



Connections Adult Literacy

— **BUILDS BRIDGES** —

for New Americans

Susan Bartlett

NEW HAMPSHIRE HUMANITIES COUNCIL

English-language learners in New Hampshire are finding their way in a new culture through the world of books.

For more than 40 years, the New Hampshire Humanities Council (NHHC) has connected people with ideas and each other, inviting participation, lifelong learning, civil discourse, and public reflection. An independent, nonprofit organization, it provides over 400 free public programs annually on topics as diverse as New England town meeting, Islamic art, African American sailors, and Sherlock Holmes.

The council's mission to reach people from all walks of life, in all corners of the state, includes more than 500 adult learners in basic-education and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes through the adult-literacy program "Connections." A four-part book-discussion series, Connections augments the curriculums of established literacy programs by bringing content-rich children's literature with thought-provoking themes to students from around the world. New readers meet with teachers and Humanities Council-trained facilitators to learn new vocabulary, engage in lively discussions and supplementary activities, and explore the world and ideas through books.

At a recent Connections program in Manchester, ESOL students discussed the importance of voting rights in a democracy. They had just finished reading Ann Malaspina's book *Hearts on Fire: Susan B. Anthony Votes for President*.

"Voting is important because we can choose our leaders," one young woman from Ecuador said.

A woman from Iraq agreed. "Before the war, we voted, but we were forced to vote only for Saddam Hussein. They threatened you if you did not vote for him."

A young man newly arrived from Ukraine used a laptop to translate his point. "We vote to make sure tyrants do not gain control," he read.

"In Bhutan," an older man offered, "we could vote, but then we lost our right to vote. But we could vote in the refugee camp."

A woman from Vietnam nodded. "It is important to vote to choose the laws, to make sure they are fair for everyone."

Hearts on Fire, with its bold illustrations and accessible text, is a part of a Connections series highlighting the theme of liberty, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. The series was introduced in response to interest from adults studying for their citizenship test. Facilitated book discussions offer adult learners opportunities to articulate their thoughts while gaining exposure to the life experiences and perspectives of others. Through in-depth conversations, learners develop their vocabulary, put their learning into context, and find ways to connect to the community. One Connections participant remarked, "The conversation helps me the most. Before, I did not speak. Now I do."

Addressing the Challenge

Connections brings 30 facilitated book discussions to adult-learning centers in 15 locations across New Hampshire annually. Although the program is similar to other adult-literacy efforts in promoting reading and conversational skills, Connections uses the power of literature instead of textbooks to stimulate discussion. Biographies, novels, short stories, and poetry connect new readers to history, ideas, culture, and themes that are relevant for those who are new to the country. Eighty percent of Connections participants are new immigrants and refugees, although the program also serves native English speakers by providing basic education, tutorials, and GED classes. Additionally, it reaches developmentally disabled adults and

incarcerated parents, who participate in the Family Connections program of the New Hampshire Department of Corrections.

Connections began as a book group for adult tutorial programs through the New Hampshire State Library. The Humanities Council took the program on in the 1990s and later adopted the four-part, facilitated-discussion model developed by the Vermont Humanities Council.

"We discovered that facilitated discussions are much more effective in established classes where students meet regularly and have developed a certain level of comfort with each other," says Terry Farish, 2008–2013 Connections coordinator. "We expanded the program to meet the growing demand for literacy education among programs for new immigrants."

NHHC partner organizations find that Connections serves a vital purpose in their own programs. Suzanne Corby, director of English for New Americans, an adult-literacy program of Southern New Hampshire Services in Manchester, notes that the "curriculum and the textbooks we use are oriented toward very practical, survival English that is needed on a day-to-day basis. The Connections programs offer our students exposure to a literary world beyond what they encounter in their daily study. They offer our students a way to expand their vocabularies, think analytically and critically, share their thoughts, and experience the joys of actually reading. The most popular choices for themes are the ones that emphasize American culture and values, something they would not be readily exposed to without the Connections Program."



photos Rebecca Field of Fieldworks Photography

Facilitators work closely with teachers to select books that fit themes chosen for their relevance to adult experience. In addition to liberty, themes of families, work, journeys, and courage stimulate discussion and expand learning. Facilitators assess the needs and abilities of each group, customize discussions and activities, and encourage participants to take the risk of expressing their ideas aloud in English.

Facilitators also plan activities such as writing, drama, research, painting, and cooking to deepen understanding of the teaching materials and enhance the discussion. And students are often inspired to explore on their own. For example, after reading *Johnny Tremain*, the classic Revolutionary War tale by Esther Forbes, Manchester Adult Learning students organized a trip to Boston's Freedom Trail. Students keep their books to build their home libraries. In addi-

tion to reading with their children, many students share books with friends, coworkers, bosses, and even customers.

"I love to read. I love books," says a student who works at a bakery. "I have to share my books with everyone."

The Importance of Literacy

In the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights, literacy is acknowledged as a fundamental freedom, as important to well-being as food and housing. What's different about literacy, though, is that once acquired it never diminishes. Literacy builds competence and confidence, providing the means to engage in lifelong learning. Solid literacy and communication skills facilitate self-advocacy and access to better health care. They enhance parent-child connections, open doors to community and cultural opportunities, and help lead to economic self-sufficiency.

Adult Literacy in America, by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, calls literacy the single most critical factor in personal and financial success for new immigrants as well as native adults.¹

Supporters of the Connections program agree. "At a time when New Hampshire's population is becoming more diverse, with an influx of resettled refugees and immigrants from non-English-speaking lands, adult literacy has taken on a new importance," says Byron Champlin, program officer for Lincoln Financial Foundation.

Adds Ken Sheldon, Bank of America New Hampshire president, "Connections is another example of the [New Hampshire Humanities] Council identifying a real need, rallying partners around it, and coming up with an innovative solution. Adult literacy leads to economic empowerment, which can change lives and benefit the entire community."

And yet, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 50 percent of adults arriving in New Hampshire from other countries with little or no English are not yet functionally literate. The department defines functional literacy as "the knowledge and skills needed by adults, in life and at work, to use information from various texts (news stories, editorials, manuals, brochures) in various formats (including text, maps, tables, charts, forms, timetables)." It states that the literate adult should be able to "retrieve, compare, integrate, and synthesize information from texts and to make inferences."

Adults with poor literacy skills are often isolated, excluded from the social and economic life of the community, and dependent on uncertain and complex systems for support. Literacy programs like Connections can fill the void, offering adult learners meaningful connections to the wider community. While gaining the skills and confidence necessary for social and economic success, students move from isolation to engagement.

Connections inspires innovative projects that respond to community needs and trends. In 2012, the New Hampshire Humanities Council collaborated with Nepali-speaking Bhutanese participants to publish the bilingual Nepali folktale *The Story of the Pumpkin*. This publication continues to be a source of pride for New Hamp-

shire's largest community of refugees and is used in classrooms across the state.

In other developments, Manchester Adult Learning students inspired by *Hearts on Fire* hosted their own living-history presentation, with storyteller Sally Matsen as Susan B. Anthony. Meanwhile, Connections has begun developing web-based resources for students, including a blog for submitting stories, essays, and poems. And participants can sign up to receive e-mails about Council programming.

Connections opens the world of learning to adults from many countries, enabling more engagement, more access, and more "connection."

Susan Bartlett is the adult literacy coordinator at the New Hampshire Humanities Council, which is based in Concord. Contact her at sbartlett@nhhc.org.

Endnote

¹ Irwin S. Kirsch, Ann Jungeblot, Lynn Jenkins, and Andrew Kolstad, *Adult Literacy in America* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93275.pdf>.

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