

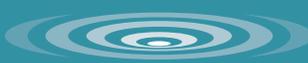
# Research in Practice Projects

## Make it Real: Participatory Action Research with Adult Learners

Dee McRae



RiPAL-BC



Research in Practice in Adult Literacy  
British Columbia

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# Preface

Make it Real: Participatory Action Research with Adult Learners  
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*Make it Real: Participatory Action Research with Adult Learners* is one in a series of reports resulting from Research in Practice Projects (RiPP), a RiPAL-BC project. RiPAL-BC is a grass roots network of individuals and organizations committed to research in practice in adult literacy in British Columbia, Canada.

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RiPAL-BC  
C/O 601-510 West Hastings Street  
Vancouver, BC V6B 1L8  
Ph: 604-684-0624 / Fax: 604-684-8520  
Email: [RiPAL@literacy.bc.ca](mailto:RiPAL@literacy.bc.ca)

<http://ripal.literacy.bc.ca>

Research-in-Practice Projects (RiPP) started as a way to encourage and support practitioners to engage in research about their practice. College and community practitioners were eager to participate in research activities but seldom had the required resources and energy to write a research proposal for a small individual project. Practitioners explained that their “proposal-writing” energy gets directed to program delivery proposals. RiPP offered an alternative. Building on previous research-in-practice projects carried out in Alberta by The RiPAL Network, RiPP involved five literacy practitioners in research-in-practice projects and provided them with research education opportunities and support.

In the fall of 2003, literacy program coordinators, instructors and others involved in literacy practice were invited to participate in a facilitated meeting to explore possible research topics they might be interested in pursuing. During the following weeks, those who were interested in continuing with the project developed individual research proposals. Throughout the next eighteen months, five practitioners collected data, analysed it and wrote their findings. The group came together several times to discuss the research stages they were navigating and the challenges they were facing. Online discussions allowed the group to stay in touch and maintain the level of support required to make progress in their individual projects.

The process was not without challenges. Writing, especially, became an almost insurmountable hurdle that was hard to make space for in busy professional and personal lives. Practitioner researchers worked for many months; dedicating many more hours than the project had anticipated, to produce research reports that would be rigorous but also speak clearly to the audience they care about most, other practitioners and community members.

In this report, Dee McRae explores what she describes as a powerful and meaningful approach to learning for learners and for practitioners. Participatory Action Research projects, Dee argues, can increase learners’ personal agency through facilitated group decision-making processes. While being respectful of learners realities these projects also foster skills and capacities that allow learners to explore, expand and negotiate their world.

**Marina Niks**  
RiPP Coordinator  
[ripal@literacy.bc.ca](mailto:ripal@literacy.bc.ca)

# Acknowledgements

I had two roles in the Hair Straight Back project: one as the facilitator of the project, the other as the researcher of the project process. The two roles depended on each other and on many other individuals. I wish to acknowledge all those who made this project possible and supported the project, and me, in my two overlapping roles.

First, to the participants of the project, who took a risk to try a new approach to learning, who patiently worked with me for the two years this project took, my thanks for your perseverance, participation and action, but mostly for all that you taught me.

To Sandi Lavallie, Career and College Prep Coordinator at Northwest Community College, Houston campus, my recognition of the amazing work you do for our college, our community and for literacy, because without your support and encouragement, no part of this project would have been possible. Our discussions and reflections added depth and richness to the process.

To Marina Niks, who is still pushing me on my learning road of research in practice, and is often digging me out of the ditch, you have my respect as a great teacher and mentor.

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I also wish to acknowledge Houston Link to Learning Board of Directors for hosting the project and administering the funding, and Northwest Community College for their continued support of literacy projects.

And finally I wish to acknowledge the role the National Literacy Secretariat played in providing funding for both the original Hair Straight Back project and for their support of research in practice via the Research in Practice Project (RiPP) that I later joined. Much of the work on which I base my practice was originally an NLS project that was then written up and shared.

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## Introduction

Participatory Action Research offers an approach to teaching adult literacy learners that is respectful of their current place in the world and also allows them to develop personal skills and capacities to allow them to further explore, expand and negotiate their world. I will show you the ways this happened, and what I think caused this growth to occur in a project I facilitated: Hair Straight Back.<sup>1</sup>

As a literacy practitioner, I had the privilege of participating in challenging literacy research projects that moved me forward in terms of understanding and literacy. Hair Straight Back (HSB) was my first attempt at a Participatory Research Project with a group of adult learners. I chose to do a research project with learners because a previous collaborative research project, *Dancing in the Dark*, (Niks, Allen, Davies, McRae and Nonesuch, 2003) provided me with an enriching learning experience. It seemed not quite right that I should be having the amazing learning opportunities only with other practitioners. I wanted to offer the adult learners in my community those same possibilities. Hair Straight Back was also my research project as a practitioner researcher with mentoring from Marina Niks, the Research Friend to the project. While the HSB project was underway with learners, I was invited to join the Research in Practice Project (RiPP). So while HSB was a Participatory Research Project with learners, it was also, on another layer, *my* research project.

Most literacy practitioners will find no new startling information in these pages. Literacy practitioners have been approaching learners as I am suggesting for decades, building people’s capacity and developing learners’ personal agency. Many already create all these kinds of opportunities for their groups of learners. I hope this report will encourage other practitioners to try using participatory action research in the classroom or with community groups. But this report is not a “How to,” nor even a complete “What happened when.” (Those 65 pages went direct from Marina to the shredder, on five different occasions!) Rather, this is, “Here are some interesting things that happened when I did this project and here is what I think about them.”

In this report I argue that adult learners who participate in Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects can increase their personal agency through facilitated group decision-making processes and the different learning opportunities related to the project. In the literature review I frame HSB as a PAR project. This allows me to go on to examine how HSB allowed those learners involved in the project

<sup>1</sup> The team referred to working hard towards a timeline as “Hair Straight Back.” Gradually that became the name of the project and together we designed a logo that appears on the map, brochure and jackets.

*At its heart, PAR (participatory action research) is about action. Its purpose is not to generate knowledge that is filed away...but to provide a solid and thoughtful basis for change—and not just any change, but one that benefits the people who will be affected by it.*

*Merrifield, 1997*

*Real change beats getting it done.*

*A. Docherty, 2003*

to develop their personal agency through their participation in the project. I look at the development of personal agency with the team members in relation to ownership of the project, decision making related to the project and money, and the wonderful messiness inherent in this type of literacy project. I will also show the value of PAR as a powerful and meaningful approach to learning both for practitioners and learners. I do not pretend to know everything; if research has taught me anything, it is that I know less now than I ever did.

## Research in My Practice

As a literacy practitioner, my travels into research and into the research literature have been directed by specific needs of learners and also by what has come across my desk. The latter has had far greater influence on my practice than the former.

The call to literacy practitioners in the field to participate in what became *Naming the Magic* by Evelyn Battell (1999) caught my interest and, while I was unable to contribute to that project, the recognition of the non-academic outcomes shaped my practice and understanding of literacy and learning. The opportunity for practitioners to form a Literacy Research Circle in 2000 indirectly led to my participation in *Dancing in the Dark* (Niks et al, 2003). It was during *Dancing* that Andrea Pheasey, Audrey Fofonoff, Deborah Morgan, Grace Malicky, Linda Keam, Mary Norton and Veronica Park (2000) published *Learning About Participatory Approaches in Adult Literacy Education: Six Research in Practice Studies*. The six Alberta practitioners spoke so eloquently of all their successes, but to me, more importantly, of their failures. The honesty of their reports and the discussion of the messiness inspired me to pursue the rank of researcher in practice. As *Dancing* ended, I imagined a space where adult learners could reap some of the same benefits from a research project as I had gained in the *Dancing in the Dark* project. And so we come to Hair Straight Back.

# Literature Review

## Hair Straight Back as Participatory Action Research

In this section I argue that Hair Straight Back was a Participatory Action Research project by comparing PAR definitions in the literature to what happened within the project. By framing the original HSB project as Participatory Action Research (PAR), I can call on a multitude of researchers, educators and practitioners to support my realizations and data analysis of what happened during the HSB classroom sessions. This PAR framework also provides pathways for me and others to repeat and improve the process with another group of learners. The opportunities for doing PAR with adult learners are unlimited. I hope to convince other practitioners of the benefits to the learners of being involved in PAR learning situations.

Juliet Merrifield (1997) says that PAR is not a research method but an approach to research and to learning that may use different methods. She goes on to state that three ideas are central to PAR: participation, action and knowledge. I will explore these three principles with examples from the Hair Straight Back (HSB) project with quotes from the literature and experiences from the HSB project. From there I will extract my main themes related to this project.

## Participatory

... owned and controlled not by the researcher but by the people in the communities and organizations who need the research to act on issues that concern them (Merrifield, 1997).

Participatory research is defined as systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting change (Green, Lawrence, George, Daniel, Frankish, Herbert, Bowie & O'Neill, 2003, p. 419).

In the Hair Straight Back project, the research team was made up of adult learners who had to overcome multiple barriers in order to attend school. This made them knowledgeable experts in the area of study. The team used their experience and knowledge as adult students to identify and describe the needs of adult learners. They then explored the various service providers in the community to determine where individuals could go for assistance in meeting those multiple needs. Participation in PAR means that it is the people with experience in the situation, that it is those who are/were affected by the very conditions they are now studying, who are doing the research. In HSB, it was a group of adult learners

*I always had a hard time with school. I hated going to school. I don't know why but I didn't like school at all. I did not know how important school was until I started to get older in my life. When I had to fill out forms and to read them I didn't know how to fill them out or how to read them. So I got my sister to help me fill them out and read them to me so I could understand what they wanted me to do.*

*Lawrence,  
Project participant.*

researching the needs of adults in general who want to become students.

