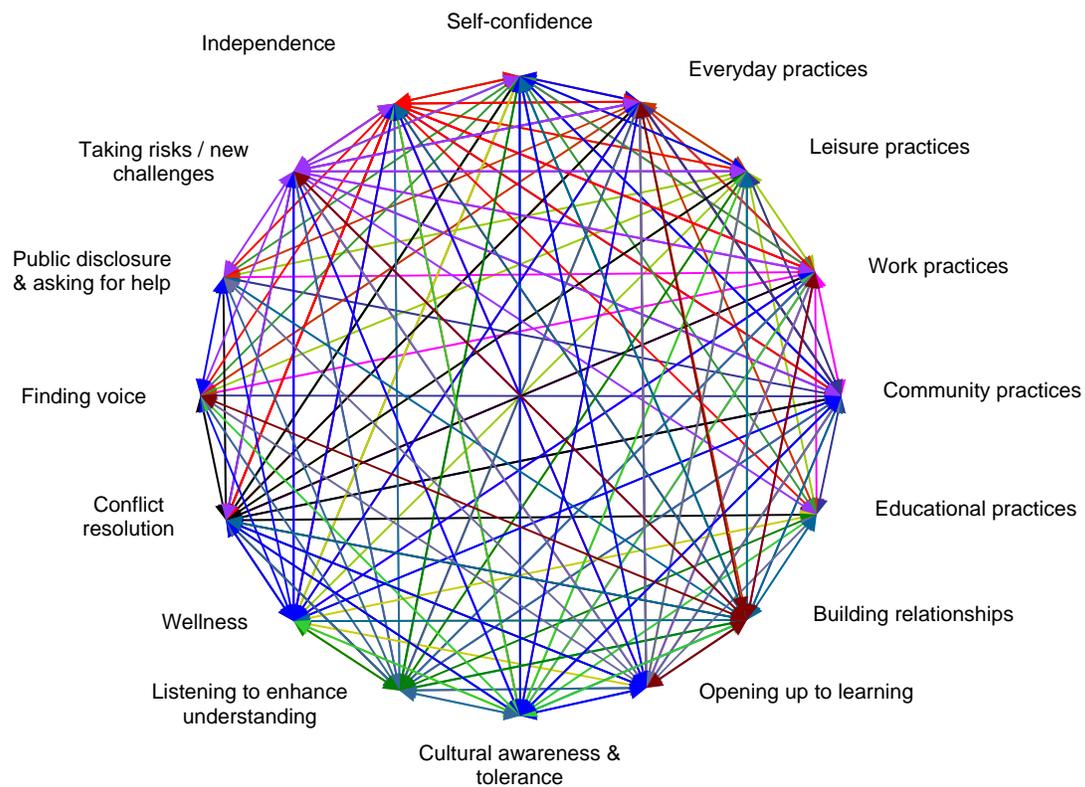


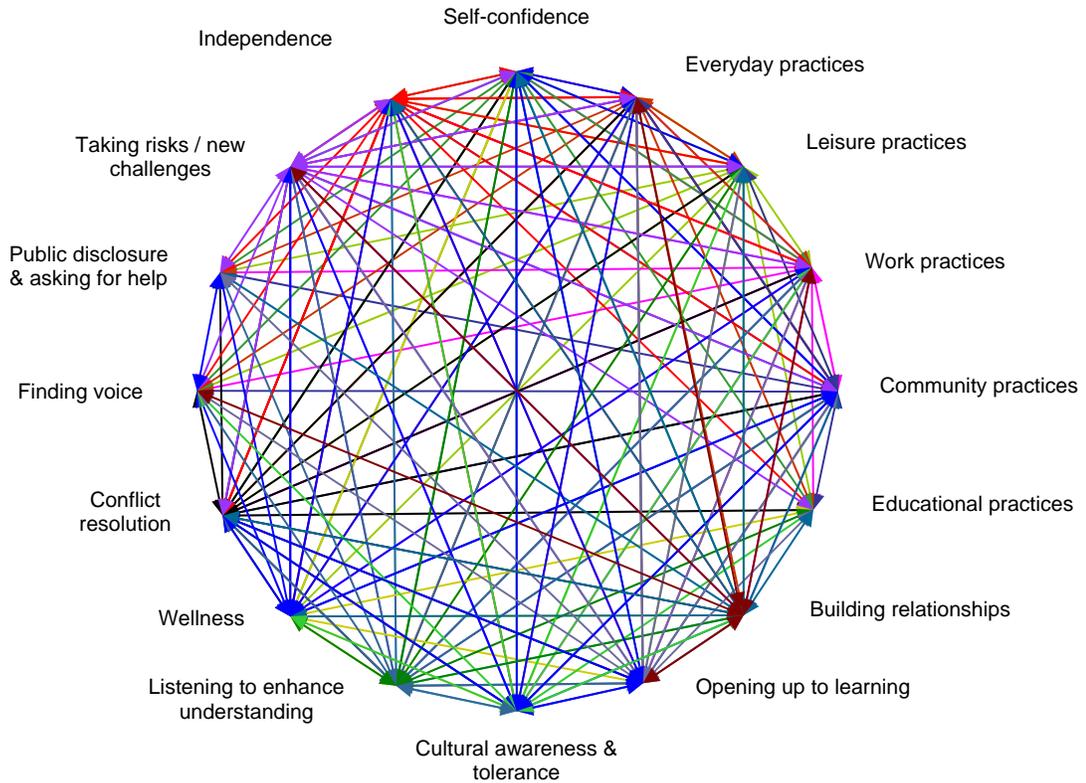
"I've opened up"



Exploring Learners' Perspectives on Progress

LEVEL 1 AND LEVEL 2 LEARNERS IN COMMUNITY-BASED ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS

"I've opened up"



Exploring Learners' Perspectives on Progress

LEVEL 1 AND LEVEL 2 LEARNERS IN COMMUNITY-BASED ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS

“Literacy is like water. It goes everywhere. You just can’t see now. It is very important. Like water, sometimes it goes underground and you can’t see it but, it’s flowing all the time.”

Kerrie, learner



“I feel more inspired to write, to read, to understand, to evolve, to grow, to transcend my former barriers and develop new boundaries. I dream more. I read more. I jump through more mental hoops now. ...Concentrate and have a longer attention span. More tolerant. More patient. More understanding. More easy going. It brings out the best in me, coming here. It’s like a ripple effect. I have more confidence.”

MJ, learner



“I felt rejuvenated in my practice. I learned that literacy was making a difference in learners’ lives. Even learners who didn’t seem to be very motivated in their learning reported their learning was making a difference in their lives. I learned that besides the literacy learning, learners were benefiting from being involved in a group, in a program, in making friends and connections. This helped me feel better about teaching. It made me want to make my teaching better and more responsive to the needs of the learners. I thought that this process – that of finding out from learners what they think they are learning and how this is changing their lives – is really beneficial for an instructor’s morale. Teaching is a sometimes tiring project of endless preparing and searching for appropriate contextualized materials, creating them when none are found, often wondering if learning is really happening. This process gave me renewed enthusiasm for teaching.”

Anne-Marie, practitioner researcher

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For additional copies of this project report and the companion documents:

- Measuring Non-Academic Outcomes in Adult Literacy Programs: A Literature Review (Westell, 2005)
- People and Progress Magazine (Editor: Sookermany, 2006)

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I Introduction

This project explored what constitutes progress in community-based literacy programs from the perspective of learners. The research took place between December 2004 and January 2006. Project aims focused on both learners and practitioners:

Learner-focused Project Aims:

- Explore the current scope of knowledge regarding the progress of learners in community-based programs by means of a comprehensive international literature review
- Through our own original research, explore and document the perspectives of Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) level 1 and 2 learners who have independence as a goal regarding their own progress: what evidence do they see of their own progress, and how that progress has affected their lives
- Communicate findings to the broader literacy community through a discussion paper. (This paper evolved into a magazine which we felt would be a more accessible format to disseminate our findings and recommendations, and could also be used as a resource by practitioners)
- Write a report with findings & recommendations

Practitioner-focused Project Aims:

- Develop research skills of practitioners such as facilitating a focus group, interviewing, analyzing data, and bridging theory and practice
- Refine current methods of capturing information about learning from learners

This report describes the findings, recommendations and process of a collaborative practitioner-research project by five community-based literacy organizations. The project involved three program partners (Action Read, Literacy for East Toronto (Toronto Catholic District School Board), and Parkdale Project Read) and two additional program organizations (Regent Park Learning Centre and Wellington County Learning Centre). Brief program descriptions are as follows:

Action Read (AR) located in downtown Guelph Ontario, provides adult literacy and family literacy services to the city.

Literacy for East Toronto (LET) located in a downtown east Toronto neighbourhood, provides a variety of literacy activities to adults learners. LET is administered by the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

Parkdale Project Read (PPR) is located in a downtown west Toronto community with a large immigrant population. Its literacy program incorporates an understanding of the effects of trauma and violence on learning. It has a partnership with a local consumer/survivor membership organization.

Regent Park Learning Centre (RPLC) is located in Regent Park, a large subsidized housing development in Toronto's downtown east neighbourhood. RPLC is a multi-faceted community agency providing literacy programming exclusively to women.

Wellington County Learning Centre (WCLC) offers service to the rural residents of Wellington County (Southwestern Ontario). One-to-one tutoring is provided to learners at their homes and in the community.

The project was supported by an advisory committee that included an experienced practitioner researcher, literacy practitioners and research mentors from the Festival of Literacies Office (FOL) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

A. Background

The roots of this project go back several years beginning in 2002. It flowed out of two initiatives brought together by the staff of the Festival of Literacies Office at OISE/UT. Action Read (AR) and Parkdale Project Read (PPR) members held a number of on-going discussions regarding learner progress within community-based literacy programs. At the same time, members of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE-UT) Adult Literacy Research Circle¹, including practitioners from Literacy for East Toronto (LET) were independently researching and discussing a similar theme.

These discussions underlined a need to broaden and deepen our understanding of “progress” in learners attending our programs. In particular, we recognized the importance of learners’ voices in developing our shared understanding of what constitutes progress.

Early discussions among practitioners and learners, along with preliminary research, established that:

- Current measures of learners’ progress are incomplete.
- Learners want multiple ways to talk about progress.
- Learners find talking about their learning useful and stimulating.
- Practitioners would benefit from a more complete understanding of the adult literacy learning process and the learning measures associated with that process.
- Provincial funders are asking for greater accountability of learning progress.

¹ From 2001-2003 OISE/UT hosted the Adult Literacy Research Circle with cost-shared funding from MTCU and NLS. The Adult Literacy Research Circle was a circle of literacy practitioners and researchers exploring research ideas and sharing relevant knowledge from both research and practice.

While keeping this broad perspective in mind, we chose to refine the focus of our research interests to exploring Level 1 and 2 learners' perspectives on progress for those who primarily had "independence" as a learning goal. It should be noted that in Ontario literacy services are provided to adults who are working towards one of three goal pathways: employment, further education / skills training or independence. Our shift in focus to learners having independence as their main learning goal was made with the intention of further contributing to an understanding of what constitutes "independence" in the context of adult literacy.

The project also aimed to help academics further develop their understanding about how adults learn, what constitutes "progress" and the effectiveness of practitioner-academic research collaborations. We also hoped that this work would help to inform government policy makers in developing their accountability frameworks for delivering adult basic education. Most importantly, we thought this work would help learners to begin to understand their own ways of learning, to recognize the progress they make in all aspects of their lives once they entered a literacy program and to articulate their learning needs and dreams. We believed this project would not only answer our questions about progress, but also be relevant to the concerns and questions of other literacy programs in Canada.

We secured funding in September 2004, and started the project in December 2004.

B. Focus group questions and prompts

We used a qualitative exploratory approach, facilitating 18 focus groups comprised of a total of 56 adult learners to explore their perspectives on progress. The learners were drawn from the five participating literacy organizations. We used a semi-structured interview approach to elicit answers to our basic question: how do learners perceive progress?

The foundation for our approach came from Battell's (2001) research, *Naming the Magic: Non-Academic Outcomes in Basic Literacy*. This project described and field-tested six techniques for documenting non-academic outcomes of learners as a result of their participation in literacy instruction. One technique involved questioning learners with the intent to encourage them to develop a "growing awareness of the various changes in their lives". (Ibid., p 47) Our project made use of some of the suggested questions and prompts from that technique. Below are the questions we used in the focus groups.

1. Why did you decide to come to this literacy program?
2. What did you want to learn when you first came?
3. How long did you think it would take to learn what you wanted to learn?
4. How is the learning different from what you first thought it would be?
Why did you keep coming to the program?
5. Have you learned some of what you wanted to learn? How can you tell?
6. Do you see a difference in your everyday life as a result of your learning?

II Executive summary

Learners' perspectives on progress

This project explored learners' experiences and understanding of progress and sought to define and articulate this knowledge. The research showed the importance of understanding and valuing the perspectives learners have of their progress. We discovered numerous non-academic outcomes critical to learners' progress that they associated with adult literacy programs. Learners realized very well what literacy can do for them and value the many non-academic outcomes they experience in various facets of their lives.

The learners' comments also provided insight into the richness and complexity of the learning outcomes and of the interactions between these outcomes, their program environment, the learning process and non-academic learning outcomes they achieved.

Key Points

- Independence, further education/training and employment related goals are often pursued simultaneously.
- Although the majority of learners reported that estimating how long it will take to reach a goal was difficult, they were easily able to articulate the pace of learning they required to be successful.
- The learning environment has a powerful influence on learning, motivation and retention of learners. A safe, comfortable and non-judgemental environment where they could learn from and support each other was needed and highly valued.
- Learners described their progress by referring to the real life activities they could now do in a wide variety of life contexts (everyday practices, leisure practices, work practices, community practices and educational practices).
- Learners described a wide range of non-academic indicators of progress which they associated with their participation in adult literacy programs. **These indicators appear to be both a consequence of learning and necessary for learning to happen.** The first three were identified by almost all learners and seemed central to their perspective on progress:
 - Self-confidence
 - Finding voice
 - Opening up to learning
 - Independence
 - Building relationships; building community
 - Wellness
 - Taking risks / new challenges
 - Public disclosure and asking for help
 - Listening to enhance understanding
 - Cultural awareness and tolerance

- Conflict resolution

Achieving the non-academic outcomes was very important to the learners we interviewed. These outcomes as described by the learners provided improvement in the quality of their lives and became part of their learner identity. Not only do these outcomes have value in their own right for the learners, they also provide vital support to their learning process and contribute to the attainment of goals. On reflection, what the learners told us about non-academic indicators of progress can help us think about what may be relevant to many literacy learners across the province.

The learners' perspectives on non-academic progress therefore need to be valued in literacy programs. Fully understanding and formally assessing this type of progress takes care. Our research found that learners might value non-academic outcomes not considered by practitioners. As well, practitioners may not observe some progress in everyday life evident to learners. We have offered a tool (page 34) that may help learners and practitioners identify, understand and appreciate the full set of outcomes a learner may have achieved as a result of their literacy program participation. In turn, this enhanced self-awareness and insight into what they have achieved can help them set future goals that build on their achievements.

Building practitioner research capacity

This project provided novice practitioner researchers a rare opportunity for collaborative research, reflection and analysis. Our reflections, the lessons we learned, and the recommendations we provide will serve as valuable planning and implementation lessons for future practitioner researchers. Many of us have already begun to make changes to our practices as a result of our research experience.

Key Points

- Practitioners expressed an appreciation and respect for the learners' words and have become more reflective and analytical about the processes of teaching and learning.
- Collaborative research requires building relationships and negotiating meaning - of language, concepts, and interpretations. It requires sufficient time and resources to focus on building skills, reading the literature, conducting the research, analyzing the data, and reflecting on the findings.
- Practitioner researchers should talk about, document and value the research process including the uncertainties and the tensions they experience. These should be viewed as an integral part of the research.

The insights we gained into learners' perspectives on progress and the research process have implications for both practice and policy. This report provides recommendations in section IX that have implications for literacy practice and policy, for building practitioner research capacity in Ontario and for further research relating to learners' perspectives on progress.

III What learners said

A. What brought learners to literacy

Our practitioner-research project explored learners’ perspectives on progress, focusing on Level 1 and 2 learners who primarily had “independence” as a learning goal. The focus group discussions first confirmed that learners come to our programs for a wide variety of reasons. It was not always easy to separate or prioritize these reasons into discrete goals. Secondly, our discussions highlighted that the pathway of independence encompasses a wide range of learner needs. Learners’ views of independence seemed to be linked to the ability to do everyday tasks at home and in their community and to a range of personal growth issues.

Learners reported 103 specific goal statements in total. These statements were grouped into 15 sub-categories in order to aid analysis. These sub-categories were in turn classified into one of three categories, as shown in the table below.

Learning Categories	Goal statement sub-categories, as described by learners
Independence	Improve numeracy for every-day purposes
	Improve ability to read & write for every- day purposes
	Improve reading and writing so as not to have to depend on anyone else
	Improve ability to read to kids / help kids with homework
	Improve verbal communications skills
	ESOL
	Improve self esteem
	Self expression: write a book, write poetry, write songs
	Personal growth: redress education they missed when young; “to see how much I could accomplish”
	Expand social circle
	Improve specific skills: spelling, grammar, vocabulary, numeracy
Further Training or Education	Pursue further credit: General Equivalency Diploma (GED), college, high school credit
Employment	Help get a job
	Help get a better job
	Improve reading / writing for current job

Not only were learners' goals distributed among all three categories, 17 of 56 learners interviewed had goals spanning multiple categories. In cases where learners had multiple goals, some of these goals were of comparable significance in their lives, and therefore were not easily prioritized. For example, a number of learners wanted to improve their reading and writing so that they could help their children in school. Others wanted to learn how to do everyday tasks such as reading a newspaper or handling money. Many of these same learners also wanted to get a job or go on to further training.

Two-thirds (37) of learners reported independence-related goals. In fact, we know this number is understated. Researchers who worked with these learners as practitioners reported that many of the learners with training and employment-related goal statements are also seeking greater independence.

