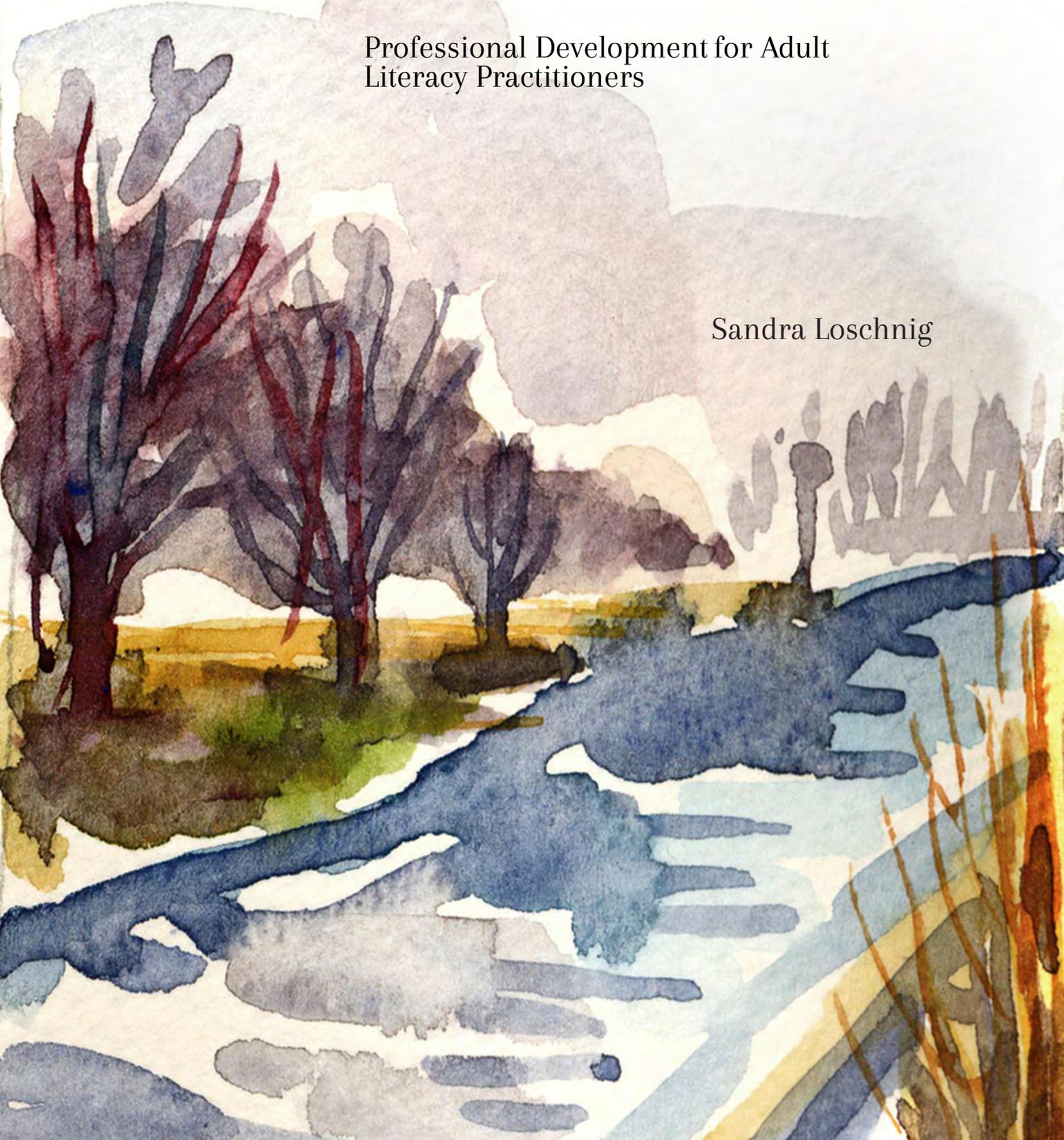


Stories from the Field

Professional Development for Adult
Literacy Practitioners

Sandra Loschnig



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Introduction

Stories from the Field: Professional Development for Adult Literacy Practitioners is a unique initiative of the Adult Literacy Research Institute that started in January 2013 and ran until the end of February 2014. (Phase 2 of this project begins March 1 and runs until the end of June).

The Adult Literacy Research Institute (ALRI) promotes and conducts critical inquiry and applied research and aims to inspire innovation in the field of foundational learning (adult literacy, basic education, upgrading, and essential skills).¹ We bring people together to collaborate on local and national projects and to share their knowledge and experience in research and practice. ALRI is located in the Centre for Excellence in Foundational Learning at Bow Valley College in Calgary, Alberta.

Stories from the Field took a journalistic approach to professional development for adult literacy and essential skills practitioners throughout the province. We explored current issues, innovations, and challenges in teaching and learning reading, writing, numeracy, and technology in adult literacy and essential skills in Alberta. The articles were posted locally (within Bow Valley College), provincially on the adult literacy and learning e-conferencing sites, and nationally on the Adult Literacy Research Institute blog and the Copian website.

The project was inspired by *Literacies: Researching Practice Practising Research*, a literacy journal that published from 2003 to 2009. *Literacies* challenged us to examine our practice and helped us stay connected with what was happening across the country. It was filled with practitioner voices sharing the things they learned while teaching adult literacy. It took the form of research, articles, stories, interviews, and art, and was one of the most accessible sources of professional development in the field. Back issues and a blog are still available on-line.²

Stories from the Field aspired to fill part of the gap left by *Literacies*' closing shop.

1 <http://www.centreforexcellenceinfoundationallearning.ca/>

2 <http://www.literacyjournal.ca/>

What Did We Do?

Over the past year, I met with twenty-eight adult literacy practitioners (coordinators, volunteers, administrators, and instructors) to talk about their work. Together, we discussed their teaching philosophies and instructional practices, celebrated learner success stories, and shared our challenges in teaching adult literacy. These practitioners worked in many different learning settings including correctional facilities, community literacy programs, colleges, and workplaces. I talked to people working in rural and urban programs with diverse learners including Indigenous people, new immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, seniors, and people in correctional facilities. Learners ranged from young adults to seniors. I wanted to get a broad picture of what was happening in adult literacy in Alberta. I found out that adult literacy is a complex and multifaceted field. Just as there is no one type of learner, there is no one type of practitioner.

Why Did We Do This?

The Adult Literacy Research Institute wanted to take on this project for several reasons:

- to contribute to the professional development of adult literacy and essential skills practitioners;
- to encourage conversations about teaching philosophies and instructional practices;
- to highlight information, communication, and professional development needs as practitioners articulate them;
- to create awareness of the diverse learning needs of adult students and the adaptations and innovations that are being created to meet these needs; and
- to create a forum where practitioners share knowledge, resources, and expertise with each other.

Some Highlights and Common Themes

When I grow up I want to be...

No one I met had planned to be an adult literacy practitioner. Everyone, without exception, started somewhere else and took a roundabout way before coming to literacy. As you might expect, some started in the K-to-12 school system and moved into adult education, but there were many more who took a more circuitous route. Many applied for the literacy coordinator position in their town because they wanted to work part time. Others worked in the oil and gas sector and were looking for something more meaningful. Some came to adult literacy through social work, community development, and an interest in social justice. Several came through working in special education with adults who had either developmental disabilities or learning disabilities. Still others came to adult education through an interest in languages and linguistics.

However, there were common denominators among all the practitioners:

- All were passionate about teaching and learning.
- All were committed to the work.
- All were dedicated to their students' learning.
- All were lifelong learners themselves.

Again and again I heard the words “I kind of fell into teaching adults, and fell in love with it.” It simply resonated with who they were. As Penny Marcotte, a Foundational Learning Instructor at Bow Valley College, said,

Never, ever, ever had teaching been on my radar at all. I was going to be a geologist. This was supposed to be my interim holding place until I found something else downtown in oil and gas and I just never left. I absolutely love it. And I have never looked back.

Personal philosophies and perspectives on teaching and learning

There were several important themes that appeared when practitioners spoke of their personal philosophies and perspectives on teaching and learning. People described the necessity of working from a learner-centred, holistic perspective—tailoring the teaching to the needs of the learners. Identifying learners’ strengths, making the lessons relevant and meaningful to learners’ lives, and creating a safe learning environment were seen as key principles. Practitioners talked about the teaching being about the people first and the subjects second. Respect, honouring the adult learner, and recognizing we are equal partners within a teaching/ learning relationship were also seen as important elements of adult literacy practice.

Sheri Lockwood of Bow Valley College is a literacy practitioner working in corrections. Here is how she describes these principles.

I think that allowing people to show what they know and what they’re interested in and where the gaps are is a really important piece of the teaching process. It isn’t just about the mental and it isn’t just about the academics within it. It’s teaching people first and then subjects. It’s not just about acquiring information, but it’s about how to they make meaning from that information, how is it relevant for them.

Or as Deborah Morgan, a grassroots literacy practitioner says, “in a group setting, it’s really important to honour what the people are there for—what they want to learn. And to find ways to teach them or facilitate what it is they want to learn. I find that we all teach and learn together.”

Without exception, all the practitioners I spoke to expressed appreciation for the opportunity to spend time reflecting on their personal teaching philosophies, literacy practice, and present work. They found it valuable to step back and take stock of where they had personally and professionally travelled in the adult literacy and essential skills fields. Jenny Horsman, literacy scholar and practitioner, sums it up this way: “The questions felt like they invited me in... They helped me situate the learning and violence focus within my long history in adult literacy. I think that situating people in relation to their work in general makes a lot of sense.”

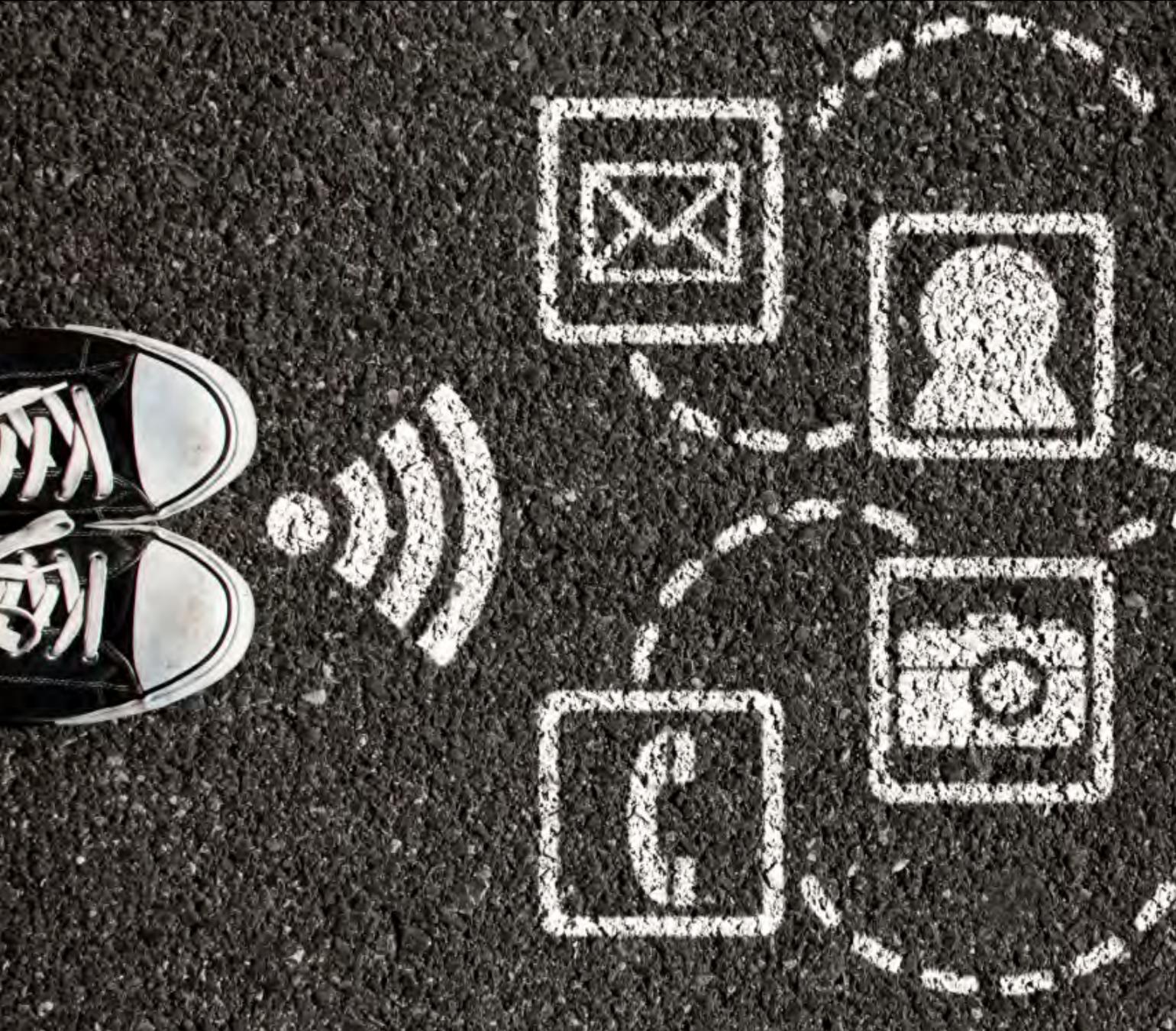
Innovative practices

Adult literacy practitioners working within constraints of time, materials, money, and space are remarkably creative using instructional techniques and technology in new and interesting ways. Some of their innovations include the creation of original programming and specialist positions. For a snapshot of innovative practices drawn from the interviews, check out the chapter with that title on page 62.

The Stories

Join us on this journey as we learn about the work of adult literacy practitioners throughout Alberta in all its diversity and complexity. We hope you will recognize yourself in these stories and discover some surprising new learning.

