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*The following is an adaptation of a presentation I gave on theorist/practitioner tensions in adult literacy education at the Literacy Pre-Conference of the 2005 Adult Research Conference in Athens, Georgia. For a more extended discussion of this important topic, consult my bibliographical review essay, "Between the Life of the Mind and the World of Action: Explorations into Consciousness, Pedagogy, Politics, and Philosophical Science in Adult Literacy Education" http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/George/biblio/cover.htm. The four topics listed below were framed by the presenters.*

### Theorist/Practitioner Tensions: Persisting Conflicts

**Current limitations on research:**

1. US government mandates regarding methods and outcomes for educational research
2. The framework of perpetual pragmatism
3. Constant and severe shortages of resources, accompanied by unrealistic expectations about what research can achieve
4. Lack of support from management for practitioner research and inquiry

I experience all of these limitations in any given role or situation, and depending on what I'm seeking to accomplish, in any given research project. These four limitations are obviously interconnected. I take them up one at a time in relation to some of the issues I struggle with both as a practitioner and a researcher/theorist. Because the focus this morning is on problems related to these limitations; in not bringing in proposed strategies/solutions at this point, I take a deliberate and exaggeratedly pessimistic stance for a discussion that nonetheless, will be viewed as useful.

**(# 1) US governmental mandates regarding methods and outcomes for educational research**

The current USDOE's emphasis on scientific-based educational research as defined by the gold standard hierarchy of experimental design, and the marginality, if not de-legitimization of other schools of scholarship, namely, critical pedagogy, constructivism, feminist and afro-centrist theory, phenomenology, ethnography, and postmodernism, have been an acute problem for the field of adult literacy research in the neo-conservative era of the current administration. Even so, governmental mandates on research, policy and accountability have been problematic ever since adult literacy became linked to ABE

starting with the Manpower Development and Training Act in the 1960s, through capital development and competency-based models of policy rationalization.  The critical landmarks along this trajectory include, the 1975 APL study, the 1983 Nation at Risk report, and Forrest Chisman's influential report, *Jump Start*, published in 1989, linking ABE to the human resource needs of the post-industrial economy.

The cumulative result was that the humanistic and social reformist aspects of adult literacy "specifically dedicated to improving some specific aspect of the human condition or societal conditions" (Quigley, p. 69) were largely left out in federal policy or defined through the logic of the prevailing policy orientations.  This, despite the fact that a rich body of academic literature on adult literacy was emerging in the same time period, that extended well outside the boundaries of policy, signified by the names alone of Paulo Freire, Tom Sticht, David Harman, Elsa Auerbach, Hannah Fingeret, Susan Lytle, Brian Street, Sylvia Scribner, David Barton, and others.  It was as if the twain were never meant to meet between policy orientation and academic research and theory construction in adult literacy education.  Instructors, program directors, and administrators are caught in the middle.

This long-seated tendency toward self-evident functional competency was strengthened in the late 90s with the WIA/NRS, in the dual focus on employment and uniform standards of accountability at a very high aggregate level, even though there was little connection between such measures and what was learned or taught at the programmatic level. Although the NRS levels may have presented the illusion of accountability rigor from a policy standpoint, from a scientific standard, these measures were anything but valid. While the NRS has been widely criticized for a broad range of reasons, Tom Sticht's NLA postings were particularly pointed in drawing out the gap between the measures and valid standards of scientific research, some of which I include in Chapter 5 of *Conflicting Paradigms in Adult Literacy Education*, in a section titled "NO Levels Out There."

One might characterize this 40-year policy orientation from the MDTA to the WIA/NRS, as a neo-liberal perspective: a self-evident competency-based view of adult basic education, grounded in a philosophy of "cost-benefits utilitarianism," with a "return on investment" metaphor as the operative imagery, measured by an exacting mathematical calculus.  Robert McNamara's rationalizing logic comes to mind, along with the accompanying critique of "the best and the brightest" which had underlain the reasoning that undergirded the Vietnam War.