Goal Categories	# of Learners
Independence only	24*
Employment only	9
Training only	6
Total single category learners	39
Independence & Employment	8*
Independence & Training	5*
Training & Employment	2
Independence, Training & Employment	2*
Total multiple category learners	17
Total learners	56
Total single and multiple* category learners (independence as one of the goals)	39

B. Timelines and pacing

In speaking with learners about the time required to achieve their goals and the pace of their learning, we were struck by two things:

- the reluctance and/or resistance and general difficulty they expressed in setting timelines
- the self awareness and the insights they demonstrated when describing the pace of learning that worked best for them

Setting Goals Timelines

The majority of learners (35) reported that estimating how long it will take to reach a goal was difficult. Many learners seemed to link time limits with being pressured or rushed, something they needed to avoid to be successful. One learner reported, *“For me, I don’t count times. If you put a time, it’s like a rush and you do everything wrong.”* George felt that *“sometimes timed goals lead to failure and depression.”*² These typical responses did not appear to be linked to learners’ length of time in their programs.

Learners’ reluctance to estimate how long it would take to learn what they wanted to learn was related to issues such as their self-image as a learner and past educational failures, views on learning, changing life circumstances and learning styles.

Fifteen learners said that to commit to a timeline would be setting themselves up for disappointment and perhaps failure. For many of these learners, estimating a timeline for their learning brought up negative memories from past school experiences where they had not completed their education, a particular course or covered an academic concept in the time allotted. Some expressed a fear that if you did not reach your stated goal within an estimated time frame, you would be asked to leave the program, even when clearly this was not a program policy or practice.

Five learners described learning as a life-long pursuit, so timelines were not necessary. Three learners in this category participated in their respective programs, worked towards and achieved specific short-term goals and then exited. They returned to the program when they required specific literacy skills and knowledge for another goal. For example, Venus participated in her literacy program a few years ago with the aim to read and write for everyday purposes, a goal she accomplished. Recently she returned to her literacy program to work on understanding and managing household bills.

Five learners said it was difficult to determine how long the learning would take due to diverse changing life circumstances. Estimating how long it will take to reach goals could be affected by issues such as daycare, employment, health, or part time versus full time programs. For many of the women who were single parents, the availability of daycare and the health of their school age children often interrupted participation in their programs.

Eight learners were not sure how long it would take to reach their goals; however, they did not provide explanations for their uncertainty.

Pace of learning

Although estimating timelines was reported as being difficult by most learners, all but three were able to easily identify their preferred learning pace. The majority reported they required a slower pace to be successful. As with estimating timelines, 16 learners felt that being pressured or rushed did not enhance their rate of learning. Some learners reported that they would need a slower pace due to their learning styles and or because they were starting from a low literacy

² Throughout this report we have either used learners names with their written consent or have used pseudonyms they have chosen. See section VI, subsection D on Ethical Issues page 43.

level. Some, like Doug and Fee, reported that “*learning takes time and practise*”. John echoed what others also said, it “*was going to take a bit longer*” because he had to “*start right from scratch*”.

Overall, the majority of learners (44) said directly or indirectly that they were satisfied with their pace of learning. Five learners said they were learning faster than they thought they would. Four learners said they felt their pace was slower than they had hoped. Two of these learners felt a frequent change in tutors was a possible reason for a slower than desired learning pace.

C. Learners’ perspectives on progress

This project explored learners’ experiences and understanding of progress and sought to define and articulate this knowledge. Learners described their progress by referring to a wide variety of everyday practices and contexts. Their examples often demonstrated what real-life activities they could now do, activities that involved reading, writing, numeracy and oral communication skills and increased knowledge. Many of these same examples also involved what has come to be termed non-academic indicators of progress. These non-academic indicators (such as an increase in independence or risk-taking) cannot be entirely accounted for by increased literacy skills. We were specifically interested in understanding and documenting these real-life activities and non-academic indicators. Our collective experience as practitioners leads us to feel that general demonstrations (assessments) cannot convey a complete picture of learners’ progress. They often do not capture the above stated progress that we as practitioners expect and see in learners.

Learners’ comments provided insights into the richness and complexity of learning and of the interactions between their program environment, the learning process, their improved literacy skills and non-academic outcomes. As we listen to learners talk about their progress, we quickly came to the realization that pulling apart literacy skills (reading, writing, numeracy and oral communication skills) and increased knowledge from non-academic indicators was not an easy task. MJ’s comments illustrate the complexity of and interactions between the outcomes:

“I feel more inspired to write, to read, to understand, to evolve, to grow, to transcend my former barriers and develop new boundaries. I dream more. I read more. I jump through more mental hoops now. ...Concentrate and have a longer attention span. More tolerant. More patient. More understanding. More easy going. It brings out the best in me, coming here. It’s like a ripple effect. I have more confidence.”

Expanded literacy practices

Everyday practices

Everyday practices were defined in this study as everyday life activities related to basic skills: the ability to read, write, communicate verbally and solve math problems. Some everyday tasks included reading, understanding and being able to pay household bills, writing letters of complaint to the cable company, completing money orders, reading and completing forms for health insurance, writing birthday cards and letters, reading letters from children’s school, and

using the library. Learners told us they were more confident when shopping and handling money. Reading grocery flyers and food labels helped learners identify the best buys. They reported now being able to count money and calculate total cost after tax. James reported being able to estimate the costs of his groceries before he gets to the checkout. Learning about percentages has helped learners understand and figure out percentage discounts on sale items. Understanding fractions has improved the quality of MJ's cooking. She no longer makes *"floppy food that doesn't taste right and is weird."* Learning to read street and subway signs gave some increased independence. Chan can travel around the city without having to be accompanied by a family member, and Matt does not worry so much about getting lost. Improved oral communication skills have contributed to literacy learners being able to communicate more effectively with family, health professionals and children's teachers. These claims were reported by both English speaking learners and by those whose first language is not English.

Leisure practices

Many learners talked about how they used their literacy skills for pleasure related activities. Some of these included reading to their children and grandchildren, reading the newspaper, reading the bible and reading books. Princess and Marg reported having read their first fiction novels. Wendy told us that she now uses reading as a way to relax when she is upset. Debbie told us *"there are days when I get into a book and I can't set it down. That's a good thing."* The pleasure context also encompassed writing letters and email to friends and family, writing journals and autobiographical stories.

Work practices

Learners also reported progress in their work context such as completing time cards, reading work reports and communicating better with fellow workers and the public. Mary reported that in her job at the hospital she is no longer *"afraid when... talking sometimes to the nurses."* Achievements in the area of job seeking were related to completing application forms, investigating training courses and taking steps to consult job counsellors.

Community practices

Several learners felt they were able to participate more effectively in community activities. George, Maynard and Jean felt their improved literacy skills gave them the reading skills and confidence to be more effective members of community organizations. Carmella can now sit through community meetings (i.e. a tenant's meeting). Mary felt good enough about her improved oral communication skills to be a member of her literacy program's volunteer board.

Educational practices

Learners talked about educational practices related to their own learning and their children's learning. They included activities like reading and understanding articles, writing essays, completing homework assignments and using the Internet for researching topics for debates. Supporting children in their educational studies was important to many of the parents we

interviewed. Helping children with homework included using their reading and math skills. Frieda talked about now having the skills and confidence to help out at a homework club for children in her apartment building.

A few learners described specific “school-based skills” they mastered, like long division, reading without stopping and writing complete sentences. Although they related some of these specific skills to everyday practices, a number of the gains seemed to be more related to proving they could learn. These learners often had difficulty in school when young, and wanted to prove to themselves and sometimes to others that they could master certain skills. Betty described how “*that divide got [her] down.*” She “*could never do that. Divide!*” Now she can. Evelyn wanted “*to find out for myself how much I could learn.*”

Non-academic indicators

Self-confidence

The predominant non-academic measure of progress described by learners was an increase in self-confidence. All 56 learners identified an increase in self-confidence as being a key outcome of their participation in literacy programs. Some described self-confidence as self-esteem, while others described it as a feeling of having more control in their lives or being more independent. Venus expressed her increased confidence as feeling “*strong inside*” and “*proud and brave.*” George describes it as having “*ego and dignity*”. No matter how they described self-confidence, most suggested that it was a significant indicator of progress and a critical contributing factor to other positive changes in their lives. Most learners also recognized a positive relationship between increases in general knowledge and literacy skills (reading, writing, numeracy and oral communication skills) and the development of a positive self-image. Their new literacy skills coupled with self-confidence are linked to a large range of real-life outcomes.

Finding voice

Almost all learners (53 of 56) reported a positive change in their confidence level vis-à-vis finding and using their voice. Finding voice included communicating with peers within literacy programs and in social situations outside the program; addressing strangers or authority figures; or advocating for themselves or someone else. Many learners reported that they were less shy, and less afraid or nervous to talk to people. Progress for many was their ability to engage in conversations with peers, present ideas and ask questions. James and Betty spoke about feeling more comfortable in expressing an opinion, rather than sitting back in their groups and not saying anything. Learners reported being more comfortable when talking in public and interacting with new people.

Several learners also reported standing up for themselves in uncomfortable or difficult situations. They spoke up for themselves at home with spouses and children, or in social or public situations. Betty and Sally talked about being more confident in their household, and more confident in themselves. Sally reported her spouse calls her a “*bully*” now because she does not jump to do everything he says the second that he says it and Betty’s family told her she was “*mouthy*” because now she expresses anger. For Ida, learning was linked to her finding

better ways to communicate with her children and to be more present in their lives. There were many reported examples where learners described standing up for themselves more frequently, and with more confidence when dealing with authority figures like teachers, medical professionals, bosses and social workers.

A great many of the learners reported that finding voice started in their literacy programs, in small groups with peers and with tutors. They referred to a safe, supportive program environment in which patient and encouraging staff and peers helped build confidence. Learners could let their guard down and take risks in presenting or challenging ideas. Many referred to their programs as being like a family where one can freely discuss problems and solicit advice. As one learner eloquently stated *"My shyness has vanished"*. Another noted, *"As a result of coming here I'm more outspoken. I was more on the shy side."*

Opening up to learning

Learners reported that attending a literacy program helped them to feel more hopeful and to develop a positive attitude about learning. They related how, through their participation, they came to realize they *could* learn. Feddy changed her goal because she saw *"improvement"*, whereas before coming to the literacy program she thought she *"couldn't do anything"*. An alarming number of learners spoke of past school failures and the verbal and physical abuse they endured from school staff and family because of these failures. For these learners, participation in a supportive and non-judgmental environment resulted in an increased openness to learning. Theresa's reflection was echoed by other learners, *"I've learned to get to know myself a little more. Things I never thought I could do that I can do. I didn't think that I was that smart. I thought I was on the level of stupid."* Matt reported he has *"a lot less walls up"* and Isa reported that her perspective on failure had changed: *"Even when we fail, it is always a learning experience."* Many reported now having the confidence that they can keep on learning on all kinds of levels throughout their lives. Belief in their ability to learn and an awareness of their strengths contributes to the building of a learner identity.

Independence

Many of the learners talked about how being in their program helped them to become more independent both at home and in the community. As we reported in this section under Everyday Practices (p.14), they were able to complete tasks and access services they had previously depended on someone else to do. For example, being able to pay bills, use Interac, find their way around town, help their children with homework or independently make and attend an appointment were important indicators of progress for many. Marg reported feeling good about herself because she did not have to wait for one of her children to fill in a money order. It meant a great deal to George that he could complete a simple form and sign his name instead of copying the information from a card. The ability to complete everyday activities independently was not just linked to improved literacy skills and new knowledge. Learners talked about having the confidence to complete tasks.

Taking risks / new challenges

An increase in confidence led some learners to take on new challenges and risks even though they may have not been completely comfortable with the reading, writing or numeracy skills required for the activities. Kendra reported enjoying new challenges: *“the more challenging, the better!”* Juan is now taking an advanced English course, which he says is challenging but he’s *“willing to go the distance around my education”*. A number of learners felt taking on risky or “scary” activities was a definite sign of progress. Sherry participated on the hiring committee at Action Read even though *“being on the Hiring Committee was scary.”* Fatima enrolled in a manicure/make-up course even though she did not feel her literacy skills were adequate.

Public disclosure and asking for help

Some learners seemed to view public disclosure of difficulties with reading and writing as a sign of progress. For some, as self-esteem rose there was a corresponding lessening of embarrassment around others finding out they had difficulties reading and writing. A number of learners reported openly discussing their literacy difficulties with partners and children, something they were hesitant to do before joining their literacy programs. Marg talked about no longer being ashamed and does not *“hide that I couldn’t read and write. I come out and say it.”* She felt positive about disclosing to fellow hospital volunteers that she was attending a literacy program. Furthermore she was confident enough to ask fellow volunteers to read or clarify new information. She no longer assumes in every instance where she cannot understand that it is due to her lack of literacy skills. The learners’ increase in learning skills and self-confidence tended to help them move away from blaming themselves for not understanding. Albert was able to openly discuss his literacy difficulties with his social worker, which resulted in him accessing additional supports. Other learners were not embarrassed to ask for help in reading street signs or to ask for directions.

Conflict resolution

Eleven learners reported that participation in literacy, especially in group settings, helped them “speak out” in what they felt was a more appropriate manner, without anger and with greater sensitivity. Ron and Mary talked about being able to express themselves in a peaceful way when they were upset, instead of striking out. Kris expressed it well when she said:

“I do have a big mouth and I do have my opinions but it’s getting more polite instead of being more aggressive. Instead of telling the person off, I’m learning how to hold back and think, Am I going to hurt that person? Maybe I should tell them in a polite way. I’m being more understanding of others.”

Things at home used to get Ida so angry, but now she feels,

“I know how to deal with it just because of my learning ability. What I learn it calms my mind down so much. At home I know how to talk to my kids. I’ve become more intelligent so I can stand up for myself.”

Wellness

Just under half (26) of the learners reported positive health impacts linked to their participation in literacy programs. These included a better understanding of a particular health issue, more effective interactions with the health system, healthier lifestyle choices and health benefits (such as feeling less stressed).

With regard to health knowledge, learners reported an improved understanding of their health issues and ability to better research treatment options. Several learners felt an increase in knowledge coupled with improved self-esteem was linked to a greater degree of healthcare involvement. They were more willing to question their doctors' advice and ask for clarification. Marg and Jeanne were able to ask their doctor questions concerning health issues, instead of just blindly following the prescription directions, as was their past practice. Fatima was confident enough to seek a second opinion regarding her health issues. These learners reported a change in their attitude when dealing with health professionals. Whereas before they assumed that their difficulty in understanding health information was linked to literacy skills, now they felt that it is also the responsibility of the doctor to communicate clearly.

There were numerous reports of learners making lifestyle choices and engaging in new activities that could have a beneficial impact on health. These included walking, biking, going to the gym, eating a more healthy diet and engaging in meditation or yoga. Six learners who participated in yoga classes offered as part of their literacy program said that these classes enhanced learning. Misty reported that *"yoga builds energy"* and she could *"think more clearly"* and Angela felt *"mentally recharged"* after yoga class.

Many learners (13 of 26 who reported positive changes) reported a reduction in their stress or anxiety levels, which they said, contributed to their feeling more *"calm"* or *"content"*. Several learners reported they slept better. Two learners felt that a reduction in their anxiety level was linked to less frequent asthma attacks. Literacy participation for three learners was reported as a contributing factor in their motivation to quit or cut back on smoking, while two learners reported the same for substance abuse.

Listening to enhance understanding

Changes in the way they listened were reported by 16 learners. These changes were linked by the learners to a better mutual understanding of points of view and openness to consider shifting ones stance. MJ and Angela described themselves as being active listeners now, listening to more than just the words. MJ said, *"I just don't listen to words but I listen to facial expressions, posture."* Juan Carlos reflected a common view when he said,

"I open myself to let people open themselves. I like to listen more than to be listened. It gives me input. I want to know what they have on their minds too. That's part of my new quest."

Cultural awareness and tolerance

Nine learners from the Toronto literacy programs spoke about the cultural diversity within their programs, relating learning in a diverse cultural setting with a shift to a more open-minded perspective towards other cultures. The cultural diversity in some of the participating programs gave learners the opportunity to learn about different cultures and ways of doing and thinking. Ann, for example, reported, *“My class gives me chances to make friends. I learn different cultures, so I understand, support and sympathize with them. I am proud to have friends from different countries.”* Some learners reported that their enhanced awareness/openness to different cultures carried over to their community practices. They reported trying new foods, shopping in stores that cater to customers of a faith other than theirs and participating in community celebrations hosted by cultures.

Building relationships; building a learning community

The majority of learners spoke at length of the benefits of learning in community, and viewed building relationships within literacy programs as an important part of the process of learning. As learners built relationships with peers, tutors and practitioners they became less shy and reported having the confidence to express an opinion, rather than sit back and not say anything. They also perceived that they had made progress when they felt at ease and comfortable enough to participate in conversation. Matt reported: *“Just coming here, I’m around more people; I’m interacting with more people I’m talking more to more people.”* Alice reported that she never used to be a group person, and feels she has *“come a long way in coming into the group.”* As learners’ comfort levels rose, they contributed ideas, asked for and gave advice to peers, and expressed a desire to help other learners.

The importance of learning from each other was another factor learners reported. Learners talked about gaining knowledge and meaning through discussions with peers and practitioners. Joanne said learning in a group gave her courage and helped her be more creative, more imaginative. Venus said, *“It helps very much in a group. From one idea to another idea. When you’re in a group the ideas bubble up. When you talk it bubbles inside there, but when you’re by yourself it doesn’t.”*

The social aspect of learning and the importance of a learning community are best summed up by a learner, Tashi:

“With the group, we can learn lots of informal knowledges, not only just academic knowledge, there are also some other informal knowledges, so that we can make changes with each other, that’s how I felt at very first, so for me, this is also very exciting too, because you know, knowledge, what I think is not only that knowledge that you get in the school or the institutes formally, there is another knowledge also that is informal, you can get from different people’s opinion and their experiences, and things like that. So, there is another part of the knowledge, too. So, I thought you know, discussing among the students and tutors when I came, I thought this was a good chance to get different kinds of knowledges.”

