentorship Was Key to Success in the IFL Project**

Mentors were a critical component of the project. Terri recruited mentors who had a background in adult learning, adult literacy, and/or working with individuals with developmental disabilities. Each organization was assigned a mentor who was responsible for observing
a workshop to learn about the organization, as well as helping the staff think about how to incorporate the learning from the workshops into their daily work and organizational practices (Peters 2014, 6). “Many organizations felt that without a mentor, they would not have been able to see the changes they wanted to make or receive support to make them” (Peters 2014, 5).

Our mentor’s flexibility was critical to our success. Her background knowledge was invaluable in creating training that met the needs of the Library … Our mentor was also very receptive to hearing and incorporating our ideas for making the content relevant to Calgary Public Library program subjects and situations. This allowed staff to see immediate tie-in and connections … The training was critical to raising awareness of the integration of foundational learning system-wide, and our learners will benefit far into the future as the discussion continues. (Calgary Public Library staff qtd. in Peters 2014, 6)

Challenges That Came Up During Implementation

As happens with all new programming, the IFL project was not without its challenges. Staff turnover in mid project, resistance to change from learners and co-workers during implementation, and simply getting everyone—staff and mentors—in the same room for training and meetings tested the IFL facilitator’s capacity to deliver the project effectively. Identifying and addressing the challenges resulted in creativity and improvements in the way the project activities are offered. For example, instead of holding large workshop meetings with all the participants, Terri shifted to delivering some of the workshops to staff right in their own organizations. This proved very popular because she could provide specific suggestions about how to integrate the training into their programming during the workshop (Peters and Messaros 2011, 9).

Staff turnover and organizational restructuring is part of any workplace, but it sometimes resulted in the newly trained staff leaving the organization, and new staff not being able to follow through with implementing changes. Terri realized that in future IFL training projects, it is crucial to include supervisors, decision makers, and others in the organization so that the learning has greater impact and longevity (Peters 2014, 18).
Future Directions

Both Terri Peters (project facilitator) and Nancy Purdy (executive director of Calgary Learns) want to use the learning gained from these first two phases of the Integrating Foundational Learning project to create a sustainable collaborative model that can be recreated in other communities. Nancy envisions IFL as a more fluid type of professional development offered to community organizations.

In future, it’s possible that we will have two streams of the program: one with training only (organizations pick and choose which sessions to attend) and one with the training plus mentoring (organizations would commit to attending all the training sessions and be assigned a mentor).

This type of model would provide greater flexibility for organizations to commit as much time and energy as their capacity allows and still receive the training. “Sometimes instructors have only one session with their learners. These one-time workshops are a different kind of program so you can’t make the same type of [in-depth] change. But the facilitation training, for example, might be a really good piece for these educators to pick up some strategies,” Nancy explains.
Both Terri and Nancy emphasize that one of the really important side benefits of the IFL project is the opportunity for creating partnerships and collaborations. Organizations work alongside each other during the workshops. “This in turn helps foster relationships, breaking down some of the barriers. People start seeing the fit where they might be able to work together,” Nancy says.

Alberta’s Social Policy Framework includes community collaboration as part of the roles and responsibilities for the non-profit and voluntary sector. Specifically, the policy encourages community organizations to collaborate with one another, sharing knowledge and raising awareness, assist one another to develop their own place-based response, and work with other non-profit and voluntary sector organizations, and foundations around shared interests and building system capacity (Government of Alberta 2013, 16).

The Integrating Foundational Learning project fulfills all three roles within the community literacy landscape—providing opportunities for sharing knowledge, assisting communities to develop their own response to the needs of foundational learners, and building system capacity within non-profit organizations. Terri and Nancy are hopeful about securing funding to carry the project forward.

References
Adults with Disabilities Using Technology to Learn with the Speech-Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) Software

Since 1993, students with disabilities at Bow Valley College have been improving their reading, writing, and math skills using a unique and innovative computer technology called SARAW. These are some of the things learners say about how SARAW has made a difference in their lives:

“At work, I can find things better because I can find the word on the package or box. My boss has noticed I can read better. When I am grocery shopping I can see the words easier.”

“Reading to my children at night, glad to be in this program and hope to be here for a long time.”

“Read stories to audience, read stories that I wrote about my brother.” (Gardner 2005a, 25-26)

At Bow Valley College, adult literacy practitioner Belle Auld has coordinated the SARAW program for the past fifteen years. Belle told me about the program's history and development.

The SARAW software was created in the early 1990s. The Neil Squire Society in Burnaby, world renowned for designing technology for people with disabilities, collaborated with Capilano College in Vancouver, who are known for innovative literacy programming. The software is adult based and teaches reading, writing, and math skills to adults with disabilities at below grade 7 level.

The SARAW software was originally designed for people with physical disabilities who are non-verbal. “However, people with intellectual as well as physical disabilities have used the program to help them strengthen their literacy skills” (Gardner 2005b, 1). SARAW was recognized nationally by the Governor General’s Flight to Freedom Award sponsored by Canada Post in 1996. The award “honours a project showing long-

1 For our purposes, the term disabilities includes physical, intellectual, visual, psychiatric, and hearing-related disabilities. It does not include learning disabilities, although people with disabilities may also have learning disabilities.
term achievement, innovation, leadership and organizational excellence in literacy” (Neil Squire Society 1999, 1).

