

Title: Improving Collaboration Among Literacy Practitioners in Saskatchewan Through Literacy Cafes

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Question Posed: Would providing literacy discussion forums in the form of Literacy Cafes across the province improve collaboration among literacy practitioners by 10%?

Outcomes:

- 31 of 54, or 57% of participants reported a reduction in feelings of isolation since attending a literacy café or discussion forum;
- 26% of participants who attended a café or discussion forum have developed new partnerships since their attendance;
- 64% of participants made new connections that could lead to future partnerships; and
- 22% of participants have begun the process of forging new partnerships since attending a literacy café or discussion forum.

Abstract:

Many professionals working in the literacy field report feelings of isolation and overwhelm at the literacy needs in their community, and limited financial and community support. In addition, literacy professionals have identified the phenomenon of “co-opetition” – the catch-22 of having a desire to share information with other literacy stakeholders while understanding that literacy folks are in direct competition with one another for limited literacy program funding. For those working in remote, isolated regions, these are compounded by feelings of isolation and lack of community among their colleagues, and a lack of ability to network and access resources. Professionals working in both urban and remote settings have reported difficulty with collaboration due to the above issues.

Isolations due to geographic distance can make service delivery challenging due to issues of staff recruitment and retention, access to professional development and networking opportunities, increased travel expenses, and increased resource movement expenses. Isolation also “discourages the exchange of resources and weakens attempts to learn about and evaluate programs.”ⁱ The issue of isolation is a problem identified particularly in rural areas, affecting practitioners’ abilities to network, and learners’ abilities to connect with servicesⁱⁱ.

This report summarizes research findings collected between February 2008 and May 2009 during literacy cafes and follow-up interviews conducted in the southern and central regions of Saskatchewan.

Definitions:

- **Literacy Café:** Based on the World Café method of strategic discussion, this tool allows groups of almost any size to explore emerging organizational issues through networks of conversation using basic questions that invite feedback and discovery, both individual and collective. The unique café structure allows for every voice to be heard in a creative and invigorating way that builds group cohesion in a very short timeframe.¹
- **Collaboration:** “To work jointly or together with others, especially in an intellectual endeavour.”² For this purpose, we discuss collaboration as a means to develop community partnerships with a variety of stakeholders in order to develop sustainable community literacy programs.
- **Isolation:** As defined anecdotally by literacy providers, feelings of isolation are described as general feelings of working alone, with limited support, limited or non-cooperative contact with others in the literacy field, and limited resources to make the necessary connections with potential partners, resources and supports.

Participants:

The Saskatchewan Literacy Network held five literacy cafes between February 2008 and April 2009. In addition the SLN held a provincial café-style discussion forum November 18, 2008 and an adult literacy learner café March 18, 2009. The purpose of these cafes was to provide an opportunity for networking to share ideas and discover potential for

¹ www.theworldcafe.com.

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collaboration>

collaboration among practitioners in the field of literacy, and to steer future efforts of the Saskatchewan Literacy Network.

For the purpose of this study, we focused on the participation of professional literacy stakeholders. A total of 131 literacy professionals registered to attend the cafes and provincial forum, as follows:

Regina, February 12/08:	22
Swift Current, February 27/08:	14
Yorkton, March 4/08:	11
Provincial Forum November 18/08:	57
North Battleford, May 13/09:	10
Saskatoon, May 20/09:	<u>17</u>
TOTAL:	131

Research: Research for this project was conducted as follows:

Literature review: A non-exhaustive online and print literature review was conducted to illustrate the current realities of isolation among literacy practitioners. Despite repeated messages heard anecdotally from literacy practitioners in Saskatchewan, there is a shortage of literature suggesting that literacy practitioners experience isolation and challenges in working collaboratively. The National Adult Literacy Database (www.nald.ca) was searched, in addition to www.Google.ca, using the words, in varying combinations, 'literacy' practitioners', 'isolation', 'rural', and 'adult learning'. Although results of the search were scarce, the search on NALD revealed reports with directly relevant information, revealing evidence of the need for networking opportunities in order to increase collaboration and reduce feelings of isolation.

Larson (1997) writes that to be effective, rural literacy programs must build cooperative links with other social service agencies. Shipley et al (1994) states the need for increased dialogue and discussion in order to determine how communities, community organizations and government departments can work together to enhance access to literacy education and support.

Docherty, A. (2006). *Catching our Breath: Collaborative Reflection-on-Action in Remote-Rural BC*. British Columbia: RiPAL-BC, Research in Practice in Adult Literacy.

Frank, F & Smith, A. (2000). *The Partnership Handbook*. HRSCC: Labour Market Learning and Development Unit, Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.

Larson, D. (1997). *Literacy Education Promotes Community Involvement*. New York: Cornell University: Department of Education. (ERIC *Reproduction Services* No. Ed 415 336).

Shipley, B. et al (1994). *Distinct Needs of Rural Literacy Programs*. Ontario: Ontario Rural Literacy Special Interest Group. Rural Literacy Ontario.

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2005). *The Rural Think Tank 2005*. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/dca-dea/pubs/rtt-grr-2005/index-eng.php>.

Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick (2009). *New Brunswick Directory of English-Language Community-Based Literacy Programs*. Retrieved September 30, 2009, from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/lcnb/litprogramsdirectory/litprogramdirectory.pdf>.

