

Project Evaluation Report

Written by Barbara Sykes, Evaluation Consultant, 2009.

Widening Access for Adult Literacies Project.
<http://www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca>



Artists of literacy

My thoughts on the agencies, their staff and classroom instructors.

I'm watching a professional painter. His hand is like magic, working the brush. I do not know what the painting will be but you can feel the mood and the charisma of him and his work.

The people representing their agencies in the literacy programs and teaching in the classrooms, making friendly and happy environments for all of us learning students—they are the artists, just like the painter.

Sitting at the meeting table, I may not understand all of their debating in making the literacy programs work, but I can see the excitement in their body language and hear the desire in their voices, being the professional artists that they are.

If it had not been for all of you, I would not be sitting here saying thanks. You are great artists and the masters of literacy.

Ken Steele (with permission)
September 18, 2008.

Introduction

The context and intent of the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project¹

... it could be said that the Widening Access project set out to effect a transformation of the community from one in which adult literacy learning was essentially absent to one in which it is given a high priority in agency programming, policies and practices.

The Widening Access project was initiated in 2005. The intent was to identify, develop, and assessing means of expanding access to adult literacy learning and support in the underserved northeast sector of Edmonton. A key impetus for the project was the lack of any adult literacy programs located in the northeast. Moreover, the need for literacy programs and support was deemed to be pressing in light of the multiple challenges endemic to the area. In particular, many residents of the northeast face issues related to surviving on very low incomes, living in high density and often substandard housing, coping with the difficulties that accompany single parenting, and dealing with relatively low levels of literacy. At the same time, it was recognized that, for a range of reasons, fewer than 10% of people who have challenges with literacy attend programs. Thus, the project also aimed to explore ways to integrate support for literacy into agency programs and services.

At the core of the Widening Access project was an understanding of the initiative as a community development and participatory education endeavor. Although it began with intentions and strategies, the course that the project would take over time was, by necessity, open and flexible, with multiple access points. It was understood that project activities and strategies would emerge in response to community needs and input. In some respects, it could be said that the Widening Access project set out to effect a transformation of the community from one in which adult literacy learning was essentially absent to one in which it is given a high priority in agency programming, policies and practices.

The project was structured around a partnership between two agencies: The Learning Centre Literacy Association of Edmonton, an adult literacy program located in the inner city and The Candora Society of Edmonton, a community based agency in the northeast that focuses on community development and capacity building.

As articulated in the project proposal, the intentions of the Widening Access project were to:

1. Plan, implement and assess approaches to widen access for adults to develop and expand their use of literacies, and to increase their confidence in using literacies
2. Build on research and practice to reduce barriers and enhance opportunities for adults to participate in learning
3. Plan, implement, and assess approaches to integrate support for adults to extend and practice literacies into agency programs and services

¹ The Learning Centre Literacy Association sponsored the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project, in partnership with The Candora Society of Edmonton. The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, Human Resources Development Canada, funded the project. The Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association funded several literacy classes that were offered through the project.

4. Plan, implement, and assess approaches to integrate support for adults to practice and extend literacies through participation in informal taster literacies activities
5. Plan, implement, and assess approaches to provide ongoing literacies programming to meet the needs and interests of adults in the community
6. Develop and initiate a three year plan to maintain/further develop literacies support and programs, based on learning from the project

An important element of this initiative is the use of the term “literacies” to reflect a broad understanding of reading, writing, and numeracy skills as being embedded in social practices of everyday life as well as in institutional practices.

This report is not intended as a project report and therefore does not attempt to offer a detailed description of the project. Rather, its purpose is to share the learning that emerged from the evaluation process. The report begins with a brief summary of how the project was implemented and then moves on to discuss the evaluation learning. Direct quotations appear in italicized font.

How the project unfolded: A summary of implementation

As noted above, the Widening Access project was designed as a community development project. In keeping with the nature of the initiative, a key role was that of the project animator. In fact, the animator role can be viewed as a primary project strategy in itself. For the first year of the project, the animator was the only project staff member² although support and direction was offered by the co-coordinators³ and the Project Advisory Committee. As the work of the project expanded, two part-time consultants were hired to work on particular aspects of the initiative.

In light of the fact that project activities developed in response to needs and interests in the community, they cannot be easily categorized. However, the following three broad components serve as a framework for describing the work of the project: raising awareness and setting the stage for change; providing opportunities for community members to expand literacy learning; and working with agencies to integrate literacies into their practice and policy.

Raising awareness and setting the stage for change

From the beginning, a critical component of the Widening Access project has been its efforts to raise awareness among community members, agencies, and organizations. These efforts have been twofold:

- to enhance awareness of the profound importance of literacies in peoples’ lives and wellbeing
- to raise awareness in the community about the project, its intentions, and its potential value.

² Note that there have been two people working in this position, Ann Nikolai for the first year and Susan Skaret since then.

³ Refers to the Executive Directors of the partner agencies.

Awareness of The importance of literacies

The project animator began to lay the groundwork for the project by making connections with community agencies, early childhood programs, schools, churches, government departments and interagency networks. The purpose was to draw attention to literacy issues in the northeast sector of the city and to enhance understanding of the ways in which literacy challenges impact peoples' lives, particularly with respect to accessing supports and services. The intent was also to foster a consciousness of how literacy can be effectively integrated into programs and services such that there will be positive outcomes for clients/participants, as well as to encourage referrals to the literacy programming that was being introduced.

Awareness about the project

Through connecting with agencies and organizations individually and by way of existing interagency groups, the animator sought to make the Widening Access project more visible in the community, to explain how it could benefit community members and agencies, and to assess needs and existing responses to literacy needs. Such meetings and consultations were seen as a means of building relationships that would serve as an important underpinning of the project.

