How are practitioners collecting evidence of student growth? What role does assessment play in teaching and learning in adult literacy?

I recently attended my first [Literacy and Learning Symposium](). This annual event is jointly hosted by the three lead literacy and learning organizations in Alberta: Community Learning Network, Literacy Alberta, and the Centre for Family Literacy. There were many workshops on literacy and lifelong learning. *Stories from the Field* was one of them.

The project coordinator, Audrey Gardner, and I provided a workshop on how we create articles or stories from interviews with practitioners and information from research studies. At the conclusion of the workshop, people expressed an interest in knowing more about how we (practitioners) are collecting evidence of student/learner growth (for example, through assessment).

In interviews with 23 practitioners so far, it is clear that learners' growth and success is a significant part of their work. Many use various forms of assessment including initial/diagnostic, formative, and summative. The method of assessment that practitioners use is typically guided by the individual learner's needs and goals, the program's goals, and the instructional setting.

Not only learners, but practitioners also want to know whether we are making a difference. How do we know? How do we measure learner progress?

What the research says

Community-based adult literacy practitioners often say that informal assessment begins with the first phone call or when the person walks in the door to make an enquiry about learning. From there, practitioners commonly use three forms of assessment: initial/diagnostic, formative, and summative.

Initial/diagnostic assessment takes place when a learner enters a program. This assessment can be either formal or informal depending on the program setting. The initial assessment gives the practitioner information about what motivates the individual to return to learning, what their goals are, and what their strengths are. It can be used to explore prior learning experiences and potential challenges or barriers to success.

Formative assessment takes place throughout the teaching and learning process. It provides feedback on progress to both the learner and the practitioner. The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), part of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), conducted an international research project on formative assessment. They identified six key elements of formative assessment:

1. **Establishment of a classroom culture that encourages interaction and the use of assessment tools.** Among other things, this involves creating an environment where learners feel safe to take risks and make mistakes.
2. **Establishment of learning goals, and tracking of individual student progress toward those goals.** When goals are established with the learner, the learning process becomes more transparent.

3. **Use of varied instruction methods to meet diverse student needs.** Adjusting teaching methods to meet the needs and learning styles of individual learners is important for any student success.
4. **Use of varied approaches to assessing student understanding.** Realistic settings and a variety of contexts are also important.
5. **Feedback on student performance and adaptation of instruction to meet identified needs.** Giving timely, specific feedback with suggestions for ways to improve performance helps practitioners pay attention to what does and doesn't work so they can adjust teaching strategies when necessary.
6. **Active involvement of students in the learning process.** Teaching self-assessment skills and helping learners analyze how different learning strategies have worked for them in the past amounts to "learning to learn." (phrases in bold are from the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 2008, 6-10)

The elements of formative assessment fit well with the principles of learner-centered teaching and explicit teaching, subjects I wrote about in a previous *Story from the Field*. They each begin with the learner and the learner's needs and goals; they focus on learner strengths; and they develop abilities, strategies, and skills within the context of the learner's life.

Summative assessment evaluates student learning at the end of a learning cycle or instructional unit, comparing what has been achieved against some form of standard or benchmark. It can be informal or low stakes (for example, in a community literacy program), but it is most often associated with a formal or high-stakes situation (for example for a GED certificate or course credit).

While learner success and growth are sometimes measured in statistics, grades, or numbers, learners and the practitioners who work with them often measure success through the personal stories that describe changes in their lives. As Scottish researchers Sliwka and Tett powerfully state "learning is assessed through the distance that learners have travelled in reaching their own goals" (2008, Presentation, Slide 10).

What practitioners say about learner success and growth

This is what Toni Brown, with the Calgary John Howard Society, told me about a student she worked with at the Calgary Remand Centre:

> He had been bullied a lot at school and eventually dropped out. After that, his mom home-schooled him, but it didn't really work out. He got stuck at Grade 6 and as he put it "I kind of froze…I just couldn't learn. I was afraid to learn." When I saw him, he was in his early twenties. He felt he couldn't get around this block in his head. But he really wanted to do some writing. So we slowly started working on the writing and he kind of took off with it. He wrote pages and pages. And eventually he started to work with the pre-GED book, doing essay writing. He was a really good writer. By the time he left, he had plans to get his high-school diploma and do postsecondary education. He wanted to take psychology and do all of these things. It was amazing.

Toni added that "the thing about the big changes is that it's not just about the reading and writing— it's about the whole life piece. Because it means a job or a career for somebody."

Sarah Mackenzie and Alyssa Nicholson work with the Elizabeth Fry Society. They facilitate an innovative six-week program called UNLOCK for women at the remand centre and in the community. Sarah talked about how the program is structured. "We try to make the learning interactive. We pull as many real-life experiences from both ourselves and from the group. At the end of every session we do what we call a personal challenge. Clients are encouraged to take the material that they've just learned and answer questions about how they will apply it to their everyday lives." Alyssa said that by the final session of the group, women are more open and able to talk about and share their experiences. These practitioners purposely create a safe, interactive classroom culture and use varied approaches to assess student understanding.

Corrie Rhyasen Erdman has two roles, one as an adult literacy coordinator in Spruce Grove, Alberta, and the other as pilot coordinator for the Alberta Reading Benchmarks. She told me this story about a learner in her Spruce Grove program:

> I don't think she had a clear goal in mind when she began. At first, she needed a tremendous amount of support and encouragement telling her that she could actually learn. Every time her tutor introduced something new, they would spend the first lesson in dialogue with her saying "I can't do this" and her tutor saying "Okay you said that last time and you got through." And she would slowly ease into the learning. Her inner dialogue was preventing her from really believing she was capable. That was four years ago… The next tutor wasn't aware of the dynamic so it was a very different relationship. The tutor came in with the expectation that she could learn so that changed what her learning looked like—it became more focused on learning and less on fear. Her third tutor is very technical. She is now enrolled at NorQuest College with a goal of entering a social work program. Her tutors all brought her different things and moved her along in different ways. It is a testament to the fact that we need different things at different times.

These different tutors used the principles of formative assessment to move the learner along toward success: they established a safe learning environment, gave constructive feedback, adapted the instruction to meet the learner's identified needs, and actively involved the student in the learning process to help her learn how different learning strategies worked for her in the past. In this case, her goals were not initially clear, but eventually they became clear as she became more confident in her abilities. This learner was learning how to learn.

What does this mean for adult literacy practitioners?

From the research, and practitioners' stories, it's clear that assessment is connected to effective teaching practice and includes formal and informal outcome measures as well as intentional, transparent tracking of learner progress. As Sliwka and Tett put it, "learner progress is measured by the changes that occur in relation to their lives as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners" (2008, 11).

References and Resources

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Note: See full report at http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/7311/assessment-foundation-FULL-REPORT.pdf