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Learn more about PLA annual surveys at ala.org/pla/data/plasurveys.

If it is your first time logging into Benchmark, or you need assistance resetting the password for your library, please contact plabenchmark@ala.org.
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WHY YOUR LIBRARY NEEDS AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST BOOK CLUB
ELIZABETH HANBY
According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 21 percent of adults in the United States (about 43 million) have low levels of literacy.1 Without basic literacy it is difficult to apply for jobs or social security or other governmental assistance, understand budgeting and financial imperatives, or fully engage with medical information to advocate for one’s health. In addition, as many libraries continue to tackle digital literacy, it is evident that basic literacy is a crucial prerequisite to digital success.

In this issue, you’ll read tips for successful ESOL classes at your library, see how a library built their literacy collection, hear tips and ideas for using techniques like “listening while reading,” and much more. I hope you find these articles useful as you consider your library community’s literacy needs.

While this issue of PL spotlights basic literacy, libraries are operating in many other literacy arenas including nutrition, financial, digital, and more. If you are working in digital literacy, you’ll want to visit PLA’s DigitalLearn site (www.digitallearn.org). The online courses—available in both English and Spanish—are freely available to everyone and teach basic skills such as getting started with email, navigating websites, mastering cybersecurity, videoconferencing basics, using mobile devices, and more. Through a recent partnership with AT&T, PLA has been able to add and update courses, improve training materials, and include Spanish translations.

In other updates, I’d like to thank all of the members of the PLA EDISJ Committee who’ve shared their perspectives in dozens of “EDISJ Matters” columns over recent years. We are taking a brief break this issue as we plan next steps for this column and others in the magazine. Also, we have recently released the 2023 PL volume year themes and deadlines. Visit https://bit.ly/3LiGKtU to see the list. And in further Public Libraries news, PL Online (www.publiclibrariesonline.org) is undergoing a facelift—be sure to check it out soon!

I am thrilled that this issue of PL is dedicated to the topic of basic literacy. This is foundational to the reason libraries exist. ALA’s Committee on Literacy defines literacy as “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.” In basic literacy work, the focus is on foundational competency including reading, writing, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) skills, job application assistance, and life-skill development. What is so important about basic literacy work is that it provides patrons with opportunities to learn an array of foundational skills—essentially helping to level the playing field and opening doors of opportunity for learners.

There are many specialists doing foundational literacy work in public libraries. These include social workers, outreach workers, adult services staff, tutors, youth services staff, literacy specialists, English Language Learner specialists, STEM staff, and digital literacy/digital equity staff. It also includes you, dear readers! Each of us holds a role in upholding our work in this vital area. We also have so many dedicated community partners doing and supporting this work including schools, adult education programs, literacy centers, immigration support organizations, human services departments, health departments, philanthropic partners, and local business and industry. There is a lot of collective power when local organizations work together to amplify basic literacy services for the community.

I want to share with you some home institution and upstate New York examples of how libraries are partnering to provide basic literacy learning opportunities within their communities. In addition to teaching skills and knowledge, these programs help participants to build confidence, make connections with others, and gain agency.

During the pandemic, we hired licensed social worker, Marie Matthieu, who is building a meaningful program at the
Cambridge Public Library that is expanding our reach in providing equitable services, especially for patrons who might be struggling due to the impact of poverty, structural racism, or having no safety net. Matthieu and her team of social work interns receive and give referrals and often help patrons learn how to find the information they need or assist patrons as they are navigating websites and filling out forms. Services are offered in English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole.

Our literacy specialist, Maria Balestrieri, works with patrons who are learning English and with volunteers who help to teach English. The literacy program focuses on helping immigrants to navigate living and working in the local area. It is also designed to make it easy for individuals to drop in for one session, or multiple sessions at different dates, whether someone is in Cambridge for a short stay or settling in for a long time. We also refer people to the Cambridge Learning Center, a city partner through the Department of Human Services. They offer English classes for learners who can commit to multiple sessions in a series.

Some of our talented Adult Services and Branch Services staff members have teamed up with Tech Goes Home to offer foundational technology classes spread over eight weeks. Students who complete the series and lead a presentation at the last session are given a laptop to keep. We have had 8-year-olds to 80-year-olds participate and our favorite duo was a daughter and mother team.

We also have a special collaboration with the Department of Human Services’ STEAM Initiative, the Cambridge Public School District, and nonprofits including Innovators for Purpose (IFP). The STEAM at the Library program, which focuses on helping youth (primarily youth of color), to develop STEM skills and a career network, was developed through partnership and two years of planning and designing and building a makerspace and audio/video production studio. STEAM specialists work with youth, schools, and nonprofits in the mornings before our makerspace is open to the general public and introduce STEM experiences to the public during outreach visits in the community and during programs throughout our branches. IFP offers math and design workshops to teen participants in the summer and after school.

PLA board member, Erica Freudenberger also share a couple of examples from the Southern Adirondack Library System (SALS) in New York. She said that one of the most amazing literacy programs is run by Betsy Kennedy at the Cazenovia (NY) Public Library. Kennedy began doing early literacy programming at a local food bank, which grew into adult literacy classes. They now have regular graduation celebrations for people who have gotten their high school equivalency diplomas.

Freudenberger also shared that their Farm-2 Library program, where they collect food from local farms to share with communities in rural food deserts, is intended to build relationships that lead to being able to do adult literacy work. They partner with the excellent Tri-County Literacy Center, which provides tutors for adult learners.

Book discussion groups run by a variety of library staff are another accessible way for patrons to explore literature, civics, history, liberal arts, and other societal issues. Summer reading programs led by youth services staff are a great way for youth and their caretakers to continue to explore, learn, think, and play.

Public libraries and their community partners are essential providers of basic literacy services including classes, tutoring, and career pathways for digital equity. Skilled and specialist staff deliver these services and learning opportunities in a multitude of creative ways. Thank you for all you do to provide important basic literacy services that are helping to level the playing field. I’d love to hear more about what your library is doing in this arena.

REFERENCE

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PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES FOR STRONG COMMUNITIES

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REALM BRIEFING ON VENTILATION IS NOW AVAILABLE

This research briefing on ventilation, prepared by Battelle, provides the latest research on the effects of ventilation on the spread of COVID-19 that may affect building operations, policies, and procedures, including the following:

- One study suggesting that adding a supply fan into window openings may provide an easy, cost-effective way to improve ventilation.
- A model assessing the use of portable air cleaners (PACs) in reducing COVID-19 infection in poorly ventilated scenarios found that placing PACs in the center of a room provides the optimal location for reducing the risk of infection.
- Several studies examining the use of ultraviolet (UV) technology in minimizing the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in enclosed spaces.

For a summary of these latest outputs, go here: https://www.oclc.org/realm/home.html.

NEW AND IMPROVED DIGITAL LITERACY COURSES AT DIGITALLEARN.ORG

Every day, community members access their local public libraries hoping to complete life tasks but lack the basic computer knowledge and skills to do so. PLA is proud to partner with AT&T to expand our work helping libraries and their communities close the digital divide. With support from AT&T, PLA has added and improved courses on our digital literacy training site, DigitalLearn.org. The online courses are freely available to everyone and teach basic skills such as: tips for getting started with email, navigating websites and commonly used apps, avoiding online scams, and more. Visit digitallearn.org for more information.
BANNED BOOKS FIELD REPORT AVAILABLE

The annual Field Report is a brief bibliography that provides information on books and resources that were the most challenged, restricted, removed, or banned in 2021 while providing information on the ways to defend the freedom to read. The 2021 Field Report is available now. Visit www.alastore.ala.org to purchase.

2023 EARLY LITERACY CALENDAR AVAILABLE IN OCTOBER
SPANISH VERSION AVAILABLE THIS YEAR!

PLA’s annual Early Literacy Calendar will be available in early October from the ALA store. The calendar features daily literacy-building activities that libraries can share with families in their communities. Based on Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) practices of reading, writing, singing, talking, playing, and counting, each download includes twelve months of learning activities, book lists, nursery rhymes, and more. The calendar will be available in both English and Spanish versions. PLA is grateful to REFORMA for providing the translation. Visit alastore.ala.org for more information.
Libraries are Champions of Literacy

Gretchen Corsillo / corsillo@rutherford.bccls.org

My first masters-level role was as a children’s librarian, although I spent most of my paraprofessional years working in youth services as well. I worked in public libraries for eight years before eventually enrolling in graduate school to earn my MLIS. A large part of my motivation in pursuing library science as a career was to connect kids and teens with the right books. An avid reader from a young age, I visited my local library constantly as a child. That experience and the joy of getting a new stack of books to take home each week stuck with me. I felt strongly about helping other kids experience this too.

As an undergrad literature major, I was frequently asked why I did not pursue a teaching certificate to go along with my bachelor’s degree. Those questions intensified once I announced my desire to become a children’s librarian. While there are many reasons for this, I liked the freedom of working with young people in public libraries and being able to recommend books without much regard to curriculum standards or arbitrary reading levels. That guidance is certainly important, but I loved the idea of matching kids with what they want to read—and still do.

