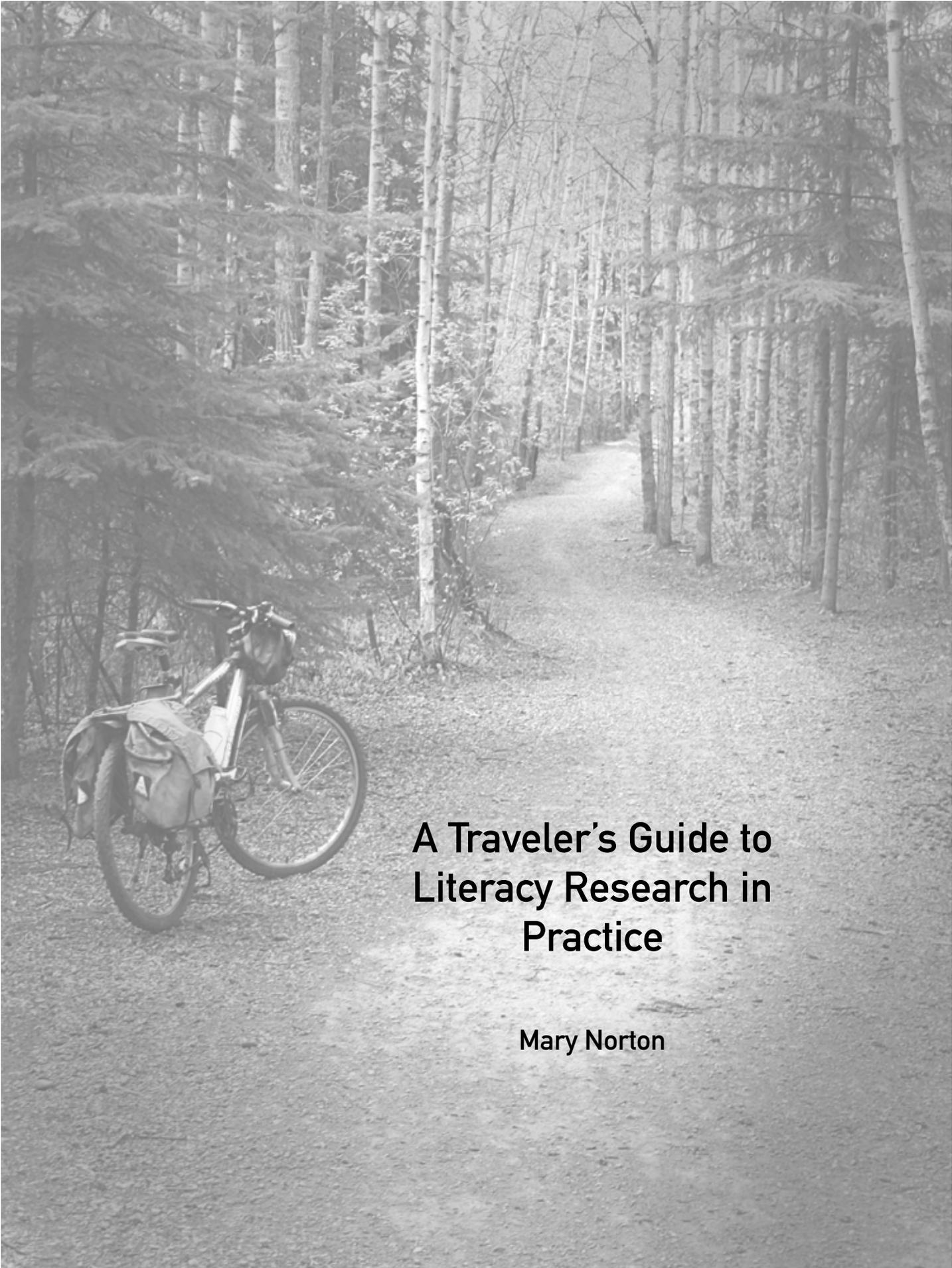


# A Traveler's Guide to Literacy Research in Practice

Mary Norton



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## The Journey So Far

*A Traveler's Guide to Literacy Research in Practice* originated in a course that was offered as part of the Research in Practice in Adult Literacy Network project.<sup>1</sup> It was then shared as a work in progress with literacy practitioners in workshops, courses and projects in Alberta and other provinces. I hoped the *Guide* could be revised and published after people had some experience with it and might offer some feedback.

In the years since the *Guide* was drafted, literacy practitioners have continued to extend the boundaries of research in practice through their own research and through reflections about the research process. Another intention in revising the *Guide* was to include more examples and perspectives from the field.

Later in the *Guide*, I write about how, through research, “we might combine what we already know with the information that we gather, in order to come up with something new, at least for ourselves.” Writing this *Guide* has followed a similar process, and so it includes ideas gathered from other researchers, researchers in practice and, by extension, the practitioners, students and others they worked and learned with. These and other contributors are acknowledged on the next page and throughout the book.

The *Traveler's Guide* is organized in chapters, starting with Locating Research in Practice and ending with Stories from the Road. Although the organization suggests a step by step format, you'll likely find that you engage in a number of steps at once and that you revisit steps along the way. I hope that the *Guide*, and reading about others' research, will provide a sense of support and companionship as you embark on your research journey.

Go well.

*If we are always arriving and departing, it is also true that we are eternally anchored. One's destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things.*  
– Henry Miller

---

1. The RIPAL Network project was initiated in 2000. Funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, the project was a collaborative effort of the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta (now Literacy Alberta), The Learning Centre Literacy Association, and the Centre for Research on Literacy at the University of Alberta. For more information go to: <http://www.nald.ca/ripal/>

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The Learning Centre Literacy Association sponsored the project and I thank the Association Board for their support. Co-coordinator Phyllis Steeves assumed many of my responsibilities while I engaged in research and writing for the *Guide*. Learning Centre students, volunteers and staff have contributed to my understanding about research in practice through their involvement with me in various research projects. Cynthia Bale provided administrative support.

The following organizations served as project partners and were represented on the Advisory Group: Centre for Education and Work, Community Based Literacy Network, Festival of Literacies, RiPAL BC, and Saskatchewan Literacy Network. Thank you.

Helen Woodrow provided invaluable support in a role that began as “coeditor.” Among other tasks, Helen collected feedback about the original guide, contacted researchers in practice for permission to include their work as examples, searched for and found poetry and quotes that are included throughout the *Guide*, provided feedback and encouragement to complete the *Guide*, and contracted and worked with the copy editor and designer. Helen also planned and carried out the project evaluation.

Helen and I would like to acknowledge literacy practitioners and university-based research colleagues across Canada for their very important contributions to the project. Some participated in focus groups or responded to a questionnaire that helped shape the revised *Guide*. Eight people read a draft of the revised version and identified areas that could be improved through further thinking and writing. Other practitioners grounded the *Guide* by sharing examples of their research work that are included in the text. An advisory group offered us advice and support throughout the life of the project. We thank everyone who helped shape the resource, and include their names below.

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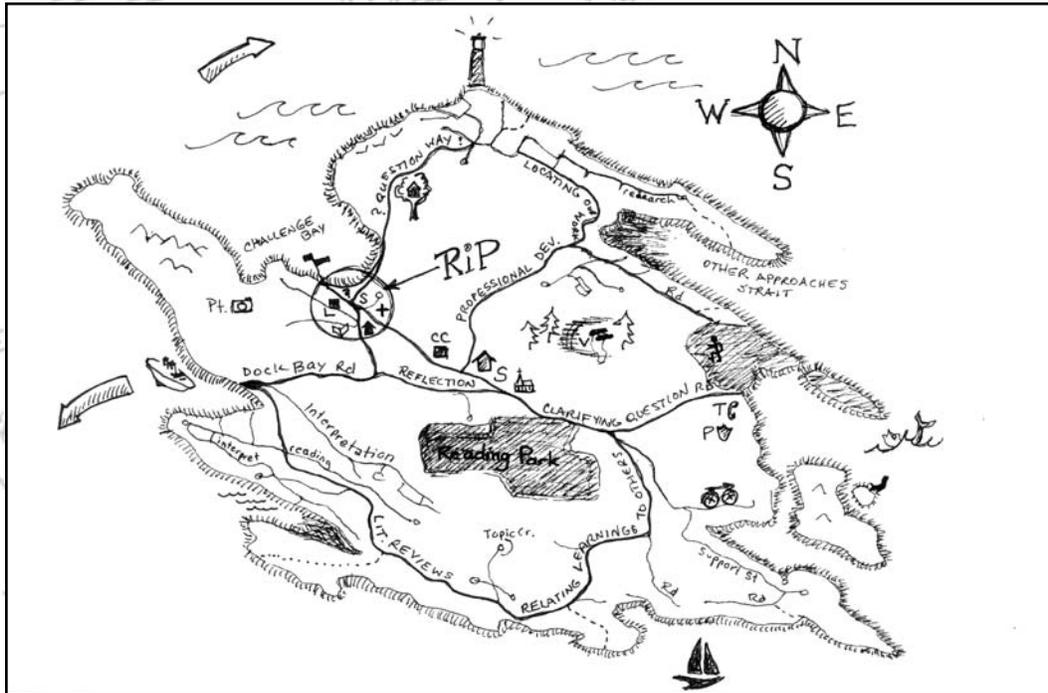
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# Locating Research in Practice





**W**HAT DO YOU DO when you become aware of a situation or idea related to your literacy work that is intriguing, puzzling or problematic? Perhaps you talk about the idea with a colleague, read a book or article about it, or try a different approach to address the situation. A *research in practice* project has the same sorts of starting points but is an opportunity to investigate a topic or question in more systematic ways. A *Traveler's Guide to Literacy Research in Practice* was written to help you to research a situation or idea related to your practice.

*The only cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity.*  
– Dorothy Parker

Research is generally described as a systematic or structured process of inquiry. In this *Guide*, *research in practice* refers to systematic inquiry done by people directly involved in literacy practice. Although the focus is on *doing* research, the *Guide* may also help you to critically engage with and respond to research that is relevant to your practice.<sup>2</sup>

Literacy practice includes the wide range of activities that help people learn, use and extend reading, writing, math and related skills.<sup>3</sup> This practice occurs in organized literacy programs and other places where people gather and are supported to develop literacy. Research in practice is usually done to understand and improve our practice—to make a difference for adult learners. Research in practice is also a way to document and share practitioners' and learners' knowledge.

*Teachers have experience and stories about practice. Research provides them with evidence and authority to support their claims.*  
– Jane Mace (Quigley & Norton, 2002, p. 5)

You may be familiar with other terms for research in practice, such as practitioner research, practitioner inquiry, teacher research and action research. In Canada, the term research in practice has been used quite intentionally to emphasize that this research is about what happens *in* practice, and that it is conducted by people who are located *inside* practice (Malicky, 2000). Research in practice is rooted in a belief that practitioners and students are producers as well as consumers of knowledge. As practitioners, our knowledge is often based in experience and we may know much more than we are able to explain. Research is one way to name and tell what we know, as well as one way to question and extend our knowledge.

Whether conducted inside or outside of practice, research is *one* approach to creating knowledge. We come to know and hold knowledge in a multitude of ways, including our everyday practice of literacy work. However, research as a way of knowing carries a lot of weight in mainstream society, and some research approaches and related beliefs about knowledge have carried more weight than others (as we'll discuss later).

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<sup>2</sup> Horsman and Norton (1999) described research in practice as reading research, reflecting on research in light of practice, applying research to practice, and doing research.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *Literacies* <http://www.literacyjournal.ca/about.html#do>

While accepting research as *one* way of knowing, the research in practice movement also challenges beliefs about *who* does research. As a university professor and supporter of research in practice, Grace Malicky (2000) noted that

research has traditionally been conducted *on* practice by someone outside of the instructional context, often a university-based faculty member or graduate student. (p. 33)

At the same time, much of the support for literacy research in practice in Canada has been provided by researchers from universities and by practitioners with academic research training. As a result, workshops, courses, networks—and this *Guide*—have been influenced by evolving practices associated with university-based research. With growing experience, those practices are also being reshaped for research in practice.

Marina Niks (2004), an academically trained researcher, has provided research support for literacy practitioners in British Columbia. Her engagements with practitioners transformed her thinking about research:

Looking back at how I approached the [research friend] role when I first started, I see now that I saw myself transferring to “the field” what I learned in university about how to do research. As I engaged in projects and reflected alone and with the practitioners on these experiences, my assumptions regarding research, knowledge and university values were challenged. I had to rethink my beliefs and understandings.

Today I see myself facilitating the emergence of new ways of doing research by practitioners, questioning assumptions about how research “should” be done and by whom. I recognize that my academic training shapes how I approach research but I also believe it does not necessarily determine it. I believe that universities teach particular ways of doing research and that

### **Girl on a Tractor**

Joyce Sutphen

I knew the names of all the cows before  
I knew my alphabet, but no matter the  
subject; I had mastery of it, and when  
it came time to help in the fields, I  
learned to drive a tractor at just the right  
speed, so that two men, walking  
on either side of the moving wagon  
could each lift a bale, walk towards  
the steadily arriving platform and  
simultaneously hoist the hay onto  
the rack, walk to the next bale, lift,  
turn, and find me there, exactly where  
I should be, my hand on the throttle,  
carefully measuring out the pace.

