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A project of the
University of Massachusetts/Boston.
Sponsored by the Massachusetts
Department of Education and
the Boston BRA/EDIC/Office of
Jobs and Community Services.

all write news

ARE YOU DISCRIMINATING?

by Marie Hassett

As many readers in Massachusetts may already know, in January of this year the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) was cited for violating the rights of two learning-disabled clients. In its letter to DTA, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in the Federal Department of Health & Human Services stated that:

... DTA fails generally to provide for the needs of learning disabled individuals in the TAFDC program, because: (1) DTA denies individuals with learning disabilities an opportunity to participate in or benefit from the TAFDC program that is equal to the opportunity afforded non-disabled individuals; (2) DTA utilizes methods of administration that have the effect of subjecting qualified individuals with learning disabilities to disability-based discrimination; and (3) DTA fails to make reasonable modifications in TAFDC programs necessary to avoid discrimination against individuals with learning disabilities on the basis of disability.

Specifically, DTA was found to be in violation of both the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Readers who are interested in the details of the OCR investigation and its findings can request a copy of the letter from the A.L.R.I.

While many ABE clients and practitioners have experience with DTA, and sometimes question the agency's practices and procedures, this may not be the most important response to the information contained in the OCR letter. Rather, state and federally funded ABE programs should be spurred to examine their own policies and practices. Are we providing services to our learning-disabled clients equal to those available to clients without such disabilities? Do our policies and practices ever, intentionally or unintentionally

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INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS AND HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT LEARNING

by George Demetrian

George Demetrian is Manager of Community-Based Programming at Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford. He says he uses this piece in tutor training "to emphasize the point that it's not the instructional materials that matter, but the quest for highly significant learning."

Adult literacy and ESOL instruction is a hunt for the learning that matters, which is difficult to discern because "what matters" is individually based and highly subjective. What is valuable in one learning setting is not necessarily so in another context, even with the same class. Moreover, the learning that matters may or may not be something students can articulate at the beginning of a learning cycle, though they may. It is also something that is often discovered only through engaging the learning process. Students often identify what is important only after engaging the formal learning environment for some time. Moreover, goals and purposes change. So it is a daunting task indeed to define "the learning that matters" as the basis for a program's curriculum. Yet it is one that is

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Please share this newsletter with others at your program. The deadline for submitting material for the next issue is: April 15.

Are You Discriminating?

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ally, create a situation of de facto discrimination? Addressing this issue demands that we examine some of the most challenging issues in our field: enrollment/admissions policies; the use of standardized tests; classroom practices; teacher training.

Who Can Come to Class?

On paper, ABE programs are open to adults wishing to improve their literacy/numeracy skills, obtain a secondary credential, or improve their skills in English. In most cases, programs administer tests to prospective applicants, and use these test scores to determine the most appropriate placement for each individual. If slots are available, new learners can join classes. If not, they can be placed on waiting lists, and/or referred to other programs. Individuals who enroll in programs complete some kind of intake assessment, set short and long-term goals, and participate in an orientation to the program's policies and practices. If learners fail to meet the expectations for attendance and participation, a program may terminate them after following a series of designated steps (usually a phone call, warning letter, and then termination letter).

The first question we should ask about this sequence is whether or not we carry it out fairly. Most programs in Massachusetts use either the TABE, the AMES, or the BEST test as a diagnostic/placement tool. While many adult educators do not necessarily believe that the results of these tests are 100% accurate, they do believe that the results are consistent. But are they?

Each of the tests listed above includes a number of different components, and programs may use one, all or a selection of those components during their intake process. Depending on the components selected, the conditions of testing, and the particular strengths and weaknesses of different learners, it is not impossible that two people with comparable skills might end up scoring very differently on what is, ostensibly, the same test.

