

Literacy Integration into Libraries

Some Observations

by Cathay Reta

The California Library Literacy Services (CLLS) program was designed to be integrated as a service of the public library. What does that mean? What does an integrated program look like? To what degree has CLLS integration been accomplished? These questions have been ongoing since the program began in 1984, and will likely continue for many more years. This paper is my attempt to share my observations and to organize the discussion in hopes that it will give new insight.

The more specific a story is, the more universal it is.

Every discussion I've ever heard about the challenge of integrating adult literacy as a public library service has been framed in a narrow view. It is often approached as a library vs. literacy issue, with literacy folk trying to get the library folk to welcome adult literacy. This narrow focus can be quite limiting. I believe the question is not a unique situation for libraries. Rather, it is a universal story. It is the story of joining – of positioning – a smaller program within a larger, established organization.

Adult Education within the K-12 School District -- You can hear the same discussion, the same challenges, voiced when you listen to adult education staff talk about being attached to K-12 School Districts. They are not assigned equal importance nor seen as essential programs when compared with the elementary and secondary schools. This was made clear when in 2009 the California legislature removed the limits on funding directed exclusively to adult education. It authorized K-12 Districts to use the funding in any way they wish; they were no longer required to fund adult education programs. The ensuing reallocation of funds almost gutted adult education in California. Many districts closed their adult education programs completely; others severely cut their budgets.

Correctional Education within the Prisons and Jails – Same story, different audience. I once sat in a roundtable discussion at a conference and listened with awe and compassion to how teachers in the prisons were treated as *outsiders*. They were not accepted by the prison guards and other staff. They had to fight for everything they got – and indeed, just as with the adult education system there was a time around 2010 when a very large number of correctional education teachers were let go because of budget issues. Prisons were told to bring in volunteers to do the teaching. - Well, that's another story . . .

And there's more -- I attended a presentation in the late 1990s that really opened my eyes to these patterns. The presenter shared marketing strategies she used to promote her program inside her organization. She shared they were necessary because other staff in her organization resented the volunteer program she managed. They felt their work was too important for volunteers to be involved. They resented the allocation of funding that went to the program. They resented that its workers spent their time out of the building and running around in the community. They didn't like the good press the program was receiving while the organization itself received so little. I sat there thinking this could be a library literacy colleague telling our story. But it wasn't.

That presentation was made by an IRS staff member discussing the challenges of integrating its Volunteers In Tax Assistance (VITA) program into the IRS. Staff were resistant to this program, just as many library professionals have been resistant to adult literacy as a regular library service. That was my first big ah-ha that this is not a library issue.

That was followed by another fly-in-from-out-of-the-blue insight that came some years later. I was talking with a friend who was a department head in city hall. In the conversation he made the statement that “librarians are strange.” I certainly couldn’t let that go unchallenged, and we began the debate. Of course, the first librarian he referred to I had known by reputation and I had to agree that yes, that particular person was *strange*. Okay. Every profession has one, but that’s no reason to label the whole group. As we continued he painted a picture for me: When librarians [he has known] go to city hall to gather around the table for meetings with other department heads, they enter as if they are different and not a part of the group. Okay, being located in another building in which they’re not running into each other may contribute to that, I suggest. I shared that in my observation, libraries often do not get respect from city management. Managers do not seem to know and appreciate how libraries contribute to their communities. There’s a lack of understanding.

“No,” my friend told me. He shared his observations: that librarians have an elitist air about them; they *answer to a higher power*. They answer to the American Library Association’s Code of Ethics and core values rather than fitting in with local government. They think that libraries are doing the greater good for the community and that separates them from the daily humdrum work of other public servants. That was tough to hear, because that seems to ring true in some instances – it certainly was with a particular librarian we both knew in common at that time. So here was the story again – public libraries struggling to be integrated into the city or county system of government. Too often, in the face of serious budget cuts, libraries are the first to take a hit.

Later, it hit me how that adult literacy staff sometimes do the same thing within their libraries. Libraries change lives, we say. If you listen closely, you might hear a tag line coming out of the literacy office – but *it’s adult literacy that really changes lives the most*, as if our work is even more important than that of our library colleagues. Does pride in our work morph into an attitude of superiority? Yes, I think that sometimes sneaks up on us. Add to that, adult literacy answers to a higher authority – the ethics and practices of adult education and learning. We tend to give that culture preeminence over library practices.

So I share all of the foregoing just to say that sometimes we ourselves have unknowingly created the barriers to integration. We need to be mindful of the messages we send. And just as importantly, we need to be aware that the issue is not so personal. Maybe it is not a problem with librarians. It may be that we just need to learn how to be better communicators at what we do. We need to promote our programs within the library as well as out in the community.

Above all, for those of us who are not librarians by profession, maybe we need to learn more about our libraries, their missions and how we fit in.

