

**SHAPING LITERACY: EVOLUTION AND TRENDS IN
CANADA'S LITERACY RESEARCH SINCE THE MID-1980s.**

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Abstract

This study sought to understand the evolution in the adult literacy research since the founding of *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* and the rise of the contemporary knowledge base in Canadian adult literacy. Three primary research questions guided the investigation which employed a critical discourse analysis (CDA) method. A text analysis grid was constructed and used across four databases representing Canadian literacy scholarship. Findings suggest that seven metaphors can be used to depict the current state of literacy scholarship, and a triangle of three solitudes—academic researchers, practitioners, and government sponsors—is presented as the current status of the research literature. Questions are raised on the inherent challenges for literacy in the 21st century.

Introduction

As early as 1859, well before Canada existed as a nation, Ross (1951) noted that adult courses in “reading, spelling, and grammar” as well as “writing and arithmetic” (p. 26) were taking place at the YMCA in Kingston. He observed that these were “perhaps, among the earliest experiments in adult education in this country” (p. 26). However, it was not until the 1970s and the rise of federally-funded literacy and basic education courses that the literacy research

literature saw marked growth (Draper, 1989; Taylor, 2001). With a central focus from the mid-1980s to 2010, this study investigated how Canada's literacy scholarship has been shaped. It is hoped this study will encourage further historical and analytical research on the evolution and "shaping" of literacy in Canada through time.

Using a tiered model of critical discourse analysis which incorporated description, interpretation, and explanation, three salient questions were posed for this study: (a) How has the field of adult literacy scholarship been shaped since the mid-1980s? (b) What are the predominant discourses presented by academic researchers, practitioners, and government sponsors in the literacy knowledge base through this major period of development? (c) How are the lines of support or disconnect represented by these three stakeholders?

Shaping a Literacy Knowledge Base

Our study reveals that Canadian adult literacy research literature has effectively been shaped by three sets of stakeholders. From the earliest philanthropic groups (Draper, 1989) to the presence of provincial/territorial and federal governments (Thomas, Taylor, & Gaskin, 1981), the influence of literacy sponsors is very clear. Secondly, those who have developed and delivered literacy programs—professional, paraprofessional, and volunteer literacy practitioners—have long comprised the second major voice. Finally, adult education and literacy researchers in both academic and non-academic settings have made the third major set of contributions to the knowledge base.

However, just as the three corners of this triangle have effectively shaped the literacy knowledge base, so too have they helped create layers of ambiguity and tension among themselves. Whether it is the relentless debate over how to define literacy, literacies, basic education, and essential skills or the plethora of social constructs and their resultant policies,

programs, and competing pedagogies, inherent to this triangle is the firm belief that each group acts in the best interests of adult literacy learners. This is despite the fact that the learners' voice has rarely been heard directly in the literature (Quigley, Folinsbee, & Kraglund-Gauthier, 2006). How this "triangle of discourse" has evolved, what it suggests for the future of adult literacy, and the very composition of who has shaped and will shape the literacy literature and the future of our field is the focus of this discussion.

Critical Discourse Analysis as a Research Approach

Although critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a theory and a method holds much promise for social analysis and educational research (Fairclough, 1999, 2001, 2003; Gee, 2004; Rogers, 2004; Threadgold, 2003), the marginalized domain of adult literacy has neglected to use this methodology. Taken together, researchers tend to agree that the key underlying assumptions of the various approaches to CDA are that language is interwoven with other elements of contemporary social change, and that text analysis is a central part of discourse analysis.

Although the literature is replete with multiple meanings of CDA (van Dijk, 2008; van Leeuwen, 2008), as Luke (1996) explained, it "offers educators a way to study how texts are constructive of social formation, communities and individuals' social identities" (p. 9). Rogers (2004), and Bloor and Bloor (2007) have helped clarify the multiple meanings by explaining that CDA is an area of critical applied linguistics that encompasses both a theory and a method. Despite the variation in methods, certain principles have been used over the past two decades in North American educational research. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argued that CDA should address social problems and that a sociocognitive approach is needed to understand how relations between texts and society are mediated. They explained how power relations are discursive and how discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory. Bloor and Bloor and van

Dijk have drawn further attention to the importance of explaining discourse structures in terms of properties of social interaction and social structure. These foundational principles were also used in developing the methodological frame for this study.

Threadgold (2003), Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter (2000), and van Leeuwen (2008) all provide overviews of methods and techniques of text and discourse analysis. For the purposes of this study, Fairclough's (1992, 1999, 2003) textually-oriented, analytical approach was adopted and modified. It includes a three-tiered model that incorporates description, interpretation, and explanation of discursive relations and social practices. Fairclough's point of reference within the existing literature on text analysis is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) particularly as associated with Halliday (1994) whose work is oriented to the social character of texts.