In terms of literacy, libraries and schools go hand in hand. Public libraries are essential in building upon the foundational literacy taught in the classroom. We help break the summer learning slide by retaining kids’ interest with our summer reading programs, and, through reader’s advisory, we help students find books they’ll love based on their individual interests and literacy skills. We augment what students are learning in school while still reiterating that reading is fun. As a children’s librarian, many of my proudest moments involved reluctant readers returning to the library to rave about how much they loved a book I’d recommended to them.

As I’ve progressed through my career into administration, I am always amazed at how many ways libraries foster all types of literacy. Not only do we help match children with the right books, but many of us champion...
adult literacy as well. My current library hired a full-time ESL teacher several years ago with the goal of providing year-round English classes to adult learners of all levels, as well as second language instruction for kids. We also teach cultural literacy through our ongoing citizenship classes. Even the career preparation that so many of us offer ties into the promotion of basic literacy skills. By championing initiatives such as these, we are truly able to help our patrons achieve success.

Through programming, most of us touch on other types of literacy too. Financial literacy is a topic often overlooked in formal education, but a frequent subject of library programs for adults and teens. On more than one occasion, I've had an adult patron remark to me that learning how to save or invest via a free library event was a lifesaver. Technology programs and individual assistance help bridge the digital divide by connecting patrons with devices and teaching them how to leverage everything from email to word processing software to coding and much more.

In the wake of the pandemic, health literacy is also becoming more commonly promoted in public libraries. For example, this year my library partnered with our state’s NJHealthConnect initiative to grant patrons access to iPads for telehealth appointments and health-related research. This grant-funded service helps educate users on reliable sources for medical information in addition to increasing their comfort levels with virtual conferencing websites and apps.

In a recent American Libraries article, ALA Executive Director Tracie D. Hall discusses the privilege that comes with literacy as it stands in today’s society. Here, she urges library workers to “call out and seek to make literacy a right instead of an advantage of the privileged.” Indeed, literacy is dependent on a certain level of education and societal standing. Individuals must not only have access to quality education but have a baseline understanding of how to access social services and other helpful resources as well. They must also have the autonomy to be able to seek out what they need. This is where public libraries can provide a vital lifeline.

In today’s world of shrinking public services and growing income disparities, we cannot exist in a silo. We must do our part to get out into our communities and make all of our literacy offerings accessible. Non-users of libraries cannot and will not take advantage of our collections, programs, and helpful employees if they are not aware of them. As libraries continue to grow beyond traditional repositories of books, we must make sure that the people who need us the most know how we can help them, and that our services do not come with a cost.

By continuing to promote literacy for all at our libraries, we can help make it a right instead of a privilege. Our literacy initiatives are open to all, not just those who can afford them. Part of the enduring beauty of public libraries is that we serve all members of our communities equally and without question. The more we promote this, the more people we can help and, eventually, establish literacy more firmly in society as a basic human right.

REFERENCES

During the ten years I served as a children’s librarian, I would often help parents wishing to check out both audiobooks and the corresponding print books for their children. These requests were often accompanied by a (sometimes unnecessarily embarrassed or sheepish) explanation—that the audio helps their children with dyslexia decode and understand the print on a page, or that listening and following along aids their children in better grasping reading comprehension, etc. While I heard many firsthand success stories from patrons, I have heard equal amounts of skepticism when trying to share my own love of audiobooks with other adults—that listening to a book is somehow less valid or important as visually reading the print. For this column, I hope to squelch the stigma surrounding audiobooks, explore evidence supporting their use as tools for adult literacy learners, and share new technological advances that can help.

**Reading While Listening (RWL)**

Reading While Listening (RWL) is a phrase and acronym coined in the library/education world to describe listening to audiobooks while following along in a print version. This practice is nothing new, especially in early literacy—as a child I had a much-loved set of Disney story books and records, with Tinkerbell’s chimes signaling page turns to stay in sync with the recording. Records turned into cassettes, then CDs, and now Play-Aways, electronic options, and Vox books, where the audio is “built in” to the book for young readers.

Detractors of audiobooks and/or RWL are concerned that over-reliance on audiobooks will prevent learners from strengthening skills of visually decoding print words and extracting meaning. Emily Best negates these concerns, especially when audiobooks and print versions are used simultaneously, in her review of research surrounding audiobooks and literacy. She points to an article in the August 19, 2019, issue of the *Journal of Neuroscience* finding that “the brain
registers and recognises words and information in almost identical ways whether written or spoken.” Best also cites a study from Ofer Bergman showing that fluency and understanding increase when the learner has control over the narration—being able to stop, rewind, and revisit parts of the audiobook correlate with an increased understanding of material. Bergman writes that RWL enhances learning by allowing the student to “shift their attention from the laborious effort of reading individual words to the far more interesting job of understanding the narrative.”

Anisha Singh and Patricia Alexander predicted a “verbal redundancy principle,” that text and audio combined could overwhelm “working memory resources,” especially if the listener processed written words faster than the auditory input. However, studies seemed to negate this concern and found the RWL practice to be especially effective in supporting comprehension for students that might struggle when decoding printed text. The authors write,

Jennifer Vecchiarelli points to benefits of audiobooks to aid in fluency and comprehension, especially when used along with print materials to include multiple senses and learning preferences. She writes, “Learners of all ages who use audiobooks to improve their literacy skills can gain confidence in their ability to learn and accelerate the learning process . . . this is especially true for adults who are learning how to read.” She points to the following five ways audiobooks can help adult learners to improve their literacy skills:

1. Critical Listening—directing attention to the sound of words can strengthen a learner’s capacity to focus and build a greater attention span.
2. Comprehension—Vecchiarelli notes that RWL speeds up the decoding/phonics process, allowing readers to focus more of their attention on understanding and comprehension. However, not all studies point to the same results regarding comprehension. Yet, in a 2016 study of experienced adults cited by Time, Beth Rogowsky found no significant differences in comprehension between groups that read a book on an e-reader, those who listened to the same book, and a third group that read and listened simultaneously.

And yet, RWL can aid in understanding prosody for less experienced learners—the patterns of stress and intonation and related meaning of a text. Daniel Willington describes that, “What a great party’ can be a sincere compliment or sarcastic put-down, but they look identical on the page. Although writing lacks symbols for prosody, experienced readers infer it as they go.” Until a learner gains that experience, RWL can help draw meaning from text by hearing proper prosody out loud, especially when listeners can control the speed and playback of the audiobook.

3. Pronunciation—hearing words as they are read can help learners sound out words, while also simplifying “the transition between learning to correctly pronounce and read singular words, and learning to connect and read them in full sentences.” This can be especially helpful for adult literacy learners who are also English language learners. As Arvyn Cerézo writes, “For those studying English as a second language, listening
while following along with the text helps them to remember correct pronunciation, pacing, and other nuances of the language.”

4. Vocabulary—As Maggie McGuire describes, “Exposure to new vocabulary comes with independent reading, reading aloud, or listening to audiobooks. Audiobooks can also be a way of introducing books above [a] current reading level, so that more complex stories and vocabulary can be introduced and enjoyed.”

Reading while listening can take vocabulary to the next level, especially for English language learners. Anna Ching-Shyang Chang describes a study by Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua of English language learners from 2008 that, “compared learning vocabulary through three modes; reading, reading while listening (RWL), and listening only (LO) . . . It was found that students learned most words in the RWL mode, followed by reading only and then LO.” Beyond vocabulary, students participating in the RWL mode seemed motivated and best able to comprehend what they read. Chang writes that the students found the story easy and interesting, they knew most words and understood the story.

5. Learning Experience—learning should be fun and motivating. RWL helps break down barriers and frustrations while including more senses in the experience. As Vecchiarelli writes, “Audiobooks open the door to an enjoyable learning experience that incentivizes learners to overcome challenges.”

**Tools to Help**

The most basic way to incorporate RWL practices in a learning program is to checkout/place holds on the book and corresponding audiobook, in whatever format works best for the learner. This could be as simple as a paired book and book on CD, or electronically with an e-book and e-audiobook through the library’s collection if the learner is comfortable using this format. While screen readers and other accessibility tools can provide audio along with highlighted printed text for materials in pdfs, online, in iBooks/Apple Books, etc., the narration might be less effective in emotional connection and comprehension than professionally-produced recordings. Vendors are seeing a market and demand for paired offerings, evident in a few new developments:

**Audible and Whispersync:** I have used Whispersync for a few years now as I enjoy switching between reading the e-book version and listening to audiobook versions of the same title. New developments include “Immersive Reading,” where the professionally produced audiobook is directly linked to the e-book, and the text is highlighted on a Kindle reader or app as it is being read on the audiobook. Audible promotes that this feature will allow users to, “Go deeper into the story to spark that extra connection. Increase your engagement when you read and listen at the same time. Boost comprehension and retention with real-time highlighting.”

