

Relationships are Key:

How to attract and support effective volunteers

An interview with **Sheryl Harrow**, READ Saskatoon

In 2005, READ Saskatoon released *Building Capacity to Attract and Retain Literacy Volunteers*. The report was the result of an extensive project to examine why the number of volunteer tutors was declining and to discover what READ Saskatoon could do to recruit and retain them. Sheryl Harrow, one of the principal researchers, spoke to Tannis Atkinson in the spring of 2006.

Literacies: What is the history of this project? How did it come about?

Harrow: In 2001 the staff noticed a decline in the number of people attending our tutor trainings. We were only getting six people to our volunteer trainings, four times a year. That was huge decline—in previous years we had at least 14 to 20 people at each training. At the same time staff attended a volunteer management certificate course and learned about the “face of the new volunteer,” so we started to put some pieces together and question what we were doing, or rather, what we were not doing. Why was it that so few people were attending our trainings, when we had been doing exactly the same things around publicity, marketing and recruitment?

In 2000 we had brought in the volunteer criminal record check. We quickly attributed the decline in volunteers to the fact that they had to commit to 12 hours of training and then provide a criminal record check. We assumed this was what had lowered our numbers. That wasn't it at all, looking back.

We started to spin our wheels: “How quickly can we solve this problem?” Our response and strategy were to look at what we were doing wrong. We began to tinker with the program, which, in hindsight, was worse than leaving it alone. We rushed into solutions because

we wanted so desperately to fix the problem, instead of just asking what the real problem was.

Finally, we hit upon a solution. How about doing a research project investigating our program...which is when we finally came up with the idea of research in practice.

Literacies: Can you talk about the structure of the research project?

Harrow: After we got an inkling that the project was bigger than we thought, we put in an application to the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). We got turned down, but were glad we were—we wouldn't have got the data we needed. Two weeks later we got a call for proposals from the Knowledge Development Centre. We reworked and resubmitted our application. They said the idea was good but they wanted this to be a successful application so we should do the research and learn about the research process. We had to bring in someone with a PhD and get some extra support from the READ Saskatoon Board. We had ten days to find a sociologist who had time to devote to the project, bring her up to speed, and reshape the project's methodology. It was a huge job, but we did it.

Literacies: When you were first told you needed to involve someone with a PhD, were you reluctant or resistant? Did you think that it would change your project?

Harrow: I can honestly say that I didn't feel like that. We wanted so much to know the answers to our question that we were willing to let go of any ego. We saw it as bringing credibility to our paper and to what we're doing and also so the funder could trust us.

Literacies: Was this your first research?

Harrow: This was my very first research. It was a lot of work. I wish that the schedule was set up to reflect how research works—some weeks it took 15 hours and some it took 60 hours. It was wonderful; we had wonderful people to work with. But it was a frustrating length of time. We started off in January 2003 with the literature review, then had two focus groups in 2004, then a huge survey of all volunteers from the past ten years, then a survey of over 100 adult tutors. That was a lot in one year. And then time to write it up. So it was a very long process.

Literacies: Would you do another?

Harrow: Well, I would. I don't know if I would do one with as many methodologies attached. We were naïve going into the process.

Now that a year has gone by, I have questions that have come out of our research report and there are things I would love to do as a spin-off. Staff at READ Saskatoon are responsible to 135 adult learners and 135 volunteers. We keep in contact by phoning a lot of people. They need one-to-one conversation, to normalize the tutoring experience more than anything. Because of the research findings, we developed a mentoring project and secured money from NLS for a mentoring project where experienced volunteers mentor new volunteers. We would not have done that without this project.

I would do another research project. I'd like to do follow-up after the mentoring piece has wound up. I would like to see if the mentoring has made a difference to the length of time people volunteer. Our goal is that if people volunteer for two, three or four years we have done amazingly well. Another question I have is: how many tutors exit with learners? I want to learn more about our intake process. A lot hinges on the adult learner's commitment and their ability to articulate what they want to do. I'm not sure that we are clear



"Time will be considered our most valuable resource and its most prized 'investment' will be relationships." - Sue Vineyard

enough that this is about that learner—their needs, what they want to work on. So I think there is definitely something to be looked at in our intake process with learners to make matches more successful and to be strategic about who we place learners with.