Is Technology Changing the Meaning of Literacy?





The other evening I was having supper with my family in a restaurant. Nearby, at other tables, were two young families with children under the age of ten. Each of the four children had their own iPad or tablet. They spent the time before and after dinner totally engrossed on their computers. I was struck by how iPads, and computers in general, are an integral part of all of our lives.

Some Interesting Statistics

Did you know that

- 27.4 million Canadians are on-line (80% of the population);
- 93 percent go on-line for product information;
- 60 to 70 percent of Canadians have a mobile phone; and
- 80 percent of those use a smart phone (Breikss 2012)?

The International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS 2005) told us that 42 percent of Canadian adults (over 9 million) do not have the reading, writing, or numeracy skills needed to function well in their lives. Ironically, when you think about these statistics from Google

Engage, it is likely that many of those 42 percent of Canadians are on-line and using their mobile or smart phones to search for information and communicate with one another.

Using Facebook, texting, e-mailing, and reading on-line—today, we are far beyond using paper and pencil as primary tools for building literacy. New technologies are transforming the way we interact with and use text. But using technology for education is not new. In 1925, the Canadian National Railroad radio network began providing educational programming as a public service to children and adults (Buck 2006). In 1927, CKUA, Canada's first public broadcaster operating out of the University of Alberta, started broadcasting concerts, poetry readings, and university lectures, and Nova Scotia's Department of Education broadcasts started in 1928 (Keast 2005).

What is different today is the rapid and unprecedented growth in the use of technologies in all areas of our lives, including learning

and teaching. Technology is more than the invention of new machines and much more complicated than just learning how to use a cell phone or personal computer. New technologies (the Internet in particular) are influencing how we understand and learn about the world, locally and globally.

When we think about using technology for learning, it helps to consider two different but connected approaches.

Using Technology To Learn

The first approach looks at technology as a set of tools (electronic machines) that can be used to help people improve what are considered traditional literacy skills (i.e., reading, writing, and numeracy). For example, Speech-Assisted Reading and Writing (SARAW) at Bow Valley College is a talking computer program that teaches basic reading, writing, and math skills to adults who are reading and writing at levels between beginners and Grade 6. Dragonally Speaking and Kurzweil are other examples of speech-to-text technologies that help adults with dyslexia and other learning disabilities as well as English Language Learners.

Learning To Use Technology

The second approach does not separate traditional literacy practices from digital literacy. A study by Australia's National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) proposes that "literacy education is equally and simultaneously digital

literacy education." The study calls for "a fundamental shift in understandings of what constitutes adult literacy teaching and learning, and recognition that adult literacy programming should be re-envisioned to meet the learning needs of learners in a society that is changing based on the pervasive availability and use of technologies" (Snyder et al. qtd. in Moriarty 2011, 12).

Digital literacy is more than simply being able to turn on a computer. The NWT Literacy Council has developed the following introduction to digital literacy within the framework of adult literacy:

Digital literacy is the ability to locate, organize, understand, evaluate, and create information using digital technology. The term "digital literacy" relates to the functional skills of knowing about and using digital technology. These include:

1. The ability to analyze and evaluate digital information
2. Knowing how to act sensibly, safely and appropriately on-line
3. Understanding how, when and why to use technology.

(NWT Literacy Council qtd. in Moriarty 2011, 17)

Digital literacy has become fundamental to communication (e.g., mobile phones) and for many people, using digital technologies enables fuller participation in life and learning. The challenge for adult literacy



“In all settings, the reasons for learning technology need to be relevant and useful in real-life applications.”

practitioners is how to integrate more traditional teaching approaches to building literacy skills with the emergence of what is called digital literacy skills. The technology jargon alone can be overwhelming for both practitioner and learner. So-called digital literacy, for example, is changing how literacy is defined and understood. How do we as instructors and tutors help learners to both use technology to learn and learn how to use technology?

The AlphaPlus 2012 report *Incorporating Digital Technologies into Adult Basic Education* presents five vignettes about community organizations incorporating technology

into their programming.¹ They list these promising practices, among others:

1. Access to up-to-date computers with Internet, a printer, and speakers.
2. Sustainability. People need to know that once they commit to learning, the resources will continue to be there.
3. Integrity in learning programs requires opportunities for practising new skills.
4. Trained literacy educators who can recognize and provide support when people’s literacy needs and interests shift. (For example, from being curious to surfing the net to creating web pages; from reading other people’s writing to creating their own texts.)

Many adult literacy practitioners I spoke to emphasized the importance of using technology within the context of learners’ lives, not simply using technology for technology’s sake. In all settings, the reasons for learning technology need to be relevant and useful in real-life applications. “The technologies used in programs should reflect the everyday lives of learners and support opportunities for practice,

¹ <http://alphaplus.ca/en/web-tools/tech-podcasts-group1/incorporating-technologies.html>

moving closer toward a closer match between formal curricula and learners' everyday technology uses" (Jack Jones in Smythe 2012, 37).

Other studies (Jimoyiannis and Gravani 2011) emphasize that the principles of adult learning still apply to teaching technology, namely:

- a) self-directed learning as a preferred model;
- b) adults' prior experience and interests as a rich resource for the course;
- c) a task-based, rather than a technology-centred approach (e.g., learning to do on-line banking, researching health resources); and
- d) the importance of the wider social context in technology cultivation and learning.

Digital technologies are constantly evolving. Adult literacy practitioners are particularly challenged to both develop their own technology skills and understanding of digital literacy and to create a meaningful approach to include digital literacy skills in their programming. Ongoing training and professional development for educators is essential if we are to provide coherent, integrated programs that encompass all literacies, traditional and digital (Snyder, Jones, and Lo Bianco 2005, 29).

We have confirmation that we are headed in the right direction with

the inclusion of on-line technologies for the instruction and engagement of adult learners, even those with the most limited skills and language proficiencies. What the field needs now is a compass and a few strategic landmarks to chart a course forward with on-line technologies—our learners already inhabit the landscape. (Silver-Pacuilla and Reder 2008, 34)

Stories from the Field hopes to uncover some navigational themes that best support literacy learning and teaching in the areas of reading, writing, numeracy, and technology. We invite you to join the discussion with your points of view, teaching and learning practices, and references that guide you as instructors and tutors as you steer your own course through this digital landscape.

Flooded with Thoughts on Literacy While Bailing Out in Calgary

By Audrey Gardner



The day after the International Symposium on Literacy as Numbers: Researching the Politics and Practices of Literacy Assessment Regimes in London,¹ I flew back to Calgary saturated with happy thoughts from all the event's provocative conversations, presentations, and discussions about the implications of large-scale measures (international skill surveys) on the meaning of adult literacy at both the policy and practice levels. It was a long way to travel for a one-day event but the topic was so close to my own research that I had to go. I am exploring

¹ <http://www.uea.ac.uk/literacy/asnumbers>

how so-called assessment regimes—that is, measurement technologies on a global scale such as those commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—influence national policies. It was definitely worth the journey.

Here in Canada there is little opportunity to participate with colleagues in constructive discussions about how government's emphatic uptake of the OECD surveys has had an enormous impact on the teaching and learning practices in programs. I am not talking about the pressures of working in an under-resourced corner of adult education, but about having a forum to really look at power relations in adult literacy and question how literacy is increasingly being valued as a workforce skill and not as an aspect of broader and more complex daily life. What does it mean that we use statistical language (e.g., 42% of Canadians don't have enough literacy skills) to advocate for literacy but at the same time critique the calculated "problem" of adult literacy in Canada?² My poster presentation looked at the implications of using test scores in international surveys to determine who is productive and, more disturbingly, who is unproductive.

I came home ready to dive into writing

² Canada's Shame. In-depth Education Report. CBC, *The National*. 24 May 2006. Retrieved 31 July 2013 from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/education/canada-shame.html>

about my newly gained knowledge but just as I recovered from jetlag my household was evacuated. A few blocks from our house the Bow River was raging and water was spurting out of street sewers and brimming over the river banks. We had to gather what we could, pets and all, and quickly move to higher ground. My suitcase was still sitting in my bedroom, barely unpacked. I quickly threw in some more clothes and my notes from the symposium. I somehow thought that I could keep my mind on all the new knowledge I had gained and find a place where I could settle into writing while waiting out the evacuation. Grumbling about how inconvenient being evacuated was—as far as I knew the river had never flooded before—I was determined to stay focused on the amazing experience I'd had at the symposium and fold all of what I'd learned into my research.

The next morning I stood on the hilltop looking down at the water surrounding my house. I could feel my mind shut down. When I started thinking again it was about wanting to be with my family and wanting to know if my neighbours and friends were okay. The musings about the symposium were gone. I was overwhelmed with sadness. After a couple of days we were able to start bailing out the watery mess inside our houses. By the sixth day of seemingly never-ending cleaning and clearing out the muck and mud, it felt like my symposium immersion had been

swept away with the flood waters. It is now a month after being evacuated. The Bow River has receded, contained within its newly carved-out banks and I am once again determined to get my mind back to where it was before the flood. Writing this is my attempt to paddle back to thinking about the disturbing concept of literacy as numbers.

The symposium focused on the underlying divergent and competing beliefs about the meaning and value of literacy. Mary Hamilton talked about what happens to our understanding of literacy when it's translated into the statistical language of international surveys that inform labour market policies, not learning assessments in classrooms and programs. She says that

1. Large-scale enumerative projects of literacy assessment are increasingly global in scope and affect educational policy and practice.
2. We need productive critical debate between academics, practitioners, research students, and policy-makers about the implications and the social, political, and scientific contexts within which these surveys are being carried out. We also need to really think critically about the ways in which literacy is being conceptualized as numbers.

3. It's crucial that we apply critical policy, ethnographic, and sociological research perspectives to literacy assessment.³

Much more than arguing about whether literacy is a human right or a set of human capital skills, "Literacy as Numbers" was a forum to critically question what measurement is doing to how we understand what literacy actually is.

I use the term *measurement* to mean institutionally arranged concepts and methods of making judgments about people's literacy. Institutional measurement values scientific methods over individual/personal knowledge and local, cultural contexts. Institutional measurement is made up of testing practices, statistical calculations, an elaborate apparatus, and technical expertise. Sotiria Grek from the University of Edinburgh said in her presentation that "testing is important because it produces numbers and consequently ratings and rankings; once the OECD has created this unprecedented spectacle of comparison in European education, no system can remain hidden and separate any longer. The field of measurement becomes instantly the field of the game."⁴

3 Her talk is on Youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QyAYNd-k2xw>

4 Sotiria Grek, The OECD as a Site of Co-production: European Education Governance and the New Politics of "Policy Mobilization." Paper presented at the International Symposium on Literacy as Numbers: Researching the Politics and Practices of Literacy Assessment Regimes, London UK, 17 June 2013.

Many of the discussions at the symposium focused on how politics and large-scale international measures such as the OECD international adult literacy surveys are awkward bedfellows that spawn policies to fasten adult literacy programs to narrow and unrealistic outcomes. Submerged under the statistical language of these measures is the misfit of policy objectives with actual assessment practices in literacy programs. How relevant is the IALS statistic that claims “40 percent of Albertans aged sixteen and older struggle with their ability to understand and use information from texts”?⁶

During the first two intense weeks following the flood, information freely flowed among my friends and neighbours about bailing water out of soggy houses and gardens, how to prevent mould, and where to find disaster relief. After I went back to work and students started returning to the literacy programs, they talked about how they experienced the Calgary floods. Like me, they learned what to do through engaging with others. Text was definitely part of this state of emergency, but we learned how to get and use information from multiple sources and in multiple ways.

In everyday life, using information from texts usually also involves talking, listening,

and doing—all of which intersects with reading, writing, and calculating. But standardized tests don’t capture such real-life scenarios—they don’t acknowledge how people get information from relationships. Without knowing the literacy levels of the hundreds of people helping each other in our waterlogged community, I witnessed over and over again that the ability to understand and use information from texts is a social practice, not an isolated act cut off from the socio-cultural world we live in. Literacy, like water, is fluid and uncontainable. To use Francis Ponge’s poem “Water” to talk about literacy, I’d add that it “eludes all definition, yet leaves its traces in my mind, on this paper—formless blots.”⁷

6 Government of Alberta, *Living Literacy: A Literacy Framework for Alberta’s Next Generation Economy*, 2009, 1.

7 Francis Ponge, *The Nature of Things*, translated by Lee Fahnestock (New York: Red Dust Books, 1995).

***Constructivist, Learner-centred, Holistic*—What Do These Terms Really Mean and How Are They Related to Adult Literacy and Learning?**



In my years as a facilitator, I never used the word *constructivist* to describe what I was doing. I might have used the word *holistic* to describe my approach to working with adult learners, and I would definitely have used the words *learner* or *student-centred*. Over the past few weeks, I've been interviewing practitioners working in adult literacy and essential skills in Alberta to learn more about how they see what they do. It's made me curious about what these terms mean and how they relate to adult literacy and learning.

What the Research Says

In education, constructivism is a theory about how people learn. There are two important concepts in this theory. The first is that people construct or build new knowledge on what they already know. The second is that people actively construct meaning through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Thirteen Ed On-line, 2004).¹

To me, constructivism looks a lot like learner-centred teaching. Instructors acknowledge that each student is an individual with unique learning needs. Instructors bring together a variety of techniques throughout the course and engage in dialogue with students, encouraging questions, reflection, and active participation. Learning is interactive, building on previous knowledge and experience. Students work in groups, learning from each other.

¹ To find out more about how constructivist teaching compares to a more traditional model, see http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/constructivism/index_sub1.html

Students' past experiences, culture, and knowledge are valued.

Learner-centred teaching can mean different things to different people. In an effort to clarify the definition, Maryellen Weimer, a specialist in adult education and author of the second edition of *Learner-Centered Teaching*, identifies five characteristics:

Learner-centered teaching engages students in the hard, messy work of learning. Students need opportunities to practise learning skills and tasks. Teachers do less of the work for their students.

