

**Proceedings of the
Research-in-Practice Seminar**

Edmonton, Alberta

October 24 - 26, 1997

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Introduction

I really enjoyed the experience Interacting with other very experienced practitioners was a unique experience for me

It was great to see so many old friends and to meet new people It was a rich sharing, and while I still have some unanswered questions I think and hope that together we have laid the groundwork for something to continue in this area

In October, 1997, eighteen people from across Canada gathered at the Learning Centre, an adult literacy program in Edmonton. Working in two languages, we listened, talked, queried, debated, dreamed and reflected about research practices and perspectives. We started to lay some ground work to encourage and support research in adult literacy practice in Canada.

This document is a record of the seminar's proceedings. It includes this introduction, notes from the discussions, a statement of values, and an action plan. Notes from presentations, a list of seminar participants, and a financial statement for the seminar are appended.

Background

In February 1996, the National Literacy Secretariat hosted a "conversation" about policy for literacy research. Participants in the conversation identified a need to recognize, link and support literacy research and practice. Following their participation in the conversation, Yvon Laberge and Mary Norton, both of Edmonton, met to imagine ways to encourage practitioner research in Alberta. With the encouragement of their provincial government literacy consultant, they applied to the National Literacy Secretariat for a grant to research and develop a proposal for a project to encourage and support practitioner research in adult literacy.

Research for the proposal development involved six consultants across Canada who responded to a questionnaire about practitioner research and in some cases surveyed others in their regions. As a result of the consultations and a literature review, a two phase project was proposed. The purpose of Phase I was to organize and facilitate an assembly of up to 40 people with an interest in practitioner research to exchange information and recommend strategies to encourage and support practitioner research in Canada." Depending on the outcome of the first phase, the purpose of Phase II was to carry out action to support and coordinate assembly participants and others as they plan and initiate practitioner research activities in their locales.

The proposal was submitted to the National Literacy Secretariat. At the same time, the NLS was developing a framework to guide the work of the secretariat regarding literacy research. Pending the completion of this framework, the NLS arranged financial support for a smaller scale gathering

Overview and purposes of the seminar

The seminar was described as an opportunity for participants to develop understanding about a range of perspectives and approaches to practitioner research. This would assist participants as they undertake or support practitioner research in their areas. Proposed purposes for the seminar included:

- to develop awareness and understanding about practitioner research (e.g., rationale for, approaches to, perspectives on)
- to learn about projects or programs that promote and support practitioner research
- to exchange information about practitioner research projects in Canada
- to plan ways to maintain communication among seminar participants and others about practitioner research

Although the seminar focused on practitioner research, the term research-in-practice was used in order to include research mentors, learners and others who might also be involved in research about literacy practice.

Participants

Participants included 18 Anglophone and Francophone practitioners, researchers and staff from federal/provincial/territorial government and literacy organizations. Participants were invited because of their interest and experience in practitioner research and their capacity to share or apply information from the seminar in their future work. Participants were identified during the original proposal development and through other consultations.

Participants included three people who were contracted to make presentations that served as starting points for discussion. These three were invited because of their particular experience in supporting practitioner research and developing theoretical frameworks about it.

Process

The process for the first day of the seminar included the three presentations. During each presentation, designated participants identified questions which provided starting points for discussion in small groups. On Sunday, attention was focused on discussing values and strategies to support research-in-practice and on outlining an action plan.

Acknowledgements

The research-in-practice Seminar was sponsored by the Learning Centre Literacy Association, in partnership with the University of Alberta, Faculty of Education and Faculty Saint-Jean. The National Literacy Secretariat provided a contract to the Learning Centre to implement the seminar and paid travel expenses for a number of participants. The NLS also paid for simultaneous translation services. The University of Alberta, Faculty of Education contributed \$1000 for seminar expenses and the Faculty Saint-Jean hosted an opening reception. The Learning Centre and the Boyle Street Co-op provided meeting space.

All who gathered for the seminar volunteered their time, experience, enthusiasm and good will. Some participants and others had additional roles: Yvon Laberge, Grace Malicky and Mary Norton planned the seminar. Yvon arranged translation services, provided liaison with the Faculty Saint-Jean, and elegantly facilitated the seminar process. Grace provided liaison with the Faculty of Education. Mary coordinated seminar arrangements and prepared this report. Jenny Horsman, Allan Quigley and Serge Wagner made presentations. Irene Vandette provided administrative support. Jean Reston, Mary McGinnis and Lil Gallant catered brilliantly. Margaret Robinson coordinated support from the NLS.