Literacies: My experience is that sometimes learners know something about what they need, but as they get more confident, more things come up. It's an ongoing process.

Harrow: We have found that when learners transition from tutoring to other learning institutions or structured learning settings, they do not want to take a tutor with them. Maybe they don't think that the tutor can go with them. They don't picture themselves in an educational institution with a tutor. I found it interesting because the volunteers helped them get there.

Literacies: What other questions did you have?

Harrow: Our big light bulb was the perception versus the reality of what happens when people volunteer. That hit home for us. We are responsible for being accurate about what the tutoring relationship can be like. Often we didn't want to be truly honest—we learned that we need to be more up-front. We're good about showing off learners who have excelled in their learning: those who manage a department store, own a business or are the foreman of a crew.... We should be proud, but we can't set that up as the norm. This is not what all learners or tutors experience. Some tutors who see very little progress also experience great rewards in their tutoring relationship. To reduce the gap between perception and reality, we put together quotes from volunteers who had both good and bad experiences. Now, in the last hour of the training, we problem-solve about what volunteers can do: talk to staff, do they

know about supports in the community, is this adult learner ready for reading and writing? The more that we can close the gap between the tutor's perception and the reality of volunteering, the longer the volunteer will be around. This is about honesty and being completely up front. The volunteers who are with us the longest have the greatest empathy. Writing and reading are significant but so is everything else with adult learners.

Literacies: Lots of learners are dealing with so many other issues, not just a lack of education.

Harrow: It seems like it's the middle and upper class who tend to volunteer. They can be very removed from what low-income families struggle with. There's a difference between their perception and the reality of who the learners are. As one volunteer says on page 17 of the research report: "I

Examining Unpaid Literacy Work by Maria Moriarty

Volunteers form a large part of the adult literacy workforce in Canada. Perhaps it is not too much to say that community-based literacy, as we know it, could not continue without the scores of volunteers who work as tutors, fundraisers and members of volunteer boards. Literacy agencies spend many hours recruiting, training, managing and coordinating volunteers. Many literacy workers entered the field as volunteers and, in many jurisdictions, individuals who have been volunteers are given preference in hiring.

Despite the importance of volunteering to the field, there has been little or no systematic examination of the role of volunteers in adult literacy, nor of the tangle of issues, needs, benefits and motivations of volunteering. Much of the Canadian, and American, literature on volunteers focuses on coordination and management rather than on consideration of volunteer practices and their impacts in programs.

One exception is a 1998 paper published by Montreal's Centre for Literacy. In "Behaviour and Beliefs of Volunteer Literacy Tutors" Catherine Hambly discusses how volunteers' attitudes affect literacy organizations and learners. This case study asked tutors why they did not keep in touch with the literacy organization for whom they volunteered. Hambly found "a link from an apparent contradiction—that tutors desire to help their learners but

are complacent about their learners' progress—to a belief system shared by these tutors...[that] underlies their disinclination to receive support from the organization." The paper explores four fundamental beliefs, and concludes that more research is needed. It also points out that "[u]nfortunately, volunteer organizations often lack the financial and personnel resources necessary for research projects." The full report is available at: www.centreforliteracy.qc.ca/Publications/wkpaper3/cover.htm.

An article published in 2005 provides a nuanced and comprehensive discussion of the use of volunteers in the United States. In "Volunteers in Adult Literacy Education" (*Review of Adult Learning and Literacy* 5, 125-154), Jennifer A. Sandlin and Ralf St. Clair note that the use of volunteers in adult literacy is so thoroughly accepted that the implications and issues surrounding it remain relatively unquestioned. Through a literature review and interviews, the authors identify the key issues and controversies surrounding the use of volunteers in adult literacy. They propose that there is a need for careful research to examine the roles and activities of adult literacy volunteers, and to arrive at a deeper understanding of the use of volunteers as literacy educators and in other support roles in adult literacy. You can read a summary of this paper at www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=772.

didn't consider this person [to be] an adult, I just thought she had never learned to read." That's a class issue.