Learner-centered teaching includes explicit skill instruction. Teachers help students learn how to think and solve problems. Learning skills develop faster if they are taught with the content.

Learner-centered teaching encourages students to reflect on what they're learning and how they're learning it. Assignments give students an opportunity to reflect, and analyze what they are learning and how they are learning it. The goal is to make students conscious of themselves as learners and encourage the development of learning skills.

Learner-centered teaching motivates students by giving them some control over learning processes. Teachers search out ethically responsible ways to share power with students. For example, they might give students choices about assignments and deadlines.

Learner-centered teaching encourages collaboration. It sees classrooms as communities of learners. Learner-centred teachers believe that students learn from and with each other. (italicized phrases from Weimer 2012)²

Traditionally, teacher-centred approaches see teachers as the disseminators of knowledge and students as passive recipients. By contrast, the learner-centred approach seeks “to engage students actively in their learning in ways that are appropriate for and relevant to them in their lives outside the classroom” (Peyton, Moore, and Young 2010).³

Holistic education looks at the learner as a whole person. This approach tries to engage all aspects of the learner: spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental—and their interconnectedness with others and the world. Learning is active and reflective, and creates meaning in the context of people's lives. “Holistic education aims to call forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of learning” (Miller 2000).

2 See <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/effective-teaching-strategies/five-characteristics-of-learner-centered-teaching/> for the full article plus other interesting adult-education-related blogs.

3 For more information on the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners within this approach, see <https://teal.ed.gov/tealGuide/studentcentered>

Indigenous peoples' approaches to learning are holistic, balancing the four dimensions: body, mind, heart, and spirit. In her literature review, Ningwakwe Priscilla George argues that literacy/education policies need to reflect:

that we are Spirit/Heart/Mind and Body; therefore each component needs to be recognized and nurtured in programming

that we are not apart from Creation; rather, we are a part of creation, in that everybody is/has Spirit/Energy

that we all have a reason for being here in this life. That is, we have a purpose, and gifts for realizing that purpose.

that we have a great power at our fingertips in managing the energy of which we are a part.

(George 2008, 46)

What Practitioners in the Field Say

Not surprisingly, adult literacy practitioners weave together threads from all three methodologies in their teaching. Practitioners I talked to spoke about the importance of looking at adult learners as whole, unique individuals with full lives outside of the classroom.

“Students taught me that they have a lot going on in their lives outside of math,” said Jim Neve, a recently retired math

teacher. Before he taught full time, he was filling in for a math tutor at Alberta Vocational College.

On his first day tutoring in an adult basic education program many years ago, a student came in and began to cry and talk about her life for the next ten minutes. She didn't open a book and Jim simply listened. When she was done, she packed up her books and left. When Jim looked at the other tutor perplexed, the tutor told him, “You have to dry the tears before you can do the math.” It was an important lesson for Jim, one that he kept in mind throughout his thirty years of teaching.

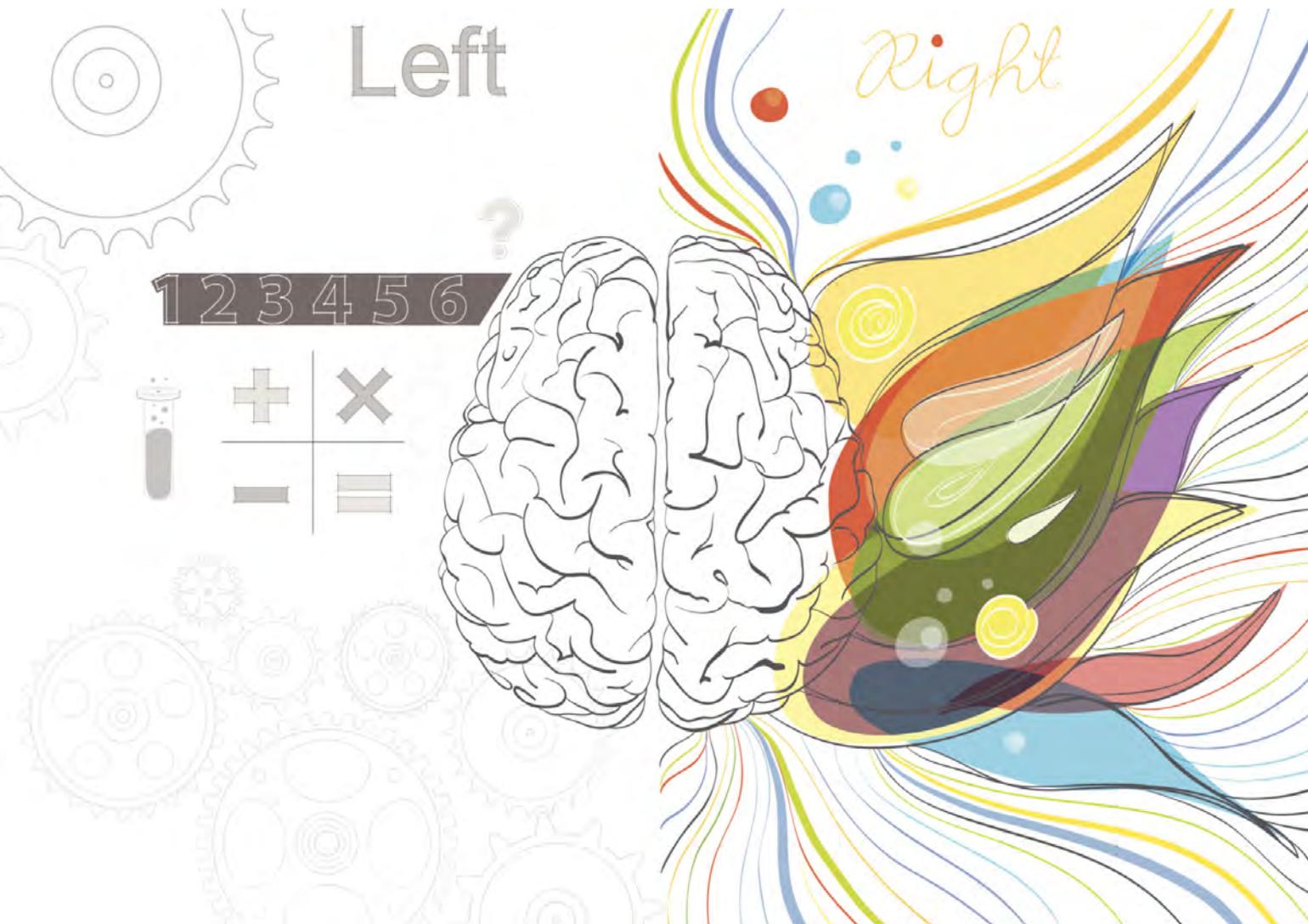
Given people's complicated histories and lives, creating a safe space for learning to actually happen is important for all practitioners. Whether learners had previous bad experiences in learning math or other subjects, personal histories of violence and trauma, or experiences of bullying, it's essential to make the classroom a positive, safe environment. “We spend a lot of time at the beginning of the class trying to determine how safe they [students] want it and what the rules are and we have to keep going back to those rules regularly to remind people,” Carol McCullough, an Adult Basic

Literacy Education instructor at Bow Valley College, explained.

Practitioners also talk about the importance of relating the learning to learners' interests and lives. "Building or creating socially and personally meaningful learning contexts is key," Trish Pryce told me as she spoke about her experience teaching an adult upgrading program on a reserve. Other practitioners echoed this sentiment.

For example, Liette Wilson, Pebbles in the Sand facilitator and English language literacy instructor at Calgary Immigrant Women's Association, said, "It's not about me creating an agenda and hoisting it on them. It's following what their perceived needs are and teaching to that perceived need."

"I approach things from a broad point and start with what they see in their lives"



said Lorene Anderson, a workplace essential skills practitioner. “If I were going to teach someone to read, I would not start with the alphabet or picture books. For example, if he wanted to travel, it might be looking at maps. I want him to understand that there is a print representation of something physical.” She feels that adult learners learn best through the real tasks they do in their lives.

Most of the practitioners use interactive group work and encourage collaboration. Penny Marcotte, a math/science teacher in

a Bow Valley College Aboriginal upgrading program, finds that her students benefit enormously from being self-paced and working in smaller groups with people who share similar backgrounds.

Whether you call the work constructivist, learner-centred, or holistic, these *Stories from the Field* suggest that adult literacy practitioners approach their work from a number of perspectives in an effort to intentionally create meaningful learning experiences for their diverse learners.

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 is, 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.¹

Another Bow Valley College adult basic education instructor, Glenna Healey, 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

1 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

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.²

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 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

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

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)

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?

Libraries, Literacy, and Social Inclusion





It was a dark and stormy night. I took refuge in the Calgary Central Library, one of my favourite places. And I was not alone.¹

Libraries are sanctuaries for many of us. As I browsed through the new books section on the main floor, I noticed other people had the same idea. People of all ages were using the library—sitting in the big comfy chairs reading magazines, having a cup of coffee at the in-house café, or surfing the net at a computer station.

At the turn of the last century, people saw libraries as crucial for “that self-education which all citizens should add to the education obtained in schools” (F.H. Hutchins qtd. in Hadley 1910, 26). Libraries were a moral imperative for citizenship. But they have evolved from those early beginnings into a place that is about much more than books. Today, most libraries offer computer courses, career programs for job searchers, services for newcomers, literacy support for adult learners, and much, much more.

Many libraries have become neighbourhood hubs helping people feel included in their communities. Young mothers and their infants attending “Books for Babies” sessions, children working on school projects, seniors learning to use computers—on the surface, it seems that everyone feels welcome at their community library. But scratch a little deeper, and we may find that the story reads differently.

As literacy practitioners, we all know learners who are intimidated by libraries for different reasons.

1 October is Canadian Library Month. This year’s theme is “libraries connect” and across the country, people are celebrating the roles that libraries play in connecting people and communities. This was the first of two *Stories from the Field* articles exploring how libraries connect with people and with literacy—in Canada and abroad.

For every person who finds the library safe and pleasant, there is another person who feels uncomfortable and unwelcome. This is a hard truth to accept, especially for people who see their library as one of society's truly accessible and equitable institutions. Identifying the barriers that keep socially excluded groups from using the library, understanding why the barriers exist, and finding ways to overcome the barriers is an iterative [ongoing] process. (Annette DeFaveri qtd. in Working Together Team 2008, 20)

Why don't people feel welcome? What are the barriers? A unique community-development project involving four libraries in four cities (Vancouver, Halifax, Toronto, and Regina) set out to answer these questions. The "Working Together: Libraries and Communities Project" worked in urban neighbourhoods with communities that are traditionally socially excluded (Williment 2009).

The Vancouver Public Library and Halifax Public Library worked in culturally diverse, low-income neighbourhoods populated by a mix of families, seniors, and adults on disability pensions. Toronto Public Libraries worked in neighbourhoods with many new immigrants, high poverty rates, and overcrowding. The Regina Public Library worked in a community with a large Aboriginal population.

Poverty, unemployment, and isolation of youth and seniors were issues there.

The project started with conversations about the meaning of social exclusion.

Social exclusion should be understood in broad terms. It can affect any stratum of our society, including people who are poor or live in poverty, people who are unemployed or underemployed, and people who are members of ethnic or cultural minorities. Being excluded can mean being alienated from the political, social, economic, and cultural life of the community because of race, gender, sexual orientation, or class. Excluded communities can include new immigrants, refugees, the working poor, and groups that have been historically isolated such as African Nova Scotians and First Nations people. For some people, being excluded can stem from, or bring about, drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness. The conditions that define social exclusion can often be multiple. (DeFaveri in Working Together Team 2008, 10)

Next, they asked people in the communities in each city how exclusion affected their lives and their library use. Project workers were surprised to hear that people were critical of libraries and felt that library workers viewed them as problems. "They felt 'their kind' was not welcome. This response was verified by many discussions within libraries concerning smelly

users, inappropriately dressed patrons and people sleeping in cubicles and with their heads on tables” (Working Together Team 2008, 5). Library fines and charges were also identified as a barrier for many people on low incomes.

The Working Together Project developed a new community-led service-planning model that brought together library staff and local citizens who experienced exclusion from the library to identify needs and barriers and to plan services accordingly. “For someone doing this work, it is important to be able to let go of one’s identification as an expert and embrace the role of the facilitator,” explains Randy Gatley, a community development librarian with the project (Working Together Team 2008, 130).

The community-led service-planning model changes the role of library staff to learners and facilitators as opposed to experts and authorities. It uses a community-development approach to move “beyond receiving feedback or hearing from the community (consultation or ‘information in’) and extends to meaningful and active community engagement in service prioritization and planning” (Working Together Team 2008, 15).

Over four years, the project identified six key lessons learned:

- Library culture, along with rules and procedures, created

significant barriers to inclusion.

- Libraries must recognize that same or consistent customer service, which does not take into account socio-economic disparity, results in inequitable services that further disadvantage socially excluded people.
- Planning relevant and effective library services for socially excluded community members requires a collaboration of equals between community members and the library.
- Relationship building is at the core of effective service planning.
- Staff “soft skills” such as empathy, interpersonal competence, and open-mindedness are essential.
- People want to see themselves represented in the library and to have an opportunity to participate. (Working Together Team 2008, 8)

An additional outcome of the project was the development of a community-led service-planning toolkit designed to help libraries engage with their communities. The *Community-Led Libraries Toolkit* includes sections on community entry, community mapping, relationship building, partnerships, program planning, computer training, collection development, and customer service.² The Working Together

² http://librariesincommunities.ca/resources/Community-Led_Libraries_Toolkit.pdf

Project's success and its *Toolkit* provide an exciting and useful blueprint for libraries interested in better serving their diverse communities.