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these are constructed by many as “the ways” to do research. People who have not been trained to do research in academia do not traditionally feel capable of generating knowledge through research. (pp. 13-14)

Engaging in research in practice may also change how practitioners understand research. In reporting on a collaborative reflection-on-action project with other practitioners, Ann Docherty (2006) wrote:

This research project has raised underlying assumptions I had that academic research is somehow more credible than practitioner research. This project has given me confidence to “own” the knowledge that has been created from my experience. It has helped me recognize that credibility comes in many forms. I leave this research report believing that my practice is informed by the multi-dimensional learning relationships that I am immersed in. This includes literacy practitioners, local mentors, practitioner colleagues and academic colleagues and the knowledge shared through reading numerous research articles and reports. (p. 6)

A look back at some of the roots of educational research will provide background for a research in practice journey, and hopefully answer some general questions you may have. In later chapters, we’ll look at how researchers in practice have adapted and challenged some academic practices and developed additional approaches.

## Research orientations

Educational research and research about adult literacy is often described as quantitative or qualitative research. In general, quantitative researchers collect data that can be counted, analyzed and presented numerically. Although researchers in practice sometimes use quantitative methods to collect data, such as questionnaires and tests, quantitative research usually refers to studies that use statistical procedures in the data analysis process. Examples of such research include the *International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey 2003* (2005) and a study of reading strategies of adult basic education students (Campbell & Malicky, 2002). (For more information about statistical procedures, see Valentine, 1997).

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a variety of *interpretive* approaches. Although there are differences among these approaches, qualitative researchers share a common interest in understanding

## Numbers

Mary Cornish

I like the generosity of numbers.  
The way, for example,  
they are willing to count  
anything or anyone:  
two pickles, one door to the room,  
eight dancers dressed as swans.

I like the domesticity of addition—  
*add two cups of milk and stir—*  
the sense of plenty: six plums  
on the ground, three more  
falling from the tree.

And multiplication's school  
of fish times fish,  
whose silver bodies breed  
beneath the shadow  
of a boat.

Even subtraction is never loss,  
just addition somewhere else:  
five sparrows take away two,  
the two in someone else's  
garden now.

There's an amplitude to long division,  
as it opens Chinese take-out  
box by paper box,  
inside every folded cookie  
a new fortune.

And I never fail to be surprised  
by the gift of an odd remainder,  
footloose at the end:  
forty-seven divided by eleven equals four,  
with three remaining.

Three boys beyond their mothers' call,  
two Italians off to the sea,  
one sock that isn't anywhere you look.

- From *Red Studio* by Mary Cornish, Oberlin College Press,  
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people's experiences and how they make sense of them. Qualitative data collection methods include observations, interviews, journaling and arts-based approaches such as drawing, collage and photography.

In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, quantitative research was the dominant approach in educational research. Then researchers began to question whether quantitative approaches used in natural science were applicable for research about people or social issues. They also challenged the *positivist* philosophy that was reflected in quantitative research at the time. Positivism has to do with a belief that we can only know what we can observe (through the senses) and measure, and that we cannot know anything beyond that, such as thoughts or feelings (Trochim, 2006).

Feminist researchers are frequently credited with challenging the patriarchal base of positivist research and the fact that it excluded women's experience, knowledge and ways of knowing. Aboriginal researchers, people of colour, people who identify as queer, and other groups have posed similar challenges, including how research has been used to control people and suppress their knowledge. Nancy Cooper (2006) discusses how research that does not account for Aboriginal worldviews has hurt Aboriginal communities. In a discussion about women's learning, Flannery and Hayes (2000) review how research about adult learning has been carried out in post-secondary settings and may not account for the diverse experiences of adults in those and other learning sites.

Like others, researchers in practice might use qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, depending on the nature of their research. However, research in practice draws mainly from qualitative ways of *thinking* about research and so shares many of the assumptions of that research orientation. These are different from positivist assumptions that have been associated with quantitative research.

The following chart compares some positivist assumptions of quantitative research with some assumptions of qualitative research. It's important to recognize that positivist philosophy has changed over the years and that contemporary quantitative researchers may share some of the assumptions of qualitative researchers. It is also important to note that qualitative research continues to evolve and that it includes various, sometimes contradictory, perspectives.

Questions	Some positivist assumptions	Some assumptions of qualitative research
What is real and true?	There is an objective reality. There are universal truths that can be identified through research.	Reality is socially constructed. There are many realities and research aims to identify patterns that may be specific to a context.
How do we know what we know?	We can only know what we can directly experience through our senses.	We develop knowledge by coming to understand the meanings that go with what is being studied.
What counts as knowledge?	Researchers and knowledge are independent of each other. Knowledge is discovered by observing and measuring things; things can be taken apart and observed to establish facts.	Researchers interact with people in the study to gather data. Research changes the researcher and the participants. The knowledge developed is dependent on the context and time.
How do we find out what we come to know?	The scientific method is used to discover knowledge. Researchers develop a hypothesis, and use experimental or quasi-experimental methods to prove or disprove it. Results are generalized to a population.	Researchers may start with an area of interest. The research evolves through the process of doing the research. They aim to understand the meaning of activities or events in a particular context.
What is the role of values?	The research process is seen as value free. Researchers construct methods to ensure objectivity and lack of bias. Researchers are not likely to describe their own assumptions or positions.	Researchers are a <i>main instrument</i> for collecting information and analyzing it. They recognize and are mindful that their experiences, personalities, values and beliefs—their biases—influence how they do their research. They are likely to describe their assumptions and biases.

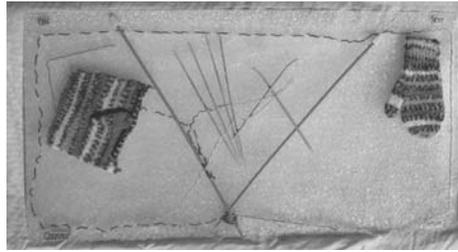
Adapted from Imel, Kerka, & Wonacott (2002).

As noted in the table, qualitative researchers see themselves as a main instrument for research. This refers to how, as researchers, we likely interact with research participants through interviews, observations and other ways. We ask questions, pick up on responses, follow ideas, and so on. How we do this is influenced by who we are, what we know, and how we know—by our view of the world and our place in it. Chapter 4 includes a discussion about worldviews and how they are shaped by our social locations.

Before reading on, you might reread the assumptions about research outlined above and reflect on your own understandings and beliefs about research.

## Exploring arts-based approaches to research in practice

Whereas quantitative research is associated with numbers, qualitative research has been called “research with words” (Hull, 1997). Although words are at the heart of literacy practice, they are, like research, one way of knowing.



**Staying Connected**  
By Sandy Harrow  
Reprinted from  
Horsman &  
Woodrow (Eds.),  
2006, p. 19

Some qualitative researchers and researchers in practice have been exploring how arts-based approaches can invite multiple and holistic ways for researchers and participants to explore, extend and express what they know (Buttignol, Jongeward, Smith, & Thomas, 2000). In particular, arts-based approaches can provide ways to tap into and express experiential and intuitive knowledge that we might not be able to express in words. Using arts-based approaches does not mean that we don't use words, however. Words are often needed to communicate meanings that are constructed through arts-based approaches (Eisner, 1997).

Arts-based approaches include video, collage, drawings, paintings, dramatic performances, scripted plays, musical compositions, photography, computer graphics, fabric arts, poetry, prose, movement, sculpture and other forms. The *Guide* includes examples of how researchers in practice have used arts-based approaches, along with other qualitative methods, at various stages of their research.

Arts-based approaches are not just for researchers and participants who see themselves as artists. As with other approaches, whether and how you use these approaches will depend on how they serve your purposes for research.

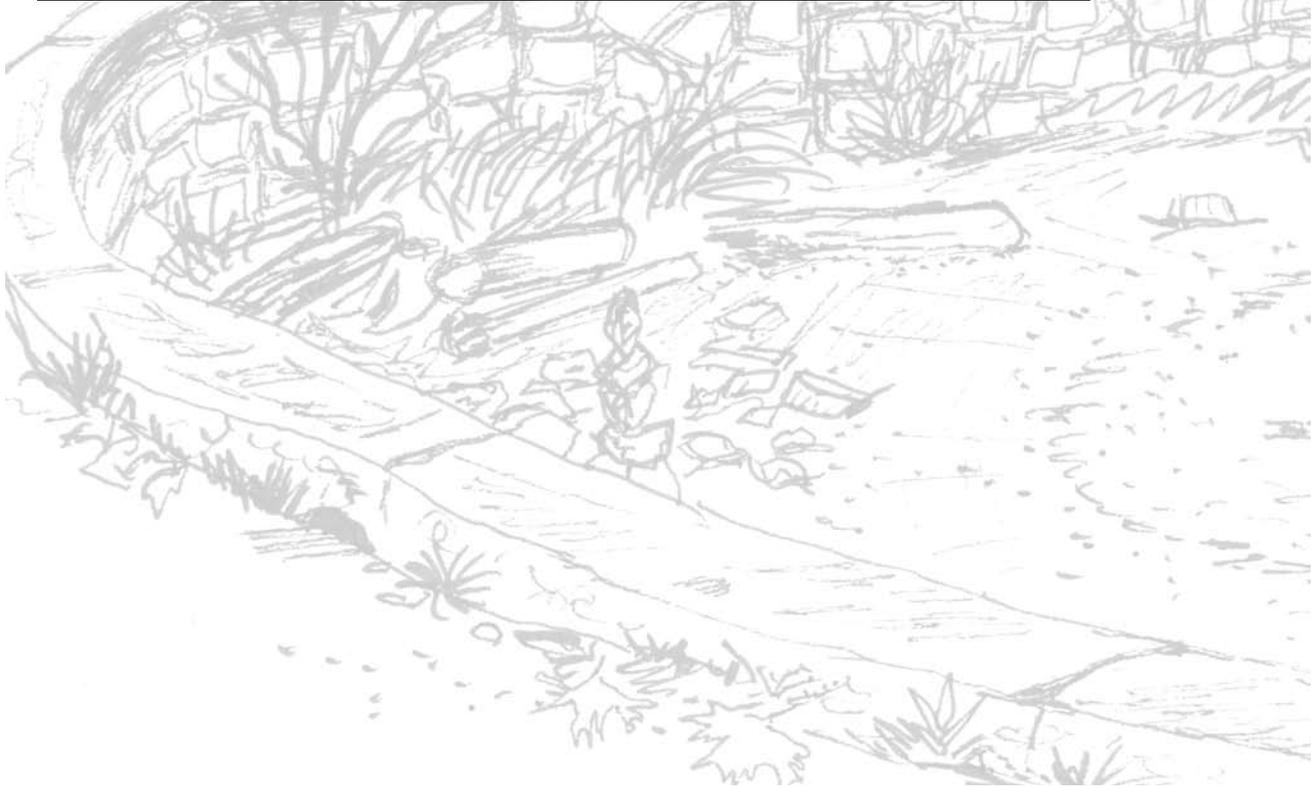
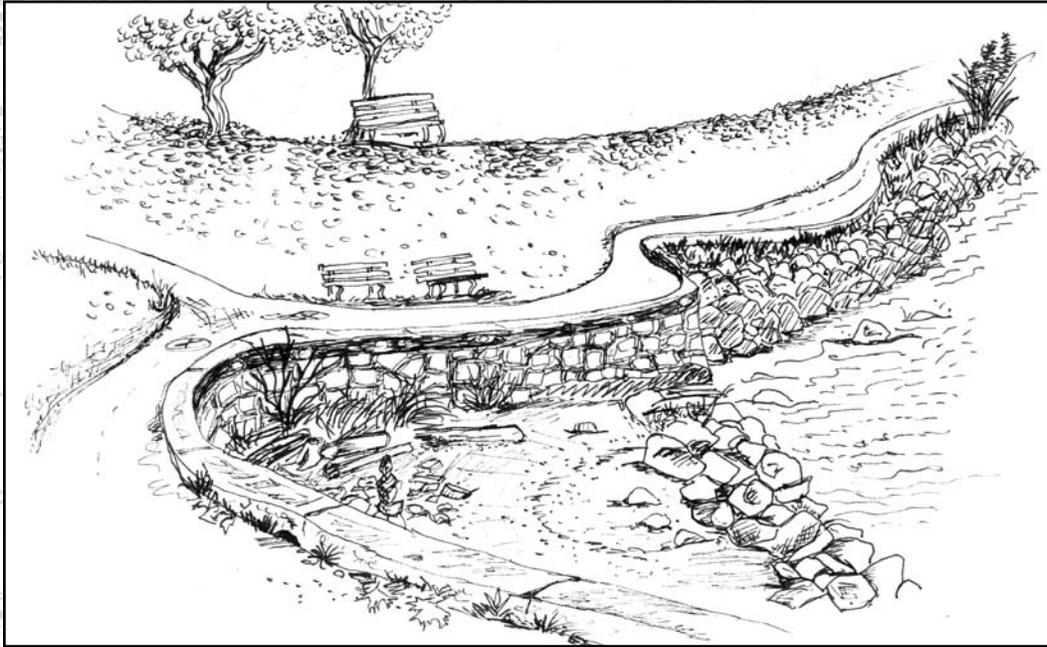
### Locating myself on the research in practice map

I completed a PhD at the University of Alberta in 1992. Soon after, I started work with The Learning Centre Literacy Association, a community-based literacy program in Edmonton where I had volunteered. Alongside my work as a co-coordinator and facilitator with the Association, I have had many opportunities to learn with others through research in practice.

My PhD research about metacognition and reading extended from a workplace reading program I had developed. My research drew on qualitative research approaches of the time, and this framework influenced me as I began to do research in practice and support other practitioners to do research.

My research thinking and practice has evolved and been influenced, in particular, by feminist qualitative approaches. My interest in arts-based research reflects my personal and professional interest in expressive arts approaches to teaching, learning and knowing. As well, I have been influenced by the support and perspectives of others who research and practice in the adult literacy field. In particular, colleagues have pushed my reflection and learning about working across identities and about ethics, topics we'll turn to in the later chapters.