Literacies: : I am interested in that whole question because the literacy program I worked in during the late 80s in Toronto had a lot of Caribbean students and a lot of white, middle-class tutors. Volunteers kept saying, "My student needs to learn to speak English." There were layers of not understanding—that that person worked two jobs, maybe had not had dinner when they got to the program—on top of the expectations about why they thought the students were there. We had to change our tutor training to address the cultural differences and experiences. We educated tutors about Creole languages—that it's not bad English, it's a specific grammar you don't know about, a distinct language. Sometimes we felt we spent more time training tutors, educating tutors about the students' realities, when the program was set up to address the *learners'* needs. In every

volunteer program there is that tension—how to most effectively use volunteers. Once we realized what the fundamental issues were, it felt easier to deal with.

Harrow: We talked about adding cultural awareness to our training. We do touch on it but don't get into the cultural aspect. Our training now is 12 hours. If we did more we'd have to take something else out. I really like the whole idea of an additional weekend training at a later date—bring in those who identify they would like more work on cultural sensitivity.

Another thing is a clash with why people volunteer. Everyone volunteers because they love to read. But they are working with people who don't read—there is a discrepancy there. The agency is built on people's deficits. We're here because there is a group of people who can't do something. We have a responsibility to flip that, to open people's eyes to the fact there are so many things adult learners can do.

We can be more strategic, that's our job as staff. There's definitely a discrepancy between teacher-tutors and mentor-tutors. With the transcripts from our research, I listened to the language that discontinued teacher-tutors used. They tended to use pronouns to describe the person they worked with. They said "he" or "she" rather than the person's name. When the mentor-tutors talked, they included themselves in the learning description: "My learner is this..", "we..", "our...". Their language was collaborative.

Literacies: I had another question about findings, about culture and class issues. When you did the survey of the students, they said they wanted Aboriginal tutors. Was that all students or just Aboriginal students?

Harrow: No, it was all adult learners. We found that when we asked Aboriginal learners in our program, they said it did not matter whether or not they have an Aboriginal tutor as long as the content and material reflects who they are. I believe that's the most important thing. This was important when we looked at how we broaden our group of tutors. As a mainly white female organization we tend to draw on our social network in the community for new volunteers. We need to look at how we market ourselves. We want to find ways of reaching the Aboriginal community more effectively.

Literacies: Asking "Do you love to read?" might not be the best way to find those tutors.

Harrow: Right.

Literacies: What unexpected things did you learn from doing the research?

Harrow: One thing I really enjoyed was learning about literacy at the international level. I came from an education background, then moved into community-based work. I need to know the international connection, to see that how that folds into the province's definition and how that definition fits into our network and our own mission.

I also enjoyed the literature review. One part that really stuck with me was reading Kangisser, who talked about the prevailing myth that volunteers are cost-free. That myth continues to be generated. It was reassuring to learn that. We can be thankful for people stepping up to volunteer, but we need to know our boundaries. Volunteering is a job. Just because you give your time, you don't have the right to do whatever you want when you want.

Also, I enjoyed reading about how relationships are the most important thing in any workplace. We knew that relationships were central in tutoring. Now we know that follow-up calls are vital. It's a huge commitment for READ Saskatoon to call all volunteers and learners every six to eight weeks. We didn't know how important those calls were until they were highlighted in the research. It's nice to know. We're doing most things really well, but we can make them even better.

The findings about recruiting, training and supporting volunteers are not the only significant results of this research. The report's conclusion includes several suggestions about the mission, structure and funding of programs that use volunteers. For example, the report suggests that, to address literacy, programs should "[a]dopt a philosophy that is conducive to building collaborative relationships" and "[m]ove away from deficit models." The report also suggests that programs "[r]eflect on the impact that year-to-year funding has on the board, staff, volunteers, and clients of the volunteer organization...Re-examine administration responsibilities and time allocation; and Ensure adequate funding and staffing capacity to meet the mandate" (p. 20). ■

Building Capacity to Attract and Retain Literacy Volunteers is available at www.nald.ca/readsask/pubs/attract/attract.pdf.

SOURCE:

Kangisser, Dianne (1985). *Pioneers and New Frontiers: The role of volunteers in combating adult illiteracy*. New York: Business Council for Effective Literacy.