COMMUNITY-BASED LITERACY IN AN URBAN SETTING:

A MODEL

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DEFINITION

A community-based literacy project is one in which members of a community share responsibility for providing basic education to local adults. In an urban setting, the project might serve a relatively small, densely populated area with high numbers of adults who are functionally illiterate.

The setting for the project reflects its close connection with other community services. It might be located in space provided by a settlement house, a local library, a church, an information post, or a community centre. The best physical location for the project is an open, accessible space with a welcoming, informal atmosphere and easy access to other community services.

Direction for the project comes through a volunteer board of directors, drawn from the local area. The provision of tutoring is also primarily through volunteers, trained by an experienced staff to work in both one-to-one and group settings, depending on the requirements of the learner.

Learner participation in the project is also voluntary; adult learners may have heard about the program through a social service agency, but they are expected to make personal, initial contact with the project's staff, and tend to be highly motivated to learn.

The involvement of adult learners and volunteers extends beyond the tutoring sessions. Both learners and tutors are encouraged to be active in all aspects of the project, whether it be helping with tasks around the office or reading centre, helping set up a resource collection, organizing educational events, or sitting on the board of directors or one of its committees.

In addition to promoting the acquisition of reading and writing skills, the goal of a community literacy project is to develop the skills of all learners -- volunteer tutors and students -- to enable them to understand one another and the area where they live. Thus, community literacy is part of the process of community development.

I. ORGANIZING A COMMUNITY LITERACY PROJECT

The following steps show how a community literacy project might be set up in an area where none yet exists:

1. **The Working Group:** A group of community workers, concerned residents and local community leaders begin to meet to discuss the need they see for adult basic education in the area. They bring to the group a variety of skills and knowledge of the area. By analysing available census or other data, or by conducting their own needs analysis, they begin to develop a picture of the community and its requirements. As the project grows, this picture of community will continue to develop and clarify.

2. **Outreach**: The original working group fans out into the community to engage the support of church leaders, school principals, local teachers, school-community relations workers, politicians, school trustees, librarians, community workers, local businesses and all others with access to community information and resources. These initial contacts will educate the community about the issue of illiteracy and give the working group a 'reading' of the area's special needs and interests. These contacts will also give an indication of the resources available in the community for supporting the program, and will help determine its shape

3. **Recruiting Students and Tutors**: Since potential students are not likely to be reached by printed announcements, outreach is done through word of mouth, referrals from community information centres and service agencies, and referrals from literacy projects in other areas with students for whom the new project will be more convenient. They can also be made aware of the project through verbal announcements at local meetings of church groups, tenants' associations, unions, PTAs and so on.

In addition to these methods, volunteer tutors can be reached using posters, flyers, public service announcements on the radio, local newsletters and community newspapers.

4. **Location, Space and Resources**: The literacy project location must be clearly visible to non-readers and those unsure about getting around their community. The centre should be accessible from the street and easily reached by public transit. Street accessibility also means making entrances and program space accessible to the physically disabled. Literacy projects which are located near community information posts, libraries or other community services are able to give protective anonymity as well as access to a variety of resources which increase the options for literacy skills development.

The program space will need to be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of activities, such as one-to-one tutoring, study groups and classes, tutor training, business meetings, social events, individual studying and reading, staff interviews with new students and tutors, administration, production of materials and publications, a resource collection and child care.

5. **Tutor Training**: Tutor training sessions are conducted by the project staff, and are based on the principle of "learner centred interaction". As the tutors are treated, they will treat students: sharing power as equally as possible, working as peers and gaining new understanding from one another.

A tutor's initial contact with the program results in an interview with a staff member concerning the length of time the tutor can commit to the project, special skills the tutor brings to the project and motivation for working with it. Some tutors choose not to make the heavy time commitment required to tutor a student; they may instead become outreach workers or give assistance with other program needs.

