

**Adapting *Writing to Read*
for adult literacy students:
It worked for Bill.
Will it work for Carol?**

Fay Holt Begg

Adapting *Writing to Read* for adult literacy students: It worked for Bill. Will it work for Carol?
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Preface

What do you do when you become aware of a situation in your literacy work that is puzzling or problematic? Perhaps you talk about the situation with a colleague, read a book or article about it, or use a trial and error approach to address the problem. A research in practice project starts with the same sorts of puzzling situations but is an opportunity to investigate a situation in more systematic ways.

Through the Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL) Network, eight literacy researchers in practice from across Alberta investigated a range of questions. During an on-line course in 2000, we clarified our questions and developed research proposals. Then, over several months in 2001, we conducted research, using various methods to gather and analyse information. We started to find some answers but also discovered more questions which fuelled lively discussion when we met in inquiry groups. Improving our practice was a main reason for us to do research, but we found personal benefits to engaging in research as well.

The research in practice process holds challenges as well as benefits, however. Perceptions of research and who “gets to do it,” confidence and expectations of self, lack of time, and writing up the research are among the challenges we faced and learned from.

As a member of the RiPAL Network, Fay Holt Begg investigated whether and how a particular teaching method would help adult students learn to read. In this paper, Fay shares her learnings.

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Introduction

Bill's reading level jumped two grades in three months, and what's more, he can now write independently. When I first worked with Bill, he knew many sight words at grade three level, but because he was unable to decipher unfamiliar words, comprehension was impossible. He had memorized the appearance of every word he knew and "just couldn't figure out new words." We experimented with a version of *Writing to Read* (Martin and Friedberg, 1986), a computer-based program first piloted in U.S. schools. *Writing to Read* is a high-tech program, using computers, electric typewriters and tape recorders. Our office is low-tech; Bill and I used pencil and paper, with results that amazed us both.

I came across *Writing to Read* (WTR) while browsing in our public library. The authors described the way kindergarten children learned how letters "make sounds to make words." My adaptation of the WTR method certainly seemed to work for Bill. Could it help other adult students who have difficulty with letter-sound correspondence?

My opportunity to research this question came through my involvement in the RiPAL (Research in Practice in Adult Literacy) Network, which included an on-line course about literacy research in practice. The final course assignment was to write a proposal for a research project I could complete in my practice, so I proposed researching my adaptation of WTR to see whether or how it could be used with another student.

As the first student to work with the method described in these pages, Bill gave me permission to tell how he learned, as did Carol, the student who became my research partner. Although Carol had nine years of schooling, she was able to read only a few sight words. She liked the plan I proposed: two lessons per week, in the privacy of her home, for six months.

In this paper I will describe the WTR method and its adaptation, assumptions I had about research, how Carol took charge, how we changed plans to accommodate her interests and abilities, and my own learning about both tutoring and research.

Context

I coordinate a rural literacy program where trained volunteers tutor students one-on-one. I applied for the position of coordinator after teaching both full-time and part-time because I wanted work that was varied, challenging and interesting, and that would allow me to work with people who really want to learn.

I conduct an assessment with each student who enters our program to determine reading level and learning style, and, based on the assessment, check for specific learning disabilities. My assessment materials are deliberately short and simple to keep student anxiety level low. I usually work with new a student myself before placing him or her with a trained volunteer tutor, so that a learning plan has been established and the student is comfortable with the process. Quigley (1997) says that the teaching-learning process is an interpersonal relationship charged with emotion, and I agree. I've found that rapport between tutor and student is crucial, and I'm far more able to make effective tutor assignments after working with students for a few weeks.

I find that different people learn in different ways, because of their individual learning styles, talents, personalities and background knowledge. Successful tutor-student teams in our program have used a variety of tutoring methods, usually combining language experience, paired reading, cloze techniques, sight-word recognition and direct phonics instruction in the context of their chosen reading. I encourage early writing as one way to harness the learning power of students' senses of touch and movement, but until reading about the WTR method, I had never considered writing as a first step in the literacy process.

By nature I am far more interested in practicality than theory; I seek new methods to help individual students. Although fitting myself into a theoretical box is difficult, I suppose the Integrated Models described by Purcell-Gates (1997) best describes my thinking about reading. My goal is to help each student become an independent reader and writer, so each program is individualized depending on student needs, abilities and interests.

