

**Exploring tutors' and students'  
beliefs about reading and  
reading strategies**

**Rebecca Still**

Exploring tutors' and students' beliefs about reading and reading strategies  
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## Preface

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

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

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

As a member of the RiPAL Network, Rebecca Still investigated questions about tutors’ and students’ beliefs about reading and reading strategies. In this report, Rebecca shares her learnings about the questions and about the research process.

Mary Norton, Facilitator  
The RiPAL Network

## Introduction

*The next concept I learned focused on philosophies, beliefs and theories in the field of literacy. This was such a significant learning . . . for me that it formed the basis of my research question. The articles I read really made me think about my own beliefs and perceptions . . . . As I continued to reflect, read and respond . . . I had more and more questions. New concepts and ideas were exploding in my head . . . So much to ponder and wonder about. But slowly my beliefs began to gel. I found myself trying new things in my program. I even began to question my actions such as “Do I train my tutors effectively?” I focused more on the students and how I could support them in their learning. I began to see how I could do things differently and be a more effective coordinator. (Reflections on learning, December, 2000).*

I became involved in research when I decided to participate in the Alberta Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL) Network project. At the beginning of the project, I took part in an on-line course called Introduction to Literacy Research in Practice. One of the first articles I read was from Quigley's (1997) *Rethinking literacy education. The critical need for practice-based change*.

Quigley introduced me to four basic philosophies of literacy education. He states: “We have a lack of understanding of the philosophical assumptions that guide our perceptions and decisions.” Previously, I had only a vague idea about literacy philosophies. After reading Quigley, I began to question my beliefs and to wonder about the beliefs of other practitioners.

After a great deal of further reading and pondering, I eventually focused my research on comparing tutors' and students' beliefs about reading. I wanted to know how tutors' beliefs impacted on the way they taught and the way students learned. I also decided to examine my own beliefs about reading in relation to those of a student I tutored. I hoped that by looking at tutors', students' and my own beliefs, I would gain insights about how to train and support tutors to do all they could to help students learn.

## Context

I am a coordinator for a rural community-based volunteer tutor adult literacy program. The program I coordinate involves about forty students and twenty tutors a year. Students and tutors enter and leave the program throughout the year, which results in about twenty tutor-student pairs meeting together at any given time. Tutors generally work with one student and are rematched as students leave. Most of the students are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) but there are a few English speaking students who want to improve their reading, writing and math skills.

Students enrol in the program for many reasons. Some want to improve their reading skills in general, while others come for work related reasons. Some ESL students want to learn to read and write English. Tutors become involved in the program through a desire to help someone else or to give back to the community.

I meet with students who wish to enrol in the program. We briefly discuss their reasons for wanting to improve their skills and what they hope to gain from being in the program. For literacy students, I conduct an informal reading assessment to determine their reading abilities and I then share the results of the assessment with them. We also discuss their prior learning experiences and what they are currently doing.

Volunteer tutors also meet with me to discuss their background experience and reasons for tutoring. Tutors participate in about ten hours of training before being matched with a student. The training covers such topics as characteristics of adult learners and how tutors can support adults in learning. I use activities to help tutors understand reading as an interactive process that involves the use of background knowledge, knowledge of language and print cues. I encourage tutors to use materials that are relevant to students and try to show there are many strategies to help students learn to read.

Matching students and tutors is based on a number of factors. Predominant is a belief the pair will work well together based on something the two may have in common, their personalities and my intuition. Occasionally a match is determined by availability of tutors and students as well as where people live, since we are a rural program.

Students and tutors usually meet for about two hours a week, for as long as both wish to remain in the program.

Before a tutor and student meet, I share with the tutor the results of the assessment and any other information which may be beneficial in the tutoring session. Then the tutor works with the student to determine learning goals and to plan strategies and materials to use. I continue to work with the tutor by offering suggestions and ideas as needed.

## Developing My Research Question

The focus for my research developed as I read research articles and related them to my practice. As mentioned at the beginning of my report, I started to wonder about literacy practitioners such as myself: Do literacy workers lack understanding of literacy philosophies? Do we need to address this to make changes to our programs? I wanted to know if practitioners were clear about their philosophies and how they affected their work.

My readings kept me thinking about the need to change someone's (not sure whose) perspective on literacy. I had experienced an 'aha' moment after reading a number of articles and I wondered if other practitioners understood the different philosophies of literacy. However, the more I read, the more diverse my questions became. I drafted several different research questions before I finally settled on the question of this study.

At first, I changed my focus from practitioners' philosophies to tutors' perceptions of literacy and whether they passed these onto their students. I became interested in finding out the tutors' beliefs about reading and whether the training I provided helped them meet their students' needs. Ceperano (1995) researched tutors' strategies and practices and concluded "that many volunteers do not implement strategies and practices currently recognised as most effective but tend to implement strategies to which they themselves were exposed as learners" (p. 56).

