Towards the Development of an International Research Strategy for Literacy and Essential Skills: Perspectives from Academic and Practitioner Researchers in Canada and Ireland

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Abstract: The symposium explores four diverse perspectives towards the development of a research strategy from academic researchers and practitioner researchers in both Canada and Ireland. It attempts to identify the types of elements in such a strategy that might be promoted at an international level on the common topic of literacy and essential skills.

Literacy and essential skills has now become a recurring issue of national importance as it relates to civic and social participation, labour market shortages, and lifelong learning. In response to the forecasted increase in the adult population who do not have the literacy skills to meet the ever changing demands of an information based global economy and society, industrialized countries such as Canada and Ireland are in the midst of developing adult learning and literacy policy frameworks (Department for Employment and Learning for Northern Ireland, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2008; Canadian Council on Learning, 2008; National Adult Literacy Agency, 2008). Problematic to this policy approach for both of these countries who share comparable adult literacy rates is the absence of a research strategy at the national and international levels that is inclusive of the key researchers who are engaged in the work of literacy and essential skills (Hamilton & Hillier 2006, Herrington & Kendall 2005, Taylor & Evans 2009). As Lee (2007) so aptly points out, there is "a continuing need for theoretical work across the boundaries of national research communities and research paradigms. A major challenge for the research field is to build an international conversation and to engage in cross-nation studies that build the capacity to better engage in the increasing complexity of the literacy/social participation relation" (p.2). The symposium is a response to this call.

It will discuss four diverse perspectives towards the development of a research strategy from the positions of academic and practitioner researchers in both Canada and Ireland. It will also seek to understand how these positions and perspectives have occured in both nations and how these research and practice communities might work together collaboratively. In the first position, Taylor argues that a theoretical lens integrating concepts of social capital and human capital theory could be a point of entry between Canada and Ireland as an element in the research strategy for studying the informal learning of workers with low literacy. Another perspective of the research strategy is taken up by Mark who focuses on the role of universities in promoting research for literacy and essential skills. This position discusses how universities can act as catalysts for training researchers and translating scientific knowledge. A third position by Pinsent-Johnson advocates for institutional ethnography as a way of engaging practitioners in the process of meaningful research. This important practitioner element of an overarching

research strategy is also explored by Montgomery who draws on her ethnographic experiences with literacy learners and a call for "on the ground" research.

Considering a Theoretical Lens for
Cross Nation Study of Literacy and Essential Skills

This symposium position argues that a theoretical lens integrating concepts of social capital and human capital theory could be a point of entry between Canada and Ireland as part of a research strategy in literacy and essential skills. It begins by an attempt to analyze how the language of literacy and essential skills is currently being used in the work of policy analysts, researchers, and adult educators in Canada. The companion analysis of language use in Ireland has yet to be done. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) espoused by Fairclough (2003) and Rogers (2004) as the frame for this perspective, three Canadian texts were used to start the mapping process of meaning and inferences of literacy and essential skills almost 15 years after the initial Occupational Essential Skills Profile project in 1994. It was thought that a current categorization of these shifting terms might provide a sense of direction in identifying the concepts for a theoretical lens. These three texts were chosen from a small panel made up federal government policy analysts, researchers and adult educators as the documents most frequently referred to in their work in literacy and essential skills. They included Essential Skills: Skills to Build On (2008); Exploring New Directions in Essential Skills (2005) and Essential Skills and the Labour Movement (2005). The main question that guided the analysis was how is literacy and essential skills presented across these texts.

A preliminary analysis and interpretation suggests two prevalent discourses – specific requirements for a knowledge based global economy and movement towards a broader use of literacy and essential skills. Embedded in the first discourse is still the strong presence of basic skill domains for lower level occupations and persistent inferences to a deficit skills model and a human capital theory interpretation. Gibb (2008) also using CDA but with different texts from adult second language and essential skills policies found similar findings in her analysis. However, in the second discourse, a slightly different perspective is presented with beliefs about the importance of civic participation in society, the learning needs of people in life and the categorization of contemporary work accompanying social environments. These two textual constructions have some overlap with the two dominant conceptions of adult literacy in industrialized countries as discussed by Blunt (2001) and Taylor and Blunt (2006). A synopsis of that argument is that literacy is an essential occupational skill required for the labour force and a component of human capital theory since knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes in individuals facilitate economic well being. The second conception views literacy as essential to social development and social outcomes. This notion of adult literacy holds closer to the social capital theory by focusing on the interactions between members of a group that build cohesion and those aspects of social structure such as the quality of networks that lead to social gain for groups or individuals. What is important in this discussion is that although these two viewpoints are often presented as being polarized in the research literature from Canada and Ireland, it may be possible to consolidate these discourses in a theoretical lens to help fuel a research strategy for cross nation study.

