

# Literacy for adults with disabilities: Still a long way to go

by Audrey Gardner

■ Compared to a decade ago, are literacy and basic-education programs more accessible for adults with disabilities? It seems there is no easy answer to this question.

Part of the problem is that there is not enough inquiry about or documentation of adult literacy programs that accommodate and are designed for people with disabilities. No doubt there are many programs across Canada where adults with disabilities experience successful literacy learning, but recently I did a quick internet scan to find recent literature on adult literacy and disabilities. I found very little new information compared to a few years ago when I was involved in a national research project, Literacy and Disabilities Study (LaDS). I had hoped to find a variety of documents, such as manuals, research reports, learner stories and other helpful references that demonstrate how to increase and improve literacy programming for adults with disabilities. Where are they?

*Despite rapid advances in technology and learning tools, people with disabilities are still being left behind on their journey toward literacy.*

Literacy for Independent Living

Most of the literature highlights the fact that adults with disabilities make up a disproportionate number of the 42 per cent of Canadians at the two lowest literacy levels (Movement for Canadian Literacy, Carpenter, Yates, Macht, Kapsalis; Literacy

Ontario, Roher), and that adults with disabilities experience barriers to accessing adult literacy programming. While it is important to build evidence on barriers and challenges, what we really need to learn about are programs where learners experience success.

## The Literacy and Disabilities Study (LaDS)

In 2004-2005, Bow Valley College in Calgary conducted the LaDS research project. We examined different delivery models and educational settings where adults with disabilities used the Speech Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) computer program to help them develop and strengthen their reading and writing skills. Although the study looked primarily at one tool, we learned that learners experience success because of a combination of factors. The tools are just one part. LaDS looked for strengths in program design and delivery and identified teaching and learning practices and resources that supported successful learning experiences.

Eleven sites participated in the study. Most were community-based adult literacy programs. A few were sites that provided support, outreach or residence for people with disabilities. Of the 44 individual participants interviewed for the study, 20 were learners, 11 were tutors, seven were instructors and six were coordinators.

The purpose of the LaDS was to learn how SARAW was being used nearly ten years after it was

### Defining literacy:

To build a society that values inclusion, it is important to challenge the assumption that literacy is only reading and writing on paper. There are multiple literacies and multiple ways of communicating. The disabilities communities define literacy from an inclusive perspective, which includes sign language, Bliss symbols, Braille symbols, adaptive communication devices, gestures and sounds.

*Fact Sheet on Literacy and Disabilities,  
Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2005*

### Defining disability:

The disability-rights model of disability presumes that all people have the same rights, regardless of disability. Disability is seen as a product of discrimination and inequality in social, economic and political life. The focus is on broad systemic factors that enable or restrict people from participating as equals in societies.

Rioux, et al. *Atlas of Literacy and Disabilities*. 2003

developed. In particular we wanted to identify effective practices that contribute to literacy skills development. We learned that effective practices involve positive, respectful relationships, communication, and selecting and using tools and materials that reflect adult learning principles.

## The key role of relationships

From the study we learned that even though learners really liked using the SARAW computer and that it was a key learning tool at most sites, the quality of the learning experience was determined overwhelmingly by the relationship between learners and their instructor or tutor. Whether in small group settings or one-to-one tutoring, the relationships of those involved in the learning underpinned the success of practical, hands-on, experiential activities. The qualities, strategies and techniques that we observed in the

interactions between learner and tutor, instructor or coordinator reflect adult learning principles in action. All of the sites used a learner-centred approach to set individualized learning plans and goals. These occur through relationships.

In the Learning and Disabilities Study most of the learners spoke about how they used the SARAW computer with the help of instructors, tutors and other learners to tell their stories. At many sites learners used the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to put their voices and stories into print. Some learners were writing their life stories, others were creating entertaining fiction and some were doing both. All of the learners expressed how much they liked learning on the SARAW computer, and especially that the computer read their words aloud and gave positive oral feedback ("Good job, Paul").

## Effective practices

From the study we identified five effective practices that help facilitate learning among adults with disabilities.

### Values and assumptions

Effective practitioners and volunteer tutors are aware of their values and assumptions about adult literacy, disabilities, equality and diversity. They are willing to challenge their assumptions and perceptions.

### Relationships in teaching and learning

Key qualities for effective relationships are: a positive attitude, respect for others, enjoyment of learning, a desire to help others, patience, ability to listen, encouragement, being a role model, team building and cooperation.

### Learning environment

An effective learning environment is one that is comfortable, has a safe and welcoming atmosphere, is focused on learning and is accessible and accommodating (including facilities for mobility and access, and human resources for support).

### Approaches to learning

Sites that practice adult learning principles and use a learner-centred approach convey to learners that respect and dignity, independence and assets, equality and care, and joy of learning are valued elements for successful learning.