A positive feature of this service is the availability of popular titles that appeal to adults. I’m currently reading/listening to David Baldacci’s *The 6:20 Man* in this format. The downside is that users must purchase both versions, usually purchasing the Audible version and “adding narration” for an extra price.

**OverDrive Read-Alongs:** OverDrive, the popular e-book provider for public libraries, offers read-alongs that are narrated e-books. A positive is that the selections would be available free to patrons of subscribing libraries. A negative for teens and adults is that the available titles seem to be mostly lower-interest children’s books appealing mostly to a young audience. The same seems to be true for the read-alongs currently offered in Hoopla Digital.

Apps are also available from various companies for IOS and Android devices that pair audiobooks with e-books for audiences of all ages. Positives are easy accessibility and some free offerings; negatives are that the selection may be limited to what’s permissible under copyright use.
**Conclusion**

In this multimedia age of instant information through various formats such as websites, streaming videos, and podcasts, literacy learners need to be able to decode and process information coming to them in multiple ways. As Cody Kommers writes, “Listening to a book isn’t cheating. At the end of the day, time spent contemplating new ideas and experiencing new worlds is what matters. And if audiobooks open new ideas and worlds for you, then that’s all that counts.”

When corresponding with someone’s learning preferences, reading while listening to an audio version of the same material is one way to sharpen understanding while making the learning process fun and motivating.

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Memories may fade over time, but often it’s the technology used to capture them that becomes obsolete. Many libraries are offering assistance in the form of technology conversion labs. Whether they are called Memory Depot or Preservation Station, these resources enable users to transfer valued memories from older technology to digital formats.

Slides, negatives, photographic prints, VHS and VHS-C tapes, audio cassettes, and 3.5” floppy disks are all easily transferred to a thumb drive with the right equipment. Genealogical treasures such as scrapbooks, journals, and drawings can be scanned to digital format using a flatbed scanner. Some libraries even have equipment to transfer vinyl record albums to digital audio.

Even libraries with tiny budgets can offer some digital conversion resources. Inexpensive equipment to transfer data from audio cassettes and floppy disks starts in the twenty to forty dollar range. The handheld devices are available from major retailers. These may be lent in-branch or checked out by users.

The most popular option—transfer of slides, photographs, and VHS tapes—is more involved to set up. Equipment needed includes a VHS deck, scanner, computer, converter, software and cables. The District of Columbia Public Library (DCPL) Build-Your-Own Memory Lab Guide is a great starting point. In addition to set-up tips, affordable suggestions for procuring necessary components can be found under Frequently Asked Questions: https://libguides.dclibrary.org/memorylab/build-it.

The Memory Depot station at my Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL) branch includes one computer set aside for transferring VHS tapes to digital and one for scanning photographic materials such as prints, negatives, and slides. Users reserve either station for a three hour window. Three hours provides enough time for most projects while enabling multiple user sessions per day. A time cushion between reservations and before the library closes gives users time to wrap up their projects. The service is popular; after piloting at two locations, six FCPL
branches now offer Memory Depot.

Caveats
Advertise the equipment as self-service unless you have extra staff to devote to this project. While some trouble-shooting is inevitable, time-consuming training and technical assistance for each individual user can be mitigated by requiring customers to attend training sessions or watch an online orientation before booking an appointment to use the equipment.

Printed instructions are important as back up. Users can refer to these instructions to refresh their memory of the training. Emphasize during training sessions that staff members will be assisting other customers at the branch and may not be available for one-on-one assistance. Additionally, not all staff members will have enough experience with the equipment to help.

What Customers Need to Know
- Types of materials that can be transferred to digital using the library’s equipment.
- Whether or not they need to make a reservation to use the equipment and how to do so.
- Whether to watch an online orientation or attend a live training session prior to arriving to use the equipment. Most libraries have a DIY policy.
- What they need to bring with them: the material to be transferred and a USB thumb drive or external hard drive (with USB cable) on which to save the material. They will want to check the storage capacity of their device. An hour long VHS video will need about a gigabyte of space, for example, to be saved as an MP4 file. (Some libraries’ equipment may enable CloudStorage as an option.)
- Users should be prepared to wait while transferring video, as this takes place in real time. A two hour video will take two hours to convert, plus additional processing time needed to save the file.

Publicity and Programs
Our staff made an “obsolete technology” display to publicize FCPL’s Memory Depot when it debuted. Visitors enjoyed reminiscing about their LP collection or slide projector days when they saw the items on display, and some even offered their own
Saving Memories with Technology Conversion Labs

The Wired Library

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items (such as a 1970s Mickey Mouse standing telephone) to include in the display. Alternatively, a display of family scrapbooks and other genealogy treasures of the type that might be transferred can help give people ideas.

Programs to train customers to use the equipment will likely be popular and provide a boost for adult program attendance statistics. These can be in-person events or live online programs. Another alternative is to post training videos on the library website. Examples of virtual orientations can be found on the FCPL website: https://research.fairfaxcounty.gov/c.php?g=811522&p=6018819.

A catchy name and logo help spread the word. FCPL’s Memory Depot has a train logo. Some other names libraries use include: Legacy Lab, Conversion Station, Digital Studio, D.I.Y. Lab (for Digitize it Yourself), Memory Network, and Preservation Station. Some are part of larger makerspaces, or “tech buffet” labs. This is also a fabulous service to offer older adults as part of a techmobile or outreach program to assisted living homes. Customers seem especially happy to have this option around the holidays. Many share that they intend to give digitized photos, videos, and audio recordings as personalized holiday gifts.

While it’s important to manage expectations—especially during these days of lingering pandemic staff shortages—memory labs are a great way to add a meaningful service that strengthens the library’s reputation as a valued community resource.

Opinions expressed by the author are her own and not meant to represent those of her employer or any other individual or entity.

PLA Strategic Plan 2022–2026

The Public Library Association (PLA) is excited to share our 2022–2026 Strategic Plan! Our updated goals are more inclusive and representative of all library workers, and reflect the central role that equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice take in our work, and the work of public libraries.

The time for climate action is now. ALA is here to help.

Announcing a new resource from the ALA Council Committee on Sustainability.

Accelerate your understanding of the new core value of sustainability, learn from library leaders focused on climate action, and empower yourself to be a leader in the area of climate justice.

Download the free guide at bit.ly/3QmDYWC
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LIBRARY METRICS AND TRENDS

Check out PLA's newest tool for data-driven planning and advocacy in public libraries! All libraries have free access to surveys, select visualizations, and peer comparisons. Paid subscribers get exclusive access to interactive data dashboards, custom reports, and more. Using Benchmark is easy—get started today!

librarybenchmark.org
ESOL AT THE LIBRARY
THEORIES, TIPS, AND TRICKS

Eric Hughes / hughese@hillsboroughcounty.org
Eric is Adult Literacy Coordinator, Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library.
Eric is currently reading Axiom’s End by Lindsay Ellis.
In my role with the Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library (THPL) I work closely with the Hillsborough Literacy Council (HLC) to provide adult literacy services and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). I also have over ten years of experience teaching adults to speak English, both within the US and abroad. During my time at the THPL, I have worked with and trained volunteers to get them going with tutoring, and I have noticed over the years that tutors often have certain anxieties and hesitations about taking on language learning, especially if they don’t have any prior teaching or language experience. To ease tutor anxieties and to help other library adult English Language coordinators, it is beneficial to explore some theories of second language learning and look at some examples of lessons and activities that provide guidance on how to conduct tutoring sessions.

The tutoring materials that most volunteer tutoring programs provide have lesson plans and activities included, which is certainly extremely helpful. But also knowing some foundational second language acquisition theories can help shed light on why those materials are designed the way they are. If tutors and program coordinators can think about these resources analytically, they will be able to apply their knowledge to developing and implementing educational plans and activities with ease, even on the fly. This will open a wide variety of learning opportunities between volunteers and learners, as well as help tutors address the individual learning needs of their students adeptly. It is also hopeful that by shedding light on what we believe about how the brain learns a second language, both tutors and program coordinators can feel more assured that their efforts are fruitful.

GROUP WORK IS BETTER FOR ESOL
Many people who volunteer to teach language assume that they will be the primary source of English language modeling for students. They are often surprised when this notion is challenged. Volunteer tutors or teachers may in fact be the top source on the correctness or incorrectness of a learner’s use of the English language, but language learning is not an act of copying a model or repeating what is heard. Learning a second language is a developmental activity that requires the mind to process language information from a variety of sources. Over time, the mind digests the information it collects about a language, both explicitly taught and observed, and begins to create its own version of the language that changes over time. This process is the acquisition of language.

With that in mind, studies indeed show that students, despite having limited language proficiency, learn more from each other than they do from a single speaker, even if that speaker is fluent in English. That is because by engaging with each other in language, interlocutors (people taking part in conversations) must both take in the information of another speaker—no matter how imperfect—and try to make sense of it. This engages the processing power of the mind. Of course, speakers must draw
upon their language skills to make themselves both understood and to understand. This exchange may go back and forth repeatedly. This is called *negotiation of meaning*. It is through this negotiation that a lot of great language learning can take place.

