

TAKING DOWN THE WALL OF WORDS

COMMUNITY

AGENCIES

AND

LITERACY



TAKING DOWN THE WALL OF WORDS
Community Agencies and Literacy

Part 1



John Howard Society of Canada

Copyright © 1990 by the John Howard Society of Canada. All rights reserved. This booklet may be reproduced, provided that credit to the author is retained.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Taking down the wall of words

Issued also in French under title: Faire tomber la
barrière de l'écrit.

Contents: v. 1. Community agencies and literacy.
ISBN 0-9693196-6-5 (v. 1)

1. Literacy--Canada. 2. Human services--
Information services--Canada. 3. Community
organization--Canada. 4. Literacy programs--Canada. I.
John Howard Society of Canada
LC154.T34 1990 302.2*244*0971 C90-090565-4

Cover art work by David W. Jones, Ottawa.

Published by:
The John Howard Society of Canada
771 Montreal Street
Kingston, ON
Canada K7K 3J6
Tel: (613) 542-7547
Fax: (613) 542-6824
E-mail: national@johnhoward.ca

Table of Contents

Preface	iv
Acknowledgments	vi
A Role for Community Agencies	1
Learning to Communicate	11
Literacy Coalitions and Networks	25

Preface

Nineteen-ninety marked the start of what many people are calling the “literacy decade.” So, with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat of the Secretary of State of Canada, a Project Management Group consisting of representatives of the United Way-Centraide Canada, the YMCA Canada, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies and the John Howard Society of Canada, looked for ways community agencies could have an effect on improving literacy levels in Canada.

Researchers across the country found examples of how community agencies are making sure that people who cannot read and write well can use their services. They also came up with ideas on how these organizations can be an important link between the people who have difficulty reading and writing and the many literacy programs available across Canada.

The research team found that many of the people served by community agencies have trouble reading and writing. Low literacy is often one of many problems faced by people who are poor, sick, out of a job or in trouble with the law.

This is the first of two booklets that give ideas on how community and literacy groups can form literacy partnerships with each other, and with the people they serve. Part 1 talks about simple ways community agencies can open up their services to people with low literacy skills and how they can work with literacy groups to encourage people who want to improve these skills to take literacy courses. It also gives an overview of literacy in Canada and the everyday challenges faced by people who cannot read and write well.

Part 2 is filled with ideas on how organizations which want to make a commitment to providing accessible services and who want literacy referrals to be part of their everyday work can do so.

On behalf of the Project Management Committee and the research team, I would like to thank the many individuals and groups who told us of their experiences so that these booklets could contribute to improving literacy and understanding in Canada.

James M. MacLachie
Executive Director
John Howard Society of Canada
Chair, Project Management Group

Acknowledgements

In preparing this booklet, the authors have drawn from many sources of information. They would particularly like to acknowledge the following:

- *La pré-alphabétisation; les bénévoles*, by Nicole Pothier and Monique Vermette; Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec; for the information included in pages 19 and 20 of this booklet.
- The Statistics Canada 1989 *Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities*
- *Literacy and Health Project, Phase One: Making the World Healthier and Safer for People Who Can't Read*, Ontario Public Health Association and Frontier College
- Rebecca Veevee, N.W.T.
- Levi Tikivik, N.W.T.

A Role for Community Agencies

Community agencies work with people to ensure that they have the power and ability to lead independent lives, to do the things they want and need to do. Literacy is one of the tools people can use to gain more control over their lives. But for workers and volunteers in community agencies, the pressures of dealing with a mother's need for infant formula, a family's housing crisis, or an individual's legal problems, can mean that they miss the signs of low literacy skills in the people they serve.

People who have trouble reading and writing are often judged harshly for not being able to fill out forms or read pamphlets. They may be embarrassed by people who make a big deal out of their problem, or who talk about it in front of other people. They may not have received much support when they revealed their low literacy skills in the past. They may also fear that their inability to read and write well could affect their eligibility for your agency's services. So, to hide their inability to read and write well, they may put up defences or act angry when they feel embarrassed.

