

• AN OLC FIELD REPORT •

# Supporting Learning, Supporting Change

**A RESEARCH PROJECT ON  
SELF-MANAGEMENT &  
SELF-DIRECTION**

*Written by*  
**Katrina Grieve**

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A FIELD REPORT FROM:



# Acknowledgements

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The purpose of this research project was to get a better understanding of self-management and self-direction and its importance to the learning process. Further, we wanted the research to identify what future projects are needed by the Literacy and Basic Skills field in Ontario. The OLC thanks Katrina Grieve for her incredible contribution to our deeper understanding of this area. Acknowledgments and thanks to Patricia Brady who managed the project. We would also like to acknowledge the contributions of the following people:

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Sue Folinsbee  
Acting Co-Executive Director  
Ontario Literacy Coalition  
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• PLEASE NOTE •

This field report is a summary of the research report.  
The summary is available online at the website of the  
Ontario Literacy Coalition: [www.on.literacy.ca](http://www.on.literacy.ca)

The full research report can be purchased from  
the Ontario Literacy Coalition at:

365 Bloor Street East  
Suite 1003  
Toronto, Ontario  
M4W 3L4  
Phone: (416) 963-5787  
Fax: (416) 963-8102  
Email: [olc@on.literacy.ca](mailto:olc@on.literacy.ca)

# Supporting Learning, Supporting Change

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## A Research Project on Self-Management and Self-Direction

### Introduction

The Ontario Literacy Coalition conducted a research project on self-management and self-direction in 2002.

#### **The purpose of the research project was to:**

- ▶ highlight the importance of self-management and self-direction to the learning process
- ▶ provide a foundation for future research projects in this area

#### **We wanted to:**

- 1 promote greater understanding of self-management and self-direction
- 2 show that successful learning is linked to self-management and self-direction
- 3 collect information on models and best practices for incorporating this area into adult literacy programs
- 4 develop recommendations for future projects

## Why read this report?

In this field report, you will find key points from the research project, describing how self-direction is critical to successful learning. Practitioners, researchers and administrators of adult literacy programs may all find something of interest in this report, as it explores the factors that affect learning, as well as progress in a literacy program and change in learners' daily lives.

There are several ways to use this report. You can read it and reflect on how self-direction is important for learning.

You can use the model that is provided to consider how to support learners in building self-awareness and self-direction. You can also learn about what other programs are doing and find out about relevant resources. After reading key points from the research, you may want to refer to the full research report to find out more.

# The research process

As the consultant for this project, I came with my own questions about the issue of self-management and self-direction. I had just completed a project that looked at transitions from community-based literacy programs to college upgrading programs. The result was a report called *Tools for Effective Transitions*, which stressed the importance of self-management and self-direction, and incorporated this area into a set of assessment tools and demonstrations. The project had started to raise questions about where the problem lay: was it just about learners' skills and behaviours, or was it just as much about creating a supportive learning environment? The Ontario Literacy Coalition project on self-management and self-direction provided the opportunity to explore these questions and find out about other people's ideas.

The project included three components: interviews with people involved in adult literacy programs in Ontario, academic research/ literature review, and an online discussion.

## 1 Interviews

Interviews with people involved in literacy programs helped me to explore why self-management and self-direction were important for learning, and to find examples of how people incorporated this area into their programs. I held 26 interviews with literacy practitioners, researchers and learners from a broad range of programs across Ontario. I also communicated with researchers from Australia, Alberta,

British Columbia and Newfoundland to discuss their approaches.

## **2 Academic Research / Literature Review**

I started the literature review with a number of studies relating to self-direction. These included studies on learner transition and learner retention. The questions raised in the interviews then led me to explore a much wider range of academic research. Studies in sociology, psychology and education shed more light on the relationship between self-direction and the learning process.

## **3 Online Discussion**

I also facilitated an online discussion on AlphaCom. This discussion was an opportunity to work through ideas coming out of the research, and to explore different ideas for program practices.

At times the scope of the project felt overwhelming. However, the Reference Group for this project provided on-going direction and support. I was also encouraged by the level of interest in the project, and by the initial response to the project findings.

# Summary of research findings

One strong message came out of the interviews and literature review: **self-direction is critical to the learning process.**

Learners, practitioners, and researchers, academics, and employers all seem to agree on the importance of this link.

However, I found many different perspectives on:

- ▶ what is involved in self-management and self-direction
- ▶ what approaches literacy programs should take to support this area
- ▶ whether it is useful to think about self-management and self-direction as a set of skills

The project raised many questions that made it important to explore broader research. What I found was that there is a whole movement of research in a broad range of fields challenging the idea that skills can be taught in isolation and easily applied to other situations. This research describes, instead, a social view of knowledge, literacy and learning that depends on context, meaning, and relationships.

The research provided a foundation for understanding the complexity and scope of self-direction in learning. I identified the key ideas and principles from the research and combined them in a model, called *Building Self-Awareness and Self-Direction*. This model sets out new directions for practice in the area of self-direction in learning ([see page 31](#)).

Some literacy programs are already making changes that acknowledge the importance of self-awareness and self-direction. Others are struggling with how best to approach this area, given the constraints of their programs. The project concludes that we need to give more attention to promoting self-awareness and self-direction, reflecting on a variety of approaches and how they support learning. This project provides a starting point for this reflection and makes recommendations on where we need to go from here.

# Why is self-direction important?

There seems to be a clear consensus that self-direction is essential in our rapidly changing society. It is important for the learning that takes place in school, at work and in daily life. While we have heard a lot about the importance of skill development in the past few decades, there is a growing recognition that we also need to look more at what helps us respond to change. Educators, academics, business leaders, and policy-makers are putting increasing emphasis on the importance of teamwork, social skills, problem-solving, initiative, and lifelong learning.