# Research in Practice as a Creative Process





While working on this *Guide*, I traveled to another city to meet with a colleague about incorporating arts-based research into the *Guide*, and about ideas for the book's design. With time to spare before the meeting, I stopped into a library and found a book on art education. Browsing through, I was drawn to the heading, "Art develops creative thinking" (Jenkins, 1992). I copied some pages, noted ordering information and continued on my way. Some hours later—possibly when I woke in the night—it came to me that *research in practice is a creative process*.

*You see things and you say, "why?" But I dream things that never were and I say, "why not?"*

– George Bernard Shaw

Jenkins (1992) describes creativity as the "process of recombining known elements and past experiences to produce something new to the individual" (p. 13). The product may be tangible or it may be an idea. This definition of creativity fits well with the perspective that we bring much to our research, including our life and work experiences. Through research, we might combine what we already know with the information that we gather, in order to come up with something new, at least for ourselves.

Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes five recursive stages in the creative process, listed below, which we can relate to the research in practice process. Although the stages of preparation and elaboration relate most to starting and completing our research, incubation, insight and evaluation need to happen all along the way.<sup>4</sup>

*Creativity is a concept surrounded by a number of beliefs and misconceptions. People believe it is limited to only a few...[and] is associated primarily with uniqueness or innovation or "artists" ... However research shows that creative thinking is a universal ability.*

– Sandra Kerka, 1999

- Preparation: being immersed in problematic issues that are interesting and prompt curiosity. This process may be conscious or unconscious.
- Incubation: ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness.
- Insight: the "Aha" moment when the puzzle starts to fall together.
- Evaluation: deciding if the insight has value and is worth following up.
- Elaboration: translating the insight into its final work.

As literacy practitioners, we invite students' creativity when we plan learning environments that allow time for exploration and unhurried work; support risk-taking and making mistakes; include time and space for quiet contemplation; and ideally, include space to leave work to finish at a later time. Questioning, making connections, imagining possibilities and reflecting also contribute to creativity (Morris, 2006).

As researchers in practice, we can use similar approaches to support and extend our own creative process. In particular, having time and tools for reflection, and opportunities to connect with others, supports creativity.

---

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Csikszentmihalyi (1996, pp. 79-80) and from Clark, D. (2004). *Creativity*. Retrieved 20/04/08 from <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/creativity/creativity.html>

## Planning for reflection

*I soon realized that  
no journey carries  
one far unless as  
it extends into the  
world around us,  
it opens an equal  
distance into the  
world within.*  
– Lillian Smith

Reflection is a process of exploring and engaging with experience in order to make sense of it (Boud, 2001).<sup>5</sup> In a BC study, researchers and practitioners named reflection as one of the attributes of effective practitioners. Leora Gesser wrote:

Reflection for me means thinking with depth. It involves pondering, chewing, turning ideas around and making choices. Sometimes reflection is an internal process, and sometimes it includes discussion and ruminating with others. (2004, p. 146)

Research in practice, like creativity, is also a reflective process. As with reflection *about* practice, you may find yourself thinking about your research spontaneously—in the shower, on your way home, or when you first wake in the morning. Research in practice also offers an opportunity to step back and reflect more intentionally about your practice. Such reflection can also help you identify and express what you know experientially and intuitively about being a practitioner (Schon, 1983). Whether spontaneous or intentional, reflection and creativity can be supported by writing, art making, taking time to move or be still, and by talking with others (Gesser, 2004, p. 146).

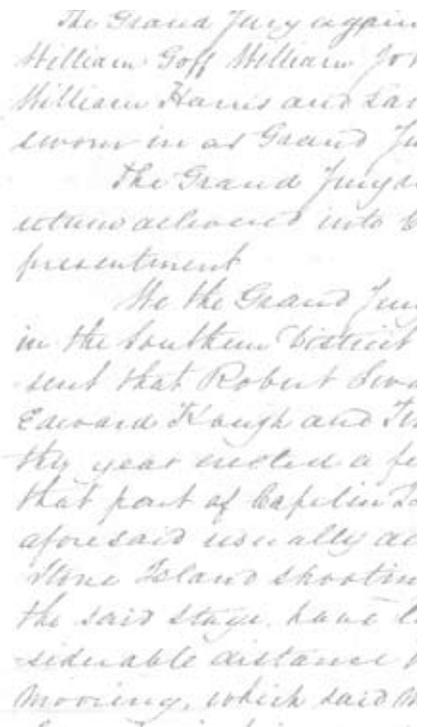
### *Writing (Journaling)*

Writing about our research in practice can be both a process for reflection and a record of our reflections. Reflective writing is often referred to as journaling. Your “journal” can be a notebook or art pad or binder, a folder on your computer, or a combination of these. Perhaps you prefer to handwrite in a special hardcover book selected for the project, or maybe you find yourself writing on bits of paper that are at hand. Choose an approach that works for you. Remember to date your entries and leave space to add reflections when you reread a page.

Whether or not you choose journal writing as a process for reflection, consider writing in a journal as a way to document your reflections. Too many times I’ve had reflections and insights while walking or cycling or riding a bus, only to lose hold of them because I did not write them down when I had the chance. Another option is to tape record your reflections.

---

<sup>5</sup> Donald Schon (1983) talks about two kinds of reflection. Reflection-in-action is the kind of reflective thinking that we do *in* the moments of teaching or other practice. Reflection *on* action is what we do when we step away from our work and take stock of our experiences.



The Grand Jury again  
William Goff William Jor  
William Harris and Lar  
sworn in as Grand Ju  
The Grand Jury  
returned into to  
presentment  
The the Grand Jury  
in the Southern District  
sent that Robert Sora  
Edward Haugh and the  
this year noted a fe  
that part of the police  
aforsaid usually re  
Stone Island shooting  
the said stage have b  
siderable distance  
moving, which said

### What's In My Journal

William Stafford

Odd things, like a button drawer. Mean things, fishhooks, barbs in your hand. But marbles too. A genius for being agreeable. Junkyard crucifixes, voluptuous discards. Space for knickknacks, and for Alaska. Evidence to hang me, or to beatify. Clues that lead nowhere, that never connected anyway. Deliberate obfuscation, the kind that takes genius. Chasms in character. Loud omissions. Mornings that yawn above a new grave. Pages you know exist but you can't find them. Someone's terribly inevitable life story, maybe mine.

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Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

### Approaches to reflective writing

You may be familiar with free writing (Elbow, 1998), brainstorming and mapping as ways to get started on writing. They can also prompt reflection and creativity by helping you tap into your intuitive knowledge. You can start any of the approaches with an idea, question or feeling that you have, or you could use one of the prompts on the next page.

**Free writing.** Write or type spontaneously without revising or editing. You might set a time limit or write until you're done. Try to keep your pen or fingers moving and let your thoughts flow. If you are stuck for words, rewrite a sentence or phrase. This process can lead to fresh insights.

When you stop free writing, review and underline words or phrases that catch your attention. Use those words as starting points for more writing, or shape them into a poem. Either process may lead to additional insights.

**Brainstorming.** List words and phrases that come to mind about an idea, question or feeling. Keep listing words until no more come to mind. You might return to the list, choose a few words and brainstorm or write about them.

**Mapping.** Mapping is similar to brainstorming, except that you look for and make connections among the ideas. Start with a word or phrase, add related words, and draw lines to show connections.

### *Prompts for reflective writing*<sup>6</sup>

**Observations.** You see something that interests you and try to describe it. Your observations may be about things to celebrate, activities or approaches you want to try out, things that challenge you or things you want to change.

**Questions.** You form and record questions about what you see and wonder about. Questions may be a prompt to seek information or for further learning.

**Wonderings.** What would happen if? Why is this? I wonder....

**Self-awareness.** You may be more aware of yourself in your practitioner role. You may celebrate, be challenged, note things to try or things to change.

**Synthesis.** You may pull together ideas from observations, discussions and previous reflections.

**Critical reflection.** This involves reflecting on your practices in relation to your own and others' beliefs and worldviews, in light of your research.

### *Reflective writing as data*

Reflective writing or written records of your reflections can also be a source of data for your research. Fay Holt Begg (2004) kept a journal during her research about how spending time, herself, on art, craft, music, meditation and exercise might help her teach students who had difficulty learning because of experiences of violence. Fay used her journal to document her observations, and used it as well to process emotions and memories that came up through reading or engaging in drawing and craft-making. (See Chapter 8 for other examples of using journals for data collection).

Although Fay found that journaling was a way to process emotions, emotional response to daily events made journal writing difficult for some BC researchers. Diana Twiss (2004), one of the researchers, reported that they

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<sup>6</sup> Prompted / adapted from a source that could not be located.

found it extremely difficult to write [in their journals]. The recent changes in government policy in BC affected many of our students in negative ways and the practitioner researchers simply couldn't relive in writing the despair they were experiencing daily. (p. 27)

The researchers had intended to write about their daily practice and their reflections about it. When they realized the challenge of writing, they decided to phone and converse with each other about their day and related topics, and tape record the conversations. However, when they reviewed transcripts of the conversations, they found that they weren't "reflective enough for our purposes" (Twiss, 2004, p. 28). Diana reflected that the journaling process might have been more successful if the researchers had had "more focused things to reflect upon and write about in our daily accounts" (p. 29).

### *Reflective writing with others (by e-mail)*

Some researchers in practice have used e-mail as a way to record their reflections and share them with colleagues. Colleagues can then engage in written discussion and dialogue with each other, which can extend the reflective process.

## Arts-based approaches

Like free writing, arts-based approaches can help us get out of our intellectual minds into other ways of knowing. When using the arts for reflection, the focus is on the process, although the product (if there is one) can be an expression and reminder of our insights and learnings. It can also be helpful to free write or brainstorm about those insights as a way to document them and reflect further.

Following is an example of how I gained insights about my practice through an arts-based activity. Although not related to a specific research project, I was involved in a practicum at the time that involved journaling and reflection. When I started the art activity, I didn't know that it would lead me to insights about the practicum or my ongoing practice. Other examples of how arts-based approaches support reflection are included in Chapters 8 and 9.

**Presence in the midst of whirling.** This piece was created during an individual expressive arts session.<sup>7</sup> I spent some time painting without

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<sup>7</sup> These sessions took place with Markus Alexander, an expressive arts therapist and educator based in Edmonton. He is the founder and director of the World Arts Organization. <http://www.worldartsorg.net/home>

anything particular in mind. When I finished, I looked at what I'd painted, from various angles. At first I was taken aback by the apparent "chaos" that I saw. I was busy, busy at work, but is this what I was feeling? I then used words ending in "ing" to write about what I saw and, in the process, arrived at the title of the piece and an increased awareness about staying present as I engaged with students and others.

Ing  
Whirling  
Being  
Spreading  
Reaching  
Multitasking  
Blowing  
Carrying  
Bending  
Stepping  
Contrasting

Being present in spite of  
in the midst of whirling



## Reflecting through stillness or movement

*Never underestimate  
the value of staring  
into space.*  
– Rebecca  
Schellenberg

I remember a story about a young man who cast his fish line into the river without baiting the hook. He didn't want to catch fish, but "fishing" provided him a respectable way to sit and think. Taking uninterrupted time to sit and let your mind wander is another way to support creativity.

For some of us, walking, cycling, swimming or other movement provides time for reflection. More than once I've come up with titles for papers and reports or had other insights about my research while running. You may have had similar experiences, but these examples are included as a reminder that reflection can be supported in a variety of ways and as an encouragement to make time for, and to value, those spaces in our lives.

## Planning for companions

Research in practice journeys are easier if taken in the company of others, in addition to those who participate in your research. Research companions can celebrate our milestones, support us when the road gets rough, and contribute to our reflective and creative processes through discussion, dialogue and reflection. Here are some ways to plan for companions.

**Support group.** In the Moving Research about Addressing the Impacts of Violence and Learning into Practice project (Battell et al., 2008), the researchers formed support groups related to their projects. They asked friends and colleagues and sometimes strangers they had heard about to

join them, and consulted them when they needed help to get started, to keep going and to prepare for workshops. They asked for feedback on their plans and writing, suggestions for questionnaires and interview questions and wisdom about the specifics of research. In some cases, the support group members brought their perspectives as people of colour or parents, or as specialists in the field of art or movement that was being studied (Evelyn Battell, personal communication, November 2007).

**Research friend/facilitator.** A research friend or mentor is someone with experience in research in practice who can provide support with the research aspects of the project. Some projects have built in research support. In British Columbia, Marina Niks, an academically trained researcher, has provided support for a number of researchers in practice. More recently, one of the practitioners that Marina supported has been able to draw on her research experience to support another researcher (Marina Niks, personal communication, January 2008).

Is there someone in your area who might provide such support, or is there someone you could work with by e-mail? If you are applying for funding to do your research project, you might budget to pay for research support.

**Research network.** A research network links researchers in practice. They usually work on their own projects and meet with others in the network for discussion, feedback and support. The evaluator for the RiPAL Network project in Alberta found that:

The opportunity to come together as a group to share experiences, ideas and struggles emerged as the most meaningful aspect of the project. The meetings were experienced as a chance to exchange ideas, to offer and receive input, and to resolve problems with individual research projects. Participants described these gatherings as inspiring and motivating and as providing a means of refocusing their thoughts. They particularly appreciated the connections with colleagues who understood and shared their struggles and were able to offer meaningful support. (Sykes, 2005, p. 7)

**Collaborative research.** In collaborative research, two or more researchers study the same topic. In Canada, collaborative research projects have been supported by the Festival of Literacies (<http://www.literaciesoise.ca/>) and RiPAL BC (<http://ripal.literacy.bc.ca/>).

