

*Sue Adams, Lisa Krolak, Eva Kupidura
and Zvonka Pangerc Pahernik*

**LIBRARIES AND RESOURCE CENTRES:
CELEBRATING ADULT LEARNERS
EVERY WEEK OF THE YEAR**

Background

In countries as diverse as Australia, Botswana, Egypt and Iceland, libraries play a significant role in Adult Learners' Week activities. This year even more countries will join the growing movement, celebrating International Adult Learners' Week for the first time, and libraries everywhere are being encouraged to play an active part in the festivities.

This seems only natural: look around almost any library or resource centre and you will see adults learning. Those pursuing formal programmes make use of library facilities at their educational institutions, while many public libraries offer literacy programmes, author readings, and other educational opportunities for their patrons. Adults use libraries for learning projects as diverse as finding out how to build a house, learning to use the Internet, reading local and international papers or studying a foreign language. Community resource centres and community learning centres in many countries serve as focal points for popular education, community involvement and valuing local knowledge.

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All over the world, libraries are dedicated to providing access to information for all, be it in written form or audio-visual form, through personal assistance or through community discussions and meetings. Libraries offer services that bridge social, political and economic barriers and traditionally make a special effort to extend their services to marginalized people. They assist in finding, using and interpreting appropriate information that opens up opportunities for learning, literacy enhancement, entertainment, individual research, critical thinking and ultimately empowerment in an increasingly complex world.



This article will explore the different roles that libraries and resource centres have played and play today in the area of adult learning. After looking at libraries' participation in Adult Learners' Week in the UK, South Africa and Slovenia, we make a journey into the past by looking at the historical partnership of libraries and adult learning in North America and Britain. More recent examples from South Africa, Brazil and the international women's movement give a global perspective, highlighting the role of libraries and resource centres in adult education linked to race, class and gender issues. The final section looks into the future by introducing ALADIN, the Adult Learning Documentation and Information Network.

Libraries and International Adult Learners' Week

The *United Kingdom* has been in the vanguard of the Adult Learners' Week movement, and also was one of the first countries to validate the strong relationship between libraries and lifelong learning. Over the years, the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Library Association have co-sponsored conferences that explore these links. In 2001 the Library Association issued a definitive strategy paper on libraries and lifelong learning in which it committed to a strong position: the Association "will position itself as a champion of the learner. It will promote the entitlement of people to learning opportunities and their right to have access to the learning resources necessary" (2001: 3).

It is not surprising, then, to see libraries strongly represented in Adult Learners' Week activities in the UK. As long-established centres of the village or town community, libraries are ideally placed to offer encouragement to adults taking their first step back into learning. Many libraries have taken advantage of Adult Learners' Week to provide learning opportunities that range from those focused on adults to those in which the whole family can take part.¹ A few examples suggest the wide range of activities organized by libraries for Adult Learners' Week:

- Family book sharing;
- Learning displays, featuring, for example arts and crafts;
- Videos about the work of a local community group;
- ‘Have a go’ days, with an emphasis on literacy, and including activities such as a newsletter workshop;
- Taster sessions on computer use;
- Setting up a stall in the local market in co-operation with local adult education providers;
- Book launches, or launches of creative writing classes.

Every year libraries throughout the country also distribute a motivational booklet produced by the Government in association with NIACE which helps to stimulate interest in adult learning opportunities and provides signposting to useful advice on, for example, how to pay for courses.

The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), formerly the Library Association, works with NIACE to facilitate libraries’ participation in Adult Learners Week, as part of its wider commitment to lifelong learning. CILIP also helps promote Adult Learners’ Week awards among its membership of librarians, building on a history of awards to individuals who were learning using library facilities.²

In *South Africa*, those about to enter the library profession are being motivated to explore the vital role of libraries in adult literacy and adult basic education. In a recent address to library students at the University of Cape Town, Bev May (2002) encouraged a focus on the development of supportive environments for adult learning. May emphasizes the importance of community ownership as a factor in the success of library-sponsored literacy initiatives, many of which were started in the early 1990s.

The Cape Town libraries have an impressive record of such activities, including family literacy projects, developing a video and hosting a national symposium to promote networking around literacy and adult basic education. May suggests that one of the most important outcomes of this symposium was the development of a twinning project, whereby libraries can support each other in their adult education activities. By arranging exchange visits that include adult learners, librarians and facilitators, strong links are built between participating libraries and their adult education communities. These links sometimes develop further into collaborative projects.