Belle explains how the technology works.

The SARAW computer has reading and writing sections and within those are reading and writing activities. The reading activities include reading authentic writing done by other people with disabilities and an accompanying workbook that builds on comprehension as well as other activities. The software also has a sounding board that I call the phonetics part of the program. It has literacy games—reading and writing activities in game format. The math portion of the program has skills starting with counting and going up to dividing. It focuses on everyday activities such as going to a restaurant, sharing the bill, figuring out taxes, going shopping and figuring
out if you have enough money, writing cheques, and math games. All of this is customizable to each student. The student can choose how much the computer speaks, they can choose the voice, and they can choose the word-predict feature.

SARAW software can also be used with assistive technology. Adults unable to operate a standard keyboard can use special adaptive equipment to operate the computer. For these learners, SARAW is the only way for them to participate in a literacy classroom.²

**Evolution of the SARAW Program**

Belle told me how the SARAW program at Bow Valley College has grown over the years.

We’ve built a whole program around the SARAW specialty software. In addition to SARAW software [and the Companion to SARAW exercise book], we have daily life activities and fun worksheets, crossword puzzles, menu math, an iPad with a user-friendly manual and appropriate apps, Lumosity brain training and brain games, Mavis Beacon teaching-typing software, and box cars and one-eyed Jacks (math games using cards and dice).³ Students work one-on-one with a tutor. Tutors are either volunteers or support workers (working with community agencies). I set up a training program to train the tutors. They attend up to two hours a week in the classroom with the students. We’re open daytimes, evenings, and Saturdays.

Belle is always looking for ways to improve both the SARAW program and services for people with disabilities. In 2003 she initiated a national research project called the Literacy and Disabilities Study or LaDS. The project had dual purposes. She wanted to explore issues in adult literacy for people with disabilities and she wanted to investigate how the SARAW software is used in different settings and delivery models. In exploring

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³ Box cars and one-eyed jacks are math games using cards and dice. (It’s also the name of a company that develops educational games.) They are part of a selection of different books and kits available from “Shuffling into Math” for K-3, including money kits, books, and more advanced math materials. See [www.boxcarsandoneeyedjacks.com](http://www.boxcarsandoneeyedjacks.com)
the connections between adult literacy and disabilities, the LaDS study (researched and written by Audrey Gardner) discovered some disturbing facts. For example, people with disabilities make up a disproportionate amount of the 42 percent of Canadian adults who function at the two lowest literacy levels (Movement for Canadian Literacy qtd. in Gardner 2005a, 4). Numerous studies on literacy and disabilities indicate that people with disabilities are disadvantaged when accessing programs to strengthen their literacy skills (Gardner 2005a, 4).

The study revealed more troubling information: all national surveys on either literacy or disabilities have identified that people with disabilities are disadvantaged when accessing education, employment, housing, and other community services.

- Fifty percent of adults with disabilities have an annual income of less than $15,000.
- Nearly 50 percent of adults with limited literacy live in low-income households.
- Only 56 percent of people with disabilities are employed, and most are working at low-paying jobs.

There is a serious lack of public awareness about adult literacy and disabilities. Stereotyping and assumptions about the capacity of people with disabilities to learn and to work are harsh social barriers (Bow Valley College and Neil Squire Society 2004). The LaDS study led to the development of several useful resources for adult literacy practitioners working with learners with disabilities:

- a fact sheet on literacy and disabilities
- a book of learner stories
- the SARAW Survey Report documenting how SARAW and other activities and factors contribute to effective literacy learning
- an effective practices guide (see references for more information).

This research was a catalyst for Belle’s next project: The Literacy Survey of Disability-Serving Agencies. Belle began thinking about inclusion and
what an ideal inclusive adult literacy program would look like. She has this to say about her development process.

I knew about the focus on inclusion in the disability world and I didn’t think SARAW was exactly inclusive … Although clients are coming to the college setting, it’s one student working with one volunteer or support worker [in the SARAW classroom]. I interviewed twenty-nine agencies in Calgary about what they wanted to see in inclusive adult literacy programming for learners with disabilities … We got their input and then created it. Thanks to an anonymous donor coming forward at just the right time, we were able to create the Adult Basic Literacy Education (ABLE) inclusive classroom where people with diagnosed physical and/or developmental disabilities work alongside people without disabilities. All the learners are working at about the grade 2 to 4 level.

An offshoot of the SARAW program, the ABLE program started in 2008 and includes the ABLE Reading and Writing class, ABLE Financial Literacy, and ABLE Computer Literacy (to be introduced this summer). While these are positive developments, the SARAW program also has its challenges. The program has been steadily growing over the years, and currently is full to capacity with thirty-eight learner and tutor pairs. The wait-list for learners wanting to attend the program is currently fifty-eight people, the most it’s ever been. That means students are waiting an average of one-and-a-half to two years to get into the program. According to Belle, “the challenge is trying to achieve the balance between the needs of those in the program for long slow progress—learners with low literacy and disabilities need the long slow progress—with the needs of the people waiting to get into the program.”

Belle finds that another challenge in the program is staff turnover among the community support workers who support the learners as tutors. Few tutors work with more than one learner—most work one to one (one learner with one tutor). “One student started with me and

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4 “Inclusion goes beyond mere physical presence to encompass meaningful participation” (Bailey and Wagar qtd. in Auld 2007, 1).
in eight weeks, he had five different support workers. So there is no continuity for the student. And it’s a huge amount of work for me to train all of them as tutors” Belle explains.