Many participants in the program can be involved in tutor training. Adult learners who have become familiar with the program can be present to discuss literacy and how it affects their lives. They can show inexperienced tutors how creative activities on the part of adult learners, such as oral history, skits, songs and student-written material are an important part of a literacy program. Experienced tutors are also a valuable resource for training.

The following themes are included in a six to eight week tutor training program held in weekly two hour sessions. They might be collapsed together when a different time frame is used.

Workshop #1: Introductions

Getting to know each other; a description of the project and its history; an introduction to the issue of literacy and its personal and social implications.

Workshop #2: The Politics of Literacy

Analysing education and its relationship to the economic system; creating a framework for the learner centred approach; beginning with the student's experience to develop a functional approach to literacy learning.

Workshop #3: Developing Curriculum

Finding, creating and using effective materials for developing functional literacy skills.

Workshop #4: Developing Curriculum, cont.

Using student's own writing or life stories as tools for learning to read and write.

Workshop #5: Reading

Exploring strategies that good readers use in order to take meaning from the printed word; practical applications for tutors.

Workshop #6: Matching

Tutors and students meet with each other, either in a group or in pairs. Both tutors and students are encouraged to state their goals and expectations, and to set out a realistic time frame for achieving them.

Workshop #7: Mixing Old and New

Tutors and learners who have been meeting for some time share their experiences and techniques, and provide encouragement to the newer student-tutor pair.

Workshop #8: Program Evaluation

Students, tutors and staff meet to discuss their progress and evaluate the program.

II. A LEARNER-CENTRED CURRICULUM

Because the goal of community-based literacy is to help people become self-reliant, active participants in their community, tutors are trained to pay particular attention to the adult learner's life experience and practical needs. Adults usually come to literacy projects with clear ideas about the areas of their lives which would benefit from the acquisition of reading, writing and basic numeracy skills. These are the areas on which the tutor will focus, by developing or finding the teaching materials which are relevant to the adult learner's expressed needs.

Some learners will be satisfied when they have achieved their stated goals, and will consider their program completed, while others will set themselves new, more ambitious goals and continue to upgrade their skills. Community-based projects do not pre-test adults or evaluate their progress according to standardized levels. Rather, they attempt to place the direction of study in the learners' hands, giving them the confidence to see education as a process which they can continue throughout their lives.

Starting Out

In order to be able to work together as equals and friends, tutor and student spend their initial sessions getting to know one another. The tutor comes to understand the learner's needs and goals, and begins to think of the materials and teaching methods which would help most in attaining them. Tutor and learner recognize one another's strengths and weaknesses, and nurture the atmosphere of trust and confidence without which learning could not take place.

The Learning Plan

Once the learner and tutor know one another well enough to establish their goals, they can draw up a learning plan (either written or verbal) to clarify their responsibilities to one another. A staff member is present at the discussion to help the pair articulate their goals and to suggest activities and materials which might help achieve them.

A learning plan includes:

- the statement of a goal, a realistic period of time to achieve it, and a serious commitment to work together;
- the length of time tutor and learner will spend together during each session, and the number of hours per week;
- a mutually agreeable location for each meeting, for example the literacy centre, the tutor's or learner's home, the library;
- arrangements for changing or cancelling a meeting;
- an agreement about homework, considering the learner's situation both at home and in the workplace. Should there be any homework? If so, what kind?

How Learner-Centred Curriculum Works

The following case studies provide examples of how materials and teaching methods can be adapted to fit the needs of individual adult learners.

1. "Ruby" came to Canada from England during the war. She left school at the age of 14, and although she can read and write, she is uncertain of her skills and wants to upgrade them. She has raised seven children, now grown up. Her husband is still working, but he is not well, and she is unsure about their future.

Ruby expresses the following needs to her tutor:

She wants to be able to do the family banking. She wants to be able to write with confidence such things as letters to family back in England. She wants to know more about the world, so that she can participate in discussions with her children.

Ruby's tutor helps her to examine and interpret bills and statements. Together they visit a bank, open an account and work on budgeting. The literacy centre provides Ruby with information about pre-retirement workshops, where she can learn how to plan a secure future, prepare for the eventuality of her husband's death and develop skills for coping independently.