D. Environment

The great majority of learners spoke in very positive terms about their learning environment, and indicated that it was critically important. They reported that the environment was especially vital in developing and fostering a positive self image, their voice and an opening up to learning.

Their comments lead us to consider what elements of the environment might be needed to promote learning and build a learner identity. Learners reported that the program environment helped them to persist in their program, especially when they experienced learning challenges. The elements they commented on referred to an environment that:

- was safe, comfortable, relaxed
- was non-judgmental
- was flexible (in terms of attendance and hours)
- was mutually respectful (between learners and between practitioners and learners)
- was respectful of and accommodated their learning style and pace
- was fun
- encouraged risk-taking, speaking up, asking questions
- provided the opportunity to develop their learning skills: asking and answering questions, listening, problem-solving, learning from other learners
- fostered the opportunity to develop social relationships with fellow learners, to be part of a learning community and to feel less isolated
- offered both small group and one-to-one learning opportunities

The majority of learners spoke of a need to feel safe, accepted and respected before they could persist in a program. For some learners, safety and comfort had to do with having people to talk to who they felt they could trust. Jean said she “*doesn’t trust anybody*” and she felt she had to protect herself most of the time by going “*into my own shell*”. However, in a program where there was mutual respect and trust she reported, “*my mask is off*” because “*I feel comfortable here...It is safe for me here.*” As a result, she felt more comfortable asking questions and being around people. She also felt “*I can say what’s on my mind and feel comfortable saying it.*” A few learners reported that their program provided a safe haven from violence at home or out in the community.

Learners from all five programs used positive words like “family”, “welcoming”, “friendly”, “comfortable”, “caring” and “home” to describe the atmosphere in their programs. They felt programs should be more than a place where they came together to learn reading, writing and numeracy skills. They referred to the importance of the “social” aspect of the environment as a contributing factor in their persistence in learning. They made friends, shared coffee and food, stories, jokes and laughter and life experiences.

Many contrasted their current positive learning environment with negative past school experiences. These experiences involved being made fun of, being called “slow”, and being embarrassed in front of other people for making mistakes. Almost all learners spoke about the need to be in a non-judgmental environment where *“If you make mistakes, you are not criticized. You have people rooting for you.”* As reported in other sections of this report, learners felt a program that was free of time pressure and was understanding and flexible about life circumstances was key.

“I keep coming back because I don’t feel pressured. Other schools they make you feel pressured because you have to be there at certain times, and that can get really hard. Here you don’t have to do that, so it’s like there is no pressure here, and I learn better, when there’s no pressure.”

The majority of learners mentioned the importance of the role of tutors in relation to their learning. Their comments illustrated that they valued practitioners’ expertise, encouragement and positive feedback on progress. What also seemed to be key for many was that their relationships with tutors went beyond the traditional teacher/student relationships they remembered from early school years. They appreciated relationships where there was mutual respect and where tutors discussed and gave support concerning very personal issues. Marg reported that,

“When my granddaughter died, I get talking about it, [with her tutor] and [she] even went to the funeral. And we didn’t know each other very well and I was so surprised that she was for me all the way regardless if I was hurt or happy it didn’t matter. She was behind me whenever I needed her help. And when I had my school bag stolen and my wallet and my money and everything couple of months ago she was right behind me.”

These aspects of the environment that learners commented on above very clearly helped build a strong sense of community and learner identity.

IV Reflecting on the findings

Learners had a lot to say about their own progress. We gained insights into the goals learners brought to the programs and their views on pacing and timelines. We captured a detailed view of a large range of reported real-life practices and non-academic indicators, and insights into just how complex the interactions could be between the learning environment, the learning process, and the outcomes.

Given all that we learned and confirmed, it became clear that our perceptions of a learner's progress sometimes had little to do with their perceptions and how their lives had changed. This section details our reflections on the learners' perspectives covering:

- goals
- timelines and pacing
- environment
- trauma
- setting
- reflecting about what learners told us about progress

A. The rich landscape of learners' goals

The landscape of learners' goals is rich and multi-dimensional. Independence, training and employment related goals are often pursued simultaneously. Learners realize very well what literacy can do for them. Our conversations with the learners and subsequent group analysis of the data highlighted that regardless of the goal, all involved both literacy skills (reading, writing, numeracy and oral communication) and non-academic skills. From this perspective, it seems that using only acquired or improved literacy skills as indicators to describe progress would not provide a balanced picture relative to these expectations.

Although our research focused primarily on level 1 and 2 learners who had independence as a goal, our experience as educators would suggest that learners at higher literacy levels, or learners who do not have independence as one of their goals would also identify a similar range of both literacy skills and non-academic indicators when describing progress.

B. Timelines and pacing

Learners' comments on setting timelines and their preferred pace of learning provided us with useful insights and raised questions. Their reluctance to set timelines did not appear, in many cases, to stem from a lack of experience in goal setting, or from a lack of self awareness, but rather from a variety of reasons they were easily able to describe. Fear of failure or of being "pressured" or "rushed" were issues for many. Based on past educational experiences, often traumatic, they seemed to view setting timelines as not being very beneficial to their learning process creating undue stress and anxiety. They also suggested that changing life circumstances often made it difficult to estimate when they would achieve a particular learning goal. In discussing this finding we acknowledged that for many people, ourselves included, setting

goals and targets is challenging, and that the road to achieving a stated goal is often not linear. Literacy learners face all kinds of additional obstacles, such as poverty, poor health, and discrimination that make the road even more challenging and get in the way of meeting timelines.

What is the impact on our programs? Practitioners and learners work together to build individualized learning/training plans when learners enter programs. It has been communicated to the literacy field by our Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) field consultants that this process should take approximately six to eight weeks. Learning plans must include end dates from the outset, dates that learners and practitioners often find they have to renegotiate when reviewing progress.

This raises questions and suggests a need to develop a more complex understanding of goal setting and the obstacles:

- Should timelines be more flexible and how would this impact program accountability?
- Before requiring learners to set timelines, would giving learners more time to experience learning successes help build a positive learner identity, help address their fear of failure and hence promote a willingness to set realistic end dates?
- What other types of practices might work better in recognizing the complexity of learning and the obstacles learners face?

Studies on learner retention and transition describe the importance of examining and making explicit the educational assumptions both learners and practitioners hold. They encourage open discussions with learners about their fears and concerns about their capabilities. The fact that many of the learners we spoke with (regardless of the length of time in the program) cited fear of failure as factor in considering timelines suggests these discussions need to be on-going.

C. Impact of violence

Although we as practitioners are aware of the issues of violence, it was still overwhelming at times to listen to or read of learners' stories of past physical and verbal abuses. It reminded us of how prevalent violence is in society and its impact on learning. Learners described violence from past school days and sometimes implied experiencing violence in other parts of their lives, for example at home, in an institution or out in the community. They spoke of the negative messages and labels they had to endure when young about their learning capabilities. The depth of their embarrassment, shame and fear had a profound impact on how they viewed themselves as learners. (Horsman, 1999) They came to their literacy programs with negative preconceived notions of what to expect.

One indicator of progress for these learners was their ability to speak in a group both in their programs, at home and out in the community without being afraid. Feeling *safe, brave, proud* and *less anxious* were other indicators of progress. Learners told us their program environment was a critical factor in changing their attitudes about their learning context and their ability to learn.

An environment that was safe, welcoming and accepting and that allowed them to bring their whole self to learning was important in supporting them to overcome fear.

D. Environment: building communities of learning

An early reflection that stood out for us was that the learning environment has a powerful influence on learning, motivation and retention of learners. In fact, what learners described was a community of learning. Our findings provided a list of environmental elements they felt were vital. They strongly and repeatedly stated that an environment, which provided opportunities to develop relationships, was important in supporting and promoting learning. They made it clear that a safe, comfortable and non-judgemental environment where they could learn from and support each other in their learning was needed and highly valued. Comments, such as “*my mind is so relaxed*”, “*I hear other ways of thinking*” and “*I open up*” suggest that the environment plays a vital role in the development of learner identity.

Learners talked about the social aspects of a positive environment where they developed relationships not just with learners but with practitioners. Learners valued environments where they could develop mutual respect, trust and self confidence. Comfortable, safe and relationship-intensive environments that recognized and encouraged learners to address personal issues also had the potential to reduce or address barriers to learning such as shyness or past negative school experiences or traumatic experiences. Learners said that caring and expert tutors made a large contribution to the environment. The exposure of learners to people of other cultures within the programs appears to also help build cultural awareness and tolerance. Successful relationship-building within the program may in turn potentially influence the building of relationships for learners outside the program.

Our findings are consistent with recent research (Hannon, 2003; Manning, 2003; Turner, 2001). Learners described themselves as being very involved in the environment, almost being wrapped up in a culture of learning. They were not just “acquiring” skills. What they said about the environment has prompted us to extend our view on how knowledge is created and how learners learn: learning is a social practice. As one researcher has said, “Knowledge is not only held in an individual’s head. It is distributed among the community of knowledge users and is embedded in the detail of authentic practice.” (Grieve, 2003, p. 42.)

This suggests a need to develop a more complex understanding of these environmental dynamics and raises some interesting questions.

- What is the connection between relationships and learning?
- How can we as practitioners promote this relationship?
- How can practitioners develop structures to further promote a community of practice model?

E. Settings: program to program variations

The majority of indicators of progress described by the learners were found across all five community based organizations. However, once all focus group transcripts were reviewed in detail and responses were compared from organization to organization, some interesting differences in the findings on learners' perspectives were found:

The majority of indicators of progress described by the learners were found across all five community based organizations. However, once all focus group transcripts were reviewed in detail and responses compared from organization to organization, there was some variation between programs regarding the indicators of progress that were mentioned by learners. Some were mentioned frequently in some programs and not mentioned in other programs.

- Only Parkdale Project Read (PPR) and Action Read (AR) learners spoke about their ability to communicate with less anger or in a calmer manner.
- Only Regent Park and Literacy for East Toronto (LET) learners talked about increased cultural awareness/tolerance.
- Relative to the other three organizations, many more learners at AR and at PPR reported positive health impacts as a result of their literacy program participation.

We wondered what factors might be related these differences. Although we know that the five programs that participated in the project have a lot in common, variation from program to program does exist. For example, program approaches vary. PPR explicitly focuses on and designs its program around normalizing the needs of trauma survivors. AR, RPLC and PPR advocate learning from a whole person perspective (mind, body, emotions and spirit.) LET is a school board managed program with one focus being supporting some learners in moving on to GED programs or credit courses; and WCLC learners do not work in groups as often as learners in the other four programs. (See the program profiles described in Appendix B).

Program settings also vary. Programs and learners come from different neighbourhoods, not to mention rural and urban settings. Some programs have close associations with local community health centre or local consumer/survivor membership organization; other programs do not have these links.

Programs also vary with regard to format, staff and organizational culture. We wondered if these program-related differences might have influenced learners' experiences and learning. As well, our findings may have also been influenced by variation in the way focus groups unfold as conversations.

Our project data does not allow us to draw links between program setting and indicators of progress. It does suggest, however, that various factors may affect the kinds of impacts learners identify, factors related to their own awareness, their own context, what is significant to them, the culture of a program and what has been talked about in the program.

F. Learners' perspectives on progress

Through doing this research we learned that learners have a lot to say about their own progress, and what they said added significantly to our understanding of their progress. Almost all learners reported changes in their lives as a result of their involvement in a literacy program. In addition to noticing changes in the ability to read, write and do math with increased proficiency in different contexts, many talked about an increase in outcomes of a non-academic nature such as confidence, an ability to speak out more easily, about friendships and connections made at the literacy program, and a greater tolerance for differences. Learners recognized these changes as indicators of progress.

What learners described as non-academic progress gave us a more nuanced understanding of these outcomes. We learned that there is a large range of indicators of progress (specifically non-academic ones) and that self-confidence, a sense of agency and social relationships are significant factors in learning – both for learning to happen and as a consequence of learning.

Many of the non-academic indicators of progress our learners expressed are identified in Grieve's report, *Supporting Learning, Supporting Change: A Research Project on Self-Management and Self-Direction*. (2003) Grieve reports that these indicators have been linked to the concepts of self management and self-direction. In her report, Grieve's concludes that "*self management and self-direction are both outcomes and necessary conditions for effective learning*" (Ibid. p. 15), and furthermore notes that research in adult literacy programs shows that they impact learner progress, transition and retention.

What the learners said about progress was also consistent with what was reported in a recent study by the Trent Valley Literacy Association, *What Goes on Here? Practitioners Study the Practitioner-Student Relationship*. (2004) The research practitioners in that project also found evidence of non-academic progress. They noted that "*students' vocabulary starts to change; students' body language changes; students begin to work independently; students are not embarrassed by their mistakes; students actively help others; students indicate they want to learn more; students apply things learned academically to real life; and, students know now they have the power to implement change in their lives.*" (qtd. in Westell 2005 p. 3) On reflection, what the learners told us about non-academic indicators of progress can help us think about what may be relevant to many literacy learners across the province.

Three indicators of progress stood out both in the significance learners ascribed to them and in the frequency with which they were mentioned. These indicators, self-confidence, finding voice and an openness to learning were principal in the minds of the learners.

Self-confidence:

The learners' responses show that self confidence is clearly a primary indicator of progress. The majority of the learners interviewed spoke about coming to their literacy programs as having been the catalyst that allowed them to become more self-confident and more outgoing. The literature review conducted for this project supports the notion that self-confidence is a key element in learning.

The literature is clear that self-confidence was crucial to learning and may contribute to other positive changes in learners' lives. One study said it this way: "Learning for Life [title of study] places self-esteem in its proper perspective. It is not a mere by-

product of adult basic and literacy education; it is the sparkplug that ignites self-efficacy and social action". (qtd. in Westell, 2005, p.8)

Finding Voice

Closely intertwined with self-confidence and improved communication skills were the learners' ability to find voice. As practitioners, many of us place a great deal of importance and weight on witnessing new learners shift from shyness to finding their voice, "a movement from silence into speech". (Campbell, 2003 p.3) Learners left no doubt that improving their ability to 'speak out' was of vital importance in their everyday lives, that speaking out was a clear indicator of their progress, and that it was indeed linked strongly to their program participation. Response frequency and the examples learners related demonstrated that they also see and highly value 'speaking out' as a significant indicator of progress and self-confidence. The learners also made it clear that the learning process and the environment foster a virtuous cycle: literacy and 'speaking out' skills bring more confidence, and an increased sense of confidence provides the opportunity to further develop the skills.

Our findings highlight that from the learners' perspective, a safe and supportive community was critical in learning and practising to 'speak out' and to overcoming fear or shyness. There were many learner comments about the support, honesty, feedback and stimulation they received from their peers. Learning alongside peers provides a training and rehearsal ground to practise how to 'speak out'.

In a study titled *Participatory Literacy Practices: Creating Possibilities*, researcher Pat Campbell examined participatory literacy practices in 5 adult literacy programs. (1994) Her findings suggest that shyness and fear of 'speaking out' may in fact stem from past experiences where learners "*were not heard because they did not speak the dominant language of academics and professionals*". (Campbell, 1994 p. 3) Although this idea may not apply to situations with family members or friends, it resonates when thinking about the learners' examples of advocating for themselves with doctors, social workers, landlords or children's teachers.

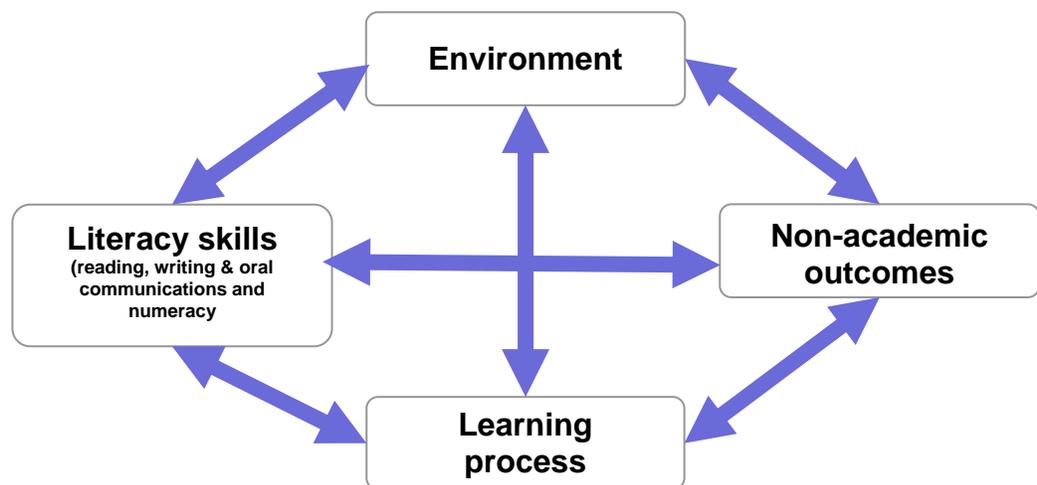
Campbell suggests, "*the concept of students' voice should be problematized so that both students and staff have a deeper understanding of their fear of speech, rather than equating it with shyness and or passivity.*" (Ibid) If we (both learners and practitioners) agree that self-confidence is pivotal to learning, and that 'speaking out' is one indicator of progress, then we may need to place more emphasis on developing, practising and recognizing voice as a non-academic outcome in our programs. Speaking and listening activities should be given more attention and learners should be afforded more opportunities to participate in small group settings that advance confidence in 'speaking out'.

Opening up to Learning

Another common non-academic outcome mentioned by learners was a growing recognition that they could learn which resulted in an opening up to learning on many levels. Comments about having the confidence that they could keep on learning signifies not only an opening up to learning but hopefulness. In our discussions we felt that hopefulness was a necessary element for learning that led learners to take risks and consider possibilities beyond their literacy programs. Hopefulness needs to be present before learners and practitioners can engage in goal-setting activities and establishing realistic timelines.

