

How Public Libraries Can Promote Adult Literacy with the World Wide Web

Thomas Quigley

Public libraries are increasingly using technology like the Internet to reach out to library users and the community at large.¹ It only makes sense to extend the same outreach to specific groups in our communities, like those involved in the work of adult literacy. Regardless of your expertise with current web technology, you can apply your web site to the literacy issue.

Isn't it a bit odd to be promoting an issue about improving reading skills by using text as one of the tools? I don't think so. Here are the two main reasons why I think the web is a natural ally in the cause:

1. Public libraries are major "drivers" on the information highway. Web access to literacy information strengthens us, and will bring increased buy-in from the literacy community (and not just because of the additional computer access points).
2. The literacy community is steadily expanding its use of technology to collaborate with others and to provide additional learning paths. Prime examples of this include the Internet-based learning program "AlphaRoute" and the work of the National Adult Literacy Database

(NALD), Canada's one-stop centre for information on adult literacy.

Public libraries have always been seen as a community meeting place. Extend this concept virtually, and we need to be there as part of the literacy community's electronic landscape. Clearly, using the Internet to promote literacy and strengthen our links to this community is a natural step for us to take.

When it comes to addressing literacy on their web pages, vast differences exist among Canada's public libraries. Many libraries have nothing, even though their web-posted mission statements and board policies often acknowledge literacy as part of their mandate. Those that do address literacy do so from different tacks: some, like Waterloo Regional Library, have a few lines under "Programs and Services" describing their collections; others, like Vancouver Public Library, have a separate page for literacy services, with multiple access points to that page.

The most common approach is to include links to literacy resources. There is little similarity, however, among what's being cited. Saskatoon Public Library lists 10 items, ranging from local to international literacy

organizations and resources, in a "Literacy/Adult Learner" category in its "Internet Resources" section. Thunder Bay Public Library has three links (one national and one local organization, plus a link to the Canadian Literacy Thesaurus) in a "Literacy" category under its "Web Links" section. What is consistent, sadly, is the difficulty in locating literacy information on public libraries' web pages. In many cases, it's so buried that the only way to locate it is by searching on the phrase "adult literacy" through the internal search engine – an approach not foreign to web users, but pity the user who receives a large "hits" list.

What would be better? Let's begin with public awareness. Consider putting a literacy link right on your homepage. Use the international literacy symbol – many libraries already use it. We use the symbol to distinguish literacy materials from other special collections, and we use it as signage for people who are looking for these materials on their own. Why not put it on the web site, our virtual library building? Make the symbol the link to your collection of literacy information. No graphic capabilities? No problem – post a statement like

“We support literacy” and then make a link from that.

Where do we go next? What else might we include on our web pages?

- Describe what literacy is and why libraries are involved. Maybe include some information on the types of literacy, such as family literacy or workplace literacy. Events like International Literacy Day (September 8) and ABC Canada’s Family Literacy Day (January 27) are well established, and the announced second UN Literacy Decade, 2003-2012, will continue to focus attention on the issue. Anticipate and support the need to know in the literacy area, just as we anticipate and support other information needs in our communities.
- Provide web access to local literacy information, both library activities and other events in your community. Do outreach – remember to obtain permission to link to other web sites, and ask them to make a link to you from theirs. Multi-branch and regional systems will find Fraser Valley Regional Library to be a good model. Each community library’s web page is based on a template, with a category for local literacy programs and associations under “Community Links.”

- Highlight selected literacy resources. Start local and proceed to the international, but don’t reinvent the wheel; use the work of others, especially NALD. For example, specifics on literacy services and organizations can be found in the “Provincial and Territorial Organizations” section of NALD’s site.
- Use your web page to illustrate and explain how you are dealing with issues of literacy collection

and access: special markings, identification, shelving. What do you have? What do you do? Edmonton Public Library’s statement is a good example here; it’s at the top of the “Literacy and Adult Basic Education” category on their “Language & Literacy” subject page.

Let’s turn this theme around and examine it more from the literacy point of view. With the current realities of Internet use and Canadian public library literacy

See How Other Public Libraries Deal with the Literacy Issue on Their Web Pages

Eastern Counties Regional Library – ecrl.library.ns.ca/info.htm; scroll down the page to “Libraries and Literacy”

Halifax Regional Library – www.halifax.library.ns.ca/literacy/index.html

Kitchener Public Library – www.kpl.org/fyi_literacy.shtml

London Public Library – www.londonpubliclibrary.ca/static/generic/56 and www.londonpubliclibrary.ca/gateway/?section_uid=3&category_uid=13

Mississauga Public Library – www.city.mississauga.on.ca/library/readers/literacy.htm

Nelson Public Library – library.nelsonbc.net/programs/literacy.html

Ottawa Public Library – www.opl.ottawa.on.ca/english/library/adults/services/literacy/index.htm

Regina Public Library – www.rpl.regina.sk.ca/about/services/literacy.shtml

Toronto Public Library – www.tpl.toronto.on.ca/spe_ser_lit_index.jsp

World Wide Web Info Cited in Article

ABC Canada Literacy Foundation – www.abc-canada.org

AlphaRoute – For more information on this and other web-based literacy learning sites, see www.nald.ca/nls/inpub/learn.htm