Ruby and her tutor read the newspaper together, beginning with the headlines and shorter passages, until Ruby is familiar with the way news is presented. They also work on composing replies to letters from friends in England, discussing how to write drafts, edit for sentence structure, paragraphing and spelling

2. "Peter" is 25 years old. He says he never "fit in" at school and had discipline or behaviour problems. He did not receive special attention from his teachers and was put in an opportunity class where he was not encouraged to read and write.

Peter would like to get a job and earn enough money to get married. He would like to have the skills to drive his own ice- cream truck.

Peter and his tutor walk through his neighbourhood, reading and learning the street signs. They work with a map on learning routes and directions. Using a simplified driver's manual, they prepare for the written driver's test. Using the diagrams in another manual, they identify the parts of a truck and their names. They practise interpreting and filling out various kinds of business forms. They examine franchise information and the laws regarding the operation of a vending truck.

3. "Margaret" is 35 years old and has been labelled emotionally and mentally handicapped ever since her childhood. She lives at home, where she is still treated as a child, although she does a substantial amount of the housework. She never went to school and has absolutely no reading and writing skills.

Margaret wants to become more independent. She feels oppressed at home, and would like to get an outside job, meet people her own age and make friends.

Margaret's tutor begins by writing down verbatim the stories Margaret tells about her background, family, hopes and fears.

Together, Margaret and her tutor read the stories, keeping a "word bank" and studying the sounds and parts of familiar words. They learn how to use a camera and take pictures to illustrate the story Margaret tells about her life, which are then published in the literacy project's student newsletter. Through the newsletter, Margaret begins to read about other people's experiences. She also attends the community literacy centre's drop-in class, where she meets other people who are learning to read.

4. "Nelson" came to Canada from the Caribbean Islands five years ago. In his country he attended a village school until he was twelve. Further schooling would have cost special fees which his family could not afford. Nelson went to work to help support his younger brothers and sisters.

In the five years Nelson has been in Canada, he has worked as a welder, but now he is unemployed. He wants to use this time to upgrade his reading, writing and spelling. He speaks English fluently and is very articulate, but he finds that his dialect interferes with the formal written English he needs to use in Canada.

Nelson is very sensitive to his cultural roots and is an excellent storyteller, in his country's tradition of oral history. He and his tutor tape these stories and listen to them as they look at a written transcript. This enables Nelson to hear his own spoken words and note their correct spellings. He and his tutor also note and discuss the grammatical differences between Nelson's dialect and formal written English.

Nelson also studies specialized information from welding manuals to prepare himself for future employment. His highly developed verbal skills make him a strong participant in small group discussions.

Groups

A community literacy project provides many ways for adults to organize into learning groups around areas of mutual need or interest. Shared interests among learners, such as getting a driver's license, learning to read sewing patterns, or concerns about health and family issues can become the focus for group work. Staff members facilitate the organic growth of such groups by organizing location, meeting time and resources.

Evaluation

In a community-based literacy project, all of the program participants share responsibility for evaluating its successes and failures. Program evaluation is a continuous process, and takes place in many different ways.

When tutor-student pairs meet with a staff member at the end of a learning plan period, they measure the learner's progress against the goals they set out with. They can also refer to the records kept by learner and tutor. This may take the form of a journal kept by the learner or the tutor, depending on the learner's skills. Or it may be in the form of a series of tapes of the learner reading. Review of these records allows the learner and tutor to see where they have made progress.

These methods of evaluating student progress are generally more meaningful to the learner than standardized testing. However, some adults may decide their progress is sufficient to warrant continuing into an academic program within the school system, and will ask for guidance in finding ways to measure grade level equivalences. Other students may discover during the evaluation that they have made progress in less tangible ways, such as feeling more self-confident, or having made new friends and overcome feelings of isolation, or being more aware of community issues. The tutor may have made similar discoveries.

