

AN AMERICAN EXPERIMENT TV411

—Reaching learners out of class

— The Pilot Year research

(excerpts from “Blurring the boundaries between acquisition and learning: Television-based literacy services in community and home contexts” a paper by Deborah D’Amico and Maura Donnelly, Research Associates, Adult Literacy Media Alliance, NY)

Maura Donnelly presented an overview of this article at the Institute.



[After explaining the theoretical framework for the project, the paper reviews the pilot year experience of TV411, a media-based national literacy service for pre-GED learners that embeds learning in real life contexts and includes a community outreach component that provides materials in both educational and less formal learning environments. Through telephone surveys, site visits, staff development and training sessions, ALMA staff documented how TV411 was being used in 200 “hubs” in four US cities. An outside research team is conducting pilot studies of learning outcomes among adults using TV411 in settings which vary along a continuum of support. ed.]

Moving learning beyond the classroom ...

Bringing the outside world into the classroom, via media and computer technology, and moving instruction beyond the physical walls of educational settings generates a more fluid relationship between learning environments and the worlds of adult learners. Television and video expand a teacher’s resources, making it possible to bring celebrity speakers, adult learner role models, and real-life contexts, such as looking under the hood of a car, into the classroom. These media also make it possible to use graphics and animation to explain complex concepts and to comfortably visit and experience such literacy rich settings as bookstores and libraries. The Adult Literacy Media Alliance (ALMA) created TV411 to be the centerpiece of a television and video-based national literacy service. TV411’s curriculum is recursive and iterative, rather than scope and sequence, and is based on extensive research with adult learners and practitioners concerning both the skills and contexts most relevant to the target audience.

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Three themes —parenting, money and health— emerged from this work as critical to adult learners and to the literacy challenges they face. The magazine style format mimics familiar television genres, such as situation comedies, music videos, sports, drama, and news shows, placing learning in a comfortable and pleasurable context.

TV411 video and print materials can be used in a range of settings with varying support for learners. Examples include a class with intensive support by a literacy professional, a group meeting in a community organization facilitated by providers such as job counselors, health care workers, etc., or self-directed, home-based learning settings with informal assistance from family and friends. As of fall 1999, enough PBS stations will carry TV411 to reach half of all US households. During its pilot year, ALMA partnered with four cities and two states to distribute TV411 video and print to more than 200 community partners, including both literacy and non-literacy organizations. Such organizations are ALMA “hubs” and their staffs receive training in how to use TV411 materials to offer literacy support within the context of their work. Taken together, the situation-based content of TV411, its familiar television format, and ALMA’s community partners embed literacy acquisition in a range of everyday activities and settings. We envision our materials being used at the point of literacy challenge, when literacy looms as an obstacle to something an adult needs or wants to do, such as complete an application, read a lease, apply for a job, compose a letter, or read to children. Use may take the form of modeling, after a learner sees someone address this challenge in a parallel situation on the show. Alternatively, a literacy helper may use our print materials to provide practice within a context of scaffolding and support in a local clinic or in a government office where many forms must be deciphered and filled out.

Some research findings on the pilot year

Based on preliminary findings of ALMA’s documentation research, TV411 materials are primarily used in the following settings: adult education and literacy programs (40); family literacy, such as Even and Head Start programs and K-12 parenting programs (26); libraries (22); welfare to work, job training, union, labor-management joint funds and workplace programs (20); multiservice community-based organizations (17); health settings, such as clinics and hospitals (12); corrections, including work release programs, detention centers, and prisons (5); housing projects or homeless shelters (5). Classification is approximate because many hubs house a number of different kinds of programs and some are using TV411 in literacy programs within other kinds of institutions. Responses to a survey question that asked hub staff to indicate what populations their organizations serve resulted in the following numbers: The general public (142 hubs); adult learners (120); workers (21) and other populations (35). Hub research further indicates that TV411 is being used in a range of service activities with youth, parents, ex-offenders, dislocated workers, homeless individuals and public assistance recipients.

How TV411 is being used

TV411 has been adapted to an array of settings, lending itself to use in regularly scheduled class or in highly individualized fashion.

Examples include:

- A Welfare to Work Program in the South Bronx where literacy classes alternate with work experience. TV411 enlivens classroom discussions in the post-lunch lull and supports resumé writing and job seeking skills.
- A Brooklyn Drop-in Center for adults seeking computer skill and job counseling uses it whenever the opportunity arises.
- South Seattle Community College and other sites are creating local wrap arounds and offering TV411 as a distance learning class.
- Libraries are circulating videos to borrowers.
- Some hubs have created simple sign-in sheets to make it easy for learners to take videos home. For example, at a reemployment training center in Pittsburgh and a Seattle workplace, workers attending basic skills classes can borrow videos and use them with TV411 In Print at home.
- TV411 tapes are being run in a large public hospital in New York, in a New York City councilwoman's office, in Goodwill stores in Pittsburgh, and in a workforce development office in El Paso.
- TV411 materials are used by a Pittsburgh health education center that fosters partnerships in prevention and operates a neighborhood peacemaker program.
- and more...

[The authors acknowledge the difficulty of documenting the impact of some of the non-traditional uses of TV411, but describe how the evaluators are trying to address the difficulty. They conclude with some implications for the field.]

Technology enables the extension of literacy education beyond the classroom and into homes and communities, but only if formulas for funding and evaluating literacy services recognize and support less formal acquisition contexts. Truly contextualizing literacy in such settings requires that policymakers, practitioners, and interested community partners reconceptualize funding, accountability, and outcome measures.

Implications for adult education practice and policy

Early data from TV411's pilot phase supports ALMA's goals of expanding the capacity of communities to support adult learning and of reaching and teaching more adult learners.

The pilot study exploring the impact of TV411 materials on learners indicates that the materials increase the frequency and variety of literacy practices and promotes attitudes and beliefs that encourage lifelong learning. Findings from hub research in non-educational settings suggest that training, technical assistance and relevant materials can foster new acquisition contexts for adult learners. However, organizational staffing and resources, as well as the assistance that ALMA can provide, directly affect the extent to which TV411 is used, including the ability to create authentic opportunities for engaging in literacy practices. This is especially the case with organizations whose mission is other than education, such as hospitals. Technology enables the extension of literacy education beyond the classroom and into homes and communities, but only if formulas for funding and evaluating literacy services recognize and support less formal acquisition contexts. Truly contextualizing literacy in such settings requires that policymakers, practitioners, and interested community partners reconceptualize funding, accountability, and outcome measures. ALMA's experience thus far contributes to this re-thinking. We hope to continue to learn from TV411 users how best to support adults in and out of classrooms as they strive for membership in the literate community.

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The Centre for Literacy has TV411 videos that can be borrowed.

New York City and TV411

Number of hubs: 84

Number surveyed: 57

Of those contacted, thirty-one (54%) are organizations whose main purpose is not education. They include two hospitals, three dislocated worker one-stop centers, eight homeless shelters or drop-in centers, eleven programs providing services to parents, one to youth in the K-12 system, and a tenants' association.

Providers in these non-educational hubs cite the life skills content and moving stories of adult learners as the features of TV411 that facilitates its use with their participants.
Source: D'amico and Donnelly