The Writing to Read Program

As Purcell-Gates (1997) notes, “reading is comprehending from print. Decoding is not reading. Only comprehension is reading.” I agree. However, my problem has been to help new readers find ways of decoding unknown words so they can comprehend. The WTR program offered one approach.

In schools where the WTR program was piloted, kindergarten students began the computer program by viewing drawings of a cat, dog, and fish, with their corresponding names. They learned the sounds of each letter in the words by hearing both phonemes and whole words. Next they learned to manipulate the letters to create new words, such as *cog*, *fog*, *cash*, *shot*, *got*, and *fit*. The program continued to introduce three words at a time until the children were able to represent each of forty-two common English phonemes with a letter or combination. As children worked through the program, they were soon able to encode words and sentences.

The children’s spelling was not regular. To start with, the five-year-olds wrote words such as *feroshus*, *refrigrator*, and *graguating*. The children soon saw the difference between their spelling and conventional spelling and actually did slightly better than other students in spelling when tested. Almost all children in the program made the transfer to reading easily (Martin and Friedberg, 1986).

Adapting Writing to Read with Bill

Spelling wasn’t Bill’s main interest. He wanted to improve his reading and writing. We began assessment with a graded word list (Bader, 1983) which showed grade two instructional level. I next tested for vowel and digraph recognition, and found that Bill seemed to focus on the beginning letter of each word and its length, often disregarding other consonants. He seemed to have little understanding of letter-sound relationships within words, vowel sounds, or phonics rules. He appeared to have learned to recognize words as wholes, as though each word was a photograph. Although informal assessment showed indicators of learning disabilities, Bill learned well in non-academic areas and is an excellent carpenter and mechanic.

I also went through Freed and Parson's (1997) Right Brain/Left Brain checklist with Bill, which showed Bill as a decidedly right-brained individual. Right-brained learners are often highly visual, holistic learners, and dislike sequential learning.

Bill said he was “able to build anything” and enjoyed the idea of learning to build words. I made enlarged copies of the pictures in Martin and Friedberg's (1986) book and mounted each set of three on cardboard. With apologies for the child-oriented illustrations, I showed Bill how each letter represented a separate “sound bite” and we rearranged letters to encode new words. Bill and I met twice a week, and he worked his way through the set of ten cards in the first month, quickly progressing to composing words of two and three syllables. When I asked Bill if he'd like to try reading the first story in an adult literacy book, he was apprehensive and so was I, but he read the page and understood the story. We were both amazed and probably a bit giddy at the breakthrough. Success feels so good!

Bill had done more than make the transfer from encoding to decoding. He had learned to read with comprehension. WTR gave Bill the ability to read words he hadn't seen in print, and I was eager to see if it would do the same for others.

The Research

I began my research with this question: Can I adapt the *Writing to Read* method, which teaches children to write as a precursor to reading, for adult literacy students? The next step was to find a student who would be willing to work with me as a partner.

Introducing Carol

Carol came to the literacy program with perfect timing. We were acquainted socially through a friend of hers who was learning to read. Carol described herself as a stay-at-home mom. She has two grown children and a 16-year old. She gardens, does crafts, and has helped with

renovations on her home. Carol reports leaving school in grade nine unable to read and does not remember having being tested to find the reasons for her reading difficulty. She said she needed to learn “how to break up big words and put letters together.”

Carol agreed to take part in my research project, knowing that while she was learning to read, I would be learning too and writing about the teaching method we would use. I explained that my report would be published, and she consented, asking only that her real name not be used. At this point I had not tested Carol’s reading level; she said she only knew a few words.

Data collection

The first data collected was from Carol’s reading assessment, including supplementary tests. I also wrote field notes after each meeting, recording what we did together, Carol’s reactions and achievements, and my own thoughts on the process. I wrote about progress, problems encountered, solutions found, and teaching methods used. I described changes observed in Carol’s attitude towards learning and her own abilities. (To be honest, I wrote and wrote without thinking about how I’d make sense of my material at the end of the project.) I also collected samples of Carol’s writing.

