



Movement for Canadian Literacy

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THE FIRST EVER IN CANADA National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering (NALG)

by Priscilla George

IN 1996, BEVERLY ANNE SABOURIN and Associates of Winnipeg and Step-by-Step Early Learning Centre, Kahnawake First Nation

submitted a proposal to the National Literacy Secretariat with the intent of “developing a comprehensive policy framework and strategic approach to the complex issue of literacy within Aboriginal communities and among Aboriginal citizens of Canada”.

The first phase of the project compiled an inventory of more than 90 adult literacy programs sponsored and/or initiated by Aboriginal Peoples, and involving Aboriginal learners as clients. Phases Two and Three looked at factors that contributed to the success of Aboriginal literacy programs. The inventory, as well as two chapters entitled *Common Threads* and *Critical Indicators* constitute *The Language of Literacy, A National Resource Directory of Aboriginal Literacy Programs*.

Those interviewed consistently suggested developing a national network of Aboriginal literacy practitioners, and having a

In April, I had the privilege of attending the National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering in Morley, Alberta. Due partly to the wholistic orientation of Aboriginal literacy, partly to the serene beauty of the setting, and partly to the wonderful people of all ages and diverse backgrounds, the experience was as uplifting as it was stimulating. In order to share the experience, and broaden the base for a national Aboriginal literacy network, MCL turned over this issue of *literacy.ca* to the National Aboriginal Design Committee. NALG Coordinator Priscilla George acted as Guest Editor, and wrote the following article as well as any others not credited to other writers. — *Wendy DesBrisay*

National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering (NALG). Phase Three established a National Aboriginal Design Committee (NADC) that is nationally representative of Aboriginal literacy practitioners to oversee such a gathering — the NADC includes a Learner and an Elder. The committee members include:



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We welcome letters to the editor, articles, news items, ideas for future issues, and feedback on any of the news and views you find in these pages. While we are particularly interested in material that addresses literacy issues, we welcome submissions that relate literacy to other social, economic or political issues. We have no formal submission guidelines, and the editor reserves the right to edit or not include submissions in future issues. The views expressed in literacy.ca are not necessarily those of MCL, its Board of Directors or the Editor, but are published to stimulate discussion on a range of adult literacy issues.

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- Don Pinay, Yorkton Tribal Council, Yorkton, Saskatchewan
- Nancy Cooper, The AlphaPlus Centre, Toronto, Ontario

Because this was the first ever NALG in Canada, we felt it crucial to have learners and Elders present, and we modestly projected 10% participation from each of learners and Elders. We met, and even exceeded, that goal. Of the 129 participants at the NALG, there were 23 learners, 6 of whom are Elders, and 3 who participated on the Learners' Panel. 14 Elders/ traditional teachers attended — 6 of whom are learners, and 4 who are also practitioners.

The NADC used the issues and topics identified in the Phase I survey in our Call for Presenters. When we cross-referenced proposed presentations to these issues and topics, language and technology need to be strengthened, and we sought out people to fill in the gap.

To make the NALG as culture-based as possible, we decided to have it in a natural environment, preferably on a First Nation. That's how Nakoda Lodge was chosen. It's surrounded by the majestic beauty of Mother Earth — mountains, Chief Hector Lake, animals, birds. A different Elder opened each day of the NALG. The medicines that they shared with us were prayers and songs in their own language.

The committee felt it important to provide opportunities for NALG participants to sit with healers, and to participate in a sweatlodge. As literacy practitioners, we're often so busy with the administrative and delivery aspects of



From left to right: Tim Southwind, Maria King and Priscilla George

programming, expectations of the host organization, commitments to community and family, that we forget to look after ourselves. The sign-up sheets for the healers and the ceremonies were full within minutes of being posted. (Many thanks to Diane Hill, Tim Southwind and Denys Auger who were available for healing/counselling sessions.) We even had to run a second sweatlodge. Several people were given their names, clans and colours — our own type of literacy.

Gichi Miigwech (thank you) to NALG participants for respecting the feelings and customs of the Stoney First Nation, when initial plans to have a Round Dance had to be changed. Our heartfelt appreciation goes to Dale House of the Stoney First Nation, who, on short notice, was able to do Give-Away Teachings of that area, and a song (with his son). NALG participants shared jokes, stories, and honourings with each other that evening. Several people blessed us with a song in their own language. Gichi Miigwech to all who brought gifts to exchange in the Give-Away. You brought meaningful gifts, along with your good intentions and best wishes. You also got to take home something that was infused with the loving energy in the room that night.

Our Saturday Morning Plenary Speaker was Evan Adams. Evan was such a hit at the NALG, that even the staff at Nakoda Lodge stopped their work to hear him speak. In fact, lunch was



Nancy Cooper, The AlphaPlus Centre, Toronto, Ontario

PHOTO BY: PETAL FLURNESS

almost over by the time Evan was finished signing autographs, and having his picture taken with people. He gave us many powerful messages. Thanks, Evan, for taking time out from your busy schedule as a medical student, actor, a speaker at many First Nations functions, and as a participant in valuable work in your community to come and be with us. Your words have touched the hearts and lives of many.

Quite a few people said that the Saturday afternoon Closing Plenary was the most important part for them. We used the energy generated at the NALG, and made plans for solidifying the foundation of Aboriginal literacy in Canada. Those present gave much valuable information for the NALG follow-up strategy. Recommendations that we take forward to the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples on your behalf are to maintain the momentum begun by the NALG through: having more NALGs; and, developing a National Aboriginal Literacy Organization. To that end, thirteen people volunteered to work with the existing NADC. We'll keep you posted on developments.



Some of the learners who attended the National Adult Literacy Gathering

PHOTO BY: PETAL FLURNESS



PHOTO BY BETAL FLURISS

Jennifer Wemigwans and Joe Beardy videotaped the gathering events.

Jennifer Wemigwans, Joe Beardy and I have begun production of the NALG video. It should be ready for distribution to NALG participants (one per program) in late summer/early fall. <priscilla.george@sympatico.ca>

Holistic Learning: A Model of Education Based on Aboriginal Cultural Philosophy

Diane Hill (Katsitsawaks) is a member of the Bear Clan of the Mohawk Nation, Grand River Territory of the Six Nations. For 13 years, she has worked on contract with the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) as a learning facilitator and instructor. She also has a part-time practice as a writer, traditional healer/counsellor, and educational consultant.

