

Case Study:

The Vital Link programme – enhancing the reading experience for Skills for Life learners through libraries

‘The students didn’t think they could learn through reading. It’s been a revelation to them that they could enjoy a book and still be learning.’ Jill Harrison, Family Learning Tutor, Tameside

With over 4,000 sites in the heart of local communities in the UK, the public library service offers a unique resource for adult literacy learners and tutors. The Vital Link works with library authorities across the country to promote their role in support of the Skills for Life strategy. Run by The Reading Agency in partnership with the National Literacy Trust and the National Reading Campaign, the Vital Link focuses particularly on how reading for pleasure can motivate students and engage new learners and is endorsed by the Society of Chief Librarians.

The Vital Link forms part of the UK Government’s Framework for the Future Action Plan for public libraries being implemented by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

A belief in the life-enriching value of reading is at the heart of The Vital Link programme which has been working with the public library service to develop partnerships with learning providers with a particular focus on reading for pleasure. This national programme has taken partnership between the sectors as its starting-point in the knowledge that the expertise and resources provided by libraries can be an ideal complement to the delivery of the teaching curriculum by literacy practitioners.

Much time has been spent building and promoting libraries’ capacity to work with literacy learners, especially those whose functional reading skills are adequate but who have little experience of choosing books for their own enjoyment or interest and to making sure libraries have attractive non-stigmatised book collections to promote their offer to local colleges, Adult & Community Learning and voluntary sector providers. The Vital Link has encouraged library staff to visit adult literacy classes and host reading activity in their libraries using fiction and non-fiction specially selected for these ‘emergent readers’, usually at Entry Level 3 or Level 1 in Skills for Life parlance.

The Vital Link’s First Choice collection features mainstream titles by authors as diverse as Jamie Oliver and Bill Bryson which have been chosen for their appealing design and content,



appropriate length and readability level. It also includes books written by authors such as Roddy Doyle, Patricia Scanlan and Lin Anderson for publishers who had spotted the dearth of material for this audience – Dublin-based New Island and Sandstone and Barrington Stoke both in Scotland. Collections focused on families (branded Got kids? Get reading!) and dads (branded Five Minutes) include children’s books also chosen for their accessibility for parents and carers with little confidence about reading aloud. The Vital Link has developed stock selection criteria for librarians and tutors to use when assessing the suitability of mainstream books for learners as well as an unique online searchable database of book titles selected for emergent adult readers – www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk

Through the development of an improvement framework, the Vital Link has provided a tool to enable libraries to achieve a consistent offer for adults with low literacy which is supported by an online guidance and case studies at www.vitallink.org.uk The Improvement Framework sets out the required management commitment, together with a three-tier framework for service development around four themes: accessibility, learner support, stock provision and reader development activity. Recent work in the Yorkshire region has been focused on how library services can support each other to move forward in their Skills for Life work and overcome issues to improving their service for adults with low literacy.

The Vital Link coordinates and supports libraries’ involvement in the BBC’s three-year RaW (Reading and Writing) campaign. The campaign is focused on reading for pleasure and families with the aim of using people’s passions to lead them into learning. Its website and guidance are geared to encouraging people to pursue and share their interests through talking about and swapping books and writing their own stories.

This push for informal learning has coincided with the launch of Quick Reads, initiated by the annual World Book Day celebration in 2006. Quick Reads represent a major investment to woo an audience which has hitherto been largely neglected by the book trade. Publishers have persuaded top authors including Ruth Rendell, Joanna Trollope, Andy McNab and Richard Branson to write short books designed to appeal to adults who have yet to develop a reading habit. Quick Reads have also been designed to go down well with people who have little time on their hands or who had given up on reading for pleasure.

In the UK, a key issue has been advocacy to the Skills for Life sector – how reading is interpreted through the Adult Literacy Core Curriculum and the role of reading for pleasure for literacy tutors in their day to day practice. The Vital Link has been running a Department for Education and Skills funded reading for pleasure campaign to encourage and enable learning providers to promote reading for pleasure and links with libraries.

A first step of the campaign was to find out the extent to which Skills for Life managers and tutors were already integrating reading for pleasure activity into their teaching. An informal ‘snapshot’ provided by a questionnaire returned by around 360 practitioners indicated overwhelming support for the concept of engaging learners in reading for enjoyment. Over two-thirds said they already had links with libraries. Many mentioned good practice including reading groups for emergent readers, multiple copy and long-term loan of materials and joint professional development.