May also points to the involvement of libraries in the Learning Cape Festival, an initiative being held this year for an entire month, from August 9th to September 8th. The programme includes media exposure of learning activities, awards acknowledging achievement, open days at learning centres,

and a help line to respond to enquiries about learning activities. Libraries are active participants, highlighting their adult learning initiatives, publicizing local activities, and promoting libraries as learning centres. According to May, “A tremendous amount of enthusiasm is building up for this project.” (2002: 12)

In *Slovenia*,³ the role of public libraries as providers of Lifelong Learning Week (LLW) events began some six years ago and has been growing steadily. On average, public libraries have amounted to 5 per cent of all LLW providers. They have organized open days, literary evenings and presentations of newly published books, round tables, and demonstrations of autonomous learning possibilities. Librarians have also demonstrated how to use the Slovenian co-operative on-line catalogue and other ways of enhancing access to library materials, offered free registrations of new clients, and decorated their premises with LLW promotional materials.

Being indirectly involved in learning processes of children, youth and adults, public libraries were among the first LLW providers who responded to the ‘lifelong learning initiative’ by organizing events which enabled several generations to come together and learn from each other by exchanging knowledge, experiences and viewpoints. One of the public libraries invited older adults to read or narrate fairy tales to children during a week-long initiative. The elderly took great pleasure in associating with children, and they felt useful. The children, meanwhile, enjoyed the active company of substitute grandparents. At other LLW venues, children and their parents were invited to visit the library in order to chat with the librarians as well as get acquainted with the materials and multitude of activities the library offers.

Beside the lifelong learning dimension, the ‘life-wide’ aspect of the LLW has also been taken into account by public libraries. Autonomously or in co-operation with other institutions, groups and individuals, they have organized exhibitions of various artifacts, lectures on drug abuse, cultural and natural heritage preservation, environmental issues and other themes relevant in their surroundings. Other activities have included presentations of language learning, and creative workshops such as ceramics, carvings, painting on silk, and so on.

In the last two years, most public libraries in Slovenia have co-operated with regional LLW co-ordinators to plan, carry out and promote their activities with other LLW providers. This approach has enabled them to become acquainted with other providers of education and learning in the region or municipality (such as folk high schools, private educational organizations, primary and secondary schools, various clubs and associations, social centres, etc.) and to establish long-lasting co-operative links beyond the scope of LLW.

Libraries and Adult Learning: The Historical Partnership in North America and Britain

These examples illustrate how libraries today are celebrating adult learning, the flowering of a partnership with very deep roots. In Anglophone North America, for example, the history of this relationship spans two and a half centuries. During the colonial period in the United States, adult education and libraries were allies in promoting an educated citizenry. Early discussion clubs, modelling themselves on English benevolent societies, developed small book collections for their members' use. Benjamin Franklin is credited with creating the first subscription library in the United States to support the educational efforts of his famous Junto, a society established in 1731 for "intellectual improvement and social enjoyment" (Sisco and Whitson 1990: 22). In the nineteenth century, mechanics' societies and the Lyceum movement continued this pattern, establishing libraries as part of their programmes of self-improvement through education. Religious denominations also contributed to continuing education initiatives, and supported the emergence of free public libraries.

As the twentieth century dawned, libraries were part of an awakening consciousness. The social gospel inspired adult educators such as Alfred Fitzpatrick, Eduard Lindeman, and Myles Horton to see education as an instrument for social change. The social encyclicals of the Roman Catholic Church had an equally galvanizing effect on James Tompkins and Moses Coady, prominent leaders of the Antigonish Movement in Eastern Canada. The emergence of this socially purposeful vision for adult education coincided with Andrew Carnegie's promotion of libraries as "instruments for the elevation of the masses of the people" (Sisco and Whitson 1990: 23). William Learned, president of Carnegie's Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, viewed the library as "an institution of astonishing power—a genuine community university bringing intelligence systematically and persuasively to bear on all adult affairs" (1924: 56).