Edmonton Public Library – www.epl.ca/EPLMaster.cfm?id=LITERACY00000001

Family Literacy and Family Literacy Day – www.abc-canada.org/family_literacy_day/index.asp

Fraser Valley Regional Library – www.fvrl.bc.ca/library/index.shtml and www.fvrl.bc.ca/programs/lit.shtml

HTML coding – Much instructional material is available; for example, see archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/WWW/HTMLPrimerPrintable.html

International Adult Learners' Week – www.adultlearning.unesco.ca/index.php and www.unesco.org/education/uie/InternationalALW/index.htm

International Literacy Day – See www.intuition-in-service.org/main/unitednations/specialdays/september.html#lit or www.unesco.org/education/literacy_2001 or www.nifl.gov/nifl/literacy_day/docs/ILD_Tool_Kit.pdf

International literacy symbol – It's hard to find on the web, but here are some examples found through an Images Search on the search engine www.google.ca. Best example: www.splashesfromtheriver.com; also www.vpl.vancouver.bc.ca/MISC/literacy.html or www.halifax.library.ns.ca/literacy/index.html

Literacy: what is it? – www.nald.ca/nls/nlsild/ILDfac.htm

Literacy: why libraries are involved – www.literacy.ca/litand/8.htm

Macromedia Flash – www.macromedia.com/software/flash

National Adult Literacy Database – www.nald.ca

Northwest Territories Public Library Services – www.nwtpls.gov.nt.ca/home.html

Saskatoon Public Library – www.publib.saskatoon.sk.ca/literacy3.html

Thunder Bay Public Library – www.tbpl.thunder-bay.on.ca/ under "Web Links"

United Nations Literacy Decade – portal.unesco.org/education/ev.php?URL_ID=4728&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201

Vancouver Public Library – www.vpl.vancouver.bc.ca/MISC/literacy.html

Vaughan Public Libraries – www.vaughanpl.com

Waterloo Regional Library – www.wrl.library.on.ca

Workplace literacy – www.conferenceboard.ca/workplaceliteracy/ and www.abc-canada.org/workplace_education

services, I think the following ranking of public library literacy services seems appropriate: literacy support services, literacy collections, and then literacy instructional programs.² Let's look at these categories in terms of potential web activity.

In the literacy support services category, the key word is cooperation. In addition to promoting yourself, point out what's available electronically in your area and in the bigger community. Provide links to online community directories, like Vaughan Public Libraries did with its links to "Vaughanlink" and "Yorklink" under the "Community Groups" section of its web page. Remember to format the information so you can use it to create a quick handout for promotion, display and outreach activities.


The literacy collections category includes the basic activities of providing print and audiovisual materials for learners and literacy providers. Use your web page to recommend literacy titles; provide a direct link to your library catalogue. Edmonton Public Library, for example, links into its catalogue's call number index. Users can browse in the "Easy English" call number listings. Create literacy materials to complement the collecting process; provide a space to create and publish electronically (consider submitting works to the "NALD Literacy Collection" category for electronic publication); maybe host interactive "blogs" for literacy students and instructors.³

In the literacy instruction category, the primary activities are conducting literacy programs and raising staff's awareness of the issue. The general literacy links on your web site can perhaps do double duty for staff development. Refer on the site to online self-study programs. Post information on how to use the library, on how to be Internet-aware.

While there is no strong catchphrase potential to libraries, literacy and the web (LWeb anyone?), public libraries do not need to justify literacy promotion via the web to anyone. The Internet, as yet another medium for library promotion, is particularly flexible in regard to "knowledge push." However, understand that using the web to present literacy is *not* about how much you do in literacy activities. Given different community needs and services, it's only natural that libraries' involvement in literacy will vary. One of the beauties of the literacy issue is its incremental nature; all you do counts toward improving reading, writing and numeracy skills.

For web content, the same applies. It's immaterial how many of your literacy services reflect a particular cited category, as it's immaterial whether your information is coded in Macromedia Flash or basic HTML. What is important is that you've included literacy in your web site. The Northwest Territories Public Library Services web page is a good example, with a simple link to the Northwest Territories Literacy

Council in the lower left corner of the homepage. Limited by some standards, this link goes not only to detailed Territory literacy information, but also leads to literacy resources "beyond." What a great way to go!

I look forward to the day when I can visit public libraries' web sites sea to sea, and find general and site-specific links to literacy information on every page I surf. It's up to you. I think here's a fine opportunity to take our technology expertise, and couple it with our knowledge of resources and how best to present them. Literacy information on public library web pages is not only a great combination, but a great contribution; it brings only benefit to public libraries and their partners in the literacy community. 

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Notes

1. Anne Pixey Mosley and Daniel Xiao, "How Libraries Can Use the World Wide Web," *Texas Library Journal* 74:3 (Fall 1998), 118-121.
2. Douglas L. Zweigig, Jane Robbins and Debra Wilcox Johnson, *Libraries and Literacy Education: Comprehensive Survey Report* (Madison, WI: School of Library and Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1988).
3. For more information, see www.lights.com/weblogs/definitions.html.