

Audio Transcript of Allan Quigley Recording

Section 7: The Way Forward – Let's Stay Visible

Hi.

Here's a question.

Through the course of writing this Literacy Guide, I introduced a number of learners and practitioners' stories, even the story of a former mayor. We read and heard about their stories.

In section one we heard the story of 82-year-old Marie who, after gaining literacy skills, proudly told her boss, "I'm not just anyone."

Through the Guide, we heard about Gerard who was on the maintenance staff of the university campus where I taught. Gerard was called one of the "dumb and dumbers" by his co-workers when he enrolled in the literacy program that our local literacy organization offered on the campus. We heard how adult literacy not only changed his life, but led to a promotion for Gerard. Further, many of his coworkers joined that same literacy program the following year.

Like Marie, Gerard was happy to tell his story to anyone willing to listen.

We heard about Tom. He was a model of social learning in the first class I taught in Northern Saskatchewan. And, we were introduced to his father who came to Regina years later to join my college's Adult Basic Education program to, in his words, "Be a good reader like Tom." He was proud of his son and happy to tell his story.

We heard about the former mayor and businessman who was the keynote speaker at an annual literacy conference held in Vancouver. How he came up to the microphone and suddenly broke down and wept. He told the audience he had dyslexia and we were the first people he ever told this. The impact on the audience of literacy educators and administrators was profound. He stood and told his story publicly.

We met Big Bill and his wife Dolores and heard how their lives changed through literacy; and what I have discussed as transformative learning.

Bill became a different person during that class. His wife, Dolores told me that literacy class, "Saved their marriage."

And, in that same story, I added how that literacy class changed my own life. My own *transformative learning* in that first class was a big part of my own story; a story I have shared in this Guide.

We heard about Evelyn. How she quit my class and how I have since thought about and, in this Guide, written about how I could have done a better job. The implications of this story, I hope, might be helpful for other practitioners.

We heard about Patty in Calcutta, India. How she took her students on a bus from the slums where they lived to visit the downtown centre of the city of Calcutta. And, as she told me, they could hardly believe their eyes. Until that moment, they had only known the world of the slums. Patty told me this was probably the best thing she ever did as a volunteer teacher working in India.

As I discussed, I believe this story. As told by Patty, depicts the very purpose of what we do in adult literacy. Our job is to give options and the literacy tools to learners make life-choices.

And now, in this seventh and final section, you read about one of the best literacy coordinators I ever met. Her name was Nancy. Her literacy program was in the so-called “rust belt” Southwest of Pittsburgh. Nancy and her program faced huge challenges. But, Nancy chose to never miss an opportunity to promote her learners and promote their program.

She continually encouraged her learners and graduates to tell their stories to the media, to politicians, and to the wider public; whether it was radio, tv, the newspapers or at invited public speaking engagements, that literacy program was well known.

By telling their stories, her learners became recognized, known, and respected in the local community. Through visibility, that program gained local pride and became a show case for adult literacy education across Pennsylvania.

So here is the question I want to ask:

Did adding the stories—written and Voice-over—enhance this Guide? The Guide, after all, could have been text only with no stories. No addition of the voice over. It could have been a classic “how-to-do” training guide

So, I am hoping the stories of learners, practitioners and a former mayor made this Guide more meaningful. More human, if I can put it that way.

To use the academic jargon, I hope the stories of actual people brought theory and practice closer together.

So, all this said, I hope the answer is, “Yes.” The stories did help. And I want to express my sincere thanks to the Community Learning Network staff who have organized this Guide and who suggested voice-over audio addition.

I want to ask this question because I want to make the point in this closing section that, “*We need to be visible.*”

We used to be visible. The issues of adult literacy were once front-page news. In the 1970’s and into the 1980’s, many politicians actually included adult literacy in their election campaign platforms.

Our field once had a Literacy Secretariat at the federal government level that funded national conferences that also funded a wonderful literacy journal written by practitioners for practitioners across Canada.

Canada was once considered a leader in literacy with a national literacy research data base that housed all the research for Canada and much of the international literacy research in one on-line location which was housed at the University of New Brunswick.

An outstanding, proactive, literacy program in Quebec was once the organizer and host of an annual international conference that brought world literacy leaders together in Canada to discuss and address the issues of adult low literacy.

All that is now gone....literacy is basically off of the media and political radar now, but all that happened back then by being visible.

Another important point worth mentioning, our history of literacy landmarks, as seen in section 2, is a history of making the issues of adult literacy visible to the wider public. Through history, the wider public typically had very little interest in literacy—even doubted that whole segments of society were capable of learning to read, write or become numerate.

So here we are now. I look back on a career that spans some fifty years. And I can say with considerable exasperation that I have talked with countless people about the issues of adult literacy, only to often be met with skepticism and comments from some, such as: “I never met anyone who is illiterate.”

From members of my own extended family to university professors, I have been asked: “Where are all these illiterate people?”

Well, the answer is easy. One in five adults in Alberta are living with some level of low literacy, and an estimated 800,000 adults between 16 and 65 are living with levels of low literacy in B.C. It is virtually impossible to not have met members of this huge “invisible minority.” “Yes, you have met adults with low literacy skills.” You just didn’t know it.

And, by the way, Alberta and B.C. are the two provinces with the highest literacy rates in all of Canada at the time of writing.

In short, if we are to build literacy into the future, we need a new conversation. A conversation with a focus on how we can be more visible once again.

And, I hasten to add, such a conversation will implicitly or explicitly help address and challenge the stigmatization of low literacy that we have inherited through our history. What I am calling literacy classism.

We have adult learners and learner graduates, together with their families, who often want to tell their stories, who are proud of their achievements. We can surely encourage more of our learners to be part of raising public awareness.

If 82-year-old Marie can say, “I’m not just anybody,” so can our field talk about and write about our program successes and our program histories. As discussed in this Guide, I am convinced that our learners can be, and should be, a major part of the way forward.

In closing, we have a proud past. We are *a profession*—a truly caring profession. Let’s celebrate our successes. Let’s tell our stories. Let’s be heard. Let’s be more visible in the years to come.

And, I hope this Guide is helpful as we learn our way forward in building literacy.

Thank you for listening and every success with your important work.

Allan