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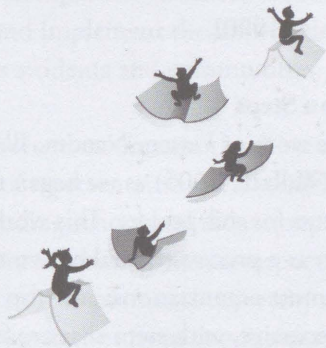
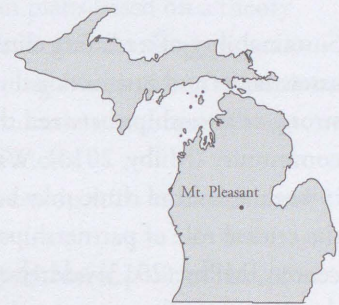
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Narrative Inquiry to Address Community Literacy Needs: The Early Development of a University-based Literacy Center

by Betsy A. VanDeusen, Ph.D.
and Meghan K. Block, Ph.D.



Building on over 40 years of success with off-campus reading clinics in Detroit, East Lansing, Mount Pleasant, and Traverse City, *The Literacy Center* (TLC) recently began a new chapter by offering literacy services on campus at Central Michigan University. The first step in creating on-campus programming was outreach and stakeholder engagement. Feedback from this meeting was rich and powerful, demonstrating the need for wide-ranging literacy support. *The Literacy Center* has over 70 stakeholders that support these objectives and four levels of stakeholder involvement: Core Team, Implementation Team, Advisory Committee, and Network Committee. Stakeholder representation also includes teacher education faculty, college staff members, and department faculty from across the university. Community representation includes stakeholders such as Mount Pleasant Public Schools, Gratiot-Isabella and Clare RESD representatives, McLaren Hospital, Mount Pleasant Community Foundation, PNC Bank, United Way, local businesses, and area principals, teachers, and parents. In this article, we share the initial journey of our center development as one model to engage community partners and support literacy locally and beyond.



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Review of Reading Clinic Impact and Implementation

We began our work with a review of reading clinics, their impact, and lessons learned from other initiatives. Although their role in the community has varied over time, beginning in the 1990s and continuing today, reading clinics have served as the intersection of research, theory, and praxis in literacy (Laster, 2013). Reading clinics are unique in that they typically reinforce school learning in an out-of-school context (Milby, 2013); and, because of their small size, reading clinics have potential to address a wide-variety of literacies (Laster, 2013). Reading clinics can also function as the intersection between literacies students experience in school and those they face out of school. Research suggests that successful reading clinics create natural learning environments and employ flexible, pragmatic

models of assessment and instruction to support students who are struggling with reading and/or writing (Laster, 2013).

Sustainability of a reading clinic relies on research-based assessments and instructional practices, as well as the strong relationships between the clinic and the local community (Milby, 2013). Without a solid foundation in both areas, the clinic may be compromised. Due to the critical role of partnerships in the success of literacy centers, Milby (2013) addresses the urgency for the development of strong school and university partnerships in which both entities recognize the importance of collaboration in order to create and implement tutoring experiences that will directly support the students in the clinic and subsequently support the community as a whole. Milby (2013) recommends specific strategies for establishing critical partnerships between communities and universities; these strategies include creating a common vision, establishing structured opportunities for stakeholder engagement with feedback loops, data collection and analysis, leveraging resources and funding, encouraging open dialogue for clinic challenges and solutions, and creating capacity to sustain the work through ongoing implementation and change.

Recognizing Milby's important recommendations, the purpose of our process was to discover how our researched-based university could pair with the community to address local literacy needs. By ascertaining needs and identifying resources, our goal was to better understand what it would take to design a community-based literacy program in the university context.

Development Perspectives

Our clinic development process used a socio-cultural perspective (Au, 1997; Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to understand the role a university-based literacy clinic might have in addressing the needs of the surrounding community. At its most basic level, learning is a social experience (Tracey & Morrow, 2006) and layers of influence impact children's learning experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). More deeply, culture influences learning and plays an integral role in children's literacy development (Au, 1997). In designing our work, we recognized both

the influence of culture and the social nature of literacy development. Because a child's community is an important aspect of his or her culture, we decided to address how the literacy needs of the local community might help to inform, plan, and implement a literacy center. Additionally, we drew upon important concepts learned from narrative inquiry that allow participants to inquire and explore qualitatively in order to better understand a particular situation or experience (Connelly & Candinin, 1990).