Methodology

Fairclough's (2001, 2003) three-tiered analytical procedures were employed as a method in this study. As a practical approach to the analytic task, a text analysis grid which contained 12 elements provided a type of inventory used by the team of researchers. The grid provided a foundation for the description and the interpretation in the CDA. At the descriptive and instrumental levels, the more micro features of the text such as vocabulary—which considered alternative key word descriptors for literacy—as well as genre, exchange, and grammatical mood were examined. In addition, important lexical features such as semantic and grammatical relations, collocation, intertextuality, and hegemony were also examined.

The first descriptive level of the vocabulary provided the exploratory value of how the contents of the text came to be represented. The focus of the second level of analysis was *interpretation*. In essence, this is the relationship between what is presented in the text and the

social positioning of the interpreter(s) (Fairclough, 2003). In this level of analysis, the linguistic elements described in the previous stage were then interpreted with reference to the meaning of the text. To enhance reliability, the four members of this research team cross-checked each others' interpretations of the four databases. Collectively, the member resources that were brought into this interpretation stage brought a combination of worldviews that encompassed post-positivism, social constructivism, and participatory/advocacy. Each of our researchers held certain assumptions about the adult literacy research process and the inherent philosophical elements of ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology, and rhetoric. These worldviews were brought together with the interpretation cross-checks. Taken together, there was consensus on the metaphors at the descriptive level. *Explanation* was the final stage of analysis; here, the focus was on the specific texts, discourse practices, and social practices. This final phase attempted to interpret the social phenomena of literacy and how it has been conceptualized within the given domains of academic, practitioner, and governmental research.

Data Sources

The primary data source was the entire set of issues of *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education (CJSAE)* from 1987 to 2010, the current lifespan of this peer-reviewed publication. For each of the 45 issues of the journal, four genres were used: individual research articles, references in these articles and the "Perspectives," book reviews, and the "Graduate degrees in Canada" section of issues. An early assumption was that there was importance in searching for terms associated with the concept of adult literacy. The alternative content descriptors used to search the *CJSAE* included literacy, basic skills training, workplace literacy, workplace basic skills, family literacy, health literacy, Aboriginal literacy, school literacy, intergenerational literacy, illiteracy, essential skills, job-focused literacy education, ESL literacy,

and workers and adults with low skills.

Three sweeps of the data collection were made. The first sweep involved 29 journal issues from 1987–2001. The second focused on the special 2001 *CJSAE* issue dedicated to literacy: *15*(2). This issue consisted of two editorials, nine research articles, six book reviews and graduate degrees in Canada. It served as a benchmark for examining the contributions to literacy to this point and provided a means for critically analyzing the third sweep consisting of the remaining 15 journal issues from 2002–2010.

Table 1.

Snapshot of CJSAE Data

Data sweep	Number of issues	Number of discourse analysis grids completed	Articles referring to some aspect of literacy	References referring to some aspect of literacy	Book reviews referring to some aspect of literacy	Graduate degrees referring to some aspect of literacy
1987–2001	29	54	47	22	13	82
Special Issue on Literacy (2001), <i>15</i> (2)	1	18	11	389	6	2
2001–2010	16	24	21	41	7	42
Total	45	96	79	452	26	126

To further deepen this analysis, secondary data sources were employed. All 10 issues of the *Literacies* journal, spanning 2003–2009, were reviewed, and 116 articles were selected for discourse analysis. Secondly, a website review was conducted of Canada’s literacy coalitions and

associations to locate Research in Practice (RiP) postings (Quigley & Norton, 2002). That search yielded 31 RiP reports and e-books as retrieved to August 30, 2010. Finally, the *State of the field report: Adult literacy* (Quigley et al., 2006) was analyzed as another secondary data source. This report includes approximately 1,200 literacy-relevant entries dating from the mid-1970s and is the most comprehensive critical review of Canadian adult literacy literature to date. Since the largest proportion of the entries in the report were under the auspices of governments and their partners, these entries were seen as representative of the government voice in the Canadian literacy research landscape.

Presentation of the Findings

The findings are presented as a number of metaphors to help depict the analysis conducted in both the primary and secondary data sources. As Walker (2008) maintained, a metaphor can help to unite “reason and imagination and provides a richer understanding of different conceptual frames present in the documents” (p. 372).

Primary Data Source Analysis

From the first data sweep (1987–2000), three metaphors emerged: literacy as emancipation, literacy as commodity, and a glimpse of literacy as social practice. From the second data sweep (2001), the main metaphor, “Opening the door on sociocultural literacy learning,” depicted the contributions to literacy theory building and areas requiring further development. The final sweep (2002–2010) presented two additional metaphors: integrating literacy into critical social practice and recognizing the continuum of formal and informal literacy learning.