Data analysis

To analyze my volumes of notes I first read through them to find similarities, so findings could be sorted in categories. Then, thanking the technology gods for my computer, I grouped paragraphs on the same topics together. Classifications included *progress indicators*, *skills taught*, *learning theory*, *phonics information*, *Carol’s thoughts*, *my thoughts*, and *questions*. Sorting the information made it possible to see accomplishments more clearly; it also helped me realize that I still had plenty of questions. I could see that there were times in our work together where I had no idea what Carol was thinking and we spent quite a bit of time going over the notes together. I discovered that she was not used to “thinking about thinking” and needed time to reflect. We repeated this review process three times,

as I found more questions from the new information Carol provided. I then added further reflections about both the tutoring and the research process.

My assumptions about research

This was my first attempt to do formal research, and I had high hopes. I began with the following assumptions: (1) that the research would answer the question I was asking in the way that I had asked it; (2) that Carol would be comfortable with the WTR process; (3) that a researcher forms a plan, follows the plan and writes up the results; and (4) that my research would flow according to the plan that I had formed.

I was excited about the opportunity and determined to do everything “right.” In order to meet assignment timelines I had written my proposal before doing my usual student intake assessment procedures with Carol. However, I didn’t worry, as the WTR method had worked for Bill. I thought that what I needed to do next was to fully document the process. Isn’t that what researchers do? My assumptions were challenged mightily as Carol and I worked together, and I found that I had to adapt the WTR method as I learned more about her needs.

When I did conduct an assessment with Carol, it showed that although she recognized a few grade two words by sight, she was unable to read text above a pre-primer level. She also has difficulty discriminating between short vowel sounds: The *a* in *cat* and the *o* in *dog* are virtually interchangeable to her ear. Carol had learned to copy from text, both in printing and handwriting, but could not read the text she had copied. Like Bill, Carol recognized whole words and had virtually no decoding skills and tested as a right-brained learner.

I had taught a previous student how to differentiate between vowel sounds by “feeling the sound”—recognizing the differences in the mouth as various sounds are produced. As Carol, like the previous student, pronounced words correctly, I planned to use the same technique.

The Tutoring

The plan and getting started

My tutoring plan was to introduce the WTR phonics cards one at a time, having Carol encode words until all sounds were learned. The next step would be for her to write sentences on her own, before attempting to read the sentences of others—exactly what Bill had done.

We began our first lesson according to plan. After practicing breaking the first three words into their component sounds, we began generating words together. Using the phonemes in *cat*, *dog*, and *fish*, we wrote other words, e.g. *cog*, *dish*, *fat*, *doc*, *fog*. Near the end of our first lesson, Carol decided that she wanted to add the second set, which are *pig*, *sun*, and *bed*, so that she would have plenty of letter-sounds to make words with at home. This gave her a total of fifteen letters: *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*, *f*, *g*, *i*, *n*, *o*, *p*, *sh*, *s*, *t*, and *u*.

By our third meeting, Carol had generated 28 words, which she correctly read to me. I thought we were making excellent headway, so we went on to the next set of cards. Because separating words into phonemes was still difficult for Carol, we practiced “feeling the sounds” to note the position of lips and tongue and the way the air flows through the mouth when making different sounds. We also tried exaggerating the sounds by almost stuttering the word: *p-p-p-i-i-i-g-g*.

The plan changes

By the fourth lesson, Carol wanted to learn “bigger words” so I showed her how to break words into syllables. We practiced saying a word slowly, to see where the natural break comes. When I tried to put this concept into words, I found myself saying “the spot where your mouth has to stop—you can feel it.” After that it was easier to show, on paper, how the word usually breaks between two consonants and that each syllable has at least one vowel in it. Carol had no problem using the correct terms for the ideas needed to discuss word formation—vowel, consonant, syllable—and we broke those words into syllables, too.

I showed Carol how to sound out two and three-syllable words. To show that many words are written as they are pronounced, I presented some longer words: *radical*, *bedding*, *puppet*, *puffin*, *particle*, and *partner*. She read all but the last one. I also introduced Carol to words containing consonant blends *ng*, *ft*, *fl*, *gl*, *gr* and *tr*, which she read. Blends are quite difficult for some students, but Carol seemed able to separate the consonants easily in her mind.