In the United States, social change agencies such as the Highlander Folk School picked up this enthusiasm and regarded the library as an integral component of their adult education activities. It is clear that Highlander's librarians did not distance themselves from the school's social activism: Hilda Hulbert, the school's librarian in 1935, was shot during a labour demonstration. In later years, Highlander's library would become a focal point for adult learners, supplying and gathering information in controversial participatory research and action campaigns. When racially-motivated efforts to close the school in 1961 seemed likely to succeed, Aimee Horton states that

it was the books and papers in Highlander's library which were at peril. In anticipation of the revocation of the School's charter

and the confiscation of its property, former student and faculty friends signed out 'on indefinite loan' many valuable books and resource materials on Southern history in Highlander's library. (1989: xii)

Individual progressive librarians also worked to "take the library to the people," in the spirit of social development. Helen Gordon Stewart, one of Rouillard's *Pioneers in Adult Education in Canada*, worked closely with community groups to develop public libraries which could serve as "the most potent agency amongst all educational institutions" (1952: 49). Having successfully inaugurated a regional library system with this aim in the province of British Columbia, she moved to Trinidad in 1940 to assist with the establishment of a similar system for the Eastern Caribbean.

The Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia, Canada, provides another striking instance of libraries engaging in partnership with adult learners for social change. Dr. Jimmy Tompkins, one of the Movement's leading figures, viewed the library as "a powerhouse of social action" (Boyle 1953: 182), a perspective grounded in his personal experience of establishing libraries in the impoverished communities where he worked. From his "People's Library" in Reserve Mines, Cape Breton, Tompkins tirelessly promoted reading among the marginalized workers in the community's study clubs. He envisioned public libraries as the universities of the people, providing a learning experience on which economic and social restructuring could be based.

Moses Coady, the other noted figure in the forefront of the Antigonish Movement, was not a champion of libraries *per se*, but clearly recognized the importance of relevant and timely information for adult learners. Coady's colleagues Sr. Marie Michael, Kay Thompson (Desjardins), and Sr. Anselm (Irene Doyle) struggled to keep up with information demands from the Movement's study clubs, and established an Extension Library that served the adult learners of the region (Neal 1998). From this base Sr. Marie Michael, a women's-organizer-turned-librarian, welcomed the hundreds of people who came from all corners of the globe to learn about, and sometimes replicate, the methods of the Antigonish Movement.

Mainstream libraries took a somewhat different route. Whereas librarians associated with social movements played an active part in adult education, and saw this role as their legitimate mandate, their colleagues in more conventional libraries turned their attention toward professionalization. Bacon notes that in Britain, librarians' self-image as a central force in adult education began to erode in the early twentieth century as they adopted a "passive value free neutral role which effectively meant that they responded to, and did not attempt to shape, the dominant culture of local society" (1980: 53). Librarians developed a somewhat passive and "diffident mode of professional

operation” (1980: 56), responding to the needs of individual adult learners upon request. In North America, “reading guidance” became the widely accepted synonym for adult education among librarians (Monroe: 1991).

In the period after World War II, however, mainstream libraries gradually moved toward extending their support to community groups, implementing at last some of the services envisioned by Learned a quarter century earlier. Public libraries continued this outreach work in the 1960s, making an effort to extend their services to marginalized groups, particularly through literacy programming.

With the upsurge of self-directed adult learning, noted adult educator Malcolm Knowles urged librarians to re-vision their role as facilitators in learning resource centres. Knowles saw the librarian’s potential as “a person who knows about the resources that are available in the community for learning and who knows how to structure learning experiences with [the learner] so that he is able to tap into these resources” (1976: 47). In Britain, librarians were encouraged to provide not only “neutral” information, but advice, assessment, counselling or assistance. A study commissioned by the Library Association noted that this role might even go as far as mediation, advocacy, and campaigning on behalf of adult learners, signalling a renewed level of engagement and activism for librarians.

Libraries and Adult Learning for Social Change: The Global Connections

Historically, many European powers had promoted an interest—some say a vested interest—in establishing education systems and libraries in the countries they colonized. As these countries of the global South achieved independence, however, critical thinkers began to question whether the Western model of library service was fundamentally capable of serving the learning and information needs of learners in their regions. Critiques centred on the dynamics of imposing colonial, book-centred models of library service on oral cultures with their own rich heritage of adult learning.

Some librarians began to propose alternative models: either adapting and re-orienting the foreign systems to be more appropriate to local realities, or advocating “a total and drastic rethink” of the role and purpose of libraries in this context (Rosenberg 1994: 250). Adult learners may want very different types of information services to meet their needs, complementing or partially replacing conventional libraries.

Community reading rooms associated with literacy programmes have a long and valuable history of contributing to these needs of adult learners. In the 1980s more flexible and proactive facilities, often called resource centres, began

to emerge as a force in movements for social change, coinciding with the rise of popular education methods in the field of adult education. These centres began to explore new relationships with adult learners, valuing local culture, supporting community development, and preserving indigenous knowledge.