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*There is evidence that self-direction can enhance learning outcomes, improve the relevance and meaningfulness of what is learned, and give people a sense of personal potency or power that is basic to the development of a learning-oriented society.*

— (Philip Candy, 1991)

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The literacy practitioners interviewed for this project were clear about the importance of this area. They described the ways in which self-awareness, self-esteem, and motivation all have a powerful impact on students' learning. These factors also seem to be critical in adapting to new learning situations, setting goals, and achieving these goals within particular learning environments.

*“Self-management / self-direction is a big priority because we see how important it is to learner success.”*

— (Sharon Brisson, Alternative Education Centre,  
Kapusking)

*“If life skills are lacking, they won’t be successful. At Seneca we have many at-risk students. Self-management & self-direction fills the void... We need to see self-management and self-direction as essential skills that support learning. People are successful in our program because we are meeting their personal and academic needs. Self-management and self-direction skills are integral to learning in an LBS program.”*

— (Elise Sheridan, Seneca College, Newmarket)

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We can find evidence for the importance of the area of ‘self-management and self-direction’ in a number of recent studies in the Ontario literacy field.

## **1 Studies on the impact of violence on learning**

In her book *Too Scared to Learn*, Jenny Horsman shows that building a sense of self, hope and the possibility of change is essential for learners to be able to set goals and learn effectively.

Horsman says:

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*“One learner told me, ‘the most important thing you can do is help me believe I have a mind and that it works.’”*

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## 2 Studies on learner retention

Among the factors that affect learner retention, aspects related to self-management and self-direction have a significant impact on whether a learner continues in a literacy program. Recent studies in Ontario college programs include: *What Counts as Evidence* (2000), *What Works* (2001), and *Retention Through Redirection* (2002). Other important studies include: *The Qualitative Tracking Project* (2002), and *Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need* (2002).

## 3 Studies on learner transition

Three studies on learner transition show the importance of self-management and self-direction for transition to further learning. These studies include *Tools for Effective Transitions* (2002), *Moving Right Along* (2001), and *Seamless Transition to More Learning* (2001).

## 4 Surveys of employer needs

A number of Ontario literacy programs have surveyed employers and found that employers particularly value problem-solving and the ability to work with others. In fact they often value these qualities as much, or more than, reading and writing skills.

# What exactly is *'self-management and self-direction'* ?

Through the research for this project, I found that the term *self-management and self-direction* is not easy to define. There are a wide range of understandings, among literacy practitioners, learners and researchers. These ideas have different implications: for what is included, and what is excluded. They also affect where our attention is focused, and the kind of program approaches we adopt. The ideas I discuss below give you some background about the different ways people are thinking about this topic. It is important to reflect on the research before forming opinions. This report will take you through these ideas, introduce other perspectives, and present a direction for the future.

## Perspectives from the literacy field

*“What is self-management and self-direction?”*

### **1 It's a set of skills, attitudes and behaviours**

This definition usually includes a variety of checklists. The focus is on teaching and assessing individual skills and behaviours, so that learners will be able to use these skills to improve their learning. Lists may include soft skills, employability skills, skills and behaviours needed for success in more academic programs, and lists of common problems affecting learner progress.

## 2 It's really about life skills

Self-management and self-direction can be seen as the life skills needed for life-long learning and problem-solving. This process includes looking at new ideas, reflecting on ourselves, practising behaviours, and taking steps to make changes in our lives. Reflecting, both as an individual and as part of group, is a critical part of this process. **In this definition, the emphasis is on the process.** The content can be adapted for a variety of contexts including community, work, and school, depending on the interests and needs of participants.

## 3 It starts from individual awareness and reflection

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Learners said that what's really important is a supportive learning environment, with:

- someone who believes in me and encourages me when I feel I can't do it
  - a sense of hope and possibilities
  - the chance to overcome fears, cope with anger and frustration
  - feeling respected, building trust, being able to ask for help
  - the opportunity to change and grow as a person
- 

This understanding assumes that there are some aspects of self-management and self-direction that are fundamental. Other features will be developed more easily once these fundamental aspects are addressed. For example, many practitioners find that if learners don't believe in their ability to learn, teaching time management or organizational skills often doesn't help.

From this perspective, what's important is:

- ▶ building self-esteem
- ▶ building awareness, the ability to reflect on oneself and others
- ▶ making connections, learning in context, creating meaning
- ▶ building a voice and a sense of possibilities for the future

#### 4 ‘Self-management and self-direction’ is not a useful term

A significant number of people interviewed in this project didn’t like the term ‘self-management/self-direction skills’. Many practitioners were unsure about whether their understanding of this area matched what was intended. Often part of the barrier was the term itself.

The learners who were consulted during this project had particular difficulty with this term. They felt offended by the implication that they didn’t know how to manage their own lives.

#### 5 Self-direction is not so much about skills

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It’s not so much about ‘skills’. It’s about a process of opening up to learning.

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Other practitioners talked about the limitations of thinking about this area in terms of individual skills. ‘Skills’ implies that being self-directed depends only on individual abilities. It does not show the importance of attitude or relationships with others. Rather than focusing on individual skills, one practitioner recommended looking at what supports learning, both in the learner and in the learning environment.

### What the literature says

The literature on self-direction has a long history. Since the 1960s, self-direction in learning has become an important focus of study. There are also many areas of study that have some connection to self-direction.

Many practitioners may be familiar with life skills and participatory education. Both these areas have a connection

to self-direction. By looking at a wider range of research and educational practices, we can develop a much richer picture of the nature of self-direction and how it affects learning: both inside a literacy program, and in learners' daily lives.

Research that has focused specifically on self-direction can be divided into the following categories:

- 1 Self-direction as a personal attribute  
(motivation, initiative and self-esteem)
- 2 Self-direction as learning strategies  
(e.g. planning and organizing, getting feedback, finding information)
- 3 Methods of teaching that encourage learner control
- 4 The learning that people do in their day-to-day lives

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It is not so useful to think of self-direction in terms of individual skills. We must recognize that self-direction is strongly affected by interactions with others, the learning environment and the broader context of the learner's life.