Carol seemed to gain confidence from these two exercises, even though she had to refer to her picture-cards to check the sounds of a few letters. By reading these words, she proved to herself that she didn't need to be afraid of longer words. I wrote in my journal:

Consonants seem almost automatic for Carol, but she is still finding it very difficult to remember which letters make which vowel sounds. The great news is that she is learning the difference between the sounds and is able to decide which vowel to use much more quickly than even two weeks ago. Yet is difficult for her to see the progress, and "feeling the vowel sound" is a slow way to go.

Problems

While I was pleased with Carol's progress, she was not. Four lessons—only two weeks work—and my student appeared tense and frustrated. I wished we could meet daily, or at least three times a week. When we spent time together combining the new letters into words, it seemed much easier for Carol to understand the letter-sounds. However, she knows that phonemic spelling (e.g. *sps* for *space*) isn't "book" spelling, and I think that with her visual strength, that's a problem.

I had kept to my plan to this point because I believed the method was worth pursuing, as it combines visual, auditory and kinesthetic/tactile modes of learning. But I also was concerned about making changes to my teaching methods when my research proposal stated I would work in a particular way. Watching Carol's expression as she concentrated fiercely, I could see she needed more stimulation—and more progress—than she could achieve from "word-building." Carol wanted to read and write and all she could see was that she was "learning letters." And she did not yet feel safe voicing her discomfort.

Carol takes the lead

At our next meeting, the fifth, I saw that as well as generating a fine group of words from the first four cards, Carol had written a story! She used the cards as an aid, and used some of the words shown to compose a short passage about life on a farm. Every word was readable.

My home is on a farm. And I have a cat and two dog in my home. I have sume fish in a big fish tank. And on my farm I have sume pig and cows. And on my window I have sume flowrs in a big vase. I have three rabbit runing around my yard. There was a man in my yard with a snake on his leg and the sun is seting. Now it is bed time. The end.

I thought this was a wonderful example of a student showing that she needed to write for a purpose—to *say* something. Carol used many of the words on her cards to invent her story and was clearly pleased with the outcome. I was delighted by both her independence and the insight she showed in finding a way to make her study time satisfying. Carol not only knew she needed a change; she found a way to make the change.

I also wanted change. I felt that we needed more fun and some relaxation. I brought a book to our session, even though we had only worked on four of the ten picture-cards. I wasn't exactly sure how it would work. Maybe I'd read to her, maybe she'd try reading. I only knew we needed a break from WTR exercises. Carol knew the sounds of most consonants, but we had not worked with combinations like *wh*, *ch*, and *th*.

The book, *When I travel, I like to fly*¹ (1996), features stories written by literacy learners. Carol and I used the paired reading technique to read the first story, then Carol surprised us both by reading it herself. She was not familiar with the term *midwife*, so I had to remind myself to be aware of vocabulary that may be new to her. We read the second story in the same manner, and she was able to “figure out” a couple of words on her own and appeared very pleased to have done so. We had made the leap to reading.

¹ *When I travel, I like to fly* is a “level one” title in the Oakland Learners series. Other titles are graded from level one to level four.

I think that paired reading helped, because Carol knew what the story was about and was familiar with the author’s way of speaking before trying to read it alone. When reading aloud, I moved my finger under the words so she could see as well as hear each word. I introduced other strategies during our reading such as “guess and check”—what word would fit? I suggested she try skipping the vowels to see if she could say the word without them and try different sounds when the vowel combination was unclear (e.g. the *ea* sounds in *great* and *eat*).

Adapting WTR

Once Carol was reading stories, we used the WTR cards in a different way. Carol referred to them when she needed a reminder of the sound of a particular letter, whether for reading or for the writing she continued to do. In my only previous experience using this method, with Bill, he completed all ten cards and had generated over a hundred words before actually attempting to read. For Carol, it didn’t happen that way. When we worked together, it was easy to rearrange letters to make different words—*leg, log, lug, dug, pug, Pam, pen, Ben, bad, pad, sad, Dad*—and she was using the letters well. But as an activity for Carol to do on her own, it wasn’t working.