People who cannot read and write well may use excuses to avoid filling out forms your organization gives them. You may have noticed that some people:

- Say they "forgot their glasses," or "have a sore arm," or "don't have the time," when asked to fill out a form;
- Ask if they can bring the form back "tomorrow?"
- Bring a friend in with them, to take care of any reading and writing that has to be done;
- Suddenly become angry and storm out the door when faced with paper work;

“I’d like to help my kids sometimes. They bring lots of books they wrote in English. I put them on the table I didn’t read it The kids cry because I didn’t read their book. So I have to learn to read and write so I can help with homework It breaks my heart because I can’t read. I tell them I’m sorry kids I can’t help you It hurts me so much almost every day I’m sorry I’m going to adult ed to learn to read. Now I feel so great It looks I’m a brand new lady One day my teacher said you know how to read so feel so happy I said my tongue is not a rock any more, my heart is open.”



- Don’t show up for appointments, even though they need your services and seem interested.

An individual’s low literacy may be behind these actions. Your organization’s literacy demands can put up walls between your services and some of the people who need and want to use them. Wordy posters in an organization’s reception area, for example, can be a signal that people need to be able to read and write well to use your services. If that’s not the message your organization wants to give people, you may want to use the ideas in this book to make your services more accessible to people who cannot read and write well.

When you do notice signs of low literacy in people you serve, you may want to let them know about literacy programs in your area. This book will also help you and the person who cannot read and write well to work together to deal with some of the barriers to learning.

A Problem We Cannot Ignore

Studies have shown that almost seven million Canadians have trouble with everyday reading and writing tasks! More than one in three Canadians:

- can't take information from a catalogue and put it on an order form;
- can't tell when schools are open from reading a brochure;
- have trouble using maps and charts.

When people can't read and write basic information, their lives become limited to things that are familiar, to places and things and activities they already know. The need to read manuals or follow other written instructions keeps them from learning new things. Low literacy can carry a high price.

People pay dearly

Adults who cannot read and write well enough to handle everyday materials are less likely to have completed high school. They usually have to settle for low-paying, low skill jobs and tend to suffer from more health problems than people with high literacy skills. A study carried out in Ontario found that:

- More than half of the people who receive social assistance aren't able to read and write well;
- only 40 per cent of people with less than a grade nine education have jobs;
- one in four people with only elementary school education says their health is fair or poor.

Seventeen per cent of people who have some high school education say their health is only fair or poor. Even fewer people who have more education say the same thing.

Almost seven million Canadians have some trouble reading and writing.

*Illiteracy is estimated to cost Canadians
\$10 billion each year.*

Poor health, a low-paying job, or no job at all, are high prices to pay for not finishing school or not being able to read and write well.

There are many other hardships and limitations people with low literacy skills face. They may wish to save money by buying generic grocery products, but not be able to read the labels. They may buy a more expensive product because the picture on the label tells them exactly what's inside the box or can.

Product labeling can be a dangerous problem. Products as different as a cooking spray and a spray pesticide can have labels that look very much alike. And medicine bottle labels are often so confusing that people cannot tell how much medicine they should give their children.

Different Degrees of Literacy

All Canadians face a big challenge in improving our levels of literacy. There is no magic dividing line between people who have high or low literacy skills. Almost all Canadians who speak English or French have some reading and writing skills and we all have some troubles with literacy. It is a matter of degree.

A person who works in a job that doesn't demand high literacy skills may be able to get along quite well with a limited ability to read and write. But if the person's job changes, or if the job disappears and the person has to try to find a new one, low literacy can become a problem. The books used in job training courses may be too difficult for that individual to handle. And filling out job application forms may be intimidating. The questions may be badly worded and hard to understand and the forms may look overly complicated.

In past decades there were lots of good-paying jobs that didn't demand a lot of reading and writing. Things have changed. Most jobs today require people to read. People working in factories have to read many different things, for an average of more than an hour and a half each day.

Workers at risk

Low literacy can be dangerous at work. Workers need to be able to read well for just about any job. If they are working with chemicals or heavy equipment, people have to be able to read instructions and warnings on labels and in manuals. And pictures and drawings don't always solve the problem for people who can't read. In one case, it wasn't clear to workers that the pictures of someone doing the task they had to do were there to show them how not to do their job. They thought the pictures were showing the way the job should be done. They did it that way and they got hurt.

Lifelong learning

Most people feel comfortable reading the materials they come across daily. But how many of us cringe at the idea of using a new computer and learning a computer program? We would rather just use our VCRs to watch movies than learn how to program them to record television shows. Even setting digital clocks is a problem. Most of us have some trouble with those instructions.

