

# Conferences: Who's Organizing Whom?

by Tannis Atkinson, Arthur Bull and Jenny Horsman

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Three of us found ourselves at the end of the Saint John conference sharing thoughts about our experiences there. Many of them were good: the people we had met, the ideas shared, the learners that were there. But over and over again we turned to a sense of opportunities missed: so many interesting learners, but only one opportunity to hear their views, in a situation that silenced many, and only after we had spent two days listening to the “experts”; so many excellent people from the Maritimes, but few presented workshops; and so little time to network and further our analysis of the issues in literacy work. Perhaps we are always doomed to frustration at conferences because we expect or at least hope for them to be able to achieve more than is really possible. But perhaps we need to think more creatively about what we want to achieve by conferences and how these goals can be facilitated.

As the Saint John conference progressed, many people became excited about the idea of a learner conference. Perhaps that idea also came out of the sense of missed opportunities. We think that before we organize a learner conference we need to discuss how to develop the literacy movement by making connections between learners. We don't expect here to offer the answers but we would like to start the discussion. We hope others will join.

First we want to say quite clearly that it is not the Saint John conference that we are critiquing, but many many conferences that we have all attended in many different cities, including ones that we have helped to create. We usually think big, looking for participation by as many as possible, and judging our success by numbers who attend. The standard conference starts with an “official opening” where we who have slogged in literacy for years are addressed in the most basic terms about the problem of illiteracy by some government official, who really should be listening to what we have to say about the issue. Is this really the best way for us to get those representing government departments to listen to our needs?

The opening is followed by a panel of “leaders in the field”, “representing” different constituencies or approaches to the problem and telling us what the issues are. Why do we give people the impossible task of representing so many of us instead of setting up different structures that would make it possible to synthesize our varied views into something far more powerful? We could work in groups to tell one another what issues we want to address. Instead, we are turned into passive listeners and a hierarchy of “knowledge” is created. The information that the directors and presidents of organizations, mostly male, have is considered important “knowledge”. We listen to researchers and, sometimes, to the practitioners, who are mostly female. Lowest of all, those who actually experience the problem are deemed to “know” very little. We should not ignore that to hear from learners at all is a new step which we have been working for, but we are still re-creating the hierarchy of knowledge. Have we forgotten about the pattern of who is still silenced - for instance the skilled practitioner, who wouldn't dream of answering a call for papers, or the “quiet” woman learner who cannot speak to a large group?

Over and over again we all say that the best part of a conference is the people we meet over coffee, but still we feel we are not “serious” if we don't fill every second of the agenda. So conferences are organized so that it is almost impossible to participate in the conference events and network effectively to build new connections. Why do we not find ways to build this networking into our conference plans, since we claim it is so important?

At the end of the conference we have a chance to work together to come up with resolutions to pass on to the policy makers. By then it is often too late: we are tired, some people have left or are leaving, we are short of time and we know we will soon be back in our own individual struggles in our own programs, unable to continue to develop the ideas. Although there are some glimmers of new insights, there is no more time to develop them - until the next time. And next time, will we do the same thing all over again?

Recently it has been exciting to see the participation by learners at conferences increasing. It is certainly good to hear from them. But is there a way that they can be heard, not only at one event, but by participating throughout? It is important that they become spokespersons for their programs by working at information tables. We cannot ignore that. But how else can we facilitate their own voice, not interpreted by us the practitioners, but telling us clearly what they want us to do?

When faced with the question of how to develop a network of learners, literacy workers are liable to come up with the organization of a conference as their first answer. This is natural since in our experience this is how people are usually brought together from different places to share common concerns, to learn from each other, and to create networks. But if conferences haven't done these things satisfactorily for us, why do we assume a conference would do these things for learners? What structure might yield the results which learners themselves want?

Some conferences we have attended have tried to create different structures. For example a conference in Gananoque, Ontario (1982) was organized around the need to create a space for networking between literacy workers and community organizers in Canada and in the "Third World". It brought together a small group of people who worked together in groups. It raised awareness about ways of networking and new allies to connect with, but for most of us it did not create ongoing alliances. Instead we returned to our individual programs in our own communities.

The literacy conference in London, Ontario (1984) tried to break away from the hierarchy of knowledge. Instead of asking for "experts" to lead workshops or present papers, a wide range of people were asked to be resource people, stating their views briefly to spark discussion. But many were unhappy with the result, some asking for the workshops that weren't there, others feeling that the breadth of views made it impossible to develop the issues and create alliances. By a lucky chance the conference was able to hire an organizer to build regionally on the networking begun at the conference, otherwise this too might have failed to lead to any ongoing communication. [*This was the beginning of the Ontario Literacy Coalition. Ed.*] The involvement of students that was achieved was token only: the event was not planned by and for learner needs.