Carol wanted to read and write and was much happier doing both by our fifth lesson. She was also very interested in learning theory. I’ve always been fascinated by the way the human mind works, and freely discuss theories with my students. I soon found myself sharing information with Carol. Right-brain theory, memory, and learning styles were discussed during our sessions together, and I also found myself teaching phonics information to answer the question “why do they spell it that way?”

As Carol and I continued to work together, she read the stories in her book over and over between meetings, and her reading improved steadily. At first we read each story together, but soon Carol began new stories on her own. Words like *mule* and *discrimination* did not hold her back for long, because she could usually make sense of them in context. Carol found it was worth using her cards or phonics information to figure out words to provide meaning to the story she was reading.

The book Carol was reading tells about the lives of literacy learners in the southern United States. They are interesting, well-written, and often quite poignant. The stories are told in the local dialect and Carol found she couldn't always predict words, because of the unfamiliar speaking patterns, e.g. "I don't be" "If it go bad"

It seemed that we had found a method of learning that suited Carol, and we continued to work with the WTR cards as a separate activity. I prepared lists of words that could be made from the phonemes on the cards she had worked with and asked Carol to tell me how to write them. She referred to the pictures when necessary and dictated letter-by-letter. This seemed comfortable, and we usually spent about five minutes during each lesson on this as we progressed through the phoneme set. Carol also used the cards to write sentences using new vocabulary as well as short stories. This was not an assignment, but an activity she chose on her own. Writing "just words" didn't work, but writing to express her thoughts and feelings certainly did.

Dictionary use became a natural outgrowth of Carol's reading, because her book contained new vocabulary as well as words that were difficult to decipher. I found a beginner dictionary which used the same symbols for vowel sounds as we had been using with the picture-cards, and Carol was soon looking up words on her own and learning to use the pronunciation guide. Two months in to the tutoring, I noted in my journal:

Carol has read all the stories in her book!!! I am amazed at the work she has done in the past six days. She asked if she could keep the book to re-read, as there are still some words she had trouble with. Again, Carol showed me that she knows what she needs to do to improve her reading ability. I'd love to think I had a hand in helping her become so independent, but I give the credit to her. Her willingness to put effort into learning has made her an absolute joy to work with.

Finding our way

Lessons seemed to take on a pattern. I'd read Carol's latest writing, listen to her read, work on new vocabulary words, and spend five minutes on

WTR. We continued to combine phonics and learning theory with reading and writing practice. When reading on her own, Carol began new stories “a word at a time” until she could read them fluently; she acquired many sight words that way.

Besides reading and writing between our meetings, Carol continued to work on her spelling lists and to break unknown words into syllables to decipher them. All this was on her own initiative; I made suggestions and supplied information, but Carol made decisions and followed through on them.

Carol wrote four paragraphs before our 12th meeting. She said that the first one took about an hour and a half to write: “time to think it out, time to write, and time to correct.” I think that’s a very good description of the writing process. I’m glad she kept track of the time; not only is it useful information for our work together, but it helps me appreciate how much effort goes into writing when a student is fairly new at the task.

To day when my dother came home from school, I as her about her work exspern. And she siad that it wus good.
Work with the kids.

I wus help my son when he wus moving to a form. I wood like to live on a form to. I wood like to have sum anamls.

I wood like to have a horse for my kids to ride it. I dont like to ride horse, but I like horse a lot.

I de glat went I can plant a garden and sum flowr. I like to work outside a lot. I like to work in my flowr bed and the trees.

By this time Carol was asking which words were misspelled so she could add them to her spelling lists. She has no problem expressing her thoughts when speaking, but was able to put no more than a summary of her ideas on paper at that point. The word *exspern* is her spelling solution for “experience.” We had finally come to the stage where she was no longer ashamed of her efforts and seemed instead to be pleased that I could read her work. As well, she was determined to improve her spelling ability.

Determination, in fact, characterized Carol's work. She disliked "sounding out" words letter-by letter when reading, and often got the letters mixed up when she tried. Yet she wanted that skill in order to read independently. She said her brain wanted to guess the word as soon as she had named the first few letters. One day she read all of a story except one word and simply didn't want to ask her husband. In desperation she began at the end of the word and went backwards. To her amazement, it was easier, and she was able to keep at it until she had a sound for each letter.