Through the process of negotiating meaning all participants in a discussion are challenged to decipher and use a wider variety of linguistic tools than they would get from listening to a single, perfect speaker, particularly since the power dynamic between a student and a teacher may prevent learners from asking as many questions, or trying to continue to speak flawed English to someone who is fluent. It is always advisable to have language learning activities take place in groups, both in-person or online.

**SCAFFOLDING**

Providing a lot of support for learning success is appropriately called “scaffolding.” Fortunately, most learning materials are already designed in a scaffolded way, but not all of them. Although scaffolding is an easy concept to understand, it is always great for educators to keep in the front of their minds. Assessing how scaffolded one’s lessons are is a great way to ensure that learners will be less likely to become frustrated, helping them feel more successful and learn more easily.

To clarify this term and concept a little more, making something easy isn’t the same as scaffolding. The aim of scaffolding is to help move a learner from where they are now to the next step in their learning journey. What scaffolding makes easy is the way toward the next skill or achievement. On the other hand, making an overall learning experience too easy would lead to boredom. Developing a keen eye for good scaffolding techniques can be part of the fun and reward of teaching.

The foundational scaffolding principle for adults is to teach them what they want to know. Good English language activities for adults build on the knowledge that adults have already built over their lifetimes. Therefore, encouraging all new tutors to spend time getting to know their learners is a good idea. When a tutor asks a learner why they have contacted the library for tutoring at this point in their lives, the answer is often, “I want to learn to read,” or, “I want to speak English.” However, there is often a bigger reason why learners want to learn those skills at this point in their lives, especially after commonly going many years without them. Typically, people want to learn to read or speak English because they have a goal they want to achieve such as reading to grandchildren, reading religious and spiritual texts, speaking to their child’s teachers, or improving their access to healthcare. Therefore, lessons geared to these topics will likely be more successful for adult learners than reading about Dick and Jane or memorizing verb forms.

Another common scaffolding technique, using pre-reading discussion questions, is related to the above principle. You will notice that before a reading excerpt in most English language learning materials, there are questions that ask students to reflect on what they already know about a topic. By first assessing what one already knows about a topic, one can home in on the gaps in one’s knowledge and/or develop interest in finding out more. An interested reader who is actively seeking information in a text is more likely to engage with that text in meaningful ways. This results in better language processing as well as recall of information. As far as language learning goes, current events and news articles are also great for instruction because learners are likely to be familiar with that content in their own languages and can more easily bridge the linguistic gap.

Another common scaffolding technique is to discuss key vocabulary before reading a passage. Tutors can select vocabulary or ask learners to skim a reading and point out vocabulary they don’t know. One of the frustrating things about language learning is trying to read a text, but having to stop frequently to look up vocabulary. At the same time, if a learner avoids vocabulary in order to continue reading, they may miss important points of the text. Good vocabulary focus ensures that the words that are essential to the text are understood. And, as an added approach, instructors can encourage learners to try and decipher word meanings from context clues elsewhere in the reading. For example, if a
person didn’t recognize the word “bright” in the sentence, *It was a bright, sunny day with clear blue skies*, the instructor could try and have a learner guess the meaning of the word based on the other information in the sentence.

Giving students options of answers is a great way to build in scaffold learning. If learners can see a list of answers to choose from, they know the right one is available to them, and they just need to recognize it. This helps them get exposed to negative examples. Being able to choose a correct choice also requires being able to recognize incorrect choices. That is all great exposure to language and reading.

Once a tutor has done well-scaffolded activities, they can then move to less-scaffolded activities using the same content. For example, after a multiple-choice vocabulary question, try talking about the topic using the exact same vocabulary. In sum, whatever a tutor is working on with their learners, it is best to go from a well-scaffolded format to a less scaffolded one, and it is perfectly fine to spend time repeatedly covering the same material in this way.

**GRAMMAR FOCUS IS NOT REQUIRED**

Another aspect of language acquisition that surprises new tutors is that grammar is not the primary focus. In fact, avoiding most grammar talk is advisable for a volunteer because it is easy to find yourself not knowing the answer to a lot more grammar questions than you would expect. It’s an old linguistics adage that, “You learned to speak your first language without grammar lessons.” Adult learners can sometimes fall in love with grammar because of its seemingly formulaic nature. Grammar study supports a belief that memorizing rules will result in language learning the way learning the steps to automotive repair might get the car running. But knowing grammar alone does not lead to language use, hence it has long fallen out of favor as the *de facto* pedagogy.

Instead, exploring language and language forms in context is a better approach. Fortunately, this also matches with a primary objective of adult education: teaching students about what they find relevant to their life experiences and life goals. Tutors can explore vocabulary and grammar forms common to certain speech situations without trying to explain the mechanics of it. An example would be discussing or practicing talking to your boss. How do you show respect and speak politely to your boss? Is saying “please” the only way to ask for something politely? No. You’ll see in any example dialog that we show respect and politeness to superiors by using phrases like, “May I have the day off?” “Would you allow me to attend a training?” (For fun compare, “Give me the day off, please,” or “Allow me to attend a training, please,” which are imperative forms. Don’t you just dread even the thought of saying those in a demanding way to your boss?)

Some tutors may not consciously think about using modal verbs in a request to show politeness. Using language in context in fact models the forms we use, whether or not we can consciously explain them.

Awareness of these three principles of language learning and adult education can help library literacy and ESOL program coordinators provide direction to volunteer tutors and help alleviate anxieties that many volunteers have. Language learning is a process, and language education is geared toward promoting the processes as far as the field of linguistics can support them. Taking time to understand the mechanics of language learning will go a long way in making decisions that will help tutors feel more comfortable when taking on new students. Knowing everything about teaching or about language is not the goal. Keeping learners engaged in their own language learning process is.

**Sample Group Conversation Session**

A typical conversation group session can be planned by employing the above concepts to optimize language learning.

There are common challenges to running open conversation groups that anyone who has done it will immediately identify. Perhaps the biggest challenge is that there will be people of all different levels in the same group. This can be a challenge for seasoned language teachers, let alone volunteers. A group conversation leader primarily needs to have some conversation topics chosen to get started, but
thinking about how to run a session in advance can improve attendee experience and the likelihood of language learning.

The first thing to remember is that the group leader is not the primary focus. A group leader can serve more as a conversation facilitator than modeler. Therefore, the conversation leaders can take the pressure to provide constant conversation or language modeling off themselves. The leader can choose a topic to discuss, perhaps a holiday that month. They can then do something as simple as bring in a picture related to that holiday or look one up on the internet and display it on a screen. They then ask group participants what they know about what’s happening in the picture, or more simply, what they see in the picture. The leader can get some good input as to what people know about the holiday and what they can say about the holiday from this initial activity. This is the beginning of scaffolding an experience.

While this is happening, the conversation leader can write some key words that the participants have come up with on a whiteboard. That way everyone of all levels can be exposed to some new vocabulary, they may even copy the vocabulary in their notebooks. Low level learners can focus on adding the vocabulary, while higher level can focus on using the vocabulary fluently. This will happen in the next phase.

The group leader can then place participants into pairs or small groups and have them talk about something related to the holiday. A common example would be, “How is this holiday celebrated in your country compared to in the US?” One caveat is to not use a yes/no question format like “Do you celebrate this holiday in your country?” Conversation leaders should become adept at avoiding questions that do not generate discussion.

If it is possible, group leaders could try to pair participants with others of a similar level. This helps to avoid the frustration that can occur if a very low speaker is paired with a very high speaker. However, if a mismatched pairing can’t be avoided, the conversation leader can write some scaffolded phrases on the white board that all participants can practice, such as “What I like about the holiday is . . .” “Every year my family . . .”

The discussion leader allows the pairs or small groups to talk while circulating among the groups to chime in on any language feedback or help. If there is time, the conversation leader can reshuffle the pairs and groups. If the conversation leader asks the participants to talk about the exact thing they personally spoke about in the previous group, this is a great scaffolding and fluency-building activity. This approach is also great for low-level learners. For more advanced learners, ask them to summarize what was said. Summarizing is a harder skill. If a conversation leader would like to go to the next level with this type of activity, they can do a jigsaw activity.

After small group discussions have occurred and perhaps been shuffled several times, the group leader can bring everyone back to the larger group and ask some recapping questions, like, “What did you talk about?” and “What was something you learned?” Since participants have already spoken about the topic numerous times and have all participated in negotiation of meaning throughout the activity, they should feel relatively comfortable speaking to the larger group. During this time the conversation leader may also choose to write some key points on the white board.

There is one final activity that makes for a great overall learning session, and which is proven to increase learning. This is to have the participants reflect on what they have spoken about that day and what they may do in the future as a next step to increase their knowledge about the topic, or their language needs to talk about the topic. This can be done as a quick, silent, written activity with the conversation leader passing through the room to check on, or it can be a quick spoken activity as a large group. The main objective is to send people out of the classroom thinking about learning more and looking for more ways to stay engaged.