Then I read O'Brien's (1989) article about students' concepts of literacy learning; she notes that "some students have definite views of how they should be instructed" (p. 302). I began to wonder whether students in my



program also have definite views about reading and I revised my question to focus on students' views of reading. My question became: "What are the students learning and what contributed to that learning? Is their learning due to their own perceptions of the reading process, or some particular method or strategy of the tutors?" I wondered if the students' needs were being met. I wondered if their skills and strengths were being built on and if the learning was relevant to the students' goals, interests and needs.

Russell (1999) examined the assumptions that teachers and students have towards writing. She found that teachers and students "appear to be speaking two different languages" (p. 2). Given my previous questions about reading, Russell's findings prompted me to wonder if the reading views of students and tutors might also differ. If so, how might these differences affect tutoring and learning? How could I address these differences during tutor training?

Eventually I focused my research on a comparison of tutors' and students' perceptions about reading. I wanted to know how possible differences impacted on the way tutors taught and the way students learned. I also decided to look at my own perceptions, as well as at the tutor training I do, and whether my perceptions differed from the tutors' and students' perceptions.

## **Reading Theories and Instructional Models**

Articles by Purcell-Gates (1997) and Fingeret (1992) introduced me to frameworks for understanding reading theories and related models for teaching and learning. Purcell-Gates reviewed theories that 'emphasised the role of letter and word recognition, . . . theories that emphasised the role of omprehension, . . . and newer theories that highlight the role of social and cultural context in the reading process" (p.1). Purcell-Gates also discussed "balanced theories" of reading and described a related instructional model which emphasises comprehension and use of meaningful learning activities and includes print-based skill development. Some teachers who advocate a balanced approach may introduce print-based skills in isolation,

along with reading relevant texts, while others aim to teach print-based skills in the context of relevant and meaningful text.

Fingeret discussed literacy as skills, tasks, practices, and critical reflection and action. Literacy as skills refers to literacy as a set of skills that need to be learned regardless of the context. Literacy as tasks focuses on applying skills for a specific purpose, while literacy as practices is accomplishing tasks within a social setting. Finally, literacy as critical reflection and action refers to literacy as a means for adults to challenge and change social situations and systems.

Reading these articles helped me clarify my own understanding of reading, which reflects a balanced view and focuses on using literacy in meaningful contexts. This understanding of reading provided a framework for observing and discussing tutors' and students' views of reading and their reading and tutoring strategies.

## **The Research**

### **Participants**

Four men and two women, including myself, participated in the research. Three students and one tutor are men. The other tutor and I are women. I asked the students and tutors to participate in the research as they were the only pairs in the program focusing on literacy at the time of the research.

All but one of the students spoke English as a first language. The one student who spoke French as a first language had most of his schooling in English. Two students were at a beginning level of reading, and one was working at a higher level. Students and tutors had been in the program for varying times, from less than a year to a few years.

All participants signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the research. They gave permission to use either their names or pseudonyms.

## Method

To gather information, I used a semi-structured interview with students and tutors and observations of students reading. I also wrote down my own perceptions of reading. I wanted to consider whether the tutor training I offer differs from the tutors' perceptions, and also compare how I actually teach with my students' perceptions.

I developed two interviews, one for tutors and one for students (see Appendix A). The interviews were based on one developed by Norton (1992), and on the concept of metacognitive goals in reading developed by Billingsley and Wildman (1990). I also considered Heathington, Gambrell and Boser's (1986) inventory to assess adult beginning readers' attitudes, beliefs, feelings and behaviours toward reading. The question "What is reading" asked to low level readers by Gambrell and Heathington (1981) also shaped the interview.

The interview questions were grouped into the following categories: purpose of reading, views of readers, early learning experiences, and strategies of reading. When interviewing the tutors I asked what they remembered from tutor training and how they were using this in their tutoring. During the student interviews I had a selection of different types of reading material they could refer to when I asked "How do you decide what you will read?" Each participant was interviewed individually for one-to-two hours and each interview was taped.

Following the interview with the students, I asked them to orally read a selected passage so that I could observe their reading. I wanted to compare what they said about their reading with the way they read. Gambrell and Heathington (1981) noted that poor readers may be unable to articulate how they read; therefore metacognitive questions such as those asked in my interview may not adequately reflect an adult's understanding of reading. Padak, Davidson and Padak (1990) also noted the importance of differentiating between strategy awareness and strategy use. An adult might mention use of a strategy but not appear to be using the strategy when reading.

I did not pilot the interviews due to the small number of people I was interviewing. During the first interview I did wonder how closely I should follow the questions. I had learned that during a standardised test one needs to read the questions as they are without changing or expanding on the wording. At first, I thought I needed to do the same with the interview. However, I didn't always get enough information with just the question, or else I needed to clarify what had been said. Therefore I expanded on questions as needed.