Metaphor #1: Literacy as Emancipation. In the first data sweep, the most prominent metaphor was literacy as a means of emancipation. In a book review, Darville (1987) presented

Harman's *Illiteracy: A National Dilemma* as an illustration of literacy as freedom, citing how "Literacy makes it possible for people to determine for themselves what they wish to know and in what depth" (p. 93). These words underpin the perception that literacy is more than ideals; it is the actual literacy experience of the learner with the potential to free the individual. Further support for this metaphor was found in many other articles that saw literacy education as a practical way for learners to take control of their lives. An example from French Canada is Chervin's (1991) claim that "meme si ce retour au scheme traditionnel reste temporaire chez la plupart des educatrices et educateurs critiques voues au developpement de l'approche quebecoise de l'alphabetisation populaire" (p. 46). In addition, Spencer's (1992) call for "student centered courses and social awareness" (p. 68) is indicative of the attention given to emancipation discourse in the 1990s. Riverin-Simard (1992) employed a strong Marxist undertone, arguing that vocational education needs to be accessible by all so that all members of society have access to the tools needed to achieve personal success. Similarly, there were a number of short samples that focused on literacy as a means of empowering women. For example, Miles (1989) argued that literacy education needs more women to fill the roles as "grass roots educators, as feminist activists, as co-ordinators of programs and networks in different fields in adult education" (p. 6) in order to raise feminist consciousness.

From beyond reading, to improving personal living conditions in developing countries (Bouvet & Gervais, 1996), to a discussion of empowerment in the particular context of anti-nuclear advocacy (Regnier & Penna, 1996), authors explored critical pedagogy as a means for teaching literacy and as a way to challenge and question dominant systems. The common thread that highlighted literacy as emancipation is that all encompass the praxis of overcoming oppression through action and interaction as described by Friere. Arguments such as "it ought to

be stressed that, for Freire, literacy education was merely a vehicle for a process of political concretization and therefore not an end in itself” (Mayo, 1994, p. 16) were examples. This point, and others, indicated how this line of discourse sees the struggle for power and radical democracy as inseparable from literacy as a form of emancipation. In essence, empowerment involves an ideological shift in order for the impact of literacy to permeate the experiences and realities of individuals who are part of a community. Within the empowerment discourse that emerged, there were also some text samples that bring to light issues that continue to plague the emancipatory potential of literacy learning. A case in point is the essay by Holtslander (1997) which points to a disconnect between institutions that adopt Friere’s rhetoric but practice “adaptation (accommodation to a modernization agenda) rather than emancipation of the literacy students” (p. 79).

Metaphor #2: Literacy as Commodity. This second metaphor depicts literacy as a commodity like acquired, portable, merchandise. In the first issue of the *CJSAE*, Selman (1987) wrote about the history of Canadian adult education in the 1950s and referred to the “work of Frontier College in *bringing basic education* [emphasis added] to men in isolated areas of the frontier” (p. 9). Barer-Stein (1987) mentioned that “adult educators become accustomed to their habitual tasks of assembling materials and services, projects and programs as in the case of basic education” (p. 31). Here literacy is seen as a portable commodity that can be effectively “packaged and delivered.”

This same human capital viewpoint is seen in Legge’s (1988) book review which addressed unemployment and the working class. Legge observed that “too often all unemployed are lumped together and the heterogeneity is ignored,” adding that “unemployment may occur at all levels of society from the unskilled worker to the high executives” (pp. 65–66). By

concluding that there must be a matching with job provisions if there is to be a point to training programs or special funding, Legge argued that basic education and “second chance learning” are the prerequisite commodities for success (pp. 65–66). This view of basic literacy as remedial education continues to “other” and marginalize such groups of workers and learners.

However, a different approach is apparent in an article by Chalom (1990) on literacy needs among immigrants in Quebec. As Chalom explained, “il est vrai que la notion d’analphabétisme est à la fois complexe pour plusieurs. L’analphabétisme serait le symptôme et non la cause d’un ensemble de conditions économiques des avantageuses vécues par un segment de la population adulte” (p. 18). Chalom’s key argument is that immigrants view basic literacy programs as a means for learning to speak a second language which will lead them to finding employment. Burnaby (1995) picked up on this same idea when discussing the linguistic minority groups of this information age.

The rise of the so-called new knowledge economy throughout the 1990s also had an impact on how literacy was perceived and how research was grounded. Sweet (2000), for instance, referred to the importance of credentialism in adult learning, noting that “changes in the Canadian economy have encouraged and required people to return to school in order to upgrade their qualifications;” adding, “The notion that one could obtain an initial or basic education and then proceed to a permanent position in the workforce has become outdated (p. 2). The viewpoint here is that the acquisition of more skills and upgrading by workers is the human capital answer that will not only help the economy, but also put employers in charge of learning, thus keeping power in the hands of those who ostensibly run the economy. Furthermore, the thesis titles from this journal period speak to the theme that literacy is an intervention for curing unemployment, while formal adult basic education programs are typically the unquestioned

vehicle for this commodity (Anderson, 1989; Banasch, 1992; Clausen, 1992; Fallis, 1989; Pitaus, 1994; Porteous, 1993; Spaulding, 1989). As will be seen, this metaphor is reflected in the practitioner literature, and dominates the sponsors' literature.