Carol definitely preferred to spell visually. By her thirteenth lesson, however, she was using her WTR cards more than in the last few weeks, mainly as an aid in writing. She used phonetic spellings only when she "knew she didn't know" how to spell a word.

Carol was also using phonics information in her reading. She not only remembered most of the phonics information we had discussed, but she was noticing spelling patterns. Phonics was not taught formally, but introduced in conversation when words in her reading seemed puzzling. As I noted in my journal:

Carol is now reading Book Three [in the Oakland series] and finding it frustrating because the vocabulary is much more difficult. The story she is working on is six pages long, and contains many words she has not seen before, including sharecropper, shoulder, biscuit, moaning, friendship, interview, fertilizer, and answer.

We took the opportunity to review some phonics skills, breaking fertilizer and interview into syllables, examining the various possibilities for the oa sound in moaning, and wondering why the word answer has an unnecessary w. (And I don't know, but so does sword.) Why does the ould in should sound different when it is part of the word shoulder? Why does the ui in biscuit sound like the i in it? (I don't know, but. . .).

Carol and I continued to work together for six months, and she improved steadily.

Reflections and Learnings

Using *Writing to Read*

Working with WTR on her own turned out to be very difficult for Carol. For Bill, it had been fun but for Carol, it was “downright miserable.” Learning should be fun, in my view, and it was clear by the fourth lesson that Carol wasn’t having fun. That’s when I realized that I’d broken my own cardinal rule—that of tailoring the tutoring to the learning needs of the individual student—because I was so intent on “research.”

Ordinarily I would have begun differently, based on Carol’s interests and assessment. She just wanted to read, and although she says she “sort of believed we would get there” she really didn’t make the connection between the beginning WTR exercises and reading. I discovered that my hunch during the first lesson was correct. I should not have sent her home with two cards rather than one. Fifteen phonemes were too many, especially since five were vowel sounds she could not distinguish from one another.

While I was thinking “encoding” Carol was thinking “spelling.” I was thinking “phonemes” while she was thinking “letters.” She felt overwhelmed trying to write words on her own. It was only when I began the writing phase of this project that I discovered Carol was having her husband help her to spell, so that she would have work to show me when we met. At that stage, for her, our relationship was still that of “teacher-student.” It simply didn’t occur to her to state her discomfort.

When I finally asked Carol how the first few lessons felt to her, she reported that they “made her a bit crazy.” She felt she couldn’t tell me she was having help with spelling, and I didn’t know why she was not learning the phonemes represented by each letter. She wanted to write to “say something.” She knew one writes for meaning.

I’ve wondered, reading other researchers’ work, (Jenkins, 1995, p. 65) why anyone would have a student read things like *bop, hop, log, sod*. Yet I was having Carol write the same kind of words, and it wasn’t working. Was

that because I was not clear enough or because Carol didn't like the exercises and tuned out? Carol isn't sure. She has not been accustomed to thinking about her actions in that way. I now realize I was so boxed into my idea of research that I wasn't working with my student's strengths.

Writing this, I wondered how I could have known that Carol wasn't doing the work on her own. And how could I have set up a working relationship that would allow her to tell me that? It would have—or should have—made a difference to the way I worked with her. I'm also wondering about risk-taking: How would it have felt if she was not able to do what we had planned? Did she understand that there were no particular expectations?

Carol knew, intellectually, that the exercises we did helped her internalize the way the letters of the alphabet stand for sounds. I think, in retrospect, that auditory difficulties combined with her very right-brained learning style made the step-by-step, picture-sound approach too slow for her to use on her own. We talked about right-brain theory, and that we can use the less dominant side of the brain by giving it tasks that the dominant side dislikes. I had suggested continuing to use the cards—left-brain step-by-step stuff—but for only five minutes at a time between household chores, so she wouldn't become frustrated.