In a community-based literacy project, the evaluation process does not end with an assessment of the student. As a participant in the project, the adult learner can assess the tutor's effectiveness:

- Were the teaching materials suitable to the needs expressed?
- Did the tutor show patience and understanding?
- Was the tutor condescending?

Moreover, both tutor and student are asked to evaluate the program as a whole. Did it meet their needs in terms of:

- staff support
- resources
- skills development
- counselling.

The answers to these questions are vital to the health of a community literacy project. The information is used by the staff of the project to develop records, statistics and reports which can help the community board of directors evaluate the overall effectiveness of the program and plan for future development. At an annual meeting of all the participants in the literacy project, learners and volunteers can then make informed decisions about how to strengthen their project.

III. RESOURCES THAT "WORK"

The functional approach to literacy in community settings means that tutors gather their teaching material in direct response to the learner's practical needs and interests. When a tutor and student develop their own materials, each learns more about the process of learning and teaching.

Developing a Resource Collection

The materials which adults need to learn to read come from everyday life: bank statements, application forms, newspaper articles, food labels and so on. Materials such as these can be cheaply duplicated and housed in an accessible, open area of a community reading centre, where they become the basis for a resource collection. The role of the staff is to ensure these materials are duplicated and replenished as they are used up, and to encourage everyone to freely borrow from, or add to, the collection.

There are many examples of useful material such a collection can contain. Literacy volunteers often take official government documents and manuals and translate them into plain English for the students. A tutor who hits upon a successful teaching unit is eager to share it with others, and can add it to the resource collection. A student with a good grasp of phonics might go through a pile of colourful magazines, clipping pictures which clearly illustrate the sounds of letters, and pasting them up on laminated sheets for other students to use.

The materials can be organized and clearly labelled by topic, such as Food, Health, Driving, etc., and placed in open bins, boxes or drawers. Technical approaches to reading and spelling such as phonics sheets or sight cards might be organized and labelled very specifically: "Words ending in 'ght', Words ending in silent 'e', Using capital letters," and so on.

This method of materials development fosters the idea that the community of literacy volunteers and students are building together, and sharing with one another, strategies for learning. The usefulness of the collection is not limited to one program, as members of other literacy projects regularly drop in to browse through one another's collections and take away new ideas for their own programs.

Student Writing

One of the most successful approaches to developing effective literacy resources is the student writing process. Student writing and publishing were pioneered in community settings, but could be used effectively in many other program models.

Student writing can be introduced at any level of literacy. It has teaching value whether the student dictates the text to the tutor or writes independently. It can happen in both one-to-one teaching and in groups. It is a flexible and stimulating teaching resource.

Curriculum Comes to Life

All adults possess a wealth of life experience. Seeing stories from their lives written down gives adult learners a sense of intimacy with print which they are probably experiencing for the first time. Community literacy tutors are trained to write down the learner's own words early in the teaching encounter, regardless of the level of difficulty in the resulting text. This is because recognizing one's own words an paper is a way of quickly overcoming the apprehension about the printed page which many adult learners feel. Moreover, reading about the life experiences of other illiterate or formerly illiterate adults inspires new students to write about themselves. This fosters the feeling that they are not alone in the struggle to become literate.

Rather than resorting to the blandly conventional plotlines of mass produced adult reading texts, student writing provides the literacy program with a continuous supply of new, inexpensive and high interest reading material.

Publishing is Learning

Adult learners who work on the publication of their own writing acquire new literacy skills and, through editorial and technical production work, come to understand how printed materials evolve.

Choosing a Theme

When students are first introduced to the idea of producing their own publication, they may-be somewhat passive and try to place editorial decision-making in the hands of the tutors. A good way to overcome this hesitation is with meetings to discuss possible themes for the publication. Talking about the various aspects of a theme such as health, housing or employment can help introduce the idea that any number of perspectives have value in a publication, and encourages adult learners to see that they have thoughts that are worth publishing. The group can then discuss the different forms which writing can take, and individuals can decide whether to write a life story, an interview, fiction, a song, a news report, announcements of related upcoming events, or lists of information resources. The choice is wide.