Recently, Diane completed her Masters Degree in Adult Education from St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Her thesis entitled, "*Holistic Learning: A Model of Education Based on Aboriginal Cultural Philosophy*" has been published just this year. Diane is owner and operator of Atetshenshera — A Healing Place, located on the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. Dianne's thesis:

- identifies some of the major beliefs, concepts, and principles that have shaped Aboriginal philosophies, and that have determined the development of various learning and teaching methods
- encourages the use of learning/teaching processes that support an Aboriginal definition of "*holistic learning*" during which a learner is challenged to acquire the qualities and characteristics necessary "*to become a whole person*"
- challenges contemporary Western educational practitioners to consider the importance of documenting and accrediting knowledge that is not contained in books
- explains how traditional Aboriginal knowledge is an equally valid representation of the current truths that exist within the western world today
- relies heavily on personal interviews with First Nation leaders that focus on traditional Aboriginal teachings (an historic first for St. Francis Xavier)
- offers an example of an educational process that helps Aboriginal learners to reclaim their cultural identity, develop an understanding of themselves, and to become more conscious of a multi-cultural environment

Following is an excerpt of Dianne's Masters Thesis, which formed the basis of her Opening Plenary Presentation at the NALG, and of which many NALG participants requested a copy.

*"Aboriginal cultural teachings embrace a form of knowledge that is created from one's journey through life, and is facilitated by one's spiritual connection to the world. In writing about Indigenous people and their knowledge base, Brant-Castellano (in press) denotes three categories that overlap and interact with each other. She refers to the first category as being a **traditional knowledge**, consisting of legends or stories about the Creation of the world; encounters with ancestors and spirits; experiences with the environment, family and clan genealogies; as well as facts and information relating to an understanding of the world. Apart from providing information, knowledge reinforces values and beliefs, and instills*

attitudes within the people. Brant-Castellano terms **empirical knowledge** as a second category that derives from multiple sources. This term refers to the way in which people create knowledge from the careful observation of a particular phenomenon over extended periods of time. Information from the observations of many people is interpreted within the context of existing information with revisions to the current state of knowledge being made when different perspectives emerge. **Revealed knowledge** is the term that she applies to the last category. Viewed as being spiritual in nature, this kind of knowledge is acquired through revelation and stems from a person's intuitive sense, his/her dreams, visions, and fasting experiences. An individual seeks this knowledge usually in response to a need for solving a problem, or for ascertaining some direction or guidance related to one's life journey or purpose."

Diane closed her presentation with an Ojibway song she had been taught, *Creator's Song — Kiin Gosha Wenji-Bimooseyaan — You're the Reason I'm Walking*. It is true what Diane said about the "ripple effect" of our words and actions — weeks after the NALG, participants are still talking about the energy from her presentation, and her song. Keep up the GREAT work, Diane!

"Writing as a Way of Healing"

The NADC is deeply grateful to the Movement for Canadian Literacy for helping us to secure Larry Loyie and partner, Constance Brissenden, to present at the NALG. Larry, of the Cree Nation, is from Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta. Through going back to school, then writing about his experiences in residential school, Larry has come to see "writing as a way of healing". He has written two books, *Ora Pro Nobis (Pray for Us)*, and *The Healing*. A third book is in process.

Larry and Constance co-facilitate workshops and presentations all across Canada for aspiring writers. They often speak the different parts in Larry's plays. Larry has had voice-box surgery, and can speak for only a few minutes, before he has to rest. Constance and Larry co-presented the following powerful excerpt on the Learners' Panel.

A scene from *The Healing*, a memoir for voices by Cree writer, Larry Loyie ©2000.

NARRATOR: (READ BY LARRY)

Although I was only ten, I was already an expert Indian hunter in all seasons, because I could get food from water or the forest. We were called ignorant and lazy because being wealthy was not the most important thing in our lives. Being skilled in a discipline and performing it well was the greatest honour for anyone.

Many Native people live these days discouraged and spiritless. The skills learned from their elders have been lost or discredited, or for that matter, they were never passed on to the younger generation because there was no one home to pass them on to.

The blame must fall on the residential schools. As a child with all my skills, I thought of myself as smart, but in residential school I was called dumb, running around the bush like a wild animal. I was called hateful and derogatory names, the meaning of which I did not understand. In frustration I ran away twice, only to be brought back and beaten. Now the truth is becoming known and is painful to us all. At night, I cry:

YOUNG MAN: (READ BY CONSTANCE)

Let not your ignorance degrade me
Nor my ignorance irritate you.

Given an equal opportunity in my childhood years
The education I was denied would have been.
I had no say in what I was taught or the right to
speak my Native tongue

If I did, I was not reprimanded but severely beaten
As I memorized the Credo, Ave Maria and Hosannas
in Latin

I was rewarded with a cheap cowboy movie on
Sunday
With no one to turn to I rebelled in silence.

While you were being taught the basics of education
I was learning the ways of not being punished.
While you were individually punished,
If one of us did something all 70 of us were equally
punished,
All made to sit in silence for an hour.
If we were caught alone, we were strapped
No one to utter, "Suffer little children, come
unto me"

*In those times, I didn't know who I prayed to
I only wanted it to stop.*

*Yes, they taught me well
What was sin, how to sin
Mostly how to hate
Things that never existed at home.
No one cared, no encouragement or kind words
No hugs when you were lonely
In despair I cry
Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa
Through my fault, through my fault, through my most
grievous fault
Who do I blame?
Yes, they taught me how to be especially strong
within myself
The spirit in me that awakens the kind and
gentle things
I was taught before that dark period.*

NARRATOR:

*Along with many of my people, we are taking the first
steps to heal. As part of my tradition, I turn once
again to the forest, the cathedral of my childhood. I
sit by another small campfire, sipping a cup of muskeg
tea, waiting for those unforgettable sunsets I watched
many times as a boy.*

ELDER:

*I marvel at the serene elegance of this place, as I sit
by the river
Remembering happy times spent here with my family
I feel a very strong presence of my people, here
with me
I can hear them singing in the wind, hear them
chattering in the leaves
I hear the laughter of children in the bubbling river
I envision that I will be part of this awesome beauty
one day
When I have completed my circle of life.
As I lay down and drift away in satisfaction
and happiness
Watstagatch suesquatch keykwhy agu meyokisegaw
My what a glorious day.*

NALG participants were deeply moved by this presentation. Larry is truly an excellent role model for Aboriginal literacy. Thank you, Larry and Constance, for making a difference.