Checking with Carol as I write this, my hunch had been right. The exercises were boring, tedious and frustrating; she “felt silly writing itty bitty words” when she really longed to be reading a book of some kind. She says she tried the five-minute technique, but neither regularly or often. Neither of us are sure at this point whether it was the actual exercises that were so difficult, or making herself do the exercises. At our eleventh meeting, as noted in my journal:

Carol told me she finally figured out how to use the cards. She is using them to help identify unknown words! I feel undone!! I knew she doesn't like to use them on her own, but never realized she's never had a purpose for them! I'd continued to refer to them in our meetings, often going back to a card to show the letter-combination being used, but by the time she was reading on her own, and writing, we were no longer “building words” as at first. She has been using them in spelling, but only as a last resort.

I've been reminded again that what I think, what I think I've said to the student, and what the student thinks after that aren't necessarily connected!

Did Carol tell me that she finally had a use for those cards just to cheer me up? I noticed that she continued to use the cards in her writing. Looking back, I remember telling her that I was glad she had a use for them, and not sharing my feelings of dismay. I really enjoyed giving honest positive feedback, but can see now that I wasn't ready to show disappointment. And how could I expect Carol to share feelings when I didn't share mine?

Control and relationship issues: Who decides?

During the write-up phase of the project I asked Carol about her feelings in the early stages of our work, and found that although Carol felt our relationship was pleasant at that time, I was “the teacher” and she was “the student.” We had not come to the stage where she was able to reveal feelings or ideas that might be taken as critical. I also asked if she was hurrying through the cards so that she could get to real reading and writing. “Bingo.” In future I need to find a way to help students understand that they are the authority on their learning. Yes, I'm the teacher, but I can't tell what students are thinking or feeling unless they tell me.

Young (1999) speaks of the “crucial importance of an effective teacher-learner relationship” (pp. 13-14). Although Young's work focuses on adult students enrolled in formal ABE classes, her observations on the qualities required for teaching may be even more important in one-on-one teaching situations. She points out that when the goal is for the learner to become independent and self-directed, the teacher cannot maintain the balance of power. In my work with Carol, it is clear that I had made the decision about what would be learned and how, as a means of completing my study.

WTR, Bill and Carol

When I worked with Bill he saw the “big picture” immediately. Words have sounds, and letters indicate the order of the sounds. Bill completed all ten sets of cards before he tried reading. He enjoyed “word building” and made rapid progress, arriving at lessons with long lists of words encoded

and even a naughty one or two. However, he already knew quite a few words by sight, and as well as being right-brained, appeared to be a very kinesthetic or “hands-on” learner. Bill had no difficulty hearing and separating the various phonemes needed to encode.

Because Carol is also right-brained and enjoys outdoor work and crafts, I assumed that she, too, would be on the kinesthetic side and would like “word-building.” However, her inability to hear the difference in vowel sounds made using the cards tedious because she had to pay attention to the position of her jaw, lips and tongue to decide which sound was being produced. We quickly saw that WTR wasn’t helping, and went directly to reading. Once Carol could see progress, and discovered that she could use the cards to help decode words, WTR turned out to be very useful. It became part of an integrated learning plan including sight words, phonics, learning theory and writing. She says she uses the cards more now that she’s reading more difficult material—and she’s no longer calling them “kiddy cards.”

Although we did not work as I’d planned in my research proposal, Carol is now reading at a grade three level, decoding new words in her reading, and continuing to learn. She also writes sentences and paragraphs independently. Although spelling is not always standard, it is always readable. She has learned to use a dictionary for both spelling and word meaning. Most important of all, in my view, is that Carol now sees herself as a learner, and is enjoying reading.

Carol makes changes and asks questions

Carol seemed very proud that her daughter scolded her for “having her nose in a book all the time.” And she informed me that *she now knows she can learn!*

Like many adult students I’ve worked with, Carol had believed that the students around her in school were learning without working at it—that it was natural for them and almost impossible for her. Now that she’s learning so well, she wonders why she couldn’t learn as a child. She had no idea that “top” students in the higher grades usually spent plenty of time

studying and, of course, had the advantage of being able to both read and take notes.

Carol also thought she should remember a new word an hour or two after being told what it was and that if you could read a word or sentence, you should be able to write the word or sentence. While reading, she was so annoyed with herself for having difficulty with new vocabulary that she hadn't noticed she'd read several pages with no errors, or that she was reading much more quickly than even two weeks before.

