Literacy for Life

Community Dialogue Report
April 17, 2007

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Sincerely,

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Executive Director   **Director of Community Relations**
Literacy Link South Central   **Literacy Link South Central**

Introduction

On April 17th, 2007, Literacy Link South Central and its community partners held a public awareness event called "Literacy for Life". Our goal was to help the social service community really understand what it is like to live with low literacy skills. We explored four ways that low literacy affects us all – our health, our jobs, our families and our communities. We built interactive literacy stations, one for each of these four topics, and invited members of the social service community to experience low literacy for themselves.

After people had a turn at the stations, they were invited to be a part of a facilitated community dialogue. Members of the literacy community struggle to find the most effective ways to market literacy so that people who struggle with low literacy skills will come forward for assistance. It was our intent that Literacy for Life would help us to draw upon the wider community's experience with literacy so that we could build upon our marketing and efforts to raise awareness. For the dialogues, Literacy Link South Central and partners worked to develop questions around literacy in our community. We wanted to know how people define literacy.

How would a frontline caseworker know if a client had low literacy skills? Which organizations do caseworkers refer to if they suspect a literacy challenge? What can we do to improve literacy rates and referrals in London and surrounding areas?

Over 100 people registered for Literacy for Life, so we had lots of feedback on the questions posed above. We learned that there are a lot of people and organizations in our community that care about the literacy needs of their clients, and that they participated in order to find ways to meet those needs. Through participating, they helped the literacy community identify areas in which to focus outreach and marketing resources and strategies.

The following is a summary of the ideas and opinions we heard during the course of the dialogues. While this report is a summary of the discussions that were held on April 17th, we have also taken this opportunity to share more information about literacy, where appropriate. This additional information about literacy appears in three ways:

1. Background information on literacy

2. Information on local literacy efforts

3. Action items that have been identified from the dialogues

These additional pieces of information will provide other dimensions to the report so that the report does not just focus on what participants said on that particular day, but it also provides some context for the discussion and a glimpse of where we could go from here.

What is the definition of literacy?

What are three words that defined your understanding of literacy until today? What new understandings do you have about what literacy means, now that you've seen the displays?

These are two of the questions that we asked participants on April 17th. We wanted to understand how many different ways people see the issue of literacy, by analyzing the words that they used to describe it. In total, ninety-nine (99) different words were used to describe literacy in our community dialogue sessions. Ninety-nine! That was almost one word per participant. Who would have thought that these simple questions would have produced such a variety of responses? The word choices are interesting, not only because of the large number of words that people used to describe literacy, but also because of the different types of words that people used. For example, some participants stuck to the "tried and true" words that speak to the skills that people learn when they improve their literacy levels. Some participants used positive words that described the potential that literacy opens for people. Others used words with negative, and in some cases stereotypical, connotations to paint a picture of the challenges that people face when they have weak literacy skills.

The following are some of the ways that people described literacy:

Skills:

Many participants thought of literacy in terms of skills. What skills do people have when they are literate? Words like "reading", "writing", "numeracy", and "spelling" were listed more frequently than any other group of words – some as many as a half a dozen times each. In some cases, participants chose words that described other types of skills like "communication" and "comprehension". It was interesting that more participants cited "lack of comprehension" (7 times) than used the word "comprehension" (6 times) to define literacy.
Literacy was defined using a negative form of a word more frequently than a positive form, even when both forms defined the same topic – comprehension. Even when described in terms of skills, literacy can have a stigma.

2

Negative:

Many participants thought of words that were negative when they thought of literacy. A number of people described literacy from the point of view of hiding low levels of literacy – words like "cover-up", "acting it out", "excuse", and "pretend". These words described a way of approaching the world that many people with low literacy skills adopt. There was a feeling that low literacy needs to be hidden from others, and it should not be disclosed. Adults who are involved in literacy programs admit to feeling this way and will describe situations in which they have hidden low literacy from friends, families and co-workers, sometimes for many years. This can take a toll on an individual, creating a constant feeling of "anxiety" and low self-esteem for the person who is trying to hide their low literacy skills.
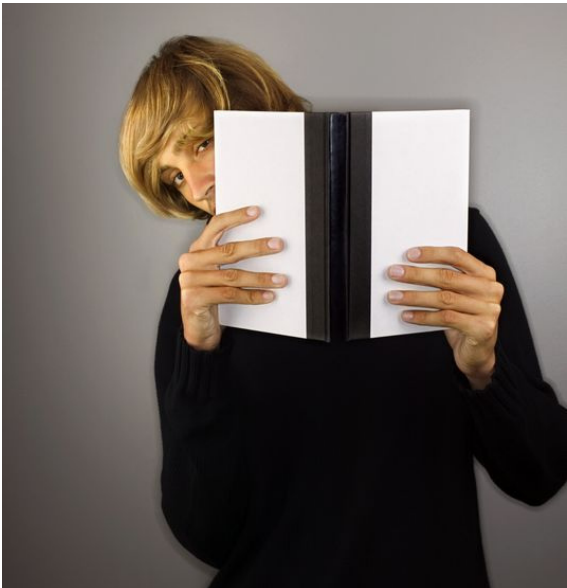
There seemed to be a general feeling that literacy is a barrier – it prevents people from being able to do things. This may seem quite obvious. Of course there are tasks that people with low literacy levels cannot do or can only do with support. However, participants at "Literacy for Life" used terms like "no education", "no skills", and "no job" to define literacy – as though people with low literacy skills cannot be skilled, employed or educated unless they upgrade their literacy skills.