Belle has a wish list for expanding the SARAW program. “I would love to see the program doubled. If we could get the funding we could have two classrooms.” She would also like to see the program use more iPad apps complete with instructions in the current iPad user manual, which would require time for research and development.

Her biggest wish is to create what she is calling SARAW Plus. “We would use what works really well in the current SARAW software, add activities incorporating essential skills and pre-employment skills, and create it as an app that can be used on a smart device, either an android or an iPad. I see this as a joint project between Bow Valley College and the Neil Squire Society.”

In the meantime, Belle continues to grow and improve the SARAW program. She recently finished a research project called Answers May Vary, designed to identify strategies, resources, and effective practices for adult literacy tutors working with learners with disabilities. She plans to use this information to produce a guide book and videos to be used by tutors both in the SARAW classroom and in community agencies working with people with disabilities.

Belle Auld, coordinator of the SARAW program at Bow Valley College.
References


Literacy Snapshots: A Look at Three Programs Serving Non-traditional Adult Learners

After graduating from university, one of my first positions was at the Canadian Mental Health Association as a “social action coordinator.” A large part of this work involved advocating for people with psychiatric disabilities around issues such as housing, employment, and income support, which included applying for AISH (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped) and helping prepare appeals. My job was to help people advocate on their own behalf, and when that was not possible, I advocated for them.

Another part of my work was supporting a newsletter committee for people with psychiatric disabilities to share their stories about topics that mattered to them. In both instances, I worked with individuals who had literacy issues. Some also had learning disabilities; others had physical disabilities. For many, their mental health issues caused disruptions in numerous areas of their lives including employment and education. I remembered this work recently when I began thinking about and researching programs that serve non-traditional adult learners.

What Do We Mean by Non-traditional Adult Learners?

In a study of humanities education programs for low-income people, researchers Groen and Hyland-Russell settled on the following definition for non-traditional adult learners by Scheutz and Slowey. They are

socially or educationally disadvantaged sections of the population … those from working class backgrounds, particular ethnic minority groups, immigrants, and in the past, frequently women … It tends to relate to older or adult students with a vocational adult training and
work experience background, or other students with unconventional educational biographies. (Scheutz and Slowey qtd. in Groen and Hyland-Russell 2010, 33)

However, Groen and Hyland-Russell go one step further in their definition. They felt it was important to understand the scope and multiplicity of barriers faced by nontraditional adult learners. Here are some of the material barriers they identified:

- lack of resources: childcare, tuition, books, computer, bus tickets
- inadequate housing: unstable housing (shelter, homelessness, transitional housing, threat of eviction)
- poor health: inadequate food, medical care, medicine, chronic illness and/or disability, both physical and mental health-related
- unemployment or underwaged jobs (Groen and Hyland-Russell 2009, 103-104).

“For many, their mental health issues caused disruptions in numerous areas of their lives including employment and education.”
Groen and Hyland-Russell say that while the material barriers often interfere with learning and education, the non-material barriers are what seem more insurmountable. These include:

- Fear, anxiety, and a belief that education was “not for them”; that they were “too stupid”; “here are all these strange people I don’t know”; “I just don’t have faith in myself … I had learned helplessness”; “all I wanted to do is run.”
- Complicated processes of application and admission: “I had no idea where to start. I didn’t know who to ask.”
- Educational gaps that created academic deficits: how to read, how to interpret, research, write essays, study.
- Previous trauma can lead to students being easily triggered by content or context: “I’ve had so many unsafe places.”
- Addiction or substance abuse issues interfere with students’ ability to cope and process information: “I counted every bar on my way here.”
- Undiagnosed learning disabilities.
- Inability or unwillingness to ask for help: “Sometimes I don’t ask for help until the situation is critical and I’m ready to quit school.”
- Tendency to isolate when feeling threatened or frightened: “I was super-sensitive to everything. I rarely talked to anybody.”
- Boundary issues: “I trusted nobody but I did everything anybody told me to.”
- Previous trauma: war, violence, bullying, residential school, separation from family. (Groen and Hyland-Russell 2009, 104)

Groen and Hyland-Russell conclude that “education could not be disentangled from the rest of students’ lives; over and over again students connected past life experiences with their past and current capacities to learn” (2009, 104).

Working with marginalized non-traditional adult learners is a complex and challenging process. Educators require skill, knowledge, and compassion. Equally important, they also need an understanding of how social differences (including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture,
ethnicity) and power affect literacy practice and learning (Stewart et al. 2009, 1).

I talked to three organizations to find out how they are developing programs to meet the learning needs of the unique populations they serve.

The Birth of Literacy Programming at CUPS

CUPS is a “non-profit society dedicated to helping low income individuals and families in Calgary overcome poverty” (http://www.cupscalgary.com). The organization began operating in 1989 and currently offers programming focused on health, education, and housing.

In the past decade, the agency identified literacy as an important issue that required more attention within the organization. They began slowly introducing and integrating the concept of literacy into various program initiatives, including staff professional development with Jenny Horsman on the impact of violence on learning1 and hosting a Books for Babies program2 for at-risk parents. More significantly, the entire agency engaged

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1 Jenny Horsman, world-renowned educator and researcher, presents custom workshops to organizations on the impact of violence on learning. See http://www.learningandviolence.net/ for resources and information.