Complexity of learning

Learners' comments were not limited to providing their perspective only on outcomes; they also spoke openly and highly of their learning environment, and linked elements of their environment with the outcomes they achieved. Their comments also included information about how they learned, and how they link their learning process to outcomes. Their comments provided interesting insights into the richness and complexity of the interactions between their program environment, the learning process, and real-life and non-academic outcomes. These potential interactions and synergies are highlighted in the diagram below. Although literacy skills and non-academic outcomes are illustrated in this diagram, the learners made no distinction between these types of outcomes. Underneath this high-level view lies a more complex web of potential interactions.



Interactions among outcomes

Just as the learning environment seems to interact strongly with the learning process and learning outcomes, it appears that outcomes themselves demonstrate a high degree of interaction. For example, learners reported that not only was self-confidence a very important learning outcome in its own right, it had a positive impact on other outcomes such as openness to learning, risk-taking, finding voice and increased participation in the community. Improved reading and writing skills might motivate a learner to sit on a community board because they feel they are better able to read meeting minutes. Their improved skills may also have changed their self-image and they are willing to take on this new challenge and feel confident enough to speak up at community board meetings even though they may feel there are still be documents that will challenge their reading and writing abilities.

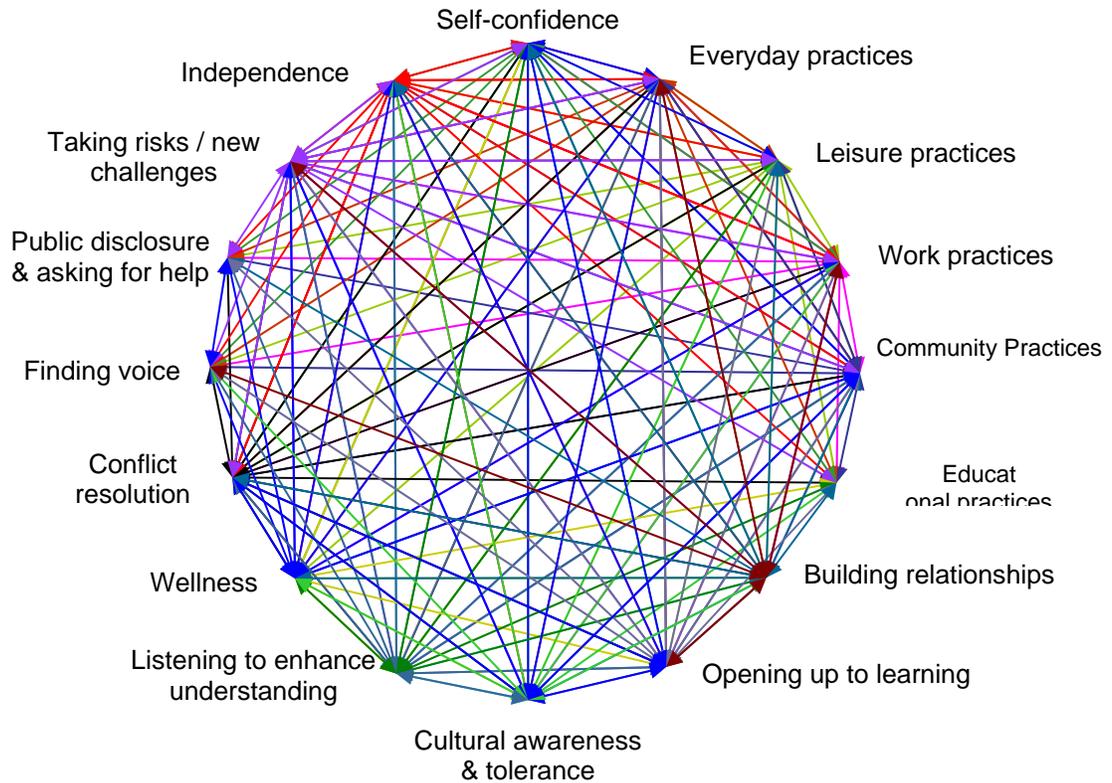
Some outcomes build on others, while some seem to be consequences of other outcomes. As well, outcomes are complex in their own right; there exists a certain degree of overlap among many. The good news is that many of these interactions appear to be synergistic, and the overall pattern of interactions can be recognized and encouraged. Practitioners providing

recognition for or reinforcing one outcome are often promoting other outcomes as well. Practitioners aware of a learning barrier can better appreciate the overall impact that barriers can have on learner progress. This pattern may also help explain why self-confidence is so highly weighted by learners and practitioners alike. This high degree of interaction and influence between multiple outcomes, whether they are specific literacy skills or non-academic in nature, promotes a more holistic view of learning and hence measuring progress. It supports the New Literacy Studies theory of viewing literacy and learning as a social practice and not simply as a set of autonomous skills of “reading and writing.” (Hamilton, 2000; Barton, 1994; Street, 2001; Gee, 1999)

The visual representation of learner outcomes shown below illustrates several points.

- Although reading, writing and numeracy skills are important to the learners; their perspectives on progress goes beyond the world of academic outcomes. They tend to perceive their own progress in a more holistic manner, one that typically includes literacy skills relevant to their own lives.
- Progress on one learning outcome may be linked to impacts on many outcomes.
- The number and complexity of the potential interactions between these 16 types of outcomes are staggering.

Potential links between non-academic outcomes and real-life practices



There is another layer to this complexity when we consider the different responses learners may have in different contexts and situations. A learner who speaks up at a community board meeting may not feel comfortable or confident to speak up with their family doctor. A learner may not complete forms required by workers, not because they are unable to read the document but as a form of protest. They may feel the information required is an invasion of privacy. Thinking about the multiple interactions between outcomes and the impact the context has led to an appreciation of the challenge these present when considering how to recognize progress. Using a narrative approach or testimonials to recognize and document progress seems to be an appropriate practice to adopt. We found that consulting the learners with open-ended questions about their progress was an effective method of dialoguing with them about their progress.

G. Including the learners' perspectives in assessment

As literacy practitioners we have always addressed outcomes that extend beyond reading writing and numeracy, ones that include a wide range of non-academic outcomes. Reflecting on our findings however, we realized that sometimes our perceptions of learners' progress differ from how *they* perceived their progress and its impact on their lives.

Our research told us that there are many other indicators of progress that assessors cannot observe but that only the learner can know and report. Furthermore, some learners expressed progress in an area of their lives and placed importance on a specific indicator of progress that we had not considered. For example, one learner talked about feeling comfortable talking with someone different from himself. To him, this was an indicator of progress resulting from his work in a numeracy group. The importance learners placed on progress in terms of what they could now do has implications for how we recognize learning.

We realized our assumptions about what constitutes progress influences our choice of assessment tools and consequently impacts assessment results. We thought about how we often value progress that a learner can demonstrate in an assessment process over progress that the learner himself observes in his life. Assessment results can be an important factor in on-going learner goal-setting, motivation and morale, tutor instruction and decisions about continuation in a literacy program and movement to other programs. If the purpose of assessment is to document learning, assessment results are incomplete when the learners' perspectives are not considered.

For these reasons, we believe that learners' perspectives should have value in adult literacy programs and therefore be included in assessment practices. There are many reasons to integrate learners' perspectives into assessment practices.

- Many non-academic indicators of progress the learners identified are both outcomes and vital elements of the learning process.
- It promotes a better understanding of the progress of learners.
- It respects learners as experts on their own progress and on indicators of progress that matter to them.
- Assessment that relies solely on testing how well learners can apply particular skills, or that relies on instructor observations miss a central element of progress – what learners believe they have learned and how this learning has changed their lives.
- It ensures that assessment is learner-centred and that decisions about what constitutes progress should not be solely assessor-dependent.
- Demonstrating learning by using standardized assessments that mainly assess progress in terms of skills can often obscure progress learners may make in real-life contexts and in non-academic outcomes.
- Progress is not limited to what we choose to test.

- Literacy practitioners will learn about what constitutes progress from the learners' perspectives.
- Programs will be better equipped to meet the literacy needs of learners.
- It ensures a more complete documentation of progress.

V Recommendations

A. Recommendations relating to practice

This project recommends that:

1. Ontario adult literacy programs value, document and incorporate learners' perspectives on progress in assessments.

- Learners' perspectives on progress should be documented in a way that gives them parity with results documented from any other on-going assessment tool.
- Recognize and value non-academic indicators of progress in order to ensure a more complete picture of learners' progress.
- Document relationships between different kinds of progress so that these relationships become more visible to the learner and to the practitioner.
- When documenting learners' perspectives on progress, recognize that their learning outcomes are not simply acquired skills (i.e., "I was able to read better"), but rather contextualized applications embedded in social practices (i.e., "*I was able to read the pamphlet in the doctors' office*") that need to be documented as such.
- Create more opportunities for learners to discuss reflectively how they are doing on an ongoing basis. Literacy learning outcomes can be rich and interconnected. For learners, the process of reflecting on and discussing their learning outcomes can:
 - i. Help them identify, understand and appreciate the full set of outcomes they have achieved as a result of their literacy program participation.
 - ii. Help learners set future goals. Greater self-awareness and insight into what they have achieved can help them set future goals that build on their achievements.

2. Ontario adult literacy programs examine how they currently document real-life practices and non-academic indicators of progress and investigate other strategies, techniques or models that already exist which facilitate the description, documentation and validation of learners' perspectives on progress.

- Programs may already have informal or formal processes (conversations or forms) that ask for learners' perspectives on progress. Document and incorporate these processes as evidence of progress in formal on-going assessment practices.
- Trial and reflect on the proposed documentation tool offered in this project.

- Consider other tools and approaches for documenting learning perspectives on progress. There are numerous models/tools which can help, for examples those found in Naming the Magic: Non-Academic Outcomes in Basic Literacy (2001), Learning Journey metaphor approach (2002), Building Self-Awareness and Self-Direction model from Supporting Learning, Supporting Change (2003).

We recommend that the mechanism by which progress be documented:

- Recognize the need for simple and practical data collection and documentation tools that do not burden literacy practitioners.
- Consider the variation in needs among programs and learners.

3. MTCU recognize the many factors that learners face in setting timelines. We recommend the Ministry enter into a conversation with the adult literacy field to clarify the role timelines play in outcomes and program accountability.

Learners seemed to view setting timelines as not being very beneficial to their learning process sometimes creating undue stress and anxiety. They suggested that changing life circumstances often made it difficult to estimate when they would achieve a particular learning goal. In our group discussions of the findings we acknowledged that for many people setting goals and targets is challenging, and that additional obstacles such as poverty, poor health, and discrimination make the task even more difficult.

Our discussions also revealed that we do not receive consistent messages from field consultants regarding the use and flexibility of timelines. We thought about what we would like the Ministry to consider:

- Before requiring learners to set timelines, allow more time to experience learning successes, help build a positive learner identity, help address their fear of failure and hence promote a willingness to discuss and encourage the notion of setting timelines.

4. Ontario adult literacy programs assess, maintain and improve their program's learning environment to help assure learners' ongoing needs are met.

- Programs should assess their overall program learning environment (including staff / tutor training) in order to understand how well learners' needs are met. Assessment methods should include capturing the learners' perspectives on how well the environment supports their learning.
- Tutor training should include information and discussion around the elements of a positive learning environment and the importance of relationship building.
- Over and over we heard learners speak about how the environment affected their learning, and their sense of progress. They spoke about feeling welcomed, how different it was from their past experience of school and of the need to feel safe both physically and emotionally before learning could occur. Programs should

consider adopting a holistic model developed by Horsman (2002) that addresses issues of violence, brings the whole self to learning and nurtures the spirit.

B. A tool for documenting learners' perspectives

Assessing and documenting learners' perspectives on progress

This section provides an assessment tool that arose out of our findings. This tool may help learners and practitioners identify, understand and appreciate the full set of outcomes a learner may have achieved as a result of their literacy program participation. In turn, this enhanced self-awareness and insight into what they have achieved can help them set future goals that build on their achievements.

I Purpose

This assessment tool has been developed to help learners and practitioners reflect on and document how learners' lives have been affected by their participation in a literacy program. The aim of this tool is to stimulate wide ranging reflection and discussion by learners about the progress they have made and the variety of social practices and contexts in which they have made that progress. This assessment approach aims to:

- support learners to think about their progress and to develop skills for critical reflection
- help practitioners and learners understand that learning outcomes go beyond the acquisition of specific literacy skills; that they include non-academic outcomes
- encourage learners to reflect on and identify all of the progress they have made, including real-life types of progress
- help practitioners and learners understand that learning outcomes are embedded in a wide range of social practices and environments
- help learners and practitioners appreciate not only the range and diversity of potential learning outcomes but the complexity and synergy of the interactions between different outcomes
- create an easy-to-use visual tool that would also serve to document the learners' progress
- allow practitioners and learners to see "at a glance" the kinds of progress that has been made, and be able to easily compare recent progress with progress made in the past
- supplement existing assessment tools

II Background

When asked, learners typically describe their progress by referring to a wide variety of everyday practices and contexts. Their examples demonstrate what real life activities they can now accomplish. For some learners, progress means being able to write a letter to their child's teacher or help them with homework. For others it means being able to complete a time card at work or read work orders. For still others it means being able to speak up and ask questions of their doctor, or participate at a public meeting. Their examples often involve improved literacy skills: reading, writing, numeracy, oral communication skills and increased knowledge. However, many of these same examples also involve what has come to be termed non-academic indicators of progress. These non-academic indicators include but are not limited to progress made in the areas of:

- self-confidence,
- speaking-up/standing up for one self
- independence
- taking on new challenges risk-taking
- listening to enhance understanding
- public disclosure of literacy difficulties and feeling comfortable asking for help
- conflict resolution skills, including anger management
- cultural awareness and tolerance
- opening up to learning - hopeful and positive attitudes about learning
- building relationships
- health and health management

These indicators cannot be entirely accounted for by increased literacy skills. Our “paper” assessments often don't capture these non-academic indicators that we as practitioners expect and see in learners. We feel it is important to understand and document these non-academic indicators. Moreover, we feel it is important to view these indicators not as a set of isolated skills, but to view them as social practices, skills embedded in and integrated with a particular context and environment.

Assessment results can be an important factor in on-going learner goal-setting, motivation and morale, tutor instruction and decisions about continuation in a literacy program and movement to other programs. If the purpose of assessment is to document learning, assessment results are incomplete when the learners' perspectives are not considered. For this reason, we believe the learners' perspectives must be included in assessment practices.

III Assessment instructions

1. In the general information section, document the learner's and assessor's names and the review date. Document the assessment period for the review.
2. Put the learner at ease. Explain to the learner the purpose of the assessment activity, the assessment process and the forms that will be used. Assure that the learner understands that this is not a test. Indicate that this is an assessment of learning progress made since the last review, or since the learner started the program if an assessment has not been made since the learner started with the program.

3. Use the questions and prompts (see page 39 of this report) provided to help engage the learner in a conversation on the progress made and reflect on his or her progress. The intent of the questions and prompts is to uncover all areas of progress made by the learner as a result of the literacy program.
4. The learner's progress can be documented in one of several ways. Information can be documented on the forms provided either during the course of the discussion, or after the questions have been asked. Either the learner or the assessor can complete the forms, or these documents can be jointly completed by both the assessor and the learner.
5. If the learner states that she has made progress in 'reading,' 'writing' or 'math,' encourage her to be more specific and describe her actual applications of reading, writing or math in her everyday practices.
6. The form showing possible learning outcomes arrayed in a circle is used to provide a visual representation of all outcomes for which the learner has made progress. Learners (or the assessors) simply circle those learning outcomes (i.e., self-confidence) for which the learner feels progress has been made. If the learner has made progress in an area not addressed by those shown in the diagram, these additional indicators can be written in one of the three empty lines provided.
7. The learner can also reflect on and indicate which outcomes have positively influenced other outcomes. These interactions can be shown by drawing a line from one outcome to one or more other outcomes on the learning outcomes circle. For example, lines connecting the "listening differently" outcome to "having and building better relationships with others" outcome and the "opening up to learning" outcomes would show that improvement in the former outcome had a positive impact on the latter two outcomes. This reflection on how one outcome might impact other outcomes may also make visible to the learner areas of progress that might otherwise not come to light.
8. Examples of activities or tasks that show progress by the learner can be documented on the "Examples of my learning" form under the appropriate headings. Have the learner review the documentation, congratulate the learner for the progress made, and thank the learner for the time they have spent doing the assessment.
9. Add any comments, if desired, in the general information box at the top of the page. File the assessment documents with other learner assessment documentation.

