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Our Voice

Literacy + OW: Best Practices for Serving Ontario Works Clients

Community Literacy of Ontario (CLO) is pleased to share our “*Literacy + OW: Best Practices for Serving Ontario Works Clients*”. Ontario Works (OW) clients represent a significant portion of clients in Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programs and have done so for the better part of the last decade.

According to the 2012/2013 EOIS-CaMS data from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, **25.8%** of adult learners in Ontario’s community-based Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) agencies self-identified Ontario Works as their source of income. A further **14.3%** of adult learners self-identified as being financially supported by the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP).

According to available data then, just over **one quarter** of adult learners in Ontario’s community-based Literacy and Basic Skills agencies are in receipt of OW. With ODSP recipients taken into account, **just over 40% of the learners in community-based literacy programs are on OW or ODSP**. And these numbers only reflect those learners who choose to self-identify their source of income as OW or ODSP. We know anecdotally that some learners may self-identify as “other” during intake, preferring to keep their status as an OW or ODSP recipient to themselves. In reality, Ontario’s community-based literacy programs likely serve even higher percentages of OW and ODSP learners than current statistics reveal.



Given the high numbers of OW clients in Literacy and Basic Skills programs, CLO decided to research and write this newsletter on best practices for working with clients who are on Ontario Works.

Researching the Best Practices

Community Literacy of Ontario used several approaches to gather best practices on how literacy practitioners can and do work with Ontario Works clients. This included a review of existing resources, a survey of our member literacy agencies, and a focus group with the CLO Board of Directors.

Review of Existing Resources

As part of our research, we reviewed various print and internet-based resources and assessed several literature reviews conducted for other literacy projects. Research results are embedded in the best practices from the field that we share in this newsletter.

Of all the excellent resources we reviewed, we found the report, *Factors that Facilitate Adult Learner Success in the NWT* (released in January 2013), to provide an excellent foundation and framework for presenting the best practices we found. If you haven't already checked out the wonderful resources produced by the Northwest Territories Literacy Council, visit their website at www.nwt.literacy.ca/

Survey Says...

In order to gather practical information for this newsletter, CLO, of course, turned to our members. We sent out a survey to our members (100 community-based literacy agencies) and were fortunate to have a 50% response rate, reflecting feedback from 50 respondents. In the survey, we asked our members to provide the following information:

- Does your literacy agency serve learners from Ontario Works? (*100% of literacy agencies indicated that they do indeed serve clients from OW*)
- Does your literacy agency serve learners from the Ontario Disability Support Program? (*Again 100% of literacy agencies noted that they serve clients from ODSP*)
- Please share a success story or a best practice in serving clients from OW or ODSP.



CLO Board Focus Group

CLO's Board of Directors is comprised of 12 directors – representing community-based literacy programs in urban and rural communities within all four regions of the province. CLO Board members agreed to participate in a focus group during which they shared many excellent ideas for working effectively with Ontario Works participants.

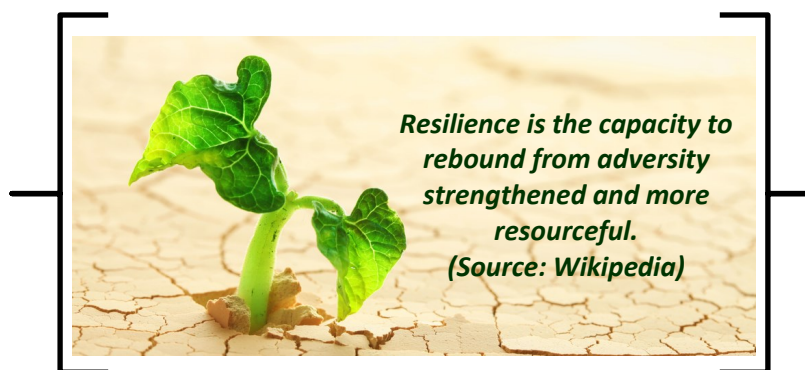
Best Practices for Service Ontario Works Clients

From these sources, Community Literacy of Ontario learned a great deal about successful approaches to serving Ontario Works clients. In the following pages of this newsletter, we will dig a little deeper into some of the approaches that have proven successful within Ontario's community-based literacy agencies and explore some related best practices to working better with Ontario Works clients.

Formally Connect Academic and Non-Academic Outcomes

Literacy programs build adult learners' academic skills in order to assist learners in achieving their goals. However, in addition to literacy instruction, practitioners also note that adult learners often experience increases in their soft skills such as increased self-confidence, the ability to set and achieve goals, and enhanced interpersonal and communication skills due to their enrolment in literacy programming.