It is this aspect of PAR that makes every moment of the time together relevant to the project. As the team discusses their lives, and the project is about their lives, chances are there is transferability to the project. I referred to this in my journal, and Marina and I called this *No Side Issues*—the project is specifically about some aspect of the participants' lives, so what might seem like a side issue or tangent often homes in directly on target:

Dee: ... they are coming up with all sorts of interesting things in this time—four or five are very shy though or don't feel their comments are important.

Marina: It might be in their experiences that you find the most interesting and useful stuff for the mapping.

Dee: We managed about four paragraphs (of the proposal) with lots of discussion—mostly side discussion as everyone wanted to explain what the centre (Houston campus) offered them in terms of support and what their barriers were to coming here. (OK these are not side issues really for example L said drugs and alcohol were what prevented him from coming so we will need to look at services to addicts if we want a clear picture of services students need.)

Marina: Right! No side issues at all which is what I was referring to previously (Journal, September 25, 2002).

## Action

Action gives a clear purpose for doing research, and a yardstick by which to measure how useful the research is (Merrifield, 1997).

Action happens when the Plan is put in place and the hoped for improvement to the social situation occurs (Hughes & Seymour-Rolls, 2000).

An action was identified early in the Hair Straight Back project and agreed upon by the team. The team chose to produce a map of services provided in Houston. The team members then worked through various steps to complete that action and also headed down multiple dead-ends as the team explored other ideas as they developed, for example video production. Many of the ideas and explorations/dead-ends have left a mark on the final map and brochure,

the team member, the team as a whole or on future programming that is under consideration at our campus. The HSB team completed the action at the end of the project. A user-friendly, colourful, graphic town map and brochure were published, clearly identifying various services and how they could be accessed.

While the team has received positive feedback in relation to the map, the project did not track whether adults returning to school have actually used this map and brochure. In the case of HSB, the action was taken but the *yardstick* has not been read, nor can we state that *improvement to the social situation* has occurred. We do have a large number of students attending the college upgrading program this year, but I cannot say the map has anything directly to do with this increase.

The notion of action or change caught the imagination of the team. They were anxious to “put in place (the hoped for) improvement to the social situation” and had several ideas throughout our time together that could have been acted upon. As the team worked on the project, discussion revolved around topics that included: when you are stressed you do not have the same comprehension level you do when you are calm; how there is now a 3-week waiting period for money from social services; automated phones and how awful they are; and, how maybe we should start with improved access to services at our own college. When the group agreed about how awful the automated phones are, for example, we discussed what we could potentially do about that. What if we as a group worked on the scripting for the automated system so that it was more user friendly and helpful? It would have been a small change but one that this group could have carried out. While this idea was a jump ahead and beyond the scope of the discussion at the time, it also showed the desire of the team to make change and at the same time the capacity of the team to think in real life solutions that have the potential to make a difference in people's lives. This is the power of PAR with adult learners.

The final action of the project was a map and brochure. That action has provided a sense of accomplishment for the team. The team members, who at some point in their lives would have been called “dropouts,” have produced a public document. They can identify what piece they contributed and where their ideas have been incorporated into the overall production. They have all also had the experience of working on a team project, where the whole becomes greater than the parts. But most important, they each developed increased personal capacities for dealing with learning and life.

As well, the final action has served as an awareness tool for our community, our agencies, and other communities to recognize:

*I didn't know the other members of the group well at all. As we worked together we became closer and have become friends. It has been fun working together and I hope the work we have been will help the public and the agencies that serve them.*

*Donna,  
Project participant.*

1. what agencies and services our community does have
2. what other agencies are doing
3. the capacities of adult learners
4. the complex needs of adult learners
5. a model for other communities and projects to consider.

Other adult learners look at this project and are excited to try it in their own community as they become aware of what they can achieve with a group of peers, in their town. It becomes an awareness of personal capacity, that "if they can do it, we can do it." It acts to wake up both individual capacity and community capacity.

## Research

PAR creates knowledge, but not for the sake of knowledge alone (Merrifield, 1997).

Participatory research attempts to present people as researchers themselves in pursuit of answers to the questions of their daily struggle and survival. (Tandon, 1988, p. 7).

The adult learners on the team researched how to become adult learners. They collected the data in order to answer their research question related to accessing services for adult learners. They then took their own experience and their new-found knowledge and created a map and brochure to communicate the information with the community. I did pose the original problem or question to be researched, but that came from interacting with the community of learners, many of whom later became the project team. As you will see throughout this report, the final product is by no means the only outcome of this project. In the process of working on this project, the HSB team developed many other transferable skills and were transported far into the non-academic outcomes zone (Battell, 1999).

As we discussed the list of needs (Appendix A) and then struggled to create a hierarchy of needs for adult learners specifically, other ideas arose, again giving us a much clearer picture than outside researchers could ever hope to achieve. Two particular examples stand out. I wrote about them in my journal:

The team also discussed how often it is not the people close to them who are the most supportive. "Complete strangers were more supportive than my own parents and family." The people close to them often give the "Oh she thinks she is too good for us," response when a family member says they want

to go back to school. Increased education and the change that may result in the person is feared by families and loved ones (Journal, December 4, 2002).

The team then chose to create a survey (Appendix B) in class with some very interesting discussion related to what support (from their spouse) they had when they started and how that changed as they pursued their courses further. For some, the spousal relationship evolved, but for many, returning to school spelled the end of the relationship. And if we know this can happen, what can we do about it? Can we offer counselling to spouses? How would that work? Do we need to have the discussion openly with adult students? With the spouses? If so, when? Or would this potentially create yet another barrier to adults returning to education? The team was catching on to the idea of research. They were generating the questions, questions well beyond what the original proposal had suggested.

This survey idea was completely the team's idea and as such had their full involvement and motivation. The team asked questions that made sense to them in the situation. For example, they had a question related to *Why did you decide to go back to school?* and one of the group said that we should also include *When did you decide to go back to school?* The team then got into a discussion about having to quit school for jobs, babies and other aspects of life and how by rephrasing the question, the survey may capture data we otherwise would not:

The team agreed on questions and discussed and then created another version and typed them up and photocopied for distribution all before the end of the hour! Get that! They have agreed to try one survey before next class so we can talk about it (Journal, December 4, 2002).

Similarly, when we were doing the interviews, I felt the team had a far better understanding than I did about what the answers were to some of the questions. The team, as service users, were far better truthfulness detectors than I:

B shook the pilings for me and gave me another view of the world. T was telling us that when a student comes in and says they want to be a rocket scientist, she assesses them for battery, drugs/alcohol, learning difficulties, etc. and refers them to other agencies. (Hard to deal with all the baggage and go to school.) B asked T if she told the clients ahead of time that she was making these assessments and T said "No, but we talk about them after if I pick up on something." After T left we talked about it. B says when she goes to take English 12, she wants to take English 12. What right does T have to judge her related to all those other things? If she picked up those judgment vibes, she would be "out the door so fast and never return." So,

*This was a way for me to learn about services offered and to also give something back to the community I grew up in.*

*Kara,  
Project participant.*

*PAR honours the learners' knowledge and context, then builds learning and learner capacity while generating social change.*

B is always teaching me things. Here I thought T was giving the correct answer—albeit a bit on the patronizing side—as we all agree about the need for assessment. B certainly puts into perspective when we should do the assessment and who should do it.

L said, “That was awesome,” I think referring to the process of doing an interview. He stayed while B was talking and so she said, “How about you, L, when you came back you were smoking dope. What would you have done if they said you have to be drug-free first?” That was pretty easy to answer. “I’d leave.” Because of a poem another student wrote L decided to quit dope about 3 months after he started school. He went to S and said, “I want to quit. Get me into a program.” And she did (Journal, January 15, 2003).

These and other circumstances have all reminded me of the wisdom of our learners. So many situations arose where it was their insight and input that made sense of a situation, that clarified a fuzzy area or that somehow just worked much better than anything I would have come up with independent of them.

As Surowiecki (2004) explains, crowds are wise and know things and when they work together, they are better than any expert can hope to be. I spent two years working with a team of literacy learners and their ideas and suggestions for a publication were much more fun, out-of-the-box, and usable than what I would have come up with without them. I like to think I am a creative person; none of the team would use that word to describe themselves, and yet collectively they designed a usable, sensible, logical, creative guide to services in Houston. So as Heron and Reason (n.d.) point out, co-operative inquiry as a way to “understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things” holds true as well for participatory action research. And this is, once again, precisely why PAR “works”; the participants know so much more about themselves than any expert. Throughout the project many opportunities arose to further explore the participants’ collective wisdom.

Using these principles and highlights gleaned from the research literature as it relates to participatory action research, I consider Hair Straight Back a PAR project. Participatory action research projects can be used as a powerful tool to explore learning and develop personal agency in an adult upgrading classroom. It is not any one principle of PAR that offers this benefit, but rather the combination of the principles: the relationship of the participant to the data and the project, the participant’s role in the research, and the processes facilitated to bring about the action with the participants, all working together that brings about the desired effect.

## Methods

The HSB project was designed to identify barriers for adult learners returning to school and to then research and map access to various community services that offer support for prospective students. In January 2002, I wrote the Houston Link to Learning application to the Adult Literacy Cost-Shared Program for Phase 1 of Accessing Services from the Learners’ Perspective. The application was successful and I was hired as the project researcher. (I was instructing part-time in the fundamental classroom at Northwest Community College in Houston in the Career and College Prep (CCP) program, and I also worked a few hours a week for regional coordination). Participants in the research project were offered credits for Selected English, a locally developed course. (See Appendix C for course outline.) The research sessions were held during my NWCC instructional time.

A group of nine learners chose to join the project at the outset, and another joined a few weeks later. None of the team had completed high school as youth; several had dropped out prior to high school. During the project, two of the team were doing fundamental level course work, six were doing developmental course work, and two had gone on to more advanced level classes. One had begun upgrading from a minimal reading level four years previously. One had been upgrading for several years and was working on her social service worker certificate. During the span of this project, she completed her certificate.

