

Women's literacy web sites

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LIS 520N – Literacy: The Issue and the Library's Response

Introduction

In this paper, I explore two web sites that are concerned with women's literacy issues. These two sites have very different visions of their purpose; both have the basic function of providing information on women's literacy, but they differ greatly in the purpose of the information they provide and in the audiences to which it is directed.

Like all segments of the population, women are affected both directly and indirectly by issues of literacy, but illiteracy among women is particularly troublesome because they have so widely and so often been undervalued and undereducated and so bear a disproportionately large burden of illiteracy. Furthermore, women have proven to be the prime motivators for social change and, by and large, the primary caregivers for young children, playing a critical role in supporting literacy in the next generation. Improving literacy among women must thus be a critical component of any complete solution not only to adult literacy issues but also to the problem of the persistent cycle of illiteracy. Because of women's overall lower economic status and lesser educational opportunities, however, women's literacy issues may be particularly difficult to address. Looking on the bright side, effectively addressing these problems has the potential to reap greater benefits in proportion to the greater impact of these problems.

Women in Literacy, Women in Action

Women in Literacy, Women in Action was founded by Laubach Literacy in 1991 and now continues as part of ProLiteracy Worldwide, raising funds and coordinating efforts to address women's literacy issues around the world.

The organization's web site (<http://www.womeninliteracy.org/>) seems geared mostly towards donors and volunteers – past, present, and future – and, to a lesser extent, to literacy proponents looking for inspiration and ideas; the web site is more of a showcase and source of information about the organization than a direct effort to advance women's literacy; it is most definitely not geared toward new readers.

The main aim of the web site seems to be to raise awareness of the program's mission, goals, activities, successes, and needs; the home page includes sections labeled 'Profiles' (success stories), 'Fresh news', 'Act!' (information for potential donors and volunteers), and 'Facts' (statistics on women's education, literacy, health, socioeconomic status, and human rights, both in the United States and abroad). Two separate sections describe the organization's efforts in the United States (begun in 1994 as Women in Literacy/USA) and internationally. It presents statistics in a straightforward, understandable manner

The site is visually attractive, and – at least on the surface – shows the kind of care that characterizes a professionally developed web site: a pleasant color scheme, high-quality photography, and reasonably clear organization make it stimulating and enjoyable to use. Obviously, a lot of effort has gone into the site.

Parts of the web site, however, are likely to confuse many of the site's intended audience. The home page in particular is visually very complex and has links scattered all over: links in small caps – but then some text in small caps isn't a link – links in a handwriting-like script written sideways; white links; brown links that turn white; images that are links; images that aren't links; images that appear and disappear; links arranged vertically; links arranged horizontally; and so on. Other sections of the site are presented more simply; it's too bad that the home page is such a mess.

Some visitors to the organization's home page will also be put off by a 30-second Flash animation, consisting of a series of quotes illustrating the challenges and opportunities in the area of women's literacy, that precedes the appearance of the main home page. Fortunately, a link is available to skip this introductory page.

A secure donation form makes it easy to contribute money to the program, or to other ProLiteracy efforts.

Many of the site's pages mention Laubach Literacy, in a way that suggests that an organization with that name still exists; presumably, these pages need to be revised.

The 'Profiles' section presents the compelling stories of four women – one from Guatemala (unfortunately spelled 'Guatamala'), one from Indonesia, and two from California – that have benefited from the organization's resources. I would have liked to see more than just the four success stories that are presented – given the hundreds of thousands of women that the organization and its partner programs have served, certainly there must be many dozens of stories just as compelling as these.

WE LEARN

Founded by Mev Miller in 1995 as Women Leading through Reading, WE LEARN (Women Expanding/Literacy Education Action Resource Network) is a non-profit educational organization whose mission, according to its web site, is to '[promote] women's literacy as a tool for personal growth and social change through networking, education, action, and resource development.' The organization's web site (<http://www.litwomen.org/welearn.html>) is an attempt to further this mission by providing a wide variety of information and other resources for educators, librarians, and women learners. Forming part of LitWomen.org ('an umbrella site

for not-for-profit organizations serving the literature and literacy needs of women'), the WE LEARN web site is a rough-hewn, vibrant, living and growing information space, unlike the tidy – but limited – Women in Literacy, Women in Action web site. The WE LEARN web site is clearly *not* the work of professional web developers – but that's part of its appeal, and fits well with its grassroots focus.