Metaphor #3: A Glimpse of Literacy as Social Practice. A third metaphor in this first sweep was “a glimpse of literacy as social practice.” This metaphor is suggesting there were only shades and nuances of literacy as social practice at this time; it was not yet firmly embedded in the discourse. The first glimpse is by Darville (1987) who, in a book review of Harman's work, argued that it “would be more fruitful to hold off on the ideologizing and look at how literacy actually works, to develop a conception of literacy not as a set of ideals but as a set of practices (p. 94). Similarly, Mushi (1994) called for practitioners to adopt a teaching style where they become conscious of the social and political world of the learners and infuse the classroom with workplace and daily life realities. Fretz's (1993) book review of Candy's *Self-Direction for Lifelong Learning* assesses the growth of social practice as a way of discussing adult literacy that is “built on a constructivist foundation that posits all learning is self-directed in that each individual takes new information and actively constructs idiosyncratic cognitive structures, related to previous experience” (p. 94). This constructivist lens is used frequently in the practitioner studies seen later.

Other research advocated tailoring literacy to the needs of participants. Yang (1995) advocated designing “program and promotional material to convince potential participants that the program content is highly relevant to their work” (p. 52). A similar nuance of literacy as social practice was raised by Taylor (2000) writing about transformative learning as “uniquely adult, abstract, idealized, and grounded in the nature of communication” (p. 3). These practice-based strategies also permeated the literacy discourse in the call for making learning authentic to

the workplace. Francophone authors Riverin-Simard and Delmotte (1995), for instance, argued that “Par ailleurs une façon d'arriver à proposer des interventions toujours plus adéquates dans le domaine de la formation continue est d'en connaître davantage sur les caractéristiques et difficultés particulières des jeunes travailleurs selon les grands types de milieux organisationnels” (p. 20).

Theses titles from 1992–1993 also revealed a consistent view of literacy as social practice with topics such as transformative learning, program evaluation, informal learning, and distance education (Campbell, 1993; Clausen, 1992; Folkman, 1993; Jackson, 1992; MacMahon, 1992; Veninungaard, 1992). Similarly, thesis titles from 1997 also refer to the notion of literacy as social practice in the wide range of works from Hill (1997), Rimkus (1997), Macleod (1997), Osborne (1997), Porteous (1993), Walsh (1997), and McCreath (1997). However, despite increasing shades and nuances of literacy as social practice, only Fenimore (1997) personally reflected that “As an adult educator, I also wondered what I might do to make a greater contribution to the learning experiences of older adults [and concludes that] to learn from and to teach older adults may require a willingness to re-think strategies of the past” (pp. 57–58).

Metaphor #4: Opening the Door on Sociocultural Literacy Learning. Through the second sweep, which involved the *CJSAE*'s Special Issue on Literacy (2001), the social constructivist learning approach was the dominant theme. It appeared as a building block towards literacy theory development throughout the nine articles, two editorials, six book reviews and graduate thesis titles in this issue, together with well over 350 references that are directly and indirectly related to this learning approach. Authors such as Askov (2001), Taylor and Blunt (2001), and Terry (2001) highlighted the importance of Bruner's situated cognition, Vygotsky's social cultural theory, and Wenger's social theory of learning as rudiments for

understanding adult literacy learning. Central to their arguments is the notion of collaborative learning and the interactions with peers and teachers as new knowledge is constructed in an adult classroom or group learning environment. We also saw growing attention to the learner's life roles as the driving force behind curriculum planning and emphasis on personal and social adult development. Askov (2001) made it clear that "The sociocultural/constructivist learning approach, including the concept of situated learning (e.g., Bruner, 1990), has great relevance to adult literacy programs. ... In fact, literacy activities become meaningful to the extent that they are needed in interactions with others and with the content to be learned" (pp. 9–10).

Another common thread was the contextual nature of literacy. Demetrion (2001) extended this by drawing out the philosophical underpinnings of many of the existing literacy programs of that period and pointing out that the literacy identity of learners often occurs through critical reflection and collaborative action based on an emancipatory pedagogy. St. Clair (2001), on the other hand, introduced the idea that social capital among literacy instructors is different from other types of vocational instructors. This has implications on how the status of a literacy program is viewed; therefore, inherent in this sociocultural learning approach is the need for alternative models for assessing adult literacy.

At the forefront of this position is Sticht (2001) who traced the mixed evidence on the *International Adult Literacy Survey* and the conceptualization of literacy levels that have become popularized throughout industrialized countries. Likewise, many of the arguments presented in this special issue attest to the inappropriateness of using the school-based models of literacy with assessment practices. Terry (2001), for example, maintained that "individual learners in a literacy (or other adult basic education) program ... seldom have the same incoming academic skill levels and therefore should not be given the same [standardized] pre-set units of

knowledge” (p. 64).