Research-in-practice: Some key values and principles

Based on discussion during the seminar, the following was written by Grace Malicky, in consultation with Audrey Thomas. It is included for follow-up discussion among seminar participants.

Because of social and cultural diversity across Canada, the nature of research in adult literacy as well as the nature of the support needed for this research will vary. There is no one right way to develop literacy programs or to conduct research within these programs. We need to recognize and respect a plurality of points of view not only on literacy but also on research. Working from this perspective, several key values and principles emerged at our research-in-practice seminar on October 25 and 26, 1997.

1. Practitioners and learners as researchers

There was unanimous support that more research about literacy practices be conducted by those engaged in the practice. Although the major focus of discussion involved participation of practitioners (instructors, tutors and coordinators) as researchers, learners also need to be involved as active researchers in literacy research. There are currently more models in the literature for practitioner as researcher than for learner as researcher.

2. Integration of research into program development

Traditionally, most research has been conducted by academics or outside researchers. Often, the research problem originates outside of programs and results have very little relevance for practitioners or learners. By integrating research into literacy program development, practitioners will view research as a tool to develop programs rather than as an end in itself. The purpose of research-in-practice is to improve professional practice while at the same time increasing knowledge about it. Research-in-practice links theory and practice into one whole by integrating action and reflection.

3. Ownership and control

A critical question involves ownership and control who owns knowledge, who has power and who benefits from the research. In research-in-practice, ownership is shared by learners, practitioners and research facilitators. Relationships among research participants are collaborative and egalitarian rather than hierarchical, reflecting a more democratic approach to the research process.

4. Mutual respect

It is crucial that academics value and respect the knowledge of practitioners and learners and, in turn, that learners and practitioners value and respect the contribution of academics. Different partners contribute in different, yet equally valuable, ways to the research process.

5. Learners and practitioners as active agents

Rather than being passive objects of research, learners and practitioners are active agents in the research process. All stakeholders in literacy programs need to be involved at all stages of the research process from initiation of the research through use of the results. This involves negotiation not only of the research question but also of the process through which participants work together.

6. Change

The ultimate goal of all research-in-practice is change. This might involve changes within individual practitioners, volunteers and learners, changes in literacy programs or changes at a societal level. With its focus on change, research-in-practice has the potential to promote the needs of those who have been excluded from education and improve the situation of people in literacy programs.

7. Learners and practitioners as creators of knowledge

Although both insiders and outsiders of literacy programs may question the ability of learners and practitioners to engage in the research process, thinking in daily life is not essentially different than that of academics. Research is simply more systematic. Everyone can understand or reflect on literacy, and hence, everyone can do research. The majority of people are excluded from participating in the creation of knowledge. Research-in-practice will help practitioners and learners view themselves as producers as well as consumers of knowledge.

8. Beyond the specific

Credibility and acceptance of research-in-practice will be established by sharing information generated and by drawing out common findings from specific studies to build a new baseline of possibilities. As we move beyond the specific context to a consideration of the broader underlying issues, our research will contribute to global thinking on policies and practices in literacy education as well as impacting on practice at the local level. In order to attain a global perspective as we engage in research-in-practice, we need to think globally but act locally. By focusing on general policies and practices of literacy, research-in-practice can help to redress the current shift away from empowering literacy learners towards an increased emphasis on technical aspects of literacy education.

9. Support for research-in-practice

There was unanimous agreement that support will be needed for research-in-practice and that financial support is one crucial component of this support. We strongly recommend that funding agencies recognize the value of research-in-practice both by inviting proposals for this kind of research and by continuing to fund proposals by Canadian practitioners already engaged in this type of work. In addition to financial support, literacy practitioners and learners need assistance to engage in reflection on their practice. This could be achieved through peer networking, mentoring or training programs, and might involve linkages between universities and literacy programs. Practitioners and learners also require access to information about research-in-practice. This could be provided by developing a network for sharing information about this type of research within Canada and connecting that network with others around the world.

Strategies to support Research-in-Practice

In one group, participants shared information about research-in-practice with which they were involved. Based on their experiences and the ensuing discussion, the group identified the following strategies to support research-in-practice.