Words like "fear", "embarrassment", "exclusion", "confusion", and "shame" were also used in the community dialogues. The association of negative words with literacy is one of the most significant marketing barriers that literacy programs face. These words are not only used by social service workers to describe literacy. These are words that many of the people who have low literacy skills would use to describe literacy and, potentially, themselves. This kind of negativity makes literacy a difficult issue to address at a personal level and leads to feelings of "isolation". It might be easier for people who have low literacy skills to ask about or participate in literacy programming if literacy were not so strongly associated with negative words. Fortunately, the trend of late has been to describe literacy as part of a larger continuum of skills. This approach may make literacy learning more acceptable because it presents literacy as simply another set of skills that people need to succeed in life and at work.
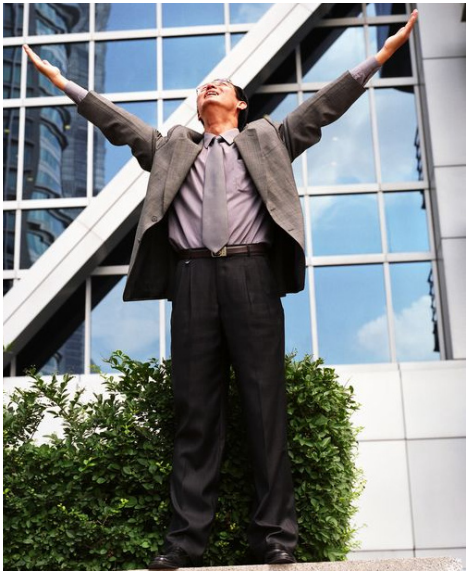
Positive:

Some of the "Literacy for Life" participants chose to define literacy using positive words. It is possible that when asked to define literacy, some participants heard the word "illiterate" and thought of all the barriers that people experience when they do not have strong literacy skills. Others thought of the reverse – all the things that people CAN do when they have strong literacy skills.

Words like "competent", "well-being", "sense of belonging", "freedom", "power", and "pride" were put forward in the dialogues. These words define literacy at a fundamental and personal level. Literate people are far more likely to feel competent and to feel like they belong. Similarly, literate people are more likely to feel like they have "choice", that they are "self-sufficient" and that they are "empowered".
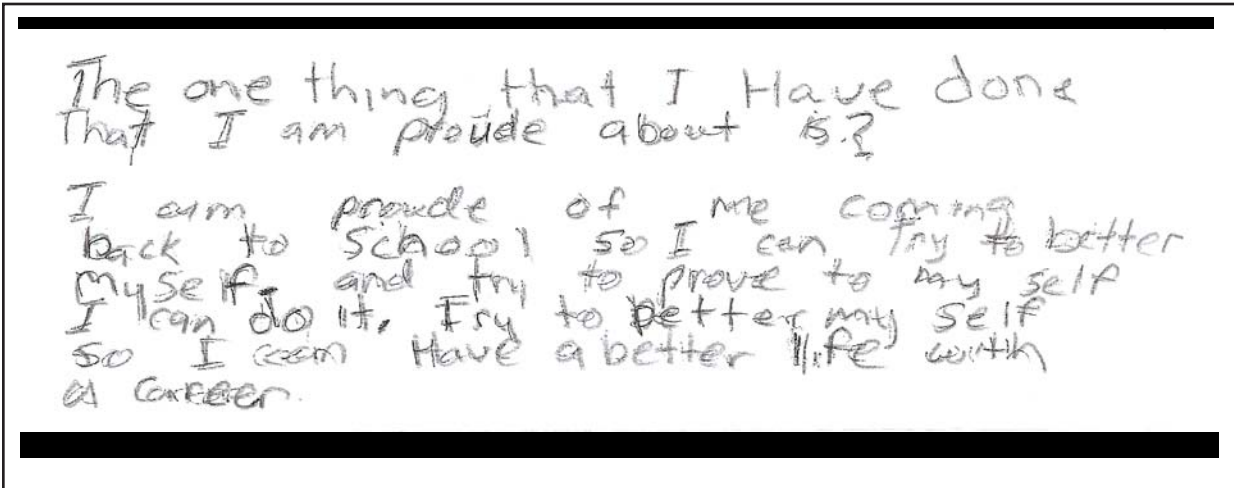
Other participants shared words that will be increasingly important as Ontarians move towards an age and an economy in which upgrading skills becomes an expectation, not an option. Words like "knowledge", "learning", and "growth" will define our population as literacy is inevitably linked to "productivity".

Another participant used the word "survival" to describe literacy. This may reflect the fact that literacy skills are rapidly becoming recognized as foundational skills – skills that are essential to survive in an information and technological age.

"Knowledge", "learning", "growth"

Why do people go to literacy programs?

The one thing that I Have done that I am proude about is?

I am proude of me coming back to school so I can try to better myself, and try to prove to my self I can do it, Try to better my self so I can Have a better life with a career.

Application:

More and more, literacy is being used to describe different types of activities or different things that people do with literacy skills. The definition of literacy is expanding beyond a skills definition to include the ways that people use or apply literacy skills. Dialogue participants offered words like "shopping" and "homework" that begin to reflect this change in thinking. Other participants used words like "computer literacy" and "techno language" to describe the range of ways in which literacy skills are used in conjunction with computers. Health literacy, environmental literacy, and family literacy are also developing into distinct sub-sets of literacy.

Social:

Literacy used to be defined as reading, writing, math and spelling, with a real focus on the concrete skills that people needed in order to read, write, do math, and spell. There is increasing recognition for the idea that literacy skills impact a person's ability to develop and maintain relationships and to participate in social networks. Community dialogue participants noted this trend as well by using words like "participation", "relationships", "inclusion", and "sense of belonging" to describe literacy.

