



POWERFUL WORDS, POWERFUL WOMEN: BOOK GROUPS AND THE TRADES

In 2014, Chicago Women in Trades in partnership with the Alphawood Foundation, piloted a unique strategy for delivering workplace readiness instruction to aspiring tradeswomen, a Book Club facilitated by Literature for All of Us.

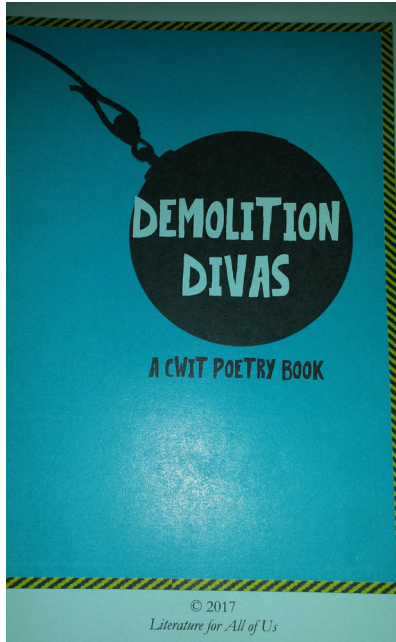
Most workplace readiness curriculum falls short, communicating what success looks like in the industry, but not necessarily helping participants internalize the belief that they are capable of and supported in meeting those expectations. Literature for All of Us, experienced in facilitating book clubs for at-risk youth, applied their knowledge and experience to the world of workforce development, creating a uniquely effective model that rounds out our pre-apprenticeship curriculum by addressing the real or imagined personal barriers that prevent women from entering male dominated occupations.

Why literature and the trades?

A literary arts organization may seem like an unusual partner for a workforce development program. Literature and hard hats may not generally belong in the same sentence, but book groups make perfect sense for women who need both the technical skills and a system of support to survive a male-dominated work environment.



“I liked finding and making time to read again, not only will this help me pass an apprenticeship entrance exam, but it is enriching my life and that of my children.”



Since 2014, Literature for All of Us has been partnering with Chicago Women in Trades' Technical Opportunities Program (TOP). The goals of the program are to strengthen bonds among the women in the TOP program, increase their self-confidence, and improve their literacy

skills. Each week, book group leaders meet with TOP participants to read and discuss literature that provides women with a sense of kinship and camaraderie. After reading poetry, novels, and essays that relate to women's empowerment, participants write poetry that reflects on their own experiences. Participants read "Word Warriors," a collection of poetry by Alix Olson; "Miles from Nowhere," a novel by Nami Mun; and "Hard-Hatted Women," a collection of first-hand accounts of women in the trades, edited by Molly Martin.

As the women develop stronger relationships, and a stronger sense of themselves as tradespeople, their poetry can capture their shifts in perspective. One example is this poem by Vannece Willoughby, a participant in the 2017 fall cohort. After reading selections of the book *Hard-Hatted Women*, Literature for All of Us participants are asked to write an "ode to women in the trades." This is what Vannece created:

HARD-HATTED WOMEN *By Vannece Willoughby*

I stand firmly planted in cement with boots
up to my round thighs, and no I didn't come
to dance or stay planted here. I came to work.
I sit firmly at the wheel of a crane, not taking in sights
but digging holes and carrying weight.
I hammer firmly not because I'm angry
but because I build.
I am still a woman who dances, whose eyes wonder
and marvel at what is seen.
I still hammer out discrimination,
disrespect and indifference.
My hat is hard
and my heart open and still soft.

Books and poetry give these women a connection point that can allow them to share their lives with one another. In the words of one recent participant "It [book group] let us share a side of ourselves that almost no one sees." Participants enter the workforce having created a supportive network of peers whose sustenance helps to ensure success on the job.

