Best Practices for LSTA-Funded Adult Literacy Programs

A. Philosophical Considerations

The best adult literacy programs are based on clear, realistic philosophies of library service. Should your library directly provide educational services to patrons, or should your library guide patrons to existing literacy programs and resources? A great program can be built on either approach, but the decision to adopt one over another must be carefully considered on a practical and philosophical level. What are the responsibilities of a library? What role does your library play in your community? What do adult learners in your area need, and is it the library’s job to offer it?

B. Designing Your Approach to Adult Literacy

a. If your library chooses to play a direct role in adult literacy education, a flexible educational program that allows students to set their own schedules and goals is preferable to a traditional, classroom-based program.
   i. As a group, adult literacy learners are self-motivated and will seek help if they need it.
   ii. Literacy learners often have outside obligations and barriers that prevent them from consistently attending fixed-schedule programs.
   iii. Not all learners will benefit from a “one size fits all” approach to literacy education. The educational needs of adult literacy learners are diverse, and the program should be able to accommodate different learning styles and needs.

b. If your program focuses on promoting access to existing resources, develop a simple system for directing learners to services and materials. Learners should not have to run through a gauntlet of staff and services before their participation in the program has even begun. A single point of access – for example, one hotline number directly linked to one librarian who can communicate compassionately with adult learners and single-handedly provide them with resources – is more comfortable for learners and will make a good impression on first-time library users.

c. Staff should be willing and enthusiastic advocates of the program. Include all staff in the planning and development stages of the program and invite their input. The program should be a collaborative effort, not a “problem” that someone will have to shoulder on top of his or her regular responsibilities.

d. Train staff to be sensitive to the needs of literacy learners. Adults with poor literacy skills are often ashamed to seek help and may feel very uncomfortable in a library setting. A positive initial interaction with staff will go a long way to put the adult learner at ease. Staff must be able to listen compassionately, to ask diagnostic questions that welcome and encourage rather than accuse (“Tell me the story of your reading” as opposed to “When did you realize you had a problem?”), and to guide learners to appropriate
resources. If possible, allow staff to make exceptions to library loan rules in order to accommodate learners who may need more time with materials.

c. Don’t bite off more than your library and its partners can chew. Keep your program simple and appropriately scaled to your service area and your available resources.

d. If another organization is already effectively reaching adult learners in your area, the library should not attempt to build a competing service. Small programs based on strong partnerships with organizations that already have an established presence in the community are more beneficial to learners than wildly ambitious programs that attempt to singlehandedly re-invent the wheel.

C. Forging Strong Community Partnerships

a. Have a staff member who is free to travel and meet with partners in the community on work time.

b. Emphasize the library’s role as a community helper. Although an extensive study on local literacy needs is often unnecessary, a significant amount of time should be spent listening to the community. The questions you ask of individuals and organizations should follow a central theme: “I’m the library. What do you need?”

c. Although your objectives may be similar, keep in mind that the organizational culture of a library will often be very different from that of its community partners. Always clarify your expectations and ask your partners to clarify theirs. Communicate with mutual understanding in mind.

d. Libraries and consortia in Oregon that are embarking on an adult literacy program for the first time should not hesitate to ask past LSTA grantees for advice. Research past grants at: [http://www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/LSTAcomp.shtml#Past_LSTA_Grants](http://www.oregon.gov/OSL/LD/LSTAcomp.shtml#Past_LSTA_Grants) and see the appendix at the end of this document for selected grants.

e. Strong partnerships with other literacy agencies, educational resources, and community advocacy groups are a must. While the partners you choose will be largely dependant on the goals of your project and the resources available in your area, you must speak to at least one of the following organizations:

   i. Local community colleges and adult educational facilities.

   ii. Agencies that provide support and housing to low-income communities, including Goodwill Industries, Volunteers of America, Oregon Humanities, and Northwest Housing Alternatives.

   iii. Churches, missions, and other religious support networks, including Lutheran Community Services Northwest and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon.