**USING FREE SOFTWARE**

Every library’s language program coordinator should know there are things that can be used for
free. I’m sure I don’t even need to say it, but free is good for both libraries with tight budgets, and for learners. Here are some great ways to engage learners with authentic interactions that also happen to work great in the distance learning context.

First, it’s assured that almost every learner these days has a phone with texting or a communication app like WhatsApp. Texting is a great way to engage learners, especially low-level learners because it allows them to receive authentic communication from a tutor, but also gives them the opportunity to respond in their own time. This means, they don’t have to come up with a response on the spot but can type and edit their responses, as well as use other tools like translators. Using texting can also help build a person’s confidence because not being face-to-face reduces pressure. Shooting learners a quick text in-between lessons is a good way to stay in touch and check in with learners about their progress on a personal objective. It also gives learners a chance to possibly ask questions and get support when they are away from the tutor.

There are many wonderful resources that are free on the internet. Of course, there are hundreds of e-learning websites that allow people to make lessons and online games, but there are some simple tools that most tutors could begin using immediately.

Email accounts like Google and Microsoft have online office productivity suites that give users the ability to share documents on the cloud. These are great for collaborating with students as well. Tutors could look at authentic job postings and share a Google Doc with a student as they work on a cover letter. The tutor can provide feedback and comments online, and in the end, the student has their own document that they created themselves.

Another fun activity would be to have a group of students working on the same document and providing feedback to each other. This collaboration would create a dynamic similar to negotiation of meaning since the learners are both writing and trying to understand someone else’s writing. Student comments are also sources of both information about the writing process, but also a form of communication of their own that must be understood. Of course, the added benefit of using online tools to help improve digital proficiency is an added bonus.

My hope is that the ideas discussed in this article will help library language program coordinators and tutors alike feel more empowered to understand how their learners can best improve English language acquisition efforts. If instructors can keep students talking to each other, processing language information, and using language, then they will have the satisfaction of seeing the rewards for their efforts unfold right before their eyes.

RESOURCES ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION


RESOURCES ON GROUP WORK


BUILDING A LITERACY COLLECTION TO SUPPORT ADULT LEARNERS
Librarians are always looking for ways to add another circle to the Venn diagram of readers in a community. We make displays, host book clubs, create readers’ advisory print pieces and write blogs and other social media teasers: anything we can think of to share our love of reading. There is a large group of people that are often overlooked in our shepherding endeavors, though: adults with low levels of literacy proficiencies.

Children’s librarians regularly factor in literacy level needs when serving young patrons—think of the huge variety of picture books, beginning readers, easy readers, easy chapter books, etc.—and building literacy skills is often at the root of programs and storytimes for children. For most adult services librarians however, literacy levels tend to not be our first thought when answering a reference question or planning a program. We’re certainly aware that everyone has varying comfort levels and abilities, but we tend to assume a basic level of literacy with our responses and recommendations. Exploring literacy levels with adults can be uncomfortable for both librarians and patrons due to the inherent stigma of being an adult with limited literacy skills. Paying more attention to adult literacy levels and providing resources and pathways for new and struggling adult readers are important endeavors for libraries to pursue.

ADULT LITERACY STATISTICS

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019179/index.asp), one in five adults lacks literacy skills sufficient to complete tasks that require comparing and
contrasting information, paraphrasing, or making low-level inferences. This translates to roughly 43 million Americans who possess low literacy skills: 26.5 million at low-functioning, 8.4 million who are considered functionally illiterate in English (unable to successfully determine the meaning of sentences, read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information, or complete simple forms), and 8.2 million who could not participate in the survey due to a language barrier or a cognitive or physical inability to be interviewed. And these numbers are not dominated by foreign-born non-native speakers of English. By ethnicity and nativity status, the largest percentage of those with low literacy skills are white US-born adults, who represent one third of the low-literacy skilled population.

Libraries are inherently well positioned to provide literacy resources for adults. In Northwest Ohio, we are extremely fortunate to have an active and highly effective community literacy organization called Read for Literacy (https://www.readforliteracy.org). Their offices are located at the Toledo Lucas County Public Library’s (TLCPL) Main Library. They have programs and service tracks for adults, families, and young readers, but for this article, I’ll be focusing on working with them on our collection for adult new readers.

For 35 years, TLCPL has had an adult literacy materials collection to support Read for Literacy’s work. The collection was created in 1986–1987 after a TLCPL librarian read Illiterate America by Jonathan Kozol and was inspired to make a difference. During this time, several local tutoring programs merged to form Read for Literacy and streamline efforts to provide basic literacy tutoring and English Language Learning assistance to adults. We had the support of our local newspaper, The Toledo Blade, in advertising the availability of the collection which helped us find community members who could benefit from these materials. The initial collection included books and media developed in conjunction with Read for Literacy, and intentionally included audio and video components along with print, which in the mid 80s was fairly cutting edge. Librarians were trained in how to “level” a supplemental reading title based on the average number of sentences and syllables per 100 words—see the Fry Graph Readability Formula, https://www.readabilityformulas.com/fry-graph-readability-formula.php for details—focusing on materials in the first five levels of the system, which are most applicable to new readers.

**THE TLCPL LITERACY COLLECTION EVOLVES**

The Literacy Collection has evolved and continues to support the efforts of Read for Literacy to meet the needs of both adult learners of English as a second language, and adult new readers at a variety of literacy levels. It has had many permutations over time and like most niche collections, it has thrived or floundered depending on budget, staffing levels, available resources, and perceived use (lower use made it easier to move down the list of work priorities). The Literacy Collection has been organized in so many ways (by reading level, call number, theme, intended audience, etc.) even librarians had trouble finding individual items or remembering why we decided to put something in a separate area within the collection. These inconsistencies have led to some materials being marked missing and ultimately withdrawn from the catalog when they couldn’t be found to fill reserves, which weakened the collection. When we shifted or weeded the larger collection, Literacy materials got tucked into convenient leftover areas that didn’t always make them easily findable.

As the COVID-19 pandemic deescalates and we renew commitments to programs and public training, we decided to tackle the literacy collection and see what we can do to make it more useful and appealing. Working in conjunction with Read for Literacy’s Adult & Family Literacy director, I evaluated the collection, especially the supplemental reading materials, and weeded anything that was worn, or appeared unappealing or outdated. We worked with a shelf list of about 1500 items, which basically contained materials in the following areas:
Leveled supplemental texts (basically 10-30 page booklets sorted into levels 1-5 of the Fry Readability Formula) organized by numeric level/colorcoded sticker, then fiction alphabetically by title and nonfiction by Dewey number.

Multi-volume tutoring sets like Laubach Way to Reading, Challenger Series, English for Everyday Activities, Focus on Phonics, etc. grouped by series.

Other support materials for tutors: workbooks, activity guides, instructional materials.

Life Skills Guides aimed at new readers, focusing on functional skills like basic cooking, getting a driver’s license, going shopping, managing a checkbook/banking, etc.

Picture dictionaries including mono and multilingual titles.

Pre-GED and basic mathematics learning texts and series such as Breakthrough to Math and Contemporary’s Number Power.

English Language learning (ELL) materials for speakers of other languages who are learning English.

A small number of scholarly literacy texts that may have been marginally helpful when there was so little else available.

Historically, due to lack of available materials for purchase and the old “anything is better than nothing” ethos, we often kept things well past their ideal life span. It was especially difficult to find materials for the first three Fry levels (and still is, though it has improved); we were always desperate for some variety and accepted materials of dubious quality that qualified as a book in each reading level. The concept of viable hi-low materials (high concept interest—low difficulty reading level) was always the goal in selecting content and even today, very few publishers produce these materials—see resource list below.

Sometimes proto-teen graphic or juvenile editions of American classics that were simplified for younger audiences were added. They fell within the leveling system, but the content wasn’t easy for new readers to work with and they caused confusion for readers looking for the traditional texts who were puzzled when their reserves came in with unexpected rewritten or abridged editions. The collection wasn’t attractive or very useful anymore and needed some love.

**EVALUATION CRITERIA**

Especially for the difficult-to-find supplemental reading booklets at the beginner levels, number of circs is relatively unimportant when weeding. Some tutors may use them in the library, so they don’t get checked out and it’s also not clear whether all students are aware of these resources enough to look for them. The entire supplemental reading collection takes up so little space (roughly four–five shelves) and are so hard to replace we tend to only weed for condition or outdated imagery/content. We made sure we have the most recent editions of the tutoring series and withdrew scholarly works that had little immediate practical use. We also withdrew workbooks without answer keys, as Read for Literacy administrators suggest they aren’t as useful to tutors.

**FINDING NEW AND ATTRACTIVE HI/LOW TITLES**

We cleared out about half the supplemental materials and were ready to look at replacement options.