There were also expressions of concern, however, about the pressure that targets, accreditation and squeezed funding were putting on their time – talk of tutors ‘bogged down in functional



literacy teaching via core curricula’ and ‘tension between reading for pleasure and meeting other priorities’. This is reflected in initial findings from Adult and Community Learning tutors involved in an NRDC-funded practitioner-led research project in Essex. Even here, where the library service has pioneered regular input into classes by library staff, there’s still a feeling that engagement with books is ‘another thing’ for them to do rather than an accepted element of everyday practice.

The Reading for Pleasure campaign also has a particular focus on developing learning resources to support the Quick Reads titles published in 2006 and 2007 and has also included partnership development events run with unionlearn and with prison education and library staff and engagement work with families in partnership with family learning and children’s centres.

A key priority has been evaluation. In the UK, the literacy side is very target driven and about moving people on whereas the reading for pleasure side delivered by libraries is more about the qualitative outcomes for learners (self-esteem, self-confidence, self-direction). Given this environment it can be difficult to demonstrate the contribution that public libraries are making to the acquisition of literacy skills for any given learner.

The Vital Link has also produced an online evaluation toolkit at www.vitallink.org.uk for library staff and literacy practitioners. This is based on the research methodology used for *Confidence All Round* (Morris, Hargreaves McIntyre, November 2005) which found that libraries’ work with emergent readers had a beneficial impact on their literacy skills and motivation to read and learn more. It found that emergent readers engaged in reading activities promoted by library staff working with tutors expressed greater confidence in their skills and increased motivation to learn. They valued the library environment and wanted to continue reading for pleasure. Those who were parents or carers also felt encouraged to read with their children.

For the immediate future, The Vital Link is developing a new reading activity to be launched later this year – The Six Book Challenge; continuing regional work on embedding the Vital Link approach; through project work looking at how we can deliver more appropriate mainstream titles for adults with low literacy and how the Vital Link approach can be applied to people with English as a second language. In 2008, a National Year of Reading will be taking place across the UK, and we are looking forward to making the most of this opportunity to promote this area of work.

Challenges:

Partnership working: this area of work cannot be done without good partnerships, this means that each partner is very clear about their own role, the benefits to each of them and what they are aiming to achieve.

Capacity and time: this goes for both sides of the partnership. This is developmental work and takes time and commitment on both sides to deliver effectively and to the right target audience (who by definition are hard to reach).

Prioritization: has this area of work been identified as a priority area of work and put into key planning and strategy documents? Has it been recognized as a budget line as well as giving staff time to deliver the work? For public libraries has it been embedded as a core function of the service?

Advocacy: this needs to happen at all levels – nationally, regionally and locally.



Appropriate resources: if you're promoting reading for pleasure to emergent readers you need the right books!

Staff/tutor understanding of the work: staff and tutors need to understand each other! For public library staff they also need to understand the target audience, the resources they are using as well as partnership and outreach working. This all has training implications particularly in the areas of basic skills awareness, engaging with adults with low level literacy and developing and sustaining partnerships.

Impact evidence: absolutely essential in order not only to see what impact the work is having and outcomes it is delivering but also whether it is being effective.

Weblinks:

www.vitallink.org.uk – main website for The Vital Link – covering, implementation, resources (including booklists), good practice, creative reading ideas, evaluation and links through to other initiatives focused on this area

www.firstchoicebooks.org.uk – online database of appropriate titles for adults with low level literacy

www.quickreads.org.uk - site for the UK Quick Reads initiative

www.quickreadsideas.org.uk – site for learners to engage with the Quick Reads titles

www.bbc.co.uk/raw - site for one of the BBC's current learning campaigns RaW 'Read More and Write Better'

Publishers:

www.quickreads.org.uk

www.newisland.ie

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

www.sandstonepress.com

Toolkits:

Got kids? Get reading! Downloadable from

<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/vitallink/gotkidspilot.html>

Research:

Confidence all round: The Impact on Emergent Adult Readers of Reading for Pleasure through Libraries (Morris, Hargreaves McIntyre November 2005) can be found at

<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/vitallink/evaluation.html>

www.nrdc.org.uk National Centre and Development Centre for Adult Literacy

