

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

Stories from the Field has been a year-long, informal professional-development project that shares literacy **practitioners' stories** of innovations, successes, and challenges working in the adult literacy field in Alberta. Because this is the last story in the initial phase of this project, **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 they 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 Online: 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 Online 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. 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 peoples.

Following her work at the MNA, Phyllis went back to school, earning certificates (with distinction) in non-profit agency management, volunteer management, and fundraising management at MacEwan University. Her heart was in working for a non-profit 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 non-profit 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 peoples. 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. This concept 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. She proceeded to explore the ideas and concepts that she had been musing on for so many years in her doctorate.

“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 amazingly 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 peoples' 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 peoples' 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. 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).

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.

One of her first projects was developing the [ESL Rural Routes](#) initiative with Dawn Seabrook de Vargas in 2000. 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](#)). 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 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. 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. 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 indeed 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.

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