Research in Practice Seminar Edmonton, October 24th to 26th

Exploring Tensions and Possibilities for Research in Practice: Notes towards a presentation!

Jenny Horsman

---

1. Introduction/background

I want to raise a series of very basic questions... to prompt our discussion

I will illustrate them (not answer them!) from some of my experience in research

I hope to invite others to engage with the questions from their own experience

My experience includes:
Many years in the Toronto based, Participatory Research Group
Involvement in the beginning couple of years of the Ontario Field Research Group
Involvement in some fashion - advisory committee etc. with a variety of types of research projects....
Right now I'm doing research under the umbrella of CCLOW (Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women)....

I often think of myself as "living" in the divide between university and practice, not quite in either camp:
I did university-based research as a student and teach occasional university courses

I also ran a program in West Africa, have done stints in programs in Canada, do a variety of "practice" based contracts

I have a bias towards bridging and narrowing the gap between the two areas!

2. Controlling research?

Who controls the money
Who controls the knowledge -
who gets it/gets to use it
What or whose knowledge counts?

Important questions about control...

I see practitioner research as part of a tradition of critique of academic research, (or some forms of academic research).

I notice we have quite a range of names for this research or "inquiry" we are talking about and wonder how important that is - eg. Is there a difference between program-based research and practitioner research?

I have a concern that research by practitioners - could be just research on the cheap or are we talking about "control" based in programs, of all research, and seeing the program as a place of "knowing" from which to critique university research as well as carry out research?

In the early days the Ontario group talked about "program-based" research and were definitely interested in issues of control:

Toronto practitioner position paper (from 1989),

not just about doing research but definitely about control - claiming knowledge about questions, and appropriate processes, and wanting control over the money!

> For research to be practical and applicable, it must respond to the questions that people with expertise in literacy work are asking, and it must present answers in a form that literacy workers can use. It must be sensitive to the learner-centred approach of community literacy. It must draw on the experience of literacy workers in facilitating analysis and discussion, as well as reading and writing, by literacy learners. In our view, this means that it must be directed from within literacy programs, rather than being imposed from outside.
>
> Therefore, a substantial part of any funding for research should be allocated to programs. Rather than contracting professional researchers to come into programs to do their research, programs themselves should direct the research from the beginning. This would mean relevant research questions, and answers in the form of usable materials. It would also mean the involvement of learners as active participants in the research rather than as passive objects of study. (Alkenbrack et al. 1989)

That statement was in the first document put out by the Ontario-wide group (although mainly at that point Ottawa/Toronto group) - <u>Exploring Community-Based Literacy Research</u> (Horsman, 1989)

Tension of value of insider knowledge versus outsider knowledge

> Del Jones - "both the participant in the parade and the bystander each see things that the other misses" (quoted in Albert & D'Amico-Samuels)

value of insider - but possible limit tends to be questioning from within the frame value of distance - can ask new questions, questions from <u>outside the frame</u>, but possible limit

can not seem useful eg. Kathleen Rockhill's (eg.1987a, 1987b, 1993) may not seem immediately useful by programs, would not be done by insider, but it is crucial research because it challenges the frame, so it should have broad impact on practice...

In "Exploring Community-Based Research" collection (I put it together with help from the rest of the group) - we explicitly positioned program-based research as part of alternative paradigms for research, approaches "own" research, and critiques of who gets access, whose knowledge counts:

- focussed on participatory research,
- and action research
- and we took the definition: "systematic collection and analysis of information on a particular topic for the purpose of informing political action and social change" (Barnsley and Ellis, 1987)
-stress choice of research approach, not just question of methodology, but also of political choice - "pr is not a method but a political approach of involving the exploited and the poor in the analysis of their own reality" research process "involve the community in the entire research project" (Hall, Gillette & Tandon, 1982) - pr - an educational process which leads to action...

- Research method will reflect "whose side on" no research neutral... (Maguire, 1987)

My experience of participatory Research and participatory evaluation - not that simple, complicated all the different people might share control, their different agendas etc.

Tension potential for practitioner to be radical, explore knowledge from insider location (although which insiders), but also tendency to be fears about how to "do it right" lead to traditional methods of research.