Each team member had personal experience with many of the barriers other practitioners will identify as being common to adult learners. Several struggle with alcohol and drugs, one remaining drug and alcohol free for over six years. Others were victims of violence. Eight of the nine women were mothers of school-age children. When we started the project, seven of the nine women were in relationships with spouses; by the end of the project four of those relationships had dissolved. Five of the participants were First Nations or Metis. Eight of the ten were living either very close to, or below, the poverty line. During the course of the project, two team members were on social assistance and one was on long-term disability.

The group of learners established a project team to determine what needs adults have before they become students and how adults wanting to return to school could meet those needs. Throughout the school year they met for one hour per week. Those individuals already registered as college students all chose to take part in the project for course credit in Selected English. The one student who was not registered at NWCC was registered as a Houston Link to Learning learner.

When I walked into the room for the Hair Straight Back project sessions, I entered as a facilitator of a National Literacy Secretariat project. I also entered the room as a researcher, with a research question related to adult learners and Participatory Action Research. I tried not to enter the room as an instructor, but I was the instructor, at other times of the day and week, to some of the team members. As this was my first research project of this sort, I felt far more comfortable in the practitioner/facilitator role than in the researcher role. I knew I was going to need help.

Marina Niks, with whom I had worked on the *Dancing in the Dark* research project (2003) was the Research Friend in the HSB project. I wrote weekly e-journals to her describing and reflecting on the weekly meetings of the project team.

In the second year of the HSB project I was invited to join five other practitioners in the Research in Practice Project (RiPP). Marina was also coordinator of the RiPP. My fellow practitioner-researchers in RiPP have offered unending support, empathy, feedback and understanding during the learning journey that is this project. I think I learned as much from their projects as from my own. I had clarity when I looked at their work, and only messiness when I looked at mine. As fellow travelers we banded together and created a space for our individual projects and the RiP project amidst our swirling lives.

## The Data

The main source of data for this project is the reflective e-mail journal I wrote to Marina over the two years that the Hair Straight Back project was underway. She replied and questioned. Our discussions were wide ranging and she helped me sort out my relationships to the group, the research and the project. The majority of the journal entries were written immediately after the group met. Marina often replied to my questions or queries before the next session. I was able to launch trial analysis of the data that we could then discuss and work through as more data was collected. I found the process incredibly valuable; it was like having an academic researcher in my pocket for consultations whenever I needed her.

## Data Analysis

This project changed the way the adult learners viewed learning and themselves as they developed their personal capacity and acted with increased agency in their personal situations. Participatory Action Research (PAR) provided a space for both the instructor and the adult learner to shift into a different learning dynamic, one which allowed the practitioner to facilitate the development of personal agency.

In this section I will explore how ownership is an important component in this dynamic and how money may offer interesting opportunities for learner growth. I will touch on the messiness that these projects own and how that is sometimes a good thing. I will refer to project facilitation as being a key factor in how these learning moments can come about, how learner wisdom needs to be respected and how many times as a practitioner I missed opportunities to allow more capacity development among the team members. I will also look at how dead ends can take projects in new directions and how, as already discussed, there is no such thing as a side issue.

The time span of this project and the nature of our community allowed me to reflect on the work of the team, within the project, and also to bring in outside verification of what seemed to be happening. First and foremost, this project changed the way the adult learners viewed learning and themselves as they developed their personal capacity and acted with increased agency in their personal situations.

### Agency and Capacity: Give a man a fish...

*Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime (Chinese proverb).*

By understanding the context in which individuals live and their current capacities, and by facilitating learning through a PAR project, the practitioner facilitates capacity and personal agency. Facilitating the development of agency is, to continue with the Chinese proverb, creating the desire of the man to fish, or allowing the man to see what fishing could offer his community, or, as Heron and Reason (n.d.) state, "learning how to act to change things you may want to change and find out how to do things better." In other words, developing capacity is more than being taught to fish. It is more than learning to read. A person who increases their reading and writing skills by one level will read and write better. A person who develops personal agency and capacity will know there are choices

in life. And the choices for the man who now knows how to fish include to fish for himself, his family, his community, or to not fish at all.

### **What does a fisher look like?**

The team already had an understanding of personal agency and capacity. I recorded their thoughts and my reaction in my journal:

One point that came out strong and clear (from the team) is that those without the self-esteem, self-confidence to demand and ask for things often ended up shafted. So how do they get the self-confidence and esteem? (Agency) Where can you go if you don't have it? What can you get? The group said, "Nothing. You are not served unless you demand things." This is rather scary—often those most marginalized are those with the least agency and they are the people who need the services the most (Journal, October 30, 2002).

This one point became the focus of access to service, access to community, access to getting on with one's life and to some extent, access to life itself and so is now a part of my personal definition of literacy. Agency is what allows people to get off the couch, to move on, to take action and to deal with success and setbacks. Paula Davies describes agency as a factor that affects how we all learn and how we deal with the world. She chose to define agency as the *power to act in or on the world to achieve a desired end* (Niks et al, 2003, p. 46).

In this project and in my work with Storytellers and Anne Docherty, I saw how personal agency or power was graphically drawn (Appendix D) to show all those things one needed in order to "get off the couch and out the door." While I originally thought this project was about "getting in the door to get services," both the project team and the youth team from Hazelton were telling me there was a step before this for many adult learners. If we go back to our man and learning to fish again, we can clearly see that the man on the couch who learns how to fish but does not make the choice to get off the couch will not develop his personal agency or capacity by only learning to fish. Personal agency may play a larger role in an individual's success or failure than any other definition and measure of literacy. If personal agency is the key, how do we know when we get there? How long does it take? What does increased capacity or personal agency look like? In *Dancing in the Dark*, when we searched the data for agency in learners, we used self-confidence or self-esteem, control, self-awareness and reflection as "markers." Two examples from this project are presented in Appendix E.

Early in the HSB project, the team explored the needs of an adult going back to school. This was easy and exciting for them; this was the knowledge they had

and this project was going to value that knowledge. This is when the HSB team started to understand what a PAR project might be all about. We were creating flipcharts with information they were able to generate, through their knowledge and experience. We looked at what things (daycare, transportation, food, shelter, drug/alcohol free mind and many more) an adult must organize and get prior to even asking themselves, "Do I want to go back to school?" and then "Am I ready to go back to school?"

...we brainstormed all the possible needs a person may have in terms of "What do adults need (to have in place in order to) learn?" They came up with about 40 different ideas...

I then asked them to write a quick, 10-minute journal piece on what they needed to become learners—personally. This brought up more ideas than the ones on the board (Journal, October 16, 2002).

This process brought forth a list that in itself was an interesting revelation to many of the team; they now understood why they were not learning at as fast a rate as they had hoped. Two of the women on the team had started their schooling process well ahead of their children, then watched somewhat helplessly as the children surpassed the mothers' academic accomplishments and milestones. This reinforced the feeling of being dumb. As they looked at the hierarchy, they realized the number of responsibilities that they had for themselves and their children, and how they had several things to deal with in their lives, sometimes on a daily basis, prior to being able to learn. Suddenly, instead of seeing themselves as slow learners they saw all the details they had been dealing with listed on the board. Not only were they meeting these needs for themselves, they were also trying to provide for their children. This awareness was, in itself, a boost to the self-esteem of these two individuals and gave them a personal awareness of their own capacities that allowed them to move forward in their lives.

*PAR is an approach to learning* that develops personal capacity. Participation in a PAR project enhances agency in that the team and the individuals know the project and hold the knowledge, and feel ownership. Through research, the team is making decisions to find out things and test hunches. A project that includes action as one of its elements, enhances agency because the group makes the decisions; participants take the lead in making decisions and designing the action.

*What I liked the most of our research group is that everyone got to know each other really well. And listening to others' attitudes, personal jokes, and ideas were overwhelming. The ideas of our research group became slow at first but sure picked up after Christmas holidays.*

*Jennifer,  
Project participant.*

*I joined this research group because I love to join and participate in anything I get my hands on. I enjoy working with groups of people because it makes me feel good about myself.*

*Jennifer,  
Project participant.*

## Ownership

Throughout the HSB project, ownership was one of my mantras. Ownership is important in the overall goal of building capacity in learners. I did not want the team to do the project for me. It was not about me; it was an issue from their lives. Learners who are “doing” are building personal capacity; learners who are “done to” are not. Heron and Reason (2001) assert, “We believe that good research is research conducted *with* people rather than *on* people;” similarly, I believe PAR projects allow for educating *with* people rather than *to* people. What a PAR project allows is a space for people to “do for themselves” actions that they have decided upon. The PAR space also offers peer support and knowledge as well as a facilitated approach to problem solving and decision making. This “doing for themselves” is what agency is about and when learners practice, develop and model agent behaviors within the PAR project, skills and capacities are transferable to daily life. The more the participants feel connected to the actions of the project, the more they feel they are doing for themselves, the greater the opportunity for development and transferability of increased personal capacity to their daily lives.

The team needed ownership over the project if the project was to be truly theirs. This ownership development was done in the confines of already having a cost-shared proposal stating what we were going to do and how we were going to do it. In an ideal PAR project, the team should be writing the proposal. Since that was not feasible with the timeline and funding process constraints, I made a conscious effort to create opportunities for the team to own the project.

We had a lot of latitude in what we did and how we went about doing the project. The social contract I agreed to with the learners was the first formal step in this process. Instead of going in with my set of rules, I offered them a facilitated space to create a social contract or a set of rules. This served a double goal: the learners could both have a learning environment and function safely and healthily as a team. The project team wrote their social contract and what they thought should be included in the team “rules of engagement.” Had I come and taught this session, with pre-formulated rules, we would have arrived at a far different place. Had I written the rules ahead of time, we would not have had the “buy-in,” and we certainly would not have had the discussion, the ownership or the eclectic mix of rules that this group chose to adhere to.