All of these tasks require different kinds and levels of literacy. Faced with a new challenge in reading, writing, or arithmetic, all of us can feel a fear of learning. We may want to avoid the situation. There are times when anyone can face a literacy

A drawing that sends the wrong message to people can do more harm than good. It wasn't clear to workers that drawings in their workplace were there to show them how not to do their jobs. They did the work that way and got hurt.

crisis of some kind. As the world changes, so do the literacy demands we face. The new challenges require a lifetime of learning.

Low literacy can become a problem for people when they cannot handle the everyday reading and writing tasks they need to do to live the way they want. Literacy skills that were good enough for a lifetime of work may not make the grade for things people want to do in retirement. The death of a spouse may force a person to face literacy tasks that the spouse used to handle. Changing jobs, or finding oneself without a job, can lead to a literacy crisis, where learning to read and write well becomes important for an individual and for that person's family. And literacy can slowly become a problem as a person feels trapped in a low-paying, boring job.

A Social Bias

There are closely-knit communities in Canada where people can be open about the fact that they cannot read and write. Among the Inuit, for example, literacy is a skill people share. Inuit who can read and write in English and Inuktitut offer help with English to their friends who have had less exposure to their second language. They then receive other kinds of help in return.

In other Canadian communities, however, where everyone is expected to be able to read and write anything they come across, people whose literacy skills are poor can be made to feel embarrassed and ashamed. An elderly person who lives alone in a large city may feel isolated, afraid, and cut off from life, without someone to help out with everyday reading and writing tasks.

How Well Can Canadians Read, Write, and Use Numbers?

To find out how well Canadians can read, write, and use numbers, the National Literacy Secretariat had Statistics Canada test Canadians from across the country. They asked

people to read things such as ads from the Yellow Pages and school letters to parents. They also asked them to do things such as fill out a bank deposit slip, find a certain kind of apartment in a group of classified ads and compare grocery labels.

To get along in Canada today, people have to be able to do most of the kinds of reading, writing, and basic math that this test measured. Statistics Canada found that most Canadians, about two people out of three, can handle most of these everyday reading tasks. A lot of people can't.

One in three Canadians has trouble reading, writing, and using numbers

In fact, 38 per cent of the people, more than one in three Canadians, had some trouble. They were able to do only some of the reading, writing, and arithmetic, or none at all. When they were asked to read a medicine label or a pool schedule, figure out a telephone bill, or find the groceries they wanted in a store ad, many Canadians couldn't.

How Well Canadians Read, 1989



Source: Survey of Literacy Skills Used in Daily Activities, Statistics Canada

The test found that more than one Canadian in five avoids situations where they might have to read or write. With their low skill level, these Canadians find they have trouble understanding many things. They can handle reading materials that are very clear and simple, but many materials they have to read each day just aren't clear enough or simple enough.

One Canadian in six has even more serious problems reading and writing. They can only find words they know in very simple materials. Still others are not able to read at all, sometimes because they don't understand any English or French.

All kinds of Canadians

Canadians from many different backgrounds find that they cannot read and write well enough to do the things they want to do. Young people who don't graduate from high school may not have the reading and writing skills they need to find jobs that pay well. People who took special education classes or vocational programs in high school may not have spent enough time on reading and writing.

Many people who get into trouble with the law aren't able to read and write well. In some cases, this may have been one of the things that took away their chances to get jobs and create lives that could keep them from coming into conflict with the law.

Adults have poor reading and writing skills for all kinds of reasons. Different kinds of disabilities can keep people from learning as much as they might like to. Immigrants and Native Canadians can have trouble learning English or French as their second language, especially if they aren't able to read and write well in their first language.

Skills you can lose

People who have been without a job for a long time can forget these skills. And people whose jobs don't involve reading and

writing may discover, after a few years, that it isn't as easy as it used to be to read and write.

People who haven't practiced the skills they learned in school sometimes find they can't do the things they used to be able to do. Mental or physical health problems can also take away people's abilities to read and write.

Whether people have lost skills they once had, or whether they never got to learn because as children they were shuffled around foster homes and schools, low literacy is not something people choose. They usually find themselves unable to handle reading and writing because of situations that are out of their control.

The young man cleared his throat as the woman behind the counter concentrated on her typing.

“Uh, um, I’d,” he began, “can I see someone about, uh —I heard you guys help people who need jobs?”

She looked up briefly and reached out to hand him a form. She started typing again as she told him to fill it out “I don’t know if anyone can see you,” she said. “You’re supposed to have an appointment”

She looked back at him and added, “We can’t take everyone who just wanders in off the street.”