The following research reports contain discussions about the collaborative process, including benefits and challenges.

- Niks, M., Allen, D., Davies, P., McRae, D., & Nonesuch, K. (2003). *Dancing in the dark: How do adults with little formal education learn? How do literacy practitioners do collaborative research?* Duncan, BC: Malaspina University College.  
<http://www.nald.ca/library/research/dark/cover.htm>
- Battell, E., Gesser, L., Rose, J., Sawyer, J., & Twiss, D. (2004). *Hardwired for hope: Effective ABE/literacy instructors*. Duncan, BC: Malaspina University College. <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/hwired/cover.htm>
- Trent Valley Literacy Association. (2004). *What goes on here? Practitioners study the practitioner-student relationship*. Peterborough, ON.  
<http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/whatgoes/whatgoes.pdf>
- Horsman, J., & Woodrow, H. (Eds.). (2006). *Focused on practice: A framework for adult literacy research in Canada*. St. John's, NL: Harrish Press.  
[http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/focused\\_on\\_practice/focused\\_on\\_practice.pdf](http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/focused_on_practice/focused_on_practice.pdf)

# Planning for the Journey





**A** RESEARCH JOURNEY benefits from some advance planning, even though the plans may change. This chapter introduces some topics and tools to help you prepare to do your research. A planning guide is included at the end of the chapter.

## Planning for you

Is this your first research journey? Or have you traveled this way once or a few times before? In either case, it's important to consider your hopes for the research and how undertaking a research project may affect you.

*Remember that  
one step at a time  
is good walking.  
—Chinese proverb*

Although intentions of research in practice include improving practice and documenting practitioner and learner knowledge, engaging in research can also be an opportunity to work with other practitioners, learn about research, develop research skills and learn about ourselves. The planning guide includes some questions to help you clarify and record your hopes.

## Planning for time

It seems that no matter how much time we budget for a research project, it always takes longer than anticipated. Even when we are able to build research into day-to-day practice, it has a way of spilling over into other aspects of life. It can be challenging to find the amount and quality of time that's needed for data analysis and writing.

Some ways to address time issues include planning “do-able” projects based in your practice, identifying timelines, integrating data collection into daily practice, and finding time to write when students are writing (Quigley & Norton, 2002, p. 13). Suggestions for integrating data collection into practice are included in Chapter 8. Still, you'll likely need blocks of time apart from your day-to-day work to complete your research, including time to reconnect with the research work.

### **I Stop Writing the Poem**

Tess Gallagher

to fold clothes. No matter who lives  
or who dies, I'm still a woman.  
I'll always have plenty to do.  
I bring the arms of his shirt  
together. Nothing can stop  
our tenderness. I'll get back  
to the poem. I'll get back to being a  
woman. But for now  
there's a shirt, a giant shirt  
in my hands, and somewhere a small girl  
standing next to her mother  
watching to see how it's done.

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of Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minnesota.

## Planning to document the research process

As you'll see in later chapters, it is important to document your research process and the decisions you make. For example, you'll want to note why you choose particular data collection methods and how you invite and involve research participants. You'll also want to keep blank copies of any documents you use, such as consent forms, questionnaires or interview questions. Your record of the research process is one resource to show that your work is credible. We'll come back to the topic of credibility in Chapter 8.

Some people document their research process as part of their reflective writing process. They write about the research process, leaving a wide margin, and then write their reflections in the margin. Another approach is to use different coloured pens to document and reflect. If you are part of a collaborative project or research network, e-mails and notes from meetings may also serve to document the process.

## Planning your research project

In the following chapters, you'll read about forming questions, inviting participants, ethical decision making, collecting and analyzing data, and sharing your research. The planning guide that follows includes topics and questions to consider as you plan your research project. You might write your responses as you plan and make decisions, or use the list as a reminder or checklist about the decisions you make. Your responses can provide an outline for a proposal, if you are writing one.

### Research project planning guide

Following are some questions to consider as you plan your research project.

#### **Focus/Question** (Chapter 6)

- What is the topic or focus for my research?
- What question(s) will guide my research?
- Why is the focus/question important to me? To others?
- What excites me about the research?

#### **Context**

- Where will I do the research?
- What permission do I need to do the research there?
- How do I make the request for permission?

- Does my employer or research site have a research protocol? Ethics review committee?

### **Locating myself** (Chapter 4)

- What do I understand and believe about research?
- What are my social locations and how might they influence my research?

### **Data collection** (Chapter 8)

- What data do I need?
- What data is already available?
- What methods will I use to collect data?
- What tools will I use?
- Will I develop the tools or can I use/adapt tools?
- How will I store the data?

### **Participants** (Chapters 8, 5)

- Who?
- How many?
- How will I contact and invite participants?
- What ethical issues do I anticipate and how will I address them?
- How might participants benefit from participating in the research?
- How will I inform participants?
- How will I request their consent?

### **Data analysis** (Chapter 9)

- How will I analyze the data?
- Do I want to use computer software for analysis? Who can help me access or select software?
- What other supplies will I need?

### **Sharing** (Chapter 10)

- Who do I want to share my research with?
- What form(s) will I use to share my research?
- If I write a report, how will I distribute it?

### **Possible challenges**

- What challenges might I encounter as I do the research?
- How might I address them?

## *Resources*

### **Myself/others**

- What experience and skills will help me do the research project?
- What research skills do I want to develop? What resources are available to help me learn (colleagues, workshops or courses, this Guide, learning as I go...)?
- Will I be working on my own or with a group?
- Are there people I can call on to talk over questions or issues that come up? Who?

### **Information (Chapter 7)**

- Do I need to learn more about my research topic before/as I do the research?
- How can I access information (personal collection, library, data bases, people)?
- How will I keep track of this information?
- What reference format will I use?

### **Finances**

- Will my time be paid or unpaid? If it's paid, what is the estimated cost?
- What other expenses will there be to do the research (e.g., tapes, phone calls, stationery, postage, travel, printing, honoraria, participants' expenses)? What is the cost?
- How will I cover the cost?

### **Time line**

- When do I want to start and finish the research?
- Can I do some of the research as part of my day-to-day practice (e.g., inviting participants, data collection, documenting the research process)?
- Will I do all of the research in addition to my day-to-day practice?
- How much time will I need/can I allocate to do each part of my research?
- When will I have some blocks of time to work on the research? (Remember to include time for documenting, reflection, analysis and writing.)

# Locating Ourselves in Our Research





ONE EVENING ON A CYCLING TRIP, my partner and I took a wrong turn and rode a number of miles before we realized that we were getting farther and farther away from our destination. It was getting late and dark, so we stopped in the next village and looked for a place to stay. As we approached the only hotel, I noticed the higher-end cars in the parking lot, but given few alternatives, we proceeded to the door. The man who answered our ring called out, rather gruffly, “Who are you?” When I said we were looking for a place to stay, he replied “We’re full.” From the way he responded it was clear to me that, full or not, there was no room for us at this hotel. Only later did I realize that the man may have been frightened by two rain soaked, mud spattered, yellow poncho clad, bicycle riding travelers. The man and I had seen the same situation through our different eyes.

Chapter 1 introduced the idea that researchers are a main instrument for our research. This refers to how, on our own or with others, we’ll choose a topic, invite participants, ask questions, listen, write, address ethics and make meaning from what we hear, see and experience. How we do all of this will be shaped by what we already know, including our values and assumptions and our social identities and locations.

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes.*  
– Marcel Proust

All of this baggage is part of who we are, and we can’t just check it at the start of our journey. Sometimes we may not even be aware of what we are carrying. As Phyllis Steeves (2002) noted in her research about change,

bias and the underlying beliefs and values that support it will not always be wholly recognized or acknowledged. Belief and value systems run deep and may be so ingrained—individually, institutionally, societally—that they are unquestionable, part of the fabric of the everyday. (p. 4)

In this chapter, we’ll start to unpack what we know—consciously and unconsciously—and look critically and carefully at how it may shape, limit and contribute to our research.

## How does who we are shape what we know?

What we know and how we know is intertwined with who we are—with our personal and social identities. Who we are in the world shapes both *how* we see and *what* we see. As a result, our research will be partial, in both senses of the word: it can’t tell the whole story, and it can’t possibly be unbiased (Cook, 2004). What is possible is to clarify and name our beliefs and identities, to be mindful of how they influence us, and try to be open to how others see and know. We’ll start with our beliefs about practice.

## Our beliefs about our practice

I have always been interested in the motivation of fellow instructors, particularly those who shared a “political” perspective with me.... I knew that my motivation or perspective was what shaped my choices of strategies and the way I related with students. I have always noticed and wondered about instructors who seemed to be motivated by a nurturing attitude, one of taking care of students, and that they seemed to be equally effective as those of us with political perspectives. (Evelyn Battell, 2004, p. 70)

Evelyn’s interest in practitioners’ perspectives and how they influence practice was one of the reasons she joined other researchers to do a study of effective ABE and literacy instructors (Battell, Gesser, Rose, Sawyer, & Twiss, 2004). Naming motivations and perspectives about practice is an important starting point for research in practice about any topic. Doing so can help us be mindful about how our perspectives influence our research—from asking questions to drawing conclusions. Writing about our perspectives in our research reports will also help our readers know where we are coming from.

The following questions might help you start to describe your perspectives. You could freewrite your responses, brainstorm words related to each question, or create a collage of pictures and words.

- How did you get involved in literacy practice? Who or what influenced you to get involved?
- How do you feel about your work?
- What hopes, perspectives and beliefs guide your work—about teaching, learning, literacy, people?
- How do your perspectives relate to others’ views of teaching and learning?

Reading about others’ perspectives can also prompt us to reflect on and clarify our own views. In writing about her research project, Rebecca Still (2002) recalls being introduced to

philosophies, beliefs and theories in the field of literacy. This was such a significant learning...for me that it formed the basis of my research question. The articles I read really made me think about my own beliefs and perceptions. (p. 1)

As prompts for reflecting about beliefs, you might read one or more of the following:

Battell, E. (2004). A passion for the possible. In E. Battell, L. Gesser, J. Rose, J. Sawyer, & D. Twiss, *Hardwired for hope: Effective ABE/literacy instructors*. (pp. 69-128). Duncan, BC: Malaspina University College. <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/hwired/cover.htm>

Quigley, B.A. (1997). Illiteracy through society's eyes. In B. A. Quigley, *Rethinking literacy education: The critical need for practice-based change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Norton, M. (2000b). Participatory approaches in adult literacy education: Theory and practice. In M. Norton & G. Malicky (Eds.), *Learning about participatory approaches in adult literacy education: Six research in practice studies* (pp. 9-30). Edmonton, AB: Learning at the Centre Press.  
<http://www.nald.ca/ripal/Resources/learning/learning.pdf>

Tisdell, E., J., & Taylor, E. W. (1999- 2000). Adult education philosophy informs practice. *Adult Learning*, 11 (2), 6-10.

You may find that what you learn through your research challenges your beliefs. If so, you may want to document your reflections about this and include these in your report. For instance, in my research about sharing power in a literacy program (Norton, 2000a), I had a number of insights about myself and about contradictions in my beliefs and practices. Learnings from my research affected how I saw myself and my practice. They continue to frame the way I approach my practice, reflection and related writing.

## Our social identities/location

Our *social identities* include our race, gender, class, sexual orientation, abilities and other identities. Our *social location* has to do with our membership in socially identified groups and the relative power or dominance of those groups. For instance, in Canada, it's generally recognized that as a group, white people have more power than Aboriginal people and people of colour, that men have more power than women, and that heterosexuality is considered the norm. Although the dominance of many groups has been challenged, their power is sustained by slow-changing social, economic and political systems.

Power relations are sustained by assumptions and ways of thinking shaped and maintained by the powerful groups. For example, until the 1960s, women teachers, nurses and other professionals were expected to resign from their jobs when they married. This reflected prevailing thinking that married women needed to be at home to look after their children and husbands (Ivany, 2004).

## **Soybeans**

Thomas Alan Orr

The October air was warm and musky, blowing  
Over brown fields, heavy with the fragrance  
Of freshly combined beans, the breath of harvest.

He was pulling a truckload onto the scales  
At the elevator near the rail siding north of town  
When a big Cadillac drove up. A man stepped out,  
Wearing a three-piece suit and a gold pinky ring.  
The man said he had just invested a hundred grand  
In soybeans and wanted to see what they looked like.

The farmer stared at the man and was quiet, reaching  
For the tobacco in the rear pocket of his jeans,  
Where he wore *his* only ring, a threadbare circle rubbed  
By working cans of dip and long hours on the backside  
Of a hundred acre run. He scooped up a handful  
Of small white beans, the pearls of the prairie, saying:

Soybeans look like a foot of water on the field in April  
When you're ready to plant and can't get in;  
Like three kids at the kitchen table  
Eating macaroni and cheese five nights in a row;  
Or like a broken part on the combine when  
Your credit with the implement dealer is nearly tapped.

Soybeans look like prayers bouncing off the ceiling  
When prices on the Chicago grain market start to drop;  
Or like your old man's tears when you tell him  
How much the land might bring for subdivisions.  
Soybeans look like the first good night of sleep in weeks  
When you unload at the elevator and the kids get Christmas.

He spat a little juice on the tire of the Cadillac,  
Laughing despite himself and saying to the man:  
Now maybe you can tell me what a hundred grand look like.

- From *Hammers in the Fog* printed by Restoration Press.  
©1995. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Our social locations have a strong influence on what we see—and on what we don't see. Particularly if we are members of more dominant social groups, it may be easier for us to take our knowledge for granted, and not notice that there might be other ways of seeing and knowing.