The process of writing the rules was in itself enlightening for the team with all kinds of abstract ideas flying around the room:

*I think this project has helped spawn my interest in research. I would like to continue in the extension of this project next year. It will advance my research techniques and hopefully help me advance my educational learning.*

*Kara,  
Project participant.*

Our discussions were rich—as in do we have to respect all opinions? What is a valid opinion? What does respecting individuality look like? What does respecting boundaries look like?

This raised a discussion of ethics about whether you should respect people’s opinions no matter what the opinion happens to be. When are you allowed to not respect their opinion? What is a valid opinion? What makes an opinion valid? Is validity tied to culture? If not, what is it tied to? How can you disrespect an opinion respectfully? How can you dislike a person’s opinions and still work with them on a team in a positive way? (Journal, September 18, 2002).

One of the factors that allowed this discussion was the open facilitation of the process. More than half of the students were fundamental level learners. Much of the fundamental curriculum is very simple reading and writing. Big ideas are not often accessible to this group via print, yet in oral discussions they had the capacity to delve into the depths of abstract thoughts, moral decisions and ethical concerns. Many have life experiences that have taken them to the edge in terms of the emotional, spiritual, and physical dilemmas they have faced (Niks, *et al*, 2003). The issues that they were discussing concerning opinions and respect are the hard issues related to living and working in harmony, more of a step into the hard questions that relate to personal capacity and even community development. The team discussed complex issues using their life experience, without it becoming personal, because here it was the project, the plan of how they wanted to work together. How they felt people should behave. They were in essence saying “If we own this room, for this hour, this is how we will behave.”

The final set of rules (Appendix F), reached within one hour, has all the required components for a team working together on a project. There was a sense of the differing capacities within the group, and that by helping one another out, the team would be stronger. As well, the team represented differing experiences that all could gain from in relation both to the project and to teamwork and cooperation. For example, one of the members, who had the weakest traditional literacy skills, was very advanced in team dynamics and group work. It was his idea to start with a sharing circle and to offer help when needed.

Writing the rules was the first tangible accomplishment for the team. They proudly placed their personal copies of the contract in their binders. One student treated hers as a special document and put it in a plastic page protector. When we re-convened the team, eleven months later, she pulled her copy out and asked if we would be following those same rules for engagement. This suggests

*We all as a group changed ideas in certain subjects a few times. Our team was so agreeable every time we did make a change. This was awesome!!*

*Jennifer,  
Project participant.*

ownership and pride of accomplishment. She had treated it as a special document, had kept it, understood its use, had remembered it and valued its worth.

This one small task of the project captures much of what is wonderful about doing PAR projects with a group of adult learners. The discussions were rich and developed, the rules wide-ranging, the power was in the hands of the group and everyone was learning in the process.

If the ownership of *HOW* to do the project was the social contract, the ownership of *WHAT* was the work we did in putting the goals into our own words. While the process of reviewing the proposal and rewriting the goals was time consuming, it also simplified the proposal for future reference, created a spirit of cooperation and involvement, and allowed the participants the opportunity to get accustomed to working in a different learning situation. This stage was also important to establishing and supporting the principles of Participatory Action Research and the way the project would operate in the future. No document, no matter how official, would stand unchallenged and un-interpreted.

The team also rephrased the goals of the project and in doing that they reframed—and took ownership of—the project as a whole. For example, one of the goals stated on the proposal read:

Challenge our assumptions about learning and learners and the services and programs we offer in the NW in order to ensure services and programs mesh for the low literacy individual.

The students revealed that this is a major obstacle related to living in a small community. People assume they know what you want because of who you are. They argued that this can create difficulty in changing who you are perceived to be (a dropout, a druggie) and in attaining a service you have not accessed before. If, for example, you are a regular at the Friendship Centre for the craft afternoon, but now you need counselling, the receptionist may assume you are here for crafts, say hello, chat, and send you off to the craft room without ever considering that you may have other needs. By that point, you may have lost your nerve for asking for what it was you really needed. It was for this reason that the project team basically told me that I had it wrong. They agreed this was the number one goal of the entire project, and we needed to broaden the scope to include all of the people all of the time. The team also felt that if they thought service providers should challenge their assumptions, then the team, as service users, needed to follow suit and also challenge their assumptions. The re-stated goal read: “Challenge our assumptions. (All of us, throughout the project.)” This change

in goals (Appendix G) gave the team the message that I would listen, they could offer real change and they knew what they were talking about.

For the team to decide that they should challenge their assumptions related to agency workers, other students, and the project itself, was a positive step. Many times, people on “the system” are in an adversarial relationship where the client is pitted against agency workers. Often, it is the low literacy client who is at a terrible disadvantage in this relationship, as they have no way of understanding their entitlements or keeping up to date with all the new regulations and rulings related to their claim. Creating “challenge our assumptions” as the number one goal for the project built an atmosphere of open-mindedness and a spirit of potential, as in “anything can happen” with the project. This spirit and atmosphere remained with the team throughout the project. Setting this goal to be the overriding ideal is another example of the PAR phenomenon and the outcomes of working with a group of adult learners in a PAR project.

The interpretation of formal documents into accessible language is something literacy practitioners do constantly with their learners. This level of group analysis of written documents was new to the HSB team. They would be working hard in their hour-long sessions, using all their critical thinking skills, communication skills and in the process learning to take this step on their own in their own lives. The team was expected to dissect everything, to think hard and make things work for them. If they did not understand something, they needed to ask another team member or me, the facilitator. Often our sessions ended with more questions being asked than answers being found. This facilitated an open framework to learning and this approach to finding out “stuff” provides participants with “how to learn” models on which to build personal capacity.

As I facilitated group ownership in a variety of ways throughout the project, I strove to ensure that the “P” in PAR, *participatory*, was real; it was not just lip service to an ideal. I wanted the team to see, hear and read examples of this principle being actively upheld and honoured. And while I was able to achieve that some of the time, the next section will explore those moments when the ideal collided with the reality.

### **Let the Learner Lead versus The Reality Zone**

Many times this project jumped far from the ideal learner-led condition into the reality zone of the facilitator taking action because of a looming deadline. The task of phoning agencies to set up interviews is a good example of the reality compromise. We had previously sent a letter to each of the agencies notifying them that we would be phoning at a later date to arrange a time for the interview.

*We did so many things together as group. I learned how to work with other adult learners. I learned not to be too shy and talk to and meet different people and to read better.*

*Nora,  
Project participant.*

I knew that many people would not remember the letter or would not be the person who read the letter. This meant the task of phoning was fairly complex. We were calling up an agency and asking them to come and meet with us on our turf and in our time frames. If they did not recall the letter, that meant the caller also had to explain the entire project over the phone. The project team needed someone to do this, someone who felt confident and had the understanding to explain the project and what we needed the agency to do:

I tried to see if anyone else wanted the job of phoning the agencies and making the appointments but this was met with no enthusiasm at all. One member stated, "You'd better just sit down and do it yourself, Dee!" The rest agreed. If we were on a different time frame, all of these things are things that the students could be trained to do. Or that they could apply for, e.g., if you want this job draw up a resume for what skills you bring to the table (Journal, December 11, 2002).

The team identified that the caller would have to have access to a telephone/ answering machine system for the task, in order to leave call back numbers. The students were at school most of the workday and most had children at home. In order to take on this task, one individual would have had to have been willing to spend much more than the allotted one hour per week for the few weeks this task took. Since the frenzy of Christmas was upon us, none of the team felt they had the extra time. This discussion in itself gives some indication of how much thought the team was providing to the tasks and how each step was well thought out and considered. The decisions the team was bringing to the PAR project had to be honoured, they chose me to phone, yet to me that seemed to move us away from the PAR principles that would have the team involved in all these tasks.

Ideally, we would set up a half-day training where students could write the script to say to the agency, have opportunities to role play the scenario and practice at filling up time slots on calendars, skills that could be taught prior to the request for callers. Then all of the team would be more confident that the person who applied or volunteered would be able to handle the task and the entire team would be building capacity in organizational skills and communication.

For the interview sessions we were able to follow a more ideal situation. The team had several practice class sessions and chose who to interview first so that they would feel more comfortable. The interview questions evolved and developed over the course of the first 3 interviews to the final version that was maintained for the rest of the sessions. The interview sessions were one hour long and were held in our classroom/meeting area. The agency personnel came to us, meeting

whatever members of the team were attending that day. The team designed the interview questions beforehand, with some guidance from me, and voted on the questions to include and what they wanted to ask. They then decided they wanted to each ask one or two questions and these were distributed to the individuals in attendance just before the interview. The team members developed a loyalty to "their" question, so soon it was only a matter of covering the missing member's question, if someone was away.

The interview practice and development time allowed for the group to gain from their experience and to revise as necessary. The repetition allowed them to become comfortable in their roles and to build confidence. The team had a unique opportunity for a different form of learning, for creating knowledge, for practising critical thinking skills and for working in a group situation, for developing their own personal capacity to talk to others and most importantly for questioning those in authority.

Near the end of the interview sessions, one of the team offered to take on the work for the missing members, saying, "Give me lots. It builds up my self-esteem when I get to ask these questions. I like it when they answer me." This statement by a team member is an indication of personal agency development among the individuals. Personal agency was built through skills developed during practice that were then put to real use in the project. The members of the project team were learning many new skills and seeing themselves as viable adults with questions to ask and concerns to raise. They saw and heard the agency personnel respond to their questions thoughtfully and respectfully. They saw this project as something that improved their sense of self and opened doors to other opportunities. They built confidence, communication skills and personal agency. After the interviews they were usually really "pumped" and reported feeling powerful asking questions.

As with any project, the team was working with constraints related to time and money. If we were operating in a magical place without constraints, I could have worked with the team ten hours per week doing this and nothing else for two months instead of one hour per week for two years for a total of seventy-five hours. Or perhaps those very constraints that seem to bind us may be the very circumstances that created the space for this project.