He sat down in the waiting room, turned the form over, and stared at it He pretended he couldn’t find his pen, in case anyone else thought he couldn’t read or something Finally, he stood up, went over to the counter, and tossed the form back.

“I can find a job faster by myself,” he snapped as he turned to leave.

The woman watched him go, shook her head in annoyance, and went back to her typing.



Learning to Communicate

To work effectively with people who do not read and write well, community agencies need to rethink how they communicate. Communication is not just putting words on paper or telling people what they need to know. The design of your offices says something to people. So does the way workers and volunteers handle reading and writing tasks for people using your services.

Although it may seem helpful to just take over and do the task yourself for someone who is having difficulty, there may be a better solution. Perhaps your organization can make the task easier for people with low literacy skills to handle. If the individual is interested, a referral to a literacy program may ultimately give the person the power and ability to handle a broad range of reading and writing challenges.

Whether or not people with poor reading and writing skills take literacy upgrading classes, you can make them more comfortable using your organization's services. As you make changes in your pamphlets, forms, and procedures to make them more easily understood, test them out on people who have used your services. They are the best judges of whether your language and methods are user-friendly.

Here are some things you can think about when you look at how accessible your organization is to people who cannot read and write well.

Literacy is an enabling skill.

Look at Your Reception Area

If you couldn't read or write, how would you see your organization when you walked in? Would you feel comfortable? Would you notice bulletin boards filled with letters and memos and wordy posters? Are forms and papers piled up in baskets on the front desk? Does everyone seem to be too busy to talk quietly with you? Is there a waiting area right next to the spot where you might have to tell someone, "Sorry, I don't understand this form..."

The first impression your agency makes on people is very important. People who can't read and write well may have taken a long time to decide to come to your office, even though they need your help. They've taken a first step. But if the reception area looks threatening, people who need help may leave anyway.

People might make up an excuse to get angry when they're handed a form to fill out, saying, "Hey, I don't need this kind of hassle!" Perhaps they'll leave quietly, taking the form and saying, "Can I bring this back tomorrow?" They're going to get a friend to help them fill in the form. Maybe that's okay. But they may have really needed your help today. The service you provide is important, after all.

What would it take to change things so that people who can't read and write well may feel more comfortable in your agency?

Making a first impression

- Place the chairs in the waiting area away from the reception desk. Give people a little privacy when they first approach you.
- Put up posters and art work with strong pictures and drawings, simple words and ideas. Take down the ones that are just lists of the steps to be followed or the rules you live by. Watch out for bulletin boards crammed with wordy pieces of paper.

Put people, not paper, first

- Put the forms out of sight. And don't just hand them to people along with a pen. Ask if they need your help, and do it in a way that won't embarrass them. Try, "Would you like me to fill that out with you, or would you prefer to do it yourself?" Make the easier idea, the one that takes the literacy burden off the person using your service, the first one you mention.
- Make the forms as simple as you can. One organization had to train its staff to complete its forms. It finally realized that, if their staff needed training, they couldn't really expect people using their service for the first time to be able to handle the form. Get some people who have used your services for some time to give you a hand. Have them comment on the form as you make changes to make it simpler.

Use clear language

- Pamphlets and sheets of paper that describe what your agency does are, of course, very important to people who want to use your services. Some pamphlets are very well designed, with clear drawings and simple language. Others use the same language that the workers and volunteers use among themselves every day. That's good for you, but will people using your services for the first time understand what you mean?

A literacy organization or a writer can often help you put together information that is short and simple and that gets the job done better for you. Test out your new pamphlet on people who have already used your services. Ask them to tell you if they think it's clear, or if the information is confusing.

"Would you like me to fill that form out with you, or would you prefer to do it yourself?"

One picture can be worth...

- Videos cost more than pamphlets, but if your agency has the money, or if it already has a camcorder and uses videos, consider making one for the reception area. People who watch the video can see how your service works. They don't have to rely on pamphlets or staff members to get the information.
- Posters may be cheaper than videos and can also be effective. With an artist's help, you can show drawings of what happens as people use your services. Test out the drawings with people who have used your services to make sure the images get your message across. A drawing that sends the wrong message to people, or one that people simply don't understand, can do more harm than good.

Make People Feel Comfortable

Think about what happens to a person who uses your services. Are there ways to make someone with poor literacy skills feel more comfortable each step of the way? Are there opportunities for you to tell if the person has a problem reading and writing? Do you take advantage of these opportunities? Here's how you can.