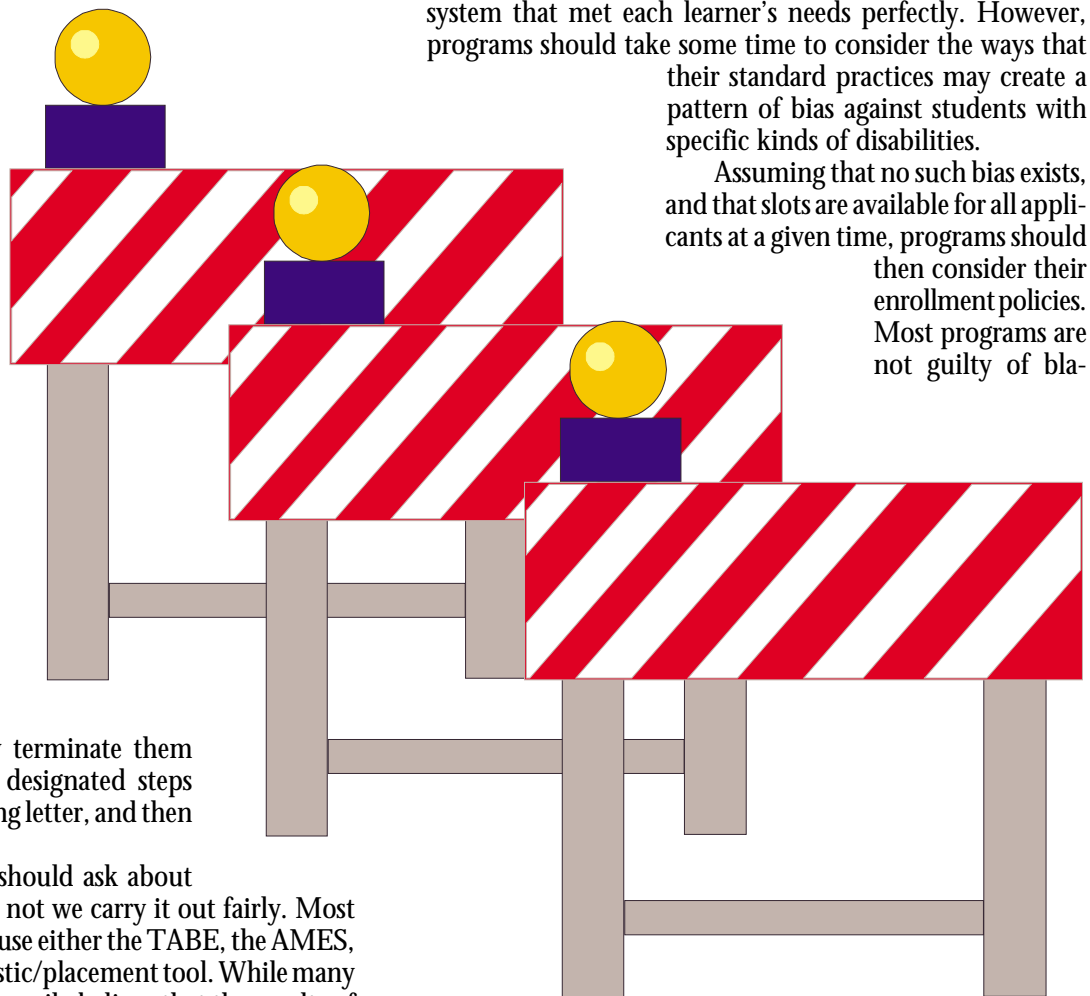
This would matter little if every candidate for enroll-

ment were guaranteed a place in the program where testing is conducted. But in an environment of limited resources, it is possible that no slot is open in the level at which a student tests, or that the only available slot is in a different program altogether. Can we be sure that student who achieved a 5.8 GLE, just missing the cutoff for Program X's pre-ASE class, would not have scored 6.2 if different components of the test had been used, or if testing conditions were different? And if that student is referred to Program Y, how can we be sure that the method of testing there yields comparable results?

Given the wide variety of diagnosed and diagnosed, disclosed and undisclosed disabilities which affect the ABE population, it would be impossible to design an intake system that met each learner's needs perfectly. However, programs should take some time to consider the ways that

their standard practices may create a pattern of bias against students with specific kinds of disabilities.