In Our Own Backyard

Some libraries in Alberta have taken a page from the Working Together Project to initiate programs designed to make their libraries more socially inclusive. For example, Manisha Khetarpal, head of library services at Maskwachees Cultural College in Hobbema, was working as a librarian at the Wetaskiwin Public Library in 2009 when she noticed that many agencies were bringing clients with disabilities to the library. (Khetarpal 2013). She also noticed that there were many immigrants working with these individuals. She saw an opportunity for the library to build connections with community members and agencies and strengthen the library's capacity to be socially inclusive.

The library created a plan to target community agencies, day programs, home care, community connections services, the Twilights' Group (a service provider for persons with vision problems), and the First Nations community living in the city and nearby reserve.

One particularly effective activity was a series of workshops entitled "Say Yes to Community Inclusion," an initiative of the Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability. The aim of the workshops was

to promote greater inclusion of Canadians with a disability in community physical-activity programs. The library assisted in creating a network to connect recreation service providers with clients who have disabilities.

The library's relationship-building initiatives included professional development for staff on diversity issues. As a result of the library's efforts, more people with disabilities, immigrants, and the First Nations community came to the library and used the services (Khetarpal 2013).

On a larger scale, the Edmonton Public Library received a grant in 2011 from the provincial government to fund a four-year community safety and outreach project. The library partnered with Boyle Street Community Services (an inner-city agency that provides programs and support to people living in poverty) to launch the "Building a Safer Community through Inclusive Learning" project. The project was a response to the increasing number of low-income people who were homeless and seeking sanctuary in the library. The library saw an opportunity to connect with these individuals and offer help.

Collaborating with library staff, outreach workers work both inside and outside the library to assist at-risk Edmontonians through literacy, education, social support, and referrals. The "Building a Safer Community through Inclusive Learning" project builds upon the Working Together

community-development model that believes “libraries act as community cornerstones that can help prevent and resolve societal challenges that marginalize segments of the population” (Edmonton Public Libraries 2011).

In early 2013, the Calgary Public Library conducted a number of community consultations as part of planning a new central library system and building. Ellen Humphrey, Interim CEO of the Calgary Public Library, described the new location as “an inspiring destination for Calgarians of every age and ability, providing rich resources for every interest and spaces for community.”

She went on to say “citizens told us they desire a place that is welcoming, inclusive and accessible, where they can experience the joys of reading, learn new skills, have fun with their families, and connect with each other and with a world of information and ideas. For Calgarians the new Central Library will also act as an agent for community building, social inclusion and engagement. As heart and hub of a growing network across the city, it will help shape service delivery in every library location” (CPL 2013).

The Calgary Public Library is already engaged in several initiatives aimed at reducing barriers and increasing accessibility for vulnerable people. Since June 2012, the library has been working with the Calgary Poverty Reduction Initiative

(CPRI), participating as a stakeholder in the community consultation process. As Heather Robertson, manager of community services, explains, the process “made us take a closer look at what we do and how we do it. What did we see happening? What are the gaps? How can we leverage our expertise?” (Heather Robertson, discussion with the author, October 2013). The library responded in support of poverty reduction, identifying the ways it works to reduce barriers and improve access to life long learning resources for Calgarians who are homeless, at risk of becoming homeless, or living in low-income situations.

Currently, library staff sit on two implementation teams (asset building and services) to help drive forward the recommendations made in the CPRI report *Enough for All*. A large focus of the asset-building team is to develop financial literacy services and provide financial



literacy education, advice, and services. The services-implementation team concentrates on developing a “client-based and integrated service access platform with common assessment, intake, referral, and case management components” (CPRI 2013, 15).

This work dovetails with the library’s involvement in another exciting community partnership, the new Safe Communities Opportunity and Resource Centre SORCe.³

Seven months ago, two representatives from Calgary Police Services (tasked with leading the implementation of SORCe) approached the library to share the idea and explore a potential partnership. “It’s exactly the sort of collaboration we are trying to build, a community hub concept” Robertson told me. The library is now one of fourteen agencies located in the new SORCe. The SORCe’s mission is “to work together as a community to ensure vulnerable people will be connected to services, supports, and solutions” (SORCe website).

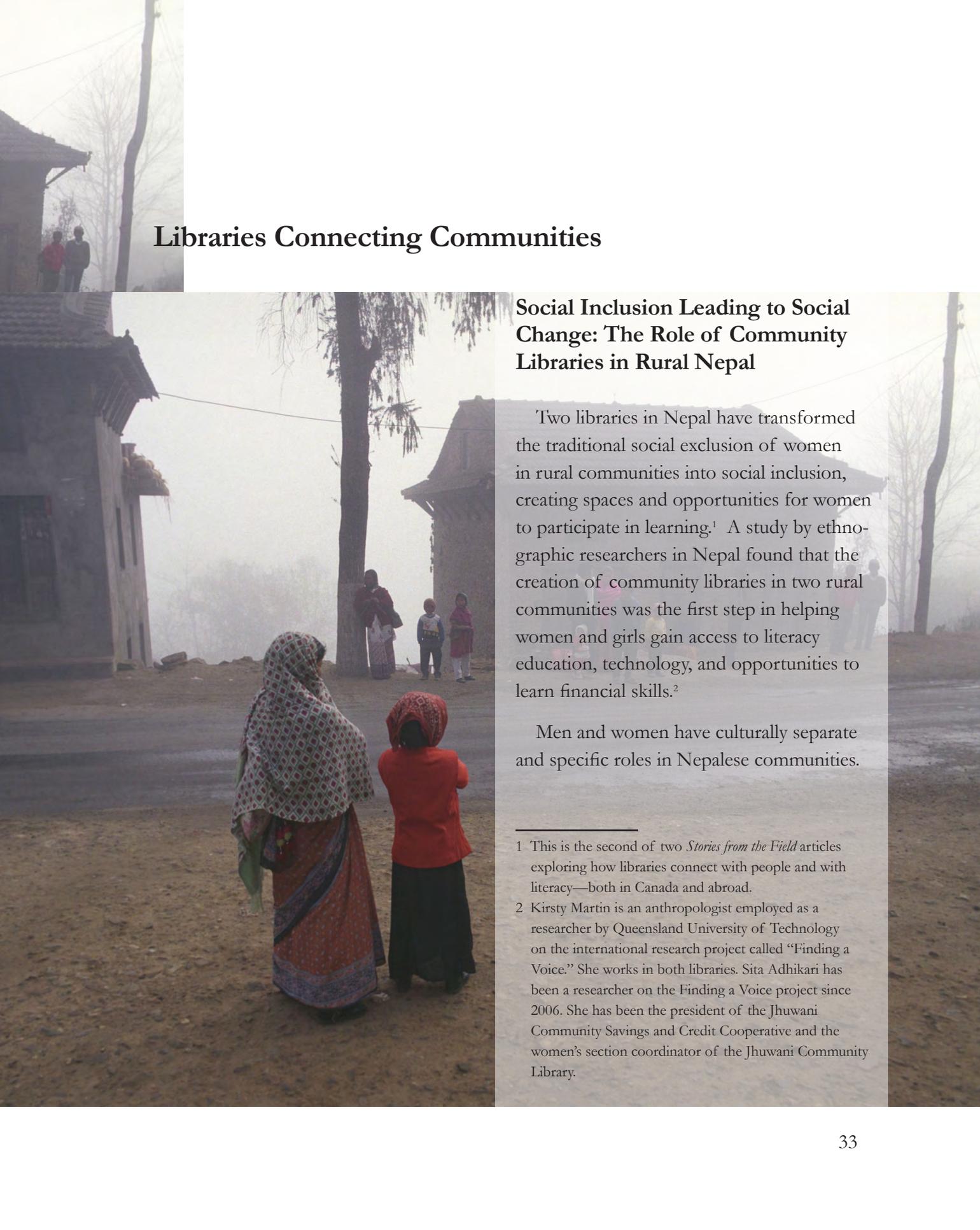
As we’ve seen from these examples, a strong library system can position itself

as a collaborative community partner, a welcoming accessible space, and a place for life long learning.

What Does All This Mean for Adult Literacy Practitioners?

“Low literacy, poverty and exclusion are all part of the same problem” (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network 2012). Literacy is about engagement, participation, expression, and connection. It’s about learning. Adult literacy practitioners can expand their awareness of the role social exclusion plays in literacy work. As well, many literacy programs have existing relationships with local libraries. We encourage you to start a conversation about the meaning of social exclusion in your communities. Who knows where it might lead?

3 The concept of SORCe was developed by a Community Leadership Group (CLG) made up of the United Way; Calgary Homeless Foundation; Alpha House; Drop-In Centre; The Alex; Neighbourlink; Office of the Chief Crown Prosecutor; Chief Probation Officer Calgary; The City of Calgary’s Community and Neighbourhood Services and Animal and Bylaw Services; Calgary Police Services; and Alberta Health Services. See <http://www.sorce.ca/>



Libraries Connecting Communities

Social Inclusion Leading to Social Change: The Role of Community Libraries in Rural Nepal

Two libraries in Nepal have transformed the traditional social exclusion of women in rural communities into social inclusion, creating spaces and opportunities for women to participate in learning.¹ A study by ethnographic researchers in Nepal found that the creation of community libraries in two rural communities was the first step in helping women and girls gain access to literacy education, technology, and opportunities to learn financial skills.²

Men and women have culturally separate and specific roles in Nepalese communities.

1 This is the second of two *Stories from the Field* articles exploring how libraries connect with people and with literacy—both in Canada and abroad.

2 Kirsty Martin is an anthropologist employed as a researcher by Queensland University of Technology on the international research project called “Finding a Voice.” She works in both libraries. Sita Adhikari has been a researcher on the Finding a Voice project since 2006. She has been the president of the Jhuwani Community Savings and Credit Cooperative and the women’s section coordinator of the Jhuwani Community Library.



In our community a girl cannot spend time in a public place, she cannot attend a social gathering, take part in or watch a sporting activity or engage in any activities outside the home. These social rules have placed real pressures and limitations on females in our community which in turn has had a negative impact on female mobility, especially in terms of their access to education. These social behaviours directly affect a girl's development notably in terms of her personality and she continues to lose her independence as she gets older. (Adhikari field notes from September 2007, Martin and Adhikari 2008, 241)

How did these two community libraries manage to change the rules governing women's participation in their societies?

The Jhuwani Community Library

The Jhuwani Community Library (JCL) was established in 2001 by people in the community with support from an international nongovernmental organization called READ (Rural Education and Development) Nepal (Martin and Adhikari 2008). From the moment the library first opened, there was a plan to provide community activities and encourage the involvement of local indigenous groups and lower-caste people, both men and women. Initially, more men participated than women.

In 2002, in an effort to encourage and increase women's involvement in the library, staff created a women's section and began to run women-specific programs. The programs were successful, attracting over fifty participants per program from mostly upper-caste groups and women who were literate. However, socially disadvantaged and lower-caste women felt intimidated and did not join the programs (Martin and Adhikari 2008).

In an effort to reach out to them, the JCL created a "mobile library" with the hope of increasing access to the library's materials to help the women develop their literacy skills. The mobile library was a success and also provided local women with information about family planning and contraception.

The JCL currently has eight computers, Internet access, a DVD player, a telephone connection, a fax, a laminator, and a scanner. In 2002, it ran the first community computer-training program. Of 102 participants, 36 were women (Martin and Ahikari 2008). Having communication facilities (Internet, phone, and fax) in the library means that women can access new media resources in ways that weren't possible before.

The researchers believe that "the social acceptability of the community library and its programs is in part derived from the fact that the library is a community space open to men and women" (Martin and Adhikari 2008, 248).

The Agyauli Community Library

The community library in Agyauli (ACL), also established with the support of READ Nepal and various partners, has achieved similar success. Most of the people in this area are lower caste or Dalit and there are many poor and landless families (Martin and Adhikari 2008). Like JCL, ACL runs innovative programming designed to encourage women's participation. This includes literacy classes, savings and credit groups, and income-generating courses.

Since 2002, the ACL has run forty-one literacy classes within the district. Over 800 women have benefitted from participating in the literacy program, 70 percent of them from lower-caste groups. Both libraries have incorporated new technologies into their services and provide skills training in digital story telling. Since December 2006, participants at JCL and ACL have made seventeen digital stories on issues such as children's welfare, gender and participation, social roles, property rights, domestic violence, women's health, and caste discrimination (Martin and Adhikari 2008).

It's clear that the two libraries facilitate "an unprecedented sense of social interaction and engagement amongst the local women" (Martin and Adhikari 2008). They have become community-approved spaces where women and men take part in life-long learning.



How Are Practitioners Collecting Evidence of Student Growth? What Role Does Assessment Play in Teaching and Learning in Adult Literacy?





I recently attended my first Literacy and Learning Symposium.¹ This annual event is jointly hosted by the three lead literacy and learning organizations in Alberta: Community Learning Network, Literacy Alberta, and the Centre for Family Literacy. There were many workshops on literacy and lifelong learning. *Stories from the Field* hosted one of them.

The project coordinator, Audrey Gardner, and I provided a workshop on how we create articles or stories from interviews with practitioners and information from research studies. At the conclusion of the workshop, people expressed an interest in knowing more about how we (practitioners) are collecting evidence of student/learner growth (for example, through assessment).

In interviews with twenty-three practitioners so far, it is clear that learners' growth and success is a significant part of their work. Many use various forms of assess-

ment including initial/diagnostic, formative, and summative. The method of assessment that practitioners use is typically guided by the individual learner's needs and goals, the program's goals, and the instructional setting.

Not only learners, but practitioners also want to know whether we are making a difference. How do we know? How do we measure learner progress?

What the Research Says

Community-based adult literacy practitioners often say that informal assessment begins with the first phone call or when the person walks in the door to make an enquiry about learning. From there, practitioners commonly use three forms of assessment: initial/diagnostic, formative, and summative.