Metaphor #5: Literacy as Critical Social Practice. Emerging from the final sweep, the earlier integrating literacy as social practice metaphor was seen to have been expanded with a turn towards greater criticality. These articles mirrored the larger, complex societal changes of this *CJSAE* period (2001–2010). Literacy as critical social practice demonstrates the underpinning metaphor of emancipation as a driving force in academic adult literacy learning research.

Text samples by Gouthro (2009) on active citizenship and by Brann-Barrett (2009) on research with citizens on the socio-economic margins support the changing view of this period that the more a nation’s citizens learn, the more the country benefits as a whole. Extending this idea, McGregor and Price (2010) used a postmodern policy analysis framework to explore how two Canadian literacy organizations used websites as civic tools for advocacy.

The growing shift towards literacy as *critical* social practice is again seen in Burstow’s (2003) article which focused on the mental health field and the specific learning needs of psychiatric survivors. Burstow found increasing awareness of a lack of equity for these learners: “Hence, the importance of literacy work” (p. 14). Rather than a commodified human capital focus, here is advocacy for literacy throughout life. Thesis research by Robinson (2008) also looked at participation by exploring literacy and mental health. Providing equal access through adult literacy education was further explored in Verma and Mann’s (2007) study of learning among lower-wage and at-risk workers. Arguing, “the skill development needs of less-educated and less-skilled workers are not being met” (p. 115), their findings further heighten the need to foster greater self-efficacy among adult literacy learners with the argument that such learners will face significant barriers to adult learning outside of the workplace. Literacy as critical social

practice, which is so strongly linked to the early metaphor of empowerment, was also evident in articles on targeted populations such as Alfred's (2004) work with Caribbean immigrant workers; Anderson's (2004) study of rural adult literacy learners; Muiri and McLean's (2005) article on Kenyan adults; Mirchandani, Ng, Sangha, Rawlings, and Coloma-Moya's (2005) writings about merchant workers; and Clover's (2009) exploration of arts-based adult education with homeless street women.

Also evident during this writing period are the challenges that are faced by adult educators in meeting the needs of diverse learners. Weinkauff (2003) echoed Corley and Tayman's (2001) work on disabled adults seen in the second sweep. Mirth (2003) also shed light on the different historical ideologies of the illiterate working class, pointing to how it is at odds with a system anchored in a middle-class, social reform ideology. Chapman (2004), in a book review of *Philosophical Foundations of Adult Education* by Elias and Merriam (2004) drew attention to the societal changes that have influenced education philosophy globally, such as the work of Freire and emancipatory learning. Thesis work by Andrade (2008), who applied Freirean critical pedagogy, also reinforced this metaphor.

Metaphor #6: The Continuum of Formal and Informal Literacy Learning. It is the seminal work by Livingstone (2007) that captures the essence of the formal-informal learning continuum metaphor. Livingstone argued "the huge hidden informal part of the iceberg of adult learning should have some further connections with the visible pyramid of formal education that appears to float above it" (p. 16). Livingstone also unmasked an area of tension between formal and informal literacy learning that stood out in a variety of text samples from publications during these last 10 years of the *CJSAE*. As this author concluded, the demands for further education

that will not be met until governments and employers “provide more coherent programs and sustained resources, especially for the least credentialed” (p. 21).

Tensions arising from the demand for increased accountability in adult education was a recurring theme from 2001–2010. Moss (2008) made the case for redefining accountability in ABE through an emancipatory approach to student assessment, and Slade (2008) explored the social organization of Canadian work experience for immigrant professionals. Both theses illustrated the familiar persistence of the human capital metaphor when referring to formal adult education. We noted text phrases like *program accreditation*, *systemization*, and *streamlining the curriculum* as references to the more specific expectations of a formal program. By contrast, problems identified with the formal learning system and the barriers inherent in them were discussed by Vautour, Pruneau, Auzou, and Prévost (2009). They asked why informal and personal-led learning could not be recognized in the same way as more formal literacy learning. On related topics, James and Francis-Pelton (2005) explored the use of achievement test scores to predict student success in basic education, concluding that such measures do not prove adequately valid in predicting success. Similarly, Sandlin (2005) looked critically at the high regard the GED holds in the US education system and raised concerns about GED programs gaining influence in Canada, including how the GED drives adult basic education programs in the US. Sandlin also noted how increased prevalence of the GED places formal learning in a position of power and dictates the avenues available within the adult learning community.

Secondary Data Source Analyses

While the primary data source for this study was the *CJSAE* itself, the contributions of literacy practitioners in the *Literacies* journal and the websites from five provinces reporting Research-in-Practice (RiP) outcomes were also examined, as were the titles of government and

government-related reports as seen in the comprehensive *State of the Field: Literacy* (Quigley et al., 2006) report. A key finding from this analysis was that the six metaphors depicted above are clearly reflected across the secondary data sources. In addition, another key metaphor emerged—literacy as relationship.