In addition to these meetings, efforts were made to promote the project to community members by developing posters and flyers, publishing articles in local print media (newspapers and newsletters), and having the project animator participate in special events such as a Women's Day hosted by the Candora Society and International Literacy Day events.

As one of its initial activities, the project offered a number of "taster" workshops that served to demonstrate how literacy can be integrated into and can support activities that are not explicitly related to literacy learning. These included scrap booking, creating greeting cards, and journaling.

Providing opportunities for community members to expand literacy learning

Community members quickly began to express an interest in participating in intentional literacy programs. Programs were offered in partnership with community agencies and have included Reading and Writing, Creative Writing, and Math. Intentional literacy programs began at Abbottsfield Mall, in conjunction with Candora Society, and expanded to Amity House, Unity Centre, and Balwin School. Programming was also initiated at Oteenow Employment Centre but was discontinued due to limited enrolment.

Much of the activity of the project has been centred at Abbottsfield Mall where Candora and several other community-based agencies are located. In response to demand for more programming, the Widening Access project initiated "Learning at the Mall" on Thursday evenings, which included literacy learning programs and individual support. While individual tutoring was not a component of the project, staff members brokered connections to existing literacy programs that offer tutors. The project also established a site at Candora Society where community residents feel welcome to drop in and talk,

discuss specific literacy concerns, use resources, ask for help and support with their learning, obtain assistance in filling out forms, and use project resources to work independently. In fall 2008, The Learning Centre Literacy Association rented space to open a Learning Centre in Abbottsfield Mall and the work initiated through the project currently operates from that location.

Although the idea of project “ambassadors” had been part of the project from the beginning, it was not fully implemented until 2007 when the ambassadors started doing presentations. At this time, three individuals who had been involved in the literacy learning groups were recruited to speak at agency and interagency meetings about their experiences with literacy and learning, with a view to raising awareness about literacy and literacy challenges.

Working with agencies to integrate support for literacies

Much of the work of the Widening Access project has been oriented toward enhancing the capacity of agencies and organizations to integrate literacy into their programs. The intention was that rather than viewing literacy as an add-on, centred on formal literacy learning opportunities, agencies would find ways of incorporating literacy support into everyday activities and programs. To this end, the project offered a number of workshops on a wide range of topics to staff of community agencies and organizations. Initially, the topics were chosen by the project animator and co-coordinators but as the project progressed, input from workshop participants was used to determine the subject matter of workshops. Workshop themes included: learning styles, participatory learning, learning difficulties, recognizing cultural factors in the learning environment, facilitation skills, and using the experiential learning cycle to incorporate literacies development into program activities.

In addition to offering these collective learning opportunities, project staff consulted with many agencies on an individual basis with the aim of helping them to become more literacy friendly. These consultations focused on assessing potential literacy challenges for clients, doing literacy audits, helping agency staff to redesign physical space, developing literacy friendly materials and identifying ways to make agencies more welcoming and comfortable for clients.

Through the workshops and consultations, project staff offered tools to assess literacy levels (including introducing a Microsoft word readability tool) in relation to print materials. They also made a point of following up with agencies and organizations, encouraging them to send revised materials for further input and generally supporting them in the change process.

The Literacy Network that emerged during the project can be viewed as both an action and an outcome of the project. As an outcome, it will be discussed in more detail below. The seeds for the network were planted in mid-2007 when the project organized visioning sessions with individuals and organizations in the community to gauge potential interest in extending supports for literacies in northeast Edmonton beyond the project. While interest was expressed, it was not until ten months later that the network began to take form.

A key message from the community agencies was that, if a network were to be relevant and successful, it would have to be action oriented as opposed to being another interagency group. They wanted the network to share ideas, knowledge and resources and to find practical ways to make agencies and communities more “literacy friendly”. In keeping with this action orientation, network members formed two sub-committees, one to organize events for International Literacy Day and the other to examine ways to support agencies in becoming literacy friendly environments. The Literacy Network continues to meet and to demonstrate their commitment to expanding access to literacy in northeast Edmonton.

The evaluation of the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project

The evaluation approach that guided this inquiry is grounded in the belief that the most meaningful learning emerges from peoples’ stories of their lived experiences

Evaluation was incorporated into the project and began very shortly after the project was launched. Although evaluation took place over the course of the project, most of the data collection was concentrated on the early stages of the project and the period in which initial funding was coming to an end.

Evaluation comprised three primary components:

- Development of logic model articulating desired outcomes and indicators of the Widening Access project
- Developing questions and methods of data collection that could be used by project staff/instructors to collect evaluation data from course and workshop participants
- Collecting, analyzing and interpreting data to determine what difference the project has made to community members

The evaluation approach that guided this inquiry is grounded in the belief that the most meaningful learning emerges from peoples’ stories of their lived experiences. This approach is congruent with the methods and goals of community development initiatives. Evaluation was oriented toward learning about the processes, impacts, and experiences of the Widening Access project.

In keeping with the goal of learning about peoples’ experiences of the Widening Access project, evaluation relied primarily on qualitative methods of data collection, interpretation and analysis. Specifically, data was collected through face-to-face and telephone interviews with individuals, group reflection sessions, participation in meetings, and review of evaluative survey documents.

As the project evaluator, I attended literacy learning opportunities offered to community participants and engaged these participants in reflective discussions of their experiences. I also had individual discussions with some participants and group discussions with facilitators of the classes. To learn about the experiences of agency and organization staff, I attended and collected data at staff meetings, interagency network meetings, and project sponsored workshops. In addition, I interviewed many agency/organization staff members individually and in small groups. Throughout the project, I met regularly with Widening Access project staff and co-coordinators, conducted

interviews and focus groups with them, and attended Advisory committee and other meetings and events associated with the project. For more detail on numbers of data collection opportunities see Table 1 below.