Implementation Steps

We drew on the work of Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, and Wallace (2005) as we began the implementation process for this project. This work views implementation as a process that takes two to four years to complete in most organizations; and also positions the process as recursive, with steps that are focused on achieving benefits for children, families, organizations, and communities. There are six functional stages of implementation: exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, innovation, and sustainability. The stages are not linear as each impacts the other in complex ways. For example, sustainability factors are very much a part of exploration, and full implementation directly impacts sustainability. In the sections that follow, we outline our activities in the first three stages.

Exploration

This stage is all about identifying the need for change, learning about possible options that may be solutions, developing stakeholders and champions, and, ultimately, deciding to proceed. To accomplish this, we:

- Discussed the center and clinic development with college leadership and six reading faculty members in the Teacher Education department.
- Reviewed community data that demonstrated the need for literacy support at the teacher candidate as well as local and regional community levels.
- Completed a full literature review to serve as a comprehensive, initial research-base to guide our center development.

- Reached out to a local elementary school for an initial and conceptual discussion of this exploratory idea.
- Secured available space in the college for both a work/resource materials room and tutoring space.

Installation

This stage establishes the resources needed to use an innovation and implement the innovation with good outcomes for students and communities. In this stage, we:

- Convened an organizational meeting, consisting of representatives of all stakeholder groups including school and district representatives, parents and caregivers, transportation providers, cross-department university colleagues, representatives from community businesses, and health-care providers.
- Determined continuing stakeholder level of involvement as a result of this organizational meeting, realizing different members are able to offer their expertise at varied commitment levels:
 - o Advisory Committee: This group meets two times per year with the goal of informing, counseling, and recommending ideas and making suggestions. Members have unique organizational perspectives in their professional roles as well as practical knowledge, such as grant opportunities, that will benefit the initiative.
 - o Implementation Committee: This group meets every six weeks to co-construct and review the ongoing implementation of this project. For example, members guide the alignment of the school and community experience and are advocates for the work in their professional roles.
 - o Network Committee: This group supports the mission and reviews regular project updates. In addition, they may share connections that enhance the project and attend events, as they are able. For example, they may share leads that support

and spark innovation or provide specific expertise as needed.

- Developed the center and clinic implementation and evaluation plans based on a theory of action and logic model, detailing program information regarding assessments, instruction, coaching and consultation, and family and community connections.
- Confirmed a partnership with local elementary school.
- Developed a comprehensive policies and procedures manual.
- Developed and implemented a recruitment and referral process.

Initial Implementation

This stage is typically the first use of innovative practices by educators and others working in an educational environment and is often a pilot version of the initial work. In this stage, we:

- Redesigned available space with appropriate furniture and to maximize “behind-the-glass” rooms.
- Secured all materials needed for pilot project implementation.
- Implemented an initial 10-week clinic experience.
- Initiated school and parent literacy workshops, based on community needs.
- Applied for and received two community grants to support professional development and materials for clinic use.
- Ensured continuous, authentic stakeholder engagement and critical feedback loops for the program through ongoing communication, committee meetings, and weekly interaction with our partner school.

What We Found

We drew upon and analyzed meeting agendas, meeting minutes, and artifacts, as well as deep interaction over a three-month period with our community stakeholders. The following community literacy needs were identified:

- increasing student achievement in literacy
- expanding caregivers abilities to support their

children's literacy achievement starting at birth and access to literacy services

- increasing teacher candidate self-efficacy and achievement in courses, on state tests, and in the field
- supporting in-service educator self-efficacy and knowledge in literacy instruction

Overall, an overarching community need for a comprehensive literacy service center for families, children, and educators became clear. After careful work with our partners, we concluded that the needs of the community could best be met through a university-based literacy center (reading clinic) that would provide PK-12 students with engaging literacy experiences to support and develop their literacy skills. In addition, the literacy center would also provide a context for teacher candidates to deepen their knowledge of literacy development and to gain further experience with administering and analyzing assessments in order to prepare instruction for the PK-12 students. These needs and the plan were captured in a visual representation field text titled *Literacy in Our Community* (Figure 1).