In England, also tensions about what research counts and the value of practitioner research:

Questions about whether practitioner research is a different creature from other research, tension want to recognize ways it is "different" (though different from what - the academic research is also not monolithic) but if it is different, then does it become not the "real thing" or lesser than the real thing and there is always that problem of who gets the money...?

> "A nagging doubt remains. What is the status of this kind of research? For example, do other people working in the field of adult literacy see it as having a value? Does it count?
>
> One answer to this may be: "Yes, it is valuable and interesting, but it is not real research. Perhaps we need another name for this sort of thing." There is a real problem with that answer and it has to do with money. For the most part funding is available for literacy provision and research into literacy provision. The funding

for provision and for research tends to come from different sources and as funds get scarcer it becomes more difficult to get funding for any research at all. The small well of funds available for research implementing slightly unconventional methodology is likely to dry us altogether if it is no longer recognised as research at all. Yet as adult literacy work goes on there is an increasing need to reflect on that work, to look at how it is done and how it is experienced by the students. Ideally, some of that reflecting ought to be done by and with people involved in adult literacy as students and tutors.... (Lawrence, 1986)

She goes on to talk about the beginnings of RaPAL (a research and practice network in England)-

The recent Research and Practice in Adult Literacy seminars in England have provided welcome opportunities to open up the discussion about what research is needed but even there, there has been a worrying tendency for the focus to be on things that looked like "proper" research proposals and to ignore or gloss over the difficult but fundamental questions about the role of research in adult literacy. What kind of research do we need? What do we need to find out if what is on offer for adult students is to be made more appropriate and interesting? What do we need to know in order to make the process of working on literacy a productive one for everyone involved in it? (Lawrence, 1986 p. 12)

In 1989 I interviewed David Barton - his account of focus of joint gatherings:

- lack of communication - practitioners don't know what research is being done,
- tension, suspicion about university - research not relevant, "wrong" sort of research

Practitioner and teacher research as a challenge to what counts as knowledge,

- U.S. (from the university) Inquiry-based research:

"Inquiry as a stance on practice.. "a radically different way of positioning oneself as a generator, not merely a consumer, of significant knowledge for improving practice" (Lytle, Belzer and Reumann, 1993)

Teachers - Questions from day-to-day experience... University based researchers - Questions from theoretical and empirical literature..

Lytle approach that ignoring teacher research relegates their knowledge to "less than":

Limiting the official knowledge base for teaching to what academics have chosen to study and write about disenfranchises teachers and relegates their knowledge to the status of practical information or common sense. This contributes to a number of problems: discontinuity between what is taught in universities and what occurs in classrooms; teachers' ambivalence about or disregard for the claims of academic research which often seems counterintuitive or unconnected to the daily demands of their work lives; and, because teachers are seldom recognized as potential contributors to the making of knowledge, a dearth of codified information about the reality of classroom life from the perspectives of insiders.

Unfortunately teacher research, which by definition has unique potential to address issues that teachers identify as significant, does not yet have an acknowledged place in constructing the knowledge base for teaching." (Lytle & Smith, 1989)

"Research by teachers is a significant way of knowing about teaching" (Lytle and Cochran-Smith, 1992)

Way of generating local and public knowledge about teaching "teacher inquiry is a way for teachers to know their own knowledge" "Teacher research is powerful way for teachers to understand how they and their students construct and reconstruct the curriculum. By conducting inquiry on their own practices, teachers identify discrepancies between their theories of practice and their practices, between their own practices and those of others in their schools, and between their ongoing assumptions about what is going on in their classrooms and their more distanced and retrospective interpretations." (Lytle & Cochran-Smith '92)

- again that tension about practitioners not valuing university research and university researchers not valuing the knowledge of practitioners...

Value as staff development, but also clear political stance about who has knowledge... In the U.S. Literacy South making claims for research as "staff development" and participatory education...

Most staff training and development starts from the premise that training consists of sharing and imparting skills, knowledge and behaviours that the practitioner needs to know and adopt. The agenda for staff development often is identified by the work organization or by more remote academic or governmental agencies. Practitioner research as a staff development mechanism, however, starts from an assumption that practitioners are both engaged in and concerned about their work, and that they are able to identify issues that are truly grounded in the complexities of working with adult literacy students. It continues with a second assumption that education professionals are competent learners and have the capacity to ask questions and arrive at reasonable and realistic answers. It also implies that these answers and the conclusions to which they lead will be accessible and real for the practitioners involved.