Data from these sources was supplemented by evaluation learning collected from literacy learning participants and workshop participants by project staff. Quantitative data tracking numbers of people attending literacy learning groups and project workshops, and demographic data was also collected by project staff and appears on pages 9-10 of this report.

Table 1: Sources of Evaluation Learning

Community Members	Agencies/Organizations	Project Staff
4 reflective discussions in literacy classes	1 reflective discussion with staff at regular agency staff meeting	9 regular reflection sessions with project staff
2 Face-to-face interviews with class participants	11 interviews with agency staff members one-on-one and in small groups (35 individuals)	3 interviews with project staff in one-on-one and group formats
3 one-on-one and group interviews with facilitators	Attendance at 2 agency network meetings in which the coordinator discussed the project	Attendance at 3 Advisory Committee meetings
Secondary data collected by facilitators	Attendance at 2 project sponsored workshops and one community sponsored workshop	
	Secondary data collected by workshop	

As with all evaluation inquiries, this one had its limitations. Given the available time and resources for evaluation, it was challenging to include all perspectives. In particular, the views of community members and agencies that may have chosen not to participate in the project were not sought. Because the project took place over more than three years, maintaining connections with the ongoing and ever changing project activities was not always possible. Community development projects are, by nature, complex and emerging. The Widening Access project was no exception. Thus, a challenge from the point of view of evaluation, was trying to capture the essence of what was essentially a “moving target”.

Evaluation findings: Sharing the learning

This section of the report focuses on evaluation learning. The first part sheds light on the process of implementing the Widening Access project and draws attention to ways in which the project evolved over time. The discussion then shifts to reflect on the outcomes of the project, first for community members and then for agencies and organizations. A discussion of challenges faced by the project follows.

Reflections on the implementation of the Widening Access project

The emergent, multi-layered nature of the Widening Access project posed some challenges at the beginning in terms of how to engage individuals and agencies and how to develop and implement project strategies. In particular, project staff faced the question of how to articulate the project to the community, especially the unfamiliar concept of “literacies”. The first phase of the project was exploratory with the endeavors of the project animator focused on establishing relationships with agencies in Abbotsfield Mall and elsewhere in the community and on attending community network and staff meetings.

Initially, it was not easy to engage agencies and organizations in a literacy-oriented project. A significant barrier was a widespread lack of awareness of literacy and how it impacts the lives of people using agency services. Most agencies defined their mandates in terms of offering social and community services, not literacy. Providing these mandated services in a context of limited resources meant that there was little time to be concerned with literacy issues. Project staff persevered and eventually, more and more agencies began to recognize the connection between literacy and the work they were doing with their clients.

A key learning that emerged from the project relates to the importance of building relationships between the project and the community agencies and organizations. This requires clear and consistent communication, staying connected, following up on regular basis, and “not leaving things hanging”. Also of critical importance are the efforts on the part of project staff to keep literacy visible and in the forefront.

We struggled at the beginning with how to proceed. It wasn't clear how the project would unfold in this community context.

One of the big questions was how to talk about the project in the community.

From the beginning, The Candora Society was involved as a partner in the Widening Access project. Although the participation of Candora in the project diminished over time, the partnership was important in a number of ways. In addition to offering a physical space and a “hub” for the project, the agency embraced change in practice and policy around literacy early on and served as a model for other agencies. The close connections among agencies in the Abbotsfield Mall also served as a foundation on which the project was able to build.

There was a positive response from Candora. They served as model – a place to begin with other agencies.

There were far fewer challenges entailed in developing intentional literacy learning opportunities. Community members expressed an interest in learning and the project responded. Efforts to offer intentional learning in sites other than Abbotsfield Mall met with limited success, although one of the agencies continues to offer literacy programming that was initiated through the project.

It's important to have the literacy-learning program in the community but not necessarily in many sites.

Conversations between project staff and community members confirmed that many people avoided going to The Learning Centre or other programs downtown because of a discomfort with the locations. In some cases, people had lived in straightened circumstances in the city core and were reluctant to revisit the area. In light of peoples' qualms about going to the inner city, The Learning Centre made the decision to open a site in Abbotstfield Mall to serve people in northeast Edmonton. This had not been an intention when the project began and can be seen as an important outcome of the Widening Access project .

One way of assessing a project is in terms of its reach to the community it is targeting. It is apparent that the reach of The Widening Access project within the community has been extensive. As of late 2008, 145 community members had attended at least one of the literacy learning classes offered by the project and, of these individuals, at least 32 had attended more than one class. It is interesting to note that a majority of people had found out about the classes from friends or family members, being referred by an agency, or from project posters or brochures. The tables below show more detail about how people heard about the classes, the ages of participants, and educational levels.

How participants heard about the literacy learning opportunities

Referred by agency/organization/social worker	30
Friends/family	29
Saw a poster/brochure	24
Attended a presentation	10
Referred by adult education program	9
Other or multiple source	23
Did not say	20

Participants by age

18-30	27
31-45	63
46-60	33
61 or older	7
No age given	15

Participants by sex

Female	118
Male	27

Participants by previous education

No schooling	3
Some elementary school (incomplete)	41
Completed elementary	14
Some high school (incomplete)	20
Completed high school	27
Alternative program/certificate	3
Some postsecondary	9
No information	38

The project's reach extended very widely across northeast Edmonton encompassing 40 neighborhoods. However, not surprisingly, nearly one third of participants came from neighborhoods in the vicinity of Abbottsfield Mall where most of the literacy learning classes are held.