There are some nice British resources, including a lovely Penguin Readers series (https://www.penguinreaders.co.uk/), but after consulting with Read for Literacy, we decided to not add these materials due to British vs. American spelling, slang, and grammar variances that would prove challenging for new readers. Currently, the best print options are from the following:

- **Grass Roots Press** (https://us.grassrootsbooks.net/collections/all) offers well illustrated fiction and nonfiction hi-lo titles, Arabic-English bilingual readers, useful student workbooks focusing on spelling and comprehension, and some excellent “photostory” books at the hardest-to-find beginner-level.

■ **New Readers Press** (https://www.newreaderspress.com/) focuses on tutoring materials and adult education learning guides. An especially helpful resource is *News for You*, which is a newspaper in print or digital (https://www.newsforyouonline.com/) formats, with timely articles for new readers.

There are also some nicely designed and well-organized websites with the option to print out or guide students to use free resources online:

■ **Southwest Adult Basic Education** (https://www.southwestabe.org/), based in Marshall, Minnesota, is a high-quality resource aimed at adult new readers.

■ **Reading Skills for Today’s Adults** (readingskills4today.com) contains stories by reading level, also has links to audio versions of each story, questions for determining reader comprehension, and links to easily printed PDF versions of the story and comprehension questions for easy offline use. The site says it is under construction, but still has a lot of useful content.

■ **Reading Skills for Healthcare** (reading4healthcareworkers.com). There is a demand for healthcare and medical information for non-native English speakers. This is likely aimed at English Language Learners who possess literacy skills in their primary language, but should be useful in a variety of tutoring situations.

■ **The Times in Plain English** (https://www.thetimesinplainenglish.com/). One of the most difficult things to find are current news sources written at a new reader level (the other being *News for You* from New Reader’s Press). This site has the goal of presenting articles from the New York Times and other newspapers written at a very low literacy level and simply organized. It is probably most useful for advanced beginners and English language learners.

■ **Learning Chocolate** (https://www.learningchocolate.com) is a vocabulary builder tool probably aimed at young new readers but still applicable to adults who need the very beginning level materials. It organizes words thematically, with illustrations and audio links for each word. There are also basic online activities and games to help with increasing comprehension. One possible drawback is that there are some intrusive ads, but this kind of content is so rare it (usually) outweighs the distraction.

■ **Center for the Study of Adult Literacy** (gsu.edu). The entire site was just updated in 2022. Resources can be found at https://sites.gsu.edu/csal/general-adult-literacy-websites/. Their library (https://sites.gsu.edu/csal/library/) contains a set of 1,600 web-based readings organized into Easier, Medium, and Harder levels across topics such as health, jobs and work, money, social studies, science, and other life skills. All texts have been reviewed for readability level and subject matter. The hardest levels to find are the beginner levels, so online collections of readings like this one that are easily updated and widely available are an extremely valuable resource.

### Digital vs. Print

Just as when the collection initially evolved, it remains important to offer resources in a variety of formats to accommodate different learning styles. Recorded Books offered sets of beginner level “SmartReader” texts with audio CDs and teachers’ guides that were initially useful, but with fewer and fewer people having access to CD players demand is now very low and most new reader audio content is moving to online providers. The digital/online resources are particularly useful because they are up-to-date, mostly low-cost or free (our favorite price!), and flexible enough for home use but there is an extra layer of difficulty in using online materials in that digital literacy often relies on traditional
literacy skills. We still get requests from customers who favor CD audio over downloadable audio, but with literacy materials we are to the point where there is no choice but to rely on digital sources, if only because no one is providing reliable, high-quality audio or video content at this level on CD or DVD. Digital resources aimed at tutors or specifically for students to use in conjunction with tutors are probably the most useful.

**PLACEMENT OF PRINT MATERIALS**

I’ve been told that some students are embarrassed by their perceived lack of knowledge and appreciate some privacy in choosing supplemental reading texts. It’s a fine line to tread in making literacy materials visible and still offering privacy for those who want to make choices without worrying that everyone in the library is observing that need. We chose to place the collection down the first aisle of the adult stacks, which seems like a good compromise between keeping the collection distinct yet also part of the larger collection from which all readers obtain materials.

**MARKETING THE COLLECTION**

In the past, librarians would give monthly tours of the Literacy Collection to tutors as a part of Read for Literacy training, both to highlight the variety of materials available and encourage tutors to see librarians as a helpful resource. One of the key points in the training was that the idea behind the supplemental 10 to 30-page booklets was to have materials for new readers to check out so they could have the feel of checking out a book. That concept is true for new readers of all ages and well worth the time and space it takes to locate, catalog, shelve and house these booklets. Going forward, we will let Read for Literacy handle marketing directly to tutors so they can streamline the collection introduction into their larger training module and focus on what would be most helpful based on tutor and student needs.

We will be working as closely as possible with Read for Literacy in keeping them up to date with the current collection and new materials. I plan to check in with them at least yearly to see if they’ve got what they need or have ideas on what else to add. I will also create annotated lists via Select Reads (http://www.dearreader.com/select-reads) which is a resource that allows us to create annotated lists with links to the catalog and reader feedback (for example, English Language Learner Resources, https://bookdbs.nextgoodbook.com /booklist/w/cd43303ce6a75acf5b2e4e739a060de 31/l/246379) to share with tutors so they can more easily see what we have and request it to be sent to their local branch. For libraries without access to SelectReads or similar marketing tools, making digital and print pathfinders (preferably at varying reading levels: one aimed at tutors and perhaps even one for students) and sharing with local tutoring programs, schools, adult education programs, and social service umbrella organizations like the United Way or Child and Family Services would be ideal.

**FURTHER READING**


BOOKS ARE ONLY HALF THE BATTLE

Having literacy materials available can be a tremendous resource, but the materials will be best used when connected to a literacy program or tutoring organization. For some libraries, this is a golden opportunity to find new purpose and connection in a community that has moved beyond traditional reference needs (see Kristy Cooper’s “Supporting Adult Literacy” article in the bibliography for an excellent example of a library that developed their own tutoring program). For libraries with staff levels already stretched too thin which cannot add another outreach program to a full load, there may be organizations in your community who already provide or could provide tutoring training and sponsorship.

According to the nonprofit transparency database, GuideStar, there are 1,622 organizations identified with adult literacy or reading promotion in the United States. Local social services organizations like the United Way or Community Shares can also help with identifying local agencies that provide tutoring or other literacy support services. For libraries that wish to provide materials, it is always best to make the community partnership connections first, then see what would be most useful to their endeavors. The above resources are what we found most beneficial for Read for Literacy’s needs; other organizations may have different requirements. The most important thing is for libraries to connect to and support local adult literacy endeavors and do whatever we can to increase this tremendously important circle in our Venn diagram of readers. We cannot pursue our many missions to increase a myriad of local literacies (digital, information, medical, financial, etc.) without this fundamental basic literacy piece in place. I hope we can find new ways to make a dent in the number of adults in our communities who struggle with reading and comprehension. As we look for new ways to be useful and connected in a post pandemic world, adult literacy outreach can be a great way to provide a much-needed service to our communities.

2023 PLA Early Literacy Calendar

Available in October

Based on the Every Child Ready to Read® practices of Reading, Writing, Singing, Talking, Playing, (+Counting), the PLA Early Literacy Calendar contains activities for every day of the year! Plus book lists, song lyrics, craft projects, and more. The 2023 Calendar, available in English and Spanish, will be released in October. Visit www.alastore.ala.org for more information. PLA thanks REFORMA for their work on the Spanish Version.
Booklist Reader

Print is coming in January!

Deliver Booklist’s unparalleled reading recommendations directly to patrons and library visitors.

Start sharing Booklist Reader digitally now. Activate your Booklist Online profile today!

Visit www.booklistonline.com for details
Intersectional Feminism is for Everybody

WHY YOUR LIBRARY NEEDS AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST BOOK CLUB

Elizabeth Hanby / ehanby@slcolibrary.org
Elizabeth is Adult Services Librarian, The County Library, Granite, Salt Lake City, Utah.

She is currently reading *Ring Shout, or, Hunting Ku Kluxes in the End Times* by P. Djèlí Clark.
he Salt Lake County Libraries (UT) have been running a well-attended monthly intersectional feminist book club for four years (facilitated by Family Services Librarian, Deanna Simonis, and myself). The Cherry Hill Public Library (NJ) began its successful intersectional feminist book club five years ago; the club continues to meet quarterly (facilitated by Tierney Miller, Reference and Adult Services Supervisor, and Laverne Mann, Library Director). What is an intersectional feminist book club? Well for starters, it’s not a club that reads about intersectional feminism; rather, it’s a club that reads popular and literary fiction—and occasionally nonfiction—through the lens of intersectional feminism.

And, what is intersectional feminism? As opposed to earlier movements of feminism in the US, which largely focused on the experiences of women who were white, middle-class, cisgendered, and able-bodied, intersectional feminism recognizes and explores all aspects of an individual’s identity—the interconnected nature of race, nativity, class, (dis)ability, gender, sexuality, etc., that create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or advantage. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989.1 In Crenshaw’s words, “Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person’s social and political identities combined to create different modes of discrimination and privilege.” It stresses how discrimination and exclusion are not simple and can’t be solved by focusing on a single issue. Crenshaw’s work did not travel beyond legal studies until the 2010s. And then, rather suddenly, intersectionality gained widespread notice in feminist circles and beyond. The term entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015. So why is it so crucial now to consider feminist issues through the lens of intersectionality?

