

Building Capacity for Literacy Friendly Communities

by **Kathy Day, Audrey Gardner, Janet Pringle, Janet Quinn** and **Rebecca Still**

A 'literacy walkabout' was a real eye-opener for staff at the Career Development offices in Pincher Creek / Crowsnest Pass. Local literacy 'specialists' Janet Quinn and Kathy Day suggested that staff review written information and direction signs throughout the building. They asked how readable the signs were for potential clients. The staff realized changes needed to be made. The Career Centre Librarian decided to adjust how jobs were posted. She enlarged the advertisements by 140% and colour coded them to indicate their age—for example, the current week's ads on yellow, the previous week's on pink, and those two weeks old on blue. Important telephone numbers were pulled out of long lists and placed immediately above telephones, in large print. The Centre Librarian reported that clients could now find job postings and telephone numbers easily. The changes also made her job easier.

This is just one of the many stories from the Connecting Literacy to Community project. The goal of the three-and-a-half-year project was to create communities that not only realized the need for, but also were committed to, providing a 'literacy friendly' environment for everyone in the community. The project was a partnership between Bow Valley College and six urban and rural communities in Alberta. Funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Alberta Community Initiatives program, the project hired literacy specialists in each community. Each worked with local organizations, services and businesses to provide information on adult literacy, facilitate workshops on literacy awareness and plain language, conduct literacy audits, and organize community events and initiatives for adult literacy.

Becoming literacy specialists

The role of literacy specialist combined community development and capacity building approaches. This role was new to everyone in the project. Becoming a literacy specialist was not easy as we were learning how to do it while we were doing it. A big 'aha' for us as a

team came when we talked about how this work demanded us to shift our own perceptions and assumptions about adult literacy and our communities.

Learning about literacy as social practice (Hamilton) offered a way for us to make this shift. Literacy as social practice explores how people use literacy (text, oral, image) in their everyday lives to get things done. Seeing literacy through this lens helped us convey to community organizations how literacy relates to every part of daily living; it became central to our work as literacy specialists. Initiating change in broad and diverse ways in our communities required us to continually learn about how to build community capacity. We found that related concepts and approaches, such as Appreciative Inquiry (Hammond and Hall), Social Marketing (Smith and Peavey), diversity and inclusion, and organizational and social change, helped fill in the puzzle of what we were trying to do: make our communities more compassionate and accessible for people who struggle with reading, writing and numeracy.

Finding the right people

To successfully build capacity it is necessary to find people in the community who willingly respond to the need for change, starting with their own practices. We learned that as literacy specialists, we were facilitators of the change process—which meant we found and supported individuals in our communities who readily took on leadership roles for literacy. We did this through guiding, observing, encouraging, and then withdrawing when ownership of change shifted from us to others in the community. Our role in effecting change was to share and give away our tools and knowledge about how to make community services more accessible for adults who struggle with reading and writing.

"Long ago the community of Pincher Creek," says Kathy, "through its Friends of Literacy Society, set the goal of having the community 'value literacy.' However, the projects were always initiated by myself

or by other literacy workers. I welcome turning this over to the community. The difference is that the ownership for valuing literacy rests now within community institutions. This happened because of staff training, document changes and changes in practice, as well as ongoing in-servicing in literacy needs. The local literacy worker can now be seen as a resource, not always the initiator."

Eventually, through trial and error, we were able to articulate how literacy relates to every aspect of community life. More importantly, service providers in community organizations were able to see that addressing adult literacy in their workplace was valuable. Change was happening, capacity was building!

Challenges

Along with the wonderful positive changes, we also experienced a number of challenges in our role as literacy specialists. Some organizations were not interested in looking at their organization through the lens of literacy. In other cases, we felt we hadn't reached out successfully to a group or agency, and knew we needed to learn more about how to do community capacity-building work. However, we learned that the process of change takes time, and needs to move at the pace of the organization. Organizations took responsibility and ownership when they had the time and desire to make change. Sometimes this meant service providers and volunteers needed to see that they already had some capacity in place before they could consider building more capacity.

Janet Quinn experienced challenges with timing and pacing. When she first joined the project, she was full of ideas and eager to get out in the community to offer workshops and educational opportunities. "I found that local agencies were interested in literacy, but when it came time to actually schedule a workshop, there just didn't seem to be the same commitment. I spent a lot of time that first year just talking to individuals about literacy and plain language." Whenever possible she talked about literacy, offered ideas and encouraged plain language practices. Janet often felt frustrated that she wasn't making a difference. As time went on, however, agencies and individuals began to contact her for more information, and to ask for her support in revising their written work. "It seemed as if the ideas had to sit and gel for a while before being taken to the next level," says Janet.

Near the end of the project, Janet conducted a workshop with a local group that fully embraced plain language practices. They rewrote several advertising pamphlets during the session, taking away many ideas that they were eager to incorporate into their work.

The Connecting Literacy to Community Project

developed a handbook and four reports, which are available on NALD.