Both the research and input from literacy practitioners suggests that formally connecting academic with these non-academic outcomes increases human resiliency and contributes to greater self-sufficiency.



Best Practices from the literacy field:

- Design modular learning so OW learners experience a sense of accomplishment as they learn each module.
- Increase learners' confidence by offering student writing circles and by publishing their work (with permission) in books, blogs, websites and promotional materials.
- In addition to literacy instruction, offer training sessions on topics such as "How to speak with confidence".
- Offer training sessions on goal setting and time management to prepare them for the world beyond OW and LBS.
- Embed activities designed to increase self-confidence and goal setting into regular literacy and numeracy instruction.
- Hold informal sharing sessions where learners get to improve their verbal communication skills by presenting to one another on topics of interest to them.



Reduce Physical Barriers Related to Basic Needs

It is well-known now that it is hard for people (adults or children) to focus on learning when their basic needs have not been met. Many Ontario Works clients find themselves without fundamentals such as enough food or clothes or they may face barriers such as accessing adequate housing or affordable daycare.

Ontario's community-based literacy programs are not only aware of these physical barriers related to basic needs but have developed some excellent and often easy-to-implement best practices in response.

Best practices from the literacy field:

- Start a community garden to facilitate access to fresh fruits and vegetables; which are typically unavailable at the local food bank.
- Maintain a stock of canned food that can be given away. Donations might come from local businesses or community groups. In one case, the local Food Bank provided canned food which then created a reciprocal relationship for referring clients.
- Get donations from local businesses for granola bars or other snacks for clients.
- Incorporate healthy eating, nutrition, grocery shopping , money management and budgeting into programming
- Assist OW clients who need it to get pardons for minor criminal convictions. People on OW who have criminal records often can't afford to pay for the legal fees to receive a pardon and they can therefore find it difficult to find work because of criminal background checks.
- Get local employers to donate soap, shampoo and other toiletries and leave them in an open area where anyone can access them without stigma.
- Gather information on other community services that can help with people's basic needs (i.e., Good Food Box, Coats for Kids, Food Bank, etc.) and share this information in an easy-to-access part of the literacy centre.
- Practise early-intervention. If attendance is waning, it isn't necessarily a motivational issue. The learner could be struggling with barriers that you can help remove.
- So that you can make effective referrals when needed, develop close relationships with local organizations that can help meet a wide variety of basic needs (Ontario Works, Food Bank, Soup Kitchen, Canadian Mental Health Association, John Howard Society, etc.).



Create a Welcoming Environment



Most literacy practitioners are aware that OW clients can be difficult to retain in literacy and other programming. Often, OW clients believe that they are treated like a number by various government systems and programs which may contribute to negative feelings and attitudes towards social and government services.

Many OW clients are faced with multiple barriers upon joining a literacy program. It's very important then that literacy practitioners make extra efforts to welcome OW clients. Not surprisingly, many programs cited specific best practices that they use to create a welcoming environment and increase the chances that OW clients will want to stay within the program.

Best practices from the literacy field

- Create a warm and inviting environment to break down the resistance of OW learners.
- Provides snacks for clients that are donated by local employers or service clubs.
- Find ways to provide positive reinforcement EVERY day.
- Make this positive reinforcement INTENTIONAL and PLANNED or it may get forgotten.
- OW clients sometimes feel bullied by other organizations and institutions. Make the literacy centre a place of mutual respect.
- Do a tour of the literacy centre/orientation sessions/group warm up, so everyone gets to know each other.
- Ensure that learners have chosen to attend, rather than believing they need to participate to appease their case worker. If they feel forced to attend, arrange a meeting with their case worker for the three of you to explore other options.
- Invite learners to activities outside of class time, for example, to social and fundraising events held by the literacy agency.
- Hold monthly pot luck lunches with staff, volunteers and learners.

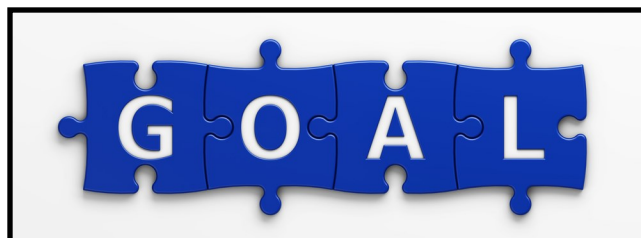


Provide Ongoing Motivation

Creating a welcoming environment will assist any program in encouraging Ontario Works clients to come back. However, there are also best practices that program staff can adopt in order to provide ongoing motivation for clients.