Engagement in the project among agencies and organizations has also been extensive with at least 44 organizations participating in various ways. This total includes 31 service providing agencies and organizations⁴, 10 schools, and 3 churches. In addition, 5 interagency partnership groups were involved.

Within agencies, the extent of reach has varied. In some agencies, most staff members have been engaged in some measure but in others only one or two staff members are trying to carry the learning of the project forward.

Most of our staff have attended workshops sponsored by the project and it has been very valuable for them.

Outcomes of the Widening Access project for community members who attended literacy

Expanded use of literacies and increased confidence in using literacies

Community members who have participated in literacy learning opportunities offered through the project indicate many ways in which their capacities have been strengthened. As regards literacy specifically, respondents shared many comments that point to the success of the project in enhancing skills in

⁴ These include social and health agencies, government service organizations, libraries, literacy programs, an employment agency and the office of a Member of the Legislative Assembly.

reading, writing, spelling, and math. They spoke with enthusiasm about their new skills and how they are using them in their lives.

Prior to attending literacy learning groups, many participants lacked confidence in their literacy skills and, even when they were able to read and write and do basic math, were reluctant to do so because they viewed their literacy skills as inadequate. They credit the programs in The Widening Access project with increasing their confidence and encouraging them to use their literacy skills in a variety of ways. Ways in which participants are using their skills include: reading more books for pleasure and learning, handling money with more skill and confidence, learning about computers, getting library cards, preparing for upgrading, reading recipes, getting into school programs and reading flyers that enable them to save money on purchases. One participant in the reading and writing group has published two books of his writing and he and another writer have read their work at the gatherings of the Poet's Haven, a group of Edmonton poets who meet monthly for public readings.⁵

I learned how to spell a little more. I learned more about writing.

I started to read more and learned to enjoy writing more and more. It has been great to get me going and I have got a lot more confidence now

I wanted to improve my reading and writing. I could hardly write before coming here.

This is the first time I've been able to read what I wrote. Usually, I don't know what I'm trying to say.

I couldn't write because I couldn't spell. It held me back all my life. I couldn't advance. In the reading and writing group, the teacher wanted me to write but I felt I couldn't and I was embarrassed. But I started to write some small pieces and it has developed from there. I started to read more and learned to enjoy writing more and more. It has been great to get me going and I have got a lot more confidence now. Barbara and Mary were talking with me one day and they suggested making a book out of my stories. I couldn't have done it without the project. It has been tremendous. I've met so many new people. I have nothing but admiration and praise for the project.

I learned a lot of things I didn't know before like how to write stories and where to put periods, commas, and where to quotation marks. Now I know a lot more than I did before.

We do scrap booking with parents and we're amazed at the literacy impact. People are writing and sharing their stories, they're connecting and talking with each other, and they're sharing their scrapbooks with their children.

Naming the benefits of enhanced literacy

It is clear from the evaluation data that participation in the literacy learning programs had benefits far beyond those of learning to read, write and do math. In evaluative interviews and conversations, respondents were eloquent in naming the benefits they derived through attending the classes. Some of

⁵ Ken Steele has published two books of stories entitled "The Golden Tree and Other Stories" and "Mr. Wind and Other Stories"

these relate directly to learning literacy skills while others are broader and demonstrate the value of bringing people together in ways in which they are able to connect and offer mutual support.

Difference in relationships outside the group

Participants frequently noted that their learning from the program had had a positive impact on their relationships with others. In particular, it has made a difference in enabling them to read to their children or grandchildren, help them with homework, or communicate more effectively with children's teachers or caregivers. For some, the fact that they were attending classes and learning reading and writing meant that they felt a greater sense of esteem in their relationships with spouses and children.

For me it's been better. Now I read my granddaughter a story every night and she understands me better.

This is a great idea to have this class. Now I can help my kids with their homework and it makes me feel good that I can.

Self-discovery/Personal development

A key outcome for many participants has been personal awareness, understanding, and growth. Some participants spoke of increased self-discovery and learning through writing or sharing their stories with other participants. Others emphasized an increase in confidence or self-esteem as a result of attending the program and experiencing success.

You're learning more about your inner self—how interesting ideas come out.

It brought my self-esteem up higher.

The participants really liked the creative writing program and from what they've said they got a lot out of it. One of the participants came in and talked to me about how much she enjoyed it. She read something to me that she had written and I could see that she was proud of her work. (Agency staff)

I feel proud to tell my husband "I'm going to school".

Making connections/Reducing isolation

A recurring theme in the accounts of participants is the importance of meeting people and making connections. Simply getting out of the house and being with others made a difference for some participants. This speaks to the importance of social connections in addressing isolation. The program clearly offers opportunities for participants to meet new people, share stories of experience, and feel a sense of belonging.

I like it that the centre can put on stuff and I can come here and enjoy myself and meet so many good people.

I met new people and got to know them through their stories.

I love coming here It gives me something to look forward to till the next class.

I enjoy coming here because it's closer to my home. Also, I can talk to others if I have problems. I'm more comfortable here than at [the downtown Learning Centre].

I'm meeting all of these wonderful people. It's more relaxed than the other things they do here.

It creates connections. People learn what they have in common. They can talk with each other and connect – get things off their minds. (Agency staff)

Enjoyment and stress release

Participants talked about the literacy learning programs as offering an opportunity to have fun, to laugh, to enjoy themselves, and to reduce stress. They took pleasure from the classes and looked forward to returning each week.

It's a stress reliever. You can laugh. It makes you feel better – increases your happiness.

Before coming to this class I was lonely for some where to go to have fun, I come here and I have new friends who are all great. I particularly like the games she has taught us and the stories we heard together. I wish the class would never end. I love coming here It gives me something to look forward to till the next class. Please don't stop this class. I enjoy everything here and everyone. There is a variety.

