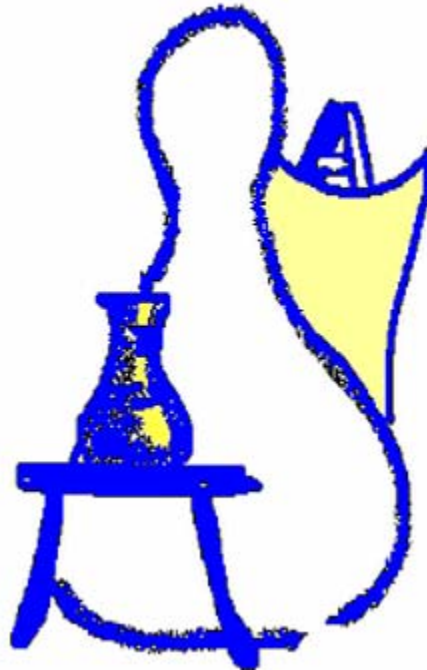


**Women's Art & Literacies:
Scaffolding learning & supporting, planning & participation
through a series of art workshops**

REPORT



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Women's Art & Literacies: Scaffolding learning & supporting, planning & participation through a series of art workshops



Project Summary

In the Fall of 2006 and through the winter and spring of 2007, Quality Learning New Brunswick worked with women and young women to develop and deliver a series of art workshops. The goal of these workshops was to provide networking, support and skill-building for women and young women. The workshops were hosted in the Crescent Valley neighbourhood of Saint John, New Brunswick's largest public housing neighbourhood. Participation in each workshop was limited, and priority of invitation was given to women and teenage girls known to be experiencing severe isolation, exposure to on-going violence, or other similar stressful life circumstances (low literacy, poor self-esteem, economic dependency).



Approach

This project was facilitated within the framework of Choice Theory (Glasser, 1998). The project was managed by an experienced adult educator and community literacy facilitator certified in Choice Theory. Workshop facilitators had or received standard Basic Week Choice Theory training. During the workshops, care was taken to provide an emotionally safe environment, provide for basic needs, facilitate relationship building and offer instruction and support in a manner that accords with adult learning principles (Knowles, 1980).

Partnerships

Quality Learning New Brunswick is a non-profit agency which helps communities develop literacy resources, programs and supports. QLNB and its partnering organizations have provided a variety of accessible programs and supports to families in this community. Core programming has been the Quality Storytent & Bookwagon programs, run in this community with the support of the Greater Saint John Community Foundation since 2003.

In this project, QLNB partnered with Vibrant Communities of Saint John, the Saint John Free Public Library, and local artisans. Vibrant Communities is currently engaged in community development work in Crescent Valley and will provide in-kind space to support the art workshop series. The Saint John Free Public Library has been working for several years to enhance Crescent Valley's access to and usage of public library materials and resources. In this project, the SJFPL will be providing local access to print and audio-visual materials and information relating to each workshop, as well as a venue for celebrating the women's work. Major funding for the project was provided by the Greater Saint John Community Foundation.

Goals

Impetus for this project came from community literacy workers' awareness of how isolated and vulnerable many women and teenage girls are in this community. In the winter of 2004-2005, QLNB facilitated a small literacy committee made up of some of these women. The women were excited to work together to plan literacy activities for children; their own and others in the neighbourhood. Their community involvement led to enhanced confidence, self-esteem and literacy skills. In reflecting on the experience, the women expressed a desire to continue learning and working to improve the neighbourhood for children. They also wanted to develop programming specifically for women like themselves.

QLNB developed this project in specific response to these women's



voices, as well as interactions workers had with women through the Bookwagon project. Aware that this was a new direction for QLNB, and wanting to provide the best service possible, QLNB also undertook to evaluate the project, and make any significant learnings made available on-line in PDF form on the QLNB website (in development).

Project Narrative

Initial recruitment and planning took place in November and December of 2006. Two workshops were held before Christmas, and ten were held between January 1st and June 2nd 2007. QLNB used phone calls, printed invitation, 'invite-a-friend', and door-to-door recruitment to encourage participation. Women and young women who took place in the initial workshops helped plan each of the following workshops.



Workshop schedule:

November 26, 2006	Women's Pottery I
December 10, 2006	Women's Pottery II
January 7, 2007	Young Women's Painting I
January 21, 2007	Women's Painting I
February 4, 2007	Knitting & Photography Young Women I
February 18, 2007	Young Women's Painting II
March 4, 2007	Knitting & Young Women Photography II
March 18, 2007	Women's Painting II
April 15, 2007	Young Women Pottery
April 28, 2007	Women's Pottery
May 27, 2007	Young Women Tye-dye
June 2, 2007	All painting & pottery wrap up

An initial meeting with key workshop participants and workshop facilitators was held on November 19, 2006 to plan workshops, discuss recruitment and evaluation. Meetings were also held between workshops to reflect on the process and make new strategies.





Project Outcomes

QLNB was able to facilitate 12 workshops for women and young women. Each workshop was designed to increase the functional literacy skills of participants; increase in self-confidence and self-esteem of participants; increase in knowledge of art skills presented for participants; create a local network of support for women and young women in Crescent Valley.

As well as having an opportunity to practice everyday literacy skills during the planning of workshops, some women wrote about their experiences:

I really like doing pottery. It was lots of fun. I made a bird but the tail of it was hard to do. I also made a cat. It was not so hard. I had lots of fun making it. Alison had to take the cat and the bird home and put them in her kiln so she could fire them. Firing makes the pottery hard. Alison brought them back so we could paint them. I also made a cup and saucer at the next workshop. I really liked making it because they were easier to make.