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The research has often been limited to only one of these aspects. However, the literature is increasingly recognizing that self-direction is more complex, involving a number of factors.

Practitioners and researchers are beginning to see that self-direction is not simply a matter of individual skills. Rather, it is strongly affected by social interactions, the learning environment and the broader context. These ideas have important implications for how we define self-direction and what program approaches we may choose. I will discuss them further in the section: *A social view of literacy and learning*.

# What are programs currently doing?

The field research for this project found that self-direction is being addressed in Ontario literacy programs in a variety of ways. Some programs focus more on content, teaching ‘self-management and self-direction skills’, while others focus more on process, involving a cycle of activity and reflection. Many programs address self-direction informally, as issues arise.

This section describes some of the approaches that literacy programs are using. I am presenting them as background for the research and the model that will follow.

## **1 Orientation sessions at college LBS programs**

These sessions prepare learners for the expectations of the program and provide them with learning strategies to help them succeed. The sessions range from two to ten weeks. Some focus on study skills, organization skills, and goal-setting. Others include identifying learning styles, interests, and personal needs.

## **2 Classes on topics related to ‘self-management and self-direction’**

This type of class is offered at a small number of college, school board and community-based literacy programs. The topics vary depending on the type of program, and learners’ needs. Some are intended to support learning in the program, while others prepare learners for transition to employment or further education. The classes highlight the importance of self-direction.

### **3 Life skills approach**

Recent life skills models are based on an approach to problem-solving. A variety of topics can be covered, but the process is the same. Adults learn about a topic, reflect on how it relates to their own experience, do an activity that relates to the topic, and then decide on one action that they want to try in their life. In a later session, they reflect on what they did and how it went. Some programs integrate both literacy activities and topics related to self-direction into this process-oriented approach. Other programs hold a life skills session once a week, as a component of the literacy program.

### **4 Integrating aspects of self-management and self-direction into literacy activities**

This approach is common in one-to-one community-based literacy programs and in many other types of programs. Some programs use activities that require self-direction (such as an assignment that expects learners to plan a project, organize their time, and hand it in by a certain date). Other programs develop activities that address topics directly (such as dealing with stress), using reading and writing to support the activity. Staff support learners with problem-solving as issues arise.

### **5 Holistic approaches to literacy**

The Native stream in Ontario has developed some interesting models to address the area of self-direction. Programs use a holistic approach, stressing the importance of balance, and addressing the connections of spirit, emotions, mind and body.

There are many other examples of holistic approaches to literacy. They may include hands-on projects such as

quilting, artwork, or cooking. Others include planning community events, doing research in the community or doing volunteer work. There have been some interesting programs using singing as a way to open people up to learning. Other holistic approaches may use a variety of activities involving the mind, physical activity, reflection on emotions, and fostering of the spirit.

Research about the impact of violence on learning has led to some creative approaches around how to help learners become more 'present' and reflective, building a sense of identity, self-esteem, and belief in the possibility of change. This research suggests that these components are essential for effective learning.

## **6 Participatory approaches in adult literacy**

These approaches are based on the assumption that, in order for learners to make changes in their lives, they need to be actively involved in their learning. By participating in decisions about their learning and their literacy program, they can gain confidence and experience. They can then use this to make positive changes in their lives.

For more information on these approaches, and specific examples from Ontario literacy programs, see the full research report.

These examples provide a background regarding current practices that address self-direction. As you consider which approach may be most effective for your program, it is important to consider what recent research says about how people learn and how they apply this learning to their day-to-day lives. This research has significant implications that need to be taken into account.

# A social view of literacy and learning

In thinking about the questions raised in the interviews and in the literature review, I felt it was very important to pursue this idea that self-direction is not simply a matter of skills. This led me to explore much broader research. I discovered a whole movement of research in a number of fields that challenges the idea of literacy as a set of reading, writing and thinking skills that can be taught in isolation. This research suggests that **we need to look at learning as a social activity that is shaped by interactions with others, by context and by meaning.** This research seemed to be an important key to unlocking the puzzle of self-direction.

I found that the movement toward a social view of learning is a significant shift in thinking. It has taken place over the last fifteen to twenty years in a variety of fields, including psychology, sociology, and education.

The New Literacy Studies is part of this movement. “The New Literacy Studies are a series of writings in research and practice that describe language and literacy as ‘social practices’, rather than technical skills to be learned in education” (Street, 1991, p. 17). These ideas are based on a number of studies on how literacy is used in everyday life. The New Literacy Studies show that there are different types of literacy, or literacies which depend on particular contexts and purposes.

For example, people use different kinds of literacy at home, at school, or at work. These are particular places where people act and use language in distinct ways. There are different social expectations in these situations, and these shape how people use literacy.

Social practices are the ways in which people act in particular situations. These practices are shaped by the context, including the social relations and power dynamics of the situation. They are also shaped by people's attitudes and perceptions.

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*This research is useful in helping us see that, like literacy, self-direction is not a static quality or skill. It is affected by the learning context, by perceptions, and by social interactions.*

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For example, a learner may take initiative in a situation where he feels comfortable. In another situation, he may simply want to listen, preferring others to take the lead.

**How much learners participate in a program and show self-direction depends on many factors.** It depends on their experiences with education in the past, how they perceive the roles of the teacher and learner, and how they interpret the learning situation. How they see a literacy program may be very different from how an instructor sees it.

Learner self-direction is also affected by how learners see themselves in relation to literacy and in relation to the learning environment. Learners may ask themselves: Do I fit in here? Are there others like me? Do I feel safe? Will I be judged? Am I going to feel stupid again? What are the risks of participating? Am I ready to take those risks?