- Anecdotal records: 'Café notes' were recorded during and after each event, capturing discussion and reflection, as well as facilitator's observations.

Some comments that were stated during a literacy cafe:

- "If funding for travel was available, I would attend regularly as the forum cafés were one of the few opportunities I had to network."
 - "Budget restraints make program implementation difficult. We need to see video conferencing available for northern communities, conference calls for increased communications, and alternative online meetings."
 - "The literacy landscape is competitive. With competition for funding, good proposal writers get the projects. These divisions do not build healthy partnerships."
- Structured telephone interview: A telephone survey was developed to obtain information about isolation and collaboration from attendees of the literacy cafes and forum in 2008 and 2009. The survey was conducted over the summer 2009. All responses were recorded on paper at the time of the interview and synthesized for this report.

Findings:

In total, 71 telephone surveys were completed. All attendees of the cafes and forum are represented in the survey results.

Cafe participants were asked two specific questions about feeling isolated and alone in their work before attending a literacy cafe or discussion forum, and after attending. (Note: the higher the rating, the greater the feelings of collaboration and cooperation with others in the literacy field):

The questions and responses are as follows:

1. On a scale of 1 – 10 (1 being 'always feel isolated' and 10 being 'never feel isolated'), how would you rate your feelings of isolation **before** attending the literacy cafe?

Respondents: 54

Average rating before literacy cafes: 6.35

2. On a scale of 1 – 10, in your current or present position, how often do you feel isolated or as though you are working alone in your region of the literacy field?

Respondents: 56

Average rating after literacy cafes: 7.25

- Practitioners who responded to questions about isolation: 54
- Practitioners who stated reduced feelings of isolation: 31 (57%)

Out of the 54 who responded to our telephone questionnaire, 31 stated that feelings of isolation have diminished since attending a literacy café.

Reasons given:

- Increased awareness, recognition of and bonding with others working within the literacy field;
- Increased awareness of various available literacy programs
- Expanded network of contacts
- Chance to share with others about successes, new ideas and challenges facing other literacy practitioners
- Enhanced knowledge of from where literacy information is available provincially and how to access it

- Excellent opportunity to find out what is happening in other communities, share information, collect contact details, meet together and network
- Practitioners who have collaborated, attempted to collaborate or partnered with others who are doing similar work **with whom they had not previously collaborated** since the literacy café: 14 (26%)
- Number of practitioners who have established new connections that could lead to project partnerships, working relationships or collaborations since attending the literacy café: 35 (64%)

Reasons given:

- Local monthly literacy group was established as a result of the café
 - Received a SaskSmart grant because the café informed us of eligibility
 - Café began a partnership in new initiatives for early childhood living
 - Made informal personal connections
 - Café provided an excellent networking opportunity
 - Previous connections that were established at former literacy events were re-solidified – we reconnected and re-established relationships with former contacts
 - Established informal friendships with other literacy practitioners and collected their contact information
- Number of practitioners who discovered potential partners who would make good candidates for planning future projects together: 12 (22%)

3. If a literacy cafe were held every 2 or 3 years in your area, would you attend?

Respondents:	67
Yes:	63
No:	2
Declined to answer:	2

Comments:

- "Dialogue is crucial for literacy organizations and practitioners to effectively communicate ideas, understand diverse perspectives and resolve issues."

- “Cafés are beneficial and an excellent avenue for connecting with others – Thank-you!”
- Great networking opportunity
- “The most productive event I’ve attended in a long time – very enjoyable.”
- “We need to continually renew and reflect upon different strategies, questions and challenges together.”
- “The cafés affirmed the literacy needs of this province.”
- “Cafés should be held more often to increase dialogue.”
- “Café’s are quite beneficial and should be held on a more regular basis.”

In summary:

- 31 of 54, or 57% of participants reported a reduction in feelings of isolation since attending a literacy café or discussion forum;
- 26% of participants who attended a café or discussion forum have developed new partnerships since their attendance;
- 64% of participants made new connections that could lead to future partnerships; and
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Reflections/My Suggestions on Future Research:

Practitioners have reported a reduction in feelings of isolation and an increase in collaborative efforts with colleagues since the cafes. Some stated a direct relation to attending a literacy cafe and establishing new connections or previous connections were strengthened, while others stated that new contacts are not exclusively due to cafe attendance. Therefore, it is difficult to clearly measure to what extent new connections can be attributed specifically to the cafes.

2010 will be the 3rd year of the 3-year Literacy Cafes Project, focusing on literacy cafes in the North. Café notes and follow-up surveys will capture participant feedback on the value of cafe-style discussion forums in reducing practitioner isolation and increasing collaborative opportunities. They could also capture more quantifiable information, such as numbers of times they made specific contact (telephone, email, in-person discussion) with others in the field before and after the cafes.

Increasing knowledge, ability and desire for collaboration could be of particular interest for northern communities, where practitioners report

increased challenges due to geographic isolation. We hope to capture and report on this information by fall of 2010.

**Sharing the
Research:**

This study will appear on the SABEA/SLN website(s).

ⁱ Shipley, B. et al (1994). *Distinct Needs of Rural Literacy Programs*. Ontario: Ontario Rural Literacy Special Interest Group. Rural Literacy Ontario.

ⁱⁱ Public Health Agency of Canada. (2005). The Rural Think Tank 2005.
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/dca-dea/pubs/rtt-grr-2005/index-eng.php>.

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