Assuming that no such bias exists, and that slots are available for all applicants at a given time, programs should then consider their enrollment policies. Most programs are not guilty of bla-



tant discrimination against any particular group of students. However, the fuzziness of categories can create situations where bias may be perceived. Consider, for instance, the line between ESOL and ABE. Clearly, if an adult wishes to attend classes and has no English-language skills, ESOL is the appropriate choice, as opposed to ABE. But at what point should a potential student be given the choice to attend an ABE class, even if English is not his/her first language? Is there a minimum score required on a test like

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Are You Discriminating?

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the TABE or the AMES? Does the potential student need to demonstrate a particular level of spoken-language proficiency? How do GLEs and SPLs compare in the classroom, and how different is that from the way they line up on paper? And ultimately, how can programs make decisions that are consistent and fair in an arena with so many variables?

Most programs and teachers are capable of making reasonably accurate assessments about who will and will not benefit from participation in a particular program or class. But if we cannot defend these decisions with something more than “the best judgment of the teacher/counselor/program director,” we have little to work with in the event that such a decision is challenged.

What Happens in the Classroom?

The possibility of discrimination does not stop at enrollment. Even after learners have been admitted to programs and begun participating in classes, the possibility still exists that a teacher’s choice of materials and methods may create a situation where some learners cannot fully benefit from their time in class. While there is widespread awareness in the field about the impact of learning disabilities and other kinds of learning challenges, that knowledge has not been put to use in every classroom. Indeed, the women who filed the complaint against DTA had participated in education programs, but had dropped out because they were unable to handle the work in the classes to which they were assigned.

Most program directors allow teachers broad discretion in the way that they set up and run their classes. This allows teachers to experiment with a variety of materials and methods, and generally creates a climate where most students are able to make satisfactory progress. However, there are teachers whose choice of strategies and materials is too limited to meet the needs of all students. Common problems include: exclusive reliance on individual or whole-group instruction; heavily visual or auditory strategies; methods or materials derived primarily from K-12 settings; lack of awareness about specific challenges which may make it difficult for a learner to participate in a class in expected ways.

The common bond among these problems is lack of balance. Given the diversity of adult learners, the variety of academic backgrounds they possess, and the challenges they may face, no one strategy can be expected to address all learners’ needs effectively. Both research and teacher folklore suggest that most teachers teach as they themselves were taught, which may be acceptable in a high school history class, but presents problems in a roomful of adult learners.

As we can safely assume that ABE teachers do want their students to learn, the problem becomes one of training and supervision. Teachers, particularly those new to the field, can benefit from regular feedback, whether from a more experienced teacher, a program administrator, or an outside

trainer, such as SABES or YALD staff. Experienced teachers, too, can gain new insights and energy when they have opportunities to think about and discuss their teaching practice with colleagues or administrators. But this is not simply a matter of helping teachers to feel comfortable. Our population is becoming increasingly diverse, and our continued educational effectiveness depends on the ability of teachers and programs to anticipate, prepare for, and adapt to changing needs in the student population.

What’s the Bottom Line?

It may seem unlikely that an adult education program would become the focus of a complaint similar to the one filed against DTA, but their example should lead us to consider how our programs are and are not meeting the needs of learners. How does your program meet the needs of its learners? Who attends your program, who gets sent elsewhere, and who enrolls but then drops out? What patterns do you detect, and what do they suggest about your policies and practices?

In the bidders’ conference for the last 5-year RFP from the Department of Education, Bob Bickerton told us that physical accessibility was no longer an issue—it was an absolute requirement. The next five years, he said, should be about creating “true accessibility,” meeting the needs of all the adults who came seeking our services. The DTA case demonstrates clearly the potential consequences if we fail to meet that challenge.

* * * * *

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The *All Write News* is published every two months by the Adult Literacy Resource Institute/SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center, which is primarily funded by the Massachusetts Department of Education, the Boston BRA/EDIC/Jobs and Community Services Department, and the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education. All signed articles represent the opinions of the individual authors and not necessarily those of the A.L.R.I. or its staff, nor does material included here necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Massachusetts Department of Education or the federal government.

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Instructional Materials & Significant Learning

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unavoidable if students are going to achieve maximum learning impact and sustain high levels of motivation which is critical for long term success.