   iv. Agencies that serve specific ethnic/cultural/economic communities in Oregon, including Oregon Tradeswomen, Hacienda CDC, Russian Oregon Social Services (a division of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon), Cambodian-American Community of Oregon (CICO) and Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO).
D. Finding Your Learners

a. Whether your program focuses on one segment of the adult learner population or reaches out to all literacy learners, you must build a clear picture of the learners in your area and target them accordingly. Remember that native English speakers and English language learners have very different educational needs and face different barriers to success, even if the educational goals of both groups fall under the larger classification of “adult literacy”

b. Do not force learners to attend your program. Social service agencies and employers can effectively spread advertising materials and word-of-mouth, but partner organizations should not be allowed to punish learners who do not meet set standards for participation and academic achievement – for example, by withholding employment or benefits.

c. Promotional language should be specific and positive. A learner being introduced to the program for the first time should be convinced that the program will effectively channel his or her motivation to learn and will help improve specific skills (for example, a promotional flyer might encourage learners to “Master the GED” or “Be a Computer Whiz”). The learner should not feel singled out as someone with a deficiency, nor should his or her individual will to learn be undermined by paternalistic language (“Can’t read? We know what you need!”) Do not use the word “literacy” – the term is too general and loaded with negative connotations that may repel adult learners.

i. Remember your target audience when promoting your program. If your program is designed to help adults with very low literacy skills, use television and radio advertising, public announcements, and word-of-mouth rather than print materials. Tactics that attract one group of learners may backfire with another – for example, a radio announcement for a “Back to School Skills Night” might interest learners who value institutional education while driving away learners who have negative associations with traditional classroom environments.

d. Never make uninformed assumptions about “what’s best” for adult literacy learners and the communities to which they belong. Any and all assumptions you make about the needs of groups and individuals must be examined for truth. The best way to check your assumptions is to speak directly to the community.

E. Technology

a. Flexible, easy-to-use technology solutions are a powerful educational tool for adult learners, but implementing a technology-based literacy program can be a difficult and unpredictable undertaking. If your library is not already actively involved in the development of new technologies, do not attempt to create them from scratch. It is difficult to anticipate the amount of time, money, and effort that will have to go into a new website or software
program before it can be released to the public, especially if staffing is inadequate or developers are inexperienced. An exception may be made for libraries that adapt existing websites or programs to their needs.

b. If your program does include a technological component, the library must be capable of providing the staff and resources necessary for continual maintenance of the technology. Keeping the program bug-free is not enough. While it does not have to be cutting-edge, the program must not rely on obsolete technology or antiquated standards of “user-friendliness.”

c. Don’t assume a universal level of technological skill or comfort among adult learners. Be prepared to offer comprehensive user support.

d. If your program directs learners to web resources outside the library, regularly check that all links have remained active, relevant, and appropriately targeted.

i. Exercise caution when linking to commercial websites. Learners must not be coerced into spending money or revealing personal information. Avoid sites where the distinction between educational content and advertisements is unclear.

Appendix: Selected Past Grants

1. 04-12-5y and 05-10-5m: Portland State University / Oregon Literacy, Inc:
   Learner Web
   a. Established an online resource portal for adult learners. An educational module system specially developed for the program allows learners to work through online lessons independently and to monitor their progress. Referrals to online and traditional literacy services are also available through the portal. URL:  
   http://www.osl.state.or.us/home/libdev/LSTA/2004OregonLSTAGrantsFunded.htm and  
   http://www.osl.state.or.us/home/libdev/LSTA/2005OregonLSTAGrantsFunded.htm (grants are listed in alphabetical order by grantee)

2. 07-06-5p: Planning Adult Literacy Services for Multnomah County Library
   a. Assessed the library needs of people with limited functional literacy and those whose primary language is not English. A service plan for adult literacy learners was built from this research. URL:  
   http://www.osl.state.or.us/home/libdev/LSTA/2007OregonLSTAGrantsFunded.htm

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