Initial/diagnostic assessment takes place when a learner enters a program. This assessment can be either formal or informal depending on the program setting. The initial assessment gives the practitioner information about what

¹ <http://www.literacylearning.ca/>

motivates the individual to return to learning, what their goals are, and what their strengths are. It can be used to explore prior learning experiences and potential challenges or barriers to success.

Formative assessment takes place throughout the teaching and learning process. It provides feedback on progress to both the learner and the practitioner. The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), part of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), conducted an international research project on formative assessment. They identified six key elements of formative assessment:

1. *Establishment of a classroom culture that encourages interaction and the use of assessment tools.* Among other things, this involves creating an environment where learners feel safe to take risks and make mistakes.
2. *Establishment of learning goals, and tracking of individual student progress toward those goals.* When goals are established with the learner, the learning process becomes more transparent.
3. *Use of varied instruction methods to meet diverse student needs.* Adjusting teaching methods to meet the needs and learning styles of individual learners is important for any student success.
4. *Use of varied approaches to assessing student understanding.* Realistic settings and a

variety of contexts are also important.

5. *Feedback on student performance and adaptation of instruction to meet identified needs.* Giving timely, specific feedback with suggestions for ways to improve performance helps practitioners pay attention to what does and doesn't work so they can adjust teaching strategies when necessary.

6. *Active involvement of students in the learning process.* Teaching self-assessment skills and helping learners analyze how different learning strategies have worked for them in the past amounts to "learning to learn." (phrases in italics are from the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 2008, 6-10)

The elements of formative assessment fit well with the principles of learner-centered teaching and explicit teaching. They each begin with the learner and the learner's needs and goals; they focus on learner strengths; and they develop abilities, strategies, and skills within the context of the learner's life.

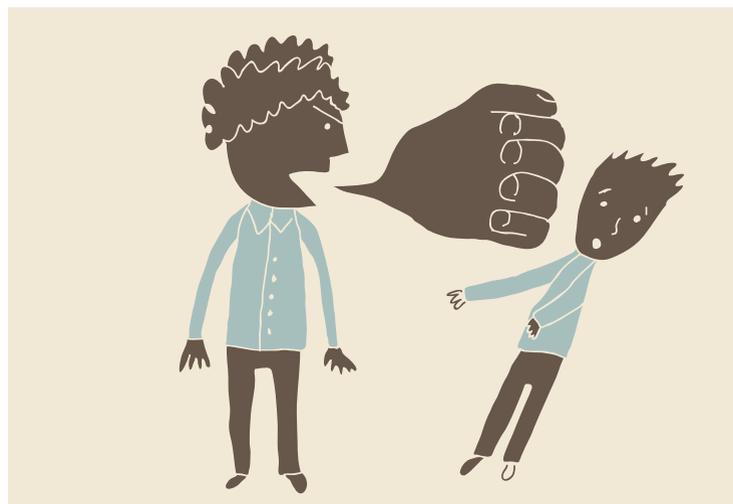
Summative assessment evaluates student learning at the end of a learning cycle or instructional unit, comparing what has been achieved against some form of standard or benchmark. It can be informal or low stakes (for example, in a community literacy program), but it is most often associated with a formal or high-stakes situation (for example for a GED certificate or course credit).

While learner success and growth are sometimes measured in statistics, grades, or numbers, learners and the practitioners who work with them often measure success through the personal stories that describe changes in their lives. As Scottish researchers Sliwka and Tett powerfully state, “learning is assessed through the distance that learners have travelled in reaching their own goals” (2008, Presentation, Slide 10).

What Practitioners Say About Learner Success and Growth

This is what Toni Brown, with the Calgary John Howard Society, told me about a student she worked with at the Calgary Remand Centre:

He had been bullied a lot at school and eventually dropped out. After that, his mom home-schooled him, but it didn't really work out. He got stuck at Grade 6 and as he put it “I kind of froze... I just couldn't learn. I was afraid to learn.” When I saw him, he was in his early twenties. He felt he couldn't get around this block in his head. But he really wanted to do some writing. So we slowly started working on the writing and he kind of took off with it. He wrote pages and pages. And eventually he started to work with the pre-GED book, doing essay writing. He was a really good writer. By the time he left, he had plans



to get his high-school diploma and do postsecondary education. He wanted to take psychology and do all of these things. It was amazing.

Toni added that “the thing about the big changes is that it's not just about the reading and writing—it's about the whole life piece. Because it means a job or a career for somebody.”

Sarah MacKenzie and Alyssa Nicholson work with the Elizabeth Fry Society. They facilitate an innovative six-week program called UNLOCK for women at the remand centre and in the community. Sarah talked about how the program is structured. “We try to make the learning interactive. We pull as many real-life experiences from both ourselves and from the group. At the end of every session we do what we call a personal challenge. Clients are encouraged to take the material that they've just learned and answer questions about how they will apply it to their everyday lives.”

Alyssa said that by the final session of the group, women are more open and able to talk about and share their experiences. These practitioners purposely create a safe, interactive classroom culture and use varied approaches to assess student understanding.

Corrie Rhyasen Erdman has two roles, one as an adult literacy coordinator in Spruce Grove, and the other as pilot coordinator for the Alberta Reading Benchmarks. She told me this story about a learner in her Spruce Grove program:

I don't think she had a clear goal in mind when she began. At first, she needed a tremendous amount of support and encouragement telling her that she could actually learn. Every time her tutor introduced something new, they would spend the first lesson in dialogue with her saying "I can't do this" and her tutor saying "Okay you said that last time and you got through." And she would slowly ease into the learning. Her inner dialogue was preventing her from really believing she was capable. That was four years ago... The next tutor wasn't aware of the dynamic so it was a very different relationship. The tutor came in with the expectation that she could learn so that changed what her learning looked like—it became more focused on learning

and less on fear. Her third tutor is very technical. She is now enrolled at NorQuest College with a goal of entering a social work program. Her tutors all brought her different things and moved her along in different ways. It is a testament to the fact that we need different things at different times.



These different tutors used the principles of formative assessment to move the learner along toward success: they established a safe learning environment, gave constructive feedback, adapted the instruction to meet the learner's identified needs, and actively involved the student in the learning process to help her learn how

different learning strategies worked for her in the past. In this case, her goals were not initially clear, but eventually they became clear as she became more confident in her abilities. This learner was learning how to learn.

What Does This Mean for Adult Literacy Practitioners?

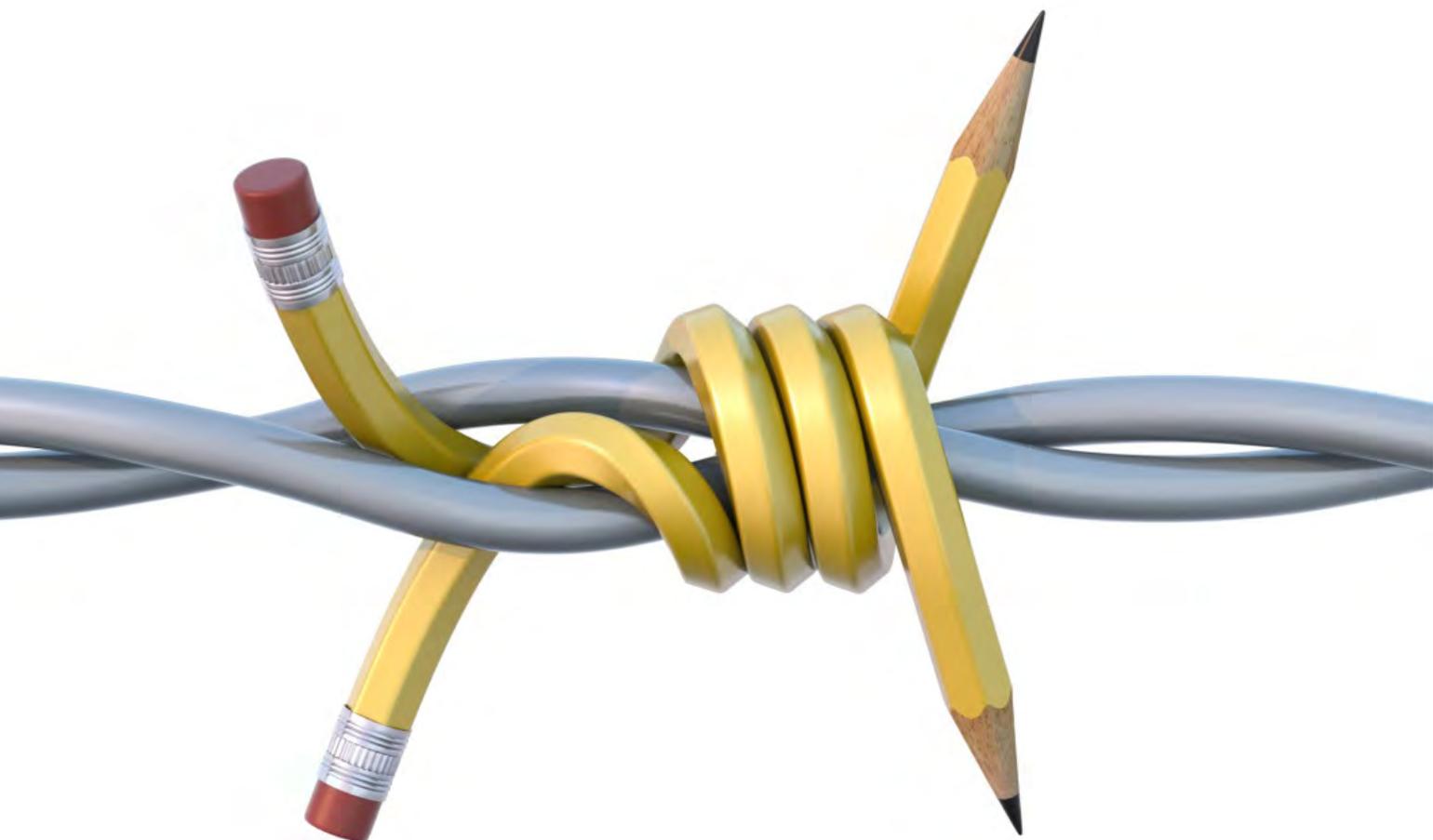
From the research and practitioners' stories, it's clear that assessment is connected to effective teaching practice and includes formal and informal outcome measures as well as intentional, transparent tracking of learner progress. As Sliwka and Tett put it, "learner progress is measured by the changes that occur in relation to their lives as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners" (2008, 11).²

² See full report at http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/7311/assessment-foundation-FULL-REPORT.pdf

Changing Perceptions: Teaching Literacy in Correctional Facilities

Eighteen years ago, in what feels like another lifetime, I coordinated a program on Vancouver Island for women who had been assaulted by their partners, sexually assaulted, or sexually abused. Many of the women had challenges with reading and writing. My job was to explain how the legal system worked, help them prepare to testify, and accompany them through

the trial process. In the context of this work, I provided emotional support and referrals to counselling and other community services. Every day, I saw the impact violence and trauma had on these women's lives. While some were able to pick up the pieces and move on, many felt stuck. Alcohol and drug abuse, depression, eating disorders, suicide attempts, low



self-esteem, unresolved grief, anger and rage, and fear of failure were common. For these women, the prospect of finding a job or going back to school seemed an insurmountable task.

More recently as I've been interviewing literacy practitioners and doing research, I've learned more about the impact of violence and trauma on learning. I heard stories about men and women in the remand centre, people who had committed violent crimes but were trying to turn their lives around. I heard stories about their vulnerability and their own histories of abuse. I learned that even an hour a week of literacy education can make a difference and that people can and do make huge changes in their lives.

What the Research Says

- People in correctional facilities are three times as likely as the rest of the population to have literacy problems.
- 65 percent of people entering Canadian correctional facilities have less than a grade 8 education.
- 79 percent don't have their high school diploma. (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police 2008)

We know that education and literacy are significant issues for people in correctional facilities who also struggle with the impact

of violence and trauma on learning—both the violence they have committed and their personal life histories of violence. Another factor that adds one more layer of complexity for learners and adult literacy practitioners is the “high prevalence of learning disabilities, emotional and behavioural disorders, and mental illness among persons in prison” (Brazzell et al. 2009, 8).

Numerous studies have shown a link between prison-based education and literacy programs and higher rates of successful rehabilitation. A Canadian study found that prison literacy can reduce recidivism by up to 30 percent depending on the level of literacy a person achieves (Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police 2008).

For officials and governments, reducing recidivism and the costs of incarceration are of prime concern. “Every dollar allocated to vocational and basic education programs for offenders yields a 200-300 percent return on investment” (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network 2012).

For individuals in jails, and the adult literacy practitioners who work with them, educational programming is an act of hope and offers a second chance at life. This is how Stefan LoBuglio, Chief of Pre-release and Reentry Services in Maryland's Montgomery County Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, puts it:

The whole enterprise of correctional education—the teachers, the volunteers, the classrooms, the books, the computers—helps humanize correctional facilities and plays a key role in relieving inmate stress and frustration by focusing individuals on positive and constructive activities and relationships. Students benefit directly from these programs by improving their skills and knowledge, and staff—particularly correctional officers—benefit from working with individuals who are more cooperative and better adjusted to their circumstances. More than that, educational programs help elevate the mission and professionalism of corrections from one of warehousing individuals to one of preparing individuals for their futures. (qtd. in Brazzell et al. 2009, 3)



What Literacy Practitioners Said

Sheri Lockwood, a Bow Valley College literacy practitioner, works at the Calgary Remand Centre with men ranging from eighteen years old to the oldest in his seventies. She teaches a cooking program in the morning and a life-management program in the afternoon. The students' skills vary widely. Some are not able to read or write. Others have more education, but still have lower literacy levels. She sees the classroom serving as a sanctuary within the corrections setting.