## **Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and analysed. I grouped the information for each participant into three or four themes based on the interview questions. The groupings were purpose of reading, concepts of readers and reading, reading strategies and, for the tutors, supporting learning. I read through the transcripts and noted concepts which corresponded with the categories. In order to compare tutors' and students' responses, I organised responses for each pair into a chart with tutor responses in one column and student responses in another. The interviews also provided background knowledge about tutors' and students' early learning experiences. I then interviewed each participant a second time to clarify certain aspects of the first interview.

The oral reading tapes were also transcribed. I analysed the miscues in each reading, deciding if the student was using context and background knowledge, print cues or both, and compared what students said about reading with how they actually read. I continued to analyse as I wrote the report, as I read articles related to my learnings and as I discussed my analysis and learnings with the RiPAL Network facilitator.

## **Learnings**

In this section I report on and compare concepts of readers and reading, reading strategies and supporting learning for each student and tutor pair. Each comparison is followed by insights and implications for tutoring. The section ends with the tutors' comments on tutor training.

## **Colin and Gayle**

At the time of the interview Colin and Gayle had worked together for one year. Colin, who is in his late twenties, found school difficult. He says he was never good at reading and remembers having only one teacher that took an interest in his reading. She would stay after school and help him read and do his homework. “After that teacher it was all down hill,” he says. The teachers in high school didn’t help and Colin eventually left school. Colin enjoys working with animals and farming and is currently working as a labourer. He wants to increase his reading skills so he can move on to better jobs. Colin reads at a beginning level and has worked with a tutor in the program for two years.

Gayle, who is in her twenties, works as a consultant. She always enjoyed reading and doesn’t remember a time when she didn’t read. Gayle had a strong desire to read and figured out how to read at a very early age. Her grade one teacher realised she could already read and gave her extended material and never made her feel she was different or singled out from the rest of the class. Reading and learning have been positive experiences for Gayle but she understands that other people have problems with learning. This has led her to help others learn to read. She has been a tutor with the program for three years and has worked with a number of students. Gayle attended about ten hours of tutor training and has occasional contact with me as I learn new ideas that may help her with her student.

## **Concepts of readers and reading**

When asked about the purpose of reading, Colin and Gayle suggested they read for knowledge and to gain new information. Colin mentioned that it’s “difficult to read for more than just information.”

Gayle and Colin had a similar view about good readers. Gayle said a good reader is someone who reads a lot and Colin said a good reader is someone who picks up a book everyday. Gayle also said good readers enjoy reading and feel they are good at it. While Gayle considers herself a good reader, Colin said, “It’s not too often that I find a book that I pick up and read.”

Colin and Gayle also agree that it is important to read everyday to retain their skills. Colin noted his reading abilities drop when he doesn't read at home. Colin also noted he needs to "read more" and "try more often" to read but he "just doesn't have the patience."

Colin said he will pick up something and if it looks interesting, he will read it, even if it's not an easy read. "I like a challenge so I would try it for awhile." However, he gets frustrated when he can't read.

*I get annoyed, then I have to close the book up and leave for a few minutes. I usually understand the sentence or the paragraph. It's just the bigger words in it. I can't really sound out and get mixed up. It's the bigger words that bother me.*

Thus Colin understands the need to practice but finds reading difficult and therefore not enjoyable.

Gayle said she reads material she finds interesting but she will also read "anything that catches [her] eye." Nicholson (1998) notes that readers who read words automatically find it difficult not to read signs, billboards and similar materials.

Colin, on the other hand, only focuses on material he finds interesting. When I handed him a pamphlet on job futures and asked if he would read it he said, "It looks kind of boring." I introduced him to a variety of reading material and asked if he would read any of it. He chose only the material he had an interest in. When Colin chooses material he is interested in, he is able to use his background knowledge and context to read.

## **Reading strategies**

Colin's descriptions of his reading strategies, along with Gayle's and my observations, suggest that Colin is a meaning-oriented reader. He said in the past he relied a lot on the pictures to help him read. Now, he wants to try and read the words first before looking at the pictures. Colin also monitors for meaning. Gayle observed that "If he starts stumbling and

that doesn't make sense, he starts over and then reads the sentence again, on his own, I don't prompt that. If it's not coming for him then he stops and starts over."

I also observed Colin's monitoring for meaning when I asked him to do some reading. Although his reading was slow he frequently self-corrected each time an incorrect word distorted the meaning. Colin would also reread sentences to make sure he had read them correctly. I noted that he didn't try to sound out unknown words. Instead, he paused and then said the words correctly. It appears Colin is reading using context clues.

Colin said he has problems with the rules of sounding out. "That doesn't always stick in my mind, [how to] sound the word out, like the o being silent." This would suggest he is less skilled in using print-based strategies to figure out unknown words. Colin will ask for help with words he doesn't know. However, he will quit if he gets stuck too often.

Gayle's strategies include skimming to find the information needed. However, if it's something a person needs to know "stuff you may have to call back at some point, you read more directly, make a point to understand it better." Gayle always turns to the dictionary for help understanding unknown words if she can't figure them out from the context. With work related reading she will ask someone who has more knowledge to explain a concept.