One of the major challenges in identifying the learning that matters is in working through the relationship between what students want and need to learn and the availability of instructional materials. In fact, there is often a significant gap between selected instructional materials and the learning that students deem important. Materials are typically viewed as providing direct access to significant learning. Sometimes materials do provide a direct connection to significant learning, though far from always. All too often, materials are chosen by tutors because they may seem interesting, useful, or convenient, though there may not be a vivid grasp of the learning purposes the materials are designed to stimulate or whether those are connected to what students most seek to know. Even still, students and tutors interact with the text based on their mutual experience, knowledge, expectations, and educational background. The learning that does emerge is based on a mediation of all of these factors—the text, the learners, the instructor, and the context of the group dynamic and the broader context that shapes the learning environment.

The quest for the learning that matters will always remain elusive since human life itself is in continuous development. Yet there are things that can help to create more dynamic relationships between instructional materials and the significant learning that students seek. The Russian educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky discusses the “zone of proximal development.” This represents a very rich zone of potential learning between what students can currently do independently and what they are able to do with the assistance of more capable others or other bridging support. Typically, but not always, it is the teacher who fills the gap. Sometimes it is other students. Sometimes it is the materials. Most often it is the interaction among the students, the instructor, the materials, and the social context that shapes the learning environment.

Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH) takes a student centered approach—the ultimate purpose of the program is to assist students to determine for themselves what they want to learn. Still, it is evident that students often lack the background to make independent decisions in defining their learning objectives. In a volunteer tutoring program, tutors also often lack the resources exclusively on their own to establish a student-centered program. Most students and tutors seek a degree of structure even as they require the freedom to chart the educational program in the manner that makes the most sense to them. In response,

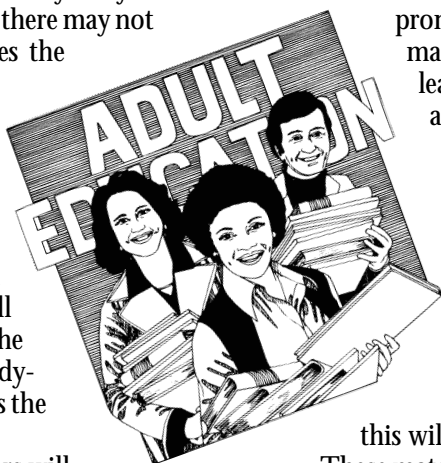
LVGH has developed curriculum sourcebooks and accompanying tutor training that honors the tension for structure while leaving considerable scope, as much as desired, for students and tutors to make their own decisions about instructional content.

These include lessons in six areas: *employment, family education, community involvement/citizenship, health, meeting personal goals, and preparing for advanced school work.* These areas were selected because they cover a wide gamut of what adult literacy and ESOL students need and want to focus their instruction upon and they represent areas of learning that are most commonly defined as important across the field. They cover a wide array of topics and include questions, activities, and language exercises. The questions and activities in particular are designed to stimulate additional areas of inquiry and discussion and as a prompt for the creation or location of additional materials that most adequately meet student learning objectives as they are emerging. They are designed to foster additional learning and insight well beyond the information that is presented within the text. It is in working through the questions and activities that additional material and learning objectives are often identified that give the emergent curriculum its vitality. It is the dynamic relationship between structure and improvisation that often stimulates the most effective learning and this will differ in each learning environment.

These materials represent only a small sampling of what students and tutors might work on, but they are intended to represent areas of general interest that may stimulate wide interest among a broad array of topics both covered and not covered by the given texts. In the words of John Dewey, “They are tools. As in the case of all tools, their value resides not in themselves but in their capacity to work shown in their consequence of their use.”

Some of the materials have been field tested in limited contexts and will be further field tested during the year. This will likely result in their modification as we continue to search for the learning that matters most. These materials will need to be supplemented, refined, and adapted for their maximum utilization in any specific learning context. These materials are guides only, though they do tap into many areas of interest that students would deem as important.

The curriculum materials, therefore, are best viewed as instrumental in the stimulation of the learning that matters. Some students and tutors may want to stay close to the available materials. For them, there is much within the guides with which to work. Others may want to veer well beyond the given materials. This is highly encouraged. As you do so, we ask that you add your best lessons to the collection samples of best lessons. In that way you will be contributing to the ongoing development of the emerging curriculum.