In a study of learners' perspectives on progress, one of the researchers noted:

Identifying that the majority of literacy workers come from a white, middle class background is important and integral to understanding where we come from, how we “see” the research data and what we “hear” in learners' words. (Lefebvre, Belding, Brehaut, Dermer, Kaskens, Lord, McKay, & Sookermany, 2006, p. 46)

For more on the idea of White identity, you might read:

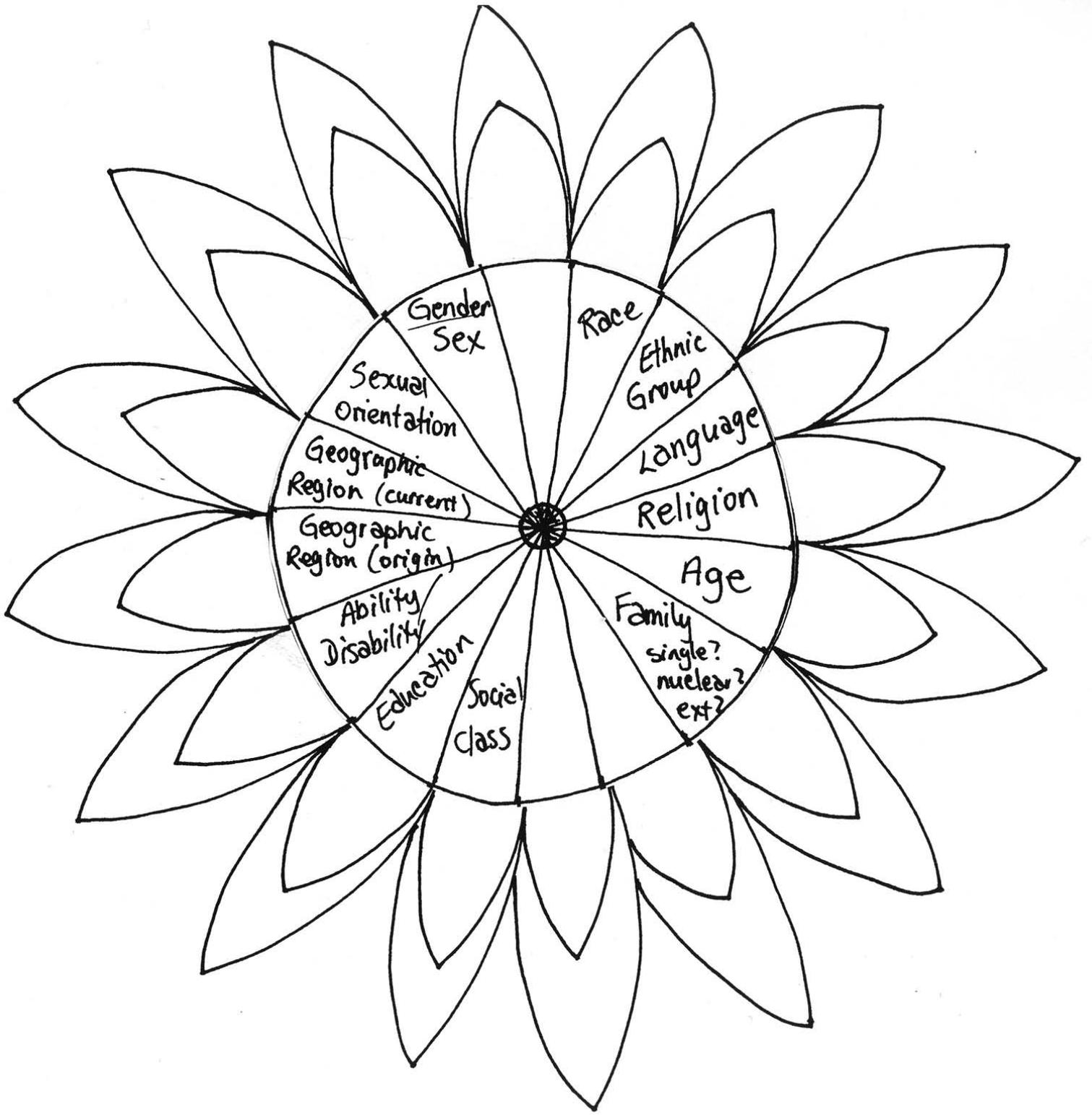
Shore, S. (2003). What's whiteness got to do with it? Exploring assumptions about cultural differences and everyday literacy practices. *Literacies* 2, 19-25.  
<http://www.literacyjournal.ca/literacies/2-2003/practice/2/1.pdf>

As other examples, a teacher or learner who identifies as a heterosexual parent might not see how books and articles about parenting might exclude parents who are in gay or lesbian relationships, or couples who don't have children. People who have succeeded in formal educational institutions may be less open to other ways of learning and knowing (Hammerberg & Grant, 2001). On the other hand, members of non-dominant groups may be conscious of the dominant perspective as well as of the non-dominant ones.

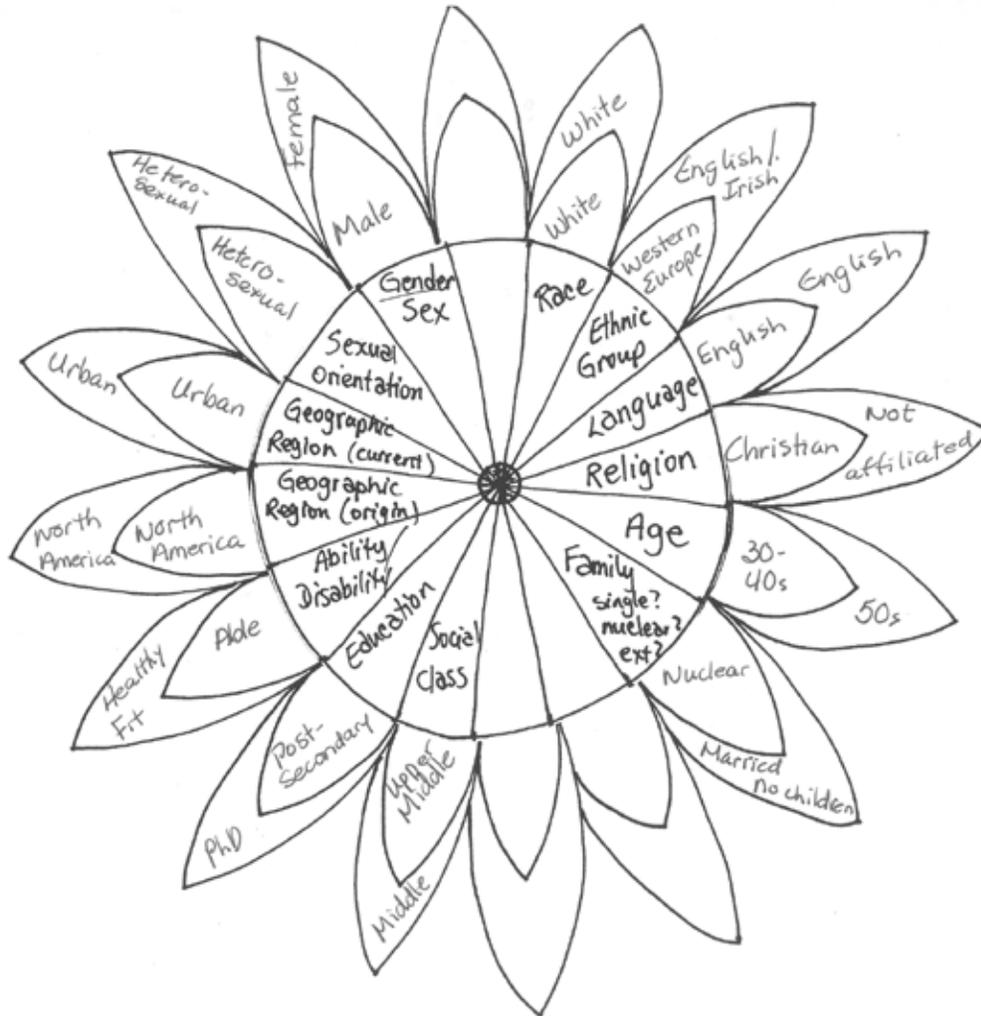
The Power Flower activity is one way to look at or be reminded about our social identities or locations in relation to the dominant ones. If you'd like to do this activity, make a copy of the Power Flower on the next page.

The flower includes three rings of petals. Various identities are listed on the petals in the centre ring.

- Review the identities that are listed. Add any that are missing for you. (For example, I might add “parenthood” as an identity.)
- For each identity that is listed, name the dominant identity in Canada. For instance, in most of Canada, the dominant language is English. Write these identities on the petals in the second ring.
- On the third ring, note your own identities.



Power Flower activity adapted from *Educating for a Change* by Arnold, Burke, James, Martin, & Thomas. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991). Reprinted with permission. Drawing by Bonnie Soroke.



Once you have completed the above, consider:

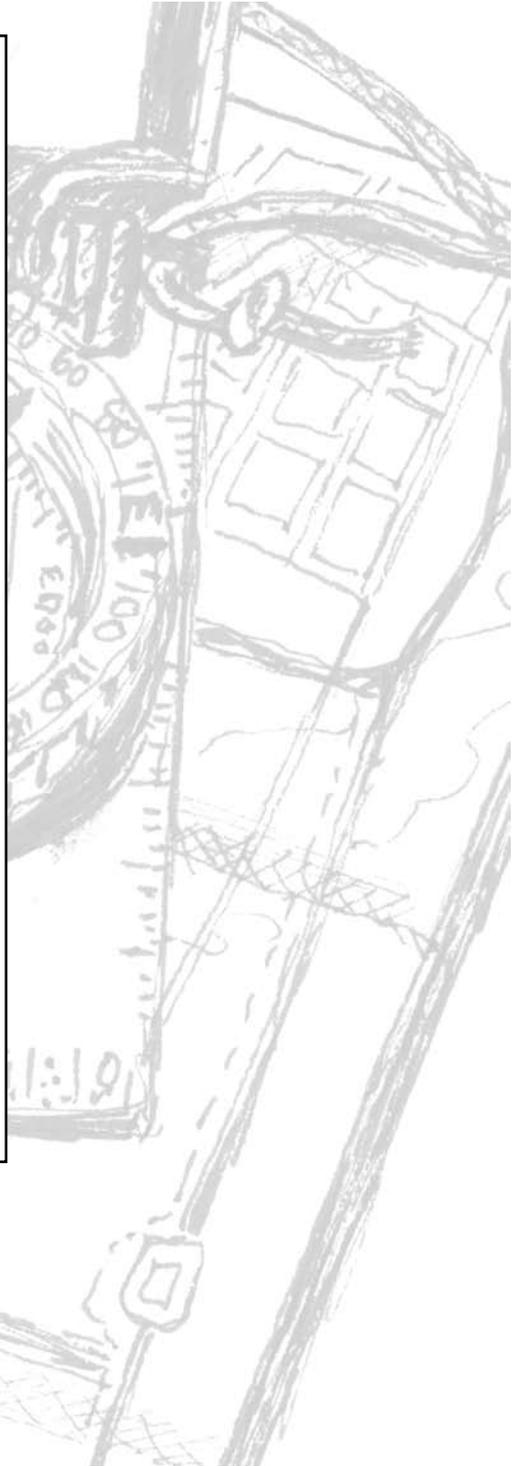
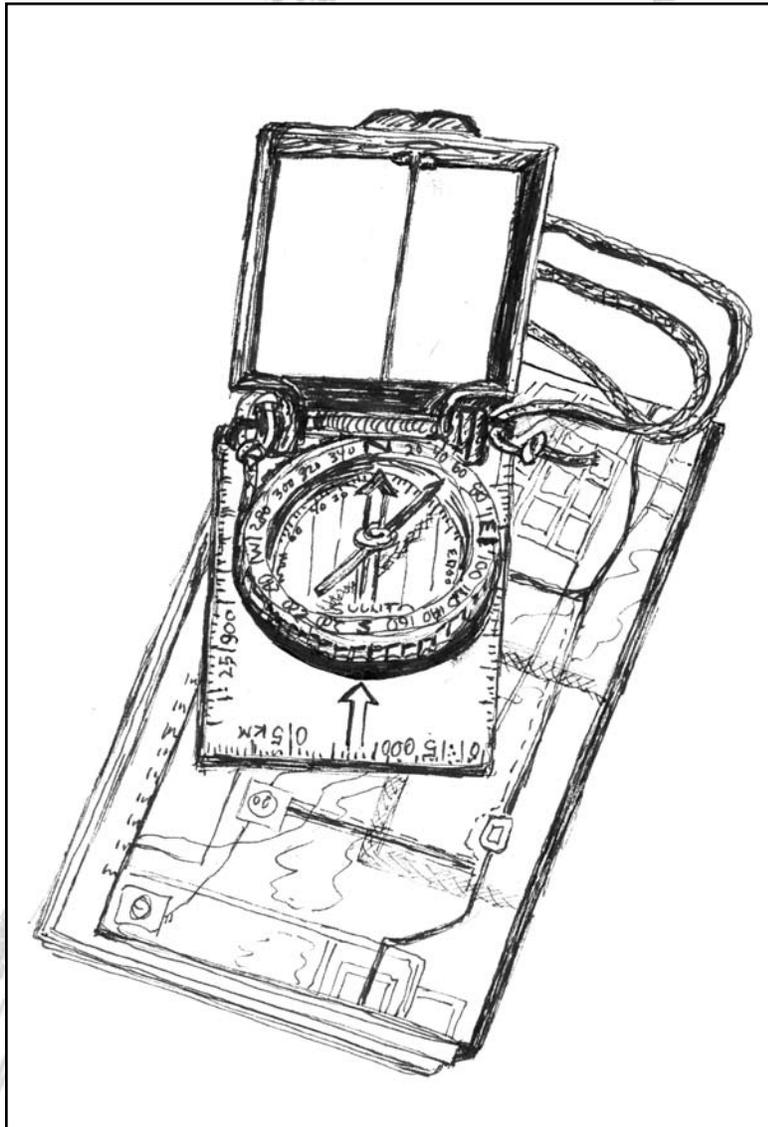
- How many factors do you have as an individual that are the same as or different from the dominant identities? What factors can't be shifted or changed?
- In what ways might your identities influence how you approach research, including how you view the world and work with others?
- How can you be mindful of and address these potential influences?