With the G.W. Bush administration, a highly focused and messianic neo-conservative perspective has emerged, which, while embracing some aspects of it, has challenged fundamental precepts of neo-liberalism, particularly its non-ideological pretensions, which had shaped both Democratic and Republican administrations since JFK, Reagan partially excluded.  In the current USDOE, the target is the progressive scholarship and accompanying practice of the past 100 years, particularly anything to do with linking research to values, constructivism, and political culture.  In the new vision, education is to become a technical field of application like medicine grounded in the philosophy of

"what works," based on a tightly defined view of scientific rigor in which the gold standard is experimental design, the efficacy of which is defined by the exactitude of the randomized sample achieved in a given research project.

This neo-conservative vision, which had been building up since at least the 1980s is captured in the three-sentence claim of the USDOE 2002-2007 Strategic Plan:

> Unlike medicine, agriculture, and industrial production, the field of education operates largely on the basis of ideology and professional consensus. As such, it is subjected to fads and is incapable of cumulative progress that follows from the application of the scientific method and from the systematic collection and use of objective information in policy making. We will change education to make it an evidence-based field. (U.S. Department of Education Strategic Plan, 2002-2007 (p. 48).

In three unsubstantiated sentences the USDOE has labeled progressive education null and void, eliminated values, including the politics of literacy and distinctive schools of educational theory outside of a neo-positivist prism. In its stead, it has sought to establish educational research as merely a technical field seeking to offer practical solutions to highly specific (and important) matters in terms of "what works" such as that of enhanced reading ability, as determined by standardized test scores. For more than a few, the association of education with medicine has also been problematic in which the teacher is to the student as the doctor is to the patient with right "treatment" the operative metaphor. For at least many practitioners and researchers/theorists of adult literacy education, this is at best a profound reductionism of how the field (as a realm of practice and theory construction) has been constructed during the past 35 years (1970) and a failure to take seriously the collective insights of the field generated over this period as the basis for moving forward. At worst it is a concerted effort to de-legitimize a view of literacy that extends beyond reading into the social practices and critical pedagogies that have shaped the thinking of the advocates of participatory literacy education and the new literacy studies, perspectives that are reduced to the pejorative terms, "ideology" and "fads," according to the language of the Strategic Plan, enshrining its own view as synonymous with right reason and self-evident truth, thereby masking its own ideological and political underpinnings.

I sought to deal with these issues in *Conflicting Paradigms*, particularly in Chapter Nine titled "Research Traditions: Problems, Paradigms and Polemics." In that chapter, I juxtaposed Shavelson and Towne's *Scientific Research in Education*, which seeks to broaden the USDOE's interpretation of science, while staying within its general neo-positivist framework, with Mertens' *Research Methods in Education and Psychology: Integrating Diversity with Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* in which she identifies three distinctive paradigms of research: Positivist/ Neopositivist, Interpretive/Constructivist, and the Emancipatory paradigm. Mertens' argues that these diverse schools of research lead to radically different assumptions in terms of what counts as legitimate methodology, in the ways in which knowledge is constructed (epistemology), and even in the ways in which the world exists (ontology).

According to Mertens all of these perspectives have opened up important arenas of investigation and all have legitimacy in their respective spheres.  The project I took on in that chapter was to problematize *Scientific Methods in Educational Research* by juxtaposing four of Shavelson & Towne's six principles of educational research in terms of the paradigmatic framework of Mertens' typology in which I sought to describe how they could be differently perceived from the divergent research traditions.  Beyond the specifics, the nonfoundational paradigmatic model proposed by Mertens' was intrinsically deconstructive of both the USDOE's vision of educational research as well as the more tempered perspective of Shavelson & Towne. Although I only briefly discussed it in *Conflicting Paradigms*, I called for a postpositivist mediating convergence.  This third way is not an integration of three schools, as the tensions among them are important to keep intact for the sake of vigorous research.  However, postpositivism would provide for a mediating perspective between positivism and constructivism in a problem-centered focus based on a definition of truth as a regulative ideal, in which problem resolution can only be (but also must be) as exacting as the nature of the problem allows.  I argue for the importance of this perspective in the essay to be distributed, *Postpositivist Scientific Philosophy:  Mediating Convergences*. ([http://www.the-rathouse.com/Postpositivism.htm](http://www.the-rathouse.com/Postpositivism.htm)).