NEW TEACHERS THINK ABOUT THEIR TEACHING

In the "Orientation to Adult Education for New Staff" mini-course, participants are frequently asked to write in response to a particular topic being discussed. Here are a couple of interesting pieces from new teachers who took part in our most recent Orientation—Kerry Rumore, from ABCD, and Bob Davison, from the Pine St. Inn. These pieces were written in response to a reading that discusses the factors which can help support student persistence in attending class.

All four supports for persistence as identified in *Helping Adults Persist: Four Supports* were helpful for me to think about in terms of my own experience as a Basics I ABE teacher. The one that I think I have had the most experience utilizing in my one-and-a-half months of teaching adult learners is the second: self-efficacy. Because these very beginning steps of learning how to read and write are deceptively "simple" for me as a reader with 30 years of experience, I found myself having to go into the emotional foundations in each adult I work with and focus on how they helped or hindered them to keep learning.

At the very beginning I was making the lessons too difficult. One of the more outgoing—but still very tough on himself—students told me that he needed to have lessons that he could feel he was learning from and that the ones I was making contained words that were too long. I knew they were really struggling to read the lessons I'd prepared, but I was just following the lesson plans of the previous Basics I teacher, afraid of changing too much while I was still the new element in the classroom. When the one student actually voiced that the exercises were too difficult, it freed me to do things a little differently. First, I tried using smaller and more phonetic words. I was still not getting it. The same student brought me a basal reader as an example of something that he might be able to read some of. I took the book home and found myself impressed by its slow, careful progression in the difficulty of the passages and question sheets. We started using them, and the class flew through the first three chapters. I was nervous that it was too easy and not challenging them at all. Then at chapter four, there was a slowing down. It took a little more time. Then a little more on chapter five. I was witnessing appropriate material being used by our class for the experience of mastery.

As far as social persuasion, we have a great dynamic in the room right now. A new student joined our group of four this past Tuesday night. I was prepared by my supervisor who told me that she definitely did not want to read aloud. When she arrived I gave her some background on the group and assured her that she didn't have to read aloud tonight, that following along while other students are reading is good. Then when one of the other students would struggle with a word when it was their turn, occasionally this new student

would offer her assistance. "Thank you," was the reply from the one who was aided. Her confidence built up to the point where when we got to her "turn" to read (if she chose to) she asked me if she could read. The other students looked surprised, since they'd heard me tell her it was OK not to read out loud. They genuinely were excited for her and gave her warm and happy applause. She quietly, slowly whispered through the passage. Some students helped when she struggled with a word. I added many "Good!"s and one student leaned over when she finished and said, "You did a great job. It is hard to get started, but believe me, if I can do it you can!"

—Kerry Rumore

The small, supportive and intimate classroom (round tables) [helps promote] a more supportive classroom experience, where tension and stress are kept at low levels in order to focus more on accomplishment, and less on failure to master the material at hand. This is accomplished, in part, by using life histories and discussion that often helps students to identify the negative forces that may affect their own feelings of self-efficacy (such as lack of time to prepare homework due to participation in a job training program). Always, I focus on the small, incremental increase in students' skills and knowledge that come from coming to class, even when students themselves are not yet aware of the progress they've made. Acknowledgment of these "small steps" plays an integral role in motivating students to return to class when they otherwise may feel intimidated. Having received acknowledgment of progress also makes it easier to accept that learning itself is a process, and that sometimes there will be discouragement along the way.

Marvin's story [in the reading] contains certain similarities to some of the [Pine Street Inn] Literacy Program's students. In particular, the desire for improvement is present in my students; some of them hope to obtain citizenship, working papers, a job, or enter a training program. Occasionally, the dream of obtaining a GED is expressed. Whatever the goal, however, the common denominator is a motivation to improve each student's situation. The attainment of each student's dream, whether a short-term or long-term one, motivates my small class to return each week. Hindrances to their motivation include lack of time and/or space for quiet study, personal challenges such as drug or alcohol dependency, and sometimes problems in their families. My approach as a teacher in a larger service framework is to make class time something to look forward to, rather than fear. No matter what the problem, or how long the time away from class has been, I try to make the students see the personal benefits to "getting back on the horse." Of course, the real key to this is providing the best reasons for each of them to want to come when it is within their control to do so. Any "enticements" we provide, in order to succeed, must be based on students' desires, as they perceive them, rather than on our perceptions of what they should be motivated by.