*Give me lots. It builds up my self-esteem when I get to ask these questions. I like it when they answer me.*

*Jennifer,  
Project participant.*

*The community agencies that we interviewed became interested in what we had to say. This felt great to show our ideas as a team.*

*Jennifer,  
Project participant.*

## The Power of Money and its Role in Capacity Building

Offering participants an honorarium seemed appropriate because they were doing jobs that people—researchers—are paid to do. I was asking them to share their knowledge and expertise, so they should get something in return. It felt unfair that I would be paid and they would not. As well, it would offer the participants an incentive to become involved and stay with the project, it would build the team feeling and it would supply the participants with a reward of some sort, either material, monetary or experiential. Somehow it made the whole vision of working with learners on a demanding PAR project just a little bit cleaner, or so I thought back in the proposal writing stage.

The existence of the honorarium was not raised as part of the signing up process. It was not advertised as being there, nor was it hidden. My vision was that the group would decide how to spend the money and that would be the end of it.

But of course nothing is that simple. Some of the participants were receiving BC Benefits, which would mean any money they received would have to be reported as income and would later be deducted from their regular benefits. The participants who were not on benefits would have the money outright. This was not perceived as fair by the group or by me. This led us to look at how we could use the money in some way for the participants, but differently than cutting individual cheques for each participant. The other option would be to have pizza lunches or a similar treat. This brought other questions to the surface:

Is it for only participants? What about the other students who also attend the main class but do not have time for this—right now there is only a handful here on Wednesday lunch hours. What if we bring in pizza one day—does everyone get some? I have to let go of my personal views. I do not want to have this group or project seemed favoured by me or the college or whatever. I don't want to be seen as enticing them into the project or bribing them to stay. I also do not want it to look elitist. We (the students and staff at the college) are small enough that everything we do, we do together. So if that is the case, is it right for the project to buy pizza for everyone who is there on Wednesdays? I am not really comfortable with that either (Journal, September 18, 2002).

While all these discussions were going on with Marina and me, and other people at the college and me, the proposal, including the budget page, was in the possession of the participants:

Interestingly enough the money aspect has not come up. I thought by now that someone would have read further and asked what we will do with the thousand dollars. Since they haven't, I am thinking of giving it to them as team building activity. Suppose you had a \$1000 to spend as a group. How would you do it? I am trying to think what would be most valuable re learning for method to do this so I will keep myself guessing until I decide (Journal, October 16, 2002).

I really think it might be time to throw the \$1000 question into the ring and see what happens. I would like to ... see where we get (Journal, October 30, 2002).

...I think I will jump into the fire and see what they feel about the \$1000 and what should be done with it (Journal, November 6, 2002),

I was concerned with the honoraria and how it should be spent. The participants did not share this hang-up:

Looked at where we were and where we still need to go re the project. Also brought back consideration of honoraria and how the group wanted to spend it. Everything from divide it up, splurge on a big fancy dinner, pay for one person to go to school, buy t-shirts or packs or jackets, to give it to a group. No decision made. (Interestingly there is not a lot of concern about this. We only talk about it when I bring it up and not at other times at all. I do not have people coming to me as individuals with ideas or with anyone bringing it to the team to discuss... This is quite different from the student association, with some of the same players) (Journal, March 19, 2003).

When we wrapped up the project in June of 2003, the team had not spent the money nor had they made a decision on how to spend it. Instead, they voted to hold the money until next year, passing on the power of making the decision to a potentially new group of participants.

The now \$2000 has not come up—the students are all aware and yet no one has said a word about the honoraria for being in the group. Again, this is so not what I would have expected (Journal, November 19, 2003).

It was during this time, the fall of 2003, that the group was dreaming of producing a video. They felt one way to pay for production costs would be to use the honorarium money. While the team knew video production would be expensive, they never got to the point of researching that aspect, as other problems with the

concept blocked it as a serious decision before the team went that far.

Oh and we actually touched on the \$2000 and what to do with it but that seemed to get boring rather fast so that went out the window—on to other thoughts... (Journal, January 7, 2004).

The project has now wrapped up its second phase and finally the money decision has been made but still the money has not been spent. The decision was led by the strongest member of the group and the rest went along with the idea. We have a logo for the team and the participants decided they would like that on fleece jackets. They then took into consideration all the participants over the course of the project who would “qualify” for a jacket and how they would use the money left over. These decisions were made just before school was completed for the year and have not been acted upon (Journal, June 2004).

Jackets ordered – money spent! (Journal, September 2004).

This one issue related to the project is quintessentially the project itself: that is agency and access. Here we have a group of people with money to spend and what they need is a group decision, which takes agency or personal power to reach. While they are willing to mull around ideas, no one in the group felt comfortable finalizing the decision, or pushing the group to finalize the decision. On two occasions, two different participants jokingly suggested that they would just take their cash share and leave the rest to decide what they wanted to do. The rest of the group did not respond in any strong way to that suggestion but somehow the response, or lack of it, caused the person who made the suggestion to drop the idea. Neither of the two proponents came to me to inquire as to whether she could get her share. Nor during the course of the two years the project ran did anyone come to me and suggest ways that we could hurry up this decision making or to lobby for his/her viewpoint. I was not perceived as having any power related to how the money should be spent.

Living in small town British Columbia one faces added expense every time we access a service not available in our community. Since we are in a small community without many shopping options, many of the products the team were interested in spending the money on, custom t-shirts, fancy dinners or team jackets, are not available locally. Had we been able to walk over and shop as a group from our campus, the money would have been spent early in the first year.



I have argued that participation in a PAR project increases personal agency, yet I am also saying that the team may have been lacking the personal agency to make a group decision and carry it forward. Again, it is the combination of personal agency and access that causes the double barrier. If it were only personal agency and decision-making that had stalled our progress, the HSB Team would have progressed, certainly by the second year, to where they would easily make the decision. Yet, the team was not in any hurry to spend the money, and they were choosing not to spend it, just to get it spent. They were not sure how to go about this joint expenditure, so they were comfortable taking their time and making a decision they would be happy with after. Being a part of a PAR project, where decision-making was an analyzed process, the team felt responsible to each other to make a wise decision and to hear all the voices. Some of the voices were quiet at first, but when the entire team was ready, when they felt they had reached consensus, they made the decision.

In the end, each member of the team ordered a fleece jacket or vest from a catalogue and then had them all embroidered with the Hair Straight Back Logo. Some of the team proved to be excellent catalogue shoppers, understanding photographs, thinking through the complicated sizing, and visualizing the best colour for the logo. Two years later, the jackets are still proudly worn. A PAR approach provides depth to the learning and decision-making processes. The decision to purchase HSB jackets also indicates the level of commitment the team felt to the project and to each other. The project had become more than making a map and brochure; by now it had grown into something participants were proud to be part of and something they willingly wanted to share with others. They also joked about including the word “consulting” in the logo, as in Hair Straight Back Consulting, and dreamt the dream about how cool it would be if someone hired them for another research task.

#### **More on Money and Capacity**

One of the successes during Phase 1 was that one of the team members applied for and was successful in attaining the job of transcribing and typing the interview tapes. The project was able to pay her \$15.00 per hour for this work. She saved her earnings to pay for her next correspondence course. In order to repeat this success in Phase 2, the team decided to include paid work for an intervention to increase access as part of the second proposal.<sup>2</sup>

As the work began to pile up with the map, checking information and ensuring

<sup>2</sup> Wages were set at \$8 per hour (minimum wage for BC), with \$1000 total set aside for this.

agencies were still on board, the tasks were demanding more time of the team and it seemed reasonable to compensate the extra time spent on these tasks with wages. As soon as we took this step, I could see that we should have taken it sooner. Many members of the team have not been paid workers for many years. They felt pride in being able to claim hours of work, though some were reluctant to ask for pay. To them, the tasks related to getting the map to the printing stage did not bear any resemblance to what they normally considered work.

Due to my own biases, we had not started this as soon as we could have. With the majority of the team on social assistance, any wages they were paid would have to be reported and paid back. The members of the team who were on social assistance wanted to pay back the system. They wanted to feel the pride that comes from wages. They wanted to report they had earned real dollars. They did not share my hang-ups about what seemed to me an unfair and adversarial system. I also was concerned that some members might be tempted to not report their earnings, and then would end up getting cut off social assistance or charged with fraud. These “problems” were all my hang-ups and assumptions. I had failed the one major goal of the project by not challenging my own assumptions related to wages and the team.

Somewhere I had crossed over the line of instructor and into “protector” from the big bad world. I had no business crossing that line; I should have held an open discussion with the team and aired all these concerns. I strongly encourage other researchers who are working with learners to look for ways of paying participants for work done in a project.

## The Messiness

In my experience, literacy projects and research are messy. Projects do not follow straight lines; goals either become clearer or are changed completely. Participants often have life issues that get in the way of consistent participation.

To knowingly launch a PAR project with adult learners of mixed skill levels and abilities is to launch oneself on a balancing act of reality versus ideal in terms of project time and commitment, training time for both learners and practitioner, and time to reflectively analyze what is happening and respond in a timely fashion. I would find myself obsessed with timelines and outcomes and then realize I was missing the point. Anne Docherty, fellow practitioner put it this way, “...there is often a trade-off between *getting the thing done* and allowing time for

real growth and change.” This project balanced those two positions constantly, but more and more I tried to allow for real growth and change.

It would be incorrect to leave the impression that participatory learners are all perfect happy participants in the project. There were glitches along the way, some that we remedied and others that I did not pay enough attention to at the time. I did not want this project to feel like school work to the participants. Not all the team was enrolled in the upgrading program, and it was supposed to be a different form of learning.