A search of all practitioner websites was conducted up to August 15, 2010 to identify and review the research from Canada's Research-in-Practice movement. The RiP reports from British Columbia and Alberta were located on the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) and those from Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia were located on their individual coalition or professional association websites. As Horsman and Woodrow stated in their 2006 pan-Canadian study of RiP, besides conducting research on practice, this initiative gives “practitioners other ways to engage with research” including “reading, responding, reflecting, sharing and applying research in daily practice” (p. 6).

Metaphor #7: Literacy as Relationship. The RiP practitioner-researchers were found to focus on three practice areas: classroom-based problems, effective practice using systematic critical reflective discussion, and learner-instructor relational issues. Irrespective of research methodology used, the metaphor that dominated was literacy as relationship. This metaphor extended from the indirect impacts of instructor-learner relations to direct or implicit therapeutic involvement with learners. Collaborative practice, issues of power, and pedagogical constructivism were consistently evident across this relationship metaphor. For example, Norton (2004) discussed a project focused on women and ways to address violence in their lives through literacy education. In this project, learning workshops were later supported by online discussion for the instructors. Their research resulted in the key finding, as articulated by Horsman, that “in the face of violence, it is important to teach to the whole person—body, mind, emotion and

spirit—recognizing that each part could be damaged by violence, and that each can either block or support learning” (p. 5). In this same project, Kehler stated, “My job was to create a space where the women felt accepted for the strong, if struggling, women they were. I encouraged, supported and validated each participant. ...I accepted them as whole people” (p. 76).

In the posted electronic book, *Hardwired for Hope: Effective ABE/LITERACY Instructors* (Battell, Gesser, Rose, Sawyer, & Twiss, 2004), practitioners studied the nature of collegial relationships in investigating the qualities that make an effective ABE/literacy instructor. They found that practitioner collaboration was critical to teaching effectiveness and, again, stressed the importance of relationship-building with learners. As Rose explained: “Many adults come back to school without the supports to make them efficient learners. Such adults are wanting more than the content. They are often looking for a relationship with their instructors to help facilitate their transition to education” (p. 56). Gesser and Sawyer, concisely summarized that project’s finding, stating: “practitioner-researchers ... need to invite the whole person into the classroom and to provide support and learning in the personal and emotional realm as well as the academic” (p. 133). The *Festival of Literacies* website revealed a similar project by tutors in the Trent Valley region of Ontario. This report further demonstrates how relationship-building in literacy often merges with therapy and “is characterized by sensitivity, attentiveness, responsiveness, acceptance, and trust” (Battell et al., 2004, p. 43).

The Research-in-Practice Movement

The RiP reports from Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia are largely aligned with the metaphors of literacy as social practice and commodity, but issues of power and emancipation were embedded throughout all of the RiP reports. One of the clearest examples is Battell et al.’s (2004) research report and the question Battell posed to her BC practitioner colleagues of

whether they saw “their teaching motivation to be ‘political’ or ‘nurturing’” (p. 72). Noting that “we all know that the larger forces of society are affecting us and our students” (p. 72), she reported, “Many students are reluctant to share the power. They are more comfortable with the teacher–down style of classroom” and “don’t really want to take a lot of responsibility for the success of the class” (p. 77).

Eight of the nine RiP reports on the Saskatchewan Adult Basic Education Association (n.d.) website, and all nine Nova Scotia postings (Literacy Nova Scotia, n.d.) aligned less with “literacy as relationship” and more with immediate classroom questions. The most common among these were student recruitment, student attendance, and retention issues. The two metaphors suggested in these websites were “literacy as commodity” and “literacy as social practice.” For Nova Scotia, issues such as learner waiting periods to begin programs, how to improve informational meetings, and learner attendance and dropout were examples of their action research studies. Literacy as commodity was seen in eight of the RiP reports on the Saskatchewan website with research on teaching, attendance, and retention questions in the majority. However, Bruce’s (2009) study conducted on the Onion Lake Reserve community evoked “literacy as critical social practice.” Bruce’s research question: “If I improve the social environment of the classroom, will the number of students who complete the first three weeks increase?” took learners into the wider First Nation community as they engaged and challenged the local power structure.

Except for Saskatchewan the number of Canada’s RiP postings are in a decline; nevertheless, as Horsman and Woodrow (2006) stated, when literacy and basic education practitioners conduct their own research which “is personal and self directed but possibly collaborative” (p. 6), and do so without overt restraint from peer review or compliance with

fundings' criteria, their research and self-articulated expression of literacy frequently revealed a metaphor of literacy as relationship. Meanwhile, the familiar metaphors of literacy as commodity and literacy as social practice were consistent in this data source.

Literacies

Turning to the 116 selected articles from the *Literacies* journal, the clear majority were identified within the metaphor of literacy as social practice (71%) while 41% were associated with the literacy as commodity, and 22% with the formal and informal learning metaphors.