Anyone wanting to use the material above in a classroom or anywhere else, should first get in touch with Larry for permission to photocopy, etc. You can contact him at livingtradition@telus.net, phone (604) 876-0880, fax (604) 876-5105.

A Shining Example of Perseverance and Courage

Highlights of a presentation by Rosie Basque, Mi'kmaq, former student, Unama'ki Training and Education Centre, Cape Breton

*I was a counsellor in the school
...one day I realized that my students have a better
education than me
I decided to go back to school, but kept putting it off
My husband said, "Don't be afraid. Nobody's
shooting at you.
If you don't face your fears, you're not going to get
anywhere"*

*I got my GED...I set a goal to go to university
My brother was murdered...I thought to myself,
"You're not a victim, you're a survivor."
so I picked myself up and went on*

*My sister, 33, died of an aneurism...I thought, "My
sister would want me to go on."
...I made the dean's list...got my BSW at Dalhousie*

*My father had a heart attack...then my husband died
A friend said, "The Creator does not give you
anything you can't handle"*

*April of that year, my son was killed in a car accident
My mother said, "At this time in your life, you're not
a quitter,
you just have to choose a different path. Your kids
need you."*

I went on social assistance, we supported each other

*Today, when I reflect on my community, I see how
great the adult education and literacy programs are.
They open doors for our people.
We have teachers, social workers, principals, lawyers,
nurses, and business people."*

[Editor's comment — There was not a dry eye in the audience as Rosie spoke. What a powerful teaching we all received that day!]

Reflections on the National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering

Debbie Purton, Saskatchewan Literacy Network

The NALG brought learners, practitioners, Elders and education/government representatives together to share information and perspectives on Aboriginal literacy needs, issues and program models. The positive energy that flowed throughout the gathering was incredible.

The setting was breathtaking. Nakoda Lodge is set at the base of a beautiful lake, surrounded by trees and framed by the mountains. The walking trail around the lake offered a wonderful reprieve at the end of a full day. Days began with the sounds of Canada Geese, and ended with the call of loons.

Personal highlights and learnings from several of the Saskatchewan participants follow:

"The First NALG was indeed a stimulating experience. I had the opportunity to present our work on the Stardale holistic model of learning, and I gained valuable insight as an individual who quests knowledge. My beliefs were reaffirmed on numerous occasions, as I participated in workshops, small group discussions, and walks around the lake. The dynamics of interaction and positive energy were continually flowing. Meeting old friends and creating new friends who support one another was something that occurred

consistently for me. I am forever grateful! There are many times I feel overwhelmed, frustrated and left without the supports necessary to empower the female participants that I work with. From this conference, I was given the tools and sustainable resources that will assist me. In my quest for knowledge and for the evolution of my spirit, all that came to be was meant to be." — Helen McPhaden, Stardale Women's Group

"It was a real eye-opener on the importance of Aboriginal literacy, and how this area is on a huge up-swing. Furthermore, it really broadened my horizons that literacy is more than just reading and writing, and that there are many other components that are often overlooked. For example, elements of healing and growth as an individual are often synonymous with literacy development. Another real awakening was Aboriginal literacy is unique in its own right." — Maynard Quewezance, Saskatchewan Post-Secondary Education and Training

"I thought it was a really good gathering. A lot of good information was passed on by everyone there. I met so many people that I never met before. I was glad I went." — Irene Jacques, Elder

"I took in the science and technology workshops — all three were interesting. The Science Projects for Literacy Learners was a Manitoba project, whereby literacy learners were paired up to carry out and showcase science projects. In-class activities included



The view from Nakoda Lodge

PHOTO BY: MARIA KING



PHOTO BY: NANCY COOPER

From left to right: Ira Stanley-Tober, Alberta Association for Adult Literacy, Moise Chartier (in background), Timmins Native Friendship Centre, Helen McPhaden, Stardale Women's Group Inc., Melfort Saskatchewan, Nora McDonald-Plourde, Nova Scotia Dept. of Education and Culture, Catherine O'Connell, Ottawa

*introduction to scientific method and science vocabulary. Pairs of students performed the experiments, and made a display for a science fair. The project team made a video of the process, and created a workbook so that others could try this idea, too. The video and workbook "**Science is Wonder**" are available from the Aboriginal Literacy Foundation (204) 989-8860. The second workshop I attended was by Charles Ramsey of New Brunswick. Charles walked us through the layers of information available through the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) website. If you haven't been to it lately, it is well worth visiting (www.nald.ca). The third workshop was by AlphaRoute from Ontario. The project will have four streams of on-line learning available for Ontarians by next year — English, French, Aboriginal and Special Needs Access. The Aboriginal content is being created with the help of Christianna Jones. She is basing her lesson on the Medicine Wheel, and an Aboriginal vision that allows learners to develop concepts enhancing the mind, the body, the spirit, and the emotions. The process will use the self-direction and self-management domain. On-line learners will have access to tutors through toll-free numbers. Their site was user-friendly. You can see a glimpse of their program on www.alphaplus.ca"*

— Bebe Ivanochko, Northlands College

"I loved the location. It was a beautiful place — a beautiful setting. It was quiet and removed from everything else, so people had to stay there. They couldn't slip away. Everyone that came had something good to say. Everyone came with open hearts, and a willingness to share. It was a very welcoming situation. The main speaker, Diane Hill, reinforced everything that I believe in. It was nice to hear her thoughts on the Aboriginal way of knowing — how everything is connected, and everything has a place and a purpose. I was just happy to be there, to share information on family literacy, and to have the information well-received. This has opened

the door for family literacy programming across Canada."

— Leanne McLeod, Won Ska Cultural School

The Gathering provided a powerful forum for sharing ideas, and collectively building a vision for Aboriginal literacy. Participants were given an opportunity to discuss the strengths of the current Aboriginal literacy movement, as well as to identify weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This information will serve as the base for developing a National Aboriginal Literacy Strategy, and recommendations to the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples.