2 Books for Babies is a family literacy program presented by the Further Education Society. See http://www.furthere.ca/page/calgary-programs for more information.
in a literacy and plain-language audit\(^3\) with Literacy Alberta to develop literacy-friendly services. After the audit, staff received training in literacy and essential skills and plain language. They then created clear oral, print, and on-line resources and information (including agency forms and signage.) Currently, the communications person at CUPS filters new forms and documents for literacy friendliness. However, maintaining consistency remains a challenge because accumulated knowledge leaves the agency when staff inevitably changes.

In the past two years CUPS also partnered with Momentum\(^4\) to deliver financial literacy training to staff and clients about money management, including reducing debt, paying bills on time, saving for the future, and increasing assets. Over eighty people have received the training so far.

Recently, Deanna Holt, volunteer manager at CUPS, began developing an adult literacy program to help CUPS clients increase their reading and writing literacy skills. She spoke to me about how the idea for the program came about.

Almost a year ago, one of my colleagues who is a mental health counsellor here approached me and said she had a couple of individuals who were coming to her and she wondered if I could find them a volunteer to help them work on their literacy skills. I said that I didn’t think it would be a problem to find a volunteer to help them, but we needed some kind of program in place to support both the literacy volunteers and the learners … I realized I needed to have a better understanding of what a literacy program at CUPS would look like. I contacted both Bow Valley College and the Calgary Public Library to begin getting more information.

Deanna initially recruited volunteers with an adult education background who had an interest in helping set up the program. As a group, they discussed goals, program directions, and purpose, and slowly the

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\(^3\) The Literacy Audit Tool Kit is available for purchase from Literacy Alberta at http://literacyalberta.ca/item/opening-doors-literacy-audit-tool-kit

\(^4\) Momentum is a non-profit agency that partners with people in building their own assets through programming in three areas: business development, financial literacy, and skills training. See http://www.momentum.org/home for more information.
program began to take shape. An important component of the CUPS philosophy is to not duplicate services so Deanna examined other programs closely to see what they offered for the individuals at CUPS.

I knew there were other literacy programs out there, but I realized that the learners at CUPS had different needs. They were coming with mental health issues and frequently were not comfortable in learning settings outside of CUPS. That made this program different … Also in this case, a lot of the folks have experienced emotional trauma in school settings and so our goal is to try to provide a comfortable space where they feel safe and more confident about working on their literacy skills.

In volunteer-tutor adult literacy programs, a positive relationship between the tutor and the learner is one of the key factors in determining ongoing learner engagement and success. Volunteer education is crucial. Deanna constantly improves and refines her volunteer training. As the program continues to gain momentum, Deanna is hopeful that volunteer tutors will be able to access the same professional development that is offered to staff at CUPS. “One of my objectives is to be able to engage the literacy program volunteers in some of the in-house training that we do here at CUPS, for example, the mental health first aid program,” Deanna explained.

The CUPS Adult Literacy Program still has challenges ahead that will determine its potential growth and future success. As Deanna sees it,

Right now referrals are still coming mostly from the one individual who works in the mental health program. That’s one of my challenges—I want to ensure that everyone I work with (there are almost 200 employees at CUPS now) is aware of this program. It’s difficult because we do so much here: health, education, and housing, and under each of those pillars there are many programs. Staff are already looking for appropriate referrals for their participants. I need to brand the literacy

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5 Resources such as Creating Learning Partners: A Facilitator’s Manual for Training Effective Adult Literacy Tutors published by Literacy Alberta provide inspiration and ideas for new literacy coordinators involved in volunteer training (Still, Wier, and Goldblatt 2007).
program here so staff know that we exist and start to make referrals [as a part of their intake process]. And it’s coming … I’m slowly starting to get referrals from other sources.

Deanna has come a long way from finding a volunteer to help a CUPS client improve their reading skills. Providing a safe space for learning, nurturing positive tutor-student relationships, creating effective tutor training and supervision, and exploring innovations in volunteer recruitment: CUPS, under Deanna’s leadership, is well on its way to developing an effective adult literacy program to serve non-traditional learners.

**Lifeline to Literacy: An Inclusive Adult Literacy Program at Bow Valley College**

The classroom fills slowly with men and women of different ages and nationalities. Several have visible disabilities. Many of the adult learners have come directly from their day jobs, the tiredness visible on their faces. People greet one another enthusiastically as they enter and set up their desks in a semi-circle. The walls of the room are covered in student art and writing. This is the Lifeline to Literacy program, an evening adult literacy class with a difference.

Learners and instructor, Debra King, displaying clothesline of art. Photo courtesy Lifeline to Literacy program.
Debra King, the class instructor, explains how the program works:

The Lifeline to Literacy is a program for adults who want to improve their reading, writing, communication, and math skills. It runs three evenings a week and students have the opportunity to take the class one or two evenings a week … It’s multilevel instruction so the learners in this program may have learning disabilities, or physical and mental disabilities—some are new immigrants who want to improve their reading and writing in English. Sometimes we have adults who are waiting to take other literacy programs at Bow Valley College. We also have a volunteer tutor working with the class to help individual students as needed.