Some learners may feel confident and self-directed in some areas of their lives, while they appear to need a lot of support in the literacy program. Other learners may feel comfortable in the literacy program, but may not be ready to try out what they are learning in other, riskier settings.

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*The New Literacy Studies calls us to look at how we do things differently in different settings. It suggests that we need to find out how people act in their day-to-day lives, and bring that experience and knowledge into our literacy programs. It calls us to do more to build connections — between learning and the self; and between what we do in literacy programs and learners’ experiences at work, home and in the community. Finally, it points to the need to explore perceptions and meaning.*

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## Learning and knowing in action

In reading more about a social view of learning, I came across fascinating research that talks about the importance of social interactions and context, and takes it one step further. The theory of ‘situated cognition’ shows how language and knowledge is linked to specific contexts, coming out of the activities and social interactions of particular situations. This doesn’t necessarily make sense in other situations. One of the most important findings of the research is that knowledge is not easily generalized or transferred to different situations.

To see what this means, let’s take a look at some examples:

- ▶ Studies have shown that how people learn in their daily lives is often different from how they learn in school. People use different tools and strategies in school and life. For example when people do their shopping they use a variety of strategies to estimate and compare, rather than simply using mathematical calculations.

- ▶ Apprenticeships provide opportunities for people to recognize and solve problems that are not clearly defined and that come out of authentic situations. More than classroom study is needed to gain this experience.
- ▶ The knowledge gained on the job by working with tools, using common processes, learning from other workers' practices and solving problems in a particular context is different from official knowledge about the job, according to trade textbooks or official workplace documents.

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*This research has important implications for education in general, and literacy programs, in particular. It shows that learning comes from meaningful activity with others. Learning is not transferred directly to new situations. It is reinvented based on the details of each new setting.*

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## Examples from workplace literacy

We can see the importance of these ideas when we look at the complexity of workplace literacy programs.

The research findings mentioned above suggest that the workplace provides valuable opportunities for learning. People are encountering complex problems in a meaningful context. However, creating workplace literacy programs in this setting is a challenging task. Educators have to deal with different motivations, expectations, and interpretations of the workplace context.

Several studies have shown the importance of considering these factors. Darrah (1997) and Gowen (1992) both show

that workers may resist job-related literacy activities if they cannot clearly see that the advantages outweigh the risks. These studies show that literacy and learning in the workplace are not simply about skills; they are a matter of choice and a matter of practice in a context that includes particular social relations and power dynamics.

These studies also talk about aspects related to self-direction. They describe managers' expectations to improve teamwork, communication skills and problem solving. They find that workers often see contradictions between what managers say, and what is rewarded in practice. Some workers are rebuked when they identify workplace problems and suggest possible solutions, even though this is officially encouraged. These examples point to the need to consider the complexity of literacy and self-direction in practice.

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*The heart of the matter is that self-direction and literacy practices in the workplace are shaped by the social context of the workplace. 'Soft skills' may indeed be important. However, the dynamics of the workplace brings further complexity to this question. The case of workplace literacy shows how we need to look beyond skills and recognize the importance of **practices, intentions and meanings.***

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## In summary

A social view of literacy and learning raises many questions that deserve further reflection. I have only touched on the main ideas presented in this research. The full research report discusses these ideas in more detail.

In summary, the research is saying that we need to look more carefully at the following areas:

- ▶ the importance of context and social interactions
- ▶ making connections to the self, to others
- ▶ building awareness of our own perceptions: how they are shaped by others and by our experience
- ▶ creating meaning

This research affirms what many adult literacy practitioners have believed for a long time — that learners' experience is the foundation for learning. But it also challenges us to go further in our thinking. It suggests that it is not enough to see experience as a background for learning. *We learn through* experience: interacting with people, participating in a culture, and using the tools available in that situation. We need to look at how to create opportunities for learners to have a variety of **learning experiences**.

# The importance of self-awareness

Throughout the research for this project, literacy practitioners talked about the importance of self-awareness. When we consider the research that I discussed above, it is clear that we need to take a deeper look at self-awareness. This involves reflecting on ourselves as learners, as well as the broader context of our lives.

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*In order to be able to set goals for ourselves, and take charge of learning, it is important to reflect on our perceptions of ourselves, of others and the world around us.*

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“Once a student learns to be truly self-aware and awaken to the self, all the other issues such as setting goals, or organizing time or taking responsibility can then be addressed. Without a sense of self-awareness and the awareness that their choices have on themselves and others, students will continue to struggle with issues of SM / SD.”

— *Expanding Perceptions*  
(2002, p. 5)

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In any learning situation, learners have preconceived ideas about themselves as learners, about the role of literacy in their lives, and about what they can expect in a ‘classroom’ situation. These ideas are shaped by previous experiences. They are also shaped by interactions with others and by the messages they get from teachers, fellow students, workers, family and friends.

When these ideas are mostly negative, they can be a significant barrier to learning. Even when a learner has made some progress, it may not be enough to change her concept of herself as a poor learner. In this context, trying to teach particular ‘skills’ may be a dead end.

## So what can we do to build self-awareness?

Some educators have talked about the importance of having learners reflect on the ideas they have about themselves, and the messages they have received from others. Then together with others, we can try to unpack these ideas and challenge personal learning myths. We can help learners find other ways to see their past experiences.

Many literacy practitioners have shown the value of a holistic approach to learning in building self-esteem and self-awareness. They often describe this process as opening up to learning.

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For ideas on holistic approaches that recognize the impact of violence on learning, see *Moving Forward: Approaches and Activities to Support Women's Learning* (2000) by Jenny Horsman.