As a follow-up to the National Gathering, a small working group in Saskatchewan has been convened to explore ways and means to continue discussions at the provincial level. Updates on this process will be included in future issues of the Saskatchewan Literacy Network newsletter.

Debbie Purton is the new Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Literacy Network,
<sklit@sk.sympatico.ca>

“A Lasting Impact”

Michael Johnny,
The AlphaPlus Centre, Toronto, Ontario

Perhaps it is best that this is being written more than a month after the first ever NALG. Conferences are fast-paced and intense, and offer a great deal of information to participants. Most important, though, is what the participants hold onto after the conference: new knowledge and skills; new friendships; and, support systems. Thus, in reflecting on what I took away from those three days, I can say that the NALG was a success — for me as a worker in Native literacy, but more importantly, for the entire Native literacy field in Canada. There were three aspects that created a lasting impact on me:

Cross-Canada Participation

There was representation from coast to coast to coast throughout Canada. Native literacy conferences have traditionally created a powerful sense of affirmation in the work that is being done on a community level, and, in my experiences, throughout Ontario. Yet, with participation from each province and territory, the affirmation seemed stronger, and was given a unified voice. Leading up to the Closing Plenary, where recommendations were made to go to the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, there were common calls for more NALGs, as well as a National Aboriginal Literacy Coalition, to continue networking and training efforts. To experience the growth of a national network of Aboriginal literacy practitioners was awesome.

Inclusion of Learners and Elders

The Aboriginal adult literacy circle was made complete with the inclusion of learners and Elders. What impressed me was the level of involvement they were given, the respect shown to them. On the morning of the 27th and 29th respectively, there was a Learners' Panel, and an Elders' Panel (on the 28th, it was a Practitioners' Panel). The powerful messages these people shared — based on their life experiences, the

courage they demonstrated in speaking in front of over 100 people, and the passion with which they spoke to Aboriginal literacy has never been experienced in a Native literacy conference I have attended. Words cannot describe the feelings I had at that time, nor can they demonstrate the respect I have for these people, who may not have realized they were teachers to many of us present.

Circles Know No Beginning or End

There is a real commitment to continue the energy and vision of the gathering into future developments, whether they be a National Aboriginal Literacy Coalition, another NALG, or at the least, increased networking and communication across Canada from Aboriginal literacy practitioners. On Friday evening, we had a Feast, a Give-Away. There was an opportunity for participants to share their feelings. I took the time to thank those who are still working in the field — whether they are learners, Elders or practitioners. They are community heroes, and should feel so proud of what they do! There were thanks to the visionaries, the workers, and support people and agencies that helped put together this conference. There were thanks for the presenters — people with skill, knowledge and experience that can help others improve the work they do. It was then, late Friday night, when the feeling of comfort was so deeply rooted in me, that I knew I would always be a part of Native literacy, and it would be a part of me!

I walked around the lake Sunday, April 30, the emotion and information of the past three days full inside of me. I felt so at peace, and so calm. I looked over the lake to the Lodge, and behind me to the Rockies. I knew, like I still do, that I am in the right place now. I brought back memories, pictures, notes, new friendships, renewed friendships, but what will endure is the deep-rooted sense of comfort. Thanks so much for the opportunity to share what I know, and to be part of the first ever NALG. I can promise that what I was able to give does not compare nor come close to what I was able to bring away from the three days.

The Future — Now I Know Where to Begin

by Moise Chartier, Peer Tutor,
Timmins Friendship Centre

To the organizers, you did a great job, and I was honoured to be a part of this conference.

Although I am not an educated person, at no point did I feel inferior. In fact, my self-esteem is still growing. I am home alone now, but I am not lonely. All of you have become my family, and families stick together. We struggle through life day-to-day, sometimes apart in our home towns, but always together in our hearts. May the Creator guide and protect us until we meet again.

Before this weekend, I would be shy to ask questions. Big words confuse me. Many times, I would be frustrated, and think myself stupid. For whatever reason, now I realize that my “brain cannot process words with too many syllables”.

Before meeting all of you, I would hold people of authority in contempt — teachers, doctors, government people — and, to be honest, I always will, but now I will search out the good ones, and apparently there are many. You have shown me this truth.

Now I can write my book. Before, I thought that good books were like puzzles, and should be hard to understand. I could never write like that. Might I suggest to those of you that can understand big words that you remember that the pen is mightier than the sword, and some of us bleed when they are used.

Evan Adams said so many things, but when he opened that book and read from it, he unlocked many doors to my mind. I can't see the page for my eyes are full of tears. Thank you, Evan, and I promise I will not burn out.

*Of God, I hope for; Of man, I know of
Of love I trust in; Of truth, I bend to
Of time, I drink to, Of friendship I believe in
Of the future, I know not where to begin.*

Now I do. Thank you.

Different Kinds of “Literacy”

by Denys Auger, Elder, Bigstone Cree Nation, Alberta

To me, there are different kinds of “literacy”. There are cultural things that a person knows well with confidence and competence. For instance, a drummer or singer in our culture is literate in his or her own knowledge of the songs and their meanings. These people are able to sing the songs, and to lift peoples’ spirits with their power to call and to bring us together as one. A hunter is literate in his or her knowledge of the land, in his ability to read the tracks, to know the way of the animals, to read the signs of weather and seasonal changes, to know the migration patterns, as well as where and when to find what he needs. A healer who understands vision, herbs, and follows directions, who can also work and listen to the wind, water, fire, and respects the land with the greater powers is literate.

Literacy is not just being competent at reading and writing the language of the dominating culture. However, that is a start, because without reading and writing, it is difficult to engage in the dialogue which we need to begin to set things right between Natives and non-Natives.



From left to Right: Irene Jacques — Elder, Saskatchewan Literacy Network, Denys Auger, Bigstone Cree Education Authority, Violet Rowan — Ermineskin Education Trust Fund

PHOTO BY NANCY COOPER

To Fly Without Wings

by Annette Odjick-Decontie, Learner,
Kitigan Zibi First Nation, Quebec

I recently was chosen to attend the very first NALG in Morley, Alberta. The trip provided me with a number of new experiences. At the airport, I saw many people from all around the world. I had never been on a plane before, and the flight was awesome! Another new experience was seeing the Rocky Mountains with snow still upon them. I visited Banff and Lake Louise. The images of wild goats, elk, and horses on the side of the roads will be etched in my mind forever.