Best practices from the field

- Find out what motivates them the most (their children, finding or keeping a job, their spouse, pride, fear of failure, etc.). Develop strategies that provide encouragement around their individual motivations.
- OW clients can sometimes be easily discouraged. Set up an “*encouragement committee*” made up of staff and students who think of ways to continually encourage students, especially those with barriers. Activities could include: sharing words of encouragement, sending note cards, giving small treats, acknowledging student accomplishments (with their permission) in the agency newsletter, etc.
- Structure learning activities so that OW clients feel an ongoing sense of accomplishment and moving forward.
- Share success stories via traditional or social media (be sure to gain permission first).
- Celebrate successes – both big and small!
- One program uses Monopoly money for clients to earn treats for being on time or completing homework assignments or even for coming back to class after a break. The “money” can be used for other rewards (gift cards from local businesses).
- Provide peer mentoring opportunities.
- Do a draw at the end of the week/month for clients who had good attendance.
- Focus on their end goal. If OW clients are reminded that hard work leads to quicker achievement of their goals, they may be more motivated.



Set Realistic Expectations

One of the approaches that we heard frequently from both CLO members and in our research is the importance of setting realistic expectations – both for the OW clients and from them. As literacy practitioners, we have a responsibility to assist OW clients to develop soft skills for life or for employment.

Best practices from the literacy field:

- Have clear rules that are enforced around attendance and good behaviour.
- Develop and enforce a policy for poor behaviour.
- Develop a commitment form with rules and expectations clearly laid out that must be signed by every learner.
- Address punctuality and attendance issue right at the very beginning. Highlight that this is so important for later success in the workplace.
- Make parallels between skills gained and practices required in literacy programs with skills required and practices required in the workplace.
- Treat being in a literacy program as an opportunity to develop exceptional workplace skills and behaviours.
- Offer sessions on “Dressing for the Workplace”. Provide a tour of a local second hand clothing shop, including gift certificates that can be used there (donated by employers or service clubs).
- Set clear expectations for personal hygiene. For people on limited budgets, personal hygiene items can be costly, so help out by keeping a supply of easily / discretely accessible hygiene products at your learning centre (paid for by community donations).
- Ask local employers to present a workshop at your literacy centre on their expectations around work habits, dress codes and workplace behaviour.



Offer Wraparound Services

The term “wraparound services” is widely used, especially within the context of Employment Ontario, but it’s especially important for literacy deliverers to have strong referral connections to wraparound services because some OW clients may present with multiple challenges – in addition to literacy and numeracy challenges.

Best practices related to wraparound services can occur in two ways: referrals versus concurrent programming. In other words, sometimes you need to refer a client out – they must address their other challenges before they are ready to come back to the program to learn.

However, Employment Ontario is encouraging concurrent programming – in which a program does its best to keep the client involved in literacy programming by referring the client to other services as the client works on his/her literacy and numeracy goals at the same time. In this instance, the support to the clients is facilitated by the LBS program and this extra support assists the client in staying focused on learning in spite of his/her other challenges.

Best practices from the field

- Offer wrap-around services so that OW clients are able to access all of the available community services.
- Take an interest in what the clients’ needs and concerns are. Support them where they are at and to take steps to help them move forward.
- Gather brochures, other promotional material, and online resources from all local programs and services and have them available in a prominent place in the literacy centre, so clients can easily learn about all available community services.
- Hold regular meetings and networking events with staff from other employment and social service agencies in order to remain fully informed about local services.
- Invite practitioners who provide services needed by OW clients to deliver presentations at your literacy centre.
- Hold a joint workshop at your literacy centre of a topic of common interest with other local service providers.



Offer Contextualized Literacy Programming

LBS delivery is learner-centred. However, because LBS programs see so many OW clients, there may be opportunities to further tailor delivery to specific groups within OW, such as young parents or single men without dependents. In doing so, you may find that there are some competencies that are more needed by or interesting to certain groups. For example, young men may be particularly interested in technology and gaming. If they're interested, they're engaged. If they're engaged, there is a greater chance they will stay within the program, build their skills and move on to their next goal.