The traditional remedial approach to staff development tends to conceptualize the "knowledge base" as known and content-based; the expert is responsible for communicating it to teachers. In an inquiry-based model the knowledge base is problematic rather than known, seeing teachers as generators of knowledge rather than simply as receivers or users. (Fingeret & Pates, 1994, p. 4)

Within this approach hope that all meet each other as knowers and co-constructors of knowledge, implication if model a shift from top down knowledge - from university to teacher, will also help teachers to shift from top down - teacher to student....

Attempts to "collaborate" - can become fraught by power imbalances - resource imbalances... universities, v. community programs...
But also important not to exaggerate divide - there are cross fertilizations, practitioners become university students, people who cross divide university and practice..

research itself a literacy practice - like other literacy practices need to be examined in context..

> Not either/or academic or practitioner, but both AND - discourse between two...
> But challenge to each be heard as equals.. Knowledge will accumulate as program-based and university-based practitioners read and critique each other's work, document and disseminate their responses, and begin to create new kinds of "interpretative universes." (Lytle et al. 1993)

if can hear each other - needs material possibilities for that, and respect....

Or will centre of what research counts remain same, while the alternatives remain in the margins....?

3. Learning how to do research?
What is research?
What counts as research?

Questions about whose knowledge counts when think about learning **how** to do research. Questions about who is the expert, and who needs to learn what from whom. Research as what practitioners already do or something new and different.

For example: Program-Based Research Special Interest Group manual (Seek, Gather and Process),

> Problematic - "value neutral" approach, but can you make research straightforward, step by step without losing complexity.....

Kirby and McKenna - Experience, Research, Social Change: Methods from the Margins...

> Explicitly political stance but also "how to" Margins - "The majority of people are excluded from participating as either producers or participants in the creation of knowledge"

Tension how to learn how to do research, without sliding into "expert" model, and/or without oversimplifying, losing political dimension of choices...
- tensions in that Ontario group (in the early days)

> research already doing, ask questions all the time v. learn how to do research donÕt yet know how to do learn traditional forms of research v. learn about critiques - alternative forms.

> Learn from experts, but which experts, what approaches to research... practical AND political question...?

RaPAL newsletter showed similar tensions in England:
    "Encourage a broader view of what counts as research"

    "A great deal of reflective and evaluative work already goes on in adult basic
    education, often informally under the name of outreach or report-writing. This
    work needs to be made visible and these activities developed into procedures that
    can be generalized, compared and used by others....

    It is also important to remember that research method is not fixed. Adult basic
    education needs to explore new methods, to be involved in developing these
    methods, and to press for their increased acceptability. In particular, we need to
    explore ways of participative research that break down the roles of "researcher"
    and "researched." (Bulletin, 1986)

But tension about "real" knowledge - Ontario accounts (1993 Occasional papers)
    I was struck by the anxiety about doing it right, in many articles, trusting the
    "experts" rather than own observation. eg. Heather Segsworth:

    I read many theories and attempted to see how my observations were fitting in.
    There were excellent theories about group stages, but to my disappointment, I
    didn't feel that my groups' experiences fit most theories. I began to feel
    despondent. I felt that I must have really been off base in my observations and
    perhaps I was just seeing what I wanted to see. I did try to squeeze my
    observations into some of these theories, but I realized that I would be
    compromising what I thought I knew.(Segsworth, 1993, p.41)

Collaboration as way to share knowledge - not expert teaching the non-knower...

Literacy South

    detailed description of complexity of collaboration... trying to hand power to
    practitioners to carry out own projects (frustration, parallels with learner-centred)

    in reassessment of '94 project- recognizes practitioner uncertainty with the
    "grammar of research" provide more reference tools, share experiences...

    gain from process, not just product value of working as a team, challenge to have
    enough time...

Collaborative at its best like participatory education:
    Collaborative research likewise respects the knowledge that everyone brings to a
    research project; teachers and administrators who work in literacy programs bring
    a rich store of experience which informs the research questions and methods.
    Researchers from university settings (and, in this case, from Literacy South as
    well) bring expertise in research methods and procedures. Together, the groups
    must negotiate the meaning of research, the questions that will be asked and the

processes through which graduate students and practitioners will work together. The projects must be conducted in ways that respect everyoneÕs knowledge and experience, which means that the research questions are rooted in the practitioners' work while incorporating the graduate students' and Literacy South staff's knowledge about effective research methods. (Fingeret & Pates, 1992)

Challenge to hold that respect across the hierarchies in society...

