



# Research Bulletin

## An Update on IL Canada's Literacy and Quality of Life Project

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## Literacy and IL: How They Work Together

By

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“Making a Connection: Disability, Literacy and Quality of Life” is a three-year national project in which we are researching skills development in the area of literacy and quality of life. Specifically, the project aims to identify, to measure and to document the link between the attainment of literacy skills and an improved quality of life for persons with disabilities. One of the key ways that we will achieve this goal is by following people with disabilities (consumers) over the course of their individual journeys, and we will collect and share their experiences, successes and challenges to learn what impact literacy and changes in literacy skills have on their daily lives.

This project uses a Participatory Action Research (PAR) model, i.e. this model actively involves people with disabilities in both project design and delivery. IL Canada employs the PAR approach because it is inclusive, and compatible with the independent living philosophy that underlies all that we do at the national and community level.

Begun in 2007, the project was originally set to end in June 2010. However, IL Canada was successful in requesting a project extension to accommodate a change in research teams, and “Making a Connection” now has a new end date of September 2010.

Five local IL Centre pilot sites are working with local literacy providers to give a forum to participants with disabilities who will define their own personalized literacy skills development goals. In the process, the pilot site Centres are also building their capacity on using a participatory action research (PAR) model and developing local partnerships.

The five sites are as follows:

- Cowichan Independent Living, Duncan, BC
- Vernon Independent Living, BC
- North Saskatchewan ILC, Saskatoon, SK
- Independent Living Resource Centre Thunder Bay, ON
- Independent Living Nova Scotia Association, Halifax, NS



(Graphic of a wheelchair user who is typing at home on his computer)

The academic partners and co-investigators for this project are Diane Driedger and Nancy Hansen; both are from the University of Manitoba. They are also women with disabilities who are familiar with the independent living philosophy and disability issues. Nancy is the Director of Disability Studies at the University of Manitoba and Diane is nearing completion of her Doctorate in Education, Language and Literacy.

The project has been progressing well and it has generated a lot of enthusiasm among the consumers, the Centres and the researchers. People with disabilities are definitely learning new skills in literacy. They take part in project design and delivery through regular interviews with the Centre literacy project facilitators who put their stories and experiences into reports which are then passed on to the researchers. At any one time there are around 50 consumers who are involved through the five sites; some stay a short while and leave, while others have been in the project since its beginning. Further, because the IL Centres are taking part in a PAR project, the coordinators at each site are also part of the Project Advisory Team along with Diane Driedger, Nancy Hansen, Susan Forster and Traci Walters at the IL Canada office. All of us are learning how to do community research together.

Literacy has been defined in many ways. Here are just two examples from the Ontario Literacy Coalition:

“Literacy is the ability to understand and employ information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

Literacy is about much more than just reading and writing — it is about how we communicate in society and how we prepare for the modern world. Supporting literacy means ensuring that people acquire the life skills and knowledge necessary to participate fully in their workplace, in their community, and in society. Literacy enables a person to exercise his or her right to participate in the workforce, in governance, to affect decision-making, and to make one's voice heard.”

Reflecting on these many definitions, we decided to use a plain language and straightforward way of thinking about literacy for this project.

Our definition of literacy from the outset was that literacy is not just about reading, writing and arithmetic; literacy is about “meaning-making”.

Here are some examples of “meaning-making”. Often there are systems or skills that an individual would like to learn to have a better quality of life. For instance, some consumers are tackling computer literacy and have come very far in terms of learning to surf the net, chat online and do word processing. Others have published their creative writing in local writers’ newsletters and in literacy providers’ newsletters. In Thunder Bay project participants were able to take advantage of the IL Centre’s comprehensive employment and employment-related supports offered through their CEO program; one participant was able to secure employment as one goal achieved in his literacy journey. For others, the goal can be educational; the project coordinator in Saskatoon was very proud to report that she had attended the General Education Diploma (GED) graduation of three participants.

An example from the pilot site in Duncan demonstrates how Making Connection participants developed their literacy skills through a healthy lifestyles activity. Several participants were involved in a group project assignment to answer such questions as: What is a healthy life? What are the components of a healthy life? How can someone on a limited income go about living a healthy life in the Cowichan Valley? The group was asked to research and decide together what a healthy life is. As a group, they were to present their findings to an audience of their choice and were instructed to use props, skits, flip charts, brochures, resources and implements that represent the components of a healthy life. While this activity came out of a healthy lifestyles project, participants were building literacy skills at the same time.

“Our groups may be experiential; information packed, may involve hands-on-learning, or may just be FUN!!! In this supported environment individuals are able to increase skills, acquire new skills and build on established skills. The resulting outcome is, that each participant will gain the self confidence needed to manage their personal challenges, overcome barriers and attain their own unique goals.” Cathie Campion, *Literacy Project Coordinator, Cowichan Independent Living*.

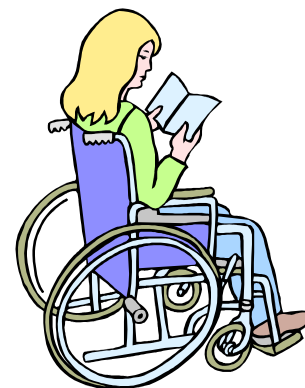
Here is another similar example: at the pilot site in Vernon, participants decided to prepare a fall feast for Thanksgiving. In order to do so, they read in order to choose two recipes for the meal, and in so doing increased their literacy skills. And at the Halifax site, the Centre has decided on a partnership between participants in Making a Connection and the Centre's own youth in transition project, Access to Community Education and Employment, because the two projects share common goals in the area of skills development for participants.

These examples serve to illustrate how well different projects, all based on an IL approach, can intertwine to build literacy skills. It will be fascinating to see, when the research is complete, if more examples of compatibility between literacy and other IL based programming and activities emerges as a common theme.

What is interesting to note is that literacy supports are being delivered in various ways at the pilot sites, and are being delivered differently depending on each consumer's goals. Each site has developed a partnership with one or more literacy providers in their community. These partnerships offer a range of options to consumers. For example, the literacy provider, SCORE, in Saskatoon provides most of the literacy instruction in areas such as reading, writing, math and life skills. In Thunder Bay, while the Centre has a literacy partner, these same skills are also taught by Centre staff members who are trained teachers. This occurs especially during the summer months when the literacy provider program winds down. In all the sites, there is a mix of in-house activities and partnerships with literacy providers. This has provided good opportunities to educate the literacy partners about the needs and goals of people with disabilities. These partnerships, for the most part, have been very fruitful and will continue after this project has concluded.

We are enthusiastic about the progress of the consumers, whom we, Nancy and Diane, have met over the past two years through our annual site visits. Their development as people and as citizens has been great to see!

(Graphic of a wheelchair user reading a book)



We plan to publish more editions of this bulletin, and we will present more stories and insights from pilot sites. In the final phase of this initiative, the participant stories and the combined findings of the research team will be captured in a practical guide on partnership building and in a research essay. These materials will be distributed to disability groups across Canada.

The Making a Connection: Disability, Literacy and Quality of Life project is funded by HRSDC through the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, formerly the National Literacy Secretariat. For more information on the project please contact Susan Forster at 613-563-2581 x 14 or email her at [membership@ilc-vac.ca](mailto:membership@ilc-vac.ca)



(Graphic of a person running bare-foot through a field trying to catch flying books with a butterfly net)

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