
A Model for Library Literacy: The LifeLong Learning Center

**Katherine Hackleman
Community Services Librarian
Vigo County Public Library**

"It used to be hard to get my kids to do homework. Now they do it willingly and even read three to four books a week," says Deborah, a single mother of two teenage girls. Deborah has been coming to the Vigo County Public Library LifeLong Learning Center since May, and is looking forward to going to college to become a public accountant or computer programmer.

Melinda, who has been taking GED classes and coming to the Center for two years talks about the change in her life. "I used to think there's no possible way.... now I know, if you think like that you'll never get it done. Before, I didn't even know how to use the computers and my math wasn't that great either, but it's getting better. I even got my friend to come in. I'm telling everyone!" Melinda plans to take her GED test in two months.

Cynthia, a mother of two, tells of some added benefits of working independently with other students in an environment rich in materials. "My IMPACT counselor made me come and I sat in here for two months. Then I got bored and started to look for something to do. Melinda helped me work *Print Shop* on the computer. I finally asked Susan and she has helped me a lot. If I'm going to help my children, I need to help myself. Doing this has made me more confident and I'm getting out of the house."

These are just three of the adult students who use the LifeLong Learning Center in the Vigo County Public Library on a regular

basis. Their goals include passing the GED test, getting into IVY Tech, helping their children with homework, getting a job, getting a promotion, and learning to read.

Libraries Do Change Lives

Whatever their goals, they all say that coming to the library has changed their lives. Deborah now helps her boyfriend with his computer and sees her interest in learning being reflected in her children's attitudes towards learning. Vickie has become interested in reading, computers and "all sorts of things." Melinda has read *Elvis Presley* and recommends it to all of her friends. They each say the Center has made them feel more interested in life and more confident.

What Makes It Work?

The environment in the Learning Center is relaxed and informal. Easy chairs and lamps with books, magazines, and newspapers arranged more like a living room than a



library, pictures on the walls, and pretty plants create a warm, inviting atmosphere for students who ordinarily might be intimidated by a library. Computers sitting on roll top desks, study tables made of warm oak, and blue carpeting with accents of mauve, all lend an air of friendliness.

The room, located on the first floor just off the main lobby of the Vigo County Public Library, is located in the center of adult activity yet secluded enough to allow the students privacy. Before the Center opened, adult tutoring was conducted in the Young People's department. Several adult students refused to be tutored because of the location, yet being taught to read around other adults was equally embarrassing. The current location allows the students to be away from children and close to, but separated from, the adult area of the Library.

The physical setting would be mean little however, without the helpful staff. Without exception, when asked "What is your favorite thing about the Center?" students answer in one way or another, "The people—they are really great. If they can't help they'll find someone who can." The Center is staffed by four part-time staff members who work twenty hours per week. They are familiar with the materials in the Center, have a thorough knowledge of the computer programs that are available, and know of resources in the community that can help students with their day-to-day needs. The staff are not teachers or tutors but resource people, and are on a first-name basis with most of the students. They provide information and encouragement in a non-threatening, unstructured manner. But equal to their knowledge is their concern for, and dedication to helping the students. The staff's caring attitude and respect for all types of personalities is what really gives the room its warmth and helps students realize their own importance.

Who then, are the teachers? Some of the students have tutors who work with them for

two hours a week. Others are in Vigo County School Corporation GED classes and use the Center when class is not in session. Some are on a waiting list to get a tutor. When in the Learning Center, many of them are their own teachers, and for the first time in their lives are taking control of their own education. This empowers them and gives them the confidence to also take control of other aspects of their lives.

The Center's multi-media materials introduce information in a variety of ways. Audio and video tape players allow students to listen to and view materials in the Center or check them out to use at home. Many students, however, find home too distracting and come to the Center to do their studying. GED study materials can be found in workbook, video, and computer formats.

Computer programs are the only materials that cannot be checked out. These programs cover spelling, learning to type, phonics, crossword puzzles, math, and writing. One phonics computer program that uses voice enhances learning by utilizing that added sense. A popular program is *Print Shop* which allows students to make greeting cards, banners, and posters.

Other materials about such subjects as math, budgeting, car maintenance, parenting, job skills, English as a second language, language, writing, getting a driver's license, taking the GED, CPR, learning disabilities, tutoring strategies, and easy-to-read novels come in a variety of formats that enhance students' and tutors' learning and teaching styles.

In order for students to read the words, and at the same time hear them, many books with text that have audio versions were purchased. For other books that did not come with audiotapes, the staff wrote to the publishers for permission to record the text. A local Kiwanis Club taped over fifty books for the Center. Besides helping the student who is learning to read, audio gives students who are

learning English as a second language a way to hear words spoken while reading.

A closed captioned decoder was purchased with the same purpose in mind. The decoder helps good but slow readers to increase their speed and allows international students to listen to idioms and word pronunciation through an entertaining media. The closed caption decoder exposes hidden printed text of the dialogue along the bottom of the screen, similar to the captioning on a television for a weather alert. Students who are studying English as a second language use the decoder more than do literacy students.

Another benefit to students is the accessibility of the Center. Because the Library is on a bus line and in the middle of town, students can take advantage of public transportation. The Center is open nearly the same hours as is the Library. The most popular times at the Center are mornings and evenings during the week.

Students are encouraged to attend other library programs such as monthly noon musical presentations and "Brown Bag" lunches. During one Brown Bag program at which Terre Haute Mayor Pete Chalos answered questions from the audience, Vickie, one of the Center's students, shared her opinion about the importance of the transportation system in getting to the library. She would not have attended a year ago, much less have spoken up.

