



Making a Connection:
Literacy, Disability and Quality of Life,
Participatory Action Research

Partnership Manual
(2010)

Conducted in partnership with:
University of Manitoba, Disability Studies Program

Introduction

Literacy is an important skill for people with disabilities in the 21st century. It has been documented extensively that people with disabilities in Canada have low literacy rates. According to the fact sheet on the www.literacy.ca website: “20% of adults with disabilities have less than a grade 9 education, as compared to 8.1% of adults without a disability who have less than a grade 9 education”. Further it states: “people with disabilities make up a disproportionate amount of the 48% of Canadian adults who function at the two lowest literacy levels” (Literacy and Disability Study Fact Sheet, 2004, p. 1). Low literacy rates affect people with disabilities’ access to educational and employment opportunities. Independent Living (IL) Canada recognizes, therefore, that having good literacy skills will play an ever more important role in our society now for people with disabilities than it may have done in the past.

From 2007 to 2010, IL Canada’s “Making a Connection: Literacy, Disability and Quality of Life Participatory Action Research” studied consumers in five Independent Living (IL) Centres across Canada. The consumers set out their own literacy plans. The project used a broad definition of literacy: meaning-making. Thus, the consumers needed tools and skills to make meaning in their environment and to create more independence and a better quality of life.

The five IL Centres were Cowichan Independent Living (Duncan) and Independent Living Vernon, both in British Columbia, North Saskatchewan ILC in Saskatoon, Independent Living Resource Centre Thunder Bay in Ontario and Independent Living Nova Scotia in Halifax.

The people who took part in this literacy study defined their own quality of life as well. It could mean learning to read the bus schedule, or obtaining computer literacy, or passing the GED to obtain high school equivalency—these are just a few examples of the kinds of literacy skills that the consumers pursued.

The five Centres formed partnerships with literacy providers in their communities during the project. These partnerships proved fruitful to the IL Centres, who were assisted in delivering literacy programming and fruitful to the literacy providers who gained knowledge of the needs of people with disabilities in the area of literacy.

This Partnership Manual is a compilation of ideas on how IL Centres can form and work together in partnerships with literacy providers. The following are some of the learnings along the way that the project would like to share with IL Centres across Canada.

A final note: the terms people with disabilities and consumers are used interchangeably, and mean the same. Also, as the formal name of this project is long, it is referred to throughout the manual simply as “Making a Connection”.

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1. Read through the literacy paper appendix of this manual, “Disability and Literacy: Making Connections”. How does this notion of literacy work in the context of the needs of your consumers?

The paper in the appendix discusses the literacy situation of people with disabilities in Canada. People with disabilities do not have high levels of literacy and this affects their quality of life. It limits their possibilities for employment and it also reduces opportunities to participate in all aspects of society on an equal footing with others.

The paper found that a review of current research revealed that literacy is more than just reading and writing, as it has traditionally been viewed. This is a central idea concerning people with disabilities and literacy. Consumers may need to read and to write, but more than that, they need to have the skills to participate more fully in activities of daily life.

Thus, it makes sense in the Independent Living (IL) context that literacy can be seen as “meaning-making”. In this project consumers undertook a number of literacy or “meaning-making” activities. Some learned how to use the computer, while others learned how to use the public transportation system. Some consumers learned how to prepare food, to cook and to shop on a limited budget. Others joined reading, writing and math literacy programmes and graduated with their high school equivalency (GED).

2. Find partners that have philosophies similar to the IL movement's thinking. Meet with different literacy groups to see if your philosophies of IL and of literacy match.

The Making a Connection literacy project showed the Centres how important it is to have the same kind of world view as the literacy organizations with whom they decided to form a partnership. All of the five pilot Centres found partners who shared similar values and ideas on providing supports and services to people with disabilities. In some cases, the IL philosophy seemed as if it had been adopted by the literacy providers! For example, the literacy providers who took part in Making a Connection chose literacy programmes that focused on what the individual wanted to learn, not on questions such as “how does this learner ‘fit into’ our existing structure”.