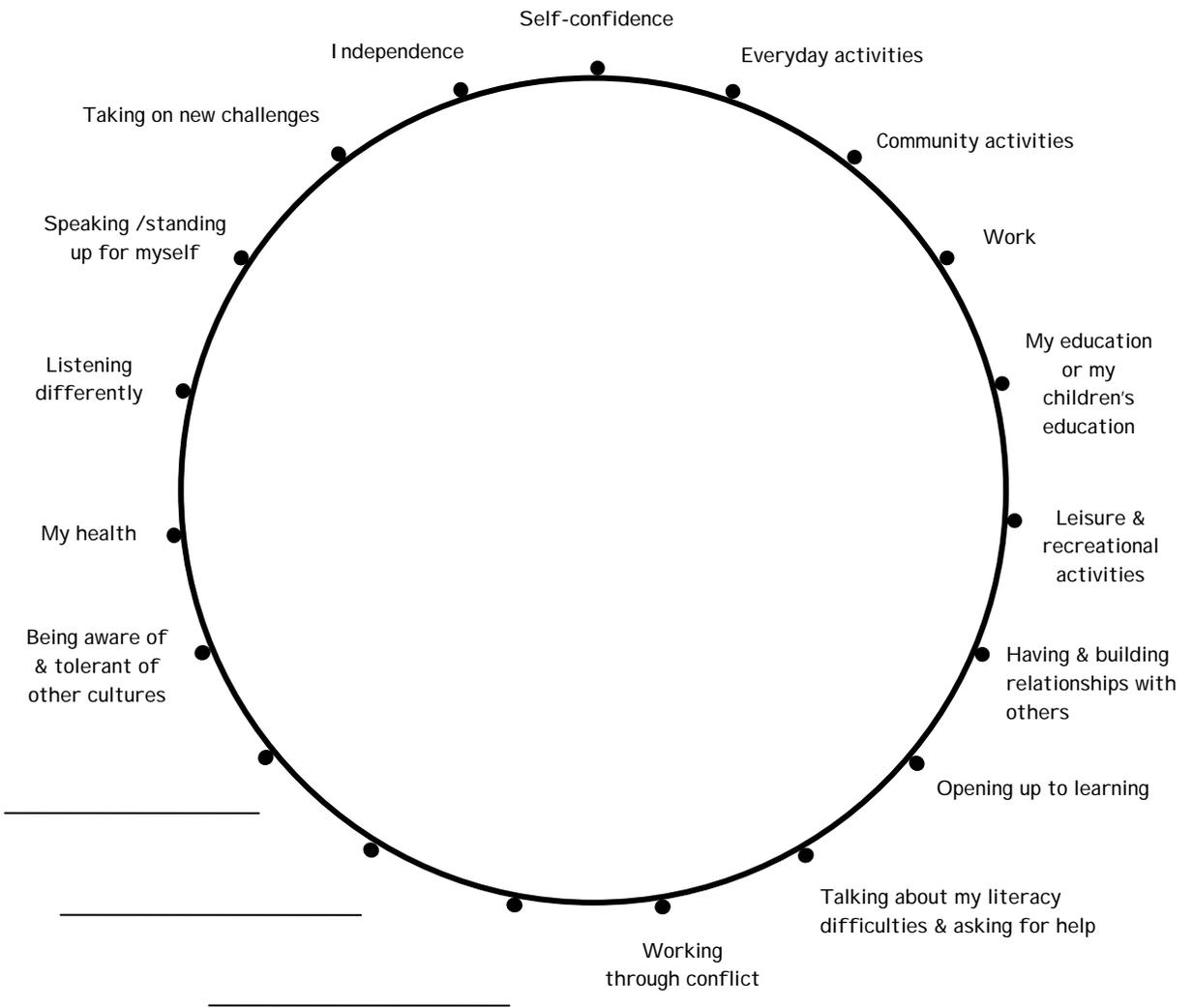
Note:

This assessment tool is just a suggestion. Many variations and alternative or additional uses for this document are possible, such as:

1. Using the learning outcome circle to help learners identify and discuss learning concerns or barriers to learning they may have.
2. Using assessment results to inform goal setting.

I General Information			
Learner:	Assessor:		
Review Date:	Assessment period:	From:	To:
Comments:			

II Areas I have made progress in since coming to the program, or since my last review:



IV Questions and Prompts

- 1 What did you want to learn when you first came?
 - How did you want reading and writing to change your life?
- 2 Have you learned some of what you wanted to learn? How can you tell?
 - Can you give us an example of how you know you've moved forward?
- 3 Do you see a difference in your everyday life as a result of your learning?
(If the response to any of the below prompts is yes, encourage the learner to provide specific examples)
 - a) Are there any changes in the way or the amount that you speak out?
 - b) Are there any changes in the way or the amount that you listen?
 - c) Do you express yourself in different ways than before? (music, art, reading, conversation, gardening, hobbies, etc.).
 - d) Do you feel any different about your health? Do you eat, drink, smoke, or exercise differently?
 - e) How comfortable do you feel in class? In the community? At home?
 - f) Do you feel you have less, more, or the same control in your life?
 - g) Have friends or family commented on a change in you? What did they say?
 - h) Are you more willing to do tasks that you may not have tried to do before you came here?
 - i) Has your involvement in the community changed since coming to the program? (in your child's school, literacy program, volunteering, other programs or classes)
 - j) Have you changed the way you make, keep and get to appointments?
 - k) Are there any changes in how you handle or own learning tools (like pens, calculator, paper...?)
- 4 How long did you think it would take to learn what you wanted to learn?
 - Did you have a set time line in your mind
 - Didn't think about it or wasn't sure
 - Thought the teacher would tell you
- 5 How is the learning different from what you first thought it would be?
 - Slower/faster? If slower, how does it feel?
 - Are you enjoying the process, or is it frustrating?

Why did you keep coming to the program?

VI Methodology

We worked within a “practitioner reflective research” framework, drawing upon the subjective knowledge and understanding of the practitioner as a resource. We used the collective experience of the practitioners to inform the focus group activities and the interpretation of data and to generate insights not otherwise available.

We sought to understand learners’ and practitioners’ experience and understanding of progress and to define and articulate this knowledge. Guidelines supplied by our research mentors were used to employ and manage human subjectivity as a research instrument, rather than as a source of bias.

A. Who we interviewed

Eighteen focus groups were held and a total of 56 learners were interviewed. Typically three learners at levels 1, 2 or 3 with independence as one of their goals were targeted for participation in the focus group session. The following tables provide demographic data of the learners interviewed.

Literacy Program	Number of learners	Number of focus groups
Action Read Guelph	15	5
Literacy for East Toronto	12	4
Parkdale Project Read (Toronto)	16	5
Regent Park Learning Centre (Toronto)	6	2
Wellington County Learning Centre	7	2

Gender:	Male	Female
# of learners:	15	41

Age:	19-24	25-44	45-64	65+	NA
# of learners:	2	27	18	6	3

LBS Level:	1	2	3	4	NA
# of learners:	18	29	8	0	1

Length of time in program:	0-5 months	6-11 months	12-23 months	24-35 months	36-47 months	48 + months	On & off over several years
# of learners:	3	6	14	9	4	16	4

Country of birth	
Canada	31
Jamaica	7
St. Lucia	1
Trinidad	1
Tibet	1
Eritrea	3
Guyana	1
El Salvador	2
Ethiopia	1
Uganda	1
Columbia	1
USA	2
Britain	1
China	1
Vietnam	1
NA	1
Total	56

Educational Background	
No formal schooling	2
Some elementary	2
3 years	2
4 years	3
5 years	4
7 years	3
8 years	8
Some high school	5
9 years	6
10 years	5
11 years	3
12 years; completed high school	8
college	3
Some post-secondary education	1
NA	2

B. Focus group approach

All learners who participated in this project were volunteers chosen from each of the five community-based organizations supporting the project. We used a semi-structured questioning approach. The questions and prompts were based on documents developed and piloted by LET and PPR staff three years ago. These documents were reviewed and modified by the group for use in this project. As stated early in this report, a number of the prompts were taken from the document “Naming the Magic”. They were designed to guide learners towards thinking about and disclosing their perception of their progress as a result of participation in the literacy program. Learners often strayed from a topic or talked about interesting issues which we felt were significant, for example their reflections on the environment. Learners were given an opportunity to talk and think about their personal progress before the focus group session.

Two practitioner-researchers facilitated each focus group, one to ask questions, to listen carefully, to respond and offer prompts, while the other took detailed notes. The focus group sessions were limited to about two and a half hours, typically with three to four learners per focus group. Coffee and snacks were made available for the participants as well as a small honorarium for each learner who participated in a focus group. In some cases, where needed, transportation costs were covered. Most focus groups were conducted during programs hours except for the Literacy for East Toronto and the Regent Park Learning Centre focus groups.

Except in the case of the two Regent Park Learning Centre focus groups, we chose to interview learners from our programs as we felt they would be more comfortable speaking with practitioners they knew. Follow-up comments from learners at LET supported this notion.

Venus: it made you feel a little stronger that you can say what you feel. I tighten up with a stranger, here you're like family.

Betty: I'm really not a talker. I sit back and listen. If it was a stranger, I just answer yes or no, wait for the next question. He wouldn't get a peep out of me. Because it was you and Anne-Marie, I'm not shy; I'm not scared.

Princess: If it was a stranger talking to us, I would probably kind of be scared to talk because I not know them all that good or well. I would have talked, but sweaty palms. And I'd rather talk to someone I know. Like here it is like a family.

The two Regent Park Learning Centre focus groups were facilitated by one staff member from the centre and one staff member from LET. The role of the LET staff was confined to answering specific questions about the purpose of the project and taking detailed notes.

Focus group sessions were recorded, and typed “selected transcriptions” were prepared from the taped sessions. We chose not to transcribe every word, leaving out irrelevant portions of the session. We developed and used a standardized report format (Appendix A) to help facilitate data comparison between different focus group sessions. Program and researchers’ profiles were prepared and included in each focus group report.

Focus Groups as an effective means to speak with learners

Overall the list of questions and prompts worked very well. As facilitators became more comfortable, they felt more confident in using the questions and prompts document as a backdrop against which the natural flow of the conversation was checked to assure that most areas of interest were covered. With each additional focus group completed, facilitators became increasingly aware of the non-linear nature of the conversations. The decision made to select learners who were comfortable with each other seemed important in generating synergy and in providing information that would help answer our questions.

The focus groups were very effective as:

- learners felt more relaxed when with their peers
- they encouraged each other
- they added to each others’ perspectives on progress. For example, Fee commented on how when another learner first entered the program, that learner would ask Fee for help in the math group. After several months, Fee felt the learner had progressed to the point where Fee was now asking her for help in math
- often the responses of one learner would spur another learner to add further to his or her answer

The size of the focus groups (three to four learners) seemed to be ideal in getting in-depth responses. It ensured, to some extent, that even those who were less talkative had a chance to respond. In a larger group, one can be quiet or “invisible” more readily.

C. Data analysis

This section describes how we organized and worked with our data to arrive at the findings reported here. We produced verbatim transcripts from the audio recordings, which were of immense value. The report writer was able to re-examine the transcripts and thoroughly understand the learners’ responses and the themes and insights reported by the practitioner research pairs in the individual focus group summaries. The ability to use and to quote learners’ exact words strengthens the report, and makes our interpretations, findings and conclusions more visible and more credible. It also allowed us to use the words of our learners, who in many cases were very eloquent.

This section describes the steps we took to interpret the data. Having verbatim transcripts allowed us to carefully and systematically read and re-read the data, looking for themes and patterns. In addition, review and reflection activity happened in multiple ways and at multiple points in the project by:

- pairs of facilitators after each focus group session
- the entire research group during 2 meetings and 2 conference calls
- individual authors as they wrote articles for the magazine
- means of written feedback on materials posted on a web-site Listserv
- the author of this report in the course of drafting the report and reviewing feedback on the draft from the practitioners, the advisory committee and the research mentor

The facilitator pairs’ interpretations and reflections were based on a detailed review of each focus group transcript using a reporting protocol developed expressly for this project (Appendix A). Themes, indicators of progress and learners’ words relevant to the project focus were identified and pulled from the transcripts. Listserv was used to provide shared access to transcripts, focus group summaries and magazine articles. Not all members had the time to provide feedback on all the articles.

The research group met face-to-face twice to discuss the findings and compare themes and indicators of progress. Part way through the focus group activities, we met for a group review and reflection on the findings. Once all focus group activities were completed, we met again for a full day group review and reflection exercise. Conference calls were used to discuss and reflect on the articles being written for the magazine, providing another opportunity to discuss and reflect on findings.

The report writer further analysed the data, taking into account focus group themes and indicators of progress identified by the practitioner researchers. Some of the categories from the literature review completed for this project were used to help frame some of our findings.

Charts were used as a tool for sorting and categorizing data in order to facilitate comparisons and to determine if additional indicators of progress could be uncovered. The charts also made it possible to see common discourse patterns, for example the frequent use of words like “pressured” or “rushed” when referring to pace of learning or “relaxed”, “family”, “safe” when referring to the learning environment. Summary information and learners’ words were also organized vertically in the charts and organized by themes such as everyday practices, leisure practices or community practices. A number of these charts were posted on the Listserv for the group to review and gave us the opportunity for further reflection. It is not clear how many of the group actually had the time to review the charts.

A draft of the final report was sent to the group for review and feedback before being sent to the advisory committee and the outside evaluator. Some of the project researchers had the time to provide feedback on the draft. It is intended that the magazine will be distributed to the field to serve as a discussion document. OISE, FOL will host the launch of the magazine.

D. Ethical issues

The ethical challenges we faced were complex, and were identified and raised at the project start as well as later during project reflections. We started from the viewpoint that the research should do no harm to the learners who participated, that their time is valued and that what they tell us, (as one member of our group expressed) is “a gift”. We felt it is important to recognize the time the learners spent with us.

There were two important issues which required on-going discussions: the use of learners’ names and the issue of “power and privilege” and its impact on how we gather and interpret information. We were able to resolve the issue of informed consent but are still struggling to understand and address the issue of “power and privilege”.

Information and consent

We tried to ensure that all learners who participated in the focus group were informed about the process and purpose of the research. The information and consent form (Appendix A) was adapted from a document developed by LET and PPR staff three years ago (which had been used in a pilot focus group at PPR.) The form included illustrations and clear language in an effort to enhance understanding and minimize potential language barriers. It was our intention that we would give the participants the opportunity to read the consent document before it was discussed in the focus group. It was our contention that learners would feel more engaged in the process if they could read the document themselves.

The form also included statements with regard to permission to use data, confidentiality and the use of people’s names or pseudonyms. Confidentiality and anonymity were issues we discussed in terms of both the final report, which would be presented to the funders, and in terms of articles discussed early in the research. This issue arose a second time when we decided to produce a magazine on our project, which would include learners’ writings. Learners who submitted writing for the magazine were extremely enthusiastic about not only having their work included in the magazine but in having their names attached to their work.

The decision to include learners' names as an option was based on a number of discussions. Staff from PPR had experience with this issue as a result of practitioner research work done at PPR by Jenny Horsman. (Horsman, 2000) PPR believes in the importance of honouring people's wisdom by including their names if they choose, rather than assuming that the most respectful approach is always hiding people's identity, as is more usual in academic research. Others from our research team weren't as comfortable with the idea of using learners' real names. Some were concerned about the vulnerability of learners that put their trust in us as staff and researchers. We were all aware of the power relationship that is present when we ask learners to take part in focus groups or in sharing personal information with us.

In the end, we decided to leave this decision to each learner, bearing in mind it was very important to be careful how we use the information that was shared with us. We acknowledged the need to always reflect on how the individual might feel when they read the report or the magazine. We included learners in every step of the process, right up to the final product by asking them to review their words in:

- the focus group summaries
- the draft article of the magazine
- the final report to funders

E. Power and privilege

This project generated key insights into the dynamics of power and privilege. We believe the project team's experience with and reflections on these questions provide a major learning opportunity for the adult literacy research community and will help serve as a road map for novice practitioner researchers. Consequently we have given considerable attention to this issue in our report.

Issues of power disparities inherent in research are complex, making both discussions and finding solutions difficult. We struggled with two related issues:

- the gap between the information we intended to collect about the cultural/racial background of learners in the focus groups, and the data we did collect
- our own position and identity and how these factors impact the research process

In our initial research team meeting, we acknowledged that the power relationship between researchers and participants was biased in favour of the researcher. We, for example, control the direction of the interview. Participants' words are shaped by the questions posed to them. We discussed how learners might feel the need to tell us what they think we want to hear and how we might address this notion. Ensuring that learners' words were authentic, unaltered and used without exploitation was also key throughout the process.

Power relationships arose again at the analysis stage concerning the impact of cultural background. In our initial planning meeting, we felt it was important to identify who was part of this research. We reviewed what information was needed for the learner profiles, and decided to collect the following basic demographic data: age, gender, literacy level at entrance, length of time in the program, and cultural/racial background. We also decided to include the

same demographic information about ourselves in the facilitator profiles in the focus group summaries.

A protocol for data collection and focus group summaries was created which included our intention to collect and report on the learners' cultural/racial backgrounds. However, in spite of this intention, a clear data collection method for this issue was not developed, creating a data collection and reporting gap that was not noticed at the time. Consequently, the cultural/racial background information that was collected was place of birth only. Some researcher pairs collected this information by asking learners where they were born, while others obtained the information from learners' files. In the end, the data we collected did not allow us to consider the impact culture or race might have on learners' perspectives of progress.

One of our members, who felt increasingly uncomfortable with part of the analysis, challenged us to consider the role our positionality (who we are, the experiences we have had, the environment we were raised in) played in the way we did research. She suggested that: *"Identifying that the majority of literacy workers come from a white, middle class background is important and integral to understanding where we come from, how we 'see' the research data and what we 'hear' in learners' words."* These issues were raised towards the end of the project and were a source of much debate, sometimes passionate and heated.

By contrast, two-thirds (29 of 56) of the learners we interviewed were members of visible minorities. Although there may very well be a link between our learners' cultural and racial backgrounds and their perspectives on progress, the data we collected did not allow us to draw links in this regard. It is especially notable that our research process did not provide this particular insight. We consider this "gap" to be a major finding. We found the intersection of and the interactions between:

- power and privilege
- the research process
- our culturally and racially diverse learner research sample
- our large team comprised of novice practitioner researchers, and
- the subject matter

to be complex and difficult to address. We feel by documenting our process other research groups in the future will benefit from our learnings.

In our discussions, numerous thought provoking questions were posed about the impact power and privilege had on our research process. Samples of these questions include:

- Did we consciously or unconsciously make the decision to leave out cultural background of learners in the analysis stage? Perhaps the issue of cultural/racial backgrounds might have been addressed differently or developed in greater depth if our backgrounds, as researchers, were more diverse.
- Why did we feel that identifying learners' cultural backgrounds was important?

- When weighing the learners' words, if we had been more alert to cultural sensitivity, might we have recognized some things learners reported as significant because they are from a certain cultural background?
- If we had explored in depth our reasons for including cultural background, would this have influenced our learner selection process, our sample size and the questions we asked?
- What would the research process have looked like had we brought this issue of power and privilege to the forefront from the beginning?
- If we had spent more time face-to-face analyzing the data collectively, would our positionality and its impacts have been made visible earlier in the process?

As stated by one of our project members, thinking about our positionality from a power and privilege perspective and challenging one another and our positionality-related assumptions throughout the project is important, but it can be difficult. We realized we would have benefited from more dialogue, reflection time and expertise from an outside facilitator experienced with these issues. In particular, we now see the importance of having early discussions in order to:

- clarify our reasons for wanting to collect cultural/racial information
- develop a clear understanding of and the distinction between the terms "cultural background" and "racial background"
- develop focus group questions that would generate the data we sought
- examine our positionality as researchers

These discussions, coupled with relevant expertise, would have helped us design data collection and analysis protocols that would have shed more light on the possible impact power and privilege had on our research process and on the subject matter we explored with our learners.