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In her book *Too Scared to Learn*, Jenny Horsman describes the impact that violence has on learning. She suggests new directions for literacy programs to take in recognizing learners' experiences and creating the kind of safe environment that is needed for learners to open up to learning. In a number of publications, Horsman demonstrates the power of holistic approaches in helping learners begin to be more reflective, gradually gaining self-awareness and a sense of possibilities for the future. She shows how literacy programs can integrate these ideas into their programs, even in small ways.

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Native AlphaRoute is available through the Alphaplus Centre website: <http://alphaplus.ca>

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In looking into holistic approaches to learning, people encouraged me to find out more about Aboriginal literacy programs. I was very impressed by what I learned. The online resource *Native AlphaRoute* presents a holistic approach to learning that provides opportunities for reflection on First Nations teachings. Activities take learners through a process of reflection and activity that recognizes different ways of knowing (through the spirit, emotions, mind and body). The importance of connecting with others (learners, family,

or members of the community), and taking learning into the community is emphasized throughout.

When we look back at what the research on literacy and learning is saying about how we learn by building meaning in social contexts, these holistic approaches seem to be very promising. They include reflection on values, identity, and perceptions. They foster a sense of community, making connections with others, and creating a safe learning environment. They recognize the importance of context: both the learning context and the context of learners' lives. Finally, they support a path toward change, recognizing that learning and personal growth are part of the same process.

For a more detailed description of holistic approaches, see the [full research report](#), or the [list of resources](#) at the end of this report.

## Creating a new model

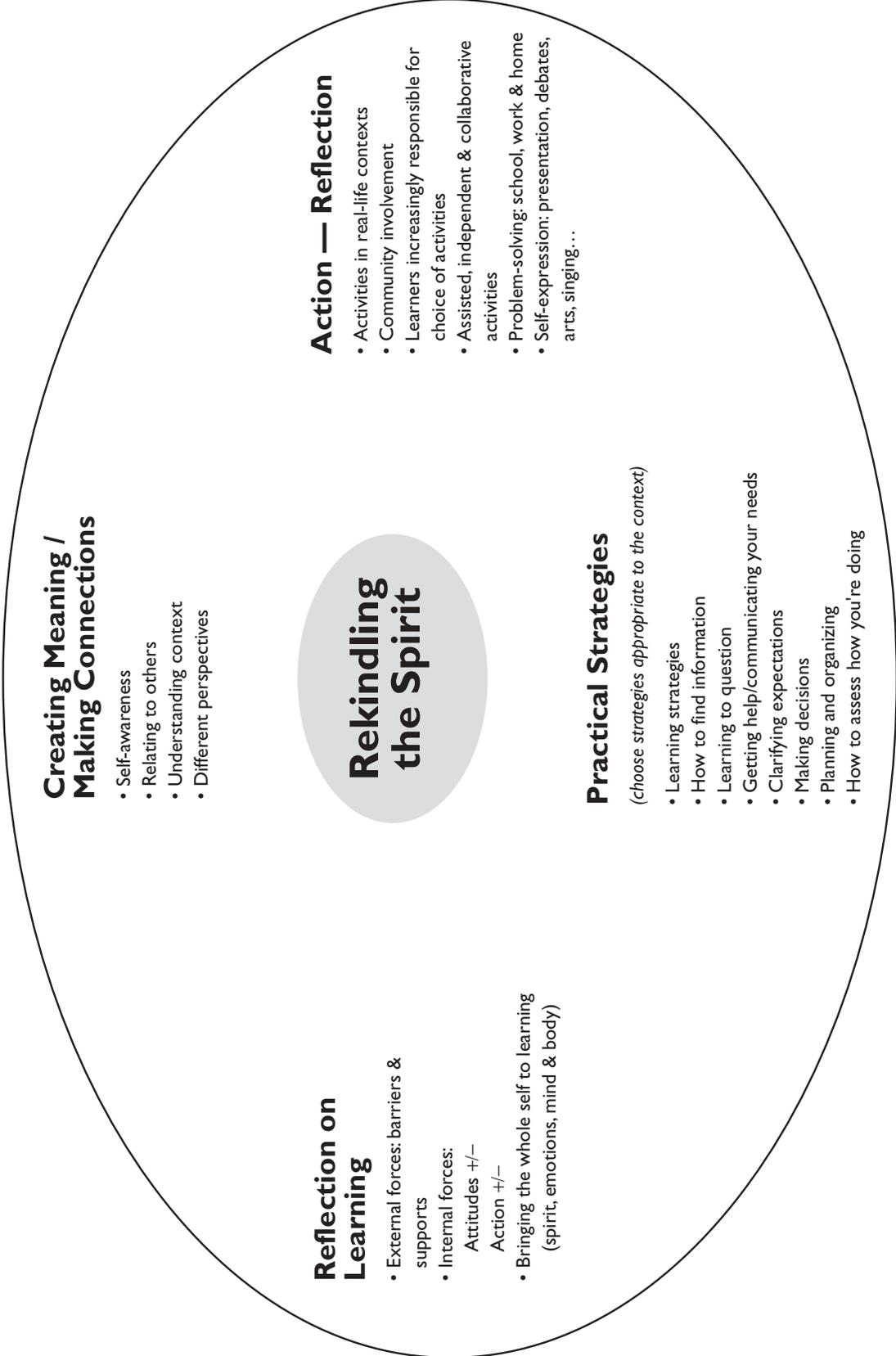
The following model is an integration of the key factors that build self-awareness and self-direction in learning. I developed the model based on what I learned from interviews with people in the literacy field, and based on the essential ideas of a social view of literacy and learning. The model incorporates aspects of a variety of program approaches, acknowledging the range of issues that affect self-direction. It is intended to broaden the understanding of self-direction, from a set of individual skills to an on-going process affected by context, perceptions and experience.

The title of the model is *Building Self-Awareness and Self-Direction*. I chose this title to acknowledge the importance of self-awareness and to reflect the idea that self-direction is never something we can achieve completely. We are all in the process of learning how to become more self-directed. It is a process rather than a set of skills that we either have or lack.