Of particular interest to this symposium position is the work of Balatti and Falk (2002) and their model of how social capital and human capital co-evolve. As opposed to explaining the broad social nature and impacts of social capital, the focus is on the micro-processes involved in the production of social capital. It suggests that human capital and social capital develop together through the interactions of learning. In brief, the model consists of three key elements: knowledge resources such as networks of knowledge and skills (human capital); identity resources such as cognitive and affective attributes (social capital) and the learning that occurs between the knowledge and identity resources. As Balatti and Falk (2002) explain, learning occurs when social capital is built or in other words, when the set of interactions call upon the existing knowledge and skills and further add form to the identity resources. This lens may be an entry point for researchers across nations and a means for developing types of comparative studies. In particular, in both Canada and Ireland there is a large gap in the domain of workplace education for employees with low educational attainment.

One specific research area and population that has not been investigated in a systematic way is the continuum of formal, non-formal and informal learning for workers with low literacy. Using this theoretical lens which brings together both human and social capital characteristics through the process of learning could provide a common approach for understanding (1) the range and types of education and training activities that workers with low literacy participate in through formal, non-formal and informal workplace learning (2) the outcomes of these activities and the factors determining the learning process used in acquiring literacy competencies and essential skills for workers with low literacy and (3) the best workplace practices common in the three work-related adult learning systems for employees with low literacy in Canada and Ireland.

The University's Role in Promoting Research for Literacy and Essential Skills

In its report on quality and capacity in educational research, the Strategic Forum for Research in Education (2008) recently noted that education as a research field has broadened considerably and that a life-wide and life-long field of study is emerging which requires new interdisciplinary expertise. It mentioned the different kinds of research that has emerged as well as the need for an agreed 'inclusive' definition of what counts as research. It also suggested that there had been too much focus on a social scientific model of research which excludes that which is more directly and explicitly linked to professional practice.

In the field of literacy and essential skills, the importance of promoting research which provides new directions for policy and improvement of practices has been widely recognised in Ireland and the UK. The setting up of the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC) dedicated to conducting research to improve literacy, numeracy, language and related skills and knowledge is a testimony to this shift in thinking.This shift towards practitioner informed research has currently taken root in Northern Ireland with the development of a partnership between universities and government focusing on learning and skills for work. As part of the Essential Skills strategy (2003), teacher training programs have encouraged research based on the everyday life concerns of teachers and learners. Participants are given training in research skills which support reflective practice. The findings from the research projects are then published through student compilations and later disseminated through local forums and

through technological means. Research topics vary considerably and have included subjects such as peer learning, mobile technology and horticulture. The focus has been to encourage practitioners to become creators and users of research. An example of a development project involving tutors and learners as researchers was the Literacy and Equality in Irish Society Project (2006), which encouraged teachers and learners to research literacy and equality issues using non- text methods of learning.

In addition to training researchers, universities have also been involved in supporting the development of an array of initiatives which promote literacy research at local, regional and national level through various strategic forums and partnerships. These cut across different life and work sectors bringing an array of interest groups together in the common pursuit of new knowledge. For example, in Ireland, bodies such as the Irish Research Association in Adult and Community Education (IRAACE), the National Association for Adult Learning in Ireland (NAALI) and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) disseminate results of research through conferences, web-sites, e-newsletters, journal publications and through competitive awards to encourage wider engagement in research in the field of adult literacy and numeracy. Some of these awards have been funded from the private sector such as the Educational Building Society in Ireland which provides annual awards for community research in adult literacy.

