

# **From Academic Institution to Public Library: The Transition of Adult Literacy in Red Deer**

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The Centre for Literacy Summer Institute 2007  
Montreal Quebec**

## **Summary**

Our presentation will focus on the challenges encountered when merging the Red Deer Adult Literacy Program with Red Deer Public Library, to become the Red Deer Public Library Adult Literacy Program. Originally Red Deer College, a local post-secondary institution, was the legal host of the Red Deer Adult Literacy Program. We will outline the proposal we made to the provincial government allowing a public library to become the administrator of an Alberta Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Program (VTALP). The majority of the VTALP's in the province have Community Adult Learning Councils as the legal hosts. Libraries, we feel, are a better fit.

Although our library – literacy partnership isn't a new one (the literacy program has been housed in Red Deer Public Library since 1998), Red Deer Public Library's formal adoption of the administration of the Red Deer Adult Literacy Program began in 2006 so we thought it was timely and appropriate to present the opportunities and challenges of a recent transition of literacy to public library for this year's Summer Institute "Libraries and Literacy: Making It Work." We **have** made it work and in this presentation, we will tell you how, from both a Librarian's and a Literacy Coordinator's perspective.

The Red Deer Adult Literacy Program began as the Red Deer Volunteer Tutor Bank, and has evolved through many forms and phases in its approximately 26 year history in Red Deer. The program actually began in the library, and then moved to a church basement, finally finding an ideal home in an old school building, housed with Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) program. These were all programs offered and administered by Red Deer College, our local post-secondary institution.

Due to a demolition and loss of funding as well as other factors in 1998, the Volunteer Tutor Bank, ABE and ESL had to find other "housing". ABE and ESL moved to Red

Deer College while Volunteer Tutor Bank program was offered space in the north Red Deer Branch of Red Deer Public Library, and the program became the Red Deer Adult Literacy Program. An informal collaboration was started. The literacy program paid the library a small yearly fee and Red Deer Public Library offered an office, some shelving and phone line. It was a very basic partnership. There wasn't space in Red Deer College to house the program, yet Advanced Education still wanted RDC to manage the grant and administer the program for the sake of consistency so the Continuing Education Department managed the Alberta government literacy grant, mail, salaries, furniture, computers, etc. The Adult Literacy program, however, was remote logistically as well as in mandate – so the marriage wasn't perfect.

After 10 years of successful collaboration, in the winter of 2006, the two Adult Literacy Coordinators Donna Grutter and Michelle Cook both decided to retire at the same time. They introduced the idea of Red Deer Public Library taking over formal administration of the literacy program from Red Deer College and adding the Red Deer Adult Literacy Program to the library's core services. The Library Director thought it was a terrific opportunity to raise the profile of literacy in the Red Deer community, as well as to cement the valuable partnership which already existed between literacy and library, and the wheels were set in motion.

The Interim Dean of Business and Human Services at Red Deer College was very supportive of the idea of literacy becoming an integral part of Red Deer Public Library since their programs and departments were undergoing some major restructuring. The

Red Deer College focus had changed and was driven by the economy. Literacy was lost in the shuffle and didn't have much of an opportunity to change and grow in the College structure. The ties needed to be cut and passed to an institution that would grow the program.

The difficulty surfaced when Alberta Advanced Education was contacted to negotiate the transfer. Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Programs (VTALPs) in Alberta, of which the Red Deer Adult Literacy Program was one, for the most part, have Community Adult Learning Councils, or CALCs, as their legal hosts. The legal host can receive and administer the grants provided by the Alberta government. Advanced Learning realized that there had to be some consistency in the administration of the programs with over 70 VTALPs in the province, all administering the funds in various and creative ways. Therefore, Advanced Ed was reluctant to have a library administer the program. Their feeling was that they have carefully set these parameters around the province, and having a library administer the grant might open a can of worms. The Library spoke with the Board Chair and the Director of the Red Deer CALC who were happy to take over as legal hosts, but to Red Deer Public Library, that wouldn't have been any different from the situation we were in at the time with RDC administering the grant. The Library wanted the program to become an integral part of our core services and complete the conversion of the Dawe Branch of Red Deer Public Library to a truly life-long learning branch. There were only a handful of literacy programs in the province receiving government funding that were administered outside of CALCs, one being the Red Deer program administered by Red Deer College, and another being Lethbridge's