Writing

The actual writing can be done independently, with a tutor, or in group meetings. Tape recorders are excellent tools, making no literacy demands while allowing the new reader/writer to record information. The transcript can be reviewed with a tutor, and the student then becomes an editor, weeding out repetition, re-wording or clarifying as necessary. The learner thus begins to think of the publication in relation to the reader.. "How can we make this clear for someone who has just picked it up?" Choosing titles together to summarize or encapsulate what a piece of writing is about also focuses on this question.

Word Games

Student writing can form the basis for practice writing. Adults like word games and enjoy making their own based on their writing. They can construct crosswords, fill-in-the-bla-aks exercises, word scrambles, questions to encourage comprehension and response, and questions to stimulate others to write. These 'word games' become a part of the publication.

Proofreading

The final stage of the editorial process before production work begins is proofreading. Students come to see correction of spelling mistakes as clarifying for the reader, rather than as signifying failure on the part of the writer.

Illustrations

The next stage in the publication process is choosing illustrations to accompany each piece. Where photographs are to be used, the students become photographers. The camera manual becomes a reading text and the student is highly motivated to understand even the most technical instructions. Once a pool of graphics and photographs is assembled, the group can choose the most appropriate, referring to the text for confirmation of their choice. Often, within a group of adults studying literacy, there will be a person with hidden artistic talents, and this person will soon become valued for adding creative touches to the pages.

Layout

Once the group has chosen illustrations, they can begin to lay out the pages. To fit the text, title and illustration on the page, the learners work on proportion, spacing and aesthetic appeal. These elements determine the readability of the page, and the group is again considering the reader's relationship to printed material. Producing "mockups" of the page layout reinforces the idea that "rough" copy is not a mess or a failure, but a necessary step toward the finished product. "Sizing" illustrations requires the use of a reduction wheel, through which the adults can learn about proportion and mathematical relationships. Other numeracy skills develop when measuring for spacing and margins -- a good way of introducing metric conversion when different types of rulers are used.

Into Print

The final stage of production before the publication goes to the printer is setting the text in print. The group should have access to a good quality typewriter in the literacy centre and enough sheets of letter transferring paper to make attractive titles and headlines. Typing is a good reinforcement of newly acquired reading and writing skills, and produces a gratifying, professional looking result. The manual skill required for letter transferring is not great, but the tracing over of letters and numbers is good writing practice. Judging the best letter and word spacing while typing and transferring headlines is good practice in seeing words as units and developing a sense of spacial relationships in writing.

Once the illustrations have been pasted down, the publication is ready for final proofing and correcting before being sent to the printer. Learners will have been involved in every stage of the production.

Making Sense of the Media

When adult leaners acquire an overview of the publication process. they are learning a great deal more about the meaning of literacy than the words "reading and writing" can convey. It is intrinsic to the philosophy of community literacy that everything be done to impart a discerning, confident attitude toward the mass of published material which confronts newly-literate adults in Canadian society.

Having helped to produce their own publication, adult learners find it easier to pick up and handle commercial books and magazines. They know where to look for "keys" such as tables of contents, pagination and indices. They are more capable of "skimming" material in order to find out whether its message is of interest. They have a better ability to "refer back" and search for clarification in the text. They are less likely to be thrown by typos, misplaced paragraphs and the wild flights of fancy in contemporary layout.

Reading Critically

Most important, having written and published their own writing, adult learners are far more likely to approach commercially produced reading material critically and independently. They will be able to discern the perspectives expressed in print and will be less likely to accept them without question. They will be able to use their own writing to express their own ideas.

They will have developed the potential to become, not passive consumers, but informed participants in the contemporary world of print. By acquiring these skills, they will provide the community with valuable new human resources.

ATTACHMENTS: BIBLIOGRAPHIES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECTS

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2. Theory and analysis
3. Publishers of literacy books which focus on student writing
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