What does an integrated library literacy program look like?

There are many answers to that question and I do not think for a moment that I have a definitive answer. I can offer, however, a few factors that might be considered for starters:

1. **Administrative Support.** Is the library director familiar and involved with the program? Supportive of the program?
2. **Class and Compensation.** Is the Adult Literacy Coordinator position categorized appropriately? Is it on par with other division supervisors who perform similar duties? Does the Coordinator take on similar responsibilities as other supervisors, such as being scheduled to open/close the library?
3. **Management Team.** Is the Literacy Coordinator part of the management team? Does the coordinator attend meetings, participate in planning and decision-making?

4. **Staff Training and Cross Training.** Is the Coordinator included in training opportunities, such as in-services on weeding the collection, customer service training, etc.? Conferences such as the California Library Association? Are adult literacy services included in orientations for new employees?
5. **Financial Support.** Is at a minimum, the Adult Literacy Coordinator position in the library budget, financed by the general fund?

Strategies to Promote Integration

1. **Seek first to understand, then to be understood.**

What is the mission of the library? Can you articulate how adult literacy supports that mission? Consider the bigger picture regarding the internal competition for space, materials, staff and funding. What are the priority needs of the library?

Speaking of funding, sometimes adult literacy seems to have “deep pockets” that other library divisions do not have. Sometimes there can be competition conflict of interest with fundraising priorities.

Also, on a personal level, consider how it may look to library colleagues when you are often out of the building because your work in building community connections requires you to be out. Be aware and sensitive to how others may misunderstand and resent this.

“We’re asking library staff to do things they’re not comfortable with (adult literacy). If we want to be accepted, we need to go out and do what we’re not comfortable with (library work).”

-- Beatriz Sarmiento, former Adult Literacy Coordinator turned Library Director Commerce Public Library

2. **Create partnerships within the library as well as outside.** As you develop marketing plans and strategies, also consider how to connect within your library, with your library colleagues. Look at their needs, interests, and programs and show them how adult literacy ties in with what is important to them. Look for ways you can work together.
3. **Socialize.** No doubt, many of you do that already. Maybe you should actually pull back on that (lest staff think you just have nothing to do other than sit around and visit all day). In some libraries, however, literacy staff have somehow separated themselves – or have found themselves separated because their offices are not in close proximity to other staff. You may have to go out of your way to talk with co-workers and get involved in library social gatherings.

When I first became an adult literacy coordinator I inherited a program in which the literacy staff were all hired from outside the library. They came in as strangers, in a new program, and never spent any time with staff. After being there a year, they were resented by library staff and seen as outsiders just taking up space and resources. When I was hired, I made it my mission to integrate the program. My first activity toward that was to volunteer for the library social committee! And that is truly out of my comfort zone. As a task rather than relationship-oriented person, that took a lot from me, but it paid off.

4. **Keep administration in the loop.** Communicate. Don’t assume they know what’s happening in your program. Don’t assume they don’t want to know. Don’t make any assumptions. Be clear and consistent with communication.

5. **Provide adult learner contact with administration and staff.** That's the best way to keep administration in the loop. Provide opportunities for them to meet and talk with adult learners directly. That is much more effective than you reporting about learners and their achievements.
6. **Give an adult literacy orientation to all new library staff.** Make sure you are included in meeting and introducing new library staff to library services.
7. **Invite library staff to literacy events.** Make sure they know they are welcome.

Integration of Adult Literacy Services: Maybe Just Another Point in History

Imagine that one day adult literacy services could be as much a part of the public library as is children's services today. That is not unreasonable when you consider that at one time children were not even allowed in the public library. It was an institution exclusively for adults. Integration of children's services into the public library evolved over time. For instance, history records that libraries only began to build separate children's rooms in the 1890s. We learn from the Manchester City Library in New Hampshire that in its move from one building to another, it was recorded that the first building "had no separate children's room. Indeed, prior to 1907 children weren't even allowed in the library."

It is not hard to imagine that adult literacy will one day be a regular, unquestioned service of the public library as well.

Only I hope it won't. I hope that we will close the gap on literacy. All adults will be able to read and write. They will be able to support their children in learning and literacy rates across the nation will skyrocket. Hopefully, there will come a time when a need for adult literacy services will just no longer exist. Some day.

About Cathay: Cathay Reta became an adult literacy volunteer tutor at the Commerce Public Library in February 1984. A year later she was made the Coordinator of the program. Since then she has worked in three different public libraries, on the state level as Training Director for California Literacy – a statewide nonprofit organization which closed its doors in 2006 and as a consultant with some statewide projects, and she has been active on national level with committees and contract work with ProLiteracy (and formerly with Laubach Literacy Action).

Currently Cathay is an adult literacy consultant.