

The Victoria READ Society

**Sharing Information – Family Literacy Programs in Greater
Victoria**

September 30, 2006

funded by the National Literacy Secretariat

Sharing Information ~ Family Literacy Programs in Greater Victoria

Project Rationale

More than 40% of working age people in British Columbia have a hard time with the everyday demands of reading, writing and using numbers. This means they may have trouble finding and keeping jobs. It means they may not be able to get the information they need to protect their health, safety or legal rights. And it means they may be unable to read to their children. (Literacy BC)

We know there are many statistics regarding the value of family literacy projects and the number of people in British Columbia who are dealing with low literacy skills. We also know that the social services environment has changed significantly in the past few years. Many organizations have downsized their programs and refocused their services. With funding cuts and changing priorities, community networks are not as robust as they once were.

When organizations are aware of community resources, they can more effectively refer clients, assess needs, develop programs, provide rationale for requests for funding and advocate for additional or different services. With this in mind, the Victoria READ Society (READ) successfully applied to the National Literacy Secretariat for funding to research and compile information on family literacy in Greater Victoria. Our objectives were to:

- Collect information to develop a directory of family literacy programs
- Conduct a community mapping process
- Document the process for other agencies.

The resulting *Directory of Family Literacy Programs in Greater Victoria* is available as a hard copy document and on-line as a full text document for viewing and downloading <http://www.readsociety.bc.ca/family/Directory.pdf> In addition, this information is available as a web-based family literacy map that can be viewed at <http://www.readsociety.bc.ca/litmap/>.

Directory

By providing easy-to-read information in a variety of formats, we felt we could:

- Increase awareness of community resources, gaps and issues around family literacy
- Increase information-sharing and communication among community agencies
- Increase access to information that will inform client referral, advocacy, program development and decision-making
- Provide opportunities for partnerships and prevent duplication of services
- Improve community access to family literacy programs.

Web-based Map

By inviting service providers, educators, and government funders to a community-mapping event, we anticipated we would:

- Build community by bringing together like-minded individuals

- Develop a network of individuals and agencies with an interest in, and commitment to, family literacy
- Set the stage for new partnerships and collaborations.

Defining Family Literacy

Our preliminary research emphasized the challenge to develop a plain language definition of family literacy and literacy-related programs. We wanted to open up opportunities for organizations to share their diverse aspects of family literacy and related programs. Rather than re-invent the wheel, we decided to include the elements of family literacy from ABC CANADA and Literacy BC. Excerpts here are used with permission.

ABC CANADA

Family literacy refers to the many ways families develop and use literacy skills, from enjoying a storybook together at bedtime and during the day, to playing with word games, singing, writing, to a relative or friend, sharing day-to-day tasks such as making a shopping list or using a recipe, and surfing the Internet for fun and interesting sites. (*Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices*, Adele Thomas, Soleil Publishing Inc., 1998)

Simple things like reading and telling stories to a child at 18 months are powerful stimuli for brain development in the early years. (*Early Years Study Final Report: Reversing the Real Brain Drain*, Government of Ontario, 1999)

Having a parent or other caring person read aloud with their children helps children learn listening skills, vocabulary and language skills, as well as develop imagination and creativity. (*Family Literacy Foundation*; 2001)

Literacy BC

Family literacy is an innovative educational approach based on a powerful premise: *parents are their children's first and most important teachers.*

Family literacy is a shared responsibility that builds on existing community resources and combines the strengths of many partners and builds knowledge within the community.

Family literacy is culturally responsive and as diverse as the communities in which it is developed.

Methodology—collecting and capturing data

Prior to applying to the National Literacy Secretariat, we ensured that this project would not duplicate other efforts in our community. We did a preliminary Internet search including resource centre databases including AlphaCat, NALD and Literacy BC. We spoke to colleagues at Literacy BC, Project Literacy Victoria (PLV) and the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD). We searched the resources available through the Community Social Planning Council

of Greater Victoria, LifeCycles (a mapping resource agency) and Volunteer Victoria. We were aware that the Greater Victoria Public Library offers wonderful family literacy programs and that some local agencies offer programs containing a small family literacy component. However, we found no evidence of comprehensive, accessible information regarding the range and extent of services that addressed or supported family literacy in the Greater Victoria region. We surmised that neighbourhood houses, community organizations and community schools offered literacy-related programs of which the larger community was not aware.

After we received approval and funding from the National Literacy Secretariat, we broadened the scope of our search to include the following:

- Directory of Community Services for the Capital Region 2005
- Local newspaper and magazines, specifically Island Parent
- Movement for Canadian Literacy
- Victoria Telephone Directory
- Volunteer Victoria
- Internet searched continued
- Community Mapping event
- Emails
- Phone calls

We did not send out formal surveys.