I decided not to use the term ‘self-management’ for a number of reasons. Many learners and practitioners dislike this term. Also, it does not capture some of the fundamental issues that appear to be so important. Underlying the ability to manage the self is self-awareness, a sense of identity and a sense of possibilities. Part of this is seeing how the small things we do can make a difference — to how we learn, how we feel about ourselves and how we cope with challenges in our daily lives. Building self-awareness also relies on interactions with others, making connections and feeling part of a community. The term ‘self-management’ does not reflect these dimensions.

# The Four Aspects of Building Self-Awareness and Self-Direction

A RESEARCH PROJECT ON SELF-MANAGEMENT AND SELF-DIRECTION



# Building Self-Awareness and Self-Direction



It is an on-going challenge to find words that reflect a social view of learning. The model I present is a work in progress. The title still has certain limitations as it implies a focus on the individual learner. As you consider the model, keep in mind the key findings of the research on the importance of context, community and relationships. Many literacy learners feel that above all, a supportive learning environment where they feel a sense of community is what helps them on the path of learning. It is essential to consider how the program will provide this environment.

## Elements of the model

The model presents four aspects involved in building self-awareness and self-direction. These aspects relate to a larger process I have called ‘rekindling the spirit’.

The model shows a broad picture of how learning can affect personal change and how personal change can support learning.

The model is not intended as a prescription for a single program approach. Different learners have different needs. Some groups of learners may already have a strong sense of who they are, what their strengths are, and where they are going. Others may need to reflect more on this area. Programs also vary in their focus and institutional context. As a result, programs may choose to focus more on one aspect than another. However, it is important for practitioners to reflect on each of the four aspects, and consider how to integrate them into their approach. The evidence suggests that learning will be more significant as a result.

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Sometimes a light will go on. Sometimes it's because they compare themselves with someone else and they suddenly realize that what is a problem for someone else is a problem for them too.

— Sharon Brisson,  
Alternative Education  
Centre in Kapuskasing

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The order in which I describe the four aspects represents one way of understanding how learning may unfold. However, viewing this as a linear process is limiting. Some learners may suddenly experience an 'aha' moment when they begin to see how other learners' experiences relate to their own. Others begin to see themselves differently when they successfully complete a project they didn't think they could manage. The 'aha' moment may come from activities in any of the four areas, leading to new ability in the others.

Different approaches may lead to doing activities in a different order. For example, some literacy programs may prefer to begin with hands-on projects, and follow up with activities reflecting on what people learned about themselves and others.

Each of the four aspects of building self-awareness and self-direction includes a description of the elements that affect *our* learning. This choice of words suggests that self-awareness and self-direction are areas that all of us are continually developing. However, it is important to consider that our understandings may not match those of learners because of our different roles and life experiences.

# Building self-awareness and self-direction

## 1 Creating Meaning / Making Connections

### *Self-awareness*

Self-awareness includes reflection on our past, present and future. It includes exploring our experience, understanding and values. It involves gaining a stronger sense of our own identity.

### *Relating to others*

Hearing from others about their experiences provides new perspective. It allows us to connect our experience to the experience of others. It can also create bonds that strengthen personal support networks.

### *Understanding context*

Context includes the various environments that we encounter in our lives. It includes learning environments, social expectations, values, and culture. Reflecting on context can lead to new understanding of the problems we may have learning in new situations. Understanding context also includes considering how our own values and ideas are shaped by society and by the individuals in our lives.

### *Different perspectives*

Exploring other ideas, experiences and opinions can open up new possibilities. It can lead to new respect for others. It can also allow us to change our own minds about what we believe.

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It is important to recognize that it can take a lifetime to build self-awareness and reflection, particularly for people who have lacked supportive interactions with others. Similarly, relating to others can be difficult for those who live with violence. However, even small steps in this area can contribute to greater learning.

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## 2 Reflection on Learning

### *External forces: barriers and supports*

Recognizing the barriers to learning that we have experienced in our lives can be an important part of finding ways to overcome these challenges. Identifying the people, situations and conditions that support us in learning, and building on these supports can provide a new boost to learning.

### *Internal forces*

While recognizing the effects of external factors is part of the process, it is also important to look at internal forces. We can look at our attitudes towards ourselves and towards learning. We can talk about the negative messages we often give ourselves, and how we sometimes sabotage our own efforts. We can explore how to give ourselves more positive messages. Similarly, we can look at how our actions either support learning or create further barriers to learning.

Jenny Horsman described the importance of images in helping women believe that they could make change in their lives. In their group they often repeated the idea of taking baby steps — and how this could lead to change. This came from the quotation, “One day I realized that my baby steps, which seemed too small to count, had taken me across the universe.”

Another useful tool is Kurt Lewin’s theory of Force Field Analysis, which was described in *The Qualitative Tracking Project*. By examining the positive and negative forces in our lives, we can look for ways to move forward.

### *Bringing the whole self to learning*

This includes reflection on different aspects of the self, including spirit, emotions, mind and body. This process may increase self-awareness and help us find ways to support our own learning. See the full research report or the *Resources* section for specific examples.

## 3 Practical Strategies

It is so easy when we look at the issue of self-direction to slide back into seeing the problem as a question of skills. It is clear that there are some concrete activities that help us learn in a variety of situations. Rather than thinking of them as skills, I have called them ‘practical strategies’ to show that they are dynamic activities that will unfold differently in particular situations.

These strategies may be useful in a variety of situations. However, the research suggests that it is not sufficient to learn them in isolation. As learners we need to have opportunities to use these learning strategies in real-life settings: responding to particular contexts, interacting with others and making decisions. It is also important to reflect on our own perceptions of these learning activities and consider other perspectives. In this way we can begin to gain understanding of the culture of the learning environment and our own role within it. Finally, reflecting on barriers and supports to learning within this context can provide new insights and suggest alternatives.