Literacy is difficult to define

We can see from the community dialogues that literacy means something different to almost everyone. Literacy is a complex topic. While it is clear where literacy begins (with the alphabet), it is not quite clear where it ends. How far literacy extends is a matter of some debate. What is not debatable though is the fact that the literacy "bar" is rising. A higher level and a greater variety of skills are needed today than were needed thirty, twenty, or even ten years ago. The diversity that exists within literacy – both in how it is defined and what it means to people who are literate, or who have acquired literacy skills – is positive. However, this diversity represents a challenge when it comes to raising awareness of literacy and its benefits. It seems that no single message about literacy is going to reach everyone – the literacy community needs to develop a number of messages about literacy in order reach those who will benefit from the opportunity to learn and increase their literacy skills.

Action item:

Consider the range of messages that can and should be developed around literacy.
Promote these messages in order to reach those who would benefit from the opportunity to learn more and increase their literacy skills.

Literacy gaps in the community

At this point in the community dialogues, participants were asked to identify any literacy gaps that they thought existed in the community. Responses to this question were as varied as the words people used to define literacy. What follows is an effort to group together responses to develop some common themes.

Understanding literacy:

Participants recognized that one of the literacy gaps in the community is the lack of consensus on what the word "literacy" actually means. Literacy affects segments of the population differently – people need to understand the breadth of the issue before they can begin to think about how to address it. One participant expressed concern that there are conflicting messages about literacy. Is literacy valued as important in and of itself, for all of the benefits it can provide to individuals and families? Or is literacy valued only as it relates to employability?

It also seems to be a challenge to get people to understand the extent of the literacy issue in London and surrounding areas because of the pervasive perception that literacy is the responsibility of school boards. There is an assumption that school boards ensure that all students graduate with adequate literacy skills. This is challenging on two levels. First of all, not all students graduate from high school with adequate literacy skills. Of the many people who do graduate with adequate literacy skills, research suggests that literacy is a "use it or lose it" skill. Literacy skills atrophy over time, especially if they are not exercised.

Background information:

Youth leaving high school without strong literacy skills:

• Seventy per cent (70%) of all future jobs in Canada are expected to require advanced education.

• Ontario's high school dropout rate, one of Canada's highest, is about 30%.

• Dropouts are nearly twice as likely as high school graduates to find themselves jobless.

• Even if they find work, dropouts make 40% less money than students with post-secondary educations.

Background information:

"Use it or lose it":

The message, both from the ALL (Adult Literacy and Life Skills) report and from Canadian experience is blunt and compelling: "use it or lose it". The advantages for Canadians who possess and maintain a reasonable literacy level are explained in part by their need to use literacy skills on the job, often complemented by access to ongoing education and training.

Raising the Score: Promoting Adult Literacy in Canada, 29 September, 2005. **http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/LessonsInLearning/**

Action item:

Promote the concept that literacy is everyone's responsibility. We need to ensure that people graduating from high school have strong skills. But we also need to ensure that we promote continuous learning, within the workplace and the home, for all populations. Promote the need to build literacy skills and keep literacy skills active, at every age and stage of life.

Often, people do not understand that literacy and English as a Second Language (ESL) are different issues. Therefore, when we talk about local literacy issues (or provincial or national, for that matter), people are quick to label literacy issues as ESL issues. They believe that we have low literacy rates because of immigration and newcomers.

Action item:

Research and review local efforts to build the language skills of immigrants in London and Middlesex. Develop messages that promote literacy as an issue that affects the whole population – not just immigrants.

Communication:

Participants also identified a need for greater communication around literacy. More specifically, they cited "communication across the city agencies and frontline workers" and "increased dialogue between agencies (best practices, new interventions, increased advocacy)" as needs. Another recommendation was for a "One stop access point for information like the 211 service". The idea of one stop literacy information could be further explored. What would this look like? A 1-800 number for people to call? A physical location that people could go to if they wanted information about literacy?

Local literacy information:

Both of these services (a 1-800 number and a physical location that people can go to for information about literacy) already exist through Literacy Link South Central. Our 1-800 referral number is 1-800-561-6896 and we're located at 213 Consortium Court, London.

Action item:

Promote the information and referral line so that it is more widely known and used. Emphasize that there is a local source of information regarding literacy that people can call if they have questions.

There were a number of references to silos in the community gap discussions. Participants identified a silo approach to literacy service delivery as a gap. This is an interesting observation because the literacy programs that are funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) meet on a regular basis to discuss the services they provide. Each year, a literacy plan is put forward to MTCU and is available to other organizations. Clearly, the annual literacy service plan is not well-known or used.

Action item:

This coming year, Literacy Link South Central plans to work with a consultant to develop an annual literacy plan that is more community-driven, and that includes information about literacy that community partners would want to know. Our local literacy plan will be finished by November 30th and will be available on Literacy Link South Central's website: www.llsc.on.ca.

It should be noted that some of the literacy programs and services in London and surrounding area are not funded by MTCU. Historically, these programs have not been included in LLSC's annual report on services. Understanding which programs are funded by which level of government is important but it is not something that most clients need to or care to know.
One participant noted that clients can be quite overwhelmed when trying to figure out "where to start" their literacy journey.