We now appreciate that addressing racial and cultural dimensions is challenging and requires hard work. Positionality is evident everywhere at both the individual level and at the team or group level. Research plans, focus group questions, sample sizes and methods, data analysis methods, research language, assumptions voiced and not voiced and much more all represent opportunities for bias. It may, in some instances, require someone with experience in both research and anti-oppressive thinking and behaviour to identify bias. If it takes effort and expertise to identify bias, it may take even more to prevent potential biases, to challenge known biases and to remove them.

As we wrap-up our project, we continue to consider how our assumptions about power and privilege played out in our research. This challenging issue has raised questions for future research.

- What does it mean to do research from an anti-oppressive framework?
- The research group was made up of 8 researchers, with a total of 10 facilitators, and was predominantly white, with only one researcher who identified as a woman of colour. Would acknowledging this and the other places we come from, whether that is speaking about race, culture, sexual orientation, religion, ability, education or class have helped us work through the issue of positionality and its impact on our research?
- By naming our power as mostly white, middle class literacy workers, would that have encouraged us to pay attention to the places where we, as researchers and group members, may be reinforcing oppressive structures and practices instead of challenging the status quo?
- How would we challenge the traditional researcher/subject power imbalance – particularly when most of our “subjects” are from marginalized groups?
- Would a discussion of power dynamics early on in the project have served as a catalyst for more critical research; and created a more open environment for all?

We came to appreciate our tensions on this issue as a strength of the group. One of our researchers, Mary summed it up well.

It seems that the more we can move in and out of frustration, anger, and openness - without censoring each other, or losing sight of the bigger picture, the healthier we are as a group. And the more honest and open we can be about the process, and our struggles (in our verbal report-backs and in the magazine), the more we will be able to pass on our learnings to the field.

Questions of positionality in research now seem to us very important, in part given our group’s research experience, and in larger measure because what our group experienced is likely a significant issue to many researchers in the adult literacy field. Within an anti-oppressive framework, we could in the future endeavour to examine our positionality through six main lenses: racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, and class oppression. As Mary describes:

And as the field becomes more and more culturally diverse (as it inevitably will, at least in Toronto - in my opinion), we will all need to become better listeners, to shift our lenses, to really try to imagine what the world feels like from different perspectives, and to start to make visible some of the power dynamics that are currently "invisible". I imagine it sort of like a complex web of infrared light patterns that are invisible to people who don't have to constantly navigate their way through them.

But if you do, it's like you're wearing the goggles and the view is a bright spider web of entangled light beams, and it must be so frustrating to hear people say that they don't see anything, or that the web has nothing to do with the research - when they're exhausted from twisting and bending their way through.

F. Recommendation

Increase the capability of literacy practitioner researchers to identify and address questions of power and privilege in future practitioner research projects.

- Provide educational opportunities to practitioner researchers to help them better understand the dynamics of power and privilege, and how these dynamics can impact and bias research.
- Develop a set of guidelines, clear definitions/language and basic tools for use by practitioner researchers that would help them plan for and address questions of power and privilege in the project planning and implementation stages.

VII Reflecting on practitioner research

This project succeeded in bringing learners voices to the foreground and in providing valuable insights on what their perspectives on progress mean to the literacy community. It also provided novice practitioner researchers an excellent opportunity to experience the research process first hand.

This section describes the project structure, the participating organizations, the training we received and the mechanics of how we worked together. A wide-ranging and detailed reflection on how we worked together is also provided, covering issues ranging from meeting logistics and group dynamics to the “messiness” of the research process. Our reflections, the lessons we learned, and the recommendations we provide will serve as valuable planning and implementation lessons for future practitioner researchers.

A. Who we were

The project practitioner researchers included eight practitioners from five literacy organizations, one of which was the principal on the research grant. A project member from this organization had responsibility for managing project finances and was the project lead. Supporting the research team was a five member advisory committee and an outside evaluator. A mentor provided support to the report writer and magazine editor.

Five literacy programs participated in the research, providing both the eight members of the research team as well as the 56 learners interviewed in the focus groups.

The majority of adult literacy learners in our programs are on social assistance or are underemployed. The learner population also includes seniors, psychiatric survivors and people with physical, developmental and learning disabilities. Although each participating organization is community-based and offers both small group learning sessions and one-on-one tutoring sessions, the overall range of services provided, the regions served and to some extent the learner profiles served by these five programs vary. (See appendix B for program descriptions)

The three Toronto programs are located in culturally diverse, low income communities and primarily serve their immediate neighbourhoods. Action Read serves the City of Guelph, while Wellington County Learning Centre serves a broad rural area (Wellington County).

Literacy for East Toronto (LET), located in a community centre in a downtown east Toronto neighbourhood, provides a wide variety of literacy activities to adults learners in literacy Levels 1-3, including pre-GED readiness group sessions. LET is one program staffed and administered by the Toronto Catholic District School Board.

Parkdale Project Read (PPR) is located in a downtown west Toronto community with a large immigrant population. It offers a wide variety of literacy activities to adults, and incorporates into its programming an understanding of the effects of trauma and violence on learning. PPR has a partnership and a satellite literacy group with a local organization that supports psychiatric consumers/survivors.

Regent Park Learning Centre (RPLC) is located in Regent Park, a large subsidized housing development in Toronto's downtown east neighbourhood. RPLC is a multi-faceted community agency providing literacy programming exclusively to women.

Action Read (AR), located in downtown Guelph, provides adult literacy and family literacy services to the city. It offers computer / technology-assisted learning for those with learning disabilities.

Wellington County Learning Centre (WCLC) provides the rural residents of the county adult literacy services by means of one to one tutoring, meeting learners at their homes and in mutually agreed upon locations. WCLC also offers youth programming and employment readiness support.

B. Training

We were fortunate to be able to attend a two day series workshop, offered by the Festival of Literacies Office (FOL) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UT), aimed at developing practitioners research skills. The workshop was designed to support literacy workers interested in research who may or may not be involved in a research project. The workshop provided an integrated presentation addressing basic issues. It presented a coherent map of research methodologies and their interrelationships.

Day 1: Research, Knowledge, Practice. Starting Questions

The Day 1 morning session explored how knowledge is created and acquired in research and in practice. It provided participants with a variety of ways they could look at their day-to-day practice to gather information and connect that information to research methods. We explored ways of choosing, combining and using these methods. The Day 1 afternoon session, "Starting Questions", explored ethical questions in research involving adult literacy learners.

Day 2: Methods for Gathering Information. Making Sense of the Data

The Day 2 morning and afternoon sessions considered ways of gathering and analysing research information. To build on Day 1, participants were asked to reflect upon their own experiences and to bring an example of an issue or question to the workshop to consider as a research topic. Together, all participants were guided through the process of formulating a research question.

We felt the workshops provided an invaluable forum to discuss issues related to our research project with experienced researchers familiar with the literacy field. The facilitators served as mentors to our group. We were able to raise issues related to methodology and ethics. We felt we would have benefited even more if they had been available before we had started our focus groups. It also highlighted the benefits of having an experienced practitioner researcher as a mentor at all stages of the project.

C. How we worked together

Meetings and communications

The original intention regarding the project approach included the use of frequent face-to-face meetings. As the project progressed, the geographic spread within the group and the travel time and resources required did not really allow this to happen. This was a source of some lessons learned. As a result, we only met as a group face-to-face three times during the course of the project: at an introductory meeting, and at two later meetings (one half-day and one full day). These meetings worked very well in supporting group communication, decision-making and overall project progress. Our one-day session was fruitful with respect to identifying indicators of progress and themes from our data. To help compensate for the reduced face-to-face meeting time, we turned to other tools: telephone conference calls, emails and Listserv, a web-based communication tool. With hindsight we agreed that while the conference calls were effective, email and the Listserv were neither effective nor timely ways to support the processes by which we communicated, reflected on and resolved issues.

Although our group meetings were very effective, competing factors made it difficult for us to meet together as much as planned. We now realize that more face-to-face group meeting time was required. More time was needed, given our group size (eight), our experience level (we were novice practitioner researchers meeting for the first time) and our project approach (we used a collaborative style). As well, the project members came into the project with different and unspoken assumptions and expectations, resulting in tensions and frustrations later in the project. Had more face-to-face group meetings been possible, these differing assumptions and expectations would likely have been ironed out earlier and would have had less impact on the project dynamics.

Several factors reduced the face-to-face meeting time our group had available. First, early in the project timeline, we decided to attend two days of practitioner research training offered by FOL at OISE/UT, thus reducing the remaining resources for our overall group meetings. Second, scheduling our large group of eight busy practitioner researchers to meet was difficult, especially given the travel time required and the limited project member availability. Most project members were working full time in their programs and therefore had difficulties obtaining release time. Personal availability constraints such as a second job or daycare also made the scheduling of face-to-face meetings a challenge.

Our plan was to use Listserv as a communications tool to compensate for our reduced meeting time and to bridge our geographical divide. We had hoped it would be a support vehicle for sharing ideas, insights into the data and concerns. However, its effectiveness was less than originally expected or needed. We all had different levels of comfort with the technology, and used it differently. It was complex to use and in some respects underutilized. It did not compensate at all for the reduced face-to-face meeting time. It did, however, serve the purpose of a project archive very well.

The benefits of “live-time” dialogue soon became clear. Those of us working in teams tended to rely on each other for support, which left the one person who worked alone feeling at times isolated. Conference calls allowed us to accomplish a lot in a short period of time, and did energize us in a way that online discussion never could.

The lack of adequate face-to-face meeting time generated difficulties with regard to project management, group dynamics, team building and communications during the course of the project. It is clear to us that ensuring an appropriate level of group interaction is vital for research practitioner teams, and that this represents an important issue for consideration by future research teams.

A question of time

Time turned out to be our biggest challenge. Research takes time and collaborative research takes longer. This is another example of the valuable learning experience we gained as practitioner researchers.

“I really underestimated how much that collaborative work multiplies when we have not two but eight researchers involved. One could think that with more researchers brings less work because we each take on our own pieces, we use our strengths to make the project manageable for others, but that is easier said than done.” (Nadine)

“I don’t feel I can properly focus on this research project. I need time and space to step back, to chew on things, to see the big picture. Time and space rarely come with this job, which is OK. It’s just not so conducive to being able to focus on research.” (Sarah)

Collaborative research requires building relationships and negotiating meaning - of language, concepts, and interpretations. There are many levels and different paces of learning going on simultaneously. It requires sufficient time and resources to focus on building skills, reading the literature, conducting the research, analyzing the data, and reflecting on the findings. Extra time for planning, coordination, and group process work, whether face-to-face or by conference call becomes a significant issue. Literacy workers, already very busy in community-based programs, need built-in support in the form of sabbaticals, lieu time, or extended project time lines in order to be able to contribute in a timely and high quality manner to research projects and to building a research culture in the field.

Project management: styles, roles and responsibilities

The scope associated with project management can be very broad and typically encompasses initiating, planning, executing, controlling and closing off project activities, and interactions with a number of people. Add to this an incredible range of project management styles, tools and techniques available to a project manager. These often need to be tailored to the specifics of the project at hand, such as the nature and scope of the project, the project goals and expectations, the project budget, the project time constraints, the team members and available tools and resources.

“I found myself wanting clear written and agreed-upon roles and responsibilities for members of the project. I wanted agendas and time lines. I wanted a list of things that needed to be done, names beside who would do them with deadlines and budget amounts attached. I sometimes felt frustrated because these lists, deadlines and budget amounts didn’t firmly materialize. We didn’t really talk about roles of project members, and expectations of what the roles entailed. I think we should have.” (Anne-Marie)

With hindsight, it is not surprising we each came to the project with different expectations as to how the project would be managed. We didn't anticipate the time and importance of naming our differences (as programs or individually) or anticipating how they might affect our working together. Some of those differences are related to:

- program cultures and approaches
- previous work histories and project experiences
- individual styles of working
- perceptions of what uncertainties mean - are we floundering?
- our insecurities as learners in the research process
- our comfort with the technology

Another factor that we would be more aware of next time in considering a project management style is the nature of the research. Good research can take many different and unexpected turns, which may necessitate shifting roles and responsibilities. How we frame the stages of the research journey can change how we view the process – does our uncertainty at some moments mean we are floundering or we are “cooking”? i.e., making new discoveries?

...maybe the answers of who does what and when and how can't be answered so early in our project. That maybe that is part of the nature of a qualitative research project. Those questions are answered later, and dependent on the stories that emerge from analyzing the data. And that part of doing research is being patient and letting the data come forth slowly instead of forcing it with the to-do list I needed... (Anne-Marie)

Although we all agree that we needed to clarify roles and responsibilities at the onset, it now seems important for us to stay somewhat flexible about roles as the process evolves. Part way through the project, two members emerged as potential report-writers who would work with a research mentor in compiling and writing up the research findings. As well after a later meeting, we changed our idea of a final report to include a magazine for the field, and saw the value in including all our voices.

Our limited ability to meet as a group directly contributed to the lack of a shared understanding among the researchers around project management style, roles and responsibilities. Had more face-to-face group meetings been possible, we feel our differing assumptions and expectations would have been ironed out early on, and we would have negotiated the optimum project management style.

Based on our experiences, we see that addressing the following points are keys to successful project management of a research project:

- decide on a model of project management style and define what that means
- clarify the roles of the project team members at the onset
- continue to be flexible about roles as the process evolves

The style of project management needs to be reflected in the budget, i.e. in a collective project management style everyone needs to be paid the same for the time they put into the project.

Teambuilding

“Should we have taken the time to clarify our personal perspectives on teaching, learning, etc. beforehand? There’s the notion of positionality that says who we are, the experiences we’ve had, the environment we’ve grown in all play a role in the way one does research. How we’ve lived impacts the way we collect and interpret information... (Susan)

We all came from programs with different staffing and funding structures. Some of us were paid as researchers; others took part in the project as part of our programming work. We represented programs alone or in groups of two or three. These differences affected our level of participation, our feelings of isolation, and perhaps our individual accountability to the project.

Again, with hindsight, we see that it is important for researchers working together on a project to set aside time to learn about individual differences, do some group work to honour those differences, and to explore how those differences might impact the research. Money should be budgeted for team-building activities. Were this done, we might have hired an outside facilitator, held a weekend or a daylong retreat to launch the project, and taken the time to get to know each other as individuals. We recommend taking the time to discuss:

- identify and understand cultural and racial differences as they relate to issues of power and privilege within the research team
- our different lengths of time in literacy
- our different experiences with research and research language
- our different exposures and access to academia and academic language and theory

I was real nervous to be involved in a “research project”, not having been involved in one before. It seemed larger than what I thought I could take on, especially as a literacy practitioner. (Sarah)

I allowed myself to be intimidated by the spoken word and written language of my fellow literacy practitioners and really questioned what I could bring to the table. (Pat)

To varying degrees, we all felt privately intimidated by the research process. As practitioners – not academics, we did not feel like *real* researchers. We wondered if anyone was going to take our work seriously. Would we be able to make a real contribution to the field? A more open discussion of power dynamics early on in the project might have addressed our anxieties and insecurities and served as a catalyst for more critical research, and created a more open, supportive environment for all.

People support

We are a large group of novices; we can't anticipate all the pitfalls of doing research. A mentor would have inevitably helped us clear up some uncertainties and improve planning. (Susan)

Our advisory committee and the research mentor were brought in part way through the process. Ideally, they should be brought in at the beginning, and, if possible, be part of some of the initial teambuilding.

Research is messy

Looking back, we appreciated all the learning opportunities we had encompassing the subject matter we were exploring, the research process we used and our group dynamics. In particular, our tensions/uncertainties around some very complex issues often catalyzed intense but productive dialogue and learning opportunities.

We came to realize that although uncertainty and disorder contributed somewhat to our tensions and frustrations, discovery and thus some floundering is part of a creative research/learning process and can trigger new and creative experiences. We saw that being flexible and spontaneous and open to doing something different can be of value. After spending the day in a research workshop for example, we had planned to meet for a few hours to check in and plan our next steps. Instead of finding a meeting room, we headed for a patio. It was one of our best meetings.

I at first balked at the idea of meeting in a bar. I felt that we went to such trouble to get everyone together and clear a couple of hours, and we weren't going to utilize the time well in a bar. However the meeting was wonderful.... It dawned on me that had our meeting happened in a meeting room, with adherence to agenda items, the ideas for the focus and presentation of our data would probably have been very different. We needed the "bar meeting. (Anne-Marie)

The meeting in the bar helped me to remember and appreciate the benefits of disorder...I was feeling at sea, and was sure a structured agenda would be helpful. Five to ten minutes into the meeting, it got thrown out and we had a very unstructured and creative brainstorming session. We came up with a whole host of ideas and threw half of them out... The wind was blowing; there was construction noise, so some couldn't always hear what was being said and I recall thinking I love this! This is what I was looking for but didn't know it, a space where we could express all kinds of ideas and concerns. I felt energy and anticipation arise out of disorder...what I learned from that meeting is we need to find the optimal juxtaposition between order and disorder. (Susan)

We feel that practitioner researchers should talk about, document and value the research process including the uncertainties and the tensions they experience. These should be viewed as an integral part of the research. If we had read about some of the challenges of working in a research collaborative, we may have been more realistic about our expectations, and felt less frustration throughout the project.

D. Key lessons learned

At each stage of the research, we gained insights that were challenging and interesting. Our lessons learned about the complex interplay between the research process and group dynamics can serve as a valuable map for the next group of practitioner researchers.

- Collaborative research involves significant time for planning, coordination, and group process work. This time is fundamental to success of the project.
- Novice practitioner researchers (especially large teams) working together for the first time require additional project time and paid mentoring support.
- Literacy workers, already very busy in community-based programs, often need built-in project support in the form of sabbaticals, lieu time, or extended project time lines in order to be able to contribute in a timely and high quality manner.
- Group meetings and to a lesser extent, conference calls are highly effective project activities.
- Project proposals and plans need to include adequate group meeting time. Potential budgetary or logistical constraints limiting face-to-face meetings should be identified and addressed at the planning stage.
- Teams unable to achieve adequate face-to-face meeting time could compensate by using more formally defined rules or mechanisms for communication, decision-making, conflict resolution and project management activities.
- Create a variety of options for communication – do not rely solely on a Listserv. A system for ongoing check-ins needs to be established.
- Decide on a model of project management and define what that means.
- Represent programs with at least two people whenever possible – to avoid individuals feeling isolated, and to provide a subgroup to process the experience outside of the collaborative.