I met several women who made an impression upon me. Priscilla George, one of the organizers, was one such woman. She has been involved with Native literacy since 1987. She participated in the National Aboriginal Literacy Action Plan. She is coordinating *The Impacts of Trauma on Literacy* theme for the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women. It was obvious Priscilla had put a lot of work into making the conference successful. With her calm and soft voice, she seemed to know exactly what had to be done to keep it flowing the right way.

Another woman who impressed me was Diane Hill, the opening keynote speaker. In 1984, Diane graduated from the University of Western Ontario, with a B.A. in the Behavioural Sciences. She has just published her Masters Thesis, *Holistic Learning: A Model of Education Based on Aboriginal Cultural Philosophy*. Her presentation about children who have been traumatized in early infancy touched me deeply. According to her, they seem to have a hard time learning. I hate to admit it, but that's my problem.

I met many practitioners, learners and Elders. Listening to them was an inspiration for me. I had doubts about going on with my education after graduating from the Choices Program. However, I discovered that many learners were older than I, and the feedback I received from them encouraged me to keep on going. I realized that I was further along with my studies than many of them, and that now was not the time to give up.

I had to admire the Elders for their courage and wisdom in telling about their experiences in residential schools. Many of them said that we needed more spirituality in our education system. They spoke of the need for healing to take place before learning could occur. I, as a Native adult learner who attended residential school, could relate to what they said. I needed to hear their words, for it was comforting to my inner self. It was good to listen to all of them.

I would like to thank the organizers and all the people who put on workshops. I would also like to thank the workers at Nakoda Lodge, who made me feel like I was at home. "Kichi-Migwech" to all. May the Great Spirit always smile upon all of you and your families. I give thanks to Kitigan Zibi Education Council for putting up the funds for this trip, and, last but not least, my teacher, Richard Johnston. This experience has given me the opportunity to keep flying without wings.

Helping People to Better Themselves

by Maureen Chartrand, Learner,
Dauphin Adult Learning Centre

I feel this conference was an opportunity. I was fortunate to experience it, because I feel I have a better understanding of what it takes to keep an adult literacy program going.

This conference made me truly appreciate our coordinator a lot more. The thing that struck me the most was how many people work behind the scenes. Some of the things that June does are writing endless proposals, attending workshops, and organizing workshops. As a student, I never knew how work goes on behind that closed door.

There are similar problems that all programs seem to have. The problem seems to be money. There are some programs who seem to have more than we do, while others appear to have less. We need funding for daycare, up-dated books, instructors, and tutors.

The conference also gave me the opportunity to meet so many nice people. I met students, instructors and Elders from across Canada. This was the first time I experienced a sweat. I feel

there is more I must learn before I experience another one like this.

Since I've been home, I have appreciated June a lot more. She does so much for the students and their education. It's nice to know there are others like her across Canada, helping people who are trying to better themselves.

Connections — and Potential

by June McMullen,
Dauphin Adult Learning Centre, Manitoba

My experience at the NALG still holds strong in my mind and my heart. Our program was very fortunate to have been chosen to represent our region, and to bring back new experiences to the community. It also gave one of the students from the Dauphin Adult Learning Program the opportunity to learn, and to grow through new experiences.

There was a good representation of learners, practitioners, Elders and resource people from every province and territory across Canada. They brought a wealth of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal communities, and literacy issues. I met a lot of these people, and I also had the chance to strengthen the connections with programs in my own province. Some of these people assisted me with new ideas, and gave me the opportunity to be involved with their programs. It would have been very difficult to make these connections, or to learn of these ideas without having attended the conference.

The workshops, panels, and speakers provided an excellent opportunity to gain new knowledge. I particularly enjoyed the workshop done by Sally Gaikezhoyngai titled, *Seven Fires — Aboriginal Cultural/Spiritual Teachings and the Learner*. Sally is an incredible teacher and storyteller. After listening to her, I understood more about issues for Aboriginal people, and also many of the experiences of the learners in my program. Her teachings were straightforward and clear with their meaning. I wish we could bring more of this learning into our classroom, and help students to identify with the teachings of the Seven Fires. It is

very sad that this learning is not recognized as essential for adult learners, as well as their children. If learners could identify their personal issues with the teachings of the Sacred Circle, and the Seven Fires, our communities would be stronger.

The panels helped me to better understand that we share common struggles in the literacy field. All the people work to better their families, their friends, and their communities. We struggle to have more Aboriginal teachings about tradition, language, and culture in the classroom. Sometimes it's due to funding restraints, or lack of understanding by non-Aboriginal institutions. The Elders' presentations helped me to see how far we have come in sharing traditional learning, while recognizing the damage that imposed education has done to many communities. Aboriginal people are beginning to address the destruction that the residential schools did to First Nation communities, and to begin to heal from these experiences. The Elders gave insight on what direction it will take.

The most enjoyable part of the conference was the support and knowledge that was available. It was an amazing experience to participate in the sweatlodge with Maureen. It was also good to have traditional counselling on-site. It provided the balance that was needed for many people. I have never been to a conference where I could talk about the learning that was going on, and then explore that learning to the fullest. This was the connection that has been lost in literacy work, and what needs to happen on an everyday level. It made me think about how essential it is to have culture and language as part of our everyday learning.

One theme that ran through my mind throughout the conference is "*potential*". Listening to all the speakers, and going to the workshops, I kept hearing the word "*potential*". I could see that many literacy practitioners are working towards the same goals in their programs, in trying to meet the needs of the learners. However, there are some barriers that make it difficult in moving forward with implementing Aboriginal traditions and culture.

I hope, through this conference, we can address these issues on a national level, and eventually start to lobby our provincial leaders for more support in this area. The potential I see is this — as practitioners, we are able to start this learning in our own communities. By gaining support from the learners, co-workers and community members, we will be able to build this knowledge together.

