

Best Practices in Health Literacy: A Case Study



What Are Best Practices in Health Literacy?

- **Identify and collaborate with local community health organizations** to enhance your and your student's experience integrating health and literacy education. Working with a local health organization provides opportunities for teaching and learning outside the usual classroom routine, such as planning a field trip to a local hospital or inviting a local health educator to be a guest speaker. These activities provide real-world opportunities for the students to reinforce language acquisition and communication skills and link the students to local health information and services. You can prepare the students for these activities by generating a list of questions for them to consider during the field trip or presentations.
- **Prepare health professionals to work with English language learners at different levels** to ensure that guest speakers communicate clearly and meet learners' needs and interests. Many health professionals are not used to presenting information in ways English language learners can understand and use. You can meet with the speakers ahead of time to describe the literacy and language skills of the class and to give them tips for communicating clearly, such as avoiding medical jargon, defining new terms, and asking for student input during the presentation. To prepare the students, have them prioritize health topics of concern and share that information with your speaker ahead of time, and ask them to think critically about where they find information to help them problem solve health concerns in their families and communities.
- **Work with the students in a computer lab to find health information online.** Teachers are increasingly using the internet as a dynamic and engaging learning tool in the classroom. Students also see computers, e-mail, and the internet as essential tools. The internet is a rich source of health information, but not all the information found on the internet is true. Being able to assess health information on the internet is a critical skill. You can prepare the students for these activities by preteaching key vocabulary, such as defining *accurate* (true) and *reliable* (trustworthy), and by asking them what they would look for on a website that would tell them the information was accurate and reliable (e.g., when was the information last updated and is the website created by a trustworthy organization?).

Implementing Best Practices at Westwood Adult and Family Literacy Center

Westwood Adult and Family Literacy Center began as a literacy program for single parents and grew to be a multiservice program that provides immigrant and refugee families education and job readiness classes as well as immigrant and refugee services.

Westwood eventually merged with the International Institute of Eastfield to collectively serve the needs of immigrants and refugees.

The program offers English language classes all levels. Kelly teaches low intermediate and intermediate ESL classes in the evening. Her students come from all over the world, but most are from South and Central America. The program had received a grant and installed a state-of-the-art computer lab. The director encouraged teachers to use the computer lab and “teach with technology.”

The Best Practices in Action

1. **Identify and collaborate with a health educator or librarian.** Kelly learned that a consumer health librarian working with the National Network of Libraries of Medicine was looking for opportunities to teach new immigrants how to find accurate and reliable health information on the internet. Kelly contacted the librarian, who described her desire to increase community access to online health information by teaching people how to use the internet to find accurate, reliable health information. Together they decided the librarian would present a class at Westwood’s large new computer lab. Inviting a guest speaker will provide the students with an opportunity to practice **adaptability and willingness to learn and respecting diversity and differences**.
2. **Prepare health professionals to work with English language learners at different levels.** Kelly worked with the librarian before she came to teach. The librarian had a lot of experience teaching and training in the community but had not worked with new immigrants and other beginning level English language learners. Kelly told her about the students (where they were from, what languages they spoke, and what their level of English proficiency was). She also asked the librarian to speak clearly, use ordinary terms instead of medical jargon, define new words, avoid using acronyms, and just talk in plain everyday language. In addition to preparing the librarian, Kelly worked with her students to prepare them to take full advantage of the class time. Kelly began by asking the students what health topics concerned them (food and nutrition was a big one). She then asked the students where they look for information when they have a health question and how do they know the information is accurate and reliable. She said that being able to locate and assess health information on the internet would be the skill they would learn in the next class. As the students prepare for the guest speaker, they practice **critical thinking and communication**.
3. **Work with the students in a computer lab to find health information online.** Offering a lesson on how to find and evaluate health information on the internet gave



the students a great opportunity to use the computer lab and learn about and practice using new vocabulary related to health and computers. Kelly suggested the students work in pairs so there would be two students to a computer to help each other with the technology and language. The librarian introduced the students to websites designed for the public rather than for health professionals, as these websites were not as complicated to read and some had information available in different languages. She used a scavenger hunt activity to get the students to search through each website to find specific information listed on a worksheet, such as information about diabetes or a video showing you how to brush your children's teeth. The more advanced English speakers worked independently in English, while the beginning students helped each other out interpreting what the librarian was saying. At the end of the session, the librarian handed out a list of accurate and reliable websites to each student. Later that week, when Kelly heard students talking about the measles outbreak they heard about in the news, she gave them a homework assignment to use the websites they had learned about to find out more information about vaccine safety and when to have children vaccinated. This activity promotes **processing and analyzing information and navigating systems**.

Reflection Questions

1. How would you prepare a health professional to work with your students as a guest speaker?
2. How would you prepare your students to work with a health professional as a guest speaker (e.g., doctor, nurse, health educator, or consumer health librarian)?
3. How did the teacher manage multiple levels of English language proficiency among the students?
4. Which are the skills that matter you think are being developed in this activity?
5. What local health organizations or health professionals are available in your community, and how might you partner with them?
6. What health-related topics are of interest or concern to your students?