The handbook is titled *Connecting Literacy to Community—Building Community Capacity: Focus on Adult Literacy*

Two reports focus on what we learned about literacy specialists: *Connecting Literacy to Community—Literacy Specialists: Prior Knowledge and Experience* and *Connecting Literacy to Community—Literacy Specialists: Competencies and Practices*

The third report reviews how ten community agencies set out to identify and remove barriers to those with low literacy:

Connecting Literacy to Community—Building Community Capacity: Literacy Audits and Strategic Planning

All four booklets can be found at: www.nald.ca/fulltext/search/search_results.asp For more information about the project, contact Audrey Gardner at agardner@bowvalleycollege.ca or call 403-410-1502.

"My role as facilitator was evident," Janet comments. "The participants accepted the responsibility for making their organization literacy friendly, and I was able to provide information, tools and guidance. Patience and perseverance was key to the process."

Discoveries

Over the course of the project we made a few discoveries. "I was amazed and thrilled to find so many small workplaces in Calgary providing health-related information and support," recalls Janet Pringle. "People were dedicated to their cause and really committed to the work they did. Most staff were very aware of the need to serve lower-literacy clients and were very pleased to be given some tools to use. It was most inspiring."

Janet further reflected on the growth of the plain language movement over the past ten years. When she began her work, it was a very specialized corner of the literacy field. Now it is more mainstream. "This project has contributed to that acceptance, by spreading information throughout a number of communities and organizations where literacy has not been the primary focus," says Janet. "Previously, many organizations were too busy to realize that plain language should be addressed. Now, it seems, many understand that literacy has to be integrated into their plans and practices if their work is to succeed."

The ripple effect

"The one thing that amazed me the most about this project was the ripple effect," says Rebecca Still. "I had a

stimulating literacy discussion with an individual, which increased her understanding about literacy. I thought that was the end of it, but months later the individual had passed on her knowledge to others. This led to major changes in a business and plain language learning for a group of college students. It was truly amazing to see others take ownership and then spread the word. I called them literacy champions."

"In my experience," Janet Quinn comments, "this snowball, or ripple effect means that literacy friendly practices are happening all over the community. Long after the project has ended, our work and educational efforts are still growing and spreading. I had so much to learn about this approach when the project began. As time went on I saw that some agencies fully embraced the concepts of literacy and plain language and they began to incorporate change into their agency. Others were just beginning to realize the relevance of literacy to their organization, and started with baby steps. As literacy advocates, we can create awareness and offer solutions at a variety of levels within our communities."

Literacy, community development and research

The project also impacted us professionally and personally in unforeseen ways. "The whole experience as a literacy specialist has been a learning curve for me," says Rebecca. "I knew a lot about literacy but next to nothing about community development or even the concept of community capacity building. Now I am beginning to see the connection. I provide information and raise awareness, and the community makes the changes. Even though the project is over I find myself continuing to raise awareness about literacy and plain language. I don't think I will ever stop being a literacy specialist."

"Doing literacy specialist work is similar to doing research," continues Rebecca. "Many times the process was messy and it was hard to see where we were going with our work. I had learned through doing research to 'trust the process.' This became my mantra. Whenever I got discouraged or felt I wasn't moving the project forward I would remind myself to 'trust the process.' After a while I would see the change happening in an organization and I would get a vision of our work."

Training others

A major outcome of the project was development of a training project for literacy coordinators. This project, *Building Community Capacity: Focus on Literacy*, trained 13 literacy practitioners, most of whom were coordinators of volunteer-tutor adult

literacy programs, to take on the role of literacy specialists in their community. "It was so exciting to know that people were beginning to think about and take action for literacy like they had never done before!" says Audrey Gardner.

"Facilitating the training project helped me step back, reflect on and inquire about what we were doing," states Audrey. "A clearer picture of this type of literacy work began to emerge: doing community capacity building for literacy is like doing research-in-practice. We eagerly researched (literature, each other's wisdom and experience) to deepen our knowledge of literacies. We tried new things in our practice and reflected on what we were doing and how we could make it better. We valued our communities and enhanced our ability to listen and learn. After nearly four years of thinking, acting (sleeping and dreaming!) about literacies as part of everyday living in our diverse communities, I am convinced that a research-in-practice framework and a community capacity building approach through the lens of literacy as social practice is one of the most effective ways to broaden and deepen our work in adult (and all) literacies."

Although our formal role as literacy specialists has come to an end, it is encouraging to know that the communities we worked with continue to make changes. We will also continue to do our part to spread the word about literacy friendly practices and to build literacy friendly communities. ■

Audrey Gardner has a strong background in community development. She was with the project from the beginning and focused her literacy work in three urban communities in Calgary. In the last year and a half Audrey also took on the role of project manager. **Rebecca Still**, also with the project from the beginning, has a strong adult literacy background and worked in the rural communities of Olds, Didsbury, Sundre, Stony Plain and Spruce Grove. **Kathy Day** joined the project in the last year and a half and worked in the small rural community of Pincher Creek and neighbouring Piikani First Nations Community. Kathy has extensive experience in family and adult literacy. **Janet Pringle** has many years of experience in writing and editing plain language materials. She joined the project in the last year and a half and focused on the health sector in Calgary. **Janet Quinn** has a strong educational and community service background. She joined the project in the last year and a half and worked in the Crownsnest Pass.

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