Once the community's need for a literacy center was revealed, our next task was to determine the initial

program offering. The scope of services was narrowed to initiate and implement a reading clinic pilot by partnering with a local elementary school. Through our inquiry, we also explored logistical facets of the literacy center such as safety of students, essential policies and procedures, and necessary professional development. As we achieved new understandings related to the programming, we collected more information through interviews and evaluations. We analyzed those results to continue to address our own developing questions about the program, while keeping the community and their needs at the forefront. An overview of our pilot project timeline is provided in Table 1.

Our ongoing work with our implementation team was captured in a poetic re-representation (Faulkner, 2009) developed from meeting feedback (Figure 2). This Cento Poem was created from stakeholder feedback, synthesizing individual six-word memoirs. The title was crafted from a word cloud of individual six-word memoir key words. From the Latin word for patchwork, the cento is a poetic form made up of lines from poems by other poets. This poem shows the caution, enthusiasm, and trust development reported in these critical early implementation phases.



Figure 1. Literacy in Our Community.

Table 1

Pilot Project Timeline

Timeline	Pilot Project Component	Objective Met
November	Professional Development for Partner School Staff (Professional Development will continue throughout these months as needs are determined by Partner School Staff)	Providing In-Service Educator Support
	Attend Parent Teacher Conferences	Providing Family/Student Support & In-Service Educator Support
December	Professional Development for Partner School Staff	Providing In-Service Educator Support
	Contact Parent/Caregivers & Conduct Interviews and Intake	Providing Family/Student Support
January	Recruit, Screen, Select, and Train Teacher Candidates for Tutoring	CMU Teacher Candidate Support
	Welcome Event for All Participating Parties	Providing support to Families, Students, & Teacher Candidates
February - April	Reading Clinic Tutoring Sessions	Providing support to Families, Students, Teacher Candidates, & In-Service Educator Support
	Attend Parent Teacher Conferences (March)	Providing Family/Student Support & In-Service Educator Support
April	Community Celebration Event	Providing support to Families, Students, Teacher Candidates, & In-Service Educators

Engaging Lifelong Literacy Learning
 Energy plus focus equals our center
 Engagement dedicated to lifelong literacy learning
 Powerful groups unite, inspire, pique change
 Develop center by coalescing around issues
 Insightful involvement, encouraging exploration, lifelong literacy
 Objectives-driven discussion for center improvement
 Thoughtful consideration of all necessary aspects
 Contemplation, revision, and use of objectives
 CMU: Inclusive, innovation, engaging literacy experience
 Nominating students for engaging interactive literacy
 Truly enjoyed working, feeling included, productive
 Fuzzy at first, but clarity prevailed
 Always amazed at the ending outcome
 Exciting collaboration to improve student literacy!
 Start to finish, the story in between
 Turn the page to learn more

Figure 2. Cento poem.

Our newly-created model serves as an important setting to support the literacy development of PK-12 students; engage teacher candidates in guided practice related to reading assessment, diagnosis, and instruction which will be embedded in undergraduate and graduate courses; and provide professional development opportunities for in-service teachers. Further, the model we have developed creates literacy opportunities for all ages and stages in the greater community, including enrichment opportunities. This is influenced by reading clinic programs such as the digital story telling enrichment program from the University of Central Florida's Enrichment Program in Literacy, which quickly evolved from a pilot program to a year-round program (Kelly & Wenzel, 2013).

Summary

This article outlines our collaborative work to address the literacy needs of our community. Analyses of those needs resulted in the creation of a university-based literacy center. A primary goal of the center is to reduce inequalities and disparities in literacy achievement within the community. This project continues to help us to better understand the community literacy landscape in multidimensional ways to better leverage stories, resources, and networks, to advance its mission. We believe and observed that this approach allows each stakeholder to participate and grow as an individual with their unique perspective and experiences while also reflecting on the collective participation of the group within this social context through ongoing interaction (Clandinin, 2006).