As a fluent reader, Gayle has a wider range of reading strategies than Colin. Gayle varies her reading strategies based on what she is reading, whereas Colin is learning basic word identification skills.

## **Supporting learning**

In order to become a better reader, Gayle says readers "have to have the skills, the phonics, the basic stuff in learning first, before they can become a reader. That foundation has to be there . . . to build upon to become a good reader." She also states that they need to find topics they like and spend time on reading. Gayle uses the Language Experience



Approach to help with Colin's reading. "I ask about what he's done this week, write it down and have him read over it." Gayle and Colin recently worked through a safety manual and open book test required for Colin's work. Gayle also uses easy readers and an occasional newspaper article with Colin. This suggests Gayle understands the need to introduce word identification skills in meaningful contexts.

However, although Colin said it is important to have reading material that is interesting, Gayle observed that even when Colin doesn't like the subject matter he will work with her. "He said, 'This is a stupid story.' I said, 'We get through this the second time with no mistakes and we don't have to do it again.' He got through it quite well." Gayle says Colin is very open to learning and is always willing to do what she suggests.

When it comes to word identification, Gayle says she struggles to understand Colin's reading.

*I think he's dyslexic and that's scary. I don't know what he's seeing and I can tell how he's twisting things at times. But I don't know how to work past that. We're just reading and he's getting better at the visual recognition. We've been working on 'know' and I just say that the k is silent and he's able to place a finger over that and sound out the rest. We're getting the auditory and visual to go in sync.*

Colin says having his tutor help him sound out words has made a difference. "She helps me with little things that I should know."

## **Insights/Implications**

Both Gayle and Colin have a meaning-oriented view of reading and believe that reading will improve through practice. However, Colin needs to develop print-based word identification strategies. He does believe he should sound out unknown words, but he doesn't use this strategy when he is reading. Gayle sees phonics as one of the "the building blocks" and works to introduce them in the context of meaningful reading. However, it appears Gayle is also unaware of other



strategies which will help Colin to use print cues. Further assessment about Colin's print-based strategies could provide insights for instruction and I could discuss with Gayle other strategies which could be used.

Although Gayle generally uses material of interest to Colin, they sometimes use material which is not interesting. Perhaps Colin could be encouraged to bring in materials of interest.

## **Randy and George**

Randy and George had worked together for a couple of months at the time of the interviews. George was helping Randy to read math and science questions in preparation for writing an apprenticeship exam.

Randy, in his early-forties, found school frustrating. He never liked to read out loud in class. He felt that if his reading problem had been understood and he had received the help he needed, then he wouldn't have fallen so far behind. Randy eventually left school and joined the workforce. Later, he went back to school and increased his reading and writing skills.

George, who is retired, owned his own business. However learning wasn't always so easy for him; he says he couldn't claim he was a reader until he was 25. He struggled in school and didn't enjoy reading out loud. However, he eventually went on to college and university. Through a lot of hard work he earned a doctorate and is presently furthering these studies. As a result of his experiences George has a lot to offer to someone who is struggling as he once did. He has been a tutor with the program for one year and has worked with a number of students. He attended ten hours of tutor training and continues to seek advice from me on ways to help his students.

## **Concept of readers and reading**

Both Randy and George read for a specific purpose. At the time of the interview Randy was reading to pass an exam and George was reading to advance his academic standing.

Randy reads things he finds interesting and to understand issues better, such as what is happening in the community. Randy has another purpose for reading as well, “I’ve gotten into trouble and I’ve been taken advantage of because of not reading properly. I want to avoid that in life. Read, because you get into trouble by not reading. [Reading] makes life easier.”

George reads to learn,

*not to gain information as such that I can write an exam on, I read in order to gain an understanding of the intent of the writer. . .to understand how they think and why they think the way they think. I’m not just reading words, or literature. I’m reading a person, their background, their ideals, prejudices and philosophy.*

Randy and George agree that time spent reading improves readers’ skills and that reading should focus on material of interest. George also feels that the reading environment helps. He said a library or a study room is a good reading environment.

Randy also emphasised the need to read interesting articles. “I look to see what is interesting. If I find an interesting article then generally there’s a bit more interest in reading it.” Randy prefers to read short articles rather than a big book or a novel. He said he would lose interest in a novel while the short articles are more encouraging to read.

George said you should “be able to relate, not to just the words, but to the meaning of the words, and why the words were written.” He said readers need to set their own goals and not read for the benefit of others: “If you’re reading to become a better person, then what you’re doing is worthwhile. But if you’re doing it only to meet a particular requirement or criteria, I don’t want you to do it.” Randy and George also agree on what makes a good reader. To Randy, a good reader is someone who reads well out loud. He thinks “of someone that could read a child’s book and put expression into the words.” Also, people who read and write poems can “put expression into it better.” When asked what would make a person good at reading he replied, “to be able to read out loud in the classroom

and make it interesting, reading directions and anything like that. That's understood by everybody, they're not puzzled from what you've said."