These articles depicted a rich set of discourses across a hugely diverse range of literacy groups, including the Innu, various First Nations, women affected by violence, learners with disabilities, Francophone learners, literacy learners in Cuba, in Scotland, and parents of learners.

Representative of the majority in the social practice metaphor is Balanoff and Chambers' (2005) article on Aboriginal elders and learners where the predominant discourse of literacy was viewed "as a social practice that takes into account culture and local contexts, and is shaped by history; if 'text' is interpreted as the complex symbol system people understand and use beyond language and print ... then these [Aboriginal] Elders are literate." (p. 18). Another example is Pringle's (2005) critical statement that "We have learned that discrimination is not to be practiced against women or ethnic minorities. But society has yet to challenge, in any serious way, the stigma of having either low reading skills or limited intellectual ability" (p. 13).

In these two data sources, despite minimal intertextuality with other literature databases, we found the presence of governmental policies and lack of funding to appear in multiple examples of the commodities and emancipation metaphors. Alkenbrack, Middleton, Niks, and Soroke (2003) asked: "In times like these, inevitable questions arise about the importance and the capacity for research: Is there any value to doing research when literacy is so underfunded?"

(p. 28). Miller (2005), within the literacy as commodity metaphor, noted how the “government focus on skills rather than on a broader definition of literacy [puts literacy in a] ‘rock and a hard place’ position [because] to gain funding ... we often need to demonstrate improvement in skills (especially reading, document use, and numeracy)” (p. 32). The emancipation metaphor often dealt directly with ever-present governmental influences. Herrington’s (2004) statement is a concise example:

At root, simply working around the most recently prescribed frameworks cannot satisfy us. I think we have to return to the question of why policy-makers want to work with very simple narratives about literacy and why ideological models seem to them to be too complicated to underpin policy. (p. 16)

The need for more intertextuality and cross-dialogue within the triangle of discourse was evident in Morgan’s (2007) article which turned power questions inward: “Unless we can pull together as a sector, we have little hope of convincing government and other funders that literacy merits a much greater societal commitment” (p. 16). Issues of power conceptualized in *Literacies* were more critically positioned than those seen in the RiP data sources, but issues with government funding were raised throughout the practitioner databases. Interestingly, while the literacy as relationship metaphor dominated the RiP sources, it comprised only 28% of this practitioner data source. No new metaphors emerged, but those identified in the *CJSAE* and RiP databases were well-represented in *Literacies*.

The State of the Field Report: Adult Literacy

The third voice in shaping Canada’s literacy research was that of the federal government and its partners as seen in the comprehensive *State of the Field on Literacy Report* (Quigley et al., 2006). The approximately 1200 references cited in that report include works cited from 34

literacy-related websites, multiple references from the major works in the academic and “grey literature,” and research “using Google, Google Scholar, Google Books, ProQuest, Medline, PubMed, SpringerLink and JSTOR” (Quigley et al., 2006, pp. 8–9). Quigley et al. found that, “The Canadian literature has recently become dominated by a focus on numbers and statistics related to people who have literacy challenges” (p. 16). Further, they found “The majority of this literature has been published or sponsored by the Canadian government and its partners” (p. 26). For purposes of this discourse analysis, the titles of the governmental research literature in the *State of the Field* report were taken to be representative of the government voice.

A total of 43 government-related entries were found. Of these, all were declarative and typically depicted adult literacy as a measurable commodity of knowledge and skills. The majority of the entries were expository analyses, interpretations, descriptions, reviews of reports, and theme studies. From reports as early as Cairns’ (1988) *Adult illiteracy in Canada*, to the 2005 *International Adult Literacy Survey. Measuring adult literacy and lifeskills* by Murray, Clermont and Binkley, consistent terms used include *literacy*, *illiteracy*, *numeracy*, *less literate*, and positivist terms such as *benchmarking*. With the exception of one reference by Livingstone, Raykov, and Stowe (2001), which engaged the metaphor of informal learning, literacy was essentially perceived as a commodity capable of carrying out economic reform.

Three Solitudes: Implications and Challenges for the 21st Century

Bourdieu (1971) wrote: “There is no absolute reality, it differs with the group to which one belongs” (p. 195). Asking how the field of adult literacy scholarship has been shaped since the mid-1980s, our analysis revealed that each of the academic, practitioner, and government discourses has shaped its contribution out of its own context and reality. Literacy research is effectively evolving out of three solitudes.

There are some promising signs as found through our question: “What are the predominant discourses presented by academic researchers, government sponsors and practitioners in the literacy knowledge base through this major period of development?” The first sweep of the 29 *CJSAE* issues found emancipation to be the most prominent metaphor. Although emancipation evolved in construct and nuance, it fell short throughout the journal’s remaining periods in the sense that, despite cries for emancipation calling for literacy as a vehicle to help free the marginalized adult learner, there was no empirical evidence that this has actually occurred. Will the new evolving research paradigms—especially around advocacy and participation—actually move us beyond emancipatory rhetoric to documenting such acts of freedom? Will populations such as English language learners, learners with disabilities, Aboriginal learners, and women as literacy learners become the focus of such research?