From the disparate impacts of COVID-19 in communities throughout the Country, to significantly higher rates of suicide among LGBTQ+ youth, to widespread protests against often violent racism, national current events prove we are far from achieving equality. The impact of crises are not uniform; intersectional feminism offers an organizational structure through which we can better understand one another and endeavor to create a more just future for us all. Intersectional feminism—specifically here as used to view storytelling literature—elucidates how interlocking systems of power affect those who are most marginalized in society. For example, it explains how the experience of poverty is gendered and racialized and how it differs within different social contexts.

To achieve this, as a book club, we need to re-envision the book club canon. This does not mean that Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* or Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (books with richly rendered social worlds though distinctly non-BIPOC or LGBTQ+ social worlds) are not reading material for the public library feminist book club; but they are now approached from a literary analysis that considers how a range of identity factors, such as gender, race, nationality, class, sexuality, age, physical ability, corporeality, role, or setting, interact to shape character and plot—emphasizing resultant advantage and disadvantage to those characters within the novel, and the invisible characters who are not. This rendering reveals much about how power operates—about power relations and social inequalities. It’s a reading strategy that—for our Salt Lake County Libraries’ intersectional feminist book club—provides a deeper and a more expansive collaboration and understanding of our own feminist selves within our communities, locally and globally. But more often than not, the intersectional feminist book clubs in both Salt Lake County and Cherry Hill read books by BIPOC and/or LGBTQ+ authors who use intersectionality as a guiding principle in their creative practices, and who asked readers to do the same as an interpretive strategy. This does not exclude literature that addresses men’s lives, and masculinity—for one, men, too, it can easily be argued, are hurt by traditional gender roles. Above all, the intersectional framework promotes social and political egalitarianism.

According to a 2021 article written by Jess McHugh for the Washington Post, “How Women Invented Book Clubs, Revolutionizing Reading and Their Own Lives,” women’s book clubs have been a subversive yet safe mode for feminists to promote and discuss contemporary issues and theories for more than 150 years.2 To extend McHugh’s thesis,
the intersectional feminist book club is the eventual culmination of the 18th century reading circle (early nomenclature for book club) that functioned as both an intellectual outlet and a radical political tool. For example, early feminist Hannah Mather Crocker, author of the feminist foundational treatise, “Observations on the Real Rights of Women,” predated this work with the founding of her reading circle in 18th century Boston in which she advocated for, among other radical ideas, women’s participation in freemasonry.3 Megan Marshall, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography “Margaret Fuller: A New American Life,” discusses the feminist renegade Fuller’s early 19th Century Book Club. Fuller was the first American female war correspondent and a magazine editor and she encouraged the women who attended the Club to answer the great questions: “What were we born to do? How shall we do it?” In her book, Marshall compared those meetings to consciousness raising (feminist book club-like) groups in the 1960s and 1970s: “There was a sense of female power that was emanating from these sessions.”4

Though these early groups were strictly for women, both the Salt Lake County and Cherry Hill book clubs invite all—male, female, non-binary—to join in. In our Salt Lake County intersectional group, we have encouraged members to create and pursue their own personal feminist agendas. We’re not attempting to achieve consensus, but rather individual, unique ideas. We in no manner desire indoctrination in the book club, but rather we’re seeking diverse thought that inspires vigorous, exploratory conversation and perhaps consequent action: using any positions of privilege we occupy to elevate the voices of those who have less, through an understanding of the multitude of identities and experiences that shape individuals’ ability to act in times of need or struggle. As feminist and civil rights activist—and an acknowledged inspiration behind Crenshaw’s theorizing—Audre Lorde wrote: “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.”5

That said, we don’t want the intersectional feminist book club to feel like a college seminar. Although, as alluded to above, almost any work of fiction can be read through the intersectional feminist lens, there are contemporary books that Tierney Miller and I highly recommend for an Intersectional feminist book club, books that are fully “Intersectional” in that the effects of multiple forms co-facilitator and I like to provide a quick overview of intersectionality to new members; and craft our own open-ended discussion questions, which support an intersectional view (rather than using the question-loaded reading group guides that abound on the internet), we are very careful not to be instructional. Our group is fun, and we strive to maintain a relaxed, enjoyable atmosphere through lots of humor and camaraderie; members often stay past the designated end time of our meetings to continue the chat.

Why does your library need an intersectional feminist book club? In addition to the merits discussed above, I believe that among the public library’s most important mandates is to help people figure out the complexities of life, from navigating the health system to finding just the right movie for a special Saturday night date to helping those with housing needs. And, nothing is more complex than the multivariate systems that determine our individual experiences. A public library Intersectional Feminist book club is a program that not only easily fulfills one of the more salient goals of the Public Library Association’s Strategic Plan for 2018–2022: “PLA advocates for equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice in order to enable every member, library, and community group to fully and equally participate in a society mutually shaped to meet their needs”; but also provides members with the opportunity to better understand themselves and others and effecting systems through the strategic reading of books and accompanying conversation. While most adult programs at public libraries will differ based on the specific library and the community they serve, the intersectional feminist book club can benefit every community, every demographic, and with a little thought and planning, do it well.

**SUGGESTED BOOKS**

Although, as alluded to above, almost any work of fiction can be read through the intersectional feminist lens, there are contemporary books that Tierney Miller and I highly recommend for an Intersectional feminist book club, books that are fully "Intersectional" in that the effects of multiple forms...
Intersectional Feminism is for Everybody

of discrimination (e.g. sexism, racism, classism) intersect in a complex and cumulative but clear manner, particularly in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups:

**HOW THE ONE-ARMED SISTER SWEEPS HER HOUSE BY CHERIE JONES (2021)**

*How the One-Armed Sister Sweeps Her House* is an exquisitely written, intimate, and visceral portrayal of interconnected lives, across gender, race, and/or class, in a rapidly changing Barbadian resort town. This debut author exposes the impact structural inequalities have—and don’t have—on these differing lives. By creating a narrative that centers on Lala, a mother in a physically and emotionally abusive relationship, Jones demonstrates how structural racism will not be extinguished until those institutions are rebuilt to enable safety and support for all lives. The prose in Jones’ work is so lush, and the conjoining complexities so compelling, the Salt Lake County book club had no trouble digging deeply into the systemic abuses at the core.

**UNDER THE UDAЛА TREES BY CHINELO OKPARANTA (2015)**

The Cherry Hill book club recommends *Under the Udala Trees* by Nigerian-American author, Okparanta. *Under the Udala Trees* is historical fiction set during and after the Nigerian Civil War, and written in a style that incorporates elements of Nigerian folklore. This powerful book won “Best Lesbian Fiction” in the 2016 Lambda Literary Awards. Tierney Miller: “This title addresses head on the dangers faced by LGBTQIA+ people in nations like Nigeria where homosexuality is illegal. Under the Udala Trees puts a global lens on issues of sexual violence and discrimination, illustrating the terrible ripple effects felt by individuals, families, and society when folks must keep their true selves hidden.”

**WOMEN TALKING BY MIRIAM TOEWS (2018):**

Set in the fictional Mennonite colony of Molotschna, a place both insular and patriarchal, *Women Talking* follows the colony’s women as they decide how to respond to the discovery that nine male members of the colony have been systematically anesthetizing and raping them. Toews, who was raised as a Mennonite and left the church when she was 18, describes *Women Talking* as a “reaction through fiction to . . . true life events.” Indeed, between 2005 and 2009 in an isolated Mennonite colony in Bolivia, women and girls (as young as 3) were drugged and raped by members of this conservative religious community. Heavy material loosely written in a conversational style (the women do talk) which is occasionally profane and surprisingly funny. This was a favorite with many members of our Salt Lake group, and we easily passed an hour and a half discussing the converging -isms (patriernalism, sexism, cultism) and the abuses they permitted.

**HER BODY AND OTHER PARTIES BY CARMEN MARIA MACHADO (2017)**

Carmen Maria Machado’s debut collection of short stories manages to be psychologically horrifying while at the same time humorous. The stories challenge genre archetypes and traditional notions of femininity through heavy use of fairy tales, eroticism, fables, and urban legend. Machado underscores the often unspoken harsh reality of many women’s lives and the violence that invades their bodies, and their minds. Each story adds layers of interpretation to the preceding and following stories, coalescing into an exploration of the multifaceted experience of trauma. Machado’s unrestrained imagination is revealed throughout, precipitating fascinating feminist discussions.