There are a number of roles which the university can play in the promotion of research. Universities have the potential to open up debates about how research can be developed for the benefit of different essential skills stakeholders. In particular, it has considerable expertise in the process of knowledge creation which it can offer to other stakeholders interested in developing their research profile. The university can also act as a catalyst for engaging in practice-orientated research and as translator of existing scientific knowledge by making research relevant to local and regional actors. It has also the potential to give direction to the development of research projects, for example, by providing advice and support to other stakeholders through the development of forums which encourage the use of research findings for the local and regional area.

Finally, the university has a particular contribution to play in the transfer of relevant knowledge in the international arena. Universities have experience transferring ideas and practices across countries, cultures and continents. International forums (such as CASAE) provide a useful way for doing this. The advent of a wide range of new communication technologies also provide new possibilities for transferring knowledge and have yet to be harnessed for maximum impact. Perhaps, we are therefore on the brink of a new revolution on how to create and share knowledge which can bring enormous benefits to local, regional and international communities of practice. Such knowledge and approaches stand to benefit not only teaching and learning in literacy and essential skills, but the entire field of education and lifelong learning. The real question is no longer whether stakeholder engagement in the research process is useful but how to bring it about.

Institutional Ethnography: Ways of Engaging in Practitioner Research
Although there have been some exciting and innovative practitioner research projects in Canada, including collaborations with academics, they have not been consistently supported. A recent effort to develop a strategy for practitioner research in Canada appeared to lose its momentum as practitioners across Canada questioned the focus on

research while programs continue to struggle for legitimacy and stability. Instead of finding a field that was excited about the potential of engaging in research, Horsman and Woodrow (2007) saw "a field that is largely demoralized and disheartened" (p. 11). Without addressing the systemic issues of under-funding, prevalence of poorly paid and insecure positions, lack of support for any type of on-going professional development and mounting accountability demands, the idea of practitioner research falls flat for most literacy educators. A potential thrust for research needs to not only take into account contributions from practitioners, but perhaps more importantly, make contributions to the development of an adult literacy education system that is consistently and adequately funded.

Since the publication of the report, there has been both possibility and further disappointment related to practitioner research. As the newly created Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES), which replaced the former National Literacy Secretariat in 2006, makes decisions about project funding for research and other activities, the field is trying to figure out what will get funded. Projects must now focus on the development of a specific form of literacy, organized by a profile of nine domain areas referred to as the Essential Skills that are employment focused. One result of the changing funding guidelines is the decision to stop funding *Literacies,* a national magazine and accompanying on-line environment for practitioner research, the sharing of ideas and professional connection. However, a national two year project on accountability that brought together educators from across Canada, and is using practitioner research and demonstration projects as its primary methodology has been funded. In a general sense though, working with such uncertainty in the field and perplexing decision-making about the value of practitioner research, why would practitioners bother to engage with research?

In order to engage with research, practitioners will have to be convinced that it will be immediately useful to them and to the field overall. One possibility is to introduce a particular form of research to practitioners that allows them to work from their experience, and at the same time, become more knowledgeable of the way decisions are made that affect their everyday practice. It is not an approach that requires a steady accumulation of findings to paint a picture of literacy learning that can be eventually useful, which would need mechanisms to support the sharing of findings. It is instead an approach that could provide more immediate understandings to individuals in various locations and programs with findings that are inherently connected. Institutional ethnography developed by Dorothy Smith (2006) and applied to the adult literacy field by Richard Darville (2001, 2002) works from the ground-up, from the practitioner's first-hand knowledge and experience. It then moves into the larger complex of adult literacy education to discover how things happen as they do, how funding decisions are made or not made, how priorities shift, and how new ways of thinking and talking about literacy education permeate everyday practice.

Darville (2002) refers to this institutional complex as the *literacy regime* that operates in the following way: "policy is fitted to the overall governing of society, programming fitted to policy, and the actual conduct of literacy work fitted to the accountability practices through which it is regulated'' (p.62). Serving as 'stepping-stones' that are used to navigate the bureaucracies of policy, curriculum development, and accountability practices are the documents that are produced within the literacy

regime. Examples of these documents include, but are not limited to, the training plans created by educators; program and curriculum guidelines produced by provincial literacy funders; learning and assessment activities published by literacy organizations; Essential Skills documents developed and supported by the federal government; and policy visions for literacy produced by international non-government bodies like the OECD. Such documents organize the ways in which adult literacy educators think about and do their everyday work. Institutional ethnography would help practitioners see how this happens.