George didn't like to read out loud when he was younger. However, as he went on to college and university he found a desire to read aloud because he discovered he could "articulate the feeling of the writer." He further stated that he

*was reading what the person who had written it was saying. I was trying to read it the way they were thinking. Now I love to read publicly and otherwise because I think I can express the writer's feeling behind the words. Words are life.*

## **Reading strategies**

Randy's challenge is to understand what he's reading. He states, "I'll read and I don't understand exactly what they're saying." However, he has developed a few strategies to cope with comprehension difficulties.

At first Randy relied on other people.

*If I've gotten a letter and I didn't understand it, I'd get somebody else to explain what the letter was saying so I could make sense of it. I would get them to explain exactly what it was saying. Now, I can read a little bit better and can read it on my own.*

Randy said he now will go back and reread to make sense. He knows he needs to "spend more time reading a passage for understanding" and he's not always happy about that. "I think I have to read it over more than I should."

Other strategies he will use include looking at the picture to help make sense of what he is reading. As well, Randy uses the dictionary. "I'd read through it first and then go to the dictionary as a second choice, and try to find out exactly what they're saying." When it comes to making sense of other material, he stated

*I read parts of a book, I then put them all together and make sense. When I'm watching a show I pick out some words that I'm not understanding and write them down. Looking them up and learning new words makes it more interesting.*

George also works on making sense of what he reads. "I usually take a paragraph and I'll read the first one or two sentences and then I'll skim through the last two sentences and see if they relate. If they don't the paragraph is meaningless." George uses context as well as other resources when he reads:

*If I have a good grasp of the subject matter then that particular word can be lost . . . if it's relating to the paragraph or subject matter in general. But if it's related to the subject in particular then I have to find the meaning of that word. I will go to a thesaurus first to understand the basic root of meaning. Computers have a thesaurus . . . and it's neat to be able to look at a word and search for other words that have similarities.*

It appears that George and Randy use similar strategies to read, although George has developed more complex strategies. George was beginning to share some of these strategies with Randy as noted in the following section.

## Supporting learning

When asked how he introduces new reading material, George replied,

*New reading material has got to be relevant to where the student's interests lay. When you're trying to read something and you can't identify or relate to it or get a picture from your mind, it's almost impossible . . . teach them on their level with images they can identify.*

When Randy struggled with comprehending a selection, George would rewrite the sentence so he could understand it better. For example:

*[With science and math instructions] I would take a paragraph explaining the mechanical advantage. I would re-write it and have [Randy] read it in*

*both styles so he could get a better understanding of the mechanical advantage. I would reconstruct the sentence in order to understand it better.*

George also worked on association with Randy.

*Memory was very poor with the students I've had, so association and relationships have been the key. [Randy] was having great difficulty in trying to understand the meaning of the sum, the product, the difference and quotient. He couldn't get those words so he used an acronym in order to help remember. We were talking about hanging picture posters on his van, his gearshift, so he could see these images on his van . . . and recall them.*

George encouraged Randy to use comprehension to identify unknown words. He said he would

*wait until [Randy] was finished the sentence. If he mispronounced the word in such away that it distorted the meaning I would stop him. If it didn't [distort], I would let him go on to the next sentence or the next portion of the reading . . . . If it posed a problem, I would refer back, 'this word here you mispronounced. How do you pronounce this word?' So that the next reading would be more fluent when it came to that word.*

George also uses the concept of phonemic awareness as a print-based strategy. He tells students,

*don't try to memorise [the word], try to feel it, because you can't remember it. . . . It's difficult to explain to the student who was trying to read phonetically that [silent] letters aren't sounds. How do you explain to a student who is learning to read that those letters shouldn't be there in the first place? . . . If I could take the sight away and relate to what they were [hearing] and what they were feeling [it could help] to overcome the phonetic terms.*

George uses this strategy in conjunction with an oral reading approach. He encouraged Randy to

*read it out loud . . . you are not only feeling the vibration, you're not only seeing the words, but you are actually also hearing those particular words being*

*generated through the mouth [and] through the ears. . . . As a result you get a much greater impact on reading.*

When asked how his tutor helped, Randy focused on comprehension:

*We go through the words and make sure I'm understanding them right. Reading it to make sense in the math, make sure I'm not making a mistake in the question. He's explaining it different ways from when I was in the classroom. We'll read it through together and he'll explain it because I'll miss the words that's putting them together properly.*

Randy further states, “Relating it to something else helps quite a bit. We work it out then look at root words, . . . then we look at the meaning of the prefix and suffix and all that.” He further stated it’s easier to find the answers “if it’s something I have an interest in and then you ask questions about it after.” This would support Gambrell and Heathington’s (1981) idea that “only when told the purpose for reading was to tell information to someone else did students respond it was important to understand” (p. 220).

## **Insights/Implications**

Both George and Randy believe they should read for meaning. George has developed some strategies that he found effective for himself and he has passed them onto his student. Randy appeared to find them useful as well.