It's fun to express yourself. I really look forward to this.

Increased access to programs and services

Community members interviewed for the evaluation did not talk about increased access to programs and services as being an outcome for them. Nevertheless, the efforts of agencies in this regard and the comments of agency staff strongly suggest that access has been enhanced for community members. Many of the initiatives of agencies in revising materials, changing practice, and creating literacy friendly environments have been undertaken in an effort to decrease barriers to access for community members with literacy challenges.

We hope that we are more accessible to families now – that they can pick up the handbook and get what they need from it. It makes life easier for families. They can be part of the program, participating more in their child's learning. It means they can talk to their children about daily events.

Some people have commented on how nice it is that information has been simplified – not as much paper.

Elements that make a difference for community members

Conversations with community participants were oriented not only to learning about outcomes but also to learning about the key elements of the program

that contribute to the outcomes. For participants in the literacy learning programs, this was the only opportunity they had had in their community to be involved in literacy programs and there was excitement that such programs had become available to them.

Responses point to the importance of a small group format in a familiar agency setting in creating a positive learning environment. Participants noted that they felt welcome in the groups and, in some cases had been explicitly invited to attend. The fact that the classes were offered in an accessible and familiar location encouraged participation. Several respondents made it clear that if classes had been offered downtown, they would not have attended because of the distance, the difficulty in getting there, or their discomfort with the inner city.

Perhaps the most important element of the literacy learning groups is the learning climate created by the program facilitator. Respondents describe facilitators as kind, patient, understanding, and always willing to explain things. They found the facilitators easy to connect with on a personal level. This was often in contrast with earlier learning experiences in which teachers had been remote. In particular, participants commented on being able to talk (or write) freely, knowing that they wouldn't be judged. Support and positive feedback from facilitators and other participants boosted self esteem and made progress more visible. The small group format worked well for people who experienced it as more relaxing than a one-on-one situation. The opportunity to learn in a welcoming environment that fostered friendship and offered fun and relaxation obviously made a significant difference to participants. Being part of a group also offered validation to some participants in that they could talk with others about their experiences knowing that "we are in the same boat".

In an effort to decrease barriers to access, the project ensured that there would be no costs for people who wanted to join the literacy learning groups. This was important to many participants who identified the absence of fees and the availability of free bus tickets as factors that enabled them to attend. Also noted as a key factor was the availability of child care that children enjoyed and parents could trust.

In a small group like this, you can get more out of it.

(Animator) invited me to come. I didn't know what it would be like but it's been really good. I feel like I'm welcome here.

There aren't any other opportunities to do this (creative writing).

You can express yourself freely without condemnation.

I can express myself without being judged. It's nice to know that others are in the same boat as you.

Community members have expressed real gratitude that there's something in the community—they don't have to go downtown. There was excitement/buzz around the Abbottsfield space. The launch of Ken's book was important.

Outcomes of the Widening Access project for agencies and organizations

Enhanced awareness and understanding of literacies

Interviews with staff of community agencies and organizations offered evidence of greatly enhanced awareness and understanding of literacy and how it is relevant to the work of the agencies and the lives of their participants. Respondents described the impact of the project as “huge” or “dramatic” in terms of drawing attention to the ways in which literacy impinges on peoples’ lives and well being. The awareness created by the project has been “eye opening” and has served to motivate agencies and individuals to move forward with change.

In the eyes of many respondents, The Widening Access project has successfully brought community agencies and organizations together and generated an enthusiasm for addressing literacy issues that is spreading in the community. Moreover, it has fostered critical thinking and changed the ways in which people view their roles in relation to the community and their clients. Indeed, many of the people involved in this project indicate that they have become strong advocates for literacy. They have understood the importance of literacy and are “passionate” about wanting to do something about it.

Learning about the impacts of low literacy on the lives of their clients has been profound for many participants, particularly as regards the connection between literacy and such social indicators as poverty, unemployment, underemployment and ill health. For some respondents, a deeper understanding about the central role that literacy plays in peoples’ lives has prompted them to reframe the benefits of literacy in terms of early intervention and health promotion/prevention outcomes. From this point of view, access to literacy “empowers people and improves their long-term perspectives”.

It’s a health promotion effort. If we can find ways to reduce peoples’ anxiety and foster better relationships with them, we support their mental health. It’s why we’re all here – to support people and help them to help themselves. Looking at the current economic situation, to get work, people will have to have education. If we’re aware and responding, we cannot meet this need. People disadvantaged in terms of literacy are going to fall way behind and this will be very costly for society. We have a moral obligation to put resources into our people— it will have such a huge impact on their lives.

Another impact related to awareness is an increased consciousness on the part of agency staff of how inaccessible they may be to clients due to the literacy barriers that face so many community members. Specifically, they point to their growing awareness of the barriers created when print materials are unclear or inaccessible. They recognize that they have not been fully inclusive of clients because clients cannot become engaged “if they don’t understand what we do”. What has emerged from this realization is an appreciation of the importance of relationships between agency/program staff and clients that can be fostered only when barriers are identified and addressed. There is clearly a growing mindfulness of the importance of clear

communication and of literacy friendliness in reducing fear and opening opportunities for more meaningful relationships with clients.

When we're working with families, there's usually another issue that takes the lead. But now we're seeing that literacy is a more major issue for families than we thought.

It has become a priority for us and we're motivated to move forward with it knowing that change is possible and powerful.

The project has absolutely built an awareness in this area.

It's very exciting to know how we can change and what impact that can have. It's clear that there is a very important connection between literacy and poverty levels.