The program was originally designed by Enerys Jones who created and built on an innovative teaching model that blended working together in groups with individual work, used art as a gateway to personal expression, and invited adult learners into the cultural community. Audrey Gardner, former coordinator in the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning at BVC, describes the philosophy behind Jones’s approach:

Enerys had a commitment to a strong community-of-learning presence in the classroom—people could work individually and then also be learning as part of a group. She invited students to attend cultural events because she felt that the arts help us engage with something in a different way than sitting with a pen and piece of paper in front of us. She was able to show how these things connected from an engaging and learning kind of approach … She also on her own time (hundreds of hours of volunteer time) created books of students’ writing and art selections.

The program incorporates a learner centred philosophy. Debra talked to me about what that looks like in the classroom.

The students will determine the goals they want to work on: they’ll set their goals when they come into the class
and we will assist them in working towards those goals. For example, they may be very specific goals like passing an apprenticeship exam or passing their driver’s license. Others want to read to their children or help them with their homework and others may have higher job opportunities but they need to improve their literacy levels.

The program continues to be innovative in its approach. In the past year, in a collaboration with the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD), the program began hosting art students doing their practicums. Each semester, an ACAD student comes into the class and works with the learners to develop a project incorporating both an art piece and a creative writing piece. Debra described a recent project.

Last fall, Randee, our student, did some research into local theatre outings and when we learned of Aesop’s Fables at the University of Calgary, the students hit upon the idea of working with fables and creating sculptures around that. Randee took the initiative to create a mapping outline and led the students in a workshop around mapping a fable. After the students attended the play, students created their own maps, retelling a fable of their choice. As well, Randee gave a sculpture workshop showing slides of her own work and work of her favourite artists to motivate students. She led two clay-making workshops to meet the needs of students attending on different nights. She wasn’t too concerned if the clay figures matched the characters in their chosen fable(s); she was more interested in having them work with the clay and create. One student also made a set of puppets. These students are unfettered in their creativity.
Another innovation within the program is the *Nations Learning Together* blog6 currently funded by Calgary Learns.7 Lisa Fajardo, a recent education program graduate and blog developer from the University of Calgary, worked with the Lifeline to Literacy students to develop the blog. Debra explained the development process.

Lisa came in and worked with the students to build the blog from the ground up. She explained what a blog was. A lot of the students didn’t have very much computer experience or understand what a blog was but they understood what a journal was. They learned that a blog was an on-line journal for sharing. Using a democratic process of voting, they started building the blog brick by brick. The students suggested names for the blog and voted on the names until they whittled it down to Nations Learning Together.

The blog was officially launched this past spring and now includes student submissions from other adult literacy and upgrading programs at Bow Valley College. Designed to help students learn more about using technology and the Internet, the blog also encourages them to make connections between creativity and learning.

Research shows that many non-traditional adult learners have previous negative experiences in education systems and need flexibility and diversity in literacy programming. Creating warm, welcoming, inclusive learning environments helps these students re-engage in learning (Crowther et al. 2010, 658). The Lifeline to Literacy program provides an innovative model of flexible, diverse, inclusive literacy programming that engages adult students in a community of learning.

**Pebbles in the Sand: A Unique Literacy Program for Immigrant and Refugee Women**

Liette Wilson carries her classroom in a suitcase and travels by C-train and bus to rented or donated classroom space in churches around the

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6 See http://nationslearningtogether.blogspot.ca/
7 Calgary Learns is a granting agency that supports foundational learning for adult Calgarians. http://www.calgarylearns.com
city, teaching ESL-Literacy. She is one of four educators working in the Pebbles in the Sand Program in several community locations in Calgary.

Pebbles in the Sand is an English Language Literacy (ELL) program provided by the Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association for immigrant and refugee women who have low literacy skills (zero to seven years of education in their home countries). Many of the women come from war-torn or unstable countries (Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Iraq, Bhutan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia) and have histories that include violence and poverty. They range from twenty to seventy years of age. Many of the younger women have small children who are bundled into strollers and brought to class. The program provides free pre-school childcare, an absolute necessity for the young mothers.


8 Pebbles in the Sand is part of the programming offered by the Calgary Women’s Immigrant Association.

9 Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association provides settlement and integrations services, language training, childcare, employment services and family services. http://www.ciwa-online.com/
Given many of the students’ histories of war and violence, Liette stresses that creating a safe environment for learning is vital.

I think it’s key right from the beginning that I establish a place of safety. Sometimes we laugh in class because we do something ridiculous or someone says something ridiculous and they realize it and they laugh too. They call a banana a watermelon and everyone thinks it’s very funny and not in a mocking kind of way. It’s a safe place—you can make a mistake and it’s okay. When I make a mistake I say “wow, I really made a mistake … oh well, let’s move on” or “let’s do it again.” The students know that it’s safe to mess up and to continue learning and I think that’s really key. If they don’t feel safe, they won’t engage and all bets are off from that point on.

Learners in the program have a wide range of literacy skills. Some of the students come from oral cultures and have no concept of written language. Liette talked about the diversity of learners in the program and how that affects the teaching and the learning.