Examples can be drawn from around the world. Three sample cases—from South Africa, Brazil, and the international women’s movement—illustrate the role of resource centres in adult education for social change linked to race, class, and gender.

Under the apartheid regime, *South Africa* developed excellent public libraries, which, rooted in the British tradition of librarianship, ascribed to high standards of professionalism and a theoretical neutrality. Louw, however, notes that “libraries and library practices... cannot be separated from the power bias of their time” (1991: 3). Conventional libraries were consequently viewed with distrust by many South Africans, who saw them as integral parts of the repressive apartheid system. Resource centres emerged as an alternative source of information and education, allied with adult learners in the struggle for an inclusive and democratic South Africa. These centres fostered activities whose goal was *conscientizing* and empowering their users, such as workshops, plays, and other cultural and educational events. As apartheid crumbled, resource centres defined themselves as catalysts in a process of change, mobilizing adult learners for democratic reconstruction of civil society. As Brammage reminds us, “words are not only descriptors, but creators and shapers of reality” (1992: 6).

In *Brazil*, resource centres called “popular documentation and communication centres” were created to support the education of community leaders, particularly among the marginalized in that country’s large cities. Cardoso (1993) points out that many of these centres were supported by churches or religious organizations as part of a movement to educate the lower classes and to document the popular struggle for democracy. These centres again played a broader role than the conventional library, both preserving and generating information vital for the social movements engaged in working toward a more equitable society, and supporting adult learners in their own quest for education.

The *global women’s movement* is another site of struggle that has recognized the value of recording and sharing the stories of those whose voices are seldom heard. It has challenged gender-based control of information and knowledge, redressing some of the issues of access and control that women face as adult learners. Women’s resource centres serve as focal points for learning and activism, and as sites of critically engaged knowledge production and documentation. These centres and their networks have been at the forefront of activism using new information and communication technologies (ICTs), as

well as leading the critique of these technologies. The Know How Conferences, held in Amsterdam in 1998 and Kampala in 2002, provide opportunities for women's information and documentation centres throughout the world to create alternative communication structures, and act as forums for sharing experience, knowledge, and learning on a global scale.

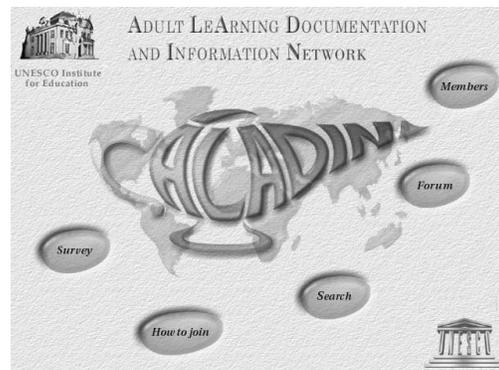
Looking into the Future: Networking of Adult Learning Documentation and Information Services

Libraries and resource centres often evolved to serve the needs of their local adult learners, but even in an age of global information exchange they may continue to work in isolation from local, national and international partners. Lack of financial and human resources constrain adult learning and education centres in both developing and developed countries, affecting how well they are able to meet their communities' needs. In many countries such information centres do not exist, or if they do, have only limited opportunities for exchange.

The new technologies both offer solutions and create obstacles to equitable access. When available, they offer new interactive modes of communication and open up an unprecedented but often overwhelming wealth of information. But when adequate access is lacking, the information gap to those who have access inevitably widens. Through developing networks, libraries and resource centres can bridge the information gap, share resources and expertise and provide adult learners with access to a spectrum of knowledge that extends beyond geographical boundaries.

At CONFINTEA V in Hamburg in July 1997, adult education documentalists, librarians and information specialists from around the world met for the first time in the history of International UNESCO Conferences on Adult Education for a workshop that focused explicitly on adult education documentation and information. Out of their discussions, sharing of experiences and expressed needs came an appeal to create a network of adult education and learning documentation and information for interactive knowledge management. The Documentation Centre of the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) was asked to lead and co-ordinate this global networking initiative, which later became ALADIN, the Adult Learning Documentation and Information Network.⁴

Among the underlying principles of the network were equity of access and partnership. From the outset ALADIN recognized that equitable access to



learning is essential to the informed citizenship in a democratic global community. As part of this community, members of ALADIN recognized that equity implies access to all kinds of information and documentation from a variety of sources—from academic or governmental sources to grassroots, community-produced materials. It also means providing access to materials developed in different regions in a variety of socio-cultural and ethnic contexts; in a variety of languages; and in a multitude of forms—from paper, audio, visual or oral traditions to electronic, Internet-based resources. CONFINTEA V provided a broad definition of adult education and learning which is reflected in adult learning materials that encompass a wide range of themes and subjects.