## **Jack and Rebecca**

Jack and I had worked together for one year before the time of the research. Jack, in his early forties, liked going to school when he was a child but had problems with the other students. Later in school he said he spent more time fighting and in the principal’s office than studying.

Eventually, he had a choice to either go to school or to work. He decided to work instead. Jack enjoys working with his hands and therefore he is a good carpenter and mechanic. He is working as a mechanic in a large

industry. He went back to school a few times and felt he always did better with a tutor. Jack reads at a beginning level. He has worked with a tutor in the program for one year and is committed to improving his reading and would eventually like to get into an apprenticeship program.

I have worked in the field of adult literacy for twelve years. I have a Bachelor of Education degree and part of my studies focused on the reading process. Although I initially started working with children, I have since changed my focus to adults. Jenkins (1995) argues that literacy acquisition is the same for both children and adults. I also have observed that the process of reading is the same for both. For many years I worked with adult ESL students, but recently I changed my focus to literacy students and decided to work with an adult literacy student.

### **Concept of readers and reading**

Jack reads mainly because he needs it for his job. “I read all the safety signs at work. I will read some of the notes on the white board and I do look at the bulletin board.” But he also reads “to fit in with the rest of the people. I want to be like everybody else.” Jack understands that reading can help him with learning. “I like reading commercials because I learn. I would like to read an owner’s manual on heavy machines.”

Jack knows he needs to read if he’s to reach his goals. “That’s one of the reasons why I came back [to the program] in the first place because before I wasn’t getting anywhere.” He further stated, “I’d like to be able to read pretty well anything.”

I also read to increase my knowledge and understanding. If I’m curious about a topic, I will read for more information. My eyes are automatically drawn to print, and, like Gayle, I find it difficult not to read signs and billboards. I also read for pure enjoyment of a story.

Jack and I have similar views about what makes a good reader. I believe the more we read the better we get at reading. Jack stated “more practice,

always more practice.” He said a good reader is a person that reads all the time: “He’s always got a book at every coffee break and every day he gets to grab a book and read it.” When asked how he would rate himself as a reader he said, “Poor.” He further stated, “If I had someone with me I’m not as nervous to read.”

Jack and I also have some different ideas about reading. Jack stated, “Reading is reading every single word on the page.” On the other hand, I believe we don’t read words, we read thoughts and ideas strung together. I believe that we read from context using our knowledge of print, syntax and our knowledge of the world.

### **Reading strategies**

Jack likes to use picture cues to read. “If I had pictures along with it I could read a lot better or if I go through it first.” I observed Jack using this technique. He would read over a section silently, look at the picture and read it over again, silently. I also observed that he was using some print cues. He looked at the word shampoo and read soap. It appears he recognises certain letters in a word and will use these along with context to predict the word.

However, Jack mentioned having difficulty with seeing the print.

*I’ll see a few words and then after that it’ll just be a blur. If I don’t look at it too long I’ll see just the words. If I look at it too long it’s just a blur.  
Poof! All the way down the page.*

I have looked at a variety of ways to assist Jack with seeing print. Jack has difficulty with word identification which may result in his not being able to see individual words. He did say, “I’ll blank them out and I’ll read the words I do know. If it doesn’t make sense, I’ll just blank them out.”

Jack said he found it easier to read with tapes. “I would listen until I could read it. I wouldn’t give up.”



When it came to meaning-oriented cues, Jack said,

*I'll read the words I do know and I grasp it from there. I'll continue on reading until I get it. Sometimes it takes me four to five times reading it but I understand it after a little while. If I don't understand it then I'll ask somebody, if I don't know the meaning of the word.*

I also observed Jack ask for help with words he didn't know. He also asked for help when he had read the word correctly but wasn't sure if he had. Jack is still working to gain confidence in his reading abilities.

Meanwhile, I use a variety of strategies depending on what I'm reading. If I read schedules, I quickly scan for information. When I read to increase my knowledge of a topic, I read slower with more concentration. I also connect what I read with what I know. In reading for pleasure, I pay little attention to actual words, rather I create images in my mind. If I encounter an unfamiliar word, I read on for context clues. I don't always try to pronounce words correctly, but occasionally I will look up a word in the dictionary for meaning as well as pronunciation.

### **Supporting learning**

Since I support teaching reading in meaningful contexts, I involved Jack in relevant activities such as learning to write cheques. To assist Jack with print-based skills I would use skill workbooks. We also discussed metacognitive reading strategies. These discussions seemed to help Jack acquire a clearer understanding of reading.

Whenever Jack came to an unknown word, I would wait until the end of the sentence or paragraph to see if he would self-correct based on context. If he didn't, I would ask Jack to block out the word, read to the end of the sentence and then predict what he thought the word might be.