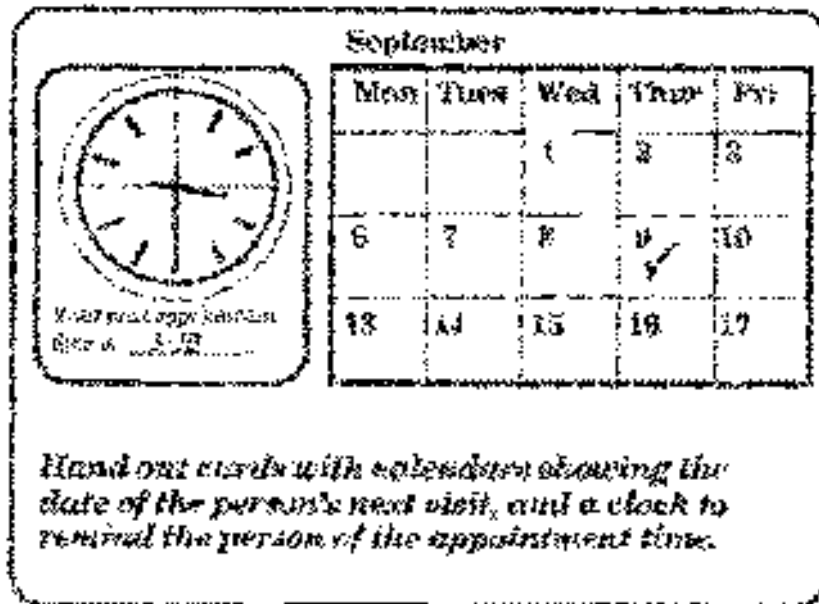
Listen and talk

- Listen for clues as the person tells you about the issue that your agency will help with.
- Make sure that the person understands any instructions you have to give. Ask if it is all clear. Ask the person what their next step will be, to make sure they know. Don't rely on a piece of paper or a pamphlet to explain how your system works, or to get someone back for a meeting. Give people a calendar page and a small drawing of a clock showing the time and date of the person's next visit, instead of a written appointment slip.

- Train your staff. Call a literacy organization and ask if someone could come by to speak to your workers and volunteers about how they can best serve people who don't read and write well. Take the opportunity to find out about literacy programs in your area, so that you can recommend them to people who might be interested.

Can you do your work a little differently?

- Take a look at your programs. Many have lots of opportunities for staff and volunteers to see if a person has a hard time reading and writing. Do you ask people joining in on your programs to read manuals or instruction sheets? Do they have to make lists or keep track of money? If they do, you have an opportunity to watch for people who try to avoid doing things in ways that involve reading, writing, and using numbers. But maybe you could change the way parts of your programs work so that people won't have to do so much reading and writing...



- In group workshops, do you ask people to write down ideas **or** describe their problems or challenges in writing? How about inviting people to use tape recorders instead? Give everyone a choice. Don't divide up the group into good writers and poor writers. Let each person decide whether they'd rather be part of the group that writes their answers, or the group that uses tape recorders. And if you use tape recorders, make sure that you show people how your machines work.
- Invite a literacy worker to help your staff and volunteers find other ways to make people with poor reading and writing skills more comfortable using your services. And ask the worker to give you ideas on what to look for to tell if someone might need to brush up on these skills.

If you know there's a problem...

- If different staff members and volunteers will work with someone who has difficulty reading and writing, consider using colour codes on your files to let workers know. In this way, workers can think about how they can do their work without embarrassing the person.

Talk about literacy programs

- Let people who use your services know about literacy programs in your area. Could literacy be one of the services you let people know about as a matter of course? If you offer life skills or employment skills programs, you may want to invite a literacy worker or a literacy student to talk to each of your groups. When talk about literacy is a normal part of a program, it can make it easier for a person to take the next step. And word of mouth is the number one way that people find out about literacy programs and get interested enough to join them.
- If you know someone who uses your services and who might be interested in taking a literacy course, take your time bringing the subject up. As you and that individual get to know one another, you can develop a relationship of trust.

That trust is important. People need to know that you are really interested in hearing about whether reading and writing is a problem, and whether they want to do something about it. They may need time to think things over. Give them all the time they need. The literacy programs will wait.

