

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Current issues and innovative work in teaching and learning reading, writing, numeracy and technology in adult literacy and essential skills in Alberta
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Learning Curves, Twists, and Turns

In 1999, I chose to leave my comfortable life on Protection Island, British Columbia, to travel to Cochabamba in Bolivia for a new job working as an educator for a women's organization. It was a learning journey in every way.

Learning Spanish, finding an apartment, discovering the eccentric transportation systems in the city, shopping for food, being immersed in a new culture—in every moment I was preoccupied with absorbing information. I even dreamed about conjugating Spanish verbs. I was trying so hard to cram everything in that my head ached each evening from the effort.

It wasn't until I came back to Canada nine months later that I could reflect on my experience. I realized what it meant to be learning a whole new culture, how difficult it was, and how it changes your very identity.

I arrived in Bolivia as an experienced educator in my own country. I had developed and managed programs, and trained and supervised staff. I felt competent and skilled. But being in a new country changed all that. I knew no Spanish, and until I learned the language, my role within my team involved giving support instead of actually teaching. I set up and prepared the room where the adult education workshops were held. Supper was always provided at these workshops and it was my job to serve and clean-up. We were using popular education methods (a teaching methodology from Paulo Freire that educates for social change and uses non-traditional methods such as art, poetry and music) and it was my responsibility to create poster boards illustrating the lessons with drawings, a skill I wasn't aware I had until I had to use it.

My whole identity shifted. Initially, I felt small and unimportant. I felt the support work was beneath me. What was I doing here anyway? I had to examine my concepts of power, equality, and work. As I discovered my own biases I felt humbled.

This scenario played out again and again. Everything I took for granted was no longer valid or easy. I ordered food in a restaurant thinking I was getting one thing but then something else would show up on my plate. It took me four months to figure out the procedure to get a telephone line installed. Even going to the bank was an ordeal—deciphering and filling out the deposit slips and following the old-fashioned Bolivian banking procedures.

My identity as a competent, confident woman seemed to fade. There were times I just cried in frustration.

Then one day, after I had been in the country for about six months, I actually felt good. I was adjusting. My Spanish was improving. When I walked to one of my favourite outdoor markets to buy some fruit and vegetables, I noticed that the Indigenous market women were all smiling at me, more than usual. I thought it was a good sign. They were getting to know me—maybe they even liked me. After a few minutes, one of the women who spoke a little English came up and pointed to my long skirt and giggled. I had tucked it into my tights in the back. (Luckily, I was wearing tights!) And I had to laugh at myself, thinking I had it all together. The women joined me in more laughter, but there was kindness and acknowledgement in their laughter. We were all women, all trying our best. I smoothed out my skirt and carried on, another piece of learning tucked under my belt.

Being a learner is exhausting, uncomfortable, and very hard work. It involves taking risks, making mistakes, and letting go of control. It also brought me incredible joy, opportunities for growth, and a new, richer sense of who I am.

What Practitioners in the Field Say

When I spoke with Celia Logan, an English-as-an-additional-language instructor, she had this to say about her recent experience as a student attending a night class to learn Spanish.

It's very interesting to be in a classroom at night when you're tired and you're hungry and you're cold—I never realized it before. When I'm standing at the front of the class when I'm teaching, I can't figure out why everyone is wearing a jacket, it's so comfortable! But now I realize that if you're not moving around you get cold. How do you deal with the tiredness and fatigue? A lot of our students are working at jobs or they have so many other responsibilities.

As a learner herself, Celia was able to stand in the learners' shoes and empathize with her students' experience.

Ramona Heikel tutors immigrant seniors at Calgary Catholic Immigration Services and talks about learning styles and the excitement of learning. "Using a newly learned skill or concept solidifies my learning. I learn by doing. I try to have students use a new skill as soon as possible—I find that if a student can teach another student [a skill], they take a leap in their self-confidence." Learning by doing or kinesthetic learning is one of several adult learning styles.

For more information on learning styles, check out *Creating Learning Partners: A Facilitator's Guide for Training Effective Adult Literacy Tutors* (Unit 3 Learning Styles) available for free download at www.literacyalberta.ca/sites/default/files/Creating_Learning_Partners.pdf

Another Bow Valley College adult basic education instructor, Glenna Healy, feels she's learning all the time.

I am one of those people who reflect every day on what I've done, what I've learned, what I could have done better. My personal experience of learning is brought into my teaching by showing my students that I, too, learn each day, by showing them that I, too, am vulnerable and that I, too, make mistakes. I need them to know that no one is perfect. We allow people to make mistakes and support each other and carry on.

As learners, we may feel scared and vulnerable so creating an atmosphere of openness and safety is crucial to providing a space for learning to happen.