Community Partners

Follow-up:

Once a client has started a journey towards upgrading – has made their desire to upgrade known to a caseworker or a social service organization, what happens? This topic will be addressed more fully under other sections of this report, but it is necessary to mention here that there is a perceived gap when it comes to follow-up. This gap was mentioned a number of times by different participants. Relatively brief statements like "lack of follow-up" and "service providers need to do follow-up" were used, so the nature of the follow-up that has been found lacking is left up to interpretation. Dialogue participants may have been talking about initial referrals to literacy programs or they may have been talking about follow-up once a client has left a literacy program.

During the community dialogue, participants were asked what they would do if they suspected that someone they were working with had a literacy issue. The intent of this question was to get a sense of where people direct clients with suspected literacy challenges. An incredible range of answers was offered and begged the question "Whose responsibility is it to follow up?" Has a service provider done his or her job by mentioning one, two, or three places that a client might consider contacting for literacy assistance? Service providers may assume that clients follow up on such suggestions on their own time. It is unlikely that these types of referrals are effective and more work needs to be done to promote appropriate literacy referrals.

Awareness:

Community awareness is an issue on two levels. It is an issue for social service providers and other community organizations. How do you recognize low literacy skills? Who do you call when you suspect someone may be impacted by low literacy? These are important questions. Our experience here at Literacy Link South Central has been that if people do not know the answer to one or both of these questions, then they tend to do nothing at all. So increasing general awareness of literacy is key to producing a more literate community.

The other significant challenge when it comes to literacy is marketing literacy to those who could theoretically benefit from literacy upgrading. According to two international literacy surveys in which Canada took part – the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALLS), over 40% of Canadian adults would benefit from upgrading or literacy programs. Forty percent of the Canadian adult population lacks the skills to "function effectively in everyday life".

According to IALS and ALLS:

Twenty percent (20%) of the Canadian adult population lacks the skills to do simple tasks requiring reading and writing.

An additional 25% of the population is able to cope with the reading demands of their everyday life only because they have adapted their surroundings to match their limited reading skills. These individuals can manage as long as no significant changes alter their surroundings.

So the question becomes "How do you market the availability of literacy programs to people who typically do not rely upon or use print to get information?" It is a difficult question to answer. Most literacy programs and organizations cannot afford to use radio or television ads to reach people who have low literacy skills. So they tend to use pamphlets, bookmarks and posters. Generally, programs know that there "needs to be more awareness of literacy resources. How do you do this (though) if people don't read well?"

There is a need for additional resources and funding for marketing the importance and the benefits of literacy. One participant noted that there needs to be "funding for work that is not direct service, like awareness". Basically, you can design literacy programs but the programs can only be effective if people actually attend to improve their skills.

Action item:

Develop a literacy awareness campaign that draws upon different forms of media.

Specific or targeted literacy programs:

When asked what literacy gaps existed in London and surrounding area, it was not unusual that a number of people cited specific groups of people that they thought were underserved. One participant said that "multiple levels of issues need multiple levels of support". One way of paraphrasing this response would be to say that there are lots of different literacy needs and they all need different approaches or supports.

Youth were mentioned as an underserved and a difficult-to-serve group. It was suggested that there is an "issue connecting to parents. There is a gap because there isn't a creative mechanism to bring them together (youth and parents)." There is definitely a gap when it comes to serving youth. Many youth that leave school without a diploma (and presumably a level of skill that would correspond to that diploma) did not have a positive experience with the school system. They are unlikely to want to re-attach to another learning system that they perceive to be identical to the one they just left. Research suggests that youth are more likely to try to work around their literacy challenges than they are to address them, until a number of years separate them from their formal school experiences. There is a need to market adult literacy programs better so that people know that these programs differ from the formal school system. This can be a difficult objective to achieve, given that many literacy programs are delivered through school boards and local colleges.

> **Did you know?**
> Adult literacy programs in Ontario are delivered by three different "sectors". Some are delivered through school boards, some through colleges, and some through community-based literacy programs.

Youth would benefit from literacy programming that is tailored to their experiences and realities.

> **Local literacy information:**
> Recently, Literacy Link South Central received funding to develop a 36-hour program for youth. We are piloting this program and we hope to bring it to other communities within our six-county service area.

One participant also noted the need to reach people "in the early years". What is being done in London and the surrounding area to promote literacy in the early years (0-6 years of age)? Fortunately, we have the Early Years Centres and the Early Years Literacy Specialists who are working to raise awareness of the importance of literacy in these early years. While these services exist, they may be constrained in the amount of outreach they can do because of funding.

Funding:

Funding was raised as a community gap in a number of cases. First, a "lack of funding around accessibility for agencies" was identified. This may have been a reference to clear language accessibility – are agencies' signs, brochures and promotional materials as accessible as they can be? There will be a fuller discussion about clear writing a bit later in the report. Another participant noted that there is a need for "funding for work that is not direct service (like awareness)." This, when coupled with the number of times that participants noted a need for more awareness around literacy, could be a challenge. Most literacy programs identify that they do not have the time or the resources to market and raise awareness of literacy. They are busy working directly with individuals who want to improve their literacy skills. From time to time, national groups like ABC CANADA or provincial groups like the Ontario Literacy Coalition do public awareness, but these awareness campaigns are short-lived.

One participant noted that there was "duplication of services". This participant may have the perception that there are too many literacy services in London and surrounding area. Or the suggestion may not be that there are too many programs, but rather that there is no noticeable differentiation between them – the general public does not know how the programs differ from one another.