If you do this activity with a group, people might complete their Power Flowers individually, report on identities they chose and participate in general discussion about the role and influence of identities.

Our social identities/locations have particular implications for inviting and working with research participants. This will be discussed in later chapters.



# Planning for Ethical Decision Making





**A**S IN DAY-TO-DAY PRACTICE, ethics are central to research in practice. In this chapter, we'll consider ethics as a decision-making process and discuss some specifics of working ethically with research participants. Topics include relationships, voluntary participation and reciprocity, anonymity and confidentiality, and informed choice and consent.

To provide a framework for what follows, take a few moments to reflect on the following situations. Suppose that:

It's the end of a long day. Tired as you are, you wait in line for 15 minutes to pay for your groceries. On your way out, you notice that the cashier gave you too much change. *What should you do?*

You teach a course that learners take for credit. You mark and return a mid-term exam. Later you realize that you marked one section of the exam out of 20 instead of out of 10. As a result, all of the marks were higher than they should have been. *What should you do?*

As part of a research project, you are interviewing students about an aspect of their program. As an aside, you find out that a number are unhappy with a particular teacher or tutor. *What should you do?*

Ethics has to do with how we ought to act in the situations in which we find ourselves—as community members, family members, friends, teachers, learners—and as researchers. Codes of ethics for researchers have been developed nationally and internationally, with the aim of protecting research participants.<sup>8</sup> Universities, colleges and other institutions also have codes or guidelines for research. Depending on where you work, you may be required to submit a plan to a committee or board and show how you will follow their research guidelines. Whether or not you are required to submit a plan, it is important to plan how you will work ethically with research participants and in all aspects of your research.

The focus of research ethics has been on minimizing harm to the participants in the research and on the related issues of voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality. Ethical guidelines were first developed for research that involved people in

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<sup>8</sup> In Canada, three national research councils worked together to develop and publish a policy statement about ethical conduct for research involving humans. Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, 1998 (with 2000, 2002 and 2005 amendments).  
<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm>

*We bring all of who we are to whatever we do, and research is no different. There is no such thing as being objective and I think this is where and how research has hurt Native communities in the past. As researchers, we cannot help but bring our worldview into the process and with these worldviews come judgments about differences however well meaning the researcher might be. I need to remember who I am, keep an open mind, use the skills I've learned for the betterment of my community and remember that the role of the researcher is to learn from the experts.*  
– Nancy Cooper (2004, p. 20)

medical experiments, with an understandable focus on minimizing mental or physical harm to clients or patients. Given the different nature of research in practice, the potential for physical harm may seem less likely, but there is potential for emotional harm or repercussions. For example, interviews may prompt participants to recall painful or challenging experiences, whether that was your intention or not. Or suppose you are interviewing practitioners about their work. Would there be repercussions if they talk about problems or challenges that have resulted from policy changes? Will you avoid research that might prompt such responses, or will you proceed? How will you inform participants about potential harm and how you intend to reduce the potential? Might you involve participants in discussion and decisions about how to reduce potential harm? These are some examples of ethical decision making.

Some researchers suggest that we focus on promoting optimal outcomes through research rather than focus on reducing harm (Shartrand & Brabeck, 2004). Hopefully, we can aim to do both. A main purpose and ethical underpinning of research in practice is to improve practice for the benefit of learners. Think about how the choices you make throughout your research journey are of benefit and to whom.

In the rest of this chapter, we'll consider a number of other ethical decisions related to involving people in your research. Although you can plan for situations that may arise, you can't always know ahead of time what might come up. Think about ethics as a process for making decisions throughout your research, rather than set of procedures to follow at the start (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002).

## Our beliefs, social identities and ethics

In Chapter 4, we considered how who we are shapes how and what we know and come to know. This includes our knowing about ethics—about minimizing harm and promoting well being. You might keep your reflections from Chapter 4 in mind as we proceed with this chapter.

## Ownership

As you plan your research, think about who owns the research or has control of it. As the researcher, you will be doing the main share of the work. But in most cases, you would not be able to do the research without the direct participation or support of others. Likely, students or other practitioners will participate in your research. Your employer may be supporting you to carry out the research in your workplace. Perhaps you received funding to do the work.

How will you share your research with participants and supporters? What input will they have about how you carry out and report on your research? What rights will you and others have to share or build on your research? Consider these questions as you plan your research and talk to others about their participation, and as you plan how to share your learnings.

## Relationships

Research in practice projects typically involve practitioners and students who have previous and ongoing relationships. Practitioners and students usually have different authority and power in a program, and often have different social identities and locations. At the same time, students and practitioners may have friendly, trusting relationships. Both situations have implications for voluntary and informed choice to participate in research. They may affect how students share information, what information is shared, and how you are able to separate the research data from other knowledge you have about the research participants.

When researchers and participants have a relationship of trust, participants might be inclined to give blanket permission to use whatever they share. This places additional responsibility on the researcher, as Janet Bauer (2004) found in her research with a writing group:

I was continually amazed at the personal nature of some of the things we shared within the group, and at times I felt overwhelmed with the broad freedom the women gave me to share anything. I did not want to misuse or abuse that trust. At one point during the VALTA Project, we had discussed informed consent. The guiding principle I took from the discussion was to “do no harm.” It is my hope that my writing reflects the respect and admiration I hold for this amazing group of women. (p. 85)

In discussing researcher-participant relations, Kirsch (1999) makes a distinction between “friendliness” and “friendship,” advocating that researchers be friendly, but not establish friendships. Many of the factors that one considers in developing teacher-learner relationships are similar to those we need to consider in researcher-participant relations. This includes what information to share about ourselves and how to respond to requests for information or other assistance.

## Voluntary participation

Voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty are fundamental in research. It is easy to turn down a request to complete a survey or questionnaire when we don't have a relationship

with the researcher. It may not be so easy when there is an established relationship between the researcher and participants. Some practitioners may decide not to do research with students in their class or program for this reason.

However, research in practice is often carried out in the context of an existing group or class. If you choose to do research with the students you work with, how can you assure them that they can choose not to participate in the research? How can you be as sure as possible that participation in your study is voluntary? Will you be prepared to suggest to someone that they not participate if you sense a hesitation before or during the research?

One approach to address these questions is to conduct the research separately from groups or classes. Andrea Pheasey and I did this in our research about participatory approaches (Norton, 2000a; Pheasey, 2000). We made a presentation about the research to all interested students in our program, invited the students to brainstorm participatory research projects, then invited them to indicate if they wanted to take part in one of the projects, which were carried on outside of the regular learning groups.

Some practitioners working in college settings have invited participation in research after a course is completed. As an example, Leonne Beebe (2006) wanted to learn about the usefulness of a Guided Reflective Writing Technique. The Research Ethics Board at her college gave her permission

to work with my students on the understanding that students would not sign the Students' Consent form until after the course marks were submitted at the end of term. This would ensure that students did not feel obliged, coerced or manipulated to participate. (p. 7)

Students who volunteered to participate gave Leonne their journals which she used as data. Although she had read students' journals during the course, she did not use them as data until the course was finished, and then only with the students' permission.

Another concern with voluntary participation is that potential participants may not understand what they are volunteering for. How can we understand research if we have not participated in research? How can we know what we are agreeing to?

To address this issue, I once asked people to review and sign consent forms at the end of a project that I was researching. I had explained the research at the start, and students had orally agreed to participate. I hoped that participants would have an understanding of the research

after they had taken part. I had to be prepared to delete data related to anyone who chose not to give consent. In retrospect, even at the end of the project, participants' readiness to sign may have reflected their trust in our relationship more than an understanding of the research.

A related concern is that in research in practice, questions and methods often evolve and change during the research. Thus, participation and consent need to be negotiated along the way. We need to be alert to body language and other cues, such as missed appointments, that may suggest a participant's reluctance to take part. We can also check regularly with participants about their agreement to participate.

## Reciprocity

As researchers in practice, we stand to gain from our research. What's in it for participants? Sometimes participants say they are happy to give back to the program. A student in Paula Davies' research commented, "If it helps other (students), then I'm happy to do it" (Davies, 2006, p. 21).

Participating in the research can also be an opportunity to voice ideas, tell one's story, and reflect on a topic. Nancy Cooper (2006) found this in her research with other practitioners. Some participants also accept a researcher's careful listening and attention as fair exchange. Research projects might also introduce new learning opportunities for participants, and practitioners and students may get to know each other in new ways.

You might choose to pay honoraria or give small gifts to participants as a way to honour their time and contribution. You might want to tell participants ahead of time that you will be providing an honorarium, or you might send a thank you gift after their participation is completed. An honorarium can be a way to involve those who otherwise might not participate. Paying for child care and travel costs, and providing refreshments or a meal, are other ways to acknowledge participants' involvement and ensure that they are not out of pocket.

Another approach is to give something to the program that participants attend. For example, while doing research at a literacy centre, Bonnie Soroke (2003) created a cloth banner with the centre's name written on it, that could be used for public relations work.

## Representation

Qualitative research generally includes descriptions of participants and the research context. Thus, there is potential for harm in how

participants and their communities are represented, particularly when participants are from non-dominant social locations and are described through dominant worldviews. Note the differences between the following descriptions:

*John is an older man*, compared to *John is in his sixties*.

*Most of the women are poor*, compared to *Most of the women have incomes under \$10,000*.

*All of the participants are unemployed*, compared to: *The participants have various occupations. John attends the program three times a week and minds his grandchildren in the evenings. Mary and Susan are raising school-aged children.*

How can you work with participants so that they are represented as they want to be seen and heard? One approach is to ask participants to say how they would like to be described. Another is to review what you write about them and how you use their words and ideas. (Be sure to explain how the research will be shared. This may affect what information participants decide to include, for example about their roles or locations.)

And what about when, as researchers, we observe or interpret situations that contribute to our learnings but cast people in a negative light? When faced with this situation, I decided to write in a way that did not identify individuals and that focused on my learnings, and I reviewed what I had written with all of the participants.

## Anonymity and confidentiality

Traditionally, anonymity has been a key consideration in research, particularly in quantitative research. This includes anonymity from the researcher(s) and from any others who might review research data or read or hear research reports. In research in practice, researchers are generally directly involved with participants, thus the participants are not anonymous to the researcher.

Although you will likely know participants in your research, you can work to ensure confidentiality, i.e., that the information you gather is kept in confidence by you and anyone who helps you with your research. Think about where you will keep your research data and related documents, so that only you have access to them. How will you share the information with co-researchers or with people you might ask to transcribe interviews or read and respond to draft reports?

Participants might choose to be anonymous when research data is shared and reported. In this case, you would use a pseudonym when you refer to participants or quote them. This is something you can ask participants about. When using pseudonyms, keep in mind that in research settings where people know each other, it can be possible to identify people through descriptions or quotes (e.g., style of speech, vocabulary). In some situations, naming a person's role or geographic location can identify them despite the use of a pseudonym.

Sometimes, participants prefer to have their own first or full names included, in order to be present and heard. In a study of learners' perspectives on progress, the researchers reported:

The decision to include learners' names as an option was based on a number of discussions.... PPR [Parkdale Project Read] believes in the importance of honouring people's wisdom by including their names if they choose, rather than assuming that the most respectful approach is always hiding people's identity, as is more usual in academic research. Others from our research team weren't as comfortable with the idea of using learners' real names. Some were concerned about the vulnerability of learners that put their trust in us as staff and researchers. We were all aware of the power relationship that is present when we ask learners to take part in focus groups or in sharing personal information with us. In the end we decided to leave the decision to each learner. (Lefebvre et al., 2006, p. 45)

## Informed choice and consent

Informed choice and consent has to do with ensuring that participants have been thoroughly informed about the research, including how it will be conducted and used, and that they have consented to participate. Informed consent and signing a consent form may seem like one and the same. However, it's helpful to separate the ideas:

- You need to inform potential participants so that they may choose to participate or not.
- If they choose to participate, you need to document that they consented.

Typically, information about the research is written out and participants are asked to sign to indicate their consent. Some researchers suggest that consent forms have more to do with protecting institutions and researchers than with protecting participants. We can also think about consent forms as a tool for informing participants and negotiating their involvement. Sample consent forms are included at the end of this chapter.

In some communities, being asked to sign a form could suggest a lack of trust and could potentially deter participants. You could choose to document verbal consent by using a tape recorder or by having someone available to witness the verbal consent. For a BC project that involved students at a number of sites, researchers developed an information and consent form that coordinators reviewed with students. The coordinators signed the form to indicate that the student had been informed and had provided consent, and passed the signed forms on to the researchers (Marina Niks, personal communication, January 2008).

Here are some questions to address in the information you provide to participants.

- What is your research about? What do you hope to learn? How will you use what you learn?
- Who are you? Who is sponsoring the research? Who else is involved in the research with you?
- How do you plan to do the research? What are you asking participants to do?
- What, if any, is the potential risk of harm for participants?
- Who might benefit from the research?
- How will the research be shared?
- What will participants receive for taking part in the research?
- Will you check back with participants about using information and quotes? How?
- How will you ensure that participation is voluntary? How can participants withdraw? What will you do with their information if they withdraw?
- How will you address issues of anonymity and confidentiality? Can participants choose to use a pseudonym or their own name?
- How will you securely store information and for how long?