Sharing a common philosophy on working together and using literacy programmes that are consumer-driven were key factors in the success of these partnerships. That is, consumers (learners) decided what they wanted to learn and the literacy provider and the IL Centre facilitated that process.

3. In meetings with prospective partners emphasize that your IL Centre has a lot of expertise to bring into the partnership in the areas of disability and literacy. Also, affirm the skills that partners can bring to your consumers with their knowledge of literacy.

Explain to prospective partners that the IL philosophy has a lot in common with the goals of literacy providers; to provide skills for employment and better quality

of life for people, including people with disabilities. IL Centres have learned, by working with consumers, what kinds of teaching methods and approaches are most successful for those with a variety of different disabilities. For instance, an essential part of the IL philosophy is that consumers define their own goals. In addition, the IL Centres in the Making a Connection project also learned flexibility from working with consumers.

Always affirm the resources that the literacy provider brings to the partnership. This can mean recognizing that the literacy partners can offer your Centre tutoring and class resources that you may not have the expertise to provide or the staff to carry out at your Centre.

4. Be open to flexible partnerships.

Perhaps your consumers may go to the literacy partner for instruction, or your staff may take a training course from the literacy partner and tutor consumers at the IL Centre. Or, perhaps your consumers can access what they need at your Centre without working with the literacy provider. In the Making a Connection literacy project we found many successful models of working with literacy partners. For example, in Thunder Bay, the staff at the IL Centre took tutoring programmes with the partners and then delivered onsite literacy one-one-one tutoring in spelling, reading, writing, and math. The Centre happened to have several certified teachers on staff and they became the tutors. However, this does not stop anyone who is not a qualified teacher from learning about literacy tutoring. Often literacy groups use a large network of volunteers who are trained by them to tutor the learners.

On the other hand, at the North Saskatchewan IL Centre in Saskatoon, the majority of the consumers in the Making a Connection project attended classes at the literacy provider site.

Many of these consumers wanted to obtain their high school equivalency and the literacy provider, Saskatchewan Centre of Reading Excellence (SCORE), was able to deliver that programme

The IL Centre in Vernon BC used a combination of literacy providers. Some of their consumers attended classes and tutoring sessions at Okanagan College. Others were tutored in-house by IL staff who had received literacy training from the literacy provider.

5. Create partnerships with literacy groups in your geographical area to facilitate maximum opportunities and access for your consumers.

It is important to develop a partnership with a literacy provider in your immediate area, as this will make travel easier for your consumers who need to go to the literacy programme. In addition, there will be a common understanding of the social context of the area that the IL Centre and the literacy providers are serving. It is also easier to meet physically with a provider located in your geographical area.

6. Find out if potential partners already teach consumers with disabilities. What have their experiences been like? In what areas do they need IL expertise?

At the outset of the Making a Connection Project, when IL Centres looked for possible literacy partners, some found that literacy providers had actually been hoping to develop more expertise in the area of disability and literacy, and they wanted to know how to make resources and classes accessible. The providers all welcomed a partnership so that they could learn more to assist their learners with disabilities. Many people who attend literacy programmes have disabilities, usually learning disabilities. Some learners have other disabilities as well. Literacy Junction in Vernon, BC informed us that they have learned a great deal about IL and how it related to the literacy training they provide from the staff at the Vernon IL Centre.

7. Explore the possibility of some of your staff or consumers becoming involved on the boards of the literacy partners.

This is an important issue to keep in mind as you work with a literacy partner. Do they already have board members or staff with disabilities who understand IL issues? One of the ways that the IL philosophy can have a more lasting impact on the community is for persons with disabilities to sit on the boards of community organizations, such as literacy providers. Does someone from your Centre's board have an interest and expertise in literacy?

8. Look for ways to expand opportunities for learners with disabilities.

The following is one of the success stories from our project, and it is a very good example of expanding opportunities for consumers. Each year Making a Connection provided honoraria to each of the literacy partners for their work on the project.