A Sense of Family

by Allan Gillis,
Director of Education, Lennox Island First Nation

I left the NALG with a feeling of hope and rejuvenation. Knowing I was going to be the only participant from Prince Edward Island, I felt isolated before even arriving — much like staff members and I sometimes feel about literacy work within our community. However, after being there, I felt very much connected, both in a professional sense (which was brought about through discussions and sessions with other participants), as well as spiritually, through the beautiful scenery of Morley, and the traditional components which were incorporated into the NALG.

The NALG was invaluable, as it provided a means of networking and connecting between literacy practitioners, learners and Elders. It was nice to hear success stories from different centres offering literacy programs. As well, I could relate to the obstacles faced by so many of the participants. It was very refreshing to attend a function where everyone felt they were an equal partner. As a result, a sense of family was formed.

Working together, the participants drafted a number of recommendations. It was inspiring to see so many participants expressing the same, or very similar, recommendations. It is my hope that this NALG will not be the last; rather, that it will be the first of its kind so that others may experience the strength evident throughout the gathering.

Earth Angels

by Leanne McLeod, Metis,
Prince Albert, Saskatchewan

I graduated from the SUNTEP (Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program) two years ago, and have had the honor to work in two interesting positions:

- at the Won-ska Cultural School, where many of our youth are returning to the classroom to overcome barriers faced by Aboriginal Peoples today; and,
- in the Pine Grove Correctional Centre, where I work primarily on a Family Literacy program.

To me, Family Literacy means that children develop literacy skills in the home. These skills include reading, writing, listening, speaking, and non-verbal skills. We, as parents, are our children's first teachers. Particularly for those in conflict with the law, the need to connect parent with child is unquestionable. Family literacy within correctional institutions helps the individual to develop basic skills, and an understanding of their role in their child's life. This program is about opportunity, support and hope. As parent, facilitator, and teacher, we need to refocus on our values, traditions, and beliefs that we are our child's first teachers. Somehow, we've allowed institutions to become surrogate parents, forgetting the simplest of our traditional teachers from our Elders that "*parenting takes priority*".

With this thought in mind, in 1998–99, Pine Grove received a grant from the National Literacy Secretariat to develop and implement a four part literacy program:

1. Using the Saskatchewan Literacy Network program, *Come Read With Me*, where there is a book of the day up to a total of 8 books. Each woman is allowed to keep the books, to start a small library for her children. This program "*encourages reading as a fun and valued activity for both parents and children. It helps parents with low literacy skills to read to their children.*" It connects parents with children through language.

2. Looking at issues, such as parenting, that the women face while incarcerated. The women learn how to communicate, listen, and handle anger in a positive manner. In each of these two programs, the women were given booklets with fun activities for themselves, or to share with their child during visitation. The women were asked to keep a journal of their thoughts, where they could write or draw their feelings.
3. Understanding the importance of the oral tradition by working with an Elder. Through craftwork and storytelling, the women learned the traditions, values, customs and beliefs of their own culture. They were encouraged to reflect on their lives, including their role as a parent. The Elder prepared them by discussing things orally, which I then helped them to write. This added a healing process to the women's journey of learning and parenting.
4. Encouraging the women to reflect on one story they would like to give to their children. They learned how to write out their stories in a book form, and how to edit their work. They were then taught the basics in computers, so each woman could complete a book with her story. This gave them a great sense of self-esteem and self-worth. The women are now confident to sit behind a computer, or to pick up a child's book and read it, or openly discuss ideas.

In the next phase, we developed a Facilitator's Manual for use in either men's or women's institutions. We asked ourselves, "How can such a program benefit the incarcerated male?" Through my research, I found that Family Literacy has, in fact, been mandated by the United States Federal Government, and has been implemented under a variety of names in a men's facility. Our goal is to have such a program recognized and delivered by penal facilities in Canada. We also hope that Family Literacy programming becomes mandated as an intervention program for individuals in conflict with the law.

In the upcoming year, we plan to provide training across Canada on this type of programming.

At the NALG, I presented the *Keys to Family Literacy* program. Throughout the conference, I found that the need for such a program is great, and the response to the possibility of this training was overwhelming.

Another new development is the support for Family Literacy Programming by the Department of Education in Saskatchewan. Both the public and the separate school divisions (community schools) within Saskatchewan will have individuals trained in *Come Read With Me*, and the *Key to Family Literacy Program*. We have discussed the program with others within institutions in Saskatchewan, who patiently await the training. Our plan is to present at next year's National Literacy Conference, Dallas, Texas, as well as at the Correctional Services Centres conference.

Many thanks go to LaVera Schiele, teacher therapist at the Pine Grove Correctional Centre, whose idea this program was. I just brought the idea to life by developing and implementing it. The program has proven that it can change the lives of others. The people in my life are the most important of all. I truly believe they were placed there by a higher power, so that they could guide me. At SUNTEP, we have a name for such people. They are "Earth Angels".



From left to right: Senator Joyce Fairbairn, LaVera Schiele, Thomas Townsend and Leanne McLeod. The manual shown is *Keys to Family Literacy*.

Anyone wishing to contact Leanne may do so at: Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Phone (306) 953-3132, home (306) 764-7204, or e-mail: hlmcleod@sk.sympatico.ca

Stardale

by Helen McPhaden, Melfort, Saskatchewan

The vision statement for Stardale is to provide life skills and literacy education, as well as advocacy, to women living in poverty and abusive situations, toward empowering their lives, their families, and their communities, thus overcoming systemic barriers.

Stardale offers many learning/healing activities and programs which are solely for the betterment of women. They are strengthened through a unique approach, which is a highly structured format that combines experiential learning, and arts and crafts in a therapeutic environment. We highlight some of these activities for this article.

Our first program was entitled, *Honouring Ourselves*. This was a 24-week program, which began with 14 weeks of Life Skills, coupled with a 4-week literacy component, followed by a 5-week childcare worker certificate program. The Life Skills program included self, family, job-education, community and leisure — all critical first steps toward self-empowerment. Also important to the women's healing, growth and transformation is literacy. Literacy opens doors to the world. The knowledge gained creates access to positive alternatives for women.

Renewal of the Spirit was an 8-week Life Skills program with a one-week collective kitchen component. We addressed the challenge of food safety and proper nutrition on a shoestring budget.

Illumination from Within was developed in response to requests from women for a program similar to *Honouring Ourselves*. It began with Life Skills, then literacy, and concluded with certification as an office worker with computer skills.