What about when your research involves a group where people come and go? In such cases, you can review your research at the start of each session and request consent. You may want to request consent verbally and document whether people agree to participate or not. You can use a similar approach when you have casual conversations with research participants that are relevant to the research. You could explain that you'd like to include the participants' comments in your research and ask for their permission to do so.

## Language and literacy differences

Differences in language and literacy use can pose challenges to the informed consent process. Whether you ask for written permission or not,

it may be helpful to have a written form or checklist for you to review with each participant. Paula Davies (2006) discussed her research idea with her class, and students had time to ask questions and share ideas before deciding whether to participate. Susan Lefebvre and her colleagues (2006) developed a clear language consent form that included graphics. Examples of consent forms follow.

**Agreement to participate in an interview about the  
use of arts-based approaches in adult literacy work**  
[Participants were practitioners]

Please check each statement to indicate agreement/choices. Send the completed form to Mary Norton [address]

- I have read the information about the research project provided by Mary Norton [provided in a cover letter]
- I agree to participate in a \_\_\_\_\_ telephone interview \_\_\_\_\_ e-mail interview about the use of arts-based approaches in adult literacy work.
- I understand that as a participant in this research I have the following rights:
  - My participation is entirely voluntary.
  - I may choose to pass on addressing any questions that are posed.
  - I am free to withdraw from the research at any time.
  - I understand that if I choose to withdraw, my responses will not be included in any reports on the research.
- I give permission to Mary Norton to transcribe or print out and use my interview responses for her research purposes.
- I give permission to Mary Norton to use and quote from my responses as follows:
  - to share what is learned from the research with other participants in this research and with support group members, in order to review and extend the learnings;
  - to share what is learned from the research with participants in a workshop with literacy educators, in order to review and extend the learnings;
  - to prepare a report about the research for publication and distribution.

I wish to review how my responses and quotes are used in the report before it is published.

- Yes
- No

I wish to have my participation and quotes acknowledged in the report as follows:

- my own name \_\_\_\_\_ (print name to be used) OR
- a pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_ (print the name to be used) OR
- "a participant"

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

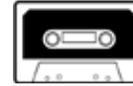
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Consent Check List

Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Focus Group Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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



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



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



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

Assigned Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

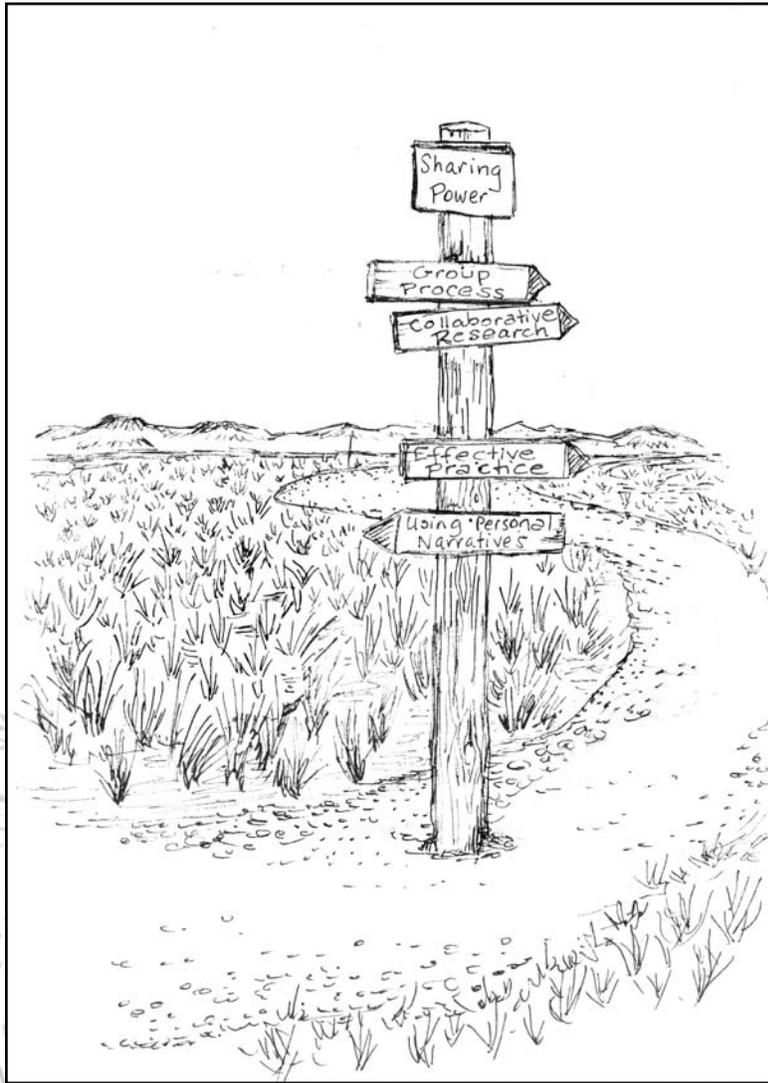
Signature of interviewers: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

From *"I've opened up": Exploring learners' perspectives on progress*, by Lefebvre et al., ©2006. (Toronto: Parkdale Project Read). Reprinted with permission.



# Setting Out: What Would You Like to Learn About?





**W**HEN I TRAVEL, whether to a new place or somewhere I've been before, I may have a general intention in mind, such as learning about community-based arts. Once I get to a place, I plan some specific visits—to see outdoor murals or a quilt show, or a play at a neighbourhood library. One visit may lead to another, and my specific interests and questions may narrow or shift. However, I usually keep my overall intentions in mind.

Other travelers may reach their destination with a more defined focus and plan about what to see and do. Even so, the plan may shift as they take stock of their time and resources and other demands on both.

So it is with research in practice. As you embark on your research in practice journey, you may or may not have a topic or focus for your research. Perhaps your starting point is an interest in learning about research in practice or working with other practitioners. However, you likely have several general ideas, interests and concerns related to your practice. These interests can be starting points for deciding an area that you want to “shine a light on.” This chapter includes suggestions for clarifying a topic and focusing in on an area to research.

## Shining a light: Some examples

A usual topic for research in practice is day-to-day literacy work. For example, Lucy Alderson and Diana Twiss conducted a research project to explore “how literacy activities empower and stabilize the lives of women in the sex trade” (Alderson and Twiss, 2003, p. 10). While focusing on how to support a particular group of learners, the research also advocated for accessible programs for that group.

Leonne Beebe (2006) was concerned that “too many returning students start with a real hope for success, only to struggle, quit and drop out again!” (p. 1). Prompted by a conference presentation about teaching students about their learning processes, Leonne carried out research to learn

how effective is the Guided Reflective Writing Technique as an intervention in generating successful student learning experiences and successful student writing. (p. 2)

In Ontario, a group of practitioners explored what happened in tutoring sessions to find out “what made it click or go astray” (Trent Valley Literacy Association, 2004, p. 2). While aiming to understand the teaching/learning relationship, the research was also a way to

*I feel that in order to do literacy work effectively, I have to be a questioning researcher. Then occasionally there will be some questions which start to niggle. Together with the students I may be making little headway on these and feel that they are really bugging me. I will then think that I've got to do a research project.*  
– Margaret Herrington (Norton & Woodrow, 2002, p. 60)

tell a story about literacy work—its complexities, messiness, frustrations, excitement and small celebrations.... We knew that the statistics submitted each month as evidence of our literacy work didn't suffice. (p. 2)

A group of British Columbia practitioners (Battell et al., 2004) also had a story to tell—about effective practitioners:

There are many instructors who have worked in the field since the 1970's, who have grown and learned and who have shared their experience in many ways over the years. The collective urge to document this generation of teaching practice coincided with the pending retirement of some of those experienced instructors. (p. 3)

## What do you want to shine a light on?

The following list may be useful as you generate possible areas for research (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003). The topics might provide starting points to identify and reflect about questions, problems or promising practices.

- Help a particular group of students learn.
- Create a more supportive learning environment.
- Try out new teaching strategies.
- Explore relationships between your beliefs and your practice.
- Explore how your personal history/identity relates to your professional work.
- Learn about advocacy.
- Understand the teaching/learning context.

You could also complete one or more of the following sentence prompts (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982, as cited in Burns, 1999, p. 54; Burns, 1999, p. 55):

- I would like to improve....
- Some people are unhappy about.... What can I [we] do to change the situation?
- I am perplexed by....
- I have an idea I would like to try out in my program—What would happen if I did...?
- How can the experience of...be applied to....
- Why do some students...while others...? How can I find out what is happening here?
- I wonder what would happen if....
- A story I would like to hear learners tell is....

Once you have a number of responses, review them. Do you notice patterns of interest, puzzles or questions? Do you feel strongly enough about any of these ideas to do further work with them?

## Taking stock

Once you've identified a focus for research, take some time to reflect about whether the research is do-able and worth doing. Talk with students and others about your interests. Their responses may offer insights and help you clarify a research focus.

The following questions might help (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005):

- What is the context for my focus or question?
- Is this do-able in my context, with the time and resources I have?
- Is the focus something I have influence or control over?
- What are my feelings about the topic?
- What are my motives for doing research about this topic?
- Can I picture myself doing research about this topic?
- How does this research fit with my vision for practice?
- Who will benefit from this research?
- Is the research worth doing?

However you arrive at your focus, consider how your location and biases influence your choice, and consider how your research will benefit others. Selecting a topic is an ethical choice (see Chapter 5).

## Focusing in

Developing a question may help to focus your project. Although some researchers believe that questions should be clarified before beginning to collect information, others see value in starting with a general question or questions. Either approach may work for you, depending on what you are researching.

Write out your question. Don't worry about the structure, just write it down. Write and rewrite as much as you need to. Once you've completed a draft question, reread it to see if it still interests you. If not, review your reflective writing and other notes to see what first caught your imagination about the research topic. Work this into your question.

In the following example, Veronica Park (2000) describes her focus and the questions she developed. She also describes the process she engaged in before deciding on a question.

*Research is about asking questions, either of ourselves and/or of others, in order to understand better what's happening around us, and to understand our effects on other people.*

— Mary Hamilton (1989, p. 5)

As a literacy co-coordinator, I felt the need to find out why people were not using the literacy service available to them.... I wondered if a different type of needs assessment would provide more useful information. Perhaps I could find out what kind of service was needed by contacting potential students and asking first, where in their lives a lack of literacy skills stopped them from doing what they wanted to do independently. Having identified a need, I would ask them what would be the best way to address it.

I decided to invite a number of Literacy and ABE students in programs at the time to form a group to design and carry out a community needs assessment.... I hoped that the group's ideas would help me to provide a more useful literacy service in the community. The question that guided my research was, "What ideas would a group of students come up with in relation to conducting a needs assessment?" (pp. 195-196)

## Not sure about "the" question?

*I am one of those  
who never know  
the direction of my  
journey until I have  
almost arrived.  
– Anna Louisa  
Strong*

If you're not sure about the question(s), you're not alone. In my research about sharing power (Norton, 2000a), I was not ready to pose a specific question at the start of the project:

As I started the research, I knew I wanted to learn about sharing power. Rather than pose a specific question, I collected information with this general focus in mind. (p. 165)

As I worked with the participants, many questions came up. Towards the end of the project, Holly, one of the participants, said: "We finally got to do something for ourselves, without the staff doing it.... It feels really good that we can actually do something" (p. 164). This prompted me to note some questions in my report:

Why do people feel that they can't do things for themselves? If we consider that "power" comes from the root "to be able" (Starhawk, 1987), we can see how feeling able and feeling powerful are linked. As an educator, I want to help students believe they "can", and I try to help them develop skills so they in fact can. But to what extent do I really help, and how? When do my actions echo other experiences that contributed to students' feelings that they can't? How do I use and misuse my power, as a teacher and as a person? These and related questions took form as I undertook my research about sharing power. (p. 164)

You may find that you modify or change your questions as you move into the research process. This is not unusual. At the same time, your general focus will provide a guidepost; it will help you keep in sight what you are doing and why.

As you narrow your focus and develop your question(s), it might be helpful to list or map out what you know about the topic. Mapping out our knowledge can help name what we know through experience. You might also start to look at what others know. Has someone else done some writing or research about this topic? If so, this doesn't mean it's not useful to research the topic yourself: your context and experience will be different. However, other research and writing about your topic may provide insights that help you develop more specific questions. The next chapter provides some suggestions about looking for related research.



## Locating Our Research in the Literature





**W**HEN I TRAVEL, especially to new places, I gather information about the place from books, from the Internet and from people who've been there before. The information gathering continues after I arrive and start to narrow in on my interests. When I return home, I seem to pay more attention to news or magazine articles about the place I visited.

I also browse the Internet, dig into books and talk to people as part of my research in practice process. Typically, though not necessarily, research also involves some checking or review of the literature. In this chapter, we'll consider the benefits and challenges to doing a literature review and consider some alternatives.

## Literature reviews

In academic research tradition, the term *literature* refers to the body of articles, reports and other documents on a particular topic. A *literature review* refers to the process of finding, reading and synthesizing materials related to the topic. It also refers to the summary of key sources that authors include in their research reports. Engaging with the literature can happen all along the way of your research. Here are some reasons for doing literature reviews.

**Locating our work.** Reading related research can help you locate your work in the bigger picture or “conversation” about the topic. Who else has done research about the topic? What have others learned? How is your research similar or different? Sometimes the literature does not reflect your experiences or you cannot find material that addresses your questions. This can be additional motivation for your research.