You Can Make a Difference

There are millions of Canadians who could benefit from literacy courses and many courses are available for them across the country. But only about two per cent of people with low literacy skills are registered in literacy programs. And only about 10 per cent of people with poor reading and writing skills are interested in taking literacy courses. With your support and encouragement, more people with low literacy skills may join literacy training programs.

Community agencies which serve people with low literacy skills can be the vital link between the programs and the people who could benefit from them. Agency workers and volunteers can encourage people with low literacy skills who use their services to learn to read and write better.

It is important to treat people with respect, of course, regardless of their ability to read and write and whether or not they are interested in improving their literacy skills. The reasons why people can't read and write well are their own business. Fear is often one reason why people don't want to improve these skills.

Fear of learning

For many adults who cannot read and write well enough to handle the things they come across each day, school is a distant, bad memory. If illness or an unsettled home life kept them from school and learning, they may have fallen behind their class mates and never managed to catch up. The same thing could happen if they had to change schools often, or if they had a learning disability that wasn't dealt with. All these things can make people afraid of trying to learn again.

“The kids are growing up. You gotta be the best you can for your kids I got a daughter She’s 20 months old. I have a feeling my daughter’s gonna need help with her homework And I’m gonna want to help her But I’m gonna be ashamed if I have to tell her I can’t do it I don’t want to tell her I never went to school. But I’m gonna have to tell her It’ll help her to stay in school, you know what I’m saying.”



Anyone can learn. People with learning disabilities may need to follow special courses to make best use of their skills. Older people may need and want to take more time for each step of learning. Workers may want to study the kinds of books and manuals that they are likely to have to use on the job. And people generally want to read and write things that are of interest to them, things they know and understand. Literacy courses can deal with these different needs.

People want to learn for many different reasons. For young people, work may be the most important thing in their lives. Parents may want to improve their skills to help their children. Ex-offenders may want better literacy to build lives that don’t include crime. Quality of life is important for many elderly people. They finally have the time to do the things they want to do. Reading and writing can help them accomplish their goals.

When you get to know someone who uses your services and know that the person’s poor reading and writing skills are causing problems for them, you may want to bring up the idea of taking a literacy course. When you do, emphasize the positive. Talk about how much the person has already

accomplished and how, with reading and writing skills, the person could do even better. Let the person know that you respect them and their abilities and that you believe in the person's potential.

Taking down the walls

Fear and embarrassment can make people put up walls to block out your suggestion. Beneath their denials and excuses, you can hear some of the reasons they really don't want to take a literacy course.

“I don't have a problem.”

When people say, “I don't have a problem. I just don't bother.” they may be embarrassed to admit that not being able to read and write well limits the person's life in ways that are troublesome.

- Tell the person that you know many people who have trouble reading and writing. The person is not alone.
- Point out that other adults take courses to improve their skills. Talk about how learning to read and write is wonderful. Mention some people you know who have taken courses — Paul, Claudette...
- Stress that it is never too late, that anyone can learn, at any age.

“I get along all right.”

When people say, “I've gotten along just fine up to now,” they may be uncomfortable talking about the subject and want to get away from you and the idea of tackling the problem at long last.

- Recognize that the person has done really well in getting around the problem. Ask how the person has done it.

- Mention that there are lots of different kinds of courses around. People can learn on their own if they want, or they can work with a small group of people. And literacy courses deal with subjects that are really interesting.
- Ask if there are any times when not reading and writing well is a real problem. Suggest that the person could learn to read and write just for that reason.

“I’ll never go back.”

When people say, “You’ll never get me back into a school,” you can be sure that the person remembers school and that the memories are not good.

- Talk about those memories. Ask what schools the person went to and what happened there. What are the person’s fears?
- Explain that things are different for adults learning to read and write. It’s all very relaxed. They treat people like adults. You have a say in what you learn.

“It’s too late.”

When people say, “I’m too old to go to school,” it is important to deal with their concern.

- Give examples of other people the person’s age who have taken literacy courses.
- Get the person to talk about goals, plans, dreams, and the things the person could do if reading and writing weren’t such a problem.
- Point out how the person’s life, perhaps their retirement years, would be even better.
- Find out whether the person has recently learned something new. Talk about that experience. Find out if the person enjoyed it.
- Invite the person to try, to take a chance.

No Guarantees

Not everyone you encourage to take a literacy course will do so. People who have developed self-confidence and who are motivated may be interested in new learning. Others, who feel less secure, might take the step if the right kind of program is available to them.