When asked about the help he is receiving, Jack commented,

*Now I'm doing more fluent reading than I was before. Before I was really scared of it. Now I'm not so scared of it. I will make an attempt and do it . . . now I feel more relaxed. I'm not nervous about it.*

*I have a decent tutor, she understands . . . I find it helpful just having her there . . . . If I make a mistake, I'll ask her. . . . If I'm with a tutor and I read out loud, if I make a mistake she'll correct me, or I will correct myself. I'll read it over again. It seems like every time I was out of school [and] I had a tutor, I did great . . . . Why would you do good with a tutor and not with a teacher? . . . Since I've been coming here . . . everything that I've been doing seems to be helping.*

## **Insights/Implications**

Jack has acquired some confidence in himself as a reader and has learned some word identification strategies. Although the tutoring strategies I used were helpful for Jack, an expansion of my own understanding of word identification strategies would have provided me more options to use with him.

## **Tutor training**

In the interview, I asked tutors what they learned about reading from the training I provided, and if it changed the way they understood how adults learn to read.

Gayle remembers the concept of learning styles from her training. “I learned not to inflict your learning style on someone else . . . :You learn this way, that doesn't mean they're going to learn the same way.” When asked if she remembered anything else she replied “That was a long time ago.”

George wanted to be a keen participant but found the training somewhat confusing.

*I wanted to know how to teach and I wanted to be perfect at it. Yet I knew I couldn't be perfect because there was so much to learn and the more material you . . . asked us to read and absorb the [more it] overwhelmed me.*

He further stated, “What you taught me I wasn't using. Although it was good background material, it was good reference material but, how do I

teach this individual?” George stated the material that was available provided a secure foundation upon which to build. “But I found I had to move off that foundation to be at the level of the student.”

## Reflections on My Question

The purpose of my research was to compare tutors' and students and perceptions of reading and whether possible differences had an impact on the way tutors taught and students learned. I discovered that all three tutor-student pairs had some similar views about reading and the reading process. They all agreed a good reader practises and reads a lot. Tutors' responses supported a balanced theory of reading in which they encouraged reading for meaning, as well as using relevant reading material to teach print-based skills.

Students also focused on reading for meaning. Colin and Jack used context clues to identify unknown words and Randy also used context as one of his strategies. However, Randy doesn't rely on context clues to the same degree as Colin and Jack. On the other hand, Colin and Jack have few print-based strategies to assist them in decoding unknown words.

Although I did not discover any major differences between tutors' and students' perceptions, I did discover there is an impact on the way tutors teach and students learn. George appears to be helping Randy with his reading needs but Gayle and I are having difficulty in helping our students. Part of this difficulty is a result of not knowing what print based strategies these beginning readers need.

In a recent large scale study of word identification and comprehension strategies of Adult Basic Education students, Campbell and Malicky (2001) found that adults at all reading levels are able to make effective use of their knowledge as they read. They concluded that programs which emphasise the use of knowledge to comprehend and identify words are appropriate for beginning readers. They also support a balanced approach to teaching

that encourages the integration of meaning based and print-based strategies, as well as providing instruction according to individual student's needs.

Tutors' approaches to tutoring reflect a balanced theory but it's unclear how much of this is due to the training I provided. However, since I incorporate a balanced theory into my training it's possible some of their understanding of the reading process is due to the training. But, I feel the tutor training I provide hasn't helped tutors to consider a variety of reading strategies for working with literacy students. This is partly due to the fact I have not been really clear about reading and tutoring strategies myself.

Ceprano (1995) states "volunteer curricula should be designed to provide knowledge of a variety of teaching approaches and techniques that can facilitate the adult learner's acquisition of literacy skills." I need to introduce a variety of reading strategies into my training.

Thistlethwaite (1994) provides a variety of word attack skills which are integrated with relevant reading material. Gayle might use the mental modelling process suggested by Duffy, Roehler and Herrmann (1988) where the tutor models the mental process of reading. Although I did not use the mental process of reading with Jack, we did discuss the reading process at great length.

Gayle and Colin might discuss together what a good reader is. The questions developed by Padak, Davidson and Padak (1990) may provide a means for further exploring Colin's understanding of the reading process.

## **Conclusion**

I believe I have always had a particular view of reading but it was undefined. Reading through the articles and conducting the research has helped to clarify my own perception of reading. Also, not only did I gain a better understanding of how students and tutors perceive reading but I also discovered how they bring their perceptions to the tutoring situation.

The process of doing the research has opened up different ways for me to approach my work. I now provide more direct support to my pairs, and I talk more with my students about their reading strengths and weaknesses. I'm also more aware of connections between theory, practice and literacy issues. I can already see benefits from this research for myself in relation to training, my own tutoring, and ways I can help support student-tutor pairs.

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## Appendix A

### Student Interview

I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. I would like to ask you some questions to help me gather information on adults' perceptions of reading and how this influences the way they learn to read. After the questions I would like you to read a few passages to me.

I am interviewing a number of people. I will take the information from all the interviews and compile it into a report. This report will be shared with my colleagues in the literacy field. Neither your name nor any other identifying factors such as place and name of the program will be used in compiling the final report. The interview should take about 1½ hours.

I've never done research before and all of this is new to me. However, I have spent some time thinking about the questions I would like to ask. I hope you will feel comfortable in answering the questions. But, you do have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions about the research or the interview?