**Clarifying questions.** Reading about related research may help you clarify the topic or question you want to address. It may help you see the problem from other points of view. Researchers sometimes suggest questions for further study. These could help you form your question(s).

**Identifying methods.** Other researchers may have used methods that you might be able to adapt or use in your research. In focus groups about learners' perspectives on progress (Lefebvre et al., 2006), the researchers used some questions and prompts suggested in an earlier related study written up by Battell (2001). Kate Nonesuch (2008a) reviewed the literature about violence and learning to develop questions for her survey about practitioners' knowledge of that topic.

**Interpretation.** Others' research and theoretical writing may help you interpret what you find. For example, in my study about sharing power (Norton, 2000a), I drew on frameworks developed by Patricia Cranton (1996) and Starhawk (1987).

**Relating learnings to others' research.** You might be able to relate what you learn in your research to others' research. Were your learnings the same? Different? Linking learnings helps build knowledge about the topic. You might make new connections to other research that opens up new ways of looking at your focus.

As well, a single research in practice study is usually too small to make generalizations. However, as numbers of studies are done on a topic, it may be possible to find patterns in the learnings. In a national project, eleven researchers explored ways to move the research about addressing impacts of violence on learning into practice. As well as publishing the reports from each exploration, project members identified and wrote about themes that were common across the reports (Nonesuch, 2008b).

**Support for a project proposal.** You might find that the topic hasn't been researched. If you're applying for funding for your research, lack of other research may support your proposal. If there is similar research, you could show how your project relates to and builds on that work.

**Reflection and professional development.** Some people find that reading others' research prompts reflection about practice. So even if you don't use all that you find, doing a literature review can be useful for your practice.

Later in the chapter, you will find sources of published literature and suggestions for reading research. At this point, we'll step off the path and look at some challenges and alternatives to literature reviews.

### *Challenges*

Research in practice has broadened the thinking about literature reviews. Practitioners have identified practical challenges of doing literature reviews and have raised challenges to the actual concept of literature reviews.

As we've discussed before, much of what we know as practitioners is learned through experience and shared informally or through workshops and conferences. This knowledge is not necessarily written down; if it is, it is not necessarily published or easily accessed. Although more and more research documents are published on the Internet, researchers in practice may not have the same access to internet resources as people located in universities. Furthermore, researchers in practice usually have limited time and must make choices about how to spend it. Learning styles may also influence whether and how one does a literature review. (For instance, my style prompts me to keep searching and reading until the time runs out; others might stop the search sooner.)

In their report about how adults with little formal education learn, the researchers wrote about the “literature review we didn’t do” (Niks, Allen, Davies, McRae, & Nonesuch, 2003, pp. 8-9). They made choices about how to spend their time, especially since their research required much more time than anticipated. Although a group member, Bonnie Soroke, looked for literature related to the topic, the little that she was able to find didn’t resonate with the researchers. Bonnie’s writing about the experience captures themes about knowers and ways of knowing:

As a graduate student doing research, I am trained to situate myself within the current literature—to explain my position and stance, to display how my research builds upon or challenges other research, and to show through the literature, how I’ve learned about my topic. In contrast, I saw how this group [practitioners] used their practice and their experience in that process. I watched and listened to how these literacy practitioners worked, how they talked about their work, learned from their work—and began to understand the ways they produce knowledge and situated themselves within that. (Niks et al., 2003, pp. 8-9)

Other researchers in practice in British Columbia have taken up the conversation about literature reviews. Ann Docherty (2006) wrote:

The ways in which I interacted with the literature is different than I expected. I have worried that there is a “right” way to conduct a literature review. Using literature has opened up questions for me: Why did I put more importance on academic research? Do I believe that an academic researcher knows more about literacy practice than a practitioner? Why was I placing higher value on what’s written about experience than on the experience itself? (p. 6)

Paula Davies (2006) describes the challenges she found in writing about the literature she’d read. She wrote: “I felt awkward as I referred to the work of other researchers. My connections to their words did not feel real” (p. 13). She goes on to say:

While working on *Dancing in the Dark* (Niks et al., 2003), we struggled to explore why we had balked at doing a literature review for the research project. We talked about feeling that citing names of other researchers and formally referring to other research often felt like we were simply sprinkling our work with a condiment and that these references were not really ingredients germane to our work.

I had these same feelings as I wrote this literature review. I am interested in the work of others, both practitioners and researchers. I do want to give credit to that work and how it informs my work. I am not sure why the traditional process of conversing with the field through a literature review felt so uncomfortable. (p. 13)

As discussed in the first chapter, research is one way to create knowledge. Research in practice builds on that approach to knowledge creation but also challenges thinking about what counts as knowledge. Whether or not you do a literature review may depend on what you want to research as well as what you already know about the topic and how you know it. Including a literature review may be important for some funders or publications.

## Other approaches

In interviews about professional development, coordinators of literacy programs in Alberta said that they preferred face-to-face learning in order to network, interact and learn from each other (Norton, 2004). Conferences, workshops and meetings have been an important way for literacy practitioners to share and build knowledge. You might be able to tap into this knowledge to locate and inform your research. Here are some ways:

**Field review.** Have a look at topics that have been explored at conferences and workshops. What are people interested in? What are presenters saying about the topics? You might be able to access conference proceedings or other write-ups through provincial/territorial literacy coalition websites. (A field review, like a literature review, could be a research project in itself. To support your research project, focus is on situating your research in relation to how others are exploring the topic.)

**Study groups.** Can you meet with colleagues to talk about your topic? Share what you are thinking and ask for their perspectives.

**Online discussion groups and forums.** There are a number of online discussion groups about topics in adult literacy. Joining such a group is one way to immerse yourself in a topic. You could also post your thoughts on the topic for response. Check with respondents about whether you can quote them or refer to their responses in your research, and if so, how they would like to be credited.

The National Adult Literacy Database links to a number of online literacy discussion groups in Canada and the United States. Go to the following address for details about how to join:

<http://www.nald.ca/info/dgroup/dgroup.htm>

## Reading research

Critical reading involves an analysis and evaluation of what we are reading. We draw on our experiences and practices, knowledge and perspectives to critically read. Reading can also be an opportunity to extend our knowledge and to critically reflect on our experiences, practices and perspectives. Here are some questions to consider as you read:

What do you bring to the reading?

- What is your interest in this reading?
- What is your social identity/location?
- What experiences, knowledge and perspectives do you draw on as you read? How familiar are you with the topic?
- What perspectives influenced your reading?

What does the author bring to the text?

- Does the author locate her/himself?
- What is the author's purpose for the research and/or writing? How will the research improve practice?
- How does the author locate the research?

What does the author say?

- How are participants represented?
- What are the main points of the writing?
- What evidence does the author offer to support the points? What kind of data does the author present? Is there enough?
- Does the author describe challenges in the research process or contradictions in what was learned in the research?

What is your response to the reading?

- Does the writing resonate with you?
- Do you find the writing credible, based on your experience and knowledge?
- Does the research relate to your research topic? Will it help to locate and inform your research?
- Is there a practice, perspective or position articulated in the reading that particularly engages or resonates with you? Why?
- Is there a practice, perspective or position articulated in the article that you find yourself resisting? Why are you resistant?
- Have your views shifted through reading this selection? How?
- How might you apply an idea from this reading to your research in practice? (e.g., does it address some of the purposes for literature reviews suggested at the beginning of the chapter?)

The following articles include suggestions for reading qualitative and quantitative research studies:

Hull, G. (1997, Feb.) Research with words: Qualitative inquiry. *Focus on Basics, 1(A)*. <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=468>

Valentine. T. (1997, Feb.) Understanding quantitative research about adult literacy. *Focus on Basics, 1(A)*.  
<http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=470>

## Documenting references

In writing this *Guide*, we consulted the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2001) for guidelines about citing sources and formatting references. You could use that manual or another approach. In either case, aim to be consistent in how you cite sources and write up your references.

Software has been designed to help you organize references and create bibliographies in various formats. Research practitioner Kate Nonesuch experienced some problems when she first started using the software but now she “couldn’t imagine working without it” (personal communication, October 2007).

Examples include:

EndNote      <http://www.endnote.com>  
Ref Works     <http://www.refworks.com>

## Finding published research on the Internet

Following are some online sources of published research and articles. Reference librarians may be able to help you find and work with other databases. As you find relevant documents, the authors’ literature reviews may lead you to other useful sources. You may find the same citations in a number of articles. This may signal that it is a relevant source.

### *Databases*

*Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English*  
<http://www.nald.ca/crd>

This database lists and describes Canadian research in adult literacy from 1994 on, as well as research in progress. In some cases, there are links to full text documents of the research.

*ERIC (Educational Resources Information Centre)*

<http://www.eric.ed.gov/>

This database contains more than one million abstracts of education-related documents and articles. You can search for articles and reports on topics related to your research focus. In many cases, the database includes links to full text documents. You may also be able to locate and view microfiche copies of ERIC documents at a university library (or access them through inter-library loan).

*National Adult Literacy Database*

<http://www.nald.ca>

This database includes a “library” of materials related to literacy research and practice, including full text documents.

### *Journals*

*Focus on Basics.* <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=31>

This is a quarterly publication dedicated to connecting research to practice. It is published by the National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

*Literacies.* <http://www.literacyjournal.ca/>

This Canadian journal includes articles about research and practice.

RAPAL Journal is published by Research and Practice in Adult Literacy, a membership organization in the UK. For information about the organization, go to <http://www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/index.htm>

### *Research in Practice Networks*

The following research networks publish research reports online:

PAARN (Pennsylvania Action Research Network)

<http://www.pde.state.pa.us/able/cwp/view.asp?A=215&Q=110085>

Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Network

<http://www.able.state.pa.us/able/cwp/view.asp?A=215&Q=110302>

Adult Education Teacher Inquiry Projects, Related Research and Resources

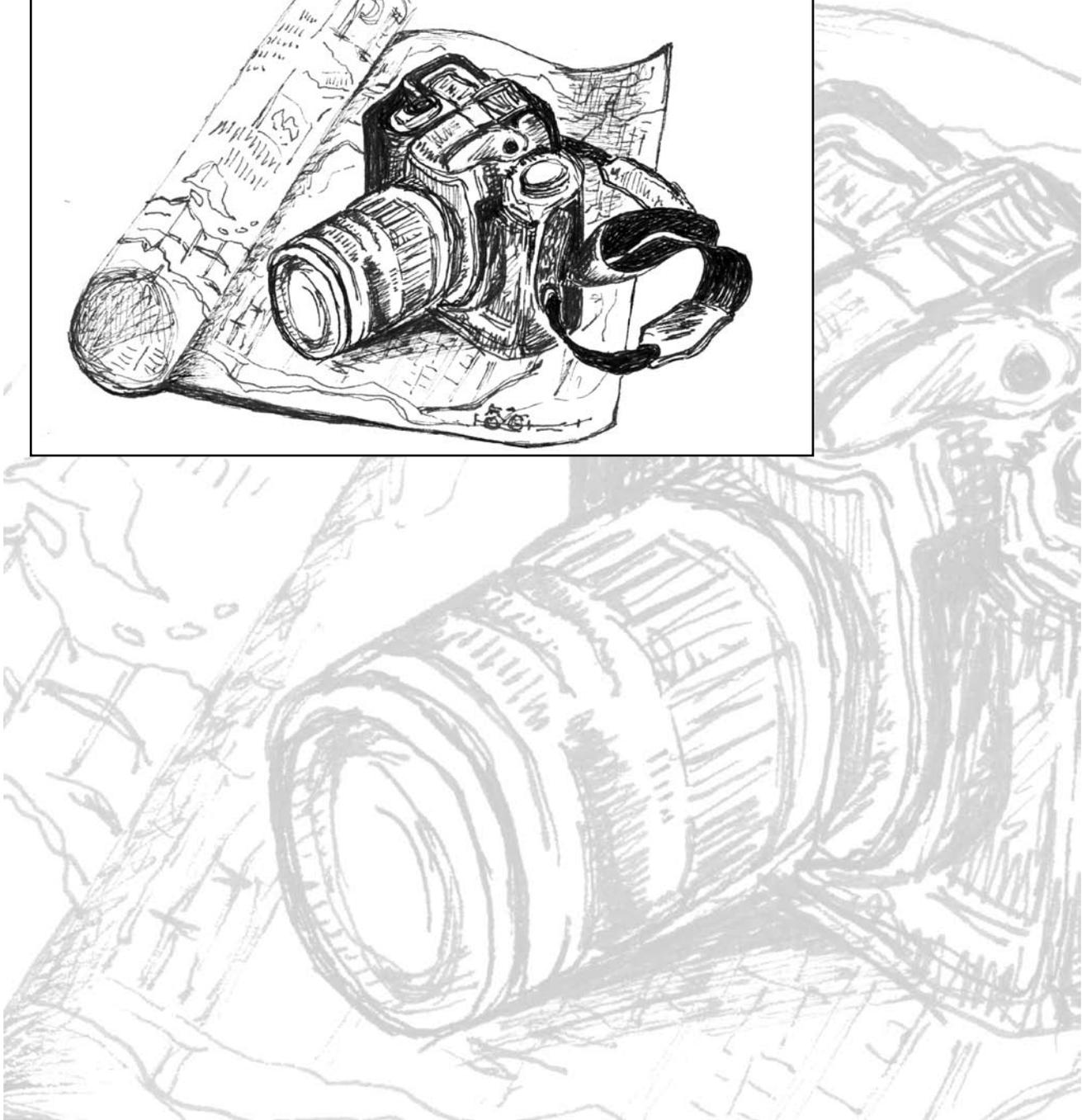