Read On Program which had been grandfathered when CALCs took over administrations in the late 1990's. Lethbridge became somewhat of a model and we had some discussion with the Coordinator of that program. We knew we had all of the structures in place to take on the program both administratively and physically but we needed to make our case before the government. A series of meetings were held with representatives from Advanced Education, Red Deer College, the Red Deer Adult Community Learning Council, Red Deer Adult Literacy and Red Deer Public Library. We made a strong case for hosting the program including the success of the existing partnership, and the disruption to literacy service if they had to find another home, as we didn't want to continue to house the program if it didn't become part of our core service.

Fortunately, Advanced Education had decided to make us an exception to the CALC rule, and granted us legal host rights since the program had been so successful in its current location. Library and literacy worked well together in Red Deer.

Now the real work began. We needed to shift the Red Deer College structure of the program to the Red Deer Public Library structure. We already had the program in place – tutors and students already used the library space. The office was already set up in an office in the library. We had a Family Literacy Program as a core service in the same office so we had gone through some transition with that program when it went from a government demonstration project to a core service of Red Deer Public Library. We had a fantastic Literacy Assistant who had been with the program for several years

to make the transition smoother. The challenge was to hire one coordinator to replace two who had been with the program for many years and had built it to the successful program it was. We didn't want to lose the tutor base they had worked so hard to build. We wanted to build on this success and were able to hire Lois who brought a wealth of knowledge, expertise and enthusiasm to the program. She is a specialist in the Adult Basic Education field, so she understood the needs of adult learners and tutors. That was the major part of the transition.

Having hosted the program for many years, and being a collaborative library (the Dawe Branch serves as a combined Kindergarten to Grade 9 school library and public library) it wasn't difficult to integrate the literacy program. It fit our mandate well, "ensuring community access to the universe of information, experience and ideas." Libraries are already great supporters of literacy. The library is a smaller institution than Red Deer College, so Adult Literacy doesn't get lost in the mix. The two programs complement each other. There is less structure than in an academic situation, so it's easier to make literacy fit. We already have a number of lifelong learning programs that we administer in the Dawe Branch Library such as Computer Lending Program and Family Literacy.

One of the most positive changes for Adult Literacy was the stability of having a permanent space to meet their needs, and not having to worry about whether or not they would be moving every year. The Library offers expanded space for larger group sessions such as conversation groups, volunteer appreciation events and tutor training sessions. The Dawe Branch Library is to undergo a renovation in 2008 that includes a

new office to be created for adult literacy so they will be designing their space from the ground up, rather than fitting in to a space that already existed, but may not fully meet their needs.

The space is conducive to tutors and students meetings. The Library is already set up as a school library. There is adequate table space. At times the pairs may find it noisy and distracting when classes come through, but others find it a comfortable environment because they don't have to be quiet when they work. Literacy clients also find this branch to be less intimidating than some libraries. It's a one-story accessible building that has a less academic, more family atmosphere.

The hours work well for adult literacy. Libraries are often open longer hours than a literacy office would be on its own. Even when there isn't literacy staff to assist tutors and students, the library is open and library staff can direct tutors and students to the office, give basic information about the program such as phone numbers to call and literacy brochures. Students and tutors can still meet and use the library facility, literacy resources or literacy computers when there is no literacy staff on site.

Libraries are largely about customer service and assisting people. Services are available for free or minimal cost. Literacy is the same. Tutors and students will bring their children, and they can find things to do in the children's area while their parents (or grandparents!) are being tutored. There is a library membership fee at Red Deer Public Library, but the fee is waived for tutors and students of the literacy program.

Having the program in the library encourages tutors and students to become not only literacy clients, but also library customers, expanding the literacy collection beyond the literacy walls. Literacy clients borrow magazines, books, CD's, DVD's and audio books, all of which will contribute to multiple literacies.