Woman participant

I went to the painting workshop and I painted a picture of a rock with the sun shining on it... I had a lot fun. I looked in this book. I found a pattern that I liked. It was very pretty. The sun was shining down on this rock. So I started to paint the picture and it turned out to be a very pretty picture when I was done.

Woman participant

From the start, I felt it was worthwhile to provide a tactile learning experience for some women who, I knew, felt challenged by printed text. This perception was strengthened after one of my adult literacy learner took part in the workshop. This woman showed increased confidence and clarity when writing about the workshops she attended. She also shifted, in a positive direction, her perceptions of herself as an able learner.”

Adult Literacy Facilitator

While these women’s literacy skills were not tested, their increased confidence in using them indicates improvement. When asked, all women and young women who participated in the planning and delivery of the workshops series indicated they learned about the medium they were using, as well as increased their esteem and confidence:

Hey, I can knit!

Young woman participant

In terms of increasing networking and support for women and young women, one facilitator wrote:

We talked about our children, our relationships and about domestic violence. Although I had known some of these women for many years, we had never been so personal, and we became deeply connected on a basic level, having shared some of the same experiences, regardless of our socio-economic status.

Workshop facilitator

I made myself busy in the kitchen because I could see one of the youth wanting to talk to another facilitator, who was closer in age. They had a long conversation, and the young woman left smiling.

Workshop facilitator

However, it was difficult to sustain the same women attending meetings and workshops. Twelve women and nine young women attended these workshops, although not all at the same time. The range of participation ranged from 2 – 16 participants per workshop. While maintaining a larger peer support network was difficult, individual relationships between some participants and some participants and facilitators were strengthened.

Evaluation

Involving women and young women in participant evaluation was our intended goal. This would have required a core group of participants that attended workshops and meetings regularly, which did not happen. Therefore evaluation consisted of participant's comments regarding workshops and what process they were involved in, and facilitator's analysis.

We were pleased with the initial start, and said so online. The workshops series was the topic of two posts on the blogsite *Qualities ~ Communities ~ Literacies* (Appendix A & B).

As well, a related post about the workshop series on an international forum, *Learning and Violence*, received more than 400 views (http://www.learningandviolence.net/forum/forum_posts.asp?TID=5)

Generally, women and young women indicated that they enjoyed planning the workshops, making things with their hands and felt proud of the things they had made. Some youth received praise from their parents when they got home, and these parents told us they were pleased to hang their daughters' paintings, and display their pottery in their homes.



Challenges and Learnings

This project had many challenges. We decided at the outset to work with women and young women who were isolated in various ways. Many of these women told us they wanted to participate in art workshops and some also indicated they wanted to be involved in the planning and facilitation of these workshops. What we discovered was that there seemed to be barriers we were unaware of, perhaps personal barriers, to their participation. We would personally invite women, who indicated they would attend, and only a small percentage of these women would actually attend. For some women, family responsibilities, alcoholism, and personal crisis interfered with their desire to participate.

Weather was also a challenge, as walking to workshops, no matter how close, was undesirable in foul weather. During one workshop day it was -12 degrees, for example, and on another workshop day it was -14 degrees before wind chill.

Onsite childcare was provided, although some women indicated they did not want to bring their children to this service, citing behaviour problems or special considerations (like autism) as reasons.



Conclusion

We learned that it is not easy to engage women who are isolated by various factors. We felt that we had listened to what participants wanted and that we have overcome certain things we knew would be obstacles: we had prior relationships with most participants; the workshops were in their community; there was onsite childcare; there was food; we made personal invitations and followed up the day before (in person or by phone) to encourage participation; and we planned workshops they had asked for. In this sense, we were successful in meeting our project outcomes.

What we concluded was that this kind of workshop series was unsuccessful as a medium for creating a strong network of peer support for these women and young women. As well, we felt their needs were so individual and issues so personal, that engagement may require more of a one-on-one approach.

References

Glasser, W. (1998). *Choice theory: A new psychology of personal freedom*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Knowles, M. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Appendix A

Greater Saint John Community Foundation Grants \$2650

<http://wendell-communitylit.blogspot.com/2006/11/greater-saint-john-community-foundation.html>

Monday, November 27, 2006

[Greater Saint John Community Foundation Grants \\$2650](#)

Women & Literacies:

Scaffolding learning & supporting, planning & participation through a series of art workshops

This project is designed to provide networking, support and skill-building for targeted women and young women in Crescent Valley, through facilitated participant-planning and delivery of a series of locally accessible art workshops (pottery, painting, etc).

This project targets women and teenage girls in Crescent Valley who are isolated, exposed to on-going violence, or are otherwise struggling through a stressful life circumstances. Low literacy, poor self-esteem, and economic dependency often add to the challenges these women and young women face.

Appendix B

Community Art Series for Women (2)

<http://wendell-communitylit.blogspot.com/2007/01/community-art-series-for-women-2.html>

Tuesday, January 09, 2007

[Community Art Series for Women \(2\)](#)



The art series I mentioned [below](#) is starting to get some traction. Initial numbers have been low, partly because of Christmas and partly because we're specifically inviting women who don't often (get to) come to such things. Reluctant dragons and such.

Thanks again to our funders, the [Greater Saint John Community Foundation](#). Thanks too to the good folks at [Eastward Sales](#) who gave me a happy break on the cost of canvas and paint. Community building is a wonderful part of community literacy work.