Students are also told about storytimes and other children's and young people's programs. This summer, some of the older children went to the Young People's room to read and use the computers while their parents studied. For a time toys were kept in the Center for younger children to play with but they were too distracting to parents and others in the room. The children's librarians are not expected to attend to young people therefore if there are any problems they may inform the parent. So far there have been no problems.

How Are Materials Selected?

Materials are selected by obtaining input from anyone involved with literacy in the community. Program directors, who are members of the coalition, are asked each year to make a "wish list." Students and tutors who use the Center are asked which materials have been most useful to them. The Project Director peruses materials at the Indiana Literacy Resource Center and talks with other directors about materials that work in their programs. Circulation records are also reviewed to see what types of materials are most popular. And of course, staff members are asked to give their opinions on what materials are used most often. Reviews of materials in professional journals such as *Library Journal*, *The Written Word*, and *ERIC* articles are studied. The most popular materials are those that help students take tests such as *GED on Video*, *Taking the TOEFL*, and a computer version of the GED test. Next in popularity are math videos and books. The most-used computer programs are *Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing*, *Print Shop*, *GED*, and word processing programs.

How Does It Work?

To enroll, tutors and students call the library. A clerk interviews them, places their names on waiting lists, and contacts them when a tutor is available for a student or when a training session is available for tutors. Depending upon time preference, experience, and needs, students and tutors are matched as openings become available in each literacy organization.

Different programs use different teaching methods, meet at different times, and provide various support services. One program is individualized, computer-based, and has a teacher available all day; another program has a medium-sized group working individually with a teacher for four hours a day, four days a week; another is one-to-one tutoring with a teacher there to help if needed, one day a

week for two hours. All of the other programs provide tutor training, pair up tutors and learners according to interest and ability, and then the tutor and student decide when, where, and how often they will meet—usually once a week for two hours or twice a week for one hour.

The Vigo County Public Library has historically played a leadership role in coalescing organizations who are working toward a common goal. The library helped start a non-profit coordinating council for agencies in the community, and worked to establish a drug hotline in the 1970's and an emergency crisis center soon afterwards. Since then the library has helped support groups become organized, worked with coalitions for youth, senior citizens, and caregivers. So in 1988 when the library decided to expand its participation in the literacy effort in the community and found there were several small programs that were providing various types of services, it decided that instead of having a program of its own, it would provide support services to the already existing ones. Information and referral, publicity and coordination of the Wabash Valley Literacy Coalition, the spelling bee (an annual fundraiser), and the tutor recognition dinner became the initial focuses for the library.

That fall a part-time director was hired for twenty hours a week, the first LSCA (Library Services and Construction Act) Title VI grant from the United States Department of Education was written, and the Library Board voted to remodel and furnish the existing print shop to house the LifeLong Learning Center. One year later the room was finished, the LSCA grant was awarded, and the LifeLong Learning Center was officially opened in January, 1989.

For four years LSCA grants have helped with staffing and the purchasing of supplemental materials and a traveling computer for the programs. Center staff also keep a data-

base of students and tutors, provide technical assistance and information to all programs in Vigo and three surrounding counties, publish a bi-monthly tutor newsletter, and provide coordination for the Wabash Valley Literacy Coalition.

The Strength of Cooperation

Due to its interest and unselfish concern for the cause, the Wabash Valley Literacy Coalition has grown and thrived over its five years of existence. It began with the library and five programs: Altrusa, GROW (a church based literacy program), a small bus-based program that has since been discontinued, and programs of the Vigo County School Corporation and the Private Industry Council. Initially, the Coalition and a tutor recognition dinner were chaired by a library staff member. The spelling bee was also chaired by a library staff member and was co-sponsored by the local newspaper. Gradually, other programs have taken leadership roles. Three new counties have joined the Coalition as well as representatives from the Western Indiana Employment and Training Services, the Welfare Department, IVY Tech, Indiana State University, Vocational Education, and the Terre Haute Tribune-Star. The Coalition meets every other month at various sites in the area. One of the Coalition's members is also a member of the Indiana Adult Literacy Coalition and, while working together on activities, the coalitions share national, state, and local literacy information.

The Wabash Valley Coalition strengthens literacy recognition in Wabash Valley. During September (national literacy month) the news media share stories about programs and students, and the cooperative spelling bee gives the month focus. One informational brochure is used for all of the programs. Using the library's telephone number for calls for referrals gives recognition to all of the programs and better service to students and tutors.

Coalition members share needs, resources, and information that is useful in running literacy programs. When one program has a workshop or in-service program for tutors, all other program participants are invited. One program has a student support group and again, students from all programs may attend. When the number of programs became stretched to the maximum, the library was able to assume the English as a Second Language Program to take some of the pressure off the Coalition.

Last year, when local programs were given the opportunity to participate in READ INDIANA which is a state-wide program introduced by Susan Bayh to provide training and support to local volunteer literacy programs, a structure was already in place to begin participation. Two people became trainers, four of the programs became sites, and the library's literacy director became regional coordinator. In September, Wabash Valley was one of the first regions in Indiana to graduate students from READ INDIANA and Mrs. Bayh was on hand to participate in

the graduation ceremony. All of this was possible because of the cooperative efforts of literacy coalition members.

.....And Why Are We Here?

The LifeLong Learning Center is the center of literacy activities in the community but the real reason for its existence is to make a difference in the lives of students. Cynthia came in on Saturday, had gotten a full time job with Head Start as a teacher's aide, and came back to the Learning Center for additional help in writing skills in order to write a report on a teacher's Head Start conference session she attended to present to teachers and aides. Without the learning and confidence building that she acquired in the literacy program, she would have not sought employment, not have made it through the interview, and not have been able to perform the tasks required on her job. Similar experiences are duplicated on a regular basis. "This is what makes the job exciting and worthwhile," reflects Chris Schellenberg, Director of the LifeLong Learning Center.