Literacy programs serving London and Middlesex:

• 	Centre for Lifelong Learning
• 	CNIB Literacy Program for Deafblind Adults
• 	Collège Boréal
• 	Fanshawe College
• 	Literacy London Inc.
• 	Nokee Kwe Occupational Skill Development Inc.
• 	Thames Valley District School Board (Gateway to Learning)

There are seven Literacy and Basic Skills programs in London and Middlesex. At first glance, this might surprise people. These programs differ though, in the clients they serve, in the type of instruction (classroom, small group, 1:1), in the hours that they operate (and therefore when they can be accessed), and in what they ultimately prepare people to do (move on to credit programming, to further education, to employment or to personal independence). As literacy is an issue that affects people in different ways, it may not be surprising that a variety of literacy programs is necessary in any given community.

> Combined, the seven local Literacy and Basic Skills programs serve about 2000 clients a year – about 6% of those adults that statistics suggest would benefit from upgrading their skills.

Employers:

A number of participants noted that there are community gaps when it comes to employment and literacy. This may be because a fair number of participants represented employment agencies and therefore have an interest in literacy's ability to prepare people for employment. Or it could be a reflection of the current media focus on the proposed skills shortage in Canada. Or it could be a combination of both.

More specifically, one participant noted that "employers only look at Grade 12" as a way of assessing whether or not a potential employee will have the skills to perform successfully on the job. Having a Grade 12 diploma is not necessarily a guarantee that someone has a Grade 12 level of skills. In fact, almost 60% of those who were identified as Level 2 in the International Adult Literacy Survey (so they have adapted their lower levels of literacy to their everyday tasks) have a Grade 12 or postsecondary education. Increasingly, attention is being given to the skills that an individual has, and not necessarily to the level of education he or she possesses. Literacy and Basic Skills programs, social service providers and even some employers have begun to think about training and employment in terms of Essential Skills. Through extensive research, the Government of Canada and other national and international agencies identified and validated nine Essential Skills.
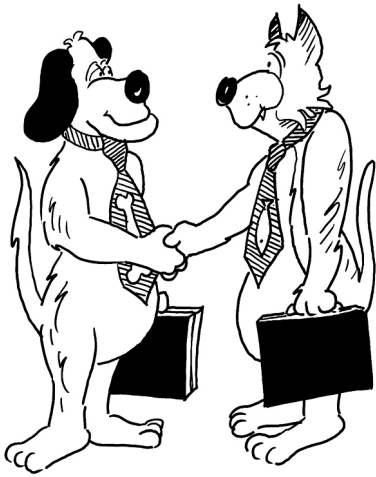
The Essential Skills are:

- Reading Text
- Document Use
- Numeracy
- Writing
- Oral Communication
- Working with Others
- Continuous Learning
- Thinking Skills
- Computer Use

A far cry from Reading, Writing, and Math! For more information on Essential Skills, go to: http://srv108.services.gc.ca/english/general/Understanding_ES_e.shtml

A few participant comments suggested that it would be beneficial if employers were to take more of an interest in literacy. There was a feeling that "Employers put the literacy issue 'under the rug' – they don't address the issue." When unemployment rates are higher and there are many people looking for work, employers do not always see the necessity of helping current employees improve their literacy skills. It is more cost-effective to bring in new employees who have higher levels of skills. However, when the unemployment rate is lower, it no longer becomes cost-effective to bring in new employees; it makes more sense to train your current employees. There was a suggestion during the community dialogues that employers "get back to on-the-job training". Should this happen, and demographics suggest that employers will become more interested in training employees onsite, then Literacy and Basic Skills programs will need to be ready to deliver training in the workplace, especially if on-the-job tasks are at a less than Grade 12 level.

Greater involvement by employers in literacy would have some significant benefits, not only for the individual employers, but also for the employees, employees' families, and the community. "Literacy can be difficult to pursue when people have jobs and families – it would be ideal if literacy was incorporated into the workplace." This participant observation certainly holds true for many individuals who are currently enrolled in Literacy and Basic Skills programs and who are working. Most will reinforce the challenges in trying to juggle full-time (and sometimes shift) work and managing a family with trying to upgrade your skills. The lives of adults can be full of responsibilities, some of which take precedence over learning. Access to learning opportunities during work time could make the difference for many adults who would benefit from upgrading.

Literacy in the workplace can be an interesting learning option but it requires strong partnerships among a variety of stakeholders. One participant said that the London community had to "recognize employment literacy" but wondered "can unions and management work together?" Unions and management may have different reasons for embracing workplace literacy, but both stakeholders can benefit and many case studies have shown how unions and management can work together.

A (2001) national survey of The Conference Board of Canada revealed the following reasons why organizations use or would use workplace literacy and basic skills programs:

Reasons to Use Program	% of Organizations
Improve productivity	66%
Cost savings	53%
Improve communications	52%
New technology	35%
Improve health and safety	31%
Increase profits	17%
Build employee loyalty	15%
Lack of qualified applicants	6%

Source: Building Cent$ of Literacy: The bottom line impact

Clear writing and accessibility

A surprising number of participants noted gaps around clear writing and accessibility of services. Over the past two years, Literacy Link South Central has delivered over 60 workshops to raise awareness of literacy and clear writing. These workshops have begun to yield some results but there is still a lot of work to do in order to improve access to community information and services.

One participant said "Public places need to be more aware of literacy levels required for their service(s)" and another suggested that online documents need to have "read aloud" features so that individuals do not have to be able to "read" the information in order to benefit from it.

Another participant suggested that service providers need to "make it easy – reception needs to be welcoming". The suggestion here is that service providers make their reception areas welcoming so that people with low literacy skills may feel more confident disclosing their difficulties. Some service providers said that it is common to have "service lists that can't be read" by people with limited literacy skills. Or that service providers may be using "forms required for service" that cannot be read or read easily. Some of the employment programs and organizations that offer training programs may use information that is "all text rich and not friendly to people with literacy challenges".