## (#2) Perpetual pragmatism

In addition to the problems referred to above, I would point to the pragmatic (small "p") ethos of a getting things done culture of the United States, as well as to a pervasive anti-intellectual bias even among many who are quite brilliant.  These cultural trends, which have very much to do with the ethos of democracy in America, are reinforced in such an applied field as adult literacy where a "what works" philosophy plays a critical role in defining the realm of legitimate research.

In terms of perpetual pragmatism, one thinks of the WIA/NRS, which was designed to resolve a variety of political/policy-based problems in the late 1990s, through what I would like to refer to as the illusion of science, yet which had the result also of exacerbating as many problems, if not more, than it set to resolve.  The irony has now come full circle when the results of NRS measurements are used by the Bush administration as evidence that the federally supported adult education program has not been effective in delivering the measurable goods.  By its very design, the NRS serves at best as a gross measure of adult student literacy levels.  However, it lent an impression of exactitude, stemming from an impetus based on the pragmatic pressure to come up with a viable format for a standardized measure at the national level, which its goods (the NRS levels) could not deliver.

My own imaginative resolution of the problem of perpetual pragmatism is to embrace the *philosophy* of pragmatism (large "p") through the concepts of John Dewey, particularly in his quest to achieve what he called "the intellectual organization, or philosophy of experience."  By this he meant a more desirable reconstruction of experience through the functional pathway of competent inquiry or aesthetic achievement

in which experience, which is somehow unsatisfactory, becomes reconstructed toward the more desirable, or even into art, as the case may be. In a current project underway, I'm seeking to draw out parallels between Dewey's key text, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* and Cochran-Smith and Lytle's *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge*, in which I draw on a discussion of the "plateau effect" in relation to low-level adult literacy readers for illustrative purposes. The underlying issues with which I am dealing in this new essay is whether and/or the extent to which experience is susceptible to such organization as Dewey pointed toward, and whether and/or the extent to which teacher research is susceptible to "systematic, intentional inquiry" as Cochran-Smith and Lytle envision.

Whether such a theoretically-laden project would be of interest to practitioners or teacher researchers, even if the topic is that of the illumination of experience perhaps is also problematic, as reflected in a recent listserv discussion where I posted the Introduction, seeking feedback and dialogue, and received what I consider as a somewhat chilled response. In short, the ideal of probing into the theoretical aspects of practitioner-based inquiry, however viable or problematic, for that matter, the effort may be, at the very least buts up against the perpetual pragmatism in the more immediate search for "what works," however that may be defined, even in teacher research. This practical bias is at the least, a limiting influence, in both theory construction and in the development of teacher research, particularly if the latter is to become a substantial subset of educational research. The effect may be particularly ironic if one accepts Kurt Lewin's maxim that there is nothing more practical than a good theory. Perhaps this is not generally assumed.

## (#3) Constant and severe shortages of resources, accompanied by unrealistic expectations about what research can achieve

I don't give the issue of resource scarcity for research much attention since I'm not connected with a university or an agency that focuses on research and theory construction. I do my writing on my own time and receive no reimbursement for expenses incurred. In terms of unrealistic expectations, it may be important to come to terms with the reality that improving practice is only one of the functions (an important one, to be sure) of research, and even here, the influence may be more indirect than direct. In my own program, while the volunteer tutors may be interested in research or theory (some more than others), they are primarily motivated by what can help them more immediately in their teaching, and even more so, by instructional materials given to them from which they can directly teach, which they then adapt. In my program director's function, I may bring in snippets of research or theory into tutor tips or materials designed for immediate use, but my primary goal is to be practical, as commonly understood, as I have internalized what that means into my on-site social role.