Strategies include:

#### ► **Learning strategies**

(learning styles, note taking, reviewing notes, tips on how to work independently, study groups)

- ▶ **How to find information**  
(research skills, resources, types of questions to ask)
- ▶ **Learning to question**  
(considering more than one opinion or perspective, exploring motive and intent, asking questions of ourselves, questioning what we read)
- ▶ **Getting help / communicating our needs**  
(understanding norms around getting help in a particular context, different sources of help, implications of communicating our needs or not doing so)
- ▶ **Clarifying expectations**  
(learning about the learning culture and what is expected; checking to see if learner expectations match program expectations)
- ▶ **Making decisions**  
(strategies, factors to consider in making decisions)
- ▶ **Planning and organizing**  
(strategies and different approaches)
- ▶ **How to assess how you're doing**  
(self-assessment, getting feedback, accepting both positive feedback and constructive criticism, understanding the purpose of assessment)
- ▶ **Other topics**  
(as appropriate to the learning situation)

In all of these topics, it may be helpful for us to reflect on how we do these activities in our day-to-day lives. We can then build on these experiences and relate them to other possible strategies.

## 4 Action-reflection

The research suggests that meaningful activity taking place in authentic situations provides the best opportunities for learning. However, educational programs often cannot reproduce the kinds of experiences that people have in their daily lives. What we can do is find ways to take learning out into the community, interacting with others in the contexts that we will encounter in our lives. We can also bring experiences from our daily lives into the classroom. If our opportunities to go out into the community are limited, we can explore situations in other ways: watching videos, doing role-plays, reading scenarios, or using pictures that describe detailed interactions, with different possible interpretations.

It is also important to make connections between what is being explored in the classroom and how it relates to people's lives. Taking something that we learn together and using it in daily life provides the opportunity to create greater meaning.

For this to happen it is important for action to be accompanied by reflection. This on-going cycle of action and reflection is the foundation of lifelong learning.

This is a difficult process for many people. We need to be open to reflecting on our actions and hearing different perspectives. This can be a big step. In order to take this step, a sense of trust, support and community is essential.

Here are some examples of what action-reflection might include:

► **Activities in real-life contexts**

► **Community involvement**

This might include interviews, visiting a new program or community centre, job-shadowing, volunteering, helping with a community project.

► **Learners becoming increasingly responsible for the choice of activities**

Programs may provide a range of activities, explore learner preferences, then encourage learners to bring in their own ideas. The goal is for learners to create new directions for the group.

► **Assisted, independent & collaborative activities**

Learners may not be ready or interested in self-directed learning when they start a program. Programs can gradually progress from assisted activities to activities where learners work independently, and finally to projects involving collaboration with others. Another approach might begin with supported group activities, and then progress to other types of activity.

► **Problem-solving**

This might include activities involving problem-solving; reflection on problems from our daily lives and how we solved them.

► **Self-expression**

This refers to activities where we express our feelings, perspectives, values and identity. Activities might include presentations, debates, art projects, singing, poetry, and collage. This type of activity presents opportunities to bring the whole self to learning.

As discussed above, this model can be used by literacy programs in many ways. Programs can create their own unique approaches by drawing out aspects of the model that are relevant to the needs of their learners, program context and choice of focus.

In thinking about which approach to take, it may be useful to look in more detail at what other literacy programs have done. The full research report describes some of these approaches in more detail. The project is also recommending that there be an in-depth study of a few different approaches, in community-based, school-board and college Literacy and Basic Skills programs. Once such a project is completed, we will have a clearer idea of what promising approaches might look like in the context of a particular literacy program.

## In conclusion

This project has identified the importance of supporting learners in a process of building self-awareness and self-direction. It pulls together research from a variety of fields with far-reaching implications for our work in adult literacy. This research suggests that we need to move towards a more complex understanding of learning, recognizing the importance of relationships, context, and meaning.

Through careful consideration of the implications of this research for self-direction, I created the model *Building Self-Awareness and Self-Direction*. This model is a starting point for programs to develop their own approach. From here, we can begin to try out these ideas in the context of particular literacy programs and reflect on how they support learning.

This project aimed to provide a foundation for further discussion and development of the area of self-management and self-direction. We need to continue to move forward with this important area, building on our own cycle of reflection and practice to find new ways to enhance learning.

# Summary of recommendations

## **This project recommends that:**

- 1 Ontario adult literacy programs examine how they currently support self-awareness and self-direction, and develop broader program responses in light of the research findings.
- 2 Mechanisms be created to foster debate and discussion on the ideas of the New Literacy Studies and the implications they have for literacy practice and for self-direction in learning.
- 3 MTCU continue to recognize the importance to the learning process of building self-awareness and self-direction, making this support clear to programs and encouraging a variety of approaches to this area.
- 4 MTCU support field development projects that allow the Ontario literacy field to develop program approaches to build on this research.

## **Recommended project work includes:**

- 1 Document particular approaches to building self-awareness and self-direction in learning, and the results of these approaches.
- 2 Research the special considerations of supporting self-awareness and self-direction when working with adults with learning or developmental disabilities.
- 3 Practitioner training in effective approaches to building self-awareness and self-direction.
- 4 Research and collect resources on life skills, self-awareness and self-direction that can be used effectively in Literacy and Basic Skills programs. (AlphaPlus Centre)
- 5 Document learner perspectives on self-direction and their experience of progress.

# Resources

## Literacy program resources addressing self-awareness

*A Dream that Walks* by Action Read Community Literacy Centre & Myrna Hanna. Guelph, Ont.: Action Read Community Literacy Centre; Waterloo, Ont.: Garlic Press, 2000.

- ▶ This video and workbook create a path for setting goals, starting with self-awareness and self-reflection. For learners at LBS Levels 1–3.