During the six months we worked together Carol's progress remained steady. The ability to read was not the only change in her life. She reported speaking up more and understanding conversations better. She believed this was "because she knows more words." Seeing herself as a learner appears to be a tremendous boost to her self-esteem.

Now Carol has questions about her schooling as a child and she's angry. "Why couldn't those teachers teach me? They never tested me to see why I wasn't learning . . . I just sat in the back of the class." There is sadness, too, because she was unable to help her children with their schoolwork. Now that she is learning, however, her daughter's school performance has also improved.

Benefits to my practice

The longer Carol and I worked together, the more I learned. My first lesson was a reminder that you can't plan a course of study until an assessment has been done. My second lesson was that adult students will not tell me what they're thinking until mutual trust has been established. Carol and I had talked about the importance of my knowing her questions and whether she was comfortable with information and methods, but Carol didn't share her feelings until she was confident they would be accepted. Saying "I don't know" and "I don't understand" can take great courage.

Lesson three was the importance of observation on my part: by our third session, I could see that beginning with WTR exercises wasn't productive,

and our lessons changed direction. Lesson four was that regardless of past education, an adult can benefit from the introduction of learning theory when it's presented as part of tutor-student conversation in context with what's happening in the lesson. Phonics information was also presented as needed, even though it's a left-brained approach. My right-brained student was interested in "rules" that answered questions and gave decoding strategies.

Because of the note-taking and journal writing done so I could eventually write this paper, I have documented methods and skills needed. Even the errors I made along the way were useful, because I had to constantly rethink and revise my plans to suit Carol's style of learning. Through the process of turning my volumes of field notes into a readable description of the work Carol and I did together, I had the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the techniques I attempted. I learned that time to think and to reflect about what is happening is not a luxury but a necessity. If I hadn't been writing about each lesson and checking my journal before the next, I might not have changed my plans as quickly. An unexpected hospital stay forced me to leave my notes aside for almost two months, and that, too, was useful because new questions came to mind. At that stage I asked Carol for comments on my writing and the questions I had, and her input was invaluable as I learned "what she was really thinking."

Susan Lytle (1997) makes the point that "on some level, all teacher research shares a common purpose to improve practice . . . [and] signals a commitment to change something." Change usually requires taking some risks, and Lytle points out that we need to pay attention to the target of change. Although my main purpose in doing this research was to examine a method of teaching, I find myself considering the student-tutor relationship on a much deeper level. Carol held back on asking critical questions and was unable to tell me when she didn't understand. All I had to tell me that things weren't going well was a sense that she was uncomfortable. I need to remember that students who felt ashamed of "not knowing" as children often became experts at hiding frustration and not asking questions. It was very important to trust my feelings and give Carol options for learning, and I need to insure that tutors in our program understand that students may be stalled but unable to voice complaints.

Questions of ethics

This was my first attempt at research in practice (or any kind of research). I realized after only two weeks with Carol that the parameters I had set were too narrow to accommodate her learning needs, yet I was unsure about making changes when I had made a formal proposal for funded research.¹ I made the changes I felt necessary, and feel that my research had value in showing another way to use WTR. I was fortunate in that Carol was a very willing student and partner, but I now wonder what would have happened if she decided not to carry on with the project.

I asked two members of the RiPAL Network project to read my report and comment, and I learned from each of them. Phyllis Steeves commented that my dilemma was that I needed Carol in order to complete the research project. That's very true, and helps me see another reason for not questioning her actions early in our work together. Mary Norton wrote a note about the parallel between Carol's reluctance to voice objections and my hesitancy in talking to Mary about changing my plans.

Final Thoughts

Both Phyllis' and Mary's comments ring true: I am making changes too, just like Carol. She "couldn't read or write" and I "didn't know how to do research." Somehow, I began the project without really thinking to the end. I had no idea how much work I was undertaking, or where it would lead me. When it came time to analyze the data, I realized that I was just plain scared, and I don't know why that realization surprised me. But it tells me, again, that learning in any area requires the learner to take risks, to leave the comfortable and take on the difficult. Carol did that, and I suddenly understand that I did too. I know that it will change the way I work with students and the training I give to tutors. And I know that it was definitely worth the effort.

¹ Participants in the RiPAL Network project received stipends to assist with the costs of doing their research projects, including time.

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