We had a mini-workshop and it was a real eye-opener. I was stunned to realize how inaccessible we are to our clients.

Our role is to engage citizens. The more we can work with tools to do that, the better.

It makes it so clear that literacy is basic to functioning in our culture. There is real value when we try to see where they're coming from, see through their eyes.

It has impacted the way I do my work, see the world, see and try to support other people.

It has broadened my perspective and changed my thinking about other aspects of practice.

Awareness makes them more tolerant of participants and their behaviours (making excuses not to do things in cooking class because they couldn't read recipes).

We really believe in this project. It's made us much more self aware around literacy.

When we're working with families, there's usually another issue that takes the lead. But now we're seeing that literacy is a more major issue for families than we thought.

The project resonates in a whole different light for me after the workshop. It's been exciting to think about these things and how we can support our participants.

In the material for the "Mommie and Me" group we were giving the wrong impression of the group. It made it sound different than what it was. So we've worked on changing this.

Change in practice and policy relating to literacy

Clearly, the project has led to greatly increased understanding of literacy issues, of the benefits of increased literacy, and of the barriers faced by community members in accessing services. In addition, agencies and organizations have taken steps to integrate their learning and insights into

practice and policy. The changes they have made have been numerous and diverse, ranging from changing physical environments to developing literacy policies.

Consultations with project staff have afforded opportunities for agencies to create more literacy friendly environments. Several agencies have changed physical space, décor, signs, posters, and brochure displays to be more welcoming, comfortable, simple, and literacy friendly. Many agencies have focused on clear print, forming committees to make changes to program materials including:

- registration packages
- brochures and pamphlets
- surveys for parents
- handbooks
- newsletters

Some agencies have significantly decreased the amount of paper they hand out to clients, preferring to use posters or verbal information.

As we began to recognize literacy issues, we've changed the way we work with parents in our program; we're going more toward oral communication.

The work done with agencies around clear print created energy and excitement about what could be changed to make print materials more inviting and readable for participants.

At least two agencies have developed policies relating to clear print materials. Candora Society is an example of an agency that has integrated a commitment to clear print into its policy manual and developed a process for ensuring that policies are followed. Using templates developed with the help of The Widening Access project staff, a team of staff members reviews all materials from the perspective of clear print guidelines. The director of another agency commented that:

We took our understanding and knowledge of the project and we've become active participants. We've re-written our registration package, surveys for clients, logic model and anything that goes to parents. We're very careful with anything that goes to parents, to make sure that it inclusive and doesn't scare people. If people struggle with literacy, they don't have a clue about what we do. It's scary and it decreases registration in our program. We're trying to change all that.

A workshop for school personnel on clear print in school newsletters prompted several schools to make changes to their newsletters. They have changed the readability level to make the content more accessible to parents, shifted from passive to active voice, decreased the number of pages, changed formatting and layout, and generally simplified their newsletters.

Now, our newsletter is totally different from what it was. It has a different layout and we use different language. There are no fillers, just the necessary information.

Another common practice that has developed in agencies is to offer help to clients in filling out forms required by government departments, schools, and other organizations. This practice has emerged from an increased awareness of how difficult it is for community members, especially those with low literacy levels or with other first languages to understand what is being asked and to write responses. Helping people to fill out forms also strengthens relationships with them. One respondent related a story of being with a woman who was struggling to fill out a form because she was having difficulty understanding the questions. This staff member commented that *“from that day on, I read all the questions to every woman so that we can have the opportunity for conversation and relationship”*.

One agency staff member drew attention to the fact that some agency employees may themselves have low literacy levels. In her agency, several staff members have attended the reading and writing classes and, as a result, have improved their literacy skills.

People hired from community may have low literacy levels. The project has enhanced their abilities through the reading and writing programs. They are much more open now – more willing to try writing reports.

Another agency has been inspired by the project to develop a new pilot project creating a financial literacy group for their clients (Future Save). Others have shared their materials and ideas with other organizations, locally and across Canada. In addition, the project has generated increased awareness of literacy resources and of where to refer people for help and support with literacy. In some cases, literacy has been integrated into agency programs.

We’re more aware of resources – where to refer people for literacy learning. We’re doing it with more thought and intention.

Staff involved in making the changes see the value of what we are doing and are proud of it. Those who took the workshops through the project are using their new skills in developing materials to give to parents.

We’ve integrated a literacy piece into our school programming. Through a journaling process we will be able to help with literacy as well as deal with people’s issues.

I believe that changing our posters had increased attendance in our groups.

Reduction/Elimination of barriers to access

The obvious first step in eliminating literacy related barriers is to gain a clear understanding of the nature and sources of those barriers. There is evidence that the agencies and organizations involved in the project are significantly more aware of the circumstances that serve as barriers for community members. Discussions in network meetings and through evaluation interviews reflect widespread recognition that access is hampered by unclear print materials and literacy “unfriendly” environments. As discussed in more detail below, numerous efforts have been made by agencies to reduce these

barriers. In addition, agency and organization staff have identified other barriers to literacy learning such as lack of child care, lack of transportation, attitudes of partners toward learning, previous experiences, and fear.

Sometimes, their partners don't want them to expand their skills so they prevent their attendance at classes.

Transportation is a big barrier – distance and costs.

Some people have a previous history of bad experiences in school. There are various literacy levels that we are not aware of and there may be a bit of fear.

Strengthened relationships among community agencies/Programs and between these agencies and community residents

The Widening Access project has had an impact on the whole community in terms of collaboration and relationship building. Closer connections have developed between agencies with similar populations and they know more about what others are doing. In some cases, referrals to other agencies have resulted from these closer links.