Many people who struggle with lower levels of literacy will never attend a literacy program – because of lack of time, life issues, or the stigma attached to literacy. If community agencies and services use the principles of clear writing, it is more likely that people with lower levels of literacy will be able to take advantage of such services to benefit their lives and the lives of their families.

On the need for clear writing…

"If I don't understand it, it's not information."

"If you don't know about us, we're not accessible."

Local literacy efforts:

Literacy Link South Central offers services that are designed to improve awareness of literacy and access to social services for people who have low literacy skills. We offer Clear Writing workshops, Clear Writing consultation, Literacy Awareness workshops and Literacy Reviews. During a Literacy Review, staff of Literacy Link South Central will come to your organization and look at your organization through the eyes of someone with low literacy skills. We will provide you with a report on the things you are doing well and the things you can do to improve accessibility.
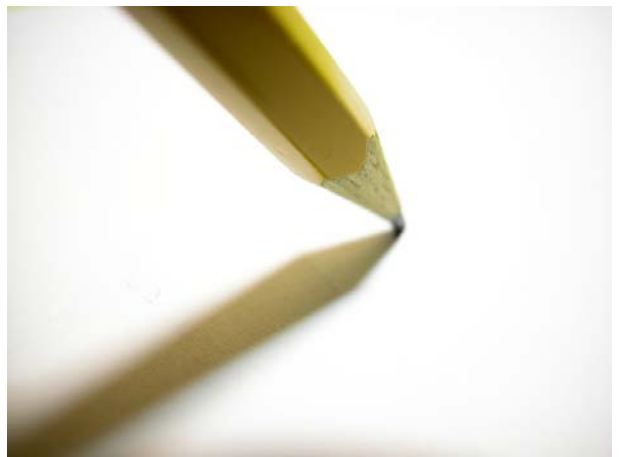
Literacy referral system

As you may have discerned from the report so far, literacy is a multi-faceted issue. Literacy refers to a diverse range of abilities and skills and encapsulates a range of emotions, from joy and inclusion to shame and fear. We have touched on different interest groups that have an investment in literacy, such as employers. The community dialogues also yielded some very important information regarding the literacy referral structure within London and Middlesex – namely that it does not exist. It is not that people do not think about where they can refer people with literacy issues to or that they do not have a handful of possible referral agencies. The challenge seems to be that there are a significant number of agencies – some literacy, some not – to which people refer. When asked what their "go-to" agency was when they had clients for whom they suspected literacy issues, sixty-eight agencies or individuals were identified by dialogue participants as points of referral for literacy. Sixty-eight agencies were identified by just over one hundred participants.

LBS = Literacy and Basic Skills. LBS programs are funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) to deliver literacy programming.

Is it good that so many agencies were identified? At the very least it shows that people wonder about where to refer people with low literacy skills. What was most interesting about this exercise was that no single Literacy and Basic Skills program (or any other literacy program for that matter) was cited frequently. The Wheable Centre for Adult Education was mentioned with the greatest frequency (13 times). Next, in terms of frequency, came libraries with 12 mentions. Then came Literacy Link South Central and the Centre for Lifelong Learning with 9 mentions each. Also of note (mentioned at least five times each) were Hutton House and ATN/Network to Learning.

At a glance, it may seem positive to have such a range of referral agencies. However, the results of this exercise identify a concern to literacy programs. Ideally, literacy programs would have been identified far more frequently. In addition, all of the literacy programs in London and Middlesex would have been mentioned frequently. All of the individuals who are referred to a non-literacy organization have at least one more step to take to find literacy services – until they find a program that can actually help them improve their literacy skills.

Action item:

It is clear that it is necessary to do more joint marketing of literacy programs in the area. All of the "go-to" agencies that were identified through this exercise should be approached with marketing materials. This way, they will be made aware of all the literacy programs in London and Middlesex.

It would be very interesting to know how many of the literacy referrals that went to non-literacy agencies actually resulted in someone eventually contacting or attending a literacy program. The range of agencies or individuals that participants listed is incredible. It varied from individuals within the formal school system (special educators and home room teachers), to employment agencies like Job Connect and Goodwill, to funders like United Way and Service Canada, to resource centres like London Urban Services Organization (LUSO) and South London Resource Centre. Individuals such as pastors, doctors and MPPs were also mentioned as "points of first contact". Earlier in the community dialogues, participants noted that the literacy system was difficult to navigate. It seems, from the discussion about literacy referrals, that the challenge is not so much navigating the system as it is navigating one's way into the system in the first place. Once you actually find a literacy program, your chances of finding the services you need increase.

What happens when literacy is only one of the issues clients face?

Some people who have low literacy skills also struggle with other issues. They may be unemployed, or they may struggle with health issues or dependency issues. It is interesting to note that many of the formerly federally-funded employment agencies were identified as literacy contacts. This may be because some of these larger employment agencies are expected to assess the range of challenges that a client may be experiencing, including literacy. Experience shows though that many caseworkers are uncomfortable trying to assess literacy and they will often avoid it, and focus instead on some of the other issues that a client needs to address. At this point, it is impossible to know how many of the incoming referral calls to non-literacy agencies actually result in a literacy referral. Making a call to try to find out how to improve your literacy skills is a very difficult call to make. If the first phone call does not yield results, and if you have to describe your situation to yet another person, anecdotal evidence suggests that many people do not make a second call to find a literacy program. The stigma is too great and the individual's self-confidence is too diminished.