- There is a vision that people can generate knowledge. We need to develop strategies about how to help people do research (e.g., training, support)
- Build links and relationships between programs and universities, in which:
 - both partners learn from the process
 - partners clarify who owns the research
 - researchers may have leave to do research
 - the expertise of the practitioner is recognized
 - there is time for the researcher and practitioners/learners to meet regularly
- Develop committee or teams of participants (learners, practitioners and researchers) to plan the research, reflect on the research process, and make new plans as needed.
- Build research and reflection into projects that may be imposed so they can be turned to the advantage of the program (while recognizing the risks).
- Researchers may serve as a catalyst. The researchers' expertise in relation to the field may have led them to pose a question related to a need.
- There needs to be a pay-off for people (utility), e.g., developing writing, collecting knowledge that honors the traditions.
- Allocate literacy funds to research-in-practice and invite / encourage inquires and proposals.
- Integrate research into program development. See research as a tool to develop the program rather than an end in itself.
- Collect the results of research projects and distribute the information.
 - provide support for people to write
 - have a dissemination process
- Provide for consultation with people who have experience doing research, e.g., practitioners who have done some work in research

Notes from discussion groups

During presentations by the three resource people, designated participants identified questions for follow-up discussion in small groups. A process for discussion had been provided. For example, regarding some questions, participants talked about:

- What do we know or believe?
- What do we need to know?
- What should be done?
- What are some of the challenges to action?
- What are some facilitating factors to action?

Following are the questions and notes from the discussions.

Question: How do we make research an integral part of practice?

What we know - believe:

- research as a principle
- something we can understand as part of the practice
- if literacy is an educative process, research should be part of the process
- vision of literacy: community-based vs technical instruction

What do we need to know?

- we need experience with research before we can judge whether it can be done in a variety of environments
- the reason you do literacy can inform the intent of why and how you do research about your work
- practitioners are overloaded; they are doing research and questioning all the time but do not have time to document it

What should be done?

- we are missing the step or venue to pull together the research -- the overview -- as a role that an organization like MCL could play

What are some of the challenges to action?

- geographic challenges
- is it possible to make it part of all learning environments; do some environments lend themselves better to research by practitioners?
- limitations of using research in a technical, non - democratic environment
- challenge to get people to realize it is important for them, that it is significant for them
- lack of time, interest
- pluralism: diverse approaches in literacy, even though it cannot be uniform
- hard to document where it has worked
- lack of stability in programs
- fear and awe of researchers as well as others that have a disdain for researchers and academics
- fear of being unable to do research; lack of self-confidence
- high turnover rate of practitioners; hard enough to train them how to teach literacy, let alone research
- research as a special interest vs. building it into the process
- bringing university resources to the field, on the terms of the field

What are some facilitating factors to action?

- experience with evaluation in literacy programs: initially, there was resistance and now it has become part of the accepted practice (user-friendly models)
- effort in Carleton (ON) with regards to standard of quality
- programs need stability; if practitioners see that they have a stable career, they will see the need or benefits of research
- using universities; good model of exchange between universities and community-based program

What do we do?

- assist programs and practitioners at the local level or assist the broader field
- show people what the practical payback is; demonstrate practical outcomes
- document models of what is working in other places
- use a framework, national clearinghouse as an incentive
- research has to be supported: practitioners need time, money; they need to feel their work is valued
- Enable practitioners to step back and reflect; sabbaticals?
- electronic technology, internet as a possible means of support
- programs need to build time for planning
- umbrella group to collect and disseminate information; use regional resource persons
- give signals that it will be a priority, that we want to put emphasis on this
- start small, from the bottom up to make it happen
- continue the work of this seminar; a group to carry this further

Question: Examine the questions of ownership and control vs the question of intention

Who controls:

- mentor, facilitator, administrator
- action researcher, practitioner
- learner, respondent
what? -- Topic, questions, subjects
for whom? -- Process, how
how? -- Dissemination

Considerations

- political
- ideological
- practical
- ethical
- human

Tension:

- no simple answers
- control and intention interwoven
- anglophone - francophone: different cultural perspective
VERY COMPLEX ISSUE

Actions:

- How do we continue and pursue this debate?
- How do we develop ways to deal with this tension?
- How can we ensure that everyone is part of the process? No one person owns a question or a problem; everyone has something to learn.

Question: How can we encourage more research on basic issues? Funding is available, NLS priority. What are the barriers?

