

We bought the stuff, it's sitting here and no one's using it...



Seminar on adult literacy

Since many people have difficulty with reading, most large public libraries have a collection of literacy resources. How effectively is it used? Should you buy or acquire the collection before you have identified your users?

Twenty-five librarians from South Eastern Queensland attended a seminar on adult literacy services, organised in March by the State Library of Queensland and the Queensland Adult English Language, Literacy and Numeracy Council (QAELN), to address these and other questions.

The main speakers were Sharon Mullens, executive officer of QAELN and literacy tutor Vicky Bell who runs a family literacy program at Caloundra Public Library. Janet Worden, community services librarian at the State Library of Queensland co-ordinated the seminar which included workshops.

Janet's suggestions for librarians who want to provide useful access to their library's literacy resources are:

- Apply the same rules to building up a literacy service/collection as you would generally, that is, identify your user need. Find out what literacy courses and programs are available in your community, get in touch with local providers and ask them what their resource needs are. Colleges of technical and further education or institutes of technology are traditional providers, but, encouraged by federal government policy, private providers have also won tenders for delivering literacy programs.
- Get help and advice from your state library and the government department and literacy council which serve your state.
- Look at internet literacy resources. Janet is particularly impressed with the Adult Community Education websites available through Vicnet, where teachers and students put up

information about themselves and their courses. ACENET is a collective of ten adult education providers from Melbourne and some country centres. Its aim is to create 'a culture of online support, new learning and teaching possibilities for adult students, teachers and community workers'. Their URL is: www.vicnet.net.au/~tw/acenet/projectupdate.html.

Other useful websites are:

- www.unisa.edu.au/alin/Content.html, co-ordinated by the University of South Australia and the Adult Literacy Research Network (SA Branch).
- www.acal.edu.au, website of the Australian Council for Adult Literacy.
- www.deetya.gov.au/vet/literacynet.htm the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.
- www.langoz.anu.edu.au/ Language Australia national resource centre.
- www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/home.htm National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarie University.

QAELN is located within the Queensland Department of Training and Industrial Relations. The executive officer, Sharon Mullens provides advice to the Minister about funding allocations for language, literacy and numeracy. The types of programs funded by the Queensland government, through the Department, include TAFE language and literacy programs and community literacy programs which public libraries may obtain grants to provide.

Sharon identified adult literacy groups as falling into a number of categories: adults who left school early or whose education was interrupted; those who occupied the fast disappearing jobs which do not require literacy;

those with a mild intellectual impairment; unemployed youth; people from a non-English speaking background; and some indigenous people.

These diverse groups of adult learners have individual goals that libraries and literacy tutors must serve. Literacy tutors are grateful for useful library collections and resources and, for good program delivery in some communities, their needs may take priority in library planning.

The critical element for effective library service to support literacy will, however, be the relationships which library staff build with the tutors, students and any organisations in the area involved in the provision of adult literacy programs. Sharon Mullens saw the expertise of librarians in building networks as critical to the success of community programs and of the best use of literacy collections.

Librarians at the seminar commented on the use of CD-ROMs by adult literacy students. Protea titles were endorsed as particularly user-friendly. Cooloola Shire librarian, Moira Maclachlan observed that a number of people, who might never have used print resources from an adult literacy collection, were keen to use CD-ROMs. Protea supplied a free sample CD-ROM which gives an introduction to the Alphabet, the Interactive Picture Dictionary, issues in English and Measuring Up. You can find out more about Protea at their website: www.proteatextware.com.au

Literacy tutor Vicky Bell described the Caloundra Community Literacy and Family Literacy programs operating within Caloundra Library. Funding for these programs was obtained as an innovations grant from the State Library Board. The program has had considerable success in encouraging parents who have concerns about their own literacy skills to seek assistance in the form of helping their children. ■