Some people who have low literacy skills also struggle with other issues.

How can we make the literacy system better?

Community dialogue participants were not only asked to identify literacy gaps in the community. They were also asked to suggest ways to improve the literacy system and the overall literacy levels of residents in the community.

Many of the suggestions made by participants mirrored the challenges that participants outlined. For example, if the challenge was a lack of awareness of literacy issues, not surprisingly participants suggested that a remedy to this challenge would be to raise awareness of literacy in the community. As the community dialogues were only about an hour and a half each in duration, there was not time to go beyond brainstorming to explore a deeper development of potential solutions.

What the feedback from the community dialogues did provide was the opportunity to, again, identify trends or patterns so that literacy groups and other interested partners can be more strategic in how we address the literacy challenges of London and Middlesex.

Outreach and awareness:

The need to reach out and talk more about literacy and its effects was very evident from the community dialogues. The majority of participants, while obviously interested enough in the issue of literacy to attend "Literacy for Life," were relatively unaware of the range of existing services or the outreach efforts that local literacy groups offer on a regular basis. Some interesting suggestions were shared around how to achieve greater outreach and awareness, including a mobile literacy service that could help to reach people for whom transportation is a challenge. Others suggested the need to educate people about literacy through less traditional means (like a traveling literacy comic). Another interesting suggestion was to "have Think Tanks with less traditional invitees". A good question would be "who are the less traditional invitees?"

It is clear that there is a need to raise awareness of existing literacy services. These services are largely unknown in the community. While a couple of programs offered through school boards have wider exposure, they also carry with them the potential stigma of formal school environments. It would be valuable to promote a literacy "system" that contains a variety of services that address a variety of goals.

Action item:

Develop an awareness of a broader literacy system and promote this system to the broader community.

There was a suggestion that "literacy attitudes and assumptions need to be challenged". This may refer to the need to do more awareness sessions. As another participant noted, "more time should be spent doing events like this – consistently". The message seems to be that occasional mentions of literacy are not sufficient. Community members hear literacy messages, seem invigorated and interested in the issue, and then upon returning to their own workplaces and clients, the messages they heard slowly evaporate. In order to be effective in raising awareness of literacy, there needs to be an awareness strategy – so that people are hearing literacy messages consistently. "Literacy for Life" was a significant event for the literacy community because it was the first time literacy providers had a public event to "ask" community members about literacy, as opposed to sharing a one-way stream of information about literacy to community members.
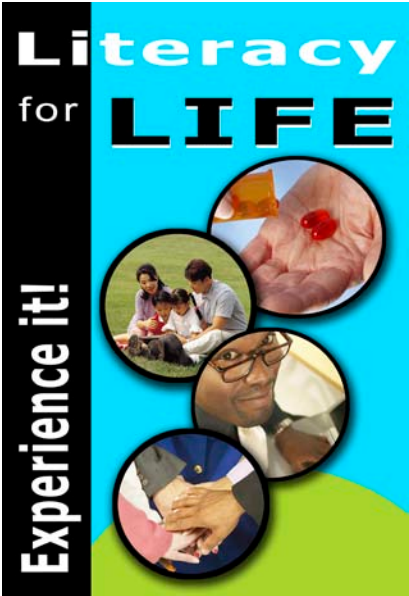

Action item:

Literacy awareness events in the future need to engage people in discussions about literacy. Community members need to be invited to develop solutions to the literacy issues we face.

Again, the need to first increase communication between literacy programs and then to increase communication between literacy programs and the general public was noted. The usefulness of a coordinating body was mentioned – there needs to be "recognition of LLSC (Literacy Link South Central) in the community. Get the message out. LLSC is a referral and networking group."

While it is true that Literacy Link South Central is a referral and networking group, this only holds true for programs that are funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). Through MTCU funding, LLSC brings together Literacy and Basic Skills programs every couple of months. What about literacy programs that are not funded by MTCU? Who is supporting them? Who provides coordination to these groups? How are they linked to the broader literacy community? It was suggested that someone "create a forum so that literacy agencies don't work in isolation". There is a forum that Literacy Link South Central coordinates called literacy service planning but it doesn't include all literacy programs. It would be a good idea to develop a more holistic literacy system – one that incorporates literacy programs that deal with all ages and all special interest groups. Then it would be timely to figure out how to market such a system.

Action item:

Develop a more holistic literacy system. Literacy Link South Central needs to expand its role to include support for non-MTCU funded organizations.

Whose responsibility is awareness?

Raising awareness around a social issue as complex as literacy is a big task. Whose responsibility is it to raise awareness of literacy? It seems clear that the individual efforts made by local literacy programs and even the combined effort of local literacy programs are not enough. The issue of literacy and the programs that exist to address literacy are largely unknown to the general public and the broader community.

One participant suggested that we need to "get a national campaign/agenda – like with drinking and driving and anti-smoking". Literacy is a national issue, and not just a local issue. However, raising awareness is often left to local programs and this is a challenge since these programs do not have the funds or the expertise to launch awareness campaigns. Even if they did, such funds would be project-driven and time-limited. This is not the way to effect social change.

Other participants suggested an advocacy approach. They suggested that we "make literacy a community issue – involve politicians by making literacy an election issue" and that we "write letters to government and advocate". Literacy Link South Central staff and other literacy program staff visit government officials when there is a particular issue that we want to draw attention to. However, these government visits are usually in response to something in the media.

