ESL Conversation Circle

New Westminster Public Library

Children

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Adults

ESL Conversation Circle

May 15, 2015

$101-250

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Byline

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This volunteer-led, weekly drop-in program offers English language learners the opportunity to practice their conversational English in a relaxed, fun way. The 90-minute Conversation Circles attract between 8 and 30 participants per session and are staffed by up to 8 volunteers. We offer two programs each week: one for adults, the other for women and children. Through this program, participants make vital community connections as they discuss current events, traditions, holidays and topics of interest.

Advanced Planning

New Westminster Public Library (NWPL) partnered with a local community service organization to create the Conversation Circles after we realized that nothing similar was available in the community. With a large population of new Canadians, New Westminster has structured ESL classes. However, there was a lack of opportunity to informally learn and practice English. With this in mind, the goals of the ESL Conversation Circle are to:

- Practice speaking English
- Meet people and make new friends
- Share experiences
- Learn about New Westminster and Canada

Adults seeking volunteer experience often approach the library, so no outreach is needed to recruit volunteers. A coordinating librarian determines the suitability of volunteers, who then meet with our partner agency to complete a criminal record check. Eligible volunteers receive an orientation booklet, which lists the program goals and has conversation and activity ideas. There is no formal training for volunteers; a librarian led the first couple Conversation Circles so the original volunteers could observe. We now have a roster of 9 to 12 volunteers, all of whom are self-starters and able to manage without supervision. The coordinating librarian regularly checks in with volunteers and tries to meet with both them and the participants as often as possible.

The women's circle was requested by our partner agency in recognition of the large number of immigrants who come from a culture where gender-mixed social interactions are uncomfortable for women. This circle is run by women, and participants may bring their children.

Future plans for this program include a Welcome to the Library package for new participants, an annual Volunteer Recognition event and more formalized evaluation of the program.

Marketing

Our usual promotional strategies include: posters in our community; advertising in weekly community newspapers; Facebook and Twitter posts; flyers in the library; press releases; posting to online event calendars; a rotating slide on the library's

homepage; a seasonal library events brochure; and participation in a city-wide events calendar. For this program, library staff also promote the program directly to library users who inquire about English language learning in the area and to the many newcomers who visit the library. Local immigrant aid agencies also promote the program to clients. As the Conversation Circles have been in place for five years, there is community word-of-mouth promotion as well.

Budgeting

Since the Conversation Circles are run by volunteers, the staff time required is fairly minimal. Staff time is needed for:

- Publicity.
- Volunteer manual preparation and maintenance.
- Volunteer communication (mostly emails).
- Occasional program participation. A staff member from the coordinating library attends a session every few months to assess how the program is functioning and to connect with volunteers and participants. This is a good opportunity to answer questions about the library and for general promotion.
- Volunteer interview/orientation.

Once the program is up and running, there is probably an average of 1 to 1.5 hours per week of staff time required to maintain the program.

Supply costs:

- Program supplies, such as a dictionary, picture dictionary, atlas and name tags ($75).
- Criminal record checks ($28 per check).

Day-of-event Activity

The volunteers schedule themselves to ensure that each Conversation Circle is adequately staffed (2 to 4 volunteers for our smaller women’s group of about 10

participants and 3 to 6 volunteers for our larger, all-adult group of 15 to 30 participants). Chairs are arranged in a circle in the library auditorium. A small table is set up at the entrance for name tags, library information and a sign-in sheet. After the initial introductions in the large circle, the group breaks into three or four smaller groups (each consisting of one or two volunteer leaders with four to six participants). Each smaller group gathers around a table. Volunteers prepare topics in advance — discussing articles in the local paper, upcoming holidays, different traditions, etc. — but the conversation is open and often follows the needs and interests of the group. All language learners are encouraged to participate. The main guideline is to have fun and feel comfortable. At the end of each Conversation Circle, a volunteer fills out a feedback form with topics discussed, attendance and any questions.

Program Execution

The Conversation Circles have been operating for five years. Many of the participants, who have hailed from more than 30 countries, return each week. Quite a few have been attending for several years. Our average attendance is 15 to 18 participants. We have 10 volunteers, some of whom come every week; others come less regularly. Several of our volunteers have been volunteering for over three years. The sessions are full of laughter, warmth and often heartfelt discussion. It is very inspiring to be able to work with individuals who are faced with challenges as they adapt to the new culture. I took over the coordination of the program several months ago. On the first day that I met with the group, a participant came up to me and said what an important lifeline the group was to her and many other participants. During the second session that I observed, I met a family from Iran who had been in Canada for only two weeks. They shared life experiences and thoughts about their new country.

Advice

This is a great, easy-to-run program to offer in communities where there are English language learners. It is virtually free and offers a much-needed service in the community. One of the keys to its success is the strength of the volunteers; thus, volunteers need to be carefully chosen. They must work without supervision and

maintain a friendly, welcoming space for newcomers. Coordinating librarians need to check in with both volunteers (email, meeting before the Conversation Circles, etc.) and participants regularly. The program offers the library an opportunity to promote additional programs, services and materials to new Canadians and those who are learning English. Partnering with local social service agencies has also been successful.

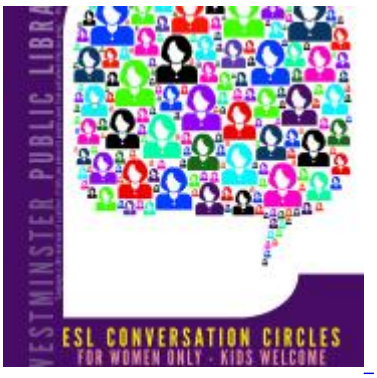
Did you try this program at your library? Share your experience using this form.

Supporting Materials

Document
feedback form conversation circles.pdf
Document
Volunteer Application Form 2013.pdf
Download this Program as a PDF

- Programming Librarian Facebook Group

Slideshow Images



More Programs

Jan 5, 2011
Adults (21 and up)+ |
Image



Partnering to Serve Immigrants and ESL Learners

Audiences:

Audience
Adults (21 and up)
Children (9 and under)
Intergenerational
Young Adult (17 - 20)
Sep 4, 2012
Children (9 and under)+ |
Image



Multicultural Literacy in Libraries

Audiences:

Audience
Children (9 and under)
Young Adult (17 - 20)
Adults (21 and up)
Intergenerational
Apr 24, 2015
Adults (21 and up)+ | $
Image



Coffee & Conversation

Audiences:

Adults (21 and up)