## What is SARAW?

SARAW is a computer program, developed in the early 1990s by the Neil Squire Society in partnership with Capilano College in Vancouver, to teach basic reading and writing skills. It was developed for people with physical disabilities, especially those who are non-verbal due to a brain injury, but has also been used to help people with intellectual disabilities. SARAW is an interactive program providing visual and auditory feedback, and includes writing, reading and vocabulary-building components.

### Where to find more information about SARAW:

- SARAW website: [www.saraw.net/index.html](http://www.saraw.net/index.html)
- Neil Squire Society website: [www.neilsquire.ca/index.asp](http://www.neilsquire.ca/index.asp)  
A national organization on technology for adults with disabilities. Home of SARAW.
- Blevins, Kim (1996). *The Companion to SARAW: An Exercise Workbook*. Vancouver: Neil Squire Foundation. [www.nald.ca/CLR/saraw/cover.htm](http://www.nald.ca/CLR/saraw/cover.htm)  
This resource includes many literacy activities to use with and in addition to the SARAW computer. It also has helpful information for tutoring and instruction.
- Bentley, Don and Pat Hodgson (2000). *SARAW Manual*. Burnaby, BC: Neil Squire Foundation. This manual comes with SARAW software. It is available from the Neil Squire Society.

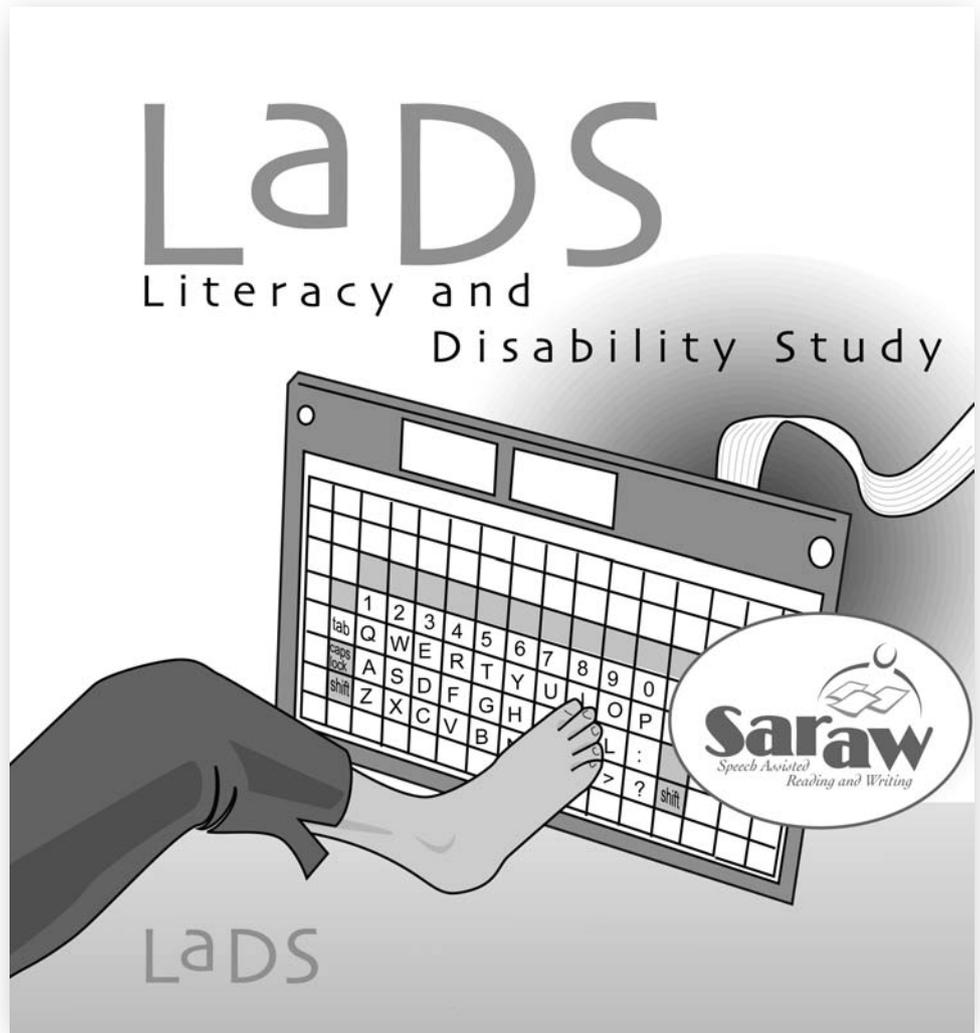
## Assessment and measuring progress

Effective practices look beyond traditional literacy assessment. Assessment of program accommodations is crucial. This involves looking to see how well a program can accommodate learners in relation to mobility, visibility, noise, communication and support. Literacy assessment includes flexibility to adapt measuring tools, support learner self-assessment and goal setting, and paying attention to how a learner likes to learn.