The general feeling seemed to be that if more efforts are made to connect to government, then more funding would be made available to market literacy and to serve people who have literacy issues. It would also be beneficial if different levels of government were to emphasize the importance of literacy by developing awareness campaigns as they have done with other important social and training issues (like anti-smoking and apprenticeship).

Action item:

Develop a strategy to educate politicians and decision-makers about the effects of literacy and encourage more government support for literacy awareness.

Literacy assessments:

A number of participants indicated that the literacy system could be improved if more attention was paid to assessments. "Literacy assessment services should be more practical. They need to be enhanced and used. Need more funding. Enhanced and better funded literacy assessments." It is unclear as to whether the individual who offered this remark was talking about literacy assessments that are currently being used within literacy programs or if they were talking about literacy assessments in other environments (where literacy could be presenting along with other client issues). Another comment offered by a participant may relate to the assessment process as it says "focus on strengths of the individual, not only on the weaknesses". There may be a perception that literacy assessments target only what an individual cannot do. It may be that the assessment processes used within literacy programs are not well-known or understood. Adult education philosophy demands that adults be recognized for the skills and experience they have. The adult literacy community may need to devote more time to explaining its assessment processes. It is also possible that assessment processes could build in more Prior Learning Assessment so that the transferable skills people have acquired through life experience can be thoroughly documented and validated.

Once clients are actually in an adult literacy program, literacy assessments need to be thorough. In the adult literacy field, assessments are currently being revised to measure three of the primary Essential Skills: Reading Text, Document Use and Numeracy. This will help the literacy community document progress more effectively.

There may be a need for a practical literacy assessment or checklist for other stakeholders to use to assess whether or not literacy is actually an issue for a client. For example, if a client is in an employment program and appears to be struggling with literacy, how would a frontline employment counselor know for sure? Again, history suggests that people can be very uncomfortable bringing up the topic of literacy. Often, they will avoid the subject entirely, rather than cause someone or themselves shame or embarrassment.

Action item:

Adult literacy programs need to think about how they communicate what they do. They could provide more information to the other social service agencies pertaining to how they do assessments and how the programming they provide is adult-focused and measured using Essential Skills.

How do you measure literacy?

Somewhat related to assessment and the literacy community's ability to describe what they do to assess literacy is the concept of measuring literacy. One participant asked "Are there benchmarks? Levels? How are they measured?" These are interesting questions. If community members wonder if there are benchmarks or levels, what do they think happens in literacy programs?
It is probable that there is a level of sophistication in adult literacy programs, in terms of how we measure literacy that is relatively unknown.
It would be useful to find a way to describe how we measure literacy to the broader community.
It would be challenging too since there are actually several different ways of measuring literacy.
It would be a good collaborative challenge for the literacy community to come up with a standard way of describing what happens in literacy programs – how they are designed to lead people through sequential skills development to help individuals reach their goals.

If community members wonder if there are benchmarks or levels, what do they think happens in literacy programs?

Practical suggestions

A number of participants made some very practical suggestions such as "develop a 1-800 referral line". Literacy Link South Central has a 1-800 referral line and has had this number for at least ten years. The wider community does not seem to know about this number and so work must be done to increase its visibility. LLSC does receive phone calls from individuals looking for literacy programs but we do not receive anywhere near the number that we could, given the population of London and surrounding areas. Other more local literacy networks have more active referral lines. It would be worthwhile to sit down with these networks (Hamilton, Toronto, and Ottawa) and ask them how they have marketed their referral lines. We could build upon these experiences to make LLSC's referral line more visible.

Action item:

Work with local literacy networks in other parts of Ontario to learn from their experiences in marketing 1-800 lines.

Conclusion

The "Literacy for Life" community dialogues on April 17th actually represent a point of evolution for the literacy community in London and Middlesex. Over the last ten years, literacy programs (primarily those funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities) have been very insular and have talked a great deal amongst themselves about how they serve clients and who they should serve. This communication has been necessary and has resulted in a cohesive literacy group. At present though, the membership of this literacy group is quite limited as it only includes those programs funded by MTCU. There is a need to expand this group so that all literacy programs are included and so that all literacy programs can benefit from information sharing, from practitioner training, and from exposure to new resources and tools. When literacy programs work more effectively, clients get better service.

There is still an ongoing issue around awareness of literacy services. Clearly, there is a need to do more work to raise awareness of existing literacy services. There is also a need to "share" the issue of literacy. Literacy is so embedded in other issues that it is a difficult issue to isolate. This makes literacy a difficult issue to address.

The stigma that is attached to literacy must also be tackled. How do we do that? Literacy has been described as a hidden issue, as a secret issue and certainly as an issue that is associated with shame and embarrassment. A good question for London and Middlesex to ask itself is what responsibility it has for the promotion of literacy. Are there any messages that are consistently sent out in this community about literacy? Who sends them? Who should send them? What is the nature of these messages?

We learned a lot from the community dialogues. We learned that people have little knowledge as to who or what the literacy system is in London and Middlesex. We learned that the literacy system would benefit clients more if it was more inclusive and included more than just those literacy programs that are funded by the provincial government. We learned that there are a lot more people and organizations in London and Middlesex that care about literacy than we previously thought. We also learned that in order to truly put literacy on the map as an important social issue that impacts people in significant ways, we must work as a broader community. If literacy is truly a social issue – one that has an impact on an individual's ability to contribute to the family, and to the community, as well as to the workplace, then it will take a wider array of partnerships and resources to address it. "Literacy for Life" was an important first step.

Please stay tuned to Literacy Link South Central's website – www.llsc.on.ca – for updates on how LLSC and its partners will be acting upon the recommendations made during the "Literacy for Life" dialogues.