One of the earliest things that struck me was that one of the fellows said my classroom is a sanctuary for him... Soon after, I attended a Jenny Horsman workshop and watched a video about a group of women that had experienced abuse and family violence. In the video, a woman was talking about the classroom being a sanctuary for them. And all of a sudden I could feel this tear coming down. I got what my learner was telling me. He was an older fellow and hadn't been in jail before. It was a totally foreign environment for him... I realized there is a transition as people come into the classroom, a transition from being a jail person to being a student. A place where you can be yourself and think... I knew I had to trust them, but I

didn't realize the degree to which they have to trust me.

She went on to speak about the impact of violence on learning she sees among her students.

Many of these men have experienced historical violence as children. And they will have done violent things to others. I think one of the things we don't always recognize is the impact of having done something violent to somebody else. Especially if the person is looking at their lives and not wanting to be involved in violence any longer... How do you put yourself back together again?

Toni Brown, a literacy practitioner from the John Howard Society, works one-on-one with men and women, also at the Calgary Remand Centre. She said this about her teaching experiences:

Until you really know someone, you don't know how vulnerable they are sometimes. I've probably lost some people because they've been scared. I've learned a lot about the human piece. I've learned never to assume anything about people. When people can't do their work, you really have to do some exploring around why they're not doing their work. And sometimes people don't understand it themselves. You

have to find out what's going on and usually there is a lot... The biggest thing is that learning is about the whole person. A lot of these people I work with are afraid to learn. So sometimes I feel like I can't get to the reading and writing part because I'm working on communication and letting go of that kind of fear.

Sarah MacKenzie and Alyssa Nicholson, with the Calgary Elizabeth Fry Society, work both in the community and in the Calgary Remand Centre running the UNLOCK program for women. UNLOCK (unlocking new levels of capability and knowledge) was created in response to an Inside Out study that identified a need for women's programming targeted at developing skills and making changes in preparation for returning to the community. The program has six key sessions on: communication skills, emotional coping, relationships, boundaries and co-dependency, developing your potential, and goal setting. Nicholson talks about the flexibility and success of the program:

Remand is a different environment in the sense that the clients aren't mandated to attend but often choose to attend every session of the program that they can. Some clients incarcerated in the remand centre may be there for a shorter period of time and only attend one session. We even have clients who

take the six sessions over and over again, and they are able to pull new information from every session.

It's clear from the information gathered through my interviews that providing educational programming within a corrections' setting requires practitioners who are conscious, flexible, compassionate, and who have knowledge of adult learning and literacy principles. Whether their clients are victims of violence and/or have committed violent crimes themselves, as learners in these settings they experience unique challenges requiring innovative teaching approaches.

Canadian researcher Dr. Jenny Horsman has done ground-breaking work in exploring the impact of violence on learning.¹ Her uniquely interactive website talks about some of the things that come up when working with learners who have experienced violence:

- *Spacing out or dissociating:* The learner daydreams or goes somewhere else in their mind when violent memories surface.
- *Acting out:* The learner may cause trouble in class, hurt themselves, or use drugs or alcohol to numb the pain and the fear.
- *Escaping into the mind:* The learner stays in her head, doing



well in the studies, but feeling disconnected from her body which can result in health issues.

- *Silence:* The learner has difficulty answering questions and is afraid to participate.
- *Lost hope and dreams:* The learner may give up any hopes and dreams, or a belief in a better future.
- *Feeling bad, stupid, and wrong:* The learner may lack self-esteem and avoid learning new things because of a fear of failure. (italicized phrases retrieved from <http://learningandviolence.net/impact.htm>)

¹ <http://learningandviolence.net/index.htm>

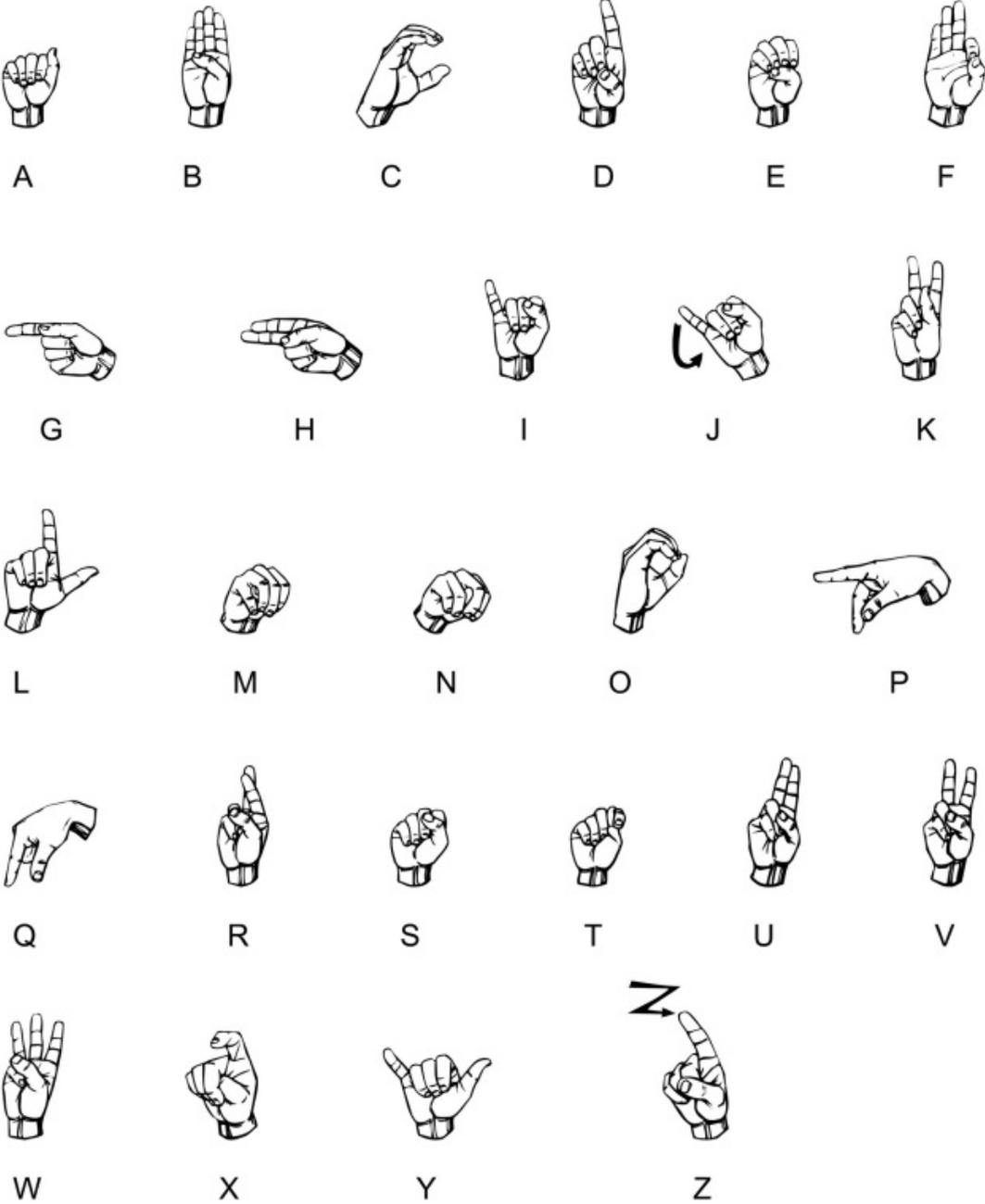
When learners walk through the classroom doors they bring their entire life history with them. It's important for practitioners to develop an awareness of the impact that violence and trauma may have had on their lives. Horsman offers these questions to consider:

- Do you know how many students in your program have experienced and/or perpetuated violence?
- What is the fallout in your school or class from different forms of home and societal violence? What have you noticed about the impact of the violence of war and displacement? Poverty? Hurtful early schooling? Several forms of violence combined?
- Do you see ways in which violence diminishes the spirit and increases the likelihood of continuing student setbacks? (retrieved from <http://www.learningandviolence.net/>)

During our interview, Horsman emphasized that adult literacy practitioners are allies to others' learning journey and asked: "How do we create learning environments that have spaciousness and room for exploration, and work really hard at not creating a sense of shame or judgment? How do we help create a sense of curiosity and openness—a place where learning can flourish?"

As Horsman has illustrated, violence takes many forms: domestic abuse, sexual assault, racism, sexism, homophobia, war, displacement, and historical abuse in residential schools. The list is long. Whether the setting is community, college, or corrections, we will meet individuals whose lives have been touched by violence and trauma. As practitioners we "need to examine our own stories and our relationship with violence if we are going to be open to the programming needed for students who have experienced trauma" (Stewart 2009, 10). Stewart speaks about "moving beyond the 'us-them' way of thinking about students' lives as often traumatized and ours as not." Acknowledging our own humanity and our experiences of violence opens the door, and the heart, to greater understanding, benefitting learners and practitioners alike.

Supporting Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Adult Immigrants as Learners



Years ago, I worked as a facilitator for a literacy program called Pebbles in the Sand, under the umbrella of the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA). The program was for immigrant and refugee women who had low literacy skills in their own language. They recognized that learning English was the key to making a life in their new country. For many, the learning was difficult but these women were full of laughter and optimism. I was constantly inspired by their courage, strength, and resilience.

Recently I learned about a literacy program at Bow Valley College that works with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing immigrant adults. On top of the usual settlement challenges that all immigrants face, these learners deal with another layer of complexity in learning to communicate. First, they need to learn American Sign Language, and then they have to transfer those skills into learning English. Within one literacy program, they are learning two new languages. As a hearing person and adult literacy practitioner, I found this to be a new and extraordinary set of skills to acquire in a new country—an impressive task!

Here is some of what I learned about bicultural learning (Deaf culture, hearing culture, cultures from around the world, and Canadian culture), and bilingual learning (learning a visual language such as American Sign Language and learning English—a phonetic, print language).

What Literacy Practitioners Said

Wanda Becker, a Deaf educator, teaches in the American Sign Language for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) Adults program at Bow Valley College. (At BVC all the instructors in this program have been deaf—such educators serve as strong cultural role models within DHH classrooms.) The focus of this innovative education program is to help adults build their American Sign Language (ASL) skills, and their English reading and writing skills. As part of the program, learners also increase their knowledge of Deaf and non-Deaf culture and learn about local Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing resources and services. Wanda shared her teaching philosophy and passion for the work. She said:

I became really passionate about this work after meeting people who did not know any sign language—or they knew sign language but no written language. Many of these people came from other cultures. I also work with Deaf individuals who were born in Canada or the United States who may have struggled in school with American Sign Language. I work to ensure that all of our cultures are respected equally. I start with where the person is in their language skills and work from there.

Wanda's job is complex. The learners

come from diverse backgrounds (including other countries). Many know sign language from their countries of origin. Others might have some knowledge of American Sign Language. She is working simultaneously with international cultures and Canadian culture, and Deaf culture and hearing culture (i.e., bicultural issues). Her first task is to teach ASL, and second, to help students transfer those skills to learn English reading and writing (i.e., become bilingual).

She finds that one of her biggest challenges is that there is no set curriculum for these kinds of bicultural, bilingual programs.

The Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf is attempting to develop curriculum for kindergarten through grade 12. They are also working on developing curriculum for adults. This includes both immigrants and individuals born in Canada with low literacy. I work with a community of individuals who are working on these issues.

Like Wanda, Brent Novodvorski, a researcher and former instructor in the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Program at Bow Valley College believes that “language teachers need to recognize and appreciate what knowledge and skills are valued, celebrated, and carried in communities—workplace, ethnic cultures, and linguistic. Although it is varied, the curriculum has

the unique position to be evolutionary and reflective of the changing world. The curriculum is the site, or a workbench, for language teachers to wield the values of membership in communities” (in Eaton 2010).

For both Wanda and Brent, the curriculum lives in the educators themselves and is not written down in any text. This means that the curriculum is being constantly adapted within a changing classroom environment. The process relies heavily on the skills and knowledge of the instructors themselves. In addition to learning the two languages, the educators purposely and consciously include learning about the values and importance of Deaf culture and community.

Supported by his research, Novodvorski makes the following recommendations to improve the learning environment for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing adult immigrant learners:

- American Sign Language should be incorporated as the language of instruction.
- DHH learners should not be enrolled in mediated learning environments (hearing classrooms with ASL interpreters).
- Recognize the equal status of American Sign Language and English.

- Ensure that ASL and English are visible as much as possible.
- Teachers should always continue to develop their translation skills. (Novodvorski 2009, 6)

These recommendations resonate with the views of other people working in this evolving area.

What the Research Says

Researcher and educator Charlotte Enns shares her model of the underlying principles and goals in Bilingual Deaf Education Programs. She believes that the primary educational goal is for people to live as bilingual (in American Sign Language and English) in society. Within this model, the Deaf are seen and respected as a distinct culture and the program focuses on developing pride, linguistic confidence, and a Deaf identity. Language and culture are intertwined. Therefore, instructors are Deaf and serve as role models, along with Deaf peers. Evidence suggests that clustering Deaf learners in one class or school results in more successful educational experiences. All Bilingual Deaf Education programs are built on the premise that it is important to establish a first-language base (American Sign Language—ASL). Learners acquire language, cognition, and social structures through ASL. Academic learning and English literacy skills are then built upon this foundation. Learners transfer skills from one language to the

other (through metalinguistic awareness). Instructors teach translation steps and skills through a comparative analysis of ASL and English. ASL is the language of instruction in the classroom (dual curriculum). The goal is to become literate in both languages (Enns 2006, 29-32).

The relationship between signed and spoken languages is complex. It is important for teachers to understand these complexities as well as the key differences between spoken language bilingual programs and Bilingual Deaf Education programs. When these principles are understood and implemented the benefits of first language signing skills can be linked with second language literacy development. (Enns 2006, 27)

Enns’s model shares many of the same principles as those underlying Bow Valley College’s DHH program.