One of the biggest challenges is the diversity of abilities. Even though everybody who qualifies for Pebbles has less than seven years of education [in their country of origin] there is a huge difference between having five years of education and having zero years of education. It shows in their awareness of learning, what they know about a basic alphabet … And when you have twelve students and they are all very high needs and hands-on, that is challenging. I want to individualize learning as much as possible, but I can’t … It’s a matter of creating an activity that can be done at three or four levels … and having back-up ideas because some students will just whiz through. But some of the other students haven’t finished the first step of the process, and you don’t want to rush them. I’ve learned that it’s really important to be particularly encouraging to those students who struggle because in a literacy class, everybody struggles. But there are some students who appear to have extra difficulty.
There are no permanent classrooms for teaching the program. Pebbles in the Sand is delivered at seven different locations around the city, primarily in church classrooms. While CIWA is grateful for the donated space, it means that the educator brings the classroom in a bag.

Liette talked about some of the logistical challenges she faces daily.

Facilities can be a challenge in this particular program. Sometimes the room is small and cramped and we have to be careful of putting things on the walls. For literacy students, the visual component is huge. I’m constantly trying to find creative ways without making holes in the walls and taking them down and putting them back up … The other challenge is needing to carry around manipulatives. I carry around a giant bag, sometimes two bags with all my supplies including everything I need to teach: felt pens, flip chart paper, masking tape, pictures, plastic fruit, games, pretend money, etc.

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10 Manipulatives are three-dimensional teaching aids and visuals that educators use to support hands-on learning. For example, Liette uses real and plastic fruit to talk about food, shopping, nutrition, etc.
As the women learn English, they also learn about life in Canada. Liette gave me some examples.

One of the things students are most interested in is using money, and learning about money. I use pretend money, something they can touch. Numbers don’t always mean a lot. Sometimes people can’t count to 100 until you give them money. Then all of the students can count to 100! The students are highly motivated to learn it and it gives them something tangible to work with rather than just a symbol. They know what it’s for, they know they need to learn it, they want to know they are getting the correct change back …

I think we did about ten weeks on food. You’d think we would get bored talking about food but we didn’t. It ties into so many different areas. You can use it to learn vocabulary, you can talk about directions, prices, shopping etiquette, serving each other. I thought it was going to be a short moment, but their interest was so high we kept going with it.

The women in the program can also access other CIWA programming including settlement and integration services, individual and family counselling, and employment services. Studies have shown that providing these sorts of “wrap around” services in addition to literacy instruction boosts learner engagement and success (Crowther et al. 2010, 660).

Unique and innovative, the Pebbles in the Sand program provides a safe landing place for immigrant and refugee women to learn English and basic literacy and continue their learning journeys.

CUPS Adult Literacy program, the Lifeline to Literacy program, and the Pebbles in the Sand program have three important things in common: they create a safe learning environment, provide “wrap around” supports and services, and work from a strength-based approach that is based on learner needs, desires, and interests. For non-traditional learners, the recipe seems to be working as they move on to the next stages of their lives.
References


Audrey Gardner—Community Developer, Researcher, and Radical Adult Literacy Practitioner

“I was a junior high teacher for about five minutes,” Audrey Gardner laughed as our interview began. “I always struggled with working in mainstream education systems. I felt more at home working in grassroots, non-profit education where you didn’t have as many restrictions to creating meaningful learning experiences.”

Twenty years ago, Audrey started her wide-ranging career working as an educator for Calgary Sexual Health Centre and AIDS Calgary. In 2001 she joined Bow Valley College (BVC), working on a project called Connecting Literacy to Community: Building Community Capacity (CLC).1 CLC was a two-year project (2001-2003), located in three rural and three urban communities in central and southern Alberta. It worked with communities to develop literacy awareness, promotion, and support, and to improve access to and the quality of existing services and programs (Gardner 2003, 10). It led to a provincial training project for literacy practitioners called Building

1 The Connecting Literacy to Community: Building Community Capacity project resulted in three publications available for free download on the Adult Literacy Research Institute Resources webpage under Research and Resources, then Community Development. http://www.centreforexcellenceinfoundationallearning.ca/
Community Capacity: Focus on Literacy, which Audrey developed and led. It was modelled on the CLC project.

“Both these projects were a good fit for me, and they were the start of an extended learning curve that I am still on. Even though I had been doing education for a long time, I hadn’t really considered the social stigmatization of adult literacy. In all my years of social justice activism I missed seeing the invisibility of adult literacy. I came to understand that it’s a serious issue of social discrimination, social exclusion, and access to power. When I began to notice how it is assumed that people ‘should’ be capable of reading, it became very apparent that literacy—education really—is deeply embedded in the politics of social class, racism, ableism, and gender inequality,” Audrey explained. She also spoke about the impact of reading Phyllis Steeves’s “Literacy: Genocide’s Silken Instrument” (2010). Audrey said, “One of the most significant things I’ve read is Phyllis’s PhD dissertation. It completely challenges our ideas about literacy as something good and something that everybody needs. Phyllis says Aboriginal peoples’ ways of knowing and well-being have been and are being erased by the idea of ‘Aboriginal literacy.’ I agree with her that literacy/education has been used as an ethnocentric instrument of colonial oppression, and strongly believe that we all need to read her thesis. We need to always question what we are doing as literacy workers.”