Maybe, by recognizing how things work, how decisions are made and money is spent, practitioners can gain some sense of stability in the face of disheartening decision-making. Maybe they will see how their concerns are the concerns of other practitioners; how they really are already connected to each other when so much of what they do is decided elsewhere. Maybe knowing how things happen provides a sense of control, or at least a common ground and feeling that they are not working and thinking in isolation. And maybe a sense of control and connection will support practitioners as they reflect on their own practice to see how personal theories and conceptualizations of literacy have been shaped more by the discourse of regime building than everyday experience.

Striving for "on the ground" research: Insights from a practitioner researcher
For literacy practitioners, the key issue is how to introduce the concept of research and make it accessible and understandable to learners and at the same time grappling with it as a new researcher. When learners express bewilderment at what the teacher is trying to explain in terms of research, it is easy to be put off and decide not to bother participants with the details of what is happening and why. But taking a participatory approach to literacy teaching means that learners experience more equitable power relationships, and so it follows that it is necessary to involve them in research that ultimately impacts upon their lives. Herrington and Kendall (2005) point out that there has been a cosmic shift in the nature of research to believe it can become integrated into practice and this leads to further questions regarding how much explanation of the process should be given and how it can be made accessible to all.

Practitioners can act as 'go-betweens' who provide the link or bridge between academics on the one hand and learner participants on the other. To do this effectively, discernment and translation skills are needed by the practitioner. Literacy teachers are generally already accepted, known, respected, trusted and even revered as having learners' best interests at heart. This is particularly the case with small literacy groups who have shared their vulnerabilities and stigmatised needs with the teacher. But is this a healthy and fruitful place from which to undertake research? As a teacher of literacy over this past six years, I (Vanessa Montgomery) see practitioner research as rather tentative, and a need for bringing a healthy caution to handling, analysing and interpreting learner participant information. Some important principles were revealed as I was conducting my own research. The ethnographic approach taken gave me confidence in seeing the value of being an "insider". Having prior knowledge of the learners meant being privy to background information which helped to 'build a picture of where participants are coming from'. On the other hand, "To be highly involved, risks compromising your researcher role" (Robson, 2002, p.311). Teacher researchers begin with what is already familiar to them—their learners and their classrooms. As a result, it is sometimes difficult to gain distance and perspective. Therefore, ethical considerations

of anonymity, confidentiality and personal protection have to be kept in mind. The aim of the ethnographic researcher is to 'get out of the way', acting only as 'information broker' (Goodson & Mangan, 1996, p.48) so that participants' accounts and actions are in the foreground. An important principle is that practitioner researcher is investigating aspects of work with learners, not investigating *them*.

I also realised that an outsider would not have been able to research this aspect of literacy learning in quite the same way as I could with this particular group of learners. It had taken me about three years to even see the need to choose this topic for research. The recruitment and retention of learners into courses had been an ongoing issue. I could only have identified this aspect of practice as needing attention by being in the job. The personal struggles experienced in fulfilling the dual role of teacher and project co-ordinator had raised issues around recruitment, retention and contextualising learning. These related closely to learners and their needs and it was the practitioner's knowledge of these practical issues which informed the whole research process in literacy and essential skills.

A dilemma for the practitioner can be ensuring that research impacts practice by communicating findings in a way that others in the field can access and use the information that is relevant to them. A sharing of practice that is enhanced by 'on the ground' research, whereby practice is improved for the benefit of learners and development of the tutor, is something to strive after. Following the consultations with learners, "Feedback should be fair and fast, short and simple" (Duffen & Thompson, 2003, p. 129). It should also be soon after the event, or people will have forgotten about it or may have lost interest. The danger is that "if it is no more than rhetoric, learners and residents will become disenchanted and sceptical" (p.129). Therefore, there needs to be communication with the participants, but even more so with other literacy teachers who can use the knowledge gained, in similar circumstances. Importantly, "...evidence in and of itself does not necessarily result in change. It is crucial who disseminates this evidence, who feels it to be important and how it is understood to be relevant to practice" (Davies et al. 2007, p. 6). The difficulty is for *all* practitioners to have the time and network connections to access research that will make a difference to them and their learners.

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