
Literacy Service

at Regina Public Library

Saskatchewan has a fine history of women's contributions to libraries and learning. Our pioneer women laid the foundations of an organization dedicated to fulfillment of the adult education needs of prairie women. Early settlement patterns found women on isolated farms instead of villages, longing for companionship and co-operative effort. Early this century, Saskatchewan women formed a network of Homemaker's Clubs, which were designed to meet the adult education needs of Saskatchewan women.

An early activity of the Clubs was the establishment of permanent and travelling libraries. The average rural prairie woman needed to develop skills for self-sufficiency, given the economic hardship and geographic isolation she faced. The information dissemination and mental stimulation provided by Club activities and libraries met a fundamental need.

As the Clubs matured and Saskatchewan grew, their women recognized the need for improved library service. As early as the late '30s, Clubs' conventions passed resolutions calling for province-wide library service much as we enjoy today. In the '40s, Homemakers lobbied their ratepayers' meetings to support regional and provincial library development. As these library organizations grew, Homemakers' women participated freely as Board members and library volunteers.

Regina women today continue this tradition with their active participation in our public library literacy program. Half of our learners are women, and many more than half of our tutors are women.

The Regina Public Library's literacy program was started in 1973, with the opening of the Learning Center, at the initiation of Ronald Yeo, Chief Librarian. The program began with staff working with adults in small group settings. Staff and learners eventually articulated a need for attention to individualized learning needs and styles. The recognition of this need and a steady rise in demand prompted the Library to investigate options for revising the program.

In 1977, the Library joined the literacy volunteers movement. Since then, the Library has regularly recruited and trained volunteer tutors, recruited learners and matched them with tutors, and provided ongoing follow-up. For those learners who choose to get their high school equivalency, the Learning Center offers programs to assist in preparation for high school equivalency examinations.

The Library's literacy program presently includes three essential characteristics: it is volunteer-based, learner-centered, and offers one-to-one tutoring. Group sessions are offered for those who wish to attend.

The Library asks for a few basic qualifications from its volunteer tutors. We expect them to have literacy competence, and the willingness and commitment to help someone else learn to read. The vast majority of our volunteers are women, which is consistent with the commitment to helping others that women are known to exemplify. The profile of our women tutors is an eclectic one, representing a variety of economic and occupational backgrounds.

The Library provides all prospective tutors with a one to one-and-a-half hour orientation in which the literacy issue, the tutoring process, and library support are presented. The tutor-training workshop lasts fourteen hours and is usually offered in seven two-hour sessions. A two-hour follow-up session is offered after tutors have had six to eight weeks of tutoring experience. Monthly tutor meetings are held to share information on successful tutoring strategies and to provide continuing education.

The training workshops also explain the nature of the tutoring relationship and represent a number of tutoring techniques. It is repeatedly stressed that the tutorial relationship is a partnership. The tutor is not asked to control or direct the learner, but is expected to coach and guide in order to help the learner achieve her goals. We emphasize that it is essential that a tutor treat the learner in a way that is positive, encouraging and patient.

The cornerstone of our tutoring technique is the "experience

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story." Simply described, the learner tells a story from her own experience, which the tutor records. This story then becomes a text for a tutoring session. This method encourages self-expression in women whose low level of literacy has often relegated them to silence or passivity. It affirms the validity of their life experience and provides a familiar context for learning.

The training also explains how to plan tutoring sessions, and how to help the learner set achievable goals. It is quite common for our learners to have limited goals, given the low self-esteem with which many arrive in our literacy program. Tutors are advised to encourage learners to recognize their potential and advance beyond their initial goals once they have been achieved. On the other hand, if a learner's goals are so ambitious as to be unrealizable within the time frame, tutors are advised to help organize the goals into achievable components. I think the goal-setting skills are especially important for the women in our program, since they often have not been exposed to the developmental potential of these skills. They are accustomed to filling their time with the needs of others, rather than organizing it for their own objectives.

Successful literacy tutoring is learner-centered. The tutoring process works with learners' own stories, or with their choice of material, and works toward their goals.

We discourage our program participants from expressing the negative descriptive labels used in statistical literacy measures. Statistical measures do not describe individuals, and our learners are individuals with their own histories and aspirations. We emphasize that our learners need improvements in their literacy skills largely because they have lacked the opportunity to learn, not because they lack intelligence.

The form for our learner-centered tutoring is a one-to-one process. One of the reasons for our choice of one-to-one is to concentrate on the individuals' needs in the learning process. Some of our learners also come to us from adult upgrading classes because they do not get sufficient attention to their needs in the classroom.

Another significant reason for one-to-one is that the large majority of our learners want us to honour their confi-

dentiality. Some don't want to acknowledge to others that they need help; others are in employment situations which might be jeopardized if their literacy needs were known.

The one-to-one process allows for flexibility and as much adaptability as suits the pair. The pair can meet in any location the participants choose. Many of our teams meet in library locations, but many also can choose a more private place.

We also offer several weekly group learning sessions. These are attended by learners in addition to regular tutoring sessions, and by learners who are waiting for a tutor.

June Waffle, who supervised our literacy program for nine years, confirms that most of the women learners preferred one-to-one tutoring when starting in the program. Herself a graduate of an adult learning process, June feels that the initial desire to protect confidentiality relates to the low esteem many women literacy students have. Before she became an active and assertive adult learner, June remembers feeling that she would have liked to be invisible. Many women literacy learners need to overcome silence and self-effacement as one of their learning barriers. Those women who overcome their need for confidentiality find support among the other learners in group sessions.

Finding tutors and learners for a literacy program involves the same strategies used in any successful library outreach program. We take advantage of mass market media for city-wide public awareness of our program, and we use targeting strategies to reach neighbourhoods and special groups.

In targeting, we rely heavily on personal contact. For example, we have attended many meetings of service agencies and community organizations to explain our program, and to ask for help in finding tutors and learners.

Most of our tutors come to see us because of our newspaper ads and the many recent articles and media features highlighting the literacy issue. Many are drawn by personal appeals from staff or friends.

Learners usually come to us by referral and word-of-mouth. The media exposure gives them a necessary awareness of us, but the personal encouragement of

friends and trusted people provides them with the courage to come forward.

Regina's Bridging Program for women was initiated by the local network of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women and is currently administered by the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology. This program attempts to meet the needs of women who require transitional support to identify and attain jobs and educational goals. The Library has tried to assist some of Bridging's learners as needed. We have also received the benefit of Bridging's job placement program, as several of their clients have worked in our literacy program.

In the last year, the Library has re-allocated resources to dramatically expand its literacy service. In the process, learners and tutors have responded to our appeals for additional help. Women have been especially active in forming committees to begin to participate more fully in the program's direction. Our committees have an exciting and unpredictable challenge ahead of them because literacy needs are growing and developing in a time of economic restraint. The women who have responded to the challenge to join our literacy drive, whether as learners or tutors, are continuing in the fine cooperative tradition of our prairie pioneer women.

Sources

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