I would like to have your permission to tape the interview. I'll have you sign this form consenting to participate in the research as well as permission to tape.

### Questions

1. I'm interested in hearing about the reading you do now.
  - 1.1 Can you tell me about some of things you like to read (or would like to read?)
  - 1.2 What other things do you read (or would like to read?)
  - 1.3 Where do you read the things you listed?
  - 1.4 Why do you read these things?
  - 1.5 How would you rate yourself as a reader?
  - 1.6 What are some signs that a person is a good reader?
  - 1.7 What do you think makes a person a good reader?
  - 1.8 What would a person need to do to become a better reader?
  
2. I'm interested in hearing about how you read. These next questions will focus on how you read.
  - 2.1 Are there things you find easier to read? Can you give me some examples? (What makes some things easier to read than others?)



- 2.2 Suppose someone gives you something to read. How will you decide whether to read it or not?
  - 2.3 Here is a sample of different types of reading material. How do you decide which one you will read?
  - 2.4 What do you notice or look at first when you look at something to read? (Do you notice individual letters, words, phrases?)
  - 2.5 What do you do if you read something and you don't understand part of it?
  - 2.6 What do you do when you're reading and there are words you don't know?
  - 2.7 What do you focus on when you're reading?
3. I'm interested in hearing about your experiences learning to read as a child and as an adult. The next questions will relate to your experiences.
- 3.1 What do you remember about learning to read as a child?
  - 3.2 How did you learn to read /were taught to read when you were a child?
  - 3.3 What did the teacher (parent, tutor) do that helped you with reading?
  - 3.4 Looking back, what do you think people could have done to help you learn?
  - 3.5 What did they do that didn't help with reading?
  - 3.6 I know you have attended other programs. What did the programs do that helped you to read?
  - 3.7 What do you do now that helps you to read?
  - 3.8 What are some things you and your tutor do in lessons that are helpful? Why?
  - 3.9 Are there some things that aren't helpful or that you don't like doing? Why?
  - 3.10 What other things would you like to do to help you read?

Some final questions I would like to ask you:

What do you read now that you didn't before?

What things are you doing now that you didn't do before?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your reading? Is there anything you would like to ask me?

### **Reading Passage**

I would like you to choose a book, passage etc. Read it to yourself and then read it to me. (Have student read a passage or two and observe the strategies they use in reading.)

Thank you for participating in the research. I would like to meet with you later and share my research with you.

## **Appendix B**

### **Tutor Interview**

I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in my research. I would like to ask you some questions to help me gather information on adults' perceptions of reading and how this influences the way they learn to read.

I am interviewing a number of people. I will take the information from all the interviews and compile it into a report. This report will be shared with my colleagues in the literacy field. Neither your name nor any other identifying factors such as place and name of the program will be used in compiling the final report. The interview should take about 1 hour.

I've never done research before and all of this is new to me. However, I have spent some time thinking about the questions I would like to ask. I hope you will feel comfortable in answering the questions. But, you do have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Do you have any questions about the research or the interview?

I would like to have your permission to tape the interview. I'll have you sign this form consenting to participate in the research as well as permission to tape.

(Ask how they are doing. How do they feel about participating in the research?)

### **Questions**

I'm interested in hearing about the reading you do now.

- 1.1 Can you tell me about some of things you like to read (or would like to read?)
- 1.2 What other things do you read (or would like to read?)
- 1.3 Where do you read the things you listed?
- 1.4 Why do you read these things?
- 1.5 How would you rate yourself as a reader?
- 1.6 What are some signs that a person is a good reader?

- 1.7 What do you think makes a person a good reader?
- 1.8 What would a person need to do to become a better reader?

I'd like to ask you some questions about your learning to read as a child.

- 2.1 What do you remember about learning to read as a child?
- 2.2 How did you learn to read /were taught to read when you were a child?
- 2.3 What did the teacher (parent, tutor) do that helped you with reading?
- 2.4 Looking back, what do you think people could have done to help you learn?
- 2.5 What did they do that didn't help with reading?

- 3.1 Are there things you find easier to read? Can you give me some examples?
- 3.2 What do you do if you read something and you don't understand part of it?
- 3.3 What do you do when you're reading and there are words you don't know?

- 4.1 What did you learn about reading during tutor training?
- 4.2 Has this changed the way you understand how adults learn to read? In what way?

- 5.1 What do you do to help your student with reading?
- 5.2 What types of materials do you use?
- 5.3 Who chooses the materials?
- 5.4 How do you introduce new reading material?
- 5.5 What types of strategies do you focus on using?
- 5.6 What do you do when your student doesn't know or recognize a word when reading aloud with you?
- 5.7 What do you do if your student doesn't understand what they read?
- 5.8 How does your student respond to these strategies?
- 5.9 Is the student using the strategies you teach?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your tutoring reading? Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Thank you for participating in the research. I would like to meet with you later and share my research with you.