Reframing Deaf Education from Hearing Loss to Deaf Gain

The word *normal* appeared in the English language in the middle of the nineteenth century, coming out of the field of statistics (Davis 1995). It became an organizing principle that provided a means of measuring standards of human biology and behaviour (Bauman 2013, 6). “When the frame of normalcy is the predominant lens through which we see people, we can only conceive of disability as a problem”

(Bauman 2013, 5). Bauman urges us to reframe hearing loss as “deaf gain,” a perspective that sees deafness not as a loss but as “an expression of human variation that results in bringing to the fore specific cognitive, creative, and cultural gains” (10). She goes on to ask us to “consider a more holistic understanding of the human potential for adaptation, neuroplasticity, and overall diversity in ways of knowing and being in community” (24).

I realized that I was using the normalcy frame. I had viewed Deafness as a disability and did not understand the concept of Deaf culture. After speaking with Wanda Becker and doing some research, I opened to a new way of looking at Deaf culture—a way that respects and honours difference and alternative ways of knowing and being. In any educational setting, working with and acknowledging our differences is an important awareness for literacy practitioners to cultivate.

So much is happening at once in a literacy program, including the many dynamics between students, tutors, ourselves, and colleagues. We work in a context of multiple social differences, including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, ability, and culture. Some of the difficult moments occur in the context of these differences; yet our discomfort with thinking or talking about these

differences can limit the possibilities of learning from what is taking place. (Stewart 2009, 4)

There are many issues involved in being a Deaf educator working with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing learners. Race, difference, abilities, exclusion, Deaf culture, and immigrant cultures are just a few of the topics that may come up in the classroom. When Deaf educators work with DHH learners exclusively in their own classes, teaching American Sign Language, and using ASL as the language of instruction to teach English, they are engaging in an overtly political act that honours Deaf culture and American Sign Language as equal to hearing culture and English.

Celebrating Alberta’s Deborah Morgan, Phyllis Steeves, and Lorene Anderson: Three Literacy Cartographers Mapping the Way



Literacy practitioner Deborah Morgan

Because this is the last story in the initial phase of *Stories from the Field*, it’s fitting that it celebrates three extraordinary women. In their own way, each is a literacy cartographer charting new and innovative landscapes in adult literacy in Alberta.

Grassroots to Technology —Deborah Morgan Has Grown Programs with Hope, Heart, and Skill.

Literacy practitioner Deborah Morgan’s work spaces have included a tiny office, a

kitchen table, and on-line learning over the past twenty-seven years but the work has rippled out to change the lives of a wide range of people. It all started in 1986 when Deborah accepted a position as the coordinator of the new Camrose Adult Read and Write Program. The program was among the first twenty-five adult literacy programs in Alberta. Contracted to work twenty hours a week for \$9.00 an hour, with a total budget of \$12,000 a year, her job was to set up an office, recruit and train volunteers to tutor adult literacy students, assess and match students with tutors, keep records, and raise awareness in the community about literacy issues (Morgan 1992, i). This was no small task! New to the literacy field, she hit the ground running.

What I didn’t know academically, I tried to make up for in enthusiasm and hope. And I had a lot of help... The strongest and most valuable support I received for the work I was trying to do was from other literacy workers in the province who were dealing with similar joys and frustrations as they faced the challenges of their own literacy work. (Morgan 1992, ii)

Eventually, Deborah became a member of the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta (LCA) and the Alberta Association for Adult Literacy. Part of this work included managing the LCA's Regional Resource People Project. As her work expanded she met more and more literacy coordinators from all over the province, hearing and sharing stories about literacy work. She felt that the development of grassroots community-based volunteer-tutor literacy programs needed to be recognized and documented as a piece of our literacy history. From this seed, the *Opening Doors* book took root.

Beginning in the fall of 1990 and over the next year, Deborah travelled over 7,000 kilometres by car, plane, and bus to visit forty-two communities in Alberta. She completed eighty-eight interviews with volunteer and paid tutors, literacy coordinators, literacy classroom instructors, and some administrators (Morgan 1992, iv).

I wrote *Opening Doors* because I was so intrigued by all the stories and experiences that literacy workers talked about and felt needed to be honoured, given a voice. I wanted people to hear about and recognize the amazing work that was going on in little communities throughout Alberta. (Personal interview, 2013)

Her work was just beginning. In 1993, Deborah was introduced to a group of women on government assistance who had

been referred by their social worker. The worker considered them to be “severely employment disadvantaged.” As Deborah recalls from that introduction, “years of poverty, abuse and getting bumped around in the system had left the women feeling bruised and afraid. The social worker didn't hold out much hope for my being able to make a difference in the lives of these women, but when I met the women, I liked them immediately” (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 8).

Deborah and the women met once a week in her kitchen, getting to know one another and developing trust. With Deborah's support, they came up with a proposal for a program that “would honour the personal and learning needs of women who had been scarred by the debilitating effects of physical, emotional, and/or substance abuse. The women wanted to call the program ‘Chapters’, because they were looking forward to a new chapter in their lives” (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 8). After almost another year of meetings and presentations, they secured funding and the Chapters program began.

In the winter of 1994, twelve women began meeting in an upstairs classroom of an old building in downtown Camrose. This is how Deborah described her approach to facilitating such a diverse group of women:

Learning has to feel safe so creating a safe environment is really

important. And part of that safe environment is acceptance. People have to feel they belong in this group—that they are worthy of being in this group. They need to feel they are equal contributors—that they have skills that they can share with one another and with the instructor. (Personal interview, 2013)

Writing was a key activity in the Chapters program. Deborah used a “writing from the heart” approach (which initially puts aside concerns about spelling and grammar). Even though their literacy skills ranged from very basic to a grade 8 level, the women wrote stories about their thoughts and experiences. They explored ideas, feelings, personal conflicts, and challenges. Eventually they produced seven publications that were enthusiastically received locally, provincially, and nationally (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 18).

Three years later when funding ran out and the Chapters program came to an end, Deborah and the women decided to put together a handbook documenting their writing experiences/exercises as part of the project’s final report.

One of the Chapters students surprised herself one day when she finished doing some writing about the loss of her marriage. She looked up suddenly and said “I don’t like talking about this stuff, but it sure

feels good to write about it. I feel like I’m writing out loud instead of talking out loud!” (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 21)

And as they say, the rest is history. The Chapters handbook was printed and called *Writing Out Loud*. The women helped to assemble one hundred binders which were distributed to volunteer tutor programs throughout Alberta. This turned into a second, third, and fourth printing as literacy workers across Canada wanted a copy of the resource. After the women sold over a thousand copies in binder form, Grassroots Press in Edmonton agreed to publish and promote a book version of *Writing Out Loud* as a professional educational resource in their catalogue. Soon practitioners in the United States wanted to purchase the book. It was evident that practitioners across Canada and internationally wanted and needed resources to help them teach writing.

This work led to the development of the Write to Learn project in 1998. This project was designed to find out how literacy workers were teaching writing in their programs. It became clear that people wanted “more professional development opportunities and better resources to help them improve their practice and approach to teaching writing” (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 28).

In 1999, Deborah and three students from the Chapters program—Sharron

Szott, Barb McTavish, and Alice Kneeland—travelled across Canada teaching what they called “fearless writing” workshops. By December, 2000, they had delivered forty-seven workshops/presentations in eighteen cities in eight provinces/territories to approximately 980 men and women (582 instructors and 398 students) (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 29).

The project was gaining momentum. Programs around the country were requesting workshops and training. The group needed to find a way to train literacy workers from regions across Canada as Writing Out Loud instructors. Creating a distance education course seemed to be the answer (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 36).

In November 2000, twenty-eight literacy workers from across Canada piloted the first Writing Out Loud on-line instructor training. The work included personal reading and on-line participation using conferencing software (Morgan and Twiss 2010, 41). Literacy practitioners had discovered on-line training and there was no turning back.

In the ensuing years, Deborah continued her work developing numerous on-line learning and professional development initiatives for literacy practitioners. This work culminated in her involvement in a nationwide project called Getting On-line: Distance Education Promising Practices for Canadian Literacy Practitioners (the GO Project). The two-year project

(2007-2009) was designed to research trends, technologies, and promising practices in on-line and distance learning in the literacy field in Canada. The project included *A Research Report on On-line Learning for Canadian Literacy Practitioners*, *A Promising Practices Manual*, an on-line course, and self-directed training modules on the GO website.

In addition to Deborah’s project work, she served as president of both the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta and the Alberta Association of Adult Literacy (precursors to the provincial literacy association, Literacy Alberta). This past year, Deborah came out of retirement to serve as a mentor in the Integrating Foundational Learning project. This work involved helping program staff at the Calgary chapter of the Multiple Sclerosis Society understand what literacy and essential skills their clients needed to make better use of the society’s programs and educational materials.

Teacher, mentor, networker, researcher, writer, and collaborator—with hope, heart, and skill, Deborah Morgan continues to be involved in literacy work from her home in Camrose, Alberta.

Maverick Literacy Practitioner and Scholar Phyllis Steeves Is Challenging the Current Way of Defining Aboriginal Literacy

When Phyllis Steeves talks about her learning journey, she speaks about “the merging of personal, professional, and academic experiences” that brought her to her current work. Phyllis describes herself as a Cree-Metis woman with strong roots in the community of Lac Ste. Anne, Alberta. Lac Ste. Anne is an annual destination for thousands of Aboriginal peoples who make a pilgrimage to the lake for healing and spiritual rejuvenation.¹ Phyllis also calls herself a mother, grandmother, sister, friend, and a daughter, although her parents have both passed away.

Phyllis’s introduction to the formal literacy world came through her work with the Metis Nation of Alberta Association (MNA) in the early 1990s. There, she created an annotated bibliography of Metis-specific literacy materials, and later coordinated a literacy program. Like many practitioners I spoke to, Phyllis didn’t plan on being a literacy coordinator—she fell into it. The work simply resonated with who she was. During this time she began reflecting on what literacy meant for her, as a Cree Metis, and what it might mean for other Aboriginal people.

¹ For more information about the annual pilgrimage see <http://www.lsap.ca/>

Following her work at the MNA, Phyllis went back to school, earning certificates (with distinction) in nonprofit agency management, volunteer management, and fundraising management at MacEwan University. Her heart was in working for



Literacy practitioner Phyllis Steeves

a nonprofit organization and she started working for a progressive, inner-city adult literacy association, The Learning Centre Literacy Association in Edmonton. This was the beginning of over ten years’ work in mainstream literacy.

While working for this association, Phyllis was granted a ten-month sabbatical, a rare opportunity in the nonprofit field. She chose to pursue a master’s degree in International Peace Studies at Trinity

College in Dublin, Ireland. Wanting a change, Phyllis planned to study topics other than literacy or issues related to Aboriginal peoples. Despite her plans to try something new, she discovered that “you can take the woman out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the woman.” Her master’s thesis explored “Cultural Genocide Practices: A Case Study of Canada’s Metis” (Steeves 2003). This work laid part of the foundation for her future thinking and research.

Phyllis returned to Canada and resumed working at the Learning Centre Literacy Association. She continued to seriously think about the various definitions of literacy and what their impact was on Aboriginal people. Literacy as a concept was expanding and becoming ever more inclusive. For example, the terms *computer literacy*, *financial literacy*, and *health literacy* (along with their corresponding skill sets) were now commonly used. These concepts included Aboriginal literacy as a construct (Steeves 2010, 3).

In 2005, she sought a doctorate program where she would have an opportunity to work with Indigenous scholars. She found one in her own backyard: the Indigenous Peoples’ Education program in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. In her doctorate she proceeded to explore the ideas and concepts that she had been musing on for so many years.

“The concept of Aboriginal literacy now encompassed principles of instruction and the ways of being and knowing of Aboriginal peoples” (Steeves 2010, 3). Phyllis wondered whether this was a positive or negative development. “I began to wonder how my grandchildren might be impacted by this inclusion of Aboriginal peoples’ ways of being and knowing under the powerful construct of ‘literacy’ as defined by the dominant society” (Steeves 2010, 4).

The resulting dissertation was called “Literacy: Genocide’s Silken Instrument.” The title is powerful, shocking, and apt. It is a potent treatise on the concept of literacy. Using the metaphor of an orb spider spinning its intricate web, it illustrates how “Aboriginal peoples’ ways of knowing and being have made contact with and become entwined within the concept of literacy” (Steeves 2010, 116). Steeves explores “the actions/events/discourses that facilitated creation of a concept which reframes Aboriginal peoples’ ways of knowing and being under a Eurocentric construct: the concept of Aboriginal literacy” (Steeves 2010, abstract). She suggests that Aboriginal people’s distinct ways of being and knowing are at risk of being erased and lost within these expanding definitions of literacy.

Currently, Phyllis is an assistant professor teaching education students (future teachers) at the University of Calgary. She

admits that she has been stunned by many students' lack of knowledge and awareness of Aboriginal people's history and ways of being, and she is working to change that. "Recently teaching student teachers, I was saddened by the lack of knowledge of the history, hardships, and successes of Aboriginal peoples. Ignorance is still the norm. The good news is this is slowly changing" (personal interview, 2014).

She is also project lead on the Alberta Adult Assessment Framework for Aboriginal Peoples project at Bow Valley College.² Team members are working to create an English-language, user-friendly self-assessment model that will be developed through engagement with Aboriginal adults in urban and rural locations.

Like the spider weaving a web, there is a constant thread weaving through Phyllis Steeves's work. She strives to bring a contextual framework that values Aboriginal peoples' history, culture, and ways of knowing and being to the table. Within that framework, she is simultaneously defining herself and challenging us to join her in critically reflecting on the meaning and impact—real and potential—of the concept of Aboriginal literacy. "Construction of a new web is imminent, its location and architecture is, however, yet to be determined" (Steeves 2010, 117).