Still others speak about negative past experiences in learning and how that influences their current teaching practice. "I've had my fingers slapped and was told that I didn't know how to write an essay—even though I teach essay writing now... Overly critical teachers have done nobody any good. I try to focus on people's strengths and make learning fun and try to make it relevant to learners' own lives... focusing on the positive instead of focusing on the negative" explains Belle Auld, Coordinator, Speech-Assisted Reading and Writing Program at Bow Valley College. Belle's focus on the positive is echoed in a number of studies that support a strength-based approach to teaching adult learners. Building on strengths increases self-confidence and opens the door to further learning.

Theresa Wall is a learning support specialist for adult English language learners at Calgary Immigrant Women's Association. She works with teachers to help them develop an individualized approach that focuses on strengths and needs with students. She talks about her learning happening in stages.

There are times when there's new information presented to me, either through an experience or reading or conversation. The next piece of learning that comes after that is when something becomes more tangible that I can apply. So, I feel like I'm learning when I fit those pieces together for myself. For learners I make things explicit and help them to see how to take pieces of information and piece them together so that it applies for life.

Her approach is a form of "scaffolding" learning or building upon previous knowledge. It helps adult learners begin to make connections to their own lives.

For more information on explicit teaching see <http://www.writeforward.ca/>. On the right-hand side under "categories" click on *Instruction*.

Identifying the inherent power differences present in any teacher-student relationship is an important step in setting up positive environments for learning. The practitioners I spoke to consciously listened to and reflected on their own experiences of learning and intentionally applied the lessons they'd learned through experience into their teaching practice.

What the practitioners in a research project said

A practitioner research project called *Powerful Listening* (Stewart et al. 2009) examined the issues of power and difference that learners and literacy practitioners experienced in their relationships with

each other. They asked how practitioners hear and understand learners and each other across multiple social differences. How do these dynamics either support or stifle literacy learning?

Our own experience helps create the lens through which we hear and understand learners and colleagues. Bringing to awareness more aspects of our own literacy learning journeys in our families, communities and at school helps us to understand ways that we listen, filter and sometimes fail to listen to learners and colleagues. By further understanding aspects of our experience of difference, exclusion, privilege, and opportunity, we come to understand more about how difference affects listening and learning (Stewart 2009, 47).

We are always learning

Literacy practitioner and skilled trainer, Linda Weir, frequently used the magic of story-telling in her teaching about lifelong learning. The following is a story she told during her training workshops.

A student was attending a program at a learning institution. Every evening after his courses were done, he would walk by the residence of the instructors. No matter how late it was, there was always one light on. It belonged to his favourite teacher. This happened for many weeks. One day he stayed after class and asked his teacher “Why is your light always on late in the evenings?” His teacher replied that she was working and reading and continuing her learning. “I am filling my well so that you may continue to draw water from it, day after day.”

Practitioners are the well that students draw their fresh water from. How do you keep your well fresh? How do you keep engaged in your own learning? Watch for future stories that explore these questions and check out <http://centreforfoundationallearning.wordpress.com/projects-in-progress/stories-from-the-field/> for more *Stories from the Field*.

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References

Literacy Alberta. 2007. *Creating Learning Partners: A Facilitator's Guide to Training Effective Adult Literacy Tutors*. Retrieved from www.literacyalberta.ca/sites/default/files/Creating_Learning_Partners.pdf

Stewart, Sheila, with Tannis Atkinson, Mary Brehaut, Guy Ewing, Sally Gailkezheyongai, Michele Kuhlmann, Maria Moriarity, Andy Noel, and Nadine Sookermany. 2009. *Powerful Listening: A Practitioner Research Project on Story and Difference in Adult Literacy*. Toronto: Festival of Literacies. www.literaciesoise.ca/story.htm

Why Explicit Writing Instruction? 2012. *Writeforward* Blog, 5 July. Retrieved from <http://www.writeforward.ca/>

Useful Resources

Chimamanda, Adichie. *The Danger of a Single Story*. This 2009 TED Talk explores the danger of thinking there is only a single story or a single way of looking at life. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>

LaDs Learner Stories — authentic writing by adult learners. This book is part of Bow Valley College's 2005 Literacy and Disabilities Study (LaDS) project that researched literacy programming delivered to adults with disabilities, using the Speech-Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) talking computer program. <http://centreforfoundationallearning.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/ladslearnerstories.pdf>

Check out the gallery of student art and poetry from the *Nations Learning Together: An Art and Adult Literacy Project*. (2013. Learners' blog, *Lifeline to Literacy*, Bow Valley College <http://www.nationslearningtogether.blogspot.ca/>)

The Popular Education News. "What is popular education?" Definition of the month from back issues of The Popular Education News. Retrieved from <http://www.popednews.org/newsletters/definitions.html>

The Way In: Word on the Prairie — This publication from Literacy Alberta celebrates the diversity of adult learners with their own stories and photo essays. See <http://www.nald.ca/library/learning/wayin/cover.htm>

Inspiring learners' stories can be found in *Write On Magazine*, by Literacy Partners of Manitoba, Fall/Winter 2012-2013. http://manitobaliteracy.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/WriteOn_Fall2012_OPWEBlo.pdf