Best practices from the literacy field:

- Combine literacy and numeracy with soft skills and employability skills as both sets of skills are often needed and can reinforce each other.
- Help clients to access practical certificates – like WHMIS, SmartServe, First Aid, Food Preparation, etc.
- Set up interested clients with the opportunity to gain volunteer experience. It is a great way to get OW clients back in the workplace by offering them the chance to build skills, confidence and references.
- Use gamification to develop and deliver literacy instruction for clients who are interested in and motivated by technology. So what is gamification? Wikipedia defines gamification as the use of game thinking game mechanics in a non-game context to for learning, problem solving, and other activities. To learn more about it, check out Literacy Link South Central's project on this important topic:
www.llsc.on.ca/node/117
- Use sector specific learning resources such as Literacy Link of Eastern Ontario' occupation-based, "**Essential Skills Training**", available at: <http://library.copian.ca/learning/browse/series?name=Essential+Skills+Training+-+LLEO> or Simcoe / Muskoka Literacy Network's series, "**Bridging the Employment Gap for Learners with Low Literacy Skills**" available at: <http://literacynetwork.ca/bridgegap.html>
- Both series effectively engage learners by focusing on employability skills rather than traditional academics. This focus also appeals to OW case workers who are trying to keep their clients connected to the workforce.
- For learners who do not have an employment goal, CLO's "**Moving Forward: Curricula and Resources for Learners on the Independence Path**" is an excellent resource. It is available at: www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/resource/Moving_Foward_HI_RES_01.pdf



Linking with Ontario Works

Ontario Works managers and caseworkers are integral in facilitating referrals to literacy programs. Yet, often these staff have many different lenses to look through in order to serve OW clients and it can be challenging to deepen their appreciation and understanding of literacy and its role in assisting individuals in becoming more employable and resilient. Here are a couple of strategies with best practices to promote better working relationships between OW offices and literacy programs.

Help OW caseworkers to better understand literacy and how it can support OW clients to meet their goals

Sometimes those of us who work in adult literacy think that the link between literacy and employment prospects is glaringly obvious. However, to most of the population, this connection may not be clearly apparent. Even in communities where the local literacy programs and literacy networks have already made presentations to Ontario Works caseworkers, communication and referrals can break down over time. Many OW offices experience turnover among their staff.

As well, OW caseworkers need to be knowledgeable in many different areas – not just education and training. Literacy practitioners need to regularly connect with local OW offices to explain the benefits of literacy and OW agencies working together.



Best practices from the literacy field

- Offer to deliver presentations to OW staff at OW staff meetings.
- Host “brown bag” luncheons with other service providers including OW.
- Offer to host workshops for OW clients.
- Share educational resources like CLO’s “*Literacy Why It Matters*” with OW staff (www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/resource/literacy_why_it_matters.pdf).
- Participate in community networking events.
- Link with other service providers via newsletters, e-communiques, websites, LinkedIn and other social media channels.
- Invite OW staff to celebrations of learning and any innovative learning experiences.

Develop approaches to assist OW caseworkers by taking the guesswork out of making referrals to literacy programs

Some OW offices are very large and serve thousands of clients. There could be quite a few community services to which caseworkers could make referrals. This can be challenging because literacy programs tend to be niche-based, and it's not always clear to those outside the literacy field why they should refer to one program over another. Making the referral process clear and seamless to the client and other service providers is critical.



Best practices from the literacy field:

- In communities where there are many different service providers and where referral pathways may not be clear, clients can sometimes be referred to programs that cannot meet their needs effectively. In such instances, a single point of referral can be a much more constructive arrangement.
- Through literacy community planning via Ontario's regional literacy networks, a single literacy program can be the point of contact for the local OW office for literacy referrals
- The local regional literacy network could be the point of connection for OW caseworkers who are unsure which of the local literacy programs can most effectively serve their clients.
- Discuss the Ontario Works Literacy Screening Questionnaire – its purpose and how to interpret the results of it with OW staff.
- Develop a referral process with like-minded agencies in your area. Gaining referrals from other community agencies and associations can grow into a mutually beneficial referral program over time.
- Develop a brochure that clearly explains the various programs, pathways and points of referral for OW caseworkers and others. This brochure could be used by all Literacy and Basic Skills agencies in the region.
- Have clear programming information on agency websites along with links to other appropriate community services.
- Continually share up-to-date information on your literacy program, its services and criteria with OW caseworkers
- Hold regular networking meetings with Ontario Works and other service providers





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Conclusion

We know that OW clients are a very important part of Literacy and Basic Skills programming. As a society, we cannot afford to "forget" those who have high or multiple needs. Our employment, training and support services need to work together in order to discover new and even more effective ways of assisting individuals in meeting their full potential.

Fortunately, community-based literacy agencies in Ontario already understand these realities. Our hope in presenting these best practices in a specially-dedicated newsletter is both to congratulate our programs on their amazing work and to provide you with some new ideas to consider as we all continue to foster literacy, learning and employment in our communities.

This newsletter is available online at:

www.communityliteracyofontario.ca/newslet.htm

OW + LBS Webinar

In addition to producing this newsletter, Community Literacy of Ontario will also be hosting a webinar on "*Literacy + OW: Best Practices for Serving Ontario Works Clients*". Watch your inbox for details in November.

Webinar