The messiness of this type of learning where there is no right or wrong answer and where the facilitator is not giving direction, but rather is continually asking questions, is, for some adult learners a scary and threatening place. While I tried to ensure learners felt challenged and not threatened in new learning situations, I was not aware how threatening this new power dynamic would be for the team. I naively expected them to be able to change their roles as easily as I did. I noted this in my journal:

There is a resistance to doing this—and I guess that is fair. After all, I have certainly dropped out of things that I felt were not “progressing.” I do think they realize how complex things are and in some ways they don’t like that. Their worlds are to some extent black and white and two-dimensional and that is how it is easiest to deal. If they looked at everything in their lives with the detail I am asking them to do this, they would accomplish nothing and they would also be very depressed. I think I look at my life in this detail. It is a different way of living almost. I do not even consider myself a processor versus “S,” a colleague, who looks at every detail in a zillion ways. Can it be that for the most part the grey zone of the world washes over this group?? (Journal, October 30, 2002).

Some of this discomfort is what makes PAR work for adult learners. This is a new way to make decisions and to think things through. It is accepting that there is no one right answer, no one correct point of view, no one “quick fix” solution. It shakes their reality, just a bit, and gives them a different glimpse of the world and how they can operate in it.

A PAR project keeps practitioners and participants out of the “tickie box” mentality. (By “tickie box” I am referring to the practice of just doing things for the sake of doing them, not for the learning and everything else that comes with it - just to tick the box beside the item on your “to do” list.) In the tickie box world, the final product is the goal, with likely some learning occurring for the

*I am a mother, friend, sister, and the list goes on. Five years ago I walked into Northwest Community College in the pursuit of an education. I never suspected how profoundly an education would impact myself, my family and my friends. I have concluded that it was far easier to walk through life with little education. Issues that were once black and white are now various shades of grey. The shades of grey represent different perspectives, opportunities and challenges.*

*Belinda,  
Project participant.*

*Although I am a university undergraduate I have remained a constant presence at NWCC. It is there that I met people who share my love/hate relationship with literacy. There that I gained a sense of empowerment in regards to my literacy abilities. There that I can use the knowledge that I have gained to advocate for those who struggle with literacy issues. So my involvement with this participatory action research is a way of examining the grey areas.*

*Belinda,  
Project participant.*

staff person who created the final product (brochure and map). In the tickie box approach, you may not have participants at all, or if you do, they are led through each task with little deviation and not much murky decision-making. In an obsessive tickie box world, getting it done quickly and efficiently is the top priority. If you are comfortable doing the tickie box work, get it done and move on with little time for the what, where, why, how, when, who and process work, PAR is not for you. In a PAR project, the final product is a tiny piece of the big learning map that happens for the participants.

For adult learners who have come to expect tickie box learning, PAR projects can create a disconnect. These learners expect to know where they are going and what they are doing in a class. That is a fair and important expectation for anyone to have if they join any form of team, group or class. Discomfort started to build early in the project as participants were not seeing their progress and accomplishments. In order to address this, we continued to revisit the outcomes for both Selected English and for the project itself. This was done by posting the outcomes and asking the team to indicate where they thought we were meeting outcomes and where we may not have yet met the outcome or needed to be sure to include some specific skill or task. The team was encouraged to suggest ways to do this and to speak critically about the project and the process. It was not long into the project that the team realized the amount of work they had done and that they could add many more outcomes to the list.

This project also presented several learning situations where a member of the team learned the “real” way. Each member of the team observed others’ behaviours over the course of the project, how commitment could be defined differently by different individuals and how the group was affected by those who did not uphold their commitments. Each member of the team had their ideas challenged or had to defend their choices. Together we saw what happened to the team when one of the stronger members was absent for an extended period for personal reasons. This too, is a key aspect of PAR. It is not just writing a brochure, or drawing a map. It is the whole complex process of collaborative research that goes into doing the task, taking the action, the very nature of PAR that allows for real failures and real successes. A PAR project and PAR learning are ripe with unexpected, non-measurable and non-academic outcomes.

## Room to Learn

Participatory Action Research provides an approach to learning that is not

always available in institutions where courses are often tied to a set curriculum of specific skill development and a specific number of course hours with little room for flexibility. This project provided a space and time for discussions related to literacy, completely unconstrained by course curriculum demands. I certainly felt a need to move the project forward, but at the same time I was willing to allow the messiness to fully develop its potential and take us wherever it may.

This project flexibility is illustrated by what happened in the fall of 2003 when the team re-formed after the summer break. We were funded again to do a follow-up or intervention to the first part of the project. We worked through what an intervention was and what it could mean. One of the team had seen the movie *Bowling for Columbine* and suggested that the equivalent, *Bowling 4 Literacy*,<sup>3</sup> would be an amazing “in your face” film project. While this was not the only intervention suggested, it was the intervention that most captured the team’s collective imagination. As we progressed in our discussions, they felt that a video would be a way to tell their personal story together with the other team members’ stories, in a broader context of adult literacy.

We watched the video, *Bowling for Columbine*, as a team and discussed the possibilities. We created a wall frieze with all our ideas and suggestions for a film. The ideas the group wanted to touch on were all over the map in terms of literacy. It would be an amazing project to carry out.

In many ways, this time was the richest for the project. Even though we chose not to do the video, our discussions related to what should be in the video allowed the team to express ideas and relate past experiences to where they were now. The group reflection on literacy that occurred during this time was self-affirming for the team and raised my awareness. Again, many practitioners are aware of the issues related to literacy, yet when we hear some of the comments from our successful learners, it comes as a surprise or a wake-up:

These comments did not come up at all last year, but when we were talking about the various aspects of low lit and in terms of the frieze putting down comments that would apply to the overall topic of literacy, failing a grade in school was put as an idea to deal with on the video so was put on the frieze. Then the students started talking openly about what grade they had failed and how they felt when that happened and why it happened... they don’t understand now why this happened but they all feel it made a major impact

<sup>3</sup> Bowling is one of the popular student/staff activities at our campus so the bowling aspect of the title held meaning for the team and was a bit of a joke at the same time.

*In many ways, this time was the richest for the project.*

on their life. “L” claims he was in Grade 1 for 5 years. At first I thought he was kidding, because he said it with the amazing First Nations style humour. “I guess the teacher really liked me.” But the reality is that he probably was given grade 1 work for 5 years and then when he was 11 they stuck him in Grade 6 with his age group and he was so far behind that in a couple of years he just gave up. “L” is the guy who was robbed by colonization—if it were 200 years ago he would be the shaman—the kind gentle wise man with lots of inner strength, generosity and spirituality. In terms of multiple intelligences, he has much, unfortunately not in our current society’s areas of focus (Journal, November 24, 2003).

R is not marginalized and is married with one child who is doing well in grade 11 work and is happily middle-class and middle-aged. I guess I found it somehow surprising or shocking that she was as susceptible to the insecurities that are found with those who are considered low literacy and do not have grade 12.<sup>4</sup> Then she started discussing how she had failed grade 1 and how that experience had been so confusing to her and how she still did not understand how that happened (Journal, November 24, 2003).

J’s comments about failing were also interesting:

I was smart in grade 3. Then we moved and I went to a different school and had a different teacher. I failed grade 4. How could I be smart one year and dumb the next? (Journal, November 24, 2003).

All the while that we were having these interesting conversations, the weeks were slipping by without any concrete action. But now in retrospect, it is these conversations and this freedom to work together in an open-ended way that allowed the personal growth and development that occurred, both for the team and for me. For most of the team, it was the first time they had mentioned their past failures to others. Many had not told their spouses or their children. I listened and learned. They spoke, listened and developed their confidence to find

<sup>4</sup> I need to clarify here that low literacy and not having grade 12 can be two very different states. Low literacy suggests struggles with everyday math and reading while not completing grade 12 can be related to a multitude of factors. We often see very skilled and competent people upgrading to the grade 12 level. Most of our low literacy learners will not be successful in attaining their Adult Dogwood Certificates. What I am seeing now is a definite overlap between the two groups in terms of critical thinking, self-image and confidence with learning. In other words, both groups exhibit many of the same “hang ups” even when they are living productive lives and have proven successes outside of school.

others in the same situation. But still, fear of being “found out” hovered nearby:

In relation to the Literacy Fair (a trade fair type idea that the school district was putting on) one of the team came and said she enjoyed being a part of the project team but that she could not take an active role in the fair (we had planned on having a table set up with a display and some of the team members there to talk about the project) because she did not want anyone knowing that she was low literacy. For her job she had said she had grade 11. She did not want anyone to know that some of her current course work at the college was grade 10—or that she had failed grade 1. Here we go again (Journal, November 19, 2003).

Throughout the project I felt myself to be in a privileged situation, in terms of my education and my access to education as a child. As an educator, I was privileged to be in on these discussions when we talked about literacy and the effect it had on each of the team members’ personal lives; I learned so much. It is through these discussions that I now have a better understanding of what the phrase “education is for the privileged” really means in people’s lives.

Framed in reference to PAR, this time of working on the frieze and considering a movie was definitely participatory and action and research. The discussions and knowledge came from participants, but to be truly PAR, I would have had to let it go. As Ann W. Martin (2001) says, “This leads to the final point in that in action research the facilitator-researcher must at some point let go and allow the participants to take responsibility for their own actions and learning” (p. 208). She goes on to point out that they may or may not be successful, and what they have learned *may* mean they will take greater control of their collective destiny.

As the facilitator of the PAR process, one constantly juggles how to take advantage of the principles of PAR in a way that best meets the needs of the individual participants and the group, at that specific time. And here is where my connection and the team connection to an institution caused problems. Unstated expectations that one educational institution will not “bash”<sup>5</sup> another and that project work will be of “a certain standard” got in the way of me giving the team free rein. In retrospect, I now feel I should have encouraged the team to make a video.

Now, only two years later, I cannot believe I was that intimidated by the concept of creating a movie, but new digital video technology has simplified access to the

<sup>5</sup> Many negative comments were directed at the public school system.