At the Vancouver Think Camp (1981), participants did not defer to "experts". Instead, those present worked at creating definitions of literacy and literacy work that could help to develop the literacy movement. In spite of this admirable goal, the structure was still quite strong, with people lecturing to the small group. Actual discussion was not developed until well into the pre-set agenda.

Each of these conferences kept some of the aspects of the traditional conference structure, and broke away in some exciting ways. Each time something new was achieved, though not always as much as we had hoped. Perhaps our sense of frustration was because these conferences start from assumptions other than those on which we base our work in literacy. In order to think about alternatives which would fit with our literacy work, we needed to clarify the assumptions on which our literacy work is based.

We begin with the assumption that literacy is more than reading and writing, that by helping someone develop the skills of literacy, we should at the same time be enabling people to gain control over their own lives (otherwise known as “empowerment”). Empowerment begins with the active involvement of the learner in the literacy setting. This means, most simply, that the curriculum is based on the learner's needs and the learning is shaped by the learner in conjunction with the tutor. However, it also means that the literacy program itself must be structured in a way that encourages the active involvement of the learners. That is, the policy of the program must be shaped by the learners, their input must be central. In other words, in all interactions with learners we (staff, tutors, other volunteers) must pass on what we know, and what the learners need or want in order to be able to do things themselves.

To extend the principle of empowerment to conferences means several things. The experiences and needs of the participants must be the starting points from which to determine the shape of the conference, including what sessions to hold. At many conferences, theoreticians provide direction to individual working in the field. To use such a format is in clear opposition to the principles of participation and empowerment. Having sessions in lecture format encourages passivity in participants: sessions should encourage participation, and should build from participants' knowledge and experiences. Sessions that do otherwise establish the hierarchy of knowledge in which the knowledge of learners is especially devalued. In spite of these objections, it is hard to imagine the creation of a network of literacy learners without some sort of event to bring people together.

Literacy learners are not a homogeneous group simply by virtue of being literacy learners: they represent an enormous range of backgrounds and experiences. Most conferences assume that participants have a commonality of interests and professional activities. One of the best ways of allowing a sense of commonality and shared interest to develop is to allow time to discuss concerns common problems, and time to brainstorm possible solutions. Organizing among learners has begun where learners were encouraged to meet and talk. How can links between learners be facilitated on a national level?

One solution might be to see a learner conference as part of a larger, ongoing process. Instead of having a conference to initiate a learner's network, do it the other way around - develop a network first and then let the participants decide if a conference would be the best way to forward their aims. A number of advantages recommend this approach:

- (1) the organization would be in place to organize the conference;
- (2) the organization would be in place to follow up the conference and to ensure that its goals were realized;
- (3) the goals of the conference would reflect the needs and interests of the learner network;
- (4) common ground would exist between the conference participants by virtue of their joint effort in the network;
- (5) the activities and format of the conference could be designed so that they were of practical and immediate use to the members of the network, rather than imposed by educators in a classroom environment.

It is clearly not going to be an easy thing to establish such a network. One first step might be to differentiate the various levels at which networking could take place (local, provincial, regional, national) and what the most appropriate initiative at each level might be. Once this is established it will then be necessary to bring these together into a larger whole.

Some of this type of activity is already happening. At the program level, East End Literacy has a learner committee (Students for Action), which meets biweekly to discuss issues, organize events, and send out a student newsletter. A staff member has been assigned to work closely with the committee. At the regional level, literacy programs in Ottawa have recently joined together to begin to share in the publication by learners of writing by learners. In a wider context, many learners from programs across the country have become “pen pals” with other learners across the country and in the “Third World”. Many good links of this sort have been initiated by the Saint John Learning Exchange. These examples, taken at random, serve only as illustrations of learner networking. Many others are undoubtedly going on across the country. What is important is that links are forged between all of these efforts to provide the groundwork for a wider national learner network.

Once this network is established, once local learners' committees are in touch with their counterparts regionally and provincially, then there may be some point in talking about a learner conference. Such a conference would truly reflect the goals of the network. The learner conference would then truly be the learners' own.

When they wrote this paper, Tannis Atkinson was the Ontario MCL Board member and coordinator of the ALFA Literacy Centre in Toronto, Arthur Bull worked with Project Read at Parkdale library (Toronto) and Jenny Horsman was a graduate student and worked with the Participatory Research Group. The paper was published in the Movement for Canadian Literacy newsletter in 1986 (v. 11, no 1).