Having Susan here is a godsend because she can make the connections and we can piggyback on them. She shares material about the project and other organizations get involved.

It's helped us to connect with other organizations who work with the same population.

In recent months, the Literacy Network has become a vehicle for strengthening relationships as agencies and organizations share their enthusiasm for the literacy work, examples of what they are doing in their programs, resources, and mutual support. Through the network, staff members from different agencies have worked together on initiatives to enhance literacy in the community including a workshop on "Creating Literacy Friendly Environments" and a project to explore a designation for agencies as literacy friendly environments. There is evidence from comments offered in a recent network meeting that members see the group as a means of further strengthening connections through sharing of resources, advice, examples, and projects.

Similarly, the project has fostered a deeper appreciation of the importance of relationships with clients. Many of the literacy efforts undertaken by agencies are based on the intention of creating more meaningful relationships and experiences for service users.

Sustainability of outcomes and processes

Sustainability of a community development intervention depends on several conditions being in place. First it must be perceived as being valuable to the community and in particular, to the population it targets. Second, it requires a commitment from agencies and organizations to carry it forward. Finally, it needs ongoing resources to ensure that it remains viable.

In the case of The Widening Access project, there is no doubt that community members as well as agency and organization staff believe the work of the project to be relevant and valuable. Without exception, people interviewed for the evaluation named benefits of the project. Staff of agencies and organizations spoke to the critical importance of the Widening Access project not only for themselves but also for the community members who use their services. In most cases, they also expressed great enthusiasm and excitement about what the project had been able to achieve and about its potential in the future.

The emergence of the Literacy Network offers evidence of the commitment in the community to carrying on the work of The Widening Access project . Network members and others are convinced of the importance of literacy efforts in their community and have chosen to be involved in sustaining the work begun by the project. It is important to remember that the Literacy Network emerged from a grassroots effort by agencies and organizations to ensure the continuation of project efforts. In this respect, network members and others in participating agencies can be seen as change agents.

There is definitely a commitment to it in the community. I hear a lot of people talking about it. The community development aspect of it is what I'd hate to see lost. It's the impetus for a lot of other projects.

People in this community are behind it and excited about it. They want to build connections with the people who use their agencies. When I go to the network meetings, there's always a willingness to be involved.

The big impetus for the network came from the community. It was not imposed.

There was a big meeting of people who had participated in the project. Questions were raised about the value and the future of the project. When we talked about whether it was valuable, I heard a resounding "yes."

The remaining question about sustainability of the project work relates to resources. Among agency and organization staff, there is essential agreement that sustainability requires ongoing staffing. They point to the need for someone to oversee the literacy work in the community and to provide the expertise that is not otherwise available in the community. This of course requires that funding be provided on an ongoing basis at least until the work of literacy is more firmly integrated into the community and the expertise is developed in community agencies.⁶

There needs to be someone to take it on, to spearhead it: someone like Susan or Michael. If not, I think it will fall by the wayside and it would be very sad to lose that.

⁶ The Learning Centre Literacy Association made a commitment to maintain the work of the project during 2009, and is taking the lead in applying for funding to sustain the work beyond that time.

Sustainability won't work without ongoing funding. It should be constant.

We're thrilled to be given a tool that's so accessible and can be used every day in our jobs. But, we don't have the expertise to train our colleagues. We need people like Michael and Susan to continue to offer their expertise.

It's really needed and should be continued. The position needs to be there.

We need to embed it in organizations/programs.

Having someone from here involved in the network helps to keep it in the forefront and helps staff to see it as valuable. It can only strengthen what we do.

Elements that make a difference for agencies and organizations

It is evidence that The Widening Access project made a difference for agencies and organizations simply by virtue of its presence in the community. By drawing attention to the critical importance of literacy to peoples' lives and well being, the project created and fostered new ways of thinking about literacy and prompted agencies to consider its relevance to their own programs.

The workshops that were offered through the project were highly praised by participants as contributing to a deeper understanding of literacy issues and how they could address these in their work. The opportunity to suggest workshop topics meant that the workshops were particularly relevant to the needs and interests of community agency and organization staff. Specifically, the use of examples, the opportunity to analyze and revise material, the availability of resources, and small group interaction were elements of the workshops that participants found most helpful. They also noted that workshop facilitators were invariably knowledgeable and responsive, had excellent presentation skills, and were always attentive to their questions and concerns.

The other major component of the project, providing individual consultations to agency staff, was also viewed as key to learning and change. The opportunity to work collaboratively with project staff, to learn by doing, and to work with their own program materials fostered change.

A recurring theme in interviews with agency and organization staff was the critical importance of the work done by project staff, particularly by the Project Animator (Susan) and Literacies Consultant (Michael), in moving the project forward. Respondents were very mindful of the unlimited help, encouragement and support they received from project staff. They noted that Susan and Michael were always accessible and willing to work with them to develop and implement creative ideas for change.

The help and support offered by project staff was always responsive to individual needs and circumstances, based on discussions about agency needs, strengths, and realities. Respondents noted that having Susan and Michael available to review materials, offer ongoing feedback, and continue to be involved in nurturing their efforts made a significant difference to them.

The gentleness and sensitivity with which project staff offered suggestions allayed any concerns that current materials would be criticized.

They brought excellent ideas and worked closely with our staff to implement them.

The approach of the program and the individuals is very powerful.

We're happy with the support we got. They were quite open and gentle with us and respectful of ownership of the materials.

Staff were willing to offer whatever we needed. They tailored it to each organization.

Learning about challenges

This section focuses on naming and reflecting on the challenges that have emerged in The Widening Access project and on how they have been manifested in the project. It also sheds light on the ways in which challenges have been addressed in the project.