For someone who has been unemployed for a long time and who feels cut off from other people, your concern may make the difference. If a person lacks self-confidence and has reached the point of really not caring about anything, your efforts may not work. But the person may be glad to know you cared enough to try.

A literacy agency can help

When you talk to someone about taking literacy training, you can work with them to look into the kinds of courses that are available in your area. The first thing you can do is contact a literacy coalition or network if there is one near you. Many major cities have literacy networks and coalitions which link the various agencies that provide literacy training, and so do each of the provinces. With one phone call to a literacy network or coalition, you can find out about all the different courses the person can choose from in your community. If there is no literacy network or coalition in your community, contact a literacy agency or school board directly.

Some communities offer many different kinds of literacy courses. Community-based literacy organizations, literacy councils, libraries and other social service and voluntary agencies, teach adults to read and write. So do community colleges and school boards.

Start by contacting a literacy program in your community.

*Literacy brings changes in people*s lives. It isn*t just a matter of figuring out what words and*

English as a second language

Many of these organizations also offer courses for people who learned another language before English or French. Programs teaching English or French as a Second Language are different from literacy programs. They can offer cultural support to a person learning a new language and a group setting that puts them in touch with other people who speak their first language.

Let the person make the decision

Talk with the person about the kind of literacy program that best meets their needs. In most places, people can join literacy programs at any time of the year, after a short wait. Some programs are specially set up so that people don*t feel they are back in a school. The people running those programs understand that some literacy learners had bad experiences in school.

Literacy programs provide support for the individual and take account of that person*s needs in planning the courses. You can talk about these things with the person and with the people who run the literacy program. Ask about how the literacy program sets goals and how it will measure the person*s progress. Make sure the person taking the course is comfortable with the way the program will be run.

Literacy programs can be private, offering one-to-one classes with volunteer tutors. Other courses are given in small, informal groups. Classroom courses are available for people who prefer a formal setting. People can follow programs fulltime or part-time, or even for just a few hours each week, if that*s all the time they have.

The literacy upgrading course a person chooses should match that person's special interests and needs. Some programs offer counselling support as well as literacy training. Others put people in touch with other people who share similar problems or goals, so they can offer each other support. Along with teaching people how to read and write, some programs offer training in other life skills, such as finding a job, running a household, or raising children.

Keep in touch

Even if the person who takes your advice and joins a literacy program doesn't need the service your agency provides any more, keep in touch. The person may need to talk to someone who understands them as well as you do. Learning to read and write is not just a matter of figuring out what letters and words mean.

Literacy brings changes to people's lives. As the person thinks about getting a new job, becomes frustrated because the learning process seems slow, or decides that finding a new literacy teacher would be a good idea, your help can be very important. As the person's life changes, you can be somebody they can count on, someone they can go back and talk to. It may not take much of your time or energy, but it can mean a lot to someone facing new life challenges.

Literacy Partners

Today, people are more aware of literacy problems than ever before. Different kinds of groups have joined in the effort to improve Canadians* abilities to read and write.

Labour unions, governments, businesses, schools, social service agencies and community groups are all playing a part in bringing literacy programs to the people who need and want them. Community agencies can encourage people who might benefit from literacy training to enrol in the programs that are available, but there will always be people who cannot read and write well.

Until we succeed in making low literacy less widespread in Canada, we can work at making it less of an issue, something people don*t have to be ashamed of. Everyone deserves access to the services they need. When workers and the people they serve communicate well, we all benefit. We hope that this booklet and Part 2 will make your job a little easier. Together, you and the people you serve can help take down the wall of words that can keep us from understanding each other.

Literacy Coalitions and Networks

All Canadian provinces and territories, and many cities, have literacy coalitions and networks. These organizations can let you know about the range of literacy training options available in your area. They may also be able to help you inform your workers and volunteers about literacy and to make your services accessible to people who don't read and write well.

For up-to-date listings of literacy agencies in your province and community, refer to the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) web site at <http://www.nald.ca/>

In Part 2, *Taking Down the Wall of Words: A Handbook for Community Agencies*, community organizations can find more information on:

- writing materials in dear language
- tips to make programs more accessible
- developing and sharing literacy resources in the community
- building literacy sensitivity into everyday activities
- sources of information about literacy

This book is for community agency board members, volunteers, and staff who want to know how they can make their organization's services more accessible to people with low literacy skills. Workers can also find out how they can be a vital link between literacy training programs and the people who could benefit from them.