In terms of pursuing "purer" research, or at least research and theory construction that doesn't have to prove itself in the immediacy of practice, I feel free to follow the direction of my own emerging reasoning and interests. For me, that has a strong academic orientation even if my subject matter stems from some aspect of direct learning/teaching experience. In this, I am seeking to contribute to the slowly emerging

scholarship of the field, first and foremost for the sake of clarifying theory, and secondarily for the sake of improving practice. Keeping both my roles in mind (daily practitioner and researcher/theorist), my underlying assumption is that both practice and scholarship have their own respective logics. While sometimes the twain shall meet, more frequently they go their separate ways and often so for very solid reasons based on what proponents of each are seeking to accomplish. As a practitioner/theorist-researcher I feel the pulls of these diverse and often conflicting logics, sometimes in creative, sometimes in highly uncomfortable ways.

Scholarship may or may not have a direct applicability, even in an applied field like education. Even when not, examining issues beyond the immediate purview of practicality can open up insights that may not be apparent at the level of immediate practice, which nonetheless may be important for the broader construction of the field. An innovative theoretical framework through which to (re)interpret experience is an obvious point of reference. In all fields, applied research depends and builds upon pure research without which new knowledge would greatly atrophy. Such is, or can be, the case also with adult literacy education. "Pure" research, so to speak, is only a problem if (a) it is viewed as irrelevant, which it often is; (b) if implications are not drawn out for application (not necessarily by the same persons), which it often isn't; and (c) if the different functions between pure and applied research and theory construction are not clearly articulated for academics and practitioners alike, which also, often is not the case.

## (#4) Lack of support from management for practitioner research and inquiry

This is a constant reality in my function as a director of Basic Literacy Programming in my agency. From the management perspective, my formal writings are viewed as not having much relevance to the daily challenges at hand, including articles that have in-depth case study material from the program. This is not a critique of management, which operates out of its own respective logic, but it does point to a challenge or a limiting factor that perhaps other practitioner/researchers-theorists face, whose writing may be quite relevant to the work on site, but not necessarily in obvious ways that generally gains the interest of management to the extent of being viewed as valuable. How generalized my experience is, I don't know. I doubt it's peculiar to me.

The consequence is a somewhat polarized outlook between what I do at my agency and what I write about, even when the writing is grounded in what I've experienced on-site in running daily programs. While much of what I write is an effort to grapple with the theory/practice nexus, little of it translates into a readily accessible discourse that would easily have direct impact on practice as currently constituted.

A case in point is my ABE article, "Motivation and the Adult New Reader: Student Profiles in a Deweyan Vein" (*ABE* 2001, #2, 80-108). This essay consists of three case study profiles of Basic Literacy students covering a period from 18 months to four years, and draws on John Dewey's concept of "growth," or progressive development, as a theoretical frame that I drew on to construct the profiles. I worked closely with the three students and drew much on my personal experience as well as data

analysis and theory construction in putting the article together. However contestable my construction may be, the essay seeks to get at many of the nuances that go into the developmental process by which students learn. The issue, however, is that the very format of the academic article is something that has not resonated at the managerial level of the three organizations of which I have been associated since 1987.

This, I imagine, is a more generalized phenomenon beyond my experience. Assuming that to be the case, at least for the sake of this discussion, short of a substantial culture change, lack of managerial support for research is likely to be an ongoing dilemma throughout the field. Whether that is an inherent problem, is another matter, which it may not be. Rather, it may simply be the price of doing business in undertaking research, particularly when its significance may not be readily grasped in relation to other pressing needs in an institutional context. The issue, I would argue, is cultural and political all the way down in how knowledge is constructed and disseminated in organizational settings, as a reflection itself of the broader politico-cultural frameworks in which institutions are embedded.