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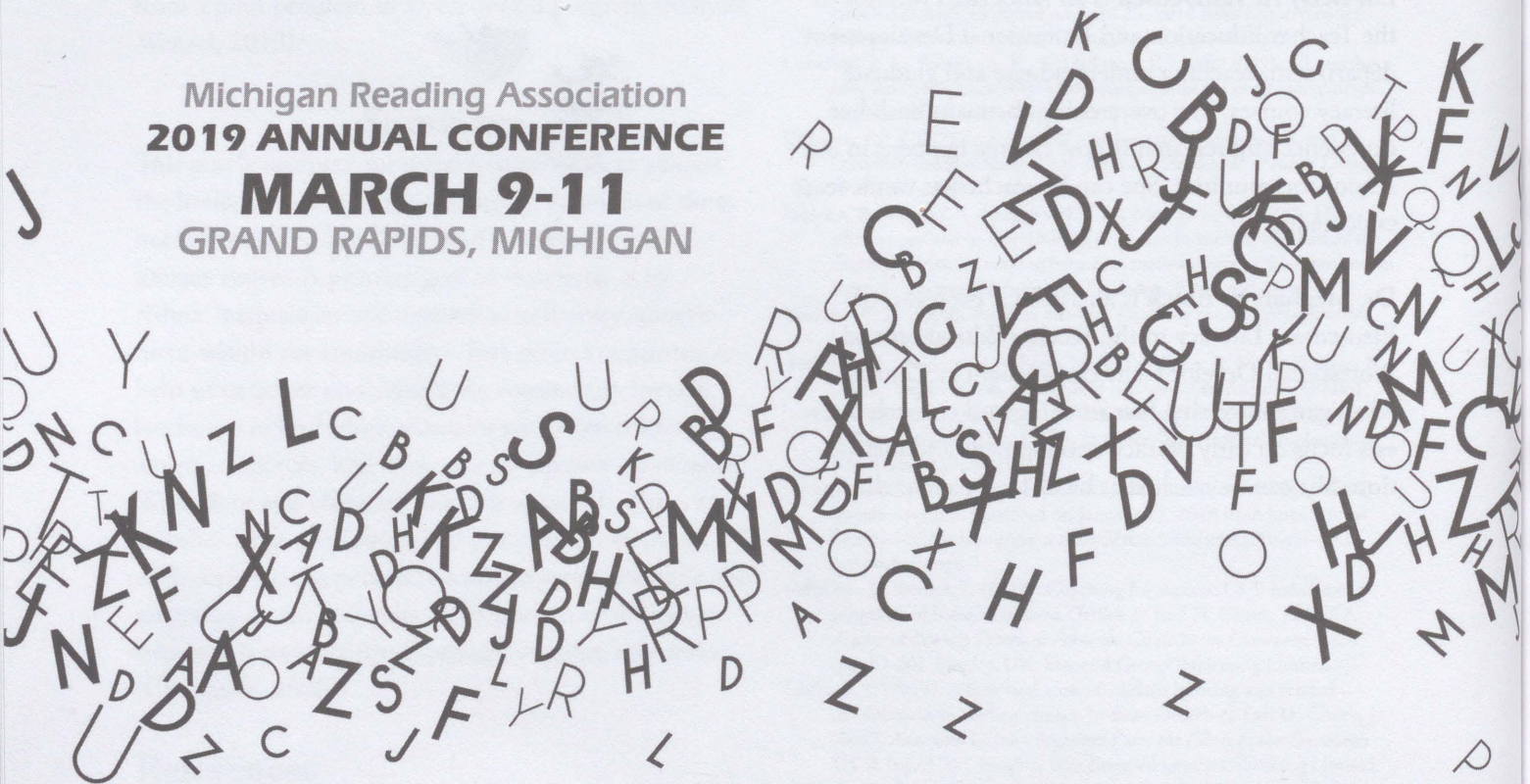


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