Although our team of novice researchers faced some important project management challenges, we believe we made adjustments, learned valuable lessons and achieved project success. Our learnings about group dynamics and process can serve as a valuable map for the next group of practitioner researchers.

E. Value of doing research

We found this project to be an amazing and empowering experience. It provided a rare opportunity for collaborative research, reflection and analysis. Many of us have already begun to make changes to our practices as a result of our research experience. The quotes below underscore the extent to which we value research.

It improves our literacy practice

I felt rejuvenated in my practice. I learned that literacy was making a difference in learners' lives. Even learners who didn't seem to be very motivated in their learning reported their learning was making a difference in their lives. I learned that besides the literacy learning, learners were benefiting from being involved in a group, in a program, in making friends and connections. This helped me feel better about teaching. It made me want to make my teaching better and more responsive to the needs of the learners. I thought that this process – that of finding out from learners what they think they are learning and how this is changing their lives – is really beneficial for an instructor's morale. Teaching is a sometimes tiring project of endless preparing and searching for appropriate contextualized materials, creating them when none are found, often wondering if learning is really happening. This process gave me renewed enthusiasm for teaching. (Anne-Marie)

It is empowering to believe that we can effect change in the field

I am excited about the writing, about getting the final product out to the field. This is where I really feel empowered. Being able to share and bring about some change, even a little bit, a slight shift in thinking or approach can make a world of difference in the work that we do. We all know that, we all have been there. (Nadine)

It helps us appreciate the value of reflection time

“There is very little time or space for reflection here at the centre. Little time for evaluation and no time for stepping back and seeing the big picture. To have that space and time to listen to learners tell their stories was truly profound...I am thankful for the opportunity to have had a little time and space, to reflect on process, to reflect on who I work with day to day, what I do. I wish I knew how to incorporate some more of that kind of time and space into my everyday work with learners”. (Sarah)

It connects research to practice

“The field needs research done from our unique perspective as practitioners. Our intimate knowledge of learners' lives over time helps us contextualize research data and interpret it with more depth and insight.” (Mary)

It allows us to imagine new possibilities for ourselves

“All these OISE workshops have allowed me to fantasize about when I, too, will put out my very own research paper. When I can take time and space to step back, ask questions, listen, analyze. I imagine going on the road...giving workshops about my fantastic findings to literacy workers around the province. (Sarah).”

F. Recommendations

- 1. Develop a practical guide for novice practitioner researchers in order to help achieve a shared understanding of project management principles and to facilitate a process by which project members negotiate, select and support a style that best suits their project.**

The guide would address project management needs at all stages of the research process from proposal writing through to project planning, implementation and report writing. This guide could suggest specific activities that support the project management process such as:

- exploring the different assumptions and expectations individuals bring to a project about project management
- learning about individual differences, (learning and working styles, cultural, philosophies etc.), doing group work to honour those differences and exploring how those differences might impact the research
- exploring the range of project management styles and negotiating a style that best fits the project, the members, available resources and timelines
- defining roles and responsibilities for project leaders/ coordinators, research members, advisory committees and mentors
- exploring a variety of communication options and establishing a system for ongoing check-ins. Teams unable to achieve adequate face-to-face meeting time could compensate by establishing more formally defined rules or mechanisms for communication, decision-making, conflict resolution and project management
- identifying and addressing potential budgetary or logistical constraints and their potential impact on the project
- team-building activities, especially when novice research practitioners are brought together for the first time

2. Build into projects the support needed to help practitioner researchers sustain their long-term research interest and their long-term capability to contribute to projects.

Recognize that building and sustaining long term, province-wide practitioner research capacity requires that the scheduling and workload barriers practitioner researcher face over the long haul not be insurmountable.

- Provide literacy workers built-in project support in the form of sabbaticals, lieu time, or extended project time lines in order to be able to contribute in a timely and high quality manner
- Communicate to those that fund projects involving research practitioners that small investments of this type can pay large dividends in building and sustaining research capacity

3. Project proposals, budgets and plans should reflect the need for practitioner researchers to explore and value their personal perspectives and differences.

- Personal perspectives as well as differences among researchers that are recognized, valued and explored early in the project result in better research. Activities that support these aims need to be identified and included in budgets and plans.

VIII Conclusion

This research brought the learners' perspectives on progress to centre stage. The project findings and the insights we gained through their perspectives reflect the considerable thought and care the learners put into these issues.

Although reading, writing and numeracy skills are important to the learner, the learners' words underlined that progress does not stop there. They may value the literacy skills of reading, writing and numeracy, but they also cherish the doors that all literacy program outcomes open up for them. We learned that learners tend to perceive their own progress in a more holistic light, one that typically includes specific literacy skills and non-academic outcomes relevant to their own lives.

We also gained valuable insights into the research process, and believe our project approach provides insights needed by practitioner researchers and indeed all those interested in increasing the capacity of practitioner research in the literacy field.

IX Project Recommendations

A. General recommendations

This project recommends that:

1. Ontario adult literacy programs value, document and incorporate learners' perspectives on progress in assessments.

- Learners' perspectives on progress should be documented in a way that gives them parity with results documented from any other on-going assessment tool.
- Recognize and value non-academic indicators of progress in order to ensure a more complete picture of learners' progress.
- Document relationships between different kinds of progress so that these relationships become more visible to the learner and to the practitioner.
- When documenting learners' perspectives on progress, recognize that their learning outcomes are not simply acquired skills (i.e., "I was able to read better"), but rather contextualized applications embedded in social practices (i.e., "*I was able to read the pamphlet in the doctors' office*") that need to be documented as such.
- Create more opportunities for learners to discuss reflectively how they are doing on an ongoing basis. Literacy learning outcomes can be rich and interconnected. For learners, the process of reflecting on and discussing their learning outcomes can:
 - i. Help them identify, understand and appreciate the full set of outcomes they have achieved as a result of their literacy program participation.
 - ii. Help learners set future goals. Greater self-awareness and insight into what they have achieved can help them set future goals that build on their achievements.

2. Ontario adult literacy programs examine how they currently document real-life practices and non-academic indicators of progress and investigate other strategies, techniques or models that already exist which facilitate the description, documentation and validation of learners' perspectives on progress.

- Programs may already have informal or formal processes (conversations or forms) that ask for learners' perspectives on progress. Document and incorporate these processes as evidence of progress in formal on-going assessment practices.
- Trial and reflect on the proposed documentation tool offered in this project.

- Consider other tools and approaches for documenting learning perspectives on progress. There are numerous models/tools which can help, for examples those found Naming the Magic: Non-Academic Outcomes in Basic Literacy (2001), Learning Journey metaphor approach (2002), Building Self-Awareness and Self-Direction model from Supporting Learning, Supporting Change (2003).

We recommend that the mechanism by which progress is documented:

- Recognize the need for simple and practical data collection and documentation tools that do not burden literacy practitioners.
- Consider the variation in needs among programs and learners.

3. MTCU recognize the many factors that learners face in setting timelines. We recommend the Ministry enter into a conversation with the adult literacy field to clarify the role timelines play in outcomes and program accountability.

Learners seemed to view setting timelines as not being very beneficial to their learning process sometimes creating undue stress and anxiety. They suggested that changing life circumstances often made it difficult to estimate when they would achieve a particular learning goal. In our group discussions of the findings we acknowledged that for many people setting goals and targets is challenging, and that additional obstacles such as poverty, poor health, and discrimination make the task even more difficult.

Our discussions also revealed that we do not receive consistent messages from field consultants regarding the use and flexibility of timelines. When we thought about what we would like the Ministry to consider:

- Before requiring learners to set timelines, allow more time to experience learning successes, help build a positive learner identity, help address their fear of failure and hence promote a willingness to discuss and encourage the notion of setting timelines.

4. Ontario adult literacy programs assess, maintain and improve their program's learning environment to help assure learners' ongoing needs are met.

- Programs should assess their overall program learning environment (including staff / tutor training) in order to understand how well learners' needs are met. Assessment methods should include capturing the learners' perspectives on how well the environment supports their learning.
- Tutor training should include information and discussion around the elements of a positive learning environment and the importance of relationship building.
- Over and over we heard learners speak about how the environment affected their learning, and their sense of progress. They spoke about feeling welcomed, how different it was from their past experience of school and of the need to feel safe both physically and emotionally before learning could occur. Programs should

consider adopting a holistic model developed by Horsman (2002) that addresses issues of violence, brings the whole self to learning and nurtures the spirit.

B. Building practitioner research capacity in Ontario

This project recommends that:

- 1. Develop a practical guide for novice practitioner researchers in order to help achieve a shared understanding of project management principles and to facilitate a process by which project members negotiate, select and support a style that best suits their project.**

The guide would address project management needs at all stages of the research process from proposal writing through to project planning, implementation and report writing. This guide could suggest specific activities that support the project management process such as:

- exploring different assumptions and expectations individuals bring to a project about project management
- learning about individual differences, (learning and working styles, cultural, philosophies etc.), doing group work to honour those differences and exploring how those differences might impact the research
- exploring the range of project management styles and negotiating a style that best fits the project, the members, available resources and timelines
- defining roles and responsibilities for project leaders/ coordinators, research members, advisory committees and mentors
- exploring a variety of communication options and establishing a system for ongoing check-ins. Teams unable to achieve adequate face-to-face meeting time could compensate by establishing more formally defined rules or mechanisms for communication, decision-making, conflict resolution and project management
- identifying and addressing potential budgetary or logistical constraints and their potential impact on the project
- team-building activities, especially when novice research practitioners are brought together for the first time

- 2. Build into projects the support needed to help practitioner researchers sustain their long term research interest and their long term capability to contribute to projects.**

Recognize that building and sustaining long term, province-wide practitioner research capacity requires that the scheduling and workload barriers they face over the long haul not be insurmountable.

- Provide literacy workers built-in project support in the form of sabbaticals, lieu time, or extended project time lines in order to be able to contribute in a timely and high quality manner
 - Communicate to those that fund projects involving research practitioners that small investments of this type can pay large dividends in building and sustaining research capacity
- 3. Increase the capability of literacy practitioner researchers to identify and address questions of power and privilege in future practitioner research projects.**
- Provide educational opportunities to practitioner researchers to help them better understand the dynamics of power and privilege, and how these dynamics can impact and bias research.
 - Develop a set of guidelines, clear definitions/language and basic tools for use by practitioner researchers that would help them plan for and address questions of power and privilege in the project planning and implementation stages.
- 4. Project proposals, budgets and plans should reflect the need for practitioner researchers to explore and value their personal perspectives and differences.**
- Personal perspectives as well as differences among researchers that are recognized, valued and explored early in the project result in better research. Activities that support these aims need to be identified and included in budgets and plans.

C. Recommendations for further research

This project recommends that:

- 1. Research be undertaken to further develop our understanding of the complex interactions between the literacy program learning environment, the learning process and progress made by the learner. Questions and areas of inquiry are numerous and include the following.**
- This project highlights the positive impacts made on the learning process and on learning outcomes by the program environment. What other impacts, either positive or negative in nature, exist?
 - What is the learners' perspective of the interactions between the literacy program learning environment, the learning process and non-academic progress made by the learner? Should their perspectives be taken into account when programs make changes in their learning environment? Should programs ask learners to assess their learning environment and provide suggestions for improvement?

- Learners repeatedly made positive references to the small group relationships they enjoyed and benefited from within their literacy programs. Why are these “learning-related relationships” so important to the learners? What are the mechanisms by which these small group “micro-environments” and their group dynamics contribute to learning. How do these group relationships compare in educational impact in comparison to the one-on-one tutor-to-learner relationships?
- What are the approaches by which programs can promote these beneficial interactions?
- What environmental models best promote a community of practice?

2. Investigate the learners’ perspectives on progress with learners from a broader cross-section of Ontario society. Identify the impact cultural diversity may have on how learners’ perceive progress.

- Project findings were based on the views of a relatively small group of learners (56 learners). Although 2/3 of the learners were members of visible minorities, the data we collected did not allow us to learn about what people’s cultural and racial identities mean for their experiences in groups and in how they may view progress differently.
- Other groups of learners should be included in future research. These could include Aboriginal, Francophone and ESOL learners.

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Appendices

A Protocol

Focus Group Session Protocol

Participant Selection & Preparation

A minimum of three learners at levels 1, 2 or 3 with independence as *one* of their goals should be targeted for participation in the focus group session. Approach potential participants privately. At this time, inform them about the project intent, the focus group methodology (in general terms), and how their participation could contribute to the project. For learners who show interest, explain the steps you will take to ensure participant confidentiality. The information page of the consent form could be discussed at this point. You could also read the consent form to them to help ensure they understand what is being asked of them.

Participants' responses tend to be richer and more detailed when they are well prepared. Participants should have an opportunity to talk and think about their personal progress before the focus group session. This can be a one-to-one dialogue in which the topic of learner progress is informally introduced and discussed. This session can be integrated with on-going progress check-ins that are already built into most programs. It can also be done with the help of a tutor who could go over the information page with the learner and begin a discussion about progress. With this approach, the learners, in effect, are both more confident and better prepared for the formal focus group session, and thereby may provide more complete and thoughtful responses.

Length and Size of focus group session

The focus group session should be limited to about two and a half hours. There should be a minimum of three and a maximum of five learner participants in each focus group.

There should be two focus group facilitators: one facilitator to ask questions, to listen carefully to responses, and to offer prompts, while the other takes detailed notes.

Honoraria and Hospitality

You may want to have coffee and snacks available for the participants. A hospitality amount of \$20 per focus group session is budgeted for this purpose.

An honorarium amount of \$15 is budgeted for each learner who participates in a focus group.

Consent and Confidentiality

A four-page consent form is provided. The first page summarizes the project, and the following three pages make up the consent form. Learners should complete and sign the last page.

Go over the consent form with the learner in private before the focus group session. Answer any questions the learner has. Stress to the learner that he can change his mind at any time, including after his participation. Explain that the interviewers will write up a summary report of the focus group session and review it with the participants.

Explain that learner names will not appear in the focus group report or final report without consent. If learners do not want their names in the tape transcription and session notes, ensure confidentiality by referring to each learner by a pseudonym.

Transcription

Each focus group session should be tape-recorded. As well, detailed notes should be taken during the session. If portions of the tape recording are inaudible or unclear, your notes will help you complete your transcription. A typed “selected transcription” should be prepared from the taped session. This means that the tapes should be transcribed, but every word need not be included and irrelevant portions of the session can be left out. In your transcription, indicate facilitators’ questions or comments with the letter “F”. Indicate learner participant’s comments with a first name or pseudonym. Indent learner’s comments so that they are visually differentiated from facilitator questions. After you complete the transcription, use it to write a focus group report.

Focus Group Report

The purpose of the focus group report is to present or display the focus group session data in a format that is easy to read. The final report writers will refer to the thirty individual focus group reports to analyze and synthesize the data and write a final project report. To help facilitate easy comparison of focus group session data, the individual reports should be similar in format.

The next page outlines a format for the focus group reports.

All material (tapes, written notes, typed transcripts and completed focus group reports) related to the focus group sessions should be kept together, boxed and sent to the project manager, Nadine Sookermany, at Parkdale Project Read. This material will remain the property of Parkdale Project Read.

Program Profile

In addition to your focus group report, prepare a program profile. In the profile, include a brief history of your program, and a brief description of the literacy services your program offers (one-to-one, small groups...), the people your program serves, and the philosophy or general approach of your program (if your program has a mission statement please include the mission statement).

Researchers’ Profiles

In addition to your program profile, please include a brief profile of each of the researchers’ similar to the information provided about the participants, including name, gender, age, educational background, cultural background, length of time in literacy, reason for working in literacy and what you wanted to learn from this research project.

Suggested Format of Focus Group Session Report:

1. **Identification** Provide identifying information about the focus group session. Identify session by program name and focus group number. For example, Action Read #1. Include date, location, start and end time of focus group session, and names and e-mail contacts of facilitators.
2. **Profiles** Provide a brief profile of each learner in the session. Refer to learners by first name or a pseudonym. Provide the following information: name, level, gender, age, educational background, cultural background, length of time in program, reason came to program, what learner wanted to learn (this information can be generated by questions 1 & 2). Provide a profile of the facilitators (include same information as for learners).
3. **Participants** Provide a brief description of the focus group participant's relation to each other, i.e. do they know each other?
4. **Reflection/ Analysis** Write a summary of the main topics discussed and highlight areas of agreement among focus group participants. Include your reflections on focus group content (perhaps responses you found particularly telling) and process.
5. **Data** In this section, participant responses are presented. Whereas the typed transcription records questions, comments and responses in the order in which they were said, responses in this section of the report should be displayed according to their relation to each other. For example, comments may be made by a learner in response to question 1, but relate to the theme of *Academic progress*. The comment should be recorded under *Academic progress*.

Display the comments of each learner in a separate column. Then divide the comments into related themes. The themes that emerge from your focus group session will depend on the comments of the participants. Different focus group sessions may have different themes emerge. List themes in the first column. If some comments do not fall into a particular theme, place them under "other". Distinguish learner quotes and facilitator comments by writing quotes in italics and facilitators' comments in parentheses.

	Joe	Bill	Sarah
Feelings:	-I'm excited to come to class now	<i>-I feel like I can do it -I feel happier about my life -I'm more motivated</i>	<i>- it's become more important to me -I enjoy it now</i>
Community:	<i>-I joined an exercise class -I help my son with his homework more -I remember more things</i>	<i>-Now I want to volunteer. I feel like I can work with a new group of people</i>	<i>-I applied for a job as a cashier because I know how to make change quickly now</i>
Other			<i>-I bought a calculator and I use it at home</i>
Academic	<i>-now I can long divide. I couldn't before -Now I want to get a GED</i>	<i>-I know how to calculate percent</i>	<i>-I passed a test on whole numbers</i>

The Focus Group Questions:

The point of the focus group questions is to guide the learner to think about and disclose her perception of her progress as a result of participation in the literacy program.