4. Making it possible to do research?

What is needed - time/money/ongoing support and/or communication?

Looking at ways to creating "spaces" for practitioner-research

Early stages of Ontario network:

> "aim to develop a strong network of literacy practitioners able to carry out research in our own programs and critique the traditional research we see"

> "Play a role in coordinating research in Ontario

> develop "policy guidelines" about community-based research

> support the development of collaborative research work.."

Great ideals, but I'm not sure how much we did - we needed funding, practical possibilities for research, to move forward...

"Capturing the Moments" (another Ontario document from the research group) talked about the problem of lack of "skills and confidence" - "confidence - product of encouragement, and support as well as interest and personality"

I think that confidence may be less important than the material needs - money/time/energy... Capturing the Moments also says: practitioners "stressed to their limit" and lack of "time or incentive to pursue research" I think those factors are crucial.

Few people will be able to research, or even read about university or practitioner research, if no conditions to make it possible...

But I think a wide variety of models could make that "space":

CCLOW projects, (Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women)

> when asked for practitioners to engage in action research project - pay for half a day a week, try an activity and "think about, talk about, or write about what was happening because of the woman-positive activity in their program" Two women from each of ten programs, to "plan, implement, document, and evaluate a woman-positive activity" A coordinating researcher to provide ongoing support

and visit each program, come together 3 workshops, develop research methods, decide how they might plan, implement, document and analyse their activities....

coordinating research two interviews each contact women women write in a journal

Some tension lack of knowledge how to do research - but no lack of women wanting to participate...

MTML literacy workers course or type of course, (Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy)
first ten weeks background in literacy issues then they carry out their own project - at the moment this can be research, they do much work together to help decide on topic plan, etc. they present a first draft to group from class for feedback, then finally give a public presentation to the literacy community

At the moment the projects are not necessarily research - but this model with introduction to doing research, and then individual research projects could easily work... Curious if MTML (or other similar org.) offered "research seminar" in a similar format to the course (like Lytle's seminar...) would people be interested... (problem in Ontario doing more for less, and now pressure to pay for own courses) - doesn't have the plus of CCLOW project where participants are paid for "half a day a week" and also paid for time to go to national workshops

Sabbaticals
(I think originally Arthur Bull's idea!) I was inspired by a project carried out by Guy Ewing where he took 6 months off to do a research project and ended up with a book... He set up a committee of his peers, to read and critique his drafts...

This process allowed him to systematize knowledge from the field, bring it together with theoretical knowledge. He was burning out this re-energized him... Possible for him as he was able to get a local network to sponsor project application, had academic background...

To make possible for more people, need:

salary and benefits university affiliation, office space, library access... honoraria for committee/academic supervision/mentors... expenses of research, publication and distribution....
(Sabbaticals would be a way a practitioner could get the distance to move between inside/outside questions)

Creating a Literacy Centre
Fascinated by various forms of literacy centre in the States, think need for stronger link theory and practice somewhere. Is the university a viable place? Or an organization like Literacy South - supporting training and research..?... or in a literacy program....

Place for critical reflection on practice - chance for discourse between practitioners and academics, projects, courses, sabbaticals, courses part of academic study and not... (more like teacher in-service courses)....

5. Communicating research?
What is needed to bring theory and practice together?

Possibilities for "spaces" to communicate processes and results of research, but also need ÒspaceÓ for people to read, think, make changes and engage in further research....

Engage in discourse where chance to communicate back and forwards between practitioners and academics...

Some examples that have been interesting:

Woman's Studies special issue on literacy, committee practitioners and academics, solicited strong articles both sides of divide...

RaPAL,

> English group including university/practitioners - but tensions remain, whose knowledge counts

Australian Journal,
> review committee of practitioners and academics..

Publications of organizations like Literacy South, University of Pennsylvania - reports of specific projects

Iowa...

> Small grants, part of commitment of the grant is to present results at the annual conference...