*As the facilitator of the PAR process, one constantly juggles how to take advantage of the principles of PAR in a way that best meets the needs of the individual participants and the group, at that specific time.*

movie making process. Digital video was very expensive and the editing software was complex. It was also one of the banned projects from cost-shared funding, as funders felt video production excessively expensive and results often did not translate into money well spent. I am now planning digital video sessions, with no additional funding, for mentally challenged learners, and perhaps *Bowling for Literacy* may eventually appear on a screen or monitor near you.

Even if the video had completely failed, the principles of PAR would have been upheld and more learning would have been facilitated. While the team could easily see doing a video, it was my limitations on that vision that kept them from trying it. As a facilitator of the process I missed this golden learning opportunity. I was too concerned about protecting the team, performing for the project, meeting the needs of funding agencies and having something completed by the end of the project, to let the PAR process fully develop. I should have had "*real change beats getting it done*" tattooed on my forehead. After all, it is the challenge of facilitating "real change" that motivates me to work with adult learners. If I can help someone learn how to learn, to see themselves as a learner, then they can take control of a powerful tool for real change in their life.

Once we gave up the video dream, the team concentrated on more achievable outcomes. After a few agency interventions failed to get off the ground due to agency staff quitting and agencies moving, the team decided a map and brochure explaining services would be the longest lasting, most worthwhile form of intervention. The story of the map was a saga in itself as the team brought in high school artists to draw the impossible "picture map" while also trying to pin down agencies as to where their offices would be in a few months<sup>6</sup> and, at the same time, dealing with life issues within the team. It was also a fun creative time as the team looked through the data, decided the services to highlight, took photographs and designed graphics to fit the requirements. The map and brochure (Appendix I) are user-friendly, bold and easy to update. The final production and distribution of the map and brochure is upheld as a team accomplishment by each of the team members. It stands as a real action the team produced for the community.

<sup>6</sup> Three of the ten agencies featured on the map have moved offices and changed addresses during this project. As well, some agencies experienced major personnel and mandate transformations.

## Conclusions

The classroom participatory action research project offers both the practitioner and the learners a different approach to learning and an opportunity to build capacity. It is a space where learning can be "laid bare," where "how to learn" is openly shown, discussed and debated. It is a space where viewpoints are validated, imaginations are stimulated, creativity released, options taken, opportunities offered and learning modeled.

In this approach to learning, the practitioner holds no special powers, "wears no clothes." It is risky in that the project is not controlled by the practitioner; rather, the team of participants plays a large role in decision making and control. It is rewarding in the places the team can and will take the project; it is rewarding to unearth the rich wisdom of the learners. It is messy and often the mess "pays off" with real change and growth, but risky as the project may not be finished according to the original timeline.

Above all, there is one reason to consider this approach with adult learners. They will each grow and develop their individual, personal power/ agency as they work as a team to solve the problems and research the information for the project. Their literacy skills will increase. They will be able to transfer this learning to the rest of their lives. Even if the project gets messy and there are constraints or time limitations, by upholding the main principles of PAR there will be opportunity for *real change and growth*. One project will spawn others. There will be no end.

## Recommendations to Practitioners

1. Not all PAR projects need to be big or funded. Start small with ideas from the group.
2. Encourage any activity that makes participants active agents in the learning.
3. If your group does not have the necessary skills, bring in community people to participate on a short-term basis, or other students in your institution. A PAR project could run with a core group and other individuals brought in to work with the team at various points when their skills were required.
4. Honour the wisdom of the group.

*PAR comes in different sizes and densities. Mini PAR may take several sessions and address "easy" topics; maxi PAR may take a few years and grapple with complex social issues.*

*That is the core challenge that PAR presents to the world of educational research: are we making a difference where it matters, is the world a better place for our work?*

Merrifield, 1997,

*PAR is not another tool for the instructor's toolbox; rather, it can become an approach to teaching to respect when choosing and using the tools you already hold.*

5. Consider personal agency as you work within your practice. What questions do you have about agency and adult learners? Do you agree that it is part of the whole literacy picture?
6. Suggest research in practice and participatory action research projects as modes of professional development for your practice, as they are both powerful professional development tools for practitioners. During the course of this project I built capacity and developed skills and understandings directly related to my work. The research in practice aspect of the project also forced me to reflect and analyze those moments of development and allows for surprise—real change—in the way I do my job. Support from peers and academia will further enrich this learning journey.
7. Try a PAR project in an institutional setting. The college connection both allowed freedom and placed constraints on the HSB project, but mostly the college connection acted to hold the messiness together. The college framework provided a regularized reason to meet, a place to meet, a credential to attain and a group of adult learners to become participants.
8. Consider the value of money in relation to the project. Pay participants when warranted. Apply to funders for wages for participants. While the money aspect could potentially create many administrative headaches for an institutionalized instructor, community literacy organizations may be able to assist in streamlining the red tape and would be a valuable partner in a project of this nature.
9. Share your experiences with the field.

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## Appendix A: Adult Students' Needs

Tandon, R. (1988). Social transformation and participatory research. *Convergence*, 21, 5-18.

### Some of the Needs of Adult Student

Childcare	Food	Patience
Clothing	Funding	Personal control
Comfort	Future	Purpose
Community	Goals	Reason
Culture	Good judgment	Recreation
Desire	Health	Respect
Dignity	Healthy body	Security
Dreams	Healthy mind	Self-confidence
Drive	Hope	Self-respect
Drug free	Know where to go	Shelter
Ease of mind	Money	Support
Encouragement	Motivation	Transportation
Exercise	Need	Validation
Family	Nourishment	Will

## Appendix B: Survey for Future and Current Students

### Future Students

1. Do you want to come back to school? Why?
2. What level of education do you have now? \_\_\_\_\_ Other training?
3. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ Dependants? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What steps have you taken to return to school?
5. What services have you used?
6. What are your obstacles to returning to school?
7. What kind of support do you have?
8. Any comments on the services in Houston?

### Current Students

1. Why did you want to come back to school?
2. Level of education? \_\_\_\_\_ Other training?
3. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_ Dependants? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What steps did you take?
5. What services did you use?
6. What were your obstacles in returning to school?
7. What obstacles do you still have?
8. What kind of support did you have?
9. Did it change over time?
10. Any comments on the services available in Houston?

## Appendix C: Selected English Course Outline



### Selected English Career and College Prep

<b>Campus:</b>	Houston
<b>Term:</b>	Fall 2002
<b>Instructor:</b>	Dee McRae
<b>Office/Phone:</b>	
<b>Times &amp; Place:</b>	Classroom 8 Times to be determined
<b>email:</b>	dmcrae@nwcc.bc.ca

### Course Content:

This course is designed to allow students to actively participate in a community research project while at the same time getting college credit for the work they are doing and the skills they are learning. Specifically, the course will involve students in the research process including skills such as interviewing, data collection, data analysis and data presentation. In a general way, the course will cover listening and speaking skills, reading and writing skills, as well as important life-long learning and study skills.

### Course Format:

- The course will involve workshop meetings of one hour per week. At times during the project students may be asked to participate beyond the one hour per week.
- The course will last as long as it takes to complete the project. Students may choose to finish at the end of the semester, whether the project is complete or not.

### Course Prerequisites:

Placement at the Fundamental Level or above

### Course Co-requisites:

CPST 020 Fundamental Computer Studies; Selected English (available on some campuses)

### Learning Outcomes:

Students who complete Sel English will demonstrate the following skills:

## **A. Communicative Skills**

### **Listening and viewing**

- listen for content
- follow instructions and directions

### **Speaking**

- organize thoughts and ideas in terms of purpose, sequence, language and conciseness
- give directions, explanations and instructions
- seek, provide, and use information constructively

## **B. Adaptive Strategies**

The student will be actively involved in a research project as it evolves. They will be involved in making decisions and planning how best to run the project.

## **C. English Skills**

### **1. Reading:**

#### **a. Reading Comprehension Skills**

- *Literal*: identify subject/topic, main ideas, supporting details, and sequence

#### **b. Reading Comprehension Strategies:** the student will demonstrate the ability to

- Preview/Survey: initial overview of large sections of text (chapters, etc.)
- Preread: overview of shorter sections of text
- Monitor evaluation of current level of understanding
- Reflect: evaluation of comprehension in retrospect

**2. Writing Skills:** In a variety of situations, the student will communicate effectively in written form.

#### **a. General Writing:** In writing, the student will demonstrate the ability to:

- collect and organize ideas using techniques such as free writing, brain storming, note taking, outlining, and thought maps;
- note take
- fill out a variety of simple forms
- respond to selected materials after reading, viewing, listening and/or discussion

**3. Research Skills:** The students will work on the “Learner’s Perspective on Community Services” project to research how services are offered in Houston. They will learn the research skills required by the project as needed. They will then determine the best way to communicate this information to the general public.

**Required Texts and Materials:** None

### **Recommended Readings/Resources:**

These will be supplied as the workshops progress.

### **Evaluation:**

Evaluation will be based on attendance at regular meetings and participation. Students will be notified if they are not meeting the requirements, and they will be encouraged to participate further.

### **Grading Profile:**

Credit will awarded for Selected English to all those who meet the evaluation requirements.

**Assignments:** To be determined.

**Tests:** There are no tests.

## Appendix D: The Poster



## Appendix E: What Agency Might Look Like

### Example One: Recognized Individual Growth of Participant

A teacher at the high school asked my college colleague and I what we had been doing with one of our students, who happened to be part of the HSB project. My colleague and I looked somewhat blank, so the teacher went on to say how she, and other staff at the high school, had noticed a real shift in how the student approached the school and the teachers when the student was at the high school as a parent to support her daughter. Specifically, there was a noted change in body language, verbally offering to assist by doing this or that to help with her daughter and she was much more willing to question and deal with the teachers. The Career and College Prep program coordinator for NWCC reported the same thing for this particular student, specifically that she was starting to make eye contact with people, cutting her hair so it was not in her eyes and not having her hand in front of her mouth when she spoke to either a group of peers or teachers. I am interpreting these observations as increased personal agency.