*Claiming Our Place: A Workbook to Help Women Become Active in the Community* by Jan Sherman and the Women's Group, Action Read. Guelph, Ontario: Garlic Press, 2000.

- ▶ Presents a series of literacy program activities designed to foster confidence and participation in the community. Activities include building self-awareness, and learning to take care of the self.

*Expanding Perceptions: An Approach to Self-Management for Employment Preparation* by Jennifer Tait. Produced for the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, 2002.

- ▶ This resource presents a model of reflection that is intended to build self-awareness, help learners explore new attitudes and perceptions, and take responsibility for change. Sections include: dealing with change, self-assessment, getting organized, personal responsibility and conflict resolution.

*Learning for Our Health: A Resource for Participatory Literacy and Health Education* by Mary Norton and Pat Campbell. Edmonton: The Learning Centre Literacy Association, 1998.

- ▶ A useful resource for addressing health issues in literacy programs and recognizing how these issues affect learning. Includes notes for practitioners on how to introduce topics, and a wide range of activities.

*Moving Forward: Approaches and Activities to Support Women's Learning* by Jenny Horsman. Toronto: Parkdale Project Read, Working Draft, 2000.

- ▶ Presents a series of activities used in the Women's Success Course at Parkdale Project Read in Toronto. Includes activities to help learners develop self-reflection, increase their strength as learners, and move toward change. Describes the experience of creating this group and the importance of program elements that support the whole learner.

Native AlphaRoute.

- ▶ On-line learning resource, available via <http://alphaplus.ca> This resource is valuable for learners who want to explore First Nations teachings. It may also interest literacy practitioners who want to explore a holistic approach to learning.

*Participatory Practices in Adult Education: Theory and Practice* by Pat Campbell & Barbara Burnaby, eds. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001.

- ▶ Includes a description of the essential principles of participatory education. Other chapters discuss examples from programs, and issues that may arise in introducing a more participatory approach.

## Resources on learner transition and learner retention

*Breaking the Barriers* by CESBA (Ontario Association of Adult & Continuing Education School Board Administrators), to be published Fall, 2002.

- ▶ Includes a series of activities and demonstrations in the area of self-management and self-direction, to help prepare learners for further education. Prepares learners for high school credit programs.

*The Qualitative Tracking Project* by Yvonne Roussy. Literacy Group of Waterloo Region, 2001.

- ▶ A thorough investigation of the factors that affect learner persistence and successful outcomes. Includes recommendations for literacy programs, and an activity for learners to examine the positive and negative forces affecting their learning.

*Retention Through Redirection* by Dee Goforth and Mary Jonik. College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading, 2002.

- ▶ Examines the factors affecting learner retention. Provides practical retention strategies for college LBS programs. Addresses areas such as goal-setting, program expectations, learner awareness of factors that affect persistence, and access to counselling.

*Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need: A Report on Recruitment and Retention Issues in Literacy and Basic Skills Programs* by Yvonne Roussy & Doug Hart. Ontario Literacy Coalition, July 2002.

- ▶ A study on learners' perspectives about why they join a literacy program, why they stay, and why they leave. Includes program recommendations such as creating supports and building community.

*Tools for Effective Transitions Community Bridging Initiative Project on Transitions to Upgrading* by Katrina Grieve. St. Christopher House Adult Literacy Program, 2002.

- ▶ Includes assessment tools and demonstrations to help prepare learners in community-based literacy programs for the transition to college upgrading programs. Discusses the importance of self-direction and the need for program supports.

*Best Practices in Exit Assessment and Transition Planning* by Pat Hatt (2001).

- ▶ Advice for preparing learners who may be reluctant to move on. Includes an analysis of transition issues for a variety of learners, including those with disabilities.

## Further reading on holistic & participatory approaches

Horsman, Jenny (1999). *Too Scared to Learn — Women, Violence and Education*. Toronto: McGilligan Books.

Horsman, Jenny (2001). *Creating Change in Literacy Programs: Talking About Taking Account of Violence*. Spiral Community Resource Group, 2001. Available online: [www.jennyhorsman.com](http://www.jennyhorsman.com)

Leroux, Kathie (1998). We Will Not Go Backwards. *Groundwork*. Vol. 19, No.1, 2 & 3.

Shelton, Leslie; Fulghum-Nutters, H. & Conan, J. (1992). *Honoring Diversity: A Multidimensional Learning Model for Adults*. California State Library Foundation, 1992.

## Other references

Darrah, C. (1997). Complicating the concept of skills requirements: scenes from a workplace. In G. Hull (ed.) *Changing Work, Changing Workers: Critical Perspectives on Language, Literacy and Skills*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, (pp. 249-272).

Goforth, Dee, and Jonik, Mary (2001). *What Works: Recruitment and Retention of Ontario Works Clients — Phase 2 Report*. Prepared for the Literacy and Basic Skills College Sector Committee.

Goforth, Dee, Jonik, Mary and Sheridan, Elise (2000). *What Counts as Evidence — Phase 2 Report*. Sudbury: Cambrian College.

Gowen, S. (1992). *The Politics of Workplace Literacy: A Case Study*. New York: Teachers' College Press.

MacLeod, Mel (2001). *Seamless Transition to More Learning*. Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board Administrators.

Street, Brian (1991). Contexts for literacy work. In Crowther, Hamilton and Tett (eds.) *Powerful Literacies*. NIACE.

**Note:** this is a partial list of resources. See the [full research report](#) for a more comprehensive list of program resources and reading related to this subject.



**ONTARIO LITERACY COALITION**

365 Bloor Street East, Suite 1003, Toronto, Ontario M4W 3L4

Tel: 416-963-5787 • Fax: 416-963-8102

E-mail: [olc@on.literacy.ca](mailto:olc@on.literacy.ca) • Website: [www.on.literacy.ca](http://www.on.literacy.ca)