Our next endeavour, *Transcendence to the Future* facilitated the women transforming themselves by helping them to acknowledge their pain with honesty, and a commitment to change. They began to achieve harmony, balance and freedom of thought. One of the women from this group has started a new business — a greenhouse operation — at the James Smith Cree Nation.

To meet the needs of many of our youth, Stardale undertook a 3-phase program entitled, *Exploring Our Options*. This was a collaborative effort with the East Side Local Area Management Board, HRDC, Melfort Ministerial, James Smith Cree Nation, and Stardale. This project focussed on education and community development.

In September, Stardale offered another program, *Rediscovery of Self*, which saw participants move into two other programs entitled, *Framework for Change — ALAPS, an Aboriginal Family Literacy Program* and *Harmonious Learning*, a one-on-one and group literacy/GED program.

We have just completed, *The Talking Quilt*. This endeavour encompassed the use of colour, texture, pattern, touchability and artistry, along with visual and mental stimulation. It ignited the flame of reconciliation for all the women and youth who participated in the designing and stitching of the quilt. As the quilt was stitched, group counselling sessions were held and videotaped. Oral and written life stories were logged from the beginning to completion in order to record the full intensity of healing, growth and change in each participant. The narrative in the resulting video incorporates the quilting, the counselling sessions/discussions, and the eventual celebration. The "council sharing" method, a traditional way, enabled the women to discuss their lives' hurts, joys, traumas and experiences, giving way to individual awakening, and emotional healing.

At Stardale, we focus on expression of the self in all art forms be it pictures, paintings, sculpture, weaving or quilt making. After all, literacy is more than the written word. Further, these methods often provide a catharsis for the women.

Hopefully a Series of NALGS

by Dennis Fendall, Executive Director,
Alberta Association for Adult Literacy (AAAL)
and Ida Tober, Literacy Help Line of Alberta

AAAL was very proud that the first NALG was held in our province, in the beautiful and sacred setting of Nakoda Lodge on the Stoney First Nation. It was an historic event that was respectful of Aboriginal traditions and spirituality, with representation from every province and territory in Canada.

We thought the different focus each day — learners, practitioners and Elders respectively — was particularly effective and stimulating. Each day began with an Elder giving a message and leading in prayer, followed by the day's relevant panel. This ensured a spiritual, as well as a thought-provoking start for each day's program.

The speakers provided insightful and relevant presentations that conveyed knowledge, encouraged discussions and stirred emotions. We appreciated the opportunity to meet and learn from these leaders about Aboriginal literacy, traditions, and successes as well as challenges.

The many displays of art, crafts, jewelry and educational materials enhanced the message of the NALG, as did the beautiful surroundings and wonderful food. It was apparent that everyone made a special effort to meet and share with fellow participants.

The organizing committee and NALG staff are to be commended for very successfully launching what is, hopefully, a series of national Aboriginal literacy gatherings. We were honoured to be a part of this one, and would consider it a privilege to be involved in the next one.

Reflections

"I'm so fortunate to live in a world where the Creator tells us to recognize each other through kindness, through harmony, through non-judgement...when we talk to each other in our language, not only the ears understand, but the soul and the heart combine, and that's where the understanding comes from."

— Violet Rowan, Elder/Learner, Ermineskin Education Trust Fund

"We have about 12 Aboriginal teachers who have attended the literacy program at one time or another. They are qualified to teach in our elementary and high school...What we need to do as educators is to help our students to believe in themselves, to dream big, and to follow their dreams." — Mary Koyina Richardson, Dogrib Nation, Rae Edzo, Northwest Territories

"The NALG helped me to understand different beliefs and concepts, and to identify various learning methods. As well, it brought to my attention, and made me more conscious of different ways of teaching."

— Mardina Joe, Conne River First Nation, Newfoundland

"...I go back to those schools I had bad experiences, being a Native role model, because there were no Native role models when I was there...I didn't let school hinder me...the way I see it, my education was everywhere..." — Alan Syliboy, Mi'kmaq Artist, Truro, Nova Scotia

"I see myself, not as a teacher, but as a guide...Let's be supportive of each other, that's what we need, sometimes just a hug or a pat on the back, because some days it's awfully hard to get up...All I've got to say is, let's remember where we've come from and where we're headed. Let's help each other along the way."

— Violet Ouellette, Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre, Thompson, Manitoba

"I'm just a helper. I carry these things that the Creator gave me to take to the people — the pipe, teachings, sweatlodge, sundance...Do what you do from the heart, you'll go farther...I was like that before, I know how they feel." — Tim Southwind, Ojibway Elder, Winnipeg Friendship Centre and Beat the Street Learning Program, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Native Literacy Resources

Ningwakwe Learning Press

Ningwakwe Learning Press (NLP) is a new non-profit organization that, until recently, was a division of the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition. NLP publishes and distributes Native educational material, including books and workbooks. Currently, it is the most unique, and culture-based resource centre for the purchase of Native adult learning materials. The assistance offered in the development of Native literacy materials at the community level has not only resulted in much-needed resources but has contributed to the overall sharing of ideas and approaches among Native literacy programs. Due to the lack of information and materials specifically designed for Aboriginal communities, this has also translated into NLP materials serving as outreach tools across Canada.

Ningwakwe Learning Press employees Maria King, Publishing Coordinator, and Petal Furness, Executive Coordinator came to the National Aboriginal Literacy Gathering with three objectives: "to co-host a workshop on Literacy Partnerships with Michael Johnny of AlphaPlus Centre; to showcase NLP's books and curriculum materials; and to network with literacy practitioners from across the country."

"These objectives were clearly met. Book sales went very well, as did our workshop. We got a lot out of the workshops by other participants from across Canada. What we didn't expect from the conference was the

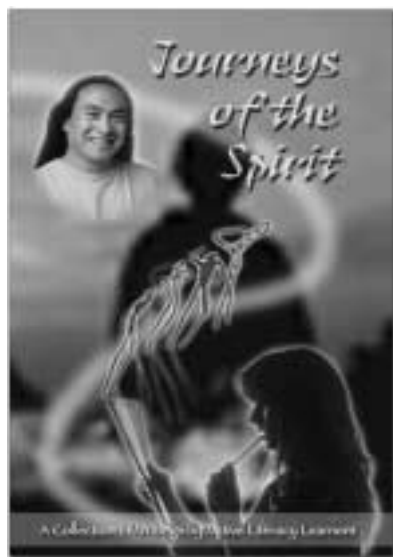


From left to right: Nancy Cooper, Centre Alphaplus Centre, Maria King, Ningwakwe Learning Press

cultural activities. This was wonderful. We also felt that our work as a publisher of culturally-appropriate resources materials was validated by the comments of conference participants. We were told that NLP is a very needed resource for Native people.