Lives continued on beyond the end of the HSB project, and in a small town we often hear about further developments. This particular student "met someone" on the Internet and has moved, with her youngest daughter, to another community. We can only hope that this was a wise decision, and that her increased personal agency will help her in her future decision making.

### Example Two: Real Life for Participant

In January, the year after Black Thursday, one of our team members received a letter from BC Benefits, telling her she had to work on and document her job search if she wanted to remain on benefits of \$400 per month. This woman was over 50, First Nations, living 115 kilometres off reserve with a white male and subsisting well below poverty level, but in a very busy productive way. These official BC Benefit's letters are usually devastating to all who receive them. This team member seemed to have a different view of the process. She tackled the task and made many suggestions of her own about where she could look for employment and short courses she could take to improve her skills. We assisted her as she wrote and typed her resume, including the large number of volunteer hours that she contributes to our Community Kitchen and all the skills and credentials her participation has provided. She launched herself on our small community, armed with her resumes, but in the end, was not hired. Her disability claim was finally refused, partially because she refused to allow them to classify her as unable to work with a colostomy bag, even though it often causes her embarrassing moments and indefinite future medical interventions. To be classed by "the system" as disabled, is, in her mind, to be called useless. She has had the condition and the bag since childhood; it is now part of who she is. And she is not useless. She cooks us bannock, does dishes at our events, always provides at

the potlucks, and writes poetry for events and people. I do not think it would be overstating it to say that the project somehow allowed her to find herself and her place in the community.

Prior to the HSB project, this learner seemed at loose ends, hanging around school, wanting to take some course, but not able to advance to the next level in either English or math, after reaching a learning plateau that had left her feeling frustrated and useless. During the time of the PAR project, she increased her self-esteem, her sense of belonging and her understanding of the welfare system she finds herself dependent on. The second year of the project she began to see herself as a volunteer at the Community Kitchen, where she had previously been a participant, and the year after the project she came and did intermediate level word-processing projects for the kitchen, the literacy organization, and the College, as a volunteer. It was during this period that she relied heavily on the community of learners at the College for support during three major and tragic deaths in her family. The financial obligations related to the funerals were so huge for this woman that the other students organized themselves to help her with this situation. She would not have been able to attend the potlatch without this financial support. For each of the deaths she wrote a poem memorializing the person; each time it was printed up in the memorial tribute. Each time she came back and talked about the funeral and the person who had died and showed us the tribute. She and her entire family were deeply touched by the generosity of her fellow students; her eldest brother sent the student body a heartfelt letter of thanks, and later dropped by to visit. The year after, this year, she has shown up a few times with a bag of bannock, but each time was too busy with her life to stay very long. It appears she has moved on. This is success; this woman has built capacity.

## Appendix F: Rules of Engagement

### **We agree to:**

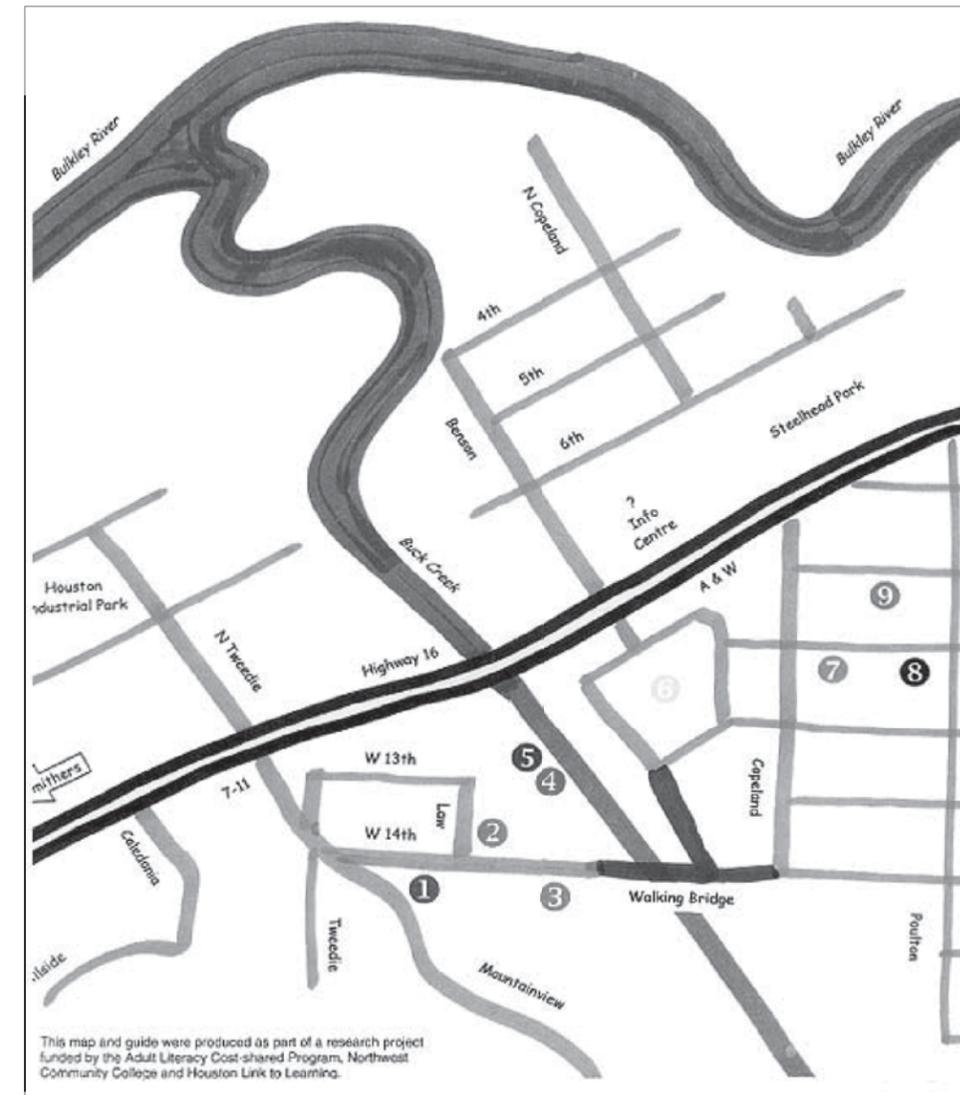
1. Start with a sharing circle.
2. Think positively.
3. Respect
  - Individuality
  - Boundaries
  - Opinions
  - Common courtesy and manners
4. Goals
  - Work toward a stated and understood goal.
5. Accountability
  - To each other / commitment
  - To the project
  - To the institutions
6. Offer help when needed.

## Appendix G: Team Goals and Original Goals

Team Approved Goals	Original Goals as Stated in the Proposal
1. Challenge our assumptions. (All of us, throughout the project.) (Originally 2)	1. Create an accessible model, suitable for use by low literacy adults, so they may better understand and access all services available to them.
2. Identify all the possible needs of adults wanting to return to school. (New)	2. Challenge our assumptions about learning and learners and the services and programs we offer in the NW in order to ensure services and programs mesh for the low literacy individual.
3. List all services in Houston and area. (3)	3. Compile an inventory of services, done by teams of literacy students, within each of at least two communities, to determine what is available, literacy skill level required to access service
4. Determine requirements: literacy skills and other "stuff" required for each service. (3 & 5)	4. Map the access routes to programs and services identified in the inventory to graphically see the flow of service and identify the connections between services and programs.
5. Evaluate services and identify gaps. (What do you need to go to get service?) (What services are not available in Houston?) (6)	5. Assess literacy level required to access the mapped routes to programs and services covered in the inventory.
6. Map services to show routes (where) and requirements (how). (4)	6. Evaluate the effectiveness of the community at meeting all the needs of low literacy adults and suggest ways to cover deficiencies to ensure more accessible services and programs.
7. Create awareness for service providers related to access to their agency and to the other community agencies and the services they provide. (7)	7. Build stronger connections within individual community learning and service networks to better meet the needs of low literacy individuals.
8. Create a model for other groups to do the same mapping project in their community. (1)	

## Appendix H: Brochure and Map

### Part of the Map Front



Part of the Map Back

<p><b>4 Northwest Community College</b> Upgrading and distance learning</p>  <p>845-7266 for appointment Receptionist Open Door for information Educational Advising by appt Monday to Thursday 8:30am to 11:00am and 12:00pm to 4:30pm Everyone welcome Yes Educational Advising is free Courses vary Summer Computer <input type="checkbox"/> No Yes</p>	<p><b>5 Houston Link to Learning</b> Literacy Services</p>  <p>Located inside college 845-2727 All Staff Open door Monday to Thursday 10:00am—2:00pm Everyone welcome Yes, specialize in assisting with reading, writing, basic computer skills Free Family <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes available No</p>
<p><b>9 Houston Friendship Centre</b> Workshops, social and cultural activities</p>  <p>845-2131 Receptionist—Monthly Calendar of Events at reception Open Door Monday to Friday 8:30am - 4:30pm Closed 12:00 to 1:00 pm Everyone welcome Yes Free Yes and Youth Centre with drop-in Sometimes available Yes</p>	<p><b>10 Houston Community Services</b> Information for families, victim services</p>  <p>845-3484 Any staff Open Door or phone for appointment Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm Everyone welcome Yes Help with all federal forms Free - specific fees or charges apply for some services No <input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes available No</p>

Brochure

## Map and Guide to Accessing Services in Houston



### Key to Symbols

**Name of Agency**

Type of service available

-  Phone number
-  Who to talk to
-  Access – open door or appointment
-  Days and times open
-  Who can use the services
-  Is there help with reading and forms?
-  Cost
-  Community Access Computer Site
-  Children's and Family Programming
-  Childcare services