ALADIN's commitment to equity of access and recognition of each partner's unique contribution is reflected by a rich and diverse membership of the network. Today eighty-four information centres world-wide are connected via ALADIN. They vary in size, information capacity, use of technology, level of organization, sectors and groups served, and type of materials collected. There are small, community-based centres serving local adult learners and development workers; there are centres with substantial collections, high-end technology and access to resources serving researchers or policy makers; there are even electronic networks providing access to sophisticated databases. They work in fields as diverse as health, environment, adult literacy, gender, democracy and citizenship, work and employment and agriculture, to name only a few. But no matter their size or their area of expertise, they all provide invaluable services—within their capacities—to adult learners, practitioners, activists, researchers or policy makers.

Since the beginning of 2002, ALADIN members are connected by an e-mail listserv which enables them to share their questions or comments electronically. For the near future ALADIN wants to concentrate on capacity building by developing a knowledge platform on Adult Learning Documentation and Information on the ALADIN website. During the upcoming UN Literacy Decade, the network will focus on fostering and supporting grassroots documentation and knowledge production, and will promote the development of dynamic information centres where people can work together for popular action. Training manuals on how to locate, create and organize information will be developed in various languages and training will be held internationally, in co-operation with the Coady International Institute in Canada.

Members of the ALADIN network world-wide, as diverse as adult learners and adult learning itself, are growing stronger as they join their colleagues in sharing information, building capacity for global knowledge exchange, and celebrating adult learners around the world.

Conclusion

These examples show the creativity, variety and vigour of libraries' involvement in lifelong learning over the centuries, around the world, and in International Adult Learners' Week in particular. The challenge for the adult education community is to reframe its perspective on libraries, seeing them with fresh eyes as genuine partners on the learning journey. The challenge for librarians is to re-forge historical links between adult education and libraries in a new and more dynamic context, and to ground their services in a people-oriented approach that unfolds the community's learning potential for individual and for social change.

Throughout the world, librarians deeply value their role in working with adult learners and adult educators, either as individuals with particular learning goals, or as part of a broader social movement. Librarians share in learners' moments of exhilaration, transformation, and power as the pieces of a learning puzzle fall into place. The integral relationship between libraries and adult learning is renewed every day as adult learners, adult educators, and librarians form partnerships in learning around the world. At their best, libraries and resource centres truly are places where adult learners are celebrated every week of the year.

Sue Adams is the Librarian of the Marie Michael Library at the Coady International Institute in Antigonish, Canada (sadams@stfx.ca); Lisa Krolak is the Head of Documentation at the UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg, Germany and the Co-ordinator of ALADIN (l.krolak@unesco.org); Eva Kupidura, I&C, is a documentation and research specialist from Canada (eva.kupidura@sympatico.ca); and Zvonka Pangerc Pahernik is the Information Officer at the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education in Ljubljana (zvonka.pangerc@acs.si). The authors network together through ALADIN.

Notes

1. The text on the role of libraries in the UK ALW was kindly contributed by Francisca Martinez, NIACE.
2. More information on the UK Adult Learners' Week can be found at <<http://www.niace.org.uk/alw>>.
3. The Slovenian Lifelong Learning Week has a beautiful and engaging website: <<http://llw.acs.si>>.
4. Detailed information about ALADIN, its members and their information services can be found in the regularly updated and annotated Directory of Members or online on the ALADIN homepage at <www.unesco.org/education/aladin>.

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In recent years, the traditional support role of conventional libraries has been complemented by that of more proactive and flexible information services, often called resource centres. In the global South in particular, resource centres often emerged with the rise of popular education movements, and have become centres of adult learning for social change. Until recently, many libraries and resource centres focusing on adult education worked more or less in isolation. At CONFINTEA V (1997), the Adult Learning Documentation and Information Network (ALADIN) was formed, with the vision of connecting such centres on a global scale. By participating in, or even leading, efforts such as Adult Learners' Week, ALADIN members and information workers around the world can highlight the linkages between libraries and adult learning.

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