The challenge of integrating literacies

A concern identified by program staff and confirmed through the evaluation relates to the challenge of integrating literacies into programs such that they become part of the everyday work of the agency. Because the clear print component of the project is more concrete and understandable, agencies have emphasized this element of literacy in their endeavors. The notion of integrating literacies is, on the other hand, more abstract, difficult to envision, and challenging to implement. While some progress has been made toward integrating literacies into programming, there is a need for more understanding of this piece and more emphasis on how it can be done.

The clear language piece is conceptually easier, more concrete. Integrating literacies is more abstract and needs to become a practice. The concept is very important but has never been very clear so this piece has not been done so much. There are no templates. (Project staff)

Clear writing is the one people grabbed onto, especially when we combined it with using computers and the readability tool. (Project staff)

The integrating literacies piece hasn't been a big success. We developed materials on integrating literacies but it didn't filter down to the people who develop the programs and we didn't get to sit in on any of the programs. (Project staff)

The challenge of creating agency "buy in"

If agencies and organizations are to become more literacy friendly, and to strengthen their capacity to integrate literacies into their work, a level of commitment or "buy in" is essential. Over the course of the project it became clear that such buy-in requires the engagement of management as well as a majority of staff members. In some cases, agency management was not

invested in the process and the staff members who were trying to carry literacy efforts forward were struggling with the challenges of creating change. Where management was involved, it was far easier to develop literacy friendly practices and even to develop literacy policies. For one agency, the fact that the receptionist was “on board” with creating a literacy friendly environment was a key factor in their efforts to change. In order to increase buy in at management levels, the Literacy Network has plans to invite agency directors to an upcoming meeting. They will also be hosting a series of workshops for agency receptionists to better equip them in their important role in relation to creating literacy friendly environments.

We're trying to get the whole agency to buy in. What makes a big difference is that our receptionist is very on board. She encourages staff to use clear print.

It is more difficult in a smaller community agency. If you lose key people, it can fall apart. In bigger organizations, it becomes more systemic. Still, buy-in has to come from the top down.

If you don't get the management to buy in, it doesn't happen. Not all managers have done front-line work and so they don't necessarily understand what literacy means. If it comes from the ED down, there is more authority.

It's still difficult to get senior staff on board. In some agencies, we have to dabble. It depends on front line staff to take it forward. (Project staff)

The challenge of agency staff turnover

Agency staff turnover proved to be a challenge in the project. In small agencies with insecure funding, it is difficult to ensure continuity of staff and consequently, challenging to integrate changes in practice. The importance of literacy in peoples' lives and the need to be attentive to literacy in agency practice, do not stay in the foreground when there are frequent changes in staff.

Staff turnover is a huge thing and a constant challenge. In one of our main programs, not a single person still there from when the project started. We need to have a presence there to remind us all the time – bring it to the forefront otherwise we'll lose it.

Conclusions and implications

The purpose of this evaluation inquiry was to learn about what difference the Widening Access project has made for community members and agencies/organizations in northeast Edmonton. It also sought to identify the elements of the project that made a difference and to assess the effectiveness of this community development model in enhancing literacy. The voices of the individuals who participated in the evaluation offer rich and meaningful learning about the experience and outcomes of being involved in the project.

Evaluative learning clearly demonstrates the many successes of The Widening Access project. For community members with literacy challenges, the project offered opportunities to access literacy learning that had not previously been

available. Participation in intentional learning enhanced their literacy skills, contributed to increased confidence and self-esteem, fostered relationships and reduced isolation.

Agencies and organizations in the community have reaped many benefits from the project. Staff members who participated in the evaluation spoke of the dramatic change the project has made in their awareness and understanding of literacy and its value in peoples' lives. Enhanced understanding has been translated into concrete change in terms of practice and policies. In particular, many agencies and organizations have taken steps to reduce or eliminate barriers faced by clients to accessing services.

Evaluative learning points to the conclusion that the Widening Access project has had important positive impacts on literacy in northeast Edmonton and that it has gone a long way toward filling the gap that existed before the project. Nevertheless, there is a shared understanding among community agencies that the work of the project is far from finished. Not only is there much more to be done in addressing literacy concerns in the northeast part of the city, it is also critical to preserve what has been established to date. As noted above, there are worries that, without ongoing resources and efforts, the work done by the project will be lost. The most hopeful development in the project in this respect is the emergence of a grassroots network of people and agencies committed to carrying the work of the project forward.

Moving forward entails supporting the network in its efforts and securing funding for ongoing literacy initiatives. It also means:

- extending intentional literacy learning opportunities to more community members
- continuing efforts toward enhancing awareness of literacy and its value
- working more closely with community agencies, schools and other organizations to encourage and support changes in practice and policy relative to literacy
- promoting understanding of the concept of "literacies" as different from the more limited notion of "literacy"
- finding ways to incorporate a "literacies way of thinking" in agencies and organizations that benefits from the support of management as well as front line workers
- finding ways to enhance understanding and practice of integrating literacies into the everyday work of agencies/organizations.

Little is known at this point about agencies and organizations that did not participate in the project. In addition, some agencies showed interest in the project early on but did not take up opportunities to become involved. There is a need to understand why agencies choose not to participate and to learn what they would need to make participation meaningful and valuable.

The success of the Widening Access project in meeting its goals and in contributing to substantial change in the community demonstrates the value of the process by which the project was introduced to and implemented in the community. The use of a community development approach may have extended the time and effort required to get the project off the ground. Yet

ultimately, the commitment of agencies and organizations in the community is one of the key strengths of the project. The shifting consciousness of agencies and organizations as regards their role in literacy is reflected in the comment of an agency staff member who said:

The project reframed our thinking. Now we understand that literacy is our business.