The various discussions at the gathering have given us vision and insights into what kind of materials we need to be targeting. We met many people, and made numerous new contacts that will prove invaluable for the work that lies ahead for NLP. We thank the organizers of this conference for their wisdom in inviting Elders and Healers to the sacred spot in the mountains."

The following new resources are available from Ningwakwe Learning Press:



Journeys of the Spirit: A Collection of Writings by Native Literacy Learners

Journeys of the Spirit is the first ever anthology of writings derived solely from Native Learners. It is a collection of Learners' voices, as shared through their stories, struggles, and triumphs. "We wish for each and every reader to have a love for learning rekindled and a passion re-ignited for the learning journey. We hope this collection will enhance and promote a greater understanding of the issues facing Native people."

ISBN: 1-896832-20-2 © 2000



Purple Destiny: A Novel by Shirley J. Hill:

This book is an important story of Native cultural awakening. It was written to be a voice for every young person who happens to be born into the drug world. Finch's life is only one story. He is one young boy who struggles all alone to escape the affects of drugs in his life. It is a story of his journey out, with the help of his Uncle Harley. "Unk" stands by Finch until the way becomes clear and both their dreams come true.

"In my book I want to reach out to teens that may be looking for answers. If I can give them some (answers) from my experiences, then this book will be a success.

The names in this story are not real. The story was taken part from real life and real situations."

ISBN: 1-896832-17-2 © 2000



Empowering the Learner: Native Literacy Workbook

This basic level workbook compliments the Native literacy curriculum Empowering the Spirit developed in 1997. The culturally based lessons strengthen and test literacy skills using content that is are meaningful and interesting. Learners work on putting words into alphabetical order, finding the meaning of words by learning to use a dictionary, copying words that are in alphabetical order, and building their vocabulary.

ISBN: 1-896832-21-0 © 2000



For information on these and other native literacy materials, contact
 Ningwakwe Learning Press, 1161 Second Avenue East, Owen Sound, Ontario N4K 2J1,
 (519) 372-9855 or 1-888-551-9757, Fax: (519) 372-1684,
 E-mail: info@www.ningwakwe.on.ca Website: www.ningwakwe.on.ca

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Ningwakwe materials can also be borrowed from AlphaPlus through interlibrary loan.

The AlphaPlus website is <http://aphacom.alphaplus.ca/home>

Native Literacy Practitioner Development Strategy

by Florence Gray, Consultant
Ontario Native Literacy Coalition

The purpose of the ONLC project “Native Literacy Practitioner Development Strategy” is to:

1. Develop our own skills list needed for literacy delivery.
2. Identify how literacy practitioners can best upgrade their personal skills inventory, if needed.
3. Identify a process to recognize and certify these skills in our practitioners.

The strategy will look at the skills presently shown by literacy practitioners, and other skills that practitioners have found useful for their work. This research has been done through the surveys with the coordinators and instructors of the Native literacy programs.

The categories of core skills are:

- approaches to adult learning and learners
- general teaching methods and strategies
- teaching literacy and numeracy
- assessment and evaluation
- communicating and working in a learning context
- professional issues, activities and development
- personnel management

This Core Skills list will also provide the basis for future training opportunities sponsored by the

ONLC. Because many of our literacy practitioners wear two hats in their work, the ONLC will simultaneously develop an Administrative Core Skills list.

Âcimowina (Storytelling)

by Constance Brissenden

Proud authors display their book at the launch of *Âcimowina (Storytelling)*, a 76-page collection of writing by students of Stony Point Campus, Northern Lakes College, on May 30, 2000. The campus is located in Wabasca-Desmarais, 400 km north of Edmonton.

The collection of student writing reflects the lives of the college’s adult learners. The stories range from tales of Cree traditional life to comical anecdotes about favourite pets and memories.

Instructor, Audrey Fofonoff, (top left in photo), Cree writer, Larry Loyie (top, third from left), and Larry’s writing partner, Constance Brissenden, helped bring the project to fruition. The book was published by Voices Rising/Learning at the Centre Press, the Learning Centre, 10116 -105 Avenue, Edmonton, AB T5H 0K2. For more information, e-mail: learningcentre@compusmart.ab.ca



PHOTO BY: CONSTANCE BRISSENDEN

Coming Events

Celebrate the 35th annual International Literacy Day

September 8, 2000

Across the country, literacy groups and sponsors organize activities to celebrate International Literacy Day and build public support for literacy. To find out more, call your provincial or territorial literacy coalition or check NALD website at www.nald.ca (after August 1, 2000).

National Summit on Literacy and Productivity

**Toronto, Ontario
October 27-28**

This event is being organized by ABC CANADA, Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français, Frontier College, Laubach Literacy of Canada, Movement for Canadian Literacy, the National Adult Literacy Database, and Commission scolaire de l'amiante services de l'éducation des adultes au Québec. Eighty participants will be invited to examine today's literacy issues, needs and challenges, and to develop recommendations for promoting a learning culture and a more literate Canada.

The invited participants will include 30 from the literacy community (organizers, educators, and learners), 30 senior decision-makers from the corporate, labour and government sectors, and 20 from other fields such as media and special interest groups.

More information will be posted soon on MCL's website, www.literacy.ca

Literacy Action Day

**Parliament Hill, Ottawa,
November 21, 2000**

At this annual event, representatives from MCL and other national literacy organizations meet with federal government politicians and officials to focus on policy areas where the government's agenda overlaps with that of the literacy community. MCL is in the process of developing policy overviews and recommendations in these areas. This year, MCL's member coalitions are planning related activities at the constituency level over the early Fall.

Watch for more information in September on MCL's website, www.literacy.ca



www.literacy.ca

See MCL's collection of Aboriginal literacy resources under "Literacy and ... "