—William (Bob) Davison

NEWS FROM THE A.L.R.I.

Discarded Library Materials Available

The A.L.R.I. library is continuing to remove from its shelves a number of old copies (mostly from the 1980's) and duplicate copies of books and other materials. Before they are discarded, they will be available in the library for teachers to examine and take. When visiting the library, look for the "Withdrawn" box and help yourself.

RCC/BPS Reneges on Space Agreement

Despite being assured last summer by those who are managing our building (Boston Public Schools and Roxbury Community College) that we would be able to use classrooms in this building for our various staff/program development activities, we have now been informed by building management that the A.L.R.I. will no longer be able to schedule rooms in this building for our activities. Obviously, we are quite upset over this turn of events and are concerned that this will have an adverse effect on our ability to provide the full range of staff development activities that we are required to offer.

At this point, we are in the process of re-configuring our library/computer lab so that we will (we hope) be able to conduct activities for up to around twenty people in room 213. This may mean at times having to restrict the number of participants in a particular activity; in these cases, priority will be given to people who get their registration forms in before the deadline and to staff from DOE-funded programs in the Boston region.

Practitioners also need to realize that, when you sign up for an activity, you are making a commitment to attend that activity. If you receive a reminder call or e-mail from me (indicating that you are registered for an activity), we expect to see you here for that activity, barring illness or emergencies, of course. ***If you change your mind about attending an activity after sending in a form, please let me know at least a week before the activity, so your space can be given to someone else.***

We would also very much appreciate finding out if any of the programs we serve have a space that can hold more than twenty people which we might be able to reserve occasionally and use for an activity. Please let me know if you can be of help with this. Thanks!
—Steve Reuys



FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Community Technology Center Grants

The U.S. Department of Education has announced plans to release grant applications for its Community Technology Center (CTC) grants sometime this month (March). Funding for the CTC Program has increased from \$32.5 million in FY2000 to \$64.95 million for FY2001. Any public or private nonprofit or for-profit agency or organization—including adult basic education programs—are eligible to apply for CTC grants. These grants are aimed at narrowing the digital divide by bringing the power of computers and information-age resources to those who have the greatest need—adults and children who don't currently have access to computers. Last year several grants were awarded to adult basic education and family literacy programs. You can get more information on this program and/or sign up to get an application via e-mail by visiting their website at <<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/CTC/ctcnews.html>>. You can also call 1-877-433-7827 or send an e-mail message to <CTC@ed.gov>.

Horsman to Speak at Harvard

Jenny Horsman will be coming to the Harvard Graduate School of Education to present a lecture and a workshop on the topic "Too Scared to Learn: Violence and Learning in Women." The lecture, which is free and open to the public, will be on Wednesday, March 14, from 6:00 to 7:00pm, at Longfellow Hall, 13 Appian Way (between Garden and Brattle Streets in Cambridge), in the Elliot Lyman Room on the second floor. The workshop will be on Thursday, March 15, from 5:00 to 7:00pm, at Larsen Hall, 14 Appian Way, in Room 210. The workshop is free, but registration is required as space is limited. Please contact Faith Harvey at 617-495-4843 to register. Dr. Horsman is a community educator and researcher with more than two decades experience in the adult literacy field. Her groundbreaking research re-examines learning through a lens focused on the prevalence and impacts of violence in women's lives.

Conference on Literacy, Technology and Learning Disabilities

The Centre for Literacy in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, will hold its 11th Annual Summer Institute this June 28-30 in Montreal. The topic will be Literacy, Technology and Learning Disabilities: Today and Tomorrow. For information and registration forms, contact Linda Shohet or Maureen Hankin at 514-931-8731, x1415 or e-mail <literacycntr@dawsoncollege.qc.ca>, or you can visit their website at <<http://www.nald.ca/litcent.htm>>.

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