What do we know/believe?

- thought it was a quick fix, but realized it wasn't so we do need research
- field rejects academics
- want to talk to students and ask them what they need
- Current focus is on economic aspects of literacy: how much -- general problem? social movement

What do we need to know?

- What are barriers to fundamental research questions?
- How can research start global thinking on what we do/are and impact on practice?
- recognizing the voice - source of change, knowledge and experience of those who are silent
- How can we bring rigor and validity to Action Research to afford same legitimacy that has historically been given to positivistic research?
- resolve tension

Resistance

- trouble looking at hard questions
- we are already talking about problems -- let's acknowledge
- raising difficult problems
- fears are grounded in social context
- scarce resources make for directed research
- can't do alone
- field is new, not a lot of PHDs and graduate students
- dilemma of creating partnerships with academia since this is a field that has resisted academia
- research is often considered to be evaluation, questioning our practice, looking at what doesn't work -- risk a negative result seen of evaluation
- climate focuses on outcomes which discourage a lot of research
- challenge of responding to immediate needs rather than the global practice
- challenge of dominant discourse: IALS, up to practitioners to take control of that discourse and use it to advance their work

Facilitating factors

- we need to take responsibility as a movement to address these issues
- other movements (i.e. women) facing similar pressures; create alliances with them
- approach literacy as part of community development -- literacy as part of the process -- literacy through community development not literacy for community development

What do we do?

- practitioners need to be involved in defining research
- use action research as a way of redefining the problem
- work collaboratively through groups and networks to move beyond the narrow question, to look at the broader underlying issue
- use action research as research that will move towards action
- use different levels of research to look at the global perspective -- take it to the higher level: use research at the local level, use information gathered to second level, to then move to higher level Then take information and return to a local level. This feedback mechanism is a way of mobilizing people towards action

Question: How do we use practitioner research to effect change?

What do we know/believe?

- learners have a voice
- instructors tend to take over
- we don't discuss life issues of learners
- learners are very polite to instructors
- there is a power structure in their literacy organization

What do we need to know?

- How to get practitioners to understand where political correctness, editing techniques and censorship arise and what to do about it?
- How do we build a sense of community?

What should be done?

- Practitioner research should be open to a wide variety of issues from learner's lives.
- to pose questions, how to make room, how to listen to learners
- How should we approach the learners, phrase the questions to get an honest answer?
- We need to train instructors to listen.

Challenges

- making time to listen to learners
- We need to support cultural and/or social differences.
- tokenism
- How do we get learners to take the risk?
- It takes time to build trust.
- political correctness, intellectual censorship, edition
- need to initiate dialogue

Facilitating factors

- The program must not be hierarchical and expect practitioner research to work.
- try to get practitioners to write
- democratic

What do we do?

- find some models - some research on research
- We want to put literacy research into the practitioner research sphere--make it an important part.

Question: How can we bring to action research the same rigor and validity to afford it the same legitimacy that has historically been given to positivistic research? (Discussion of this question was integrated with discussion of "How can we encourage research on basic issues?")

Question: How can we identify the tensions so that they can meaningfully address in a training strategy and material conditions needed to move along in this strategy?

What do we know/believe?

- of action research

What do we need to know?

- database of products , people (researchers)

What should be done?

- develop strategy

Challenges:

- time
- training
- phrasing of issue
- recognition
- hierarchical structures
- experts

Facilitating factors

- movers/facilitator
- respect
- titles done by others
- support
- mentoring

What do we do?

- consultation
- identify groups
- encourage proposals
- provide training support
- provide linkages: Internet; other participants
- publications

Actions identified in discussion groups

The following needed actions were identified in discussion groups, in relation to questions that were being considered. They are included in this form for easy reference and possible follow-up.