Over time, Audrey’s philosophy of adult education developed into two strands: her belief that education systems are classist and racist institutions, and at the same time, that education is also a pathway for self-determination and for resistance to perpetuating oppressive institutional thinking. Her beliefs about learning and equality underlie all her work. “I’ve been ridiculously fortunate. In these last thirteen years at BVC, I’ve had great opportunities to work in projects and programs that were bold enough to address the politics of education. I learned that many students in adult literacy programs have horrible memories of their experience in mainstream schooling. I certainly struggled in school when I was young, and it wasn’t until I was an adult that I began to believe I was smart.

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2 See http://centreforfoundationallearning.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/buildingcommunitycapacity.pdf
I think that is why I keep going back to school over and over again. While working at the college, I’ve been a student and an instructor, an administrator and an advocate, and a participant in a variety of things,” Audrey told me.

She shared some of the projects that stood out for her. “A project I loved being part of was called Focused on Practice, a national research project. I had a very small part on the steering committee. The project looked at how practitioners are using research in the field. It just opened up all kinds of issues of being underfunded and under-resourced—all the things we know too well.” The researchers interviewed over 500 literacy practitioners across the country, conducting an inventory of research in practice at four levels: national, provincial/territorial, community, and individual. They spoke of practice research’s value to the literacy field:

Literacy work is about hope. It’s about what we imagine is possible for learners. When we meet a new learner at intake, hear about the challenges in their lives and see their tentativeness, we know they may not be back, but we hold hope for them and speak with them in a way that makes hope audible. There is a cycle of burn-out that can happen in literacy work. We need to hold hope for ourselves too, for the programs, and for the literacy field as a whole. I think research can help with this. It can give practitioners the reflection time they need and deserve. (Woodrow and Horsman 2007, 1)

Audrey was drawn to projects that took risks and asked hard questions. The Connecting the Dots: Improving Accountability in the Adult Literacy Field in Canada project was one of these. The two-year project examined the impact of accountability on the adult literacy field across the country and explored new ways of approaching it (Crooks et al. 2008, 4). Focusing on the accountability relationship between funders and organizations delivering literacy programming, it examined the tensions literacy practitioners experience between being accountable to learners and to funders, and the different measures that different stakeholders use to determine whether or not a literacy program is successful.

Audrey described the impact this project had on her. “I was a field researcher and this gave me insight, helped develop my critical eye about
what we are doing in our work—particularly how the field was taking up the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) without questioning what this survey had to do with learning. I realized that we [as a field] were losing a community development approach—we were losing a Freirian Critical Education approach to literacy.3 We were becoming machine like. That was a profound project for me and indirectly led to my PhD thesis work.”

Audrey’s doctorate thesis (in progress) examines the politics of measurement in adult literacy, how forms of large-scale assessment such as IALS are used in government policy, and what impact this has on literacy programming. She questions the disconnections between such policy and learners’ own knowledge about how they learn and improve.

Measurement of literacy in many countries, including Canada, has adopted the use of high-cost, highly technical international surveys such as IALS and PIACC over other assessment frameworks.4 Comparing survey results between countries, regions, and groups of people may be valuable information, but when numbers become the dominant story of literacy, the knowledge of learning and teaching embedded in program practices becomes submerged. Learners as knowing actors become objects of the so-called literacy problem … Submerged under the statistical language of these measures is the misfit of policy objectives with actual assessment practices in literacy programs. (Gardner 2014, 14-15)

At the heart of Audrey’s work are a profound respect for learners, active resistance to social oppression, and a belief in self-determination. These


4 The OECD commissioned three international adult literacy surveys of mostly western/industrial countries. The two mentioned here are IALS—International Adult Literacy Survey, conducted in the early 1990s and PIAAC—Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies. PIAAC results were released in October 2013. The other survey is called ALLSS-Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, which was completed in 2005.
were very apparent as she talked about another project that was extremely important to her. The Literacy and Disabilities Study (LaDS)\(^5\) conducted a survey of literacy and other community programs in Canada that use the Speech-Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW)\(^6\) computer program with adults who have disabilities. As principal researcher, Audrey interviewed adult learners, tutors, instructors, and coordinators in eleven programs currently using SARAW across the country. The survey explored the contexts in which SARAW was being used and looked for effective practices that contribute to literacy skill development.

Not enough people with disabilities know about literacy programs, and not enough literacy programs know about SARAW and how to support learners with disabilities. While there have been some strides made in making literacy programs more accessible, and increasingly best practices in literacy programs for adults with disabilities are being identified, adults with disabilities with low literacy continue to struggle to find accessible programs. (Gardner 2005, 41)

The LaDS project resulted in four publications: a fact sheet on literacy and disabilities, a book of learner stories and experiences, the SARAW survey report, and an effective practices guide for using SARAW with people with disabilities.\(^7\)

As we neared the end of our interview, I asked Audrey what she thinks has to change in how we view literacy and essential skills. She was passionate in her reply.