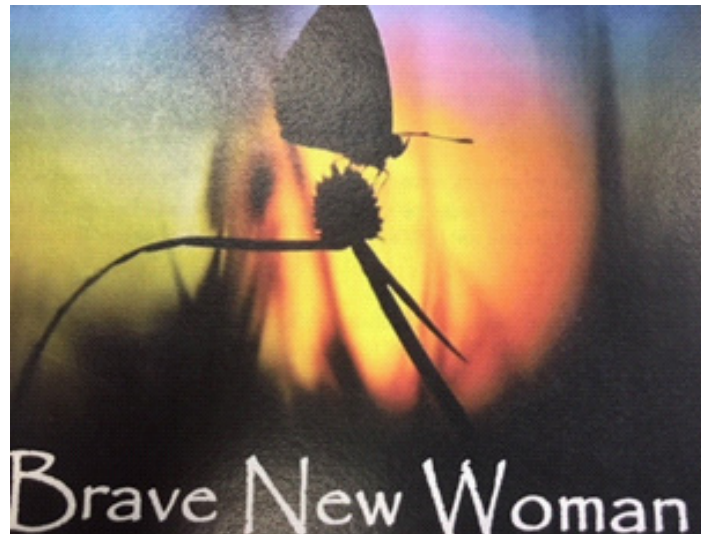
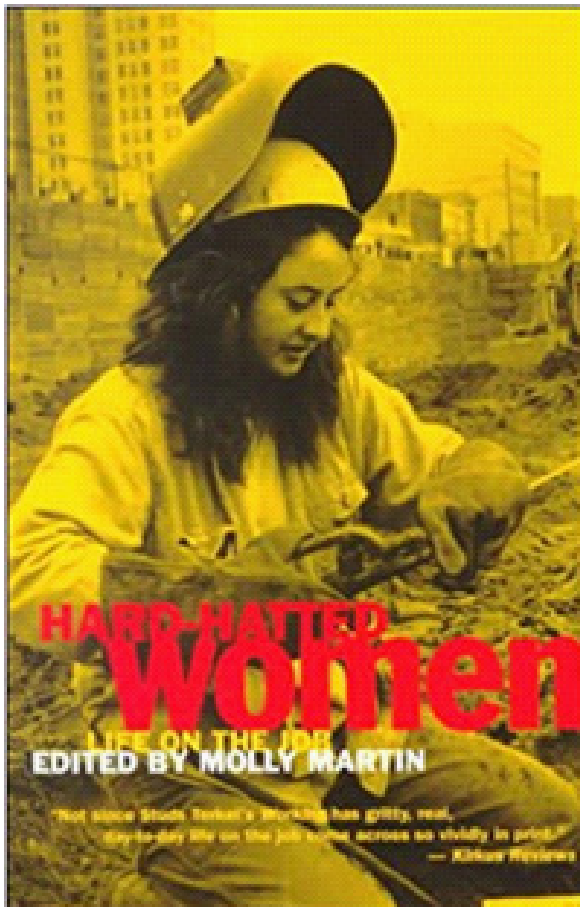
“Being successful is more than just learning math and technical skills, this class helped us build our connection with each other and think about this journey on a deeper, more personal level.”

The Numbers Don't Lie

Not only are women more connected to one another after this program, but their confidence improves and their likelihood of finishing training increases. Our statistics from our 2016-2017 cohorts demonstrate this effect:

- 97% of CWIT participants strongly agreed or agreed that the book group strengthened their relationships with the other women in the TOP program.
- 88% strongly agreed or agreed that the book group boosted their self-confidence.
- 79% strongly agreed or agreed that book group contributed to them completing the TOP program.
- 86% strongly agreed or agreed that after the book group, they are more likely to read on their own time.

The data also show the effectiveness of this program. Women were asked to take reading and vocabulary tests



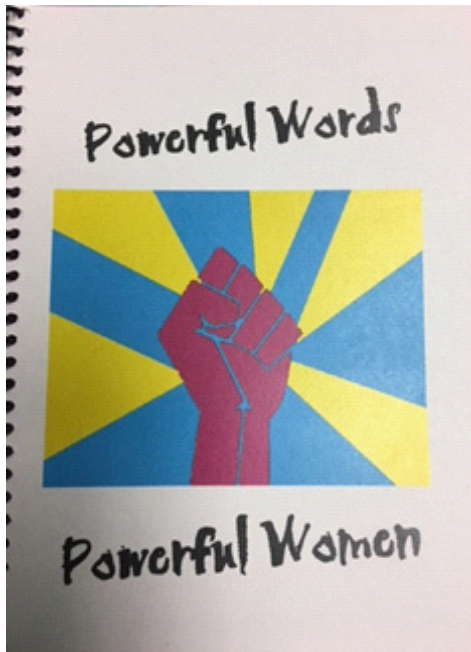
before and after their participation in the TOP program. In the 2016-2017 program year, 82% of the women who participated in our book group at CWIT saw an increase in their vocabulary scores, and 60% saw an increase in their reading scores.

How to Build a Book Group

The first thing necessary to any book group program is a strong plan. One of the key components to the Literature for All of Us book group model is our carefully developed and award-winning curricula. Over the length of partnership with CWIT, Literature for All of Us has created and honed the curriculum we use for each session of each book, including opening and closing quotes, guiding discussion questions, and writing prompts. Every session is pre-planned with enough content to fill just over the 75 minutes weekly book groups generally take. Curricula for Word Warriors, Miles from Nowhere and Hard-Hatted Women are all available here. [β--](#) (link to our curricula)

"I so much appreciated the fact that TOP serves the whole person in all our complexity."

“Everyone opened up and felt comfortable sharing their opinions and stories without any judgements by the group.”



Another crucial component is strong facilitation. Book groups do not run themselves, no matter how engaged and enthusiastic the participants. Literature for All of Us book group leaders go through a rigorous three week training before facilitating groups on their own. Professional development and support in this area is essential to a high-quality book group. For questions about Literature for All of Us' training program please contact Erin Brown at erin@literatureforallofus.org.

Finally, any attempts to create a book group program will need to come with a good dose of flexibility. There will be many groups that require a couple of key changes and tweaks in order to run effectively. Know that curricula created by Literature for All of Us, while carefully crafted, are also at the discretion of the book group leader during implementation. Length of discussion vs. writing time, number of pages read and selection of poems are all implemented using the sound judgement of the book group leader.

Please feel free to reach out if you have questions, comments or would like to connect about building your own book group! We can be reached at: info@literatureforallofus.org, or 847.869.7323.