The site has a section for adult learners that features contributions by women learners and lists of reading resources. The 'Kitchen Table Wisdom' page found in this section currently features an article on why women should vote and a review of the novel *The Dirty Girls Social Club* that appeared in an issue on women's literacy of *The Change Agent*, a periodical on adult education and social justice. Another page, 'Conversation Circles,' shares comments from a diverse body of women learners who met separately at several sites in 2001 to discuss what reading means to them, what they're interested in reading about, what they've enjoyed reading, and what helps them understand their lives as women. The resources list also found in this part of the site is particularly impressive. It's organized into 57 categories including subjects such as ethnicities (African American, Asian American, Latina), personal interests (photography, cooking, the outdoors); fiction (mysteries, young adult fiction, lesbian fiction); ESOL; social issues (housing, prisons, economics, domestic violence, immigration issues); and much, much more. Information on issues faced by women with disabilities was very limited, however, as was information on women's literacy outside the United States – but, to be fair, the latter is simply not a focus of the web site.

The section devoted to educators and librarians is no less impressive. Here are found lesson plans; a report from 2000 ('Feminist Resources and Curriculum for Women Achieving Literacy') on women's literacy efforts in the United States; a brief annotated bibliography of adult literacy

resources for librarians; a manual of best practices for organizers of book discussion groups; and much more.

Other parts of the web site highlight the efforts of women to whom WE LEARN has granted awards; some links to research that has been conducted on the topic of women's literacy (and adult literacy generally); and links to other resources on the web that may be of interest to women in literacy programs. Overall, the WE LEARN web site is a valuable resource for women generally, not just learners and new readers.

Site visitors can support WE LEARN by making donations, but can't order online. An order form is provided for ordering T-shirts, fridge poetry magnets, and books; a partnership with Books to Watch Out For (providing newsletters with 'all the buzz about lesbian and gay books and publishing') brings money to WE LEARN through a secure online ordering process.

The site's appearance, while vibrant and appealing, is much too stimulating for some readers. People with learning disabilities, in particular, are likely to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of images and text blocks they see. The 'Writings by Women Learners' page, for example, asks for contributions: 'Do you like to write? Do you have something you'd like to share with other women? This is your page. ...' Unfortunately, this text competes with no fewer than 12 images all visible at the same time – some with labels and some without – and is surrounded by three smaller text blocks with links – some in blue, some in green, and some in red, so that readers can't rely on color clues for recognizing what's a link and what isn't; some images are links, while others are not. This page cries out for a librarian's organization skills! Unfortunately, most other pages are no better. The lively presentation of information with images and varied colors has its place, but this web site suffers from an excess of it.

On the plus side, the web site uses plain language for the most part – especially in the section for women learners – and is largely devoid of jargon.

WE LEARN seems like the sort of web site that would do well as a wiki-wiki – a web site that uses special software to enable the site’s users to build the web site instead of relying on just one person or a select few. There’s an adult literacy wiki at <http://wiki.literacytent.org/> that just started barely a week ago, and there are already several hundred pages and dozens of registered users. Another wiki, for the Grassroots Literacy Coalition in New York (<http://www.glcny.org/>) is a little older but appears to be more of an individual effort. Wiki-wikis aren’t a magic bullet, but can be a good approach for people-centered, people-powered web sites such as WE LEARN that lend themselves to a community effort.

Summary

While WE LEARN is the more exciting site, Women in Literacy, Women in Action has an important role to play, too – raising awareness of women’s literacy issues and telling stories of how these may be successfully addressed. Efforts aimed at raising funds from private sources are especially important in the face of continuing uncertainties in funding from government sources.

Both web sites have room for improvement. The web is an important tool in presenting information on literacy issues – whether to adult learners, librarians, educators, administrators, or to the general public – and in helping new readers find resources that address their needs. Using the web *effectively* requires special effort, but this is a challenge that librarians – with their information-organizing skills – can help with as part of their contribution to adult literacy efforts. Librarians with web development skills are also well suited to address web site accessibility issues, such as those that mar these two sites; these issues should not be neglected as

these sites strive to serve entire communities rather than just those individuals whose needs are most easily met.