The second most predominant metaphor was literacy as commodity, typically seen as the human capital answer to perceived needs of the Canadian economy. This rhetoric shows its economic face throughout the different data sources. These emancipation and commodity metaphors not only formed the undergirding for all three sweeps but were reflected throughout the practitioner data sources, while literacy as commodity dominated the governmental literature. “A glimpse of literacy as social practice” in the *CJSAE* was the main metaphor throughout the articles reviewed in *Literacies*. Each of the metaphors was seen in this (now discontinued) practitioner journal; but, clearly, a constructivist lens was used far more by academics and practitioners than by authors of government reports.

The Special *CJSAE* issue revealed sociocultural contexts and needs of learners, and began to nuance the earlier, more singular emancipatory and human capital metaphors. By 2001, the hegemonies of “should” shifted in semantics, mood, and collocation to the hegemonic

nuances of “why and how.” Despite minimal intertextuality with the other two data sources, this benchmark issue moved the academic discourse towards a wider range of theory and theory-building. The burgeoning examples of situated cognition, constructivism, and increasing reference to collaborative learning paralleled much of what was found in *Literacies* and the RiP research bases.

In the remaining 15 *CJSAE* issues, emancipatory and postmodern frameworks appeared within the final two *CJSAE* metaphors: critical social practice and the continuum of formal and informal learning. In this third sweep, we saw the rise of new hegemonic challenges to literacy as commodity with critical questions posed to growing accountability demands, test measurement, and concern with the GED in Canada. The formal and informal learning metaphor also challenged the earliest commodity metaphor with new questions of not only “why and how,” but “when and where.” In addition, as the door was opened to sociocultural literacy learning, we now ask if this research direction could help researchers unravel questions related to informal learning such as of the importance of social networks and learning relationships in non-formal, informal, and incidental learning and pedagogical practices for learning through the social capital paradigm.

The evolution of these six *CJSAE* metaphors indicates a trend towards greater epistemological sophistication and nuance. The rise of the most recent metaphors, together with the rise of constructivism, situated learning, and collaboration brought the issues and *CJSAE* theoretical constructs closer to literacy practice and the lived experiences of learners. However, possibly due to an absence of cross-referencing, dialogue, and co-authorship, this academic research trend has yet to engage with the practitioners’ strongly-stated metaphor of literacy as relationship. Reflecting on the close proximity found between the academic and practitioner

research, we ask what role the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) can play in bringing these two groups of adult educators together. Some initial attempts have been made through CASAE, but they have amounted to false starts and empty promises.

The *CJSAE* literacy literature has begun to engage with and challenge the human capital commodity metaphor so evident in the sponsors' literature, but without evident cross-referencing or cross-dialogue with authors of the government literature. Further research and research-based dialogue with government and their partners might explore how social and cultural capital can help explain and address other dimensions of the complex phenomenon of adult literacy. Here, then, are some of the challenges we see emerging for researchers as they look at the work and previous well-intended attempts to build a field of adult literacy.

The stories and challenges in this triangle of discourses have been changing shape even during the course of this study. One trend is that, despite regular use of terms like *inclusion* and *collaboration*, when we asked our final question on how the lines of support or disconnect are represented across these databases we found practitioners only occasionally referenced the work of adult literacy academics. Similarly, academic researchers rarely acknowledged the contributions of practitioners. Both sets of discourse made reference to sponsors' power and influence, even if actual reference to the governmental research was limited. Finally, with some exceptions, the literature of government and its partners typically ignored both the practitioner and academic research. Given that each of the three databases essentially emerged through the same time period, the absence of cross-authorship and lack of cross-dialogue in this triangle must be a concern. Nor did anything in this analysis suggest the lines of connectedness were growing closer across the triangle, even if academics and practitioners have, perhaps unknowingly, been working in close proximity. If anything, the three solitudes are becoming more entrenched.

Even more pressing, the triangle was changing shape when federal funding cuts lead to the closure of the *Literacies* journal in 2009. Further, with the exception of Saskatchewan, the marked decline in the number of RiP postings to RiP websites since 2004 reveals that the voice of the practitioner is fading and will be soon lost in this discourse format. Moreover, nowhere did we see an emerging rise or connection to the learners' voice.

In closing, our three solitudes and the imminent loss of the practitioners' voice would perhaps not matter so much if so much were not at stake. The 2003 *International Adult Literacy Survey* found some 43% of the Canadian population is affected by low levels of literacy skills. Every corner and sub-discipline of the field of adult education can be seen to be affected by this huge statistic. On the occasion of this *CJSAE* anniversary, we ask the overriding question: "What can we do to transform the three solitudes of literacy into a circle of academic-practice-sponsor- and learner communities?"

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