Canadian Journal
> had thought about refereed journal here - practitioners and researchers chance for dialogue

> but in Ontario at any rate hard to imagine many practitioners with time, energy to write, or even read or change practice as a result of research....

6. Concluding!

Final thoughts about: communication, collaboration, respect for different knowledges, bridging gulf between research and practice, strengthening research, strengthening practice....

Material conditions to make it possible are crucial

Need to develop discourses which allow us to communicate across the divides

Also need material structures which can reach across the divide between academy and practice

Always need vigilance to notice the way inequalities and hierarchies distort the discourses, exclude and silence and give only some, access to the structures....

Jean-Paul Hautecouer has talked about the shift to more technical literacy, less interest in ÒempoweringÓ literacy and feared that research will shift in the same direction.

I hope he is wrong, and that there will be the creation of many "spaces" for wide variety of types of research and dialogue between those different versions.

References:

Albert, J. & D'Amico-Samuels, D. (1990). Research & Practice: Conflict or Cooperation? In Information Update, Literacy Assistance Center 6(3) March

Alkenbrack et al. (1989). Position Paper on Federal Funding for Literacy Research. In Horsman, (Ed.) Exploring Community-Based Literacy Research. Toronto: Community and Workplace Literacy Unit, Ministry of Education, Ontario. (Validation Draft)

Barnsley and Ellis. (1987). Action Research for Women's Groups. Vancouver: WomenÕs Research Centre.

Henbest, B. & VanderMarel, M. (1997). Capturing the Moments. Program-Based Research in Ontario Literacy Practice. Discussion Paper of the Literacy Field Research Group A Working Group of the OLC, April.

Fingeret, H. & Pates, A. (1992). "Heads and Hands" A Study of Collaborative Practitioner Research in Two North Carolina Community Colleges. Durham, NC: Literacy South.

Fingeret, H. & Pates, A. (1994). Innovative Training Practices: Practitioner Research as Staff Development. The Story of a Participatory Research Project. Durham NC: Literacy South.

Hall, Gillette & Tandon. (1982). Creating Knowledge: A Monopoly. Participatory Research and Development. New Delhi: Society for Participatory Research in Asia. Horsman, J. (1989). Exploring Community-Based Literacy Research. Toronto: Community and Workplace Literacy Unit, Ministry of Education, Ontario. (Validation Draft) Horsman

Kirby S. & Mckenna, K. (1989). Experience, Research, Social Change: Methods From the Margins. Toronto: Garamond Press.

Lawrence J. (1986). Research Without Statistics. In Baynham M. & Mace, J. Doing Research - A Collection of Papers on Research and Practice in Adult Literacy. London, England: Lee Community Education Centre, Goldsmiths' College.

Lytle, S.L., Belzer, A., & Reumann, R. (1993). Initiating Practitioner Inquiry: Adult Literacy Teachers, Tutors, and Administrators Research Their Practice (Technical Report TR93-11) Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Adult Literacy, University of Pennsylvania.

Lytle S. & Cochran-Smith, M. (1992). Teacher Research as a Way of Knowing. Harvard Educational Review, 62(4) 447-474.

Lytle S. & Cochran-Smith, M. (1989) Teacher Research: Toward Clarifying the Concept. The Quarterly of the National Writing Project and the Center for the Study of Writing, 11(2).

Maguire, P. (1987). Doing Participatory Research: A Feminist Approach. Amherst, Massachusetts: Center for International Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts.

RaPAL Reearch and Practice In Adult Literacy Bulletin No. 1 Summer 1986

Rockhill, K. (1993). Dis/Connecting Literacy and Sexuality: Speaking the unspeakable in the classroom. In Lankshear, C. & McLaren, P. (Eds.) Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis and the Postmodern. Albany NY: State University of New York Press.

Rockhill, K. (1987a). Gender, Language and the Politics of Literacy. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 8(2).

Rockhill, K. (1987b). Literacy as Threat/Desire: Longing to be Somebody. In Gaskell, J & McLaren, A. (Eds.) Women and Education: A Canadian Perspective. Calgary: Detselig.

Segsworth, H. (1993). Group Process in Literacy: Program-Based Research. In Seek, Gather and Report: Occasional Paper No. 1 Toronto: Literacy Field Research Group.

Seek, Gather and Process: A Research Manual for Literacy Programs. (1992). Toronto: Literacy Field Research Group.