In Vernon, one of the IL Centre's literacy partners, Okanagan College, decided that it would use these funds to establish a scholarship for students with disabilities who attend their programme. This is a wonderful example of a partnership which will have lasting effects even after this project ends.

9. Share with the literacy providers information about disability and literacy, and any literacy tools that your Centre has developed that are tailored to meet the needs of disabled consumers.

Kailin Schmiedendorf of the Independent Living Resource Centre in Thunder Bay explains the tools that their literacy programme developed:

First of all, it is important for each learner/consumer to self-identify what their goals are. We always tell people that they are 'steering their own ship', and that we are merely helping in facilitation of their learning. Many have had unpleasant experiences in the school system, and for them to know that they have a say in their own learning plan is empowering and motivating for them to continue.

Learning plans are excellent literacy tools. Our learning plans are developed by our literacy provider. They have an entry level section (consumer's literacy level upon entry into project), a learning path section (what kind of activities and skills to address) and a goal to work towards. These goals can be something like writing a short email with proper punctuation and spelling, reading a story and re-telling the main ideas or even writing a short grocery list of common items etc. This helps the tutor and consumer actually see what they are working towards, and once the goal has been reached, a sense of accomplishment is obtained.

Staying away from “cookie cutter programs” and strict program guidelines are an important part of helping to enhance one's literacy skills. Individualized skills sessions are perhaps the most effective “tool” that our centre offers to consumers. Skills sessions are designed to enhance specific skills that the consumers themselves would like to improve. These individualized skills sessions are tailored to meet the needs and learning styles of each consumer.

Facilitation and delivery methods change with each consumer as every person's learning style is different. For example, working with someone with a visual impairment may require materials to be emailed ahead of time, and information delivered orally, while working with someone with a learning disability may require a hands on/repetitive task approach. It is important to remember that even persons with the “same” disability may have completely different needs and learning styles, and thus their learning plans would look completely different. In this light, I think it is hard to

illustrate specific tools to help consumers, as these tools should be constantly changing depending on whom you are working with!

Other tools that our Centre has developed are workshops (If a person is comfortable in this learning environment). Some workshops are related to obtaining employment, going back to school or starting a business; while others are more peer-focused. Some of these peer workshops include: “boom whackers” (tuned percussion tubes), expressing your ideas on paper, watercolour painting, pottery, yoga etc.

Though these workshops seem beyond the scope of the traditional definition of "literacy" they enhance many different skill sets that are transferable to literacy and skill development.

Many of our consumers are working towards enhancing communication skills or enhancing their self-esteem. Being in a workshop allows consumers to communicate with not only staff at the ILRC, but other consumers who are working on improving certain skills. So even though they are talking and learning about boom whackers or different paint brush techniques, they are communicating their thoughts and ideas with each other and in the end feeling good about something they have completed. This in turn, allows for an increase in confidence and self esteem. Therefore, these workshops are often ice breakers into our literacy project.

I don't necessarily think that individualized sessions and workshops are effective literacy tools for only persons with disabilities - I think everyone learns a little differently from one another, and learning one-on-one is just more personable and effective.

- 10. Once a working relationship is set up, meet regularly to ensure that sharing continues to take place between your IL Centre and the literacy provider.**

By meeting regularly your IL Centre can minimize the risk of miscommunication or not being 'on the same page' in terms of how both organizations view literacy and Independent Living (IL). It creates an atmosphere of sharing that can lead to ongoing cooperation on other projects between your IL Centre and the literacy partner. And perhaps, in the end, that is what our project Making a Connection has been about: reaching out to create partnerships that have the capacity to be sustained, and to evolve and change over time.

References

Research Team, IL Canada. “Disability and Literacy: Making Connections” (Discussion Paper prepared for an IL Canada Think Tank), November 2007. This paper is the Appendix for this manual.

“Literacy and Disabilities”, Fact Sheet 4, from the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network website series, 2004 www.literacy.ca (under the literacy menu heading, click on ‘literacy information’)

Appendix

The appendix is a separate document. Please note the reference to “CAILC” on its title page. Independent Living Canada was formerly known as the Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC). It changed its name in 2008.