**PACHINKO BY MIN JIN LEE (2018)**

Pachinko opens with the portentous line “History has failed us, but no matter.” Lee’s haunting epic tale chronicles the severe existence of four generations of a Korean family living in a fiercely racist Japan. Relegated to poverty and unable to obtain passports because of discriminatory laws, they are unable to return home. Their fortunes finally begin to change when one of the family becomes a pachinko man, a business available to ethnic Koreans because of its
disreputable associations. Pachinko is about outsiders, minorities, and the politically disenfranchised. An excellent choice for an intersectional feminist book club; it is, however, 496 pages long so a club might want to read it over two or three meetings depending upon their frequency.

And a few recent releases that promise to lend themselves well to an intersectional feminist reading:

**PINA BY TITAUA PEA AND TRANSLATED BY JEFFREY ZUCKERMAN**

Peu is a Tahitian author known for her evocative and layered portrayals of the effects of colonialism. *Pina* realistically portrays a Tahitian girl, Pina, trying to keep her family together in the face of the struggles wrought by colonialism on contemporary Polynesia. *Pina* is the second to last of nine children born in the poverty-stricken community of Tenaho. Pina’s family are descendants of island warriors who opposed European expansion; their existence conveys a fierce message about the destructive nature of colonial oppression.

**CALLING FOR A BLANKET DANCE BY OSCAR HOKEAH**

Hokeah’s debut novel revolves around Ever, a young Native American man, as he explores his identity, family, community, and place in the world. His Kiowa, Cherokee, and Mexican family members tell stories that span from his infancy to his adulthood. A chapter narrated by Ever’s paternal grandfather reveals him observing his grandsons taking part in a gourd dance, and perfectly conveys the two edges of the family’s heritage: “I was amazed at how quickly they followed in my footsteps. And then it scared me.”

**TALK TO MY BACK BY MURASAKI YAMADA AND TRANSLATED BY RYAN HOLMBERG**

Yamada (1948-2009) was one of the most acclaimed women working in early manga. *Talk to My Back*, serialized between 1981 and 1984, challenges patriarchy and women’s roles in Japanese society. Yamada’s harshest criticisms are for society at large, particularly its false promises of eternal satisfaction within the nuclear family. *Talk to My Back* is lyrical and incisive, and reveals so much through the intersectional lens; it’s truly a groundbreaking work.

**REFERENCES**

Food is more than just a basic human need—learning about it and enjoying it can be important social activities. As Hillary Dodge demonstrates in her book *Gather ’Round the Table: Food Literacy Programs, Resources, and Ideas for Libraries*, food literacy initiatives are a natural fit for libraries. Featuring a multi-pronged approach to incorporating food literacy in public, school, and special libraries, this all-in-one resource:

- presents a definition of food literacy that shows how the concept touches upon important topics such as culinary skills, food security, nutrition and dieting, food allergies, health literacy, and food ethics;
- discusses the community impacts of food-related issues;
- walks readers through planning and undertaking a community food assessment, a process that can be used to identify a need, justify a service response, build buy-in and engagement, and plan for the allocation of resources;
- shares a variety of innovative food literacy programs drawn from libraries across the country, from cookbook and recipe clubs to an edible education garden, teen cooking classes, and offsite cooking demos; and
- provides information about additional resources and reference sources relating to the culinary world, including

Catherine Hakala-Ausperk is the owner of Libraries Thrive Consulting.

**Gather ’Round the Table**

*Food Literacy Programs, Resources, and Ideas for Libraries*

*Hillary Dodge*

CHICAGO: ALA EDITIONS. 2020 / 144 P. / $49.99

advice on collection development.

I spoke with the author and asked her to expand on some of these ideas:

**PL:** What exactly is “Food Literacy” and why does it belong in public libraries?

**HD:** Although various industries use the term in different ways, I use it to mean a set of inter-related behaviors, knowledge, and skills relating to food, covering the gamut from planning and selection to preparation and eating. As libraries have become more and more arbiters of social good within their communities—by creating space for community celebration, engagement, and public health, it only makes sense that they begin to intersect with food as well. Modern libraries are about multiple literacies—textual and visual, yes, but also cultural, digital, and social-emotional, as well as health literacy.

**PL:** Libraries have long been supporters of battling food insecurity by partnering with local charities to distribute meals. What else can they do to fight this community issue?

**HD:** Education is huge. The more a library can learn about the impact of food insecurity on their community, the more they can leverage their creativity to make a difference. I recommend that libraries seek out local needs assessment work in their community and join the effort.

**PL:** Libraries have long been supporters of battling food insecurity by partnering with local charities to distribute meals. What else can they do to fight this community issue?

**HD:** Get experts involved. People who work in libraries are incredibly creative and intelligent, but we don’t know it all. Partnering with community experts is a great way to ensure quality, value, and information accuracy.

**PL:** You mention that librarians need to be aware of “Food Movements.” What are those?

**HD:** Food movements are about reestablishing our connection to food. Popular right now are movements that focus on food and its connection to the land such as (Farm-to-Table), sustainability (Zero Waste and Seasonal), as well as local food and traditional cookery (Slow Food). What’s important to know about food movements is that each one has a mission of sorts, a meaning that ties food into a larger socio-political or culturally-conscious schema. Libraries should be aware of what movements are important to their communities to better support inquiries and engagement on those topics.

**PL:** How can a library discover whether its users would be interested in this topic?

**HD:** Try it out. Most libraries probably already have. Bringing snacks to a teen program, sharing recipes in a book club, catering a library-hosted celebration—these are all examples of using food for connection. I also highly recommend taking a look at the numerous case studies I have provided in my book. The section “Short Orders” in particular focuses on food programs and services of small to medium scope that are easy to replicate.

**PL:** Libraries have long been supporters of battling food insecurity by partnering with local charities to distribute meals. What else can they do to fight this community issue?

**HD:** I really love the model of the Culinary Literacy Center of the Philadelphia Free Public Library—a whole teaching kitchen devoted to food! But not every library has the resources to implement such a large service. On a much more serviceable scale, I am a big fan of libraries that house food pantries. I’ve seen some great examples of this around the country—from entire rooms devoted to the service to a handful of shelves set aside for those in need—integrating food donations with materials lending is an interesting side-take to the sharing economy.

**PL:** You provide lots of food and nutrition programming ideas. What are the most important things to keep in mind when offering these events?

**HD:** April 1st is a day of international celebration of food and literature. In my book, one of the case studies explores a school program which implemented this as an annual festival where students prepared cakes based on books. I think it’s a really entertaining way to connect traditional book literacy with food literacy which got students hooked on reading and cooking.
PL: How can libraries integrate their collections and other services into and around food literacy events?
HD: There are so many ways! Libraries can look for food festivals in their community and set up a booth showcasing cookbooks or cooking shows on their streaming video services. Or, libraries can create their own food festivals and invite the community inside. Library 21c in Colorado Springs, Colorado collaborated with a local vegan group to offer a Vegan Holiday Market within the library. That day the library filled with the vegan vendors selling gifts and cottage foods, and the parking lot hosted several vegan delicious-smelling food trucks. It was fun and delicious and drew lots of new patrons through the doors.

PL: Do “Cookbook Clubs” or “Cookbook Discussion Groups” work?
HD: From what I’ve seen, yes. Depending on the library’s comfort and policies around food, I’ve seen numerous iterations of this type of program. Libraries that don’t allow food in their space have had attendees swapping books and sharing photos. Libraries that do, bring in full potlucks and attendees try a little bit of everything. I think there are many ways to share a love of food.

PL: What about gardening? How have libraries been involved in community gardens (or could they be)?
HD: Yes, there are many examples of libraries creating community gardening programs. The High Prairie Library in Falcon, Colorado has a beautiful little community learning garden. The library staff have partnered with a local food group, Fresh Start Center, not only to help grow seedlings for the garden, but also to lead classes, and help distribute the food grown in the garden. It’s a beautiful partnership making a big impact.

PL: How would you respond to someone who says food is not part of a library’s purpose?
HD: The mission of libraries is to respond to information needs within the community—whether it’s about Shakespeare, car repair, or baking. Not all libraries can bring actual cooking into the library, but they can provide cookbooks, lists of community food banks, or education programs with the local extension office. There’s a way to fit food literacy into the work of the library if the information need is there—which I can promise you, it is.

PL: Is there anything else you’d like to share?
HD: I always love to hear about the exciting things libraries are doing with food literacy. If you have a story to tell or a program to share, contact me via my website at hillarydodge.com.
The job market in libraries has followed many of the trends in the wider economy over the past fifteen years, as shown by positions advertised in ALA JobLIST. Job postings over time shows the negative impact of the 2008 recession, followed by some recovery from 2010 up until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the end of 2020 there has been significant growth, and in the first quarter of 2022 the number of job postings surpassed all previous records. While this is encouraging, anecdotal evidence suggests libraries are experiencing difficulties finding or hiring candidates.

Explore job listings by type, function, qualifications, and salary range using the interactive data visualization: https://tinyurl.com/ala-joblist.—Compiled by Sara Goek, Project Manager, PLA

Overall, 25 percent of the total unique jobs that have been advertised on JobLIST since 2006 are in public libraries, while almost 60% are in academic or research libraries. This may reflect the usage of JobLIST among these groups, rather than actual open positions by library type.
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