## Summary Reflection

As a director of a basic literacy program and as a theorist, and as someone who has studied political culture I experience core limitations almost on a daily basis. In my list serv and more formally published writing I've sought to compensate by largely ignoring them or subjecting them to counter interpretations, which at least in theory, seek to deconstruct the seemingly omnipresence of their limiting factors. This is accomplished by positing theory and practice in polar-like perspectives, each having relevance in their respective spheres. In my role as a practitioner, I largely accept the "realities," which seem imposed on the situation of daily program operations, knowing that I have room to maneuver, but only within some very powerful constraints. This, I juxtapose to a more scholarly role in which I seek to make sense of the interface between experience and theory, lest for the sake of bringing the two together, than to draw on practice to draw out some issue related to theory or research, such as the literacy as growth thesis I've articulated, drawing on the educational philosophy of John Dewey. As a practitioner-scholar, my ideal is to bring the two realms together. However, my more basic inclination remains theory clarification. While I hope for practical application, it is primarily by the indirect route of clarifying some facet of experience through theory that I seek to engage my ideal reader a practitioner-intellectual, thoroughly versed in the intricacies of both realms.

Thus, I want the reader to grasp the literacy as growth thesis from what I have written in my theoretical discussion of student experience by appropriating my text to their own experience, even if to do so is to question my presuppositions. The literacy as growth thesis is a theoretical construct that I resonate with at a highly experiential level that, as "felt" could, in principle, be readily grasped by practitioners, regardless as to theoretical background, at the least, in an implicit manner. At the same time, there is a level of abstractness in the argument, which is also essential for its full articulation, that may make it difficult for practitioners to grasp its meaning, and thereby, its practical

application and significance.  The "growth" hypothesis, which, in *Conflicting Paradigms*, I link broadly with the new literacy studies, is a perspective on literacy development that cannot be easily translated into measurable standards of external measurement, or accounted for in wide-scale studies of research that depend on the gold standard of random sampling.  Thus, there is something on its face about this effort to *articulate* the literacy as growth thesis as a mediating pedagogy of literacy, that tends to operates against the grain of a common sense understanding that influences both governmental policy and the viewpoint of practitioners who may not necessarily have a strong theoretical background.

There's much compensation here, whether writing about pedagogy or the politics of literacy, in a search for a level of *imaginative* influence that I do not always have in my daily practice.  There is also a desire to identify issues and perspectives that I could never articulate without taking this somewhat distanced stance. In this, the tension I experience between my roles as a daily practitioner and a writer are (a) those of the intellectual in a highly pragmatic culture, and (b) those of a practitioner who is always looking a bit beyond the current reality and never quite fully fitting in.

My embrace of John Dewey, the philosopher who sought the intellectual organization of experience, is the most imaginative way that I have been able to figure out how to come to terms with these tensions, in search of integration.  I embrace this Deweyan vision as an enormously fruitful heuristic even as I maintain an underlying sense that the hoped for fusion is practically impossible, if not downright undesirable in the very danger of collapsing the practitioner-theorist tension as perhaps the unintended consequences of any such integration.  Another strategy is to ignore the tension as much as possible while internalizing it in my writing in a manner that allows me to say something in printed text that I cannot say, or have direct influence on, in my daily practice as a program director. In this respect, my objective is to construct another world, an imaginative one, to be sure, where possibilities beyond the given can be given voice.  While there is a certain illusory and elusive dimension to this, there is also the problem that in muting that voice, an imaginative world needed for reconstruction cannot be articulated in which only the "real" is given credence.  That, too, is limiting, which I seek to actively work against based on the calling of my most fundamental vocation as a public intellectual situated in a very pragmatic setting.