Although especially effective for adults with disabilities, these practices are broadly applicable. Perhaps if we looked at all adult literacy through an accommodation lens we could find ways to help learners not only find literacy programs but also to meaningfully participate. Most of the sites in the study did use an accommodation lens, and made the best of their situation. It seems that both the literacy and disabilities fields are able to make do with very little. Most not only 'make do,' they 'make the best of it!' For example, some sites in the study continued to use the original DOS version of the SARAW software even though it is now considered outdated technology. Most of participating sites partnered with other community organizations and services. These partnerships provided infrastructure support and learner referral, as well as bursaries and donations.

## Key learnings

By looking at how programs used one tool, the SARAW software, to support adults with disabilities



to strengthen their literacy, the study revealed how some literacy and disabilities programs are providing successful learning experiences. Here are some of the key things we learned:

- Most students work with a tutor or instructor and, in some locations, other students, and highly value that relationship.
- Most programs had a low ratio of student to instructor or tutor, which involved one-to-one tutoring or small classrooms.
- Although SARAW was originally developed for adults with severe physical disabilities, it is also an effective tool for building skills in reading, writing and spelling for students with intellectual disabilities as well.
- Many students build their literacy skills

## Want to know more about literacy and disabilities?

The following publications were produced by the Literacy and Disabilities Study (LaDS):

*Fact Sheet on Literacy and Disabilities.* Movement for Canadian Literacy [www.literacy.ca/litand/3.htm](http://www.literacy.ca/litand/3.htm)

- Highlights social, educational and economic barriers for adults with disabilities and low literacy.

*LaDS Learner Stories.* Bow Valley College. [www.nald.ca/fulltext/study/learner/stories.pdf](http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/study/learner/stories.pdf)

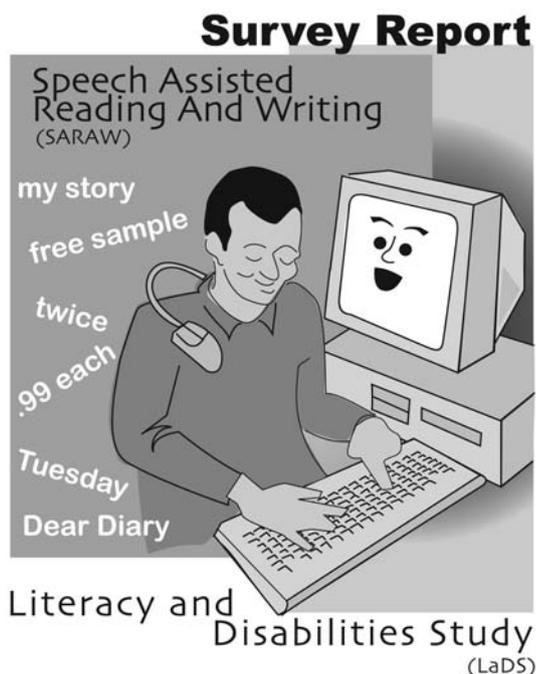
- A collection of stories written by 20 adult literacy learners using the Speech Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) computer program.

*SARAW Survey Report.* Bow Valley College. [www.nald.ca/fulltext/study/final/report.pdf](http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/study/final/report.pdf)

- A report on how SARAW and other activities and factors contribute to adult literacy learning.

*It Gets in Your Brain: Effective Practices in Adult Literacy using Speech Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) with People with Disabilities.* Bow Valley College. [www.nald.ca/fulltext/study/practice/guide.pdf](http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/study/practice/guide.pdf)

- A guide for practitioners to increase opportunities in their program for adults with disabilities to strengthen and maintain their literacy skills.



- through writing personal and creative stories, and have found their voice by using SARAW.
- Not enough literacy programs are accessible for people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities.
  - In addition to maintaining and improving literacy skills, learners using SARAW were also more self-confident, had expanded social relationships and applied what they learned to their everyday lives.

The Learning and Disabilities Study developed from a simple question that one literacy practitioner, Belle Auld, the SARAW program coordinator at Bow Valley College, had about the talking computer:

How are others across Canada using SARAW computer programs and can we learn what is working well for adult learners with disabilities?

The answer to her question was broader and more diverse than she originally imagined. Although she was only a part-time coordinator of a small local literacy program, she took a risk and produced evidence that showed what aspects of literacy programs do indeed work for adults with disabilities. Now it's your turn. ■

**AUDREY GARDNER** is the adult literacy programs and projects coordinator, Academics Foundation, Bow Valley College, Calgary. She has worked in the adult literacy field for seven years and participated in community-development and research projects locally and nationally.

### SOURCES:

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