² <http://centreforfoundationallearning.wordpress.com/projects-in-progress/alberta-adult-literacy-assessment-framework-for-aboriginal-peoples/>

Lorene Anderson—Bringing Breadth and Depth to Adult Literacy in Alberta

My approach to adult learning is that it encompasses everything from working with people with low levels of literacy to working with people who are in the workplace who may not have quite as low levels of literacy but want to improve their skills. I think that if you don't have the skills to change your world, you don't look at your world to see where it can be changed. (personal interview, 2013)

When someone calls Lorene Anderson an adult literacy specialist, she seems genuinely surprised. She is a modest woman who feels uncomfortable blowing her own horn. As she said in a recent conversation, "I'm not sure that I've contributed to the adult literacy field as much as it has contributed to me." But her education and literacy career, which started thirty years ago in a grade 1 classroom, tells a bigger story.

Although Lorene enjoyed teaching children and honed many of her skills in the school system, she discovered early on that she was passionate about teaching adults. "When you're teaching adults they're not in your classroom unless they're ready to learn. They are there because they need to be."

In 1990 she received a degree in linguistics (a second undergraduate degree) and began teaching English as a second language (ESL) at Bow Valley College. A few years later she completed a master's in education with a focus on adult education. After teaching ESL for almost a decade, Lorene decided to hang out her shingle as an independent consultant specializing in English as an additional language, workplace essential skills, and adult literacy.



Literacy practitioner Lorene Anderson

One of her first projects was developing the ESL Rural Routes initiative with Dawn Seabrook de Vargas in 2000.³ ESL Rural Routes provides support and capacity-building services to adult ESL

providers in rural and small urban communities throughout Alberta. The program especially benefits Community Adult Learning Councils (CALCS) and Volunteer Tutor Adult Learning Services (VTALS) because they provide front-line services supporting newcomers. Rural Routes services include training, workshops, and mentorships by ESL consultants and intercultural specialists. Although Lorene's involvement ended in 2012, the initiative is still going strong under the auspices of NorQuest College.

During the first year of developing Rural Routes, Lorene again teamed up with Seabrook de Vargas to develop and write an ESL Resource Package for Alberta Communities (ERPAC).⁴ The resource package helps new and experienced instructors to plan and deliver effective English-as-a-second-language programming. It is comprehensive, providing information on curriculum development, good practice, adult learning principles, learning styles, cultural diversity, Canadian Language Benchmarks, assessment, instructional practices, and resources.

During these busy years, Lorene completed the Essential Skills Profiler Training and began consulting for Alberta Workforce Essential Skills (AWES). Her education and experience were a natural fit

³ <http://eslruralroutes.norquest.ca/>

⁴ <http://www.norquest.ca/NorquestCollege/media/pdf/educationalresources/ERPAC-via-NorQuest-College.pdf>

for the organization. Conducting learning needs assessments, developing a corresponding curriculum using workplace materials, and facilitating workers' upgrading and training within the essential skills framework were an integral part of her work. One of her many projects for AWES was *Forging Links*, a social sector case study. This project involved partnering with many different agencies and organizations to raise awareness and usage of Workplace Essential Skills (WES) in Alberta and across Canada.

In 2007, Lorene joined the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) registry of experts. As part of her role there she conducted workshops on both their CLB resources and their essential skills resources. She also worked with a team to develop, edit, and pilot various resources.

More recently, in 2011-2012, Lorene worked as the workplace essential skills consultant on the Brighter Futures Project: Building on Family Literacy Programs by Incorporating Essential Skills, an initiative for the Taber and District Community Adult Learning Association.⁵ The project involved research, assessment, evaluation, and curriculum development.

Lorene shows no signs of slowing down. Her current consulting projects

include Alberta Reading Benchmarks, Learner Progression Measures and Supporting Practice Engagement, *WriteForward*, and Promising Practices for Literacy and Essential Skills Programs and Services in Alberta.⁶ She also sits on the board of directors for Calgary Learns, a granting agency that supports foundational learning for adults.

I think that what I bring to most projects is a broad background with many types of learners (ESL, ESL literacy, literacy, and workplace), different providers (rural, urban, college, volunteer, small, large) and different types of instructors (professionally trained to volunteers with very little training). (Personal conversation, 2014)

Although Lorene sums up her skills and experience in her usual modest way, the depth and breadth of her work speaks for her. She is a literacy cartographer mapping the way for practitioners working in the English as an additional language, adult literacy, and workplace essential skills fields in Alberta.

5 <http://en.copian.ca/library/learning/oles/brighter/brighter.pdf>

6 <http://albertareadingbenchmarks.wordpress.com/>; <http://centreforfoundationallearning.wordpress.com/projects-in-progress/literacy-and-essential-skills-learner-progression-measures/>; <http://writeforward.ca/>

A Snapshot of Innovative Practices

Practitioners are generous, enthusiastic, and understated about their innovative practices to support adult learning. What follows is something like a snapshot, not a comprehensive list, of some of the innovations that practitioners shared from their own work.

Using technology to remember



“I use technology every day. Everything I do is projected onto a screen. Everything that’s in front of the student, like their textbook page or their worksheet, is on the screen so they can see and hear it. I also use Adobe Connect or conferencing software to record most of my lessons. The benefits are that at the end of the day the student can go back home and listen to the lesson again. They can reinforce what they learned that day or find out what they didn’t learn” (Glenna Healey, Foundational Learning Instructor, Bow Valley College).

Using text-to-movies technology to create mini movies



The idea is simple, but it’s changed how students engage with science and math. The student picks a math or science concept (from within the curriculum), writes a short script around it, and then types it into a movie maker. Then they create a brief mini movie that can be used for other students down the road. “We have students who can’t stand up and do a presentation, but with these videos they can’t wait until I get them up on YouTube and they can send out the link, put it on their Facebook, and send it out to all their friends and family” (Penny Marcotte, Foundational Learning Instructor, Bow Valley College).

A new kind of book club



“The previous learning advantage coordinator developed a program called the Easiest Book Club Ever. It’s based on reading for pleasure. It’s not just about the academics and the fundamentals and all those really important things. We use ‘easy reads’ and we bring together a group of adults who want to spend six weeks together and read a book over those six weeks. These are adults who might be intimidated by the idea of a traditional book club. We were lucky to be able to integrate it into one of our unique groups that we facilitate for the Ghost River Rediscovery Centre. We brought a group of Aboriginal adult learners into the library and incorporated the Easiest Book Club Ever at the end of the day. The book was *The Lesser Blessed* by Richard Van Camp. We received really positive feedback from the students” (Becky Potter, Adult Literacy and Learning Advocate, Calgary Public Library).

Learner and teacher support



Theresa Wall is a learning support specialist at the Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association (CIWA). The role is the first of its kind there. Theresa works with adult learners who have been referred by educators in basic literacy, Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), and Bridge to Work programs. These are learners “who struggle to acquire a new language within the contexts of their classes and require some form of individualized support to make gains in their language acquisition. The learning support specialist provides learners with strategies to use both inside the classroom and in their everyday lives and also makes recommendations to instructors for rethinking their teaching practices in order to accommodate these learners and ensure their success. With help, support, and accommodation, even struggling learners can succeed” (Theresa Wall, Learning Support Specialist, CIWA). As an added bonus, this consultation service is available to outside educators and agencies.

Community Development Project within a First Nations community



While Trish Pryce was working in a First Nations community, she explored an idea. Her students had a wide range of academic skill levels and an ambivalent connection to school. Through in-class discussions, these students decided that it was a priority for them to develop a youth program. They came up with a general structure and got other people, agencies, and services to help with writing a proposal. The group worked together to figure out where to get donations of furniture, sports equipment, and music. They partnered with the Head Start after-school program to share a space. They fixed up the basement of the church. The after-school program ran from 3:00 to 5:00 PM and the youth program came after until 9:00 or 10:00 PM. There were teaching and learning moments throughout the project development. Students learned skills around budgeting, computer use, and working with others. “It was a moment when I saw how meaningful learning could be, how the energy just shifted once the students started doing something real. And they were using some of the skills they’d learned, to do something real” (Trish Pryce, Adult Upgrading Program, Bow Valley College).

The Education Unit



Toni Brown works one-on-one with male inmates at the Calgary Remand Centre teaching literacy skills. She told me about the Education Unit, a new program being offered within the centre. The ten-week program is a unique collaboration with different agencies coming in to teach classes on various topics. “Calgary John Howard Society does a section on literacy, Alberta Health Services does addictions classes, the library does digital literacy, Community Kitchens teaches cooking, Men’s Health talks about mental health issues, and Momentum did a session on financial literacy. I find that’s why this unit is so amazing because everybody in it has a common goal ... While they’re working on their own addictions in some of the

groups, they can focus on their other learning. They're feeling better about themselves and somebody cares, so there's all these pieces coming together to help people learn" (Toni Brown, Literacy Practitioner, Calgary John Howard Society).

SARAW Program



"The SARAW (speech-assisted reading and writing) program uses technology to help people learn. It's software that's specifically designed for people with disabilities. And it's very easy to use" (Belle Auld, SARAW Program Coordinator and Literacy Practitioner, Bow Valley College).

Violence and the Impact on Learning Gateways for Learners, Tutors, and Teachers



Jenny Horsman is continually updating her interactive Learning and Violence website.¹ There are educational gateways for learners, tutors, and teachers. "The Changing Education page is also an interactive tool for colleges and community-based programming."² The website is like a library with many different rooms" (Jenny Horsman, Literacy Practitioner and Researcher).

Therapeutic Poetry in Corrections



"I was introduced to therapeutic poetry for the first time in a workshop by Margot Van Sluytman. I ended up having her come to work with the fellows. I discovered that I could work with them as well. We talk about poetry and differentiate poetry from prose. Then I present poems. We listen to them, read them several times, and look for places that create a response. I have them write from there. I allow them to respond in whatever way they want. If they are just starting with me and they're really good at art and not good at writing, they will do a picture.

1 <http://www.learningandviolence.net>

2 <http://www.learningandviolence.net/changing.htm>

I had one fellow who didn't write or draw so his responses were in colours. Others write in another language and will sometimes read in that language. I had one fellow who couldn't write so he let me scribe for him ... If we look at the order [of learning] it's listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Many of my students need more voice because their voices have been silenced by so many different factors. Being able to express themselves is really important" (Sheri Lockwood, Literacy Practitioner in Calgary Remand Centre, Bow Valley College).

Alberta Reading Benchmarks



"The Alberta Reading Benchmarks (ARB) are a tool that volunteer tutor adult literacy programs and adult basic education programs liked using.³ One of the ways that it worked well for them was that it gave learners a language to talk about their learning and reading. And it gave them an awareness of their learning. Some practitioners used the benchmarks to develop learning plans built jointly with their learners. They were able to take out relevant descriptors from the benchmarks and say these are the skills and tasks that will help you achieve your goals. So the learning plans laid out very practical smaller goals that the learner could focus on to guide them step by step to their larger goal. It was very much about creating a common language that led to greater awareness about their learning and helped them be more active in their learning" (Corrie Rhyasen Erdman, ARB Pilot Coordinator, Spruce Grove Literacy Program Coordinator).

³ <http://albertareadingbenchmarks.wordpress.com/>

Information, Communication, and Professional Development Needs

One of the purposes of the *Stories from the Field* project was to identify information, communication, and professional development needs as practitioners articulated them.

Common Themes and Values

Many of the adult literacy practitioners valued having an adult literacy hub—a comprehensive adult literacy database that had information on research, innovations, and new developments across disciplines such as English as a second

language, foundational learning, and career programming.

Practitioners in community-based adult literacy organizations and in college-based foundational learning programs appreciated the opportunity to engage in affordable and accessible networking and professional development opportunities. This extended to the use of technology for networking and professional development. In addition to traditional face-to-face contact, people used blogs, webinars, and on-line forums.



People talked about the usefulness of experienced practitioners mentoring new practitioners. Others found it helpful to observe other practitioners in the classroom, and to be observed by a supervisor or peer.

In a college setting, practitioners use the concept of lead hands as a tool for professional development. It works like this: colleagues within a team volunteer to be lead hands on specific subject areas (of interest and relevance). They stay on top of innovations and new developments in that subject and present these at regular team meetings. For example, in the English as a Second Language department at Bow Valley College, instructor Cameron Young has a keen interest in how technology is being utilized in the classroom. Every month he does a “Tech Tuesday” and demonstrates a new tool to his colleagues.

Conclusion

Stories from the Field was designed to highlight the importance of networking, to spark conversations about adult teaching and learning philosophies and practices, to share innovations and challenges taking place in adult literacy, and to celebrate the work of adult literacy and essential skills practitioners working in programs, small and large, throughout the province.

Stories from the Field: Phase 2 will focus on adult learning practitioners delivering non-traditional programs that are specifically designed to address the needs of marginalized learners accessing services in the Bow Valley College region.

We hope that you’ve enjoyed this learning journey and invite you to post your comments and questions on the Adult Literacy Research Institute website.¹

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The Social and Holistic Approach to Numeracy website gives examples of how to use a social/holistic approach when teaching numeracy. See www.socialnumeracy.ca

For more information on learner-centered teaching, check out the Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy website. <https://teal.ed.gov/tealGuide/studentcentered>

This website from Michigan State University elaborates on the concept of learner-centered teaching in a postsecondary context. It has useful definitions, principles to guide practice, and resources. <http://fod.msu.edu/oir/learner-centered-teaching>

This document from the University of Southern California serves as a resource for faculty. It includes an explanation of learner-centered teaching, ideas for implementing it, and tips for engaging students. http://cet.usc.edu/resources/teaching_learning/docs/LearnerCentered_Resource_final.pdf

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