Challenges

- Lack of response to initial emails and requests for information.
- Names of contacts and referrals who were no longer active in the field.
- Programs cancelled or changed over the duration of our project.
- Data arrived in different forms and required revision.
- Mapping Morning – invitations by email, phone and mail = 60 sent out by mail and email. The turnout was enthusiastic but smaller than we had hoped – 30 participants.

Recommendations

- Establish a small group of knowledgeable people who will contribute to and finalize working definitions.
- Define your end-user clearly at the start of the project.
- Define what data you want to capture that will address the needs of the end-user.
- Use a cross-sector group to finalize the type of data to be captured for the directory and the map.
- Be clear about data capture format and style.
- Have one person responsible for data entry to avoid the rolling-data syndrome.
- Build in time for follow-up with each agency.
- Use an easily manipulated database system to house the information.
- Consult with the web and mapping technicians to ensure technological compatibility.

Methodology—mapping

Preliminary discussions

Early in the project-cycle, the project team attended a familiarization session with community mapping and GIS practitioners. The practitioners had previous experience in community mapping and asset-based development processes. READ staff acquired basic information related to community-based mapping and the processes and data that would be most useful when creating and delivering an on-line map. This information assisted in defining the type of data to be collected for the directory.

What was not entirely clear following this session were overarching concepts of mapping at the community level and the technical requirements related to delivering an on-line map. In addition, the session did not include a discussion related to the required features for the final on-line map. This missing detail affected the timely delivery of the final product.

Community mapping morning

The mapping process began with a community-based question and involved practitioners identified through community research. An external organization was used to plan and facilitate the mapping morning. READ staff and Project Literacy Victoria, a community partner, were involved in planning the morning. In that planning process it became clear that READ, as the community-lead organization, needed to be very clear about priorities and the required outcomes.

The mapping morning was intended to verify previously collected data, to add new information to the expanding directory and to extend the detail in some of the data entries. Those were the practical realities of the session. But, the session was much more. The mapping morning provided an opportunity for like-minded community people to come together to discuss what they were doing, identify others who might be interested in literacy work and to build relationships in ways that email and traditional meetings do not support. The on-the-ground connections helped participants identify opportunities for collaborative initiatives.

Map building

Building the on-line map was undertaken by an external contractor affiliated with the group that facilitated the community mapping day. At this stage the earlier lack of specificity and READ's limited understanding of public participatory GIS affected the efficiency and effectiveness of project delivery.

The mappers were extremely patient with the organic approach we took to map development. Once we had refined and articulated expectations, a number of options were presented along with corresponding budgets. The final solution not only delivers an accessible product, it does so in a manner that leverages mapping developments from other sources.

Challenges

- Understanding processes and technology at a level that creates meaningful dialogue with sub-contractors and facilitators.
- Remaining focused on the initial reason for bringing people together
- Finding ways to capture ideas that emerged in the mapping day and translating them into action
- Understanding technological limitations of target audiences
- Developing and maintaining communication connections between mappers and web hosts or developers.
- Bringing the group together to review the products prior to launching the materials.

Recommendations

- Involve the technical advisors at the front-end of the project planning process.
- Have mappers provide ‘show and tell’ and ‘question/answer’ segment at initial planning session.
- Ensure at least one of the leaders in the community partnership understand the concepts, opportunities and challenges of community mapping.
- Early in the project life-cycle clearly define the MINIMUM capabilities for the on-line map (i.e. loading speed; minimum features; icons; linking ability for icons; navigation features; minimum platform capabilities; cost for software maintenance/licensing; literacy-level access).
- Be clear about your community questions and what you need to learn from the session when you plan a community mapping process.
- Be open to new developments and have a systematic mechanism for capturing new ideas and directions.
- Build in time to beta test the map and the interface with your existing website.
- Plan to bring people together once the project is complete to celebrate and honour the collective work.

Practitioner's Comments

In order to expand the body of knowledge associated with community mapping and literacy we have created a separate document to capture practitioner's comments. The comment sheet is filed as a PDF and Word document on this website.

We would appreciate you adding comments and recommendations under the following headings:

- Community mapping – developing meaningful community-driven questions
- Community mapping processes – extending knowledge
- Map building – technological expectations
- Community mapping – influencing public policy discussions

Responses should be emailed to info@readsociety.bc.ca.

At the end of each month we will post comments under each heading.

Practitioner's Comments

Your Name:

Name of your organization/institution:

Contact detail:

Community mapping – developing meaningful questions

Community mapping processes – extending knowledge

Map building – technological expectations

Community mapping – influencing public policy discussions

Email comments sheet to: info@readsociety.bc.ca