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5 See http://centreforfoundationallearning.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/lads_sarawsurveyreport.pdf
6 SARAW is a computer program developed by the Neil Squire Society in partnership with Capilano College in Vancouver, BC. Initially developed for people with physical disabilities (who are non-verbal) to learn basic reading and writing skills, SARAW can also help people with intellectual and physical disabilities strengthen their literacy skills. http://www.neilsquire.ca/research-development/projects-activities/saraw/
7 These are all available on the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning website on the resources page under the heading Disability. http://centreforfoundationallearning.wordpress.com/research-resources/
I think we need to bring back a community development framework for adult literacy. We need to be clear that melding the Employment and Social Development Canada’s Essential Skills framework with the term *adult literacy*, which has been taken up in most adult literacy organizations and certainly by governments, is squeezing out adult literacy education. We have to challenge our flawed assumption that workplace skills as defined by ESDC Essential Skills (ES) are the same as literacy in diverse social contexts (including work, but not solely work). The argument can be made that the ES framework does not necessarily incorporate social injustice issues of adult literacy. We have unquestionably brought these two concepts together, thinking that they are equal and the same, but they are most definitely not. Literacy has to be understood in relation to human rights and institutional oppression.

Drawing on community development models of learning, Freirian Critical Education principles, and Steeves’s work is what is needed now, especially with the ever-increasing move toward a reductionist idea that literacy is only skills for the economic labour market. For example, the government of Alberta has a social policy framework that names literacy as a social equality issue. There is more than enough research on the social practices of literacy that support the stance that literacy is a social equality issue. It should be a straightforward decision to invest in adult literacy within this framework, but there is obvious tension to restrain literacy as simply workforce skills.

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This is of particular importance right now, in light of recent actions and policy shifts by the federal government.

On 16 May 2014, the office of the Minister of Employment, Social Development, and Multiculturalism headed by Jason Kenney issued this statement: “Our government is committed to ensuring federal funding for literacy is no longer spent on administration and countless research papers, but instead is invested in projects that result in Canadians receiving the literacy skills they need to obtain jobs … Canadian taxpayers will no longer fund administration of organizations but will instead fund useful literacy projects” (Centre for Literacy 2014).

Federal funding for organizations in the adult literacy sector across Canada ended effective 30 June 2014. These decisions were made with no community consultation. The funding cuts coupled with the shift of funding away from provincial Labor Market Agreements to the new Canada Job Grant will have a significant impact on literacy programming across the country.

Audrey ended our conversation with a call to action. She urges adult literacy practitioners to fight back.

We are in a destructive time right now. The federal funding in the Office for Literacy and Essential Skills has been drastically cut. There is no place for community development in literacy—it doesn’t seem to hold any value anymore. Organizations have to fight tooth and nail to find funding. We have to compromise our values to get funding for programs that may serve only a small number of people rather than a broader and more diverse group of people. I think that if community-based, grassroots services were being cut in any other field there would be protests. You would have a union fighting for you. But it’s a silent kind of destruction that’s happening. The federal government’s statement from ESDC Minister Kenney’s office about how literacy organizations have been wasting money on research projects and what’s really needed is direct services to learners was absolutely wrong. Reading it, I thought, “What do you think we have been doing all these years if it’s not direct service? And this field desperately needs research!”
The federal-provincial Labour Market Agreements shift toward the Canada Job Grant Strategy has also been a form of cut at the provincial and territorial level. I don’t know what kind of commitments—what kind of policies—are being considered under this flawed strategy but it seems like the knowledge and expertise of hundreds of people over the past three decades are being extinguished. The national adult literacy database, Copian, the largest repository of research and work, envied by other countries, has come to a startling end because of withdrawn federal funds. Fighting back will take a lot of effort but practitioners and allies need to act now. There are a handful of strong-willed resisters already speaking out. Tracey Mollins runs a blog called the Literacy Enquirer.9 We need to read and write on this blog. Another blog is Beyond Literacy as Numbers.10 And also look at Brigid Hayes’s blog.11

This is not happening only in Canada. David Rosen, a literacy advocate in the US, shared an e-mail with some highlights from a speech by Portuguese professor Licínio Lima at the General Assembly of the European Association for the Education of Adults in Brussels on 18 June 2014.12 Professor Lima critiqued the European approach to adult literacy, and argued that “adult education needs to go back to its roots and focus on the issue of social inclusion instead of just skills for economic competitiveness … When adult education was created it was much more connected to the social movements such as the trade union movements or suffragist movement. We should

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try to get closer to the social movements of today … I believe that adult education should become more “dangerous” and regain its potential for transformation. This means being powerful, critical and active—adult education politically and democratically engaged, not only economically engaged.”

I love the idea of being “dangerous.” I see it as a way to act up against the quiet destruction of adult literacy education. I am disturbingly reminded about my first exposure to the invisibility of adult literacy when I started in the CLC project. I now understand the vulnerability of not being able to pass as literate, and also understand literacy as an instrument of oppression. Not only are individuals disavowed, but it is abundantly clear now that adult literacy education can be easily done away with as well. Paulo Freire said education is a political act, so be political and act up for a robust investment in adult literacy education that works for people.

And with those impassioned words Audrey ended our interview and walked out the door to begin her new life in Toronto. Her penetrating intelligence, astute political analysis, and subversive sense of humour will be sorely missed by her colleagues both at Bow Valley College and in the larger adult literacy world. We can only hope we haven’t heard the last word from Audrey Gardner.

For more information on the exact details of the cuts and the effects on the adult literacy sector, check out these websites:

http://copian.ca/copian-literacy-funding-statement


http://cupe.ca/cupe-condemns-cuts-literacy-programs

http://www.resdac.net/documentation/pdf/off_to_bad_start.pdf
As educators and adult literacy practitioners, we urge you to get informed, get involved, organize protests, ask questions, and demand answers.

References