We want to learn how the learner sees her progress (the amount of progress, the evidence of progress) – and how she feels her progress has affected her life.

The questions and prompts on the following page are a guide for the focus group session. They are meant as a guide only. A participant may touch on many aspects of her learning experience during the focus group session, rather than answering a single question directly. Listen carefully. Ask for elaboration and examples to help the participant clarify thoughts.

You may want to approach some of the questions as brainstorming activities. Participant responses could be charted, providing some visual stimulus for participants.

If needed, use the bulleted prompts under each question. As much as possible, let the learner talk. Try to record all of what she says (by tape recording the session and taking detailed notes), even if it doesn't seem to answer the question that was asked.

Remember the point of the questions (in above box). Questions 1 and 2 are designed to provide us with a profile of the learner. Questions 3 and 4 are designed to get the learner thinking about his or her learning process. Questions 5 and 6 are designed to elicit the information we are looking for: How the learner perceives her progress, evidence of her progress, and the affect of her progress in her life.

Prompts

After most of the questions, prompts appear beside bullets. In question six, the prompts are lettered. The prompts are meant to lead the learner to think about different areas of his life and to consider whether his learning at the program has affected these areas. In your focus group session, you may not need to introduce all the prompts. You may want to give examples to clarify some prompts.

Be open to responses or reflections that do not fit any of the prompts.

Focus Group Questions for Facilitators

1. Why did you decide to come to this literacy program?
 - Because of children?
 - Because of a job?
 - Because of personal dream to improve your skills?
 - OW worker referral?
2. What did you want to learn when you first came?
 - How did you want reading and writing to change your life?
3. How long did you think it would take to learn what you wanted to learn?
 - Did you have a set time line in your mind
 - Didn't think about it or wasn't sure
 - Thought the teacher would tell you
4. How is the learning different from what you first thought it would be?
 - Slower/faster? If slower, how does it feel?
 - Are you enjoying the process, or is it frustrating?Why did you keep coming to the program?
5. Have you learned some of what you wanted to learn? How can you tell?
 - Can you give us an example of how you know you've moved forward?
6. Do you see a difference in your everyday life as a result of your learning?
(If the response to any of the below prompts is yes, encourage the learner to provide specific examples)
 - l) Are there any changes in the way or the amount that you speak out?
 - m) Are there any changes in the way or the amount that you listen?
 - n) Do you express yourself in different ways than before? (music, art, reading, conversation, gardening, hobbies, etc.).
 - o) Do you feel any different about your health?
 - Do you eat, drink, smoke, or exercise differently?
 - p) How comfortable do you feel in class? In the community? At home?
 - q) Do you feel you have less, more, or the same control in your life?
 - r) Have friends or family commented on a change in you? What did they say?
 - s) Are you more willing to do tasks that you may not have tried to do before you came here?
 - t) Has your involvement in the community changed since coming to the program? (in your child's school, literacy program, volunteering, other programs or classes)
 - u) Have you changed the way you make, keep and get to appointments?
 - v) Are there any changes in how you handle or own learning tools (like pens, calculator, paper...?)

Learner Consent: Project Information

We, _____ and _____ from _____ are working on a research project with two other literacy programs.

What is this research project about?

We want to find out how literacy learners in our programs think about progress. We want to find out:

- what learners think they have learned,
- how they know they have learned,
- how their learning has affected their everyday life

How will we do the research?

We will have focus group meetings. A focus group is a group of people who meet to talk about something. Each focus group will include three to five learners. We will ask questions and listen to the learners' answers.

If you agree, we will tape-record the focus group session. We will also take notes. We want to make sure that we record your thoughts accurately.

What will happen to the focus group notes?

We will use the notes to write a report of the focus group. You will be able to read and comment on the report. There will be about 30 focus groups in total. The reports from each focus group will go to a writer. The writer will find out if there are similarities in what learners say about progress. The writer will write a final report about the focus groups and make recommendations. We may also write an article for a literacy journal or newsletter. All information collected will belong to Parkdale Project Read, the administrator of this project.

Who will get the report?

The report will go to the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities (MTCU) and the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS). The NLS is an organization that funds projects that work to deepen our understanding of literacy issues. The NLS is funding this project. The report may be available to other literacy programs. All focus group session data and the report will become the property of Parkdale Project Read.

Who will benefit from this project?

This project may benefit people who work in literacy programs. It may give them a better understanding of the experiences of learners.

This project may benefit government policy makers. It may help them to make more informed decisions about how to measure progress in literacy programs.

Finally, this project may benefit learners. It may help them have more control over and input into their learning.

Learner Consent Form

I _____ agree to take part in a study.

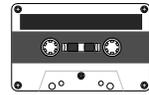
I understand that _____ and _____
will lead the focus group and take notes during the focus group session.

I understand that during the focus group I will be asked questions like:

- why I came to this program
- how fast I thought I would learn
- how I feel about my learning and successes
- how I can tell I'm improving



I understand that the focus group may be taped.



I understand that the focus group leader may take notes.



I understand that my ideas or words may be used in an article or a report.



Learner Consent Form

Program: _____

Focus Group Date: _____

I understand that I will be able read and comment on the summary report of this focus group session.



I understand that my name will **not** be used in any reports, assignments or articles without my permission.

My Name



I understand that I **do not** have to participate in the focus group.
If I join the focus group, I can refuse to answer any question.
I can leave the focus group at any time.
This will not affect my participation at this program.

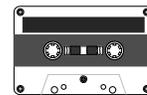
I understand that I will get an honorarium of \$15 for my participation.

Consent Check List

Program: _____

Focus Group Date: _____

- I do
 I do not
- agree to being taped.



- I do
 I do not
- agree to notes being taken during the focus
group.



- I do
 I do not
- want _____ and _____ to use my
ideas and words in a report or article.



- I do
 I do not
- want my real name used.

Assigned Pseudonym: _____

I understand what this study is about and agree to participate. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature of participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of interviewers: _____ Date: _____

_____ Date: _____

B. Detailed program descriptions

Action Read Program Profile

Action Read began in 1987 as a division of the Centre for Employable Workers, an organization which served disadvantaged adults in Guelph. In 1991 we became incorporated as the Action Read Community Literacy Centre. Our mandate is to promote literacy amongst families and adults (19 and over) in Guelph. Our Family Literacy programs first began in 1989 when we started our first Read-in programs and Homework Help Clubs.

Action Read serves learners in Literacy Levels 1-3. The centre is open to clients 45.5 hours per week.

Family Literacy Programs: The Family Literacy program invites parents/caregivers and children to attend a two hour, free program to promote early literacy. Presently we have twelve locations around the City of Guelph.

The One-to-one Tutoring Program matches adults who want to improve their literacy skills with trained volunteer tutors, beginning with an assessment of presents skills, goal setting and the development of a training plan. Tutors and learners meet for a minimum of three hours weekly. Learners are invited to participate in groups and computer assisted learning.

Groups: Action Read now offers six small groups a week that focus on specific learning goals including spelling, math, writing and women's issues

Computer Assisted Learning: Learners at Action Read are invited to learn how to use computers to further their reading and writing practice. We now have several computer based literacy programs and a whole array of software that will accommodate special learning needs.

Off-Site Groups: Action Read has groups at Shelldale Centre and Stonehenge Therapeutic Community.

Physical Space: Action Read consists of two main rooms. The first room is divided into a learning area and a computer lab. The learning area includes a library and tutor resources. It has open spaces and more private cubicles for learners and tutors to work in. The computer lab contains numerous computers with the latest in adaptive technology for learners with physical and learning disabilities. The second main room is a meeting room for groups. It consists of a long table where the groups sit, a black board, flip chart and multimedia equipment (TV, VCR, overhead projector and stereo). Action Read also has two offices for staff, a front reception area, a fully functioning kitchen and a small, private study room for learners who need a quiet learning environment. This room contains one computer which has Dragon (voice recognition software). With this program, learners can speak into the computer and the computer will type their words for them.

Literacy for East Toronto Program Profile

Literacy for East Toronto started as a community coalition. The coalition came together as the result of a community assessment of literacy needs and services, sponsored by the Queen/Saulter Branch of the Toronto Public Library in 1990. Several organizations, groups and individuals identified the need for greater literacy support and services in East Toronto, particularly the area in East Toronto known as South Riverdale, which historically has a greater incidence of low-income households than the rest of Toronto.

A small group of people began meeting and in 1991, formed a coalition called Literacy for East Toronto (LET). The coalition met regularly to discuss literacy needs in the community, to gather information on existing services and literacy needs, to organize community workshops related to serving literacy needs and to look for start-up support for a community literacy program.

In 1992, the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) offered a part-time staff person to begin a one-to-one adult literacy-tutoring program two evenings per week. The Ralph Thornton Community Centre offered the mezzanine space for the program and the Toronto Public Library offered a deposit collection of books. The program took on the name of the former coalition (Literacy for East Toronto). The former coalition became a steering committee for the program.

In 1993 the TCDSB extended the program hours to 25 hours per week to meet the demand of day and evening learners. In order to do this, the TCDSB secured literacy funding from the Ministry of Education. On May 30, 1995 Literacy for East Toronto became a registered charity.

Today, Literacy for East Toronto is open 34 hours a week. The TCDSB continues to staff LET with funding from MTCU. LET offers small group classes in numeracy and writing four mornings a week in addition to offering one-to-one tutoring. The majority of LET's learners are social assistance recipients at LBS levels 1 to 3.

Mission Statement

Literacy for East Toronto is an organization that provides free one-to-one tutoring for adults who want to read, write or do mathematics better.

We are made up of learners, volunteer tutors, board members and paid staff.

As learners, we have our own goals. We need to work at what interests us at our own pace. We work with tutors to identify our goals and to find ways to reach them.

As volunteer tutors, we listen to the needs of learners and support them in reaching their goals. We believe that being a tutor is an opportunity for learning and growth.

As volunteer Board of Directors and paid staff, we make sure that tutors and learners get what they need to teach and learn.

Literacy for East Toronto believes that learning is lifelong. We tell our community about literacy and encourage and support those interested in joining our work.

Parkdale Project Read Program Profile

Project Read believes in a learner-centred approach, based on the idea that the individual learner better defines literacy. It is the student who decides what and how they learn. Project Read supports that learning by providing a comfortable and flexible learning environment. Parkdale Project Read is a community literacy program that has been based in Parkdale for more than 20 years. It started with a few volunteers from the local library and has evolved into a politically-minded, anti-oppression-based organization that concentrates on the needs of its learners and approaches literacy from a learner-centered focus. The important elements in our organization's philosophy are: learning from a whole person perspective (mind, body, emotions and spirit), which encourages learning through art, music, movement, and creative writing. We also focus on and design our program around normalizing the needs of trauma survivors – an important component of our anti-oppression framework. By assuming that all our learners may have experienced trauma, we try to make visible within the program the issue of violence, and incorporate into our environment safeguards that will try to minimize any triggering of traumatic experiences that may be brought on by attempts at learning. This means that these safeguards become normalized, making the program safe for trauma survivors and non-trauma survivors alike. Further anti-oppression initiatives at Project Read include hiring practices that ensure that our staff population is as reflective as possible of our learning population. We feel that this is a crucial part of creating safe and open spaces for learners to express themselves and seek safe assistance. Finally, our partnership with a local consumer/survivor membership organization enables us to continually work on improving our service to this segment of our community.

About 80% of our students take part in small learning groups. In addition to reading and writing groups, we offer groups on learner-identified topics such as everyday philosophy, computers, driver's education, community in action, and math. Women meet regularly in their own space to read and discuss issues affecting their lives. So do seniors and parents. We also regularly offer short courses and individual workshops in response to student requests, volunteer suggestions or new research.

Instead of, or in addition to, small group learning, about 80% of our students work one-to-one with a volunteer tutor. All students are supported to develop a personalized program.

Parkdale Project Read Mission Statement

At Parkdale Project Read we work together to create a community where adults, most of whom have English as a first language, work to improve their reading, writing, and math.

Philosophy

Parkdale Project Read is a community-based organization. We work to:

- offer a welcoming environment that reflects the rich, diverse and multicultural community in Parkdale
- provide a learner centered program that accommodates the goals, needs, preferences and interests of the learners
- involve students, tutors and staff in directing the program
- encourage community involvement, enabling students to take part in their community
- develop community partnerships in order to strengthen services in the Parkdale area
- increase an understanding of literacy issues in Parkdale
- promote an awareness of the services provided by Parkdale Project Read

Regent Park Learning Centre Program Profile

The centre is part of Dixon Hall's Neighbourhood Centre, a multi-faceted community agency that has been open for over 75 years. The literacy program has been around for many years and has been exclusive to women LBS levels 1 to 3 for the past four years. It is run four days a week during most of the year in a small group format of usually 6 – 8 learners at a time. Learners in the group also have the opportunity to work with a tutor of their own each week. The programming includes time in a computer lab to learn basic skills and use literacy software. As well, the learners participate in a weekly yoga class as a way of learning to recognize, release and manage stress in their minds and bodies. The literacy class focuses a great deal on building self-confidence. Lessons are based on group interest and needs. The hours are suited to mothers, 9:30 – 11:30 and 1:00-3:00, Tuesday to Friday. There is on site childcare for small children and summer camp spots reserved at Dixon Hall for older children in the summer months. The program has one full-time staff person and sometimes one part-time staff person. The learners and staff are very open about family and community life. Many personal issues are shared and guests are sometimes invited to speak on matters specific to women. The class is held inside an apartment building within Regent Park, a large subsidized housing development in Toronto's downtown east neighbourhood. Learners are dealing with the challenges of poverty, the stigma of a neighbourhood labelled as dangerous and often the added pressure of single parenting and immigrant life. The learners receive a great deal of support from each other around these issues. Their most recent challenge is the complete redevelopment of their neighbourhood, Regent Park. It has already begun and is expected to take 15 years for completion.

Dixon Hall's Vision, Mission and Values

Vision:

Good jobs, good health, safe shelter, vibrant cultures - Strong community.

Mission:

We are community partners in creating opportunities for people of all ages to dream, to achieve and to live full and rewarding lives.

Values:

At Dixon Hall, we value people. Because we value people, we value:

Respect

Caring and compassion

Integrity

Accountability

Equity and accessibility

Second chances

Dreams and Possibilities

Wellington County Learning Center Program Profile

As a result of a public meeting held in October 1987, the Wellington County Literacy Council (WCLC) was established. Provincial funding was applied for and received, and the home base was established in Arthur. By the spring of 1988 the WCLC had evolved into a viable non-profit agency that was providing literacy-upgrading services to all rural Wellington County. A board of directors was elected and one staff person was hired.

Increasing public awareness to the cause of literacy was, and still is, a very important aspect of the organization's work. Links with community newspapers and service agencies, the provincial and federal governments and other literacy organizations were established by the fall of 1989. At this time, regular tutor training sessions were being held and a tutor-training manual had been developed.

From August 1993 until May 1998, the WCLC was located in the former county registry office on the main street in Arthur. Upon receiving approval from the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations in June 1998, the name of the Wellington County Literacy Council was changed to the Wellington County Learning Centre. The current location is on the main street of Arthur in the former library building where the organization continues to meet the needs of its tutors and learners.

The WCLC operates its adult one-to-one program with an annual grant from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). The youth one-to-one program is supported annually by the Guelph-Wellington United Way.

In 2000, WCLC added a basic computer-training course to its programs. It was designed to improve learner's employability in the new economy. This course introduces first time learners to Basic Computers, word processing and the Web.

In 2000, WCLC introduced its first online newspaper called, "The Learning Edge". It is an interactive online learning tool for individuals of all literacy levels. We now have five editions with the sixth currently in production. You can access the newspaper through our website.

The Wellington County Learning Centre promotes a learner-centered approach to literacy upgrading. The learners direct their own learning and set their own goals both long and short term.

Adult Program offers Literacy and Basic Skills Upgrading for adult residents of rural Wellington County. Learners are matched one-to-one with volunteer tutors and work toward achieving individualized Learning Outcomes as shown in their Training Plan.

Work Write offers literacy upgrading, employment readiness skills and career counselling. Using a small group setting, and extra one-to-one support, the program runs for 8 to 12 weeks.

Moving Forward offers additional help to individuals in the Job Readiness Program. Individuals in the Arthur Small Group meet Thursdays for more independent learning catered to those seeking higher literacy levels.

Computer Training offers basic computer training for participants in rural Wellington County. The course accommodates a maximum of 6 individuals and runs for duration of 6 weeks.

Youth Program offers Youth ages 8 to 18 and still in school the opportunity to improve their grade levels. Funded by United Way and our own fundraising, each learner receives help from a trained volunteer tutor.

Active Learning offers Youth age 8 – 12 an after school interactive, fun program at four locations throughout the County. This program is dependent on project funding.

Family Literacy offers women/caregivers in rural Wellington County an opportunity to learn and practice literacy related activities with their children age 0 – 6 years.

Training – We provide specialized training sessions for volunteers involved in the adult and youth programs. Tutor training sessions are held four to six times a year, and are provided free of charge. Additional workshops are held throughout the year, allowing volunteer tutors to learn new skills.

Assessments – We determine the needs of learners through a needs assessment. An initial assessment is conducted to gather basic information. A face-to-face interview, and our Skills Level Checklist, determines exactly which literacy skills the person already has. The learners are then appropriately matched either with a volunteer tutor or placed in our job readiness program.

Partnerships – Referrals to our program, for both volunteers and participants, are obtained from a variety of sources within the county. The WCLC works with Project Read Literacy Network, United Way, Conestoga College, and many other community organizations, service clubs and businesses to ensure that we can meet the needs of both our learners and our volunteers.

Resource Library – We maintain a collection of teaching resources that are available to learners and tutors. Our web site located at www.thewclc.ca provides links to many online learning resources. The Learning Edge, our online newspaper, is interactive and prepares our literacy students for both higher education and for the workplace. The web-based content is for all literacy levels.