- We are missing the step or venue to pull together the research -- the overview -- as a role that an organization like MCL could play.
- assist programs and practitioners at the local level or assist the broader field
- show people what the practical payback is; demonstrate practical outcomes
- document models of what is working in other places
- use a framework, national clearinghouse as an incentive
- Research has to be supported: practitioners need time, money; they need to feel their work is valued.
- Enable practitioners to step back, and reflect. Sabbaticals?
- electronic technology, internet as a possible means of support
- Programs need to build time for planning.
- umbrella group to collect and disseminate information; use regional resource persons
- Give signals that it will be a priority that we want to put emphasis on this.
- Start small, from the bottom up to make it happen.
- Continue the work of this seminar -- a group to carry this further.
- How do we continue and pursue this debate?
- How do we develop ways to deal with this tension?
- How can we ensure that everyone is part of the process? No one person owns a question or a problem; everyone has something to learn.
- Practitioners need to be involved in defining research.
- Use action research as a way of redefining the problem.
- Work collaboratively through groups and networks to move beyond the narrow question, to look at the broader underlying issue.
- Use action research as research that will move towards action

- Use different levels of research to look at the global perspective: take it to the higher level: use research at the local level, use information gathered to second level, to then move to higher level. Then take information and return to a local level. This feedback mechanism is a way of mobilizing people towards action.
- Practitioner research should be open to a wide variety of issues from learner's lives.
- to pose questions, how to make room, how to listen to learners.
- How should we approach the learners, phrase the questions to get an honest answer?
- We need to train instructors to listen.
- Find some models - some research on research.
- We want to put literacy research into the practitioner research sphere. Make it an important part.
- Develop strategy.
- consultation
- Identify groups.
- encourage proposals
- Provide training and support.
- Provide linkages: internet; other participants
- publications

Action Plan

Seminar participants identified the following actions which would be completed after the seminar.

Action	By whom
1. Prepare and distribute the proceedings of the seminar	
1.1 Compile the information discussed during the seminar and prepare a summary report	Yvon/Mary
1.2 Distribute copies to NLS, provincial and territorial governments, national and provincial networks, and the seminar participants	Yvon/Mary
2. Collect information on what is happening in participatory research, action research etc.	
2.1 Gather information on what is happening in Australia and the United States.	Allan
2.2 Compile a list of action research and participatory research conducted in literacy. Sources of information will include NLS, various websites	Send info. to Robin
3. Develop an interim network to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continue communication among seminar participants • Share information about practitioner inquiry, action research and practitioner research with a wider literacy audience. • provide access to expertise in the literacy field for those who are doing action research 	
3.1 Create a data bank in which we would find the names of researchers and practitioners with expertise in action research.	
3.1.1 Explore the possibilities of doing this for Francophone's with the Federation canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français	Luce
3.1.2 Contact MCL to see if this organization could set something up in English.	Jenny
3.2 Create a discussion group on Internet. Contact NALD and AlphaCom to explore what possibilities are available (consider cost, availability of translation services, ease of access).	Audrey
3.3 Explore possibilities of NLS support for translation if there is a cost	Margaret

<p>4. Organize a follow-up seminar</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organize such a seminar after there have been some developments • Use the internet to discuss when it should be held and who should host. 	
<p>5. Develop values and principles for the field.</p>	
<p>5.1 Review and rewrite the statements developed at the seminar</p>	<p>Luce*</p>

* Grace and Audrey also expressed interest in reviewing the statements. It was suggested that Luce, Grace and Audrey could consult with each other about doing this.

Evaluation comments

Participants were invited to write evaluative comments about the seminar. The following were submitted.

- I really enjoyed the experience. Interacting with other very experienced practitioners was a unique experience for me. Although the presentations were helpful in some ways, their presentations could have been more focused, especially in recognizing the quality and extent of the group's expertise. This is nit picking a bit because the conversations were very productive and animated. The reproductions of notes and plenary information people could take away was exemplary. Thanks for trying to keep us to an action plan.
- It was especially valuable to be at the Learning Centre. I liked the structure of drawing out questions from presentations (but presentations should have been shorter and sharper -- to address a point, but I don't know how we could have been kept in better line!). Of course I would have liked more time for discussion but I don't know whether people could have come for longer (and of course limits of money). Sunday morning was rushed and I feel that it led us to simplify -- but again I don't know how we can avoid that -- it is always hectic at the end. Overall -- thanks, it was excellent -- great facilitation, great behind the scenes work. It seems like an important step.
- I have no criticisms of the process although I wish we could do more sooner...it takes time. Please know that I want to help with this process and will find time/energy -- whatever, any time you need it in the future.
- Should we have started in the concrete? I liked the location and of this event -- grounded it in the reality of practice. An example of how much work critical inquiry takes. Great talk, great grub!
- It was great to see so many old friends and to meet new people. It was a rich sharing, and while I still have some unanswered questions I think and hope that together we have laid the groundwork for something to continue in this area.