Public internet access is available, and the library subscribes to a number of databases that are useful for literacy and ESL work (Rosetta Stone, Newspaper Direct Press Display, etc.). Students and tutors may use these computers but there are also internet capable computers within the literacy office, set up and maintained by the library's IT Department.

The Adult Literacy Program continues to receive its grant from Alberta Advanced Education, which now pays for the salaries of the Coordinator and the Literacy Assistant. Most other expenses are covered by the library, which gives adult literacy stability. Technology and phone systems are shared, and the Library's IT Department now maintains the Literacy computer equipment. Continuing education, materials budget, furniture, supplies and other expenses are paid out of the library's budget. Previously the grant had to cover everything, so fundraising was essential. Coordinators used to set money aside in case they had to find a new location if the library ever needed the space back. The Adult Literacy materials budget went from \$800.00 to \$5000.00 per year. The Friends of the Library who fundraise for the library, now also fundraise for literacy. Fundraising is, therefore, also not as great of a concern for the

RDPL Adult Literacy Coordinator as it is for other Literacy Coordinators in the province.

Adult Literacy is now able to take advantage of specialty staff and programs that were previously the domain of the library only. The library Promotions Coordinator in conjunction with the Adult Literacy Coordinator now creates displays, posters and advertising. Adult literacy also has the potential to use the library's Volunteer Coordinator, and the IT staff is shared. The library's Financial Officer administers the program which takes that component out of the Literacy Coordinator's hands. Less paperwork for the Coordinator means more time for student – tutor interaction and training.

The challenges have far been outweighed by the advantages of literacy being part of libraries' core services, but not everything has been smooth. One of the challenges we are still grappling with is staffing structure. The literacy staff has had to fit into the current library staff grids and unions. Being used to a college situation, the structure was not ideal but is evolving. Adult literacy is also serving “two bosses” – the library board and the government, each of which has different parameters and policies.

IT support is an ongoing concern as literacy and library share the same IT staff so everyone waits in line. As exciting as it is to have access to newer equipment and software, adult literacy must wait to have everything “hooked up” because it has to be done by IT staff.

The community, when it hears that a public library has an adult literacy program, often expects to borrow literacy resources just as they borrow public library materials. Our adult literacy program only loans their resources to registered literacy clients at this point.

There was a lot of initial publicity when we launched the program as a core service but as the program becomes more established, there is a concern that adult literacy could get lost in all of the other library programs that are offered in Red Deer. We are still in transition, and raising literacy's profile is a goal that we will continue to work on as the program becomes more settled as a library department. RDPL wishes to "grow the program," but the directive from the Alberta Government was to maintain the program as is for at least the first year. There was some concern that the library would change the program drastically and we were told that it must stay within the parameters of the Advanced Education grant so we have been quite careful this year to maintain consistency.

Space will always be an issue. The adult literacy program is growing, as is the library clientele. Will the library be able to sustain this growth, even through the renovation?

Funding must still come from the Alberta government in order to fully sustain the program. There is always the nagging concern that the government funding could dry up or diminish, but history shows that the grant increases rather than decreases so

we're hoping that continues. The grant also comes with restrictions on clientele, for example ESL clients. This is the fastest growing sector of adult literacy and poses a challenge for both libraries and literacy. Our collections cannot grow fast enough to meet the needs of the ESL community nor can adult literacy keep up with the demand.

Opportunity or Challenge?? This was definitely an opportunity not to be missed. With the change of personnel, changing times at the college, and the library looking for programming opportunities, the time was right to change hosts. Under the library's administration I think this program has so much potential to grow and change with the dynamic changes happening in our community. The extra resources provided by the library bring stability to the program which it has never before experienced. The opportunities to collaborate with other programs within the library are very exciting. Most of the challenges are the administrative type that do not affect the outward look of the program and are issues easily resolved in this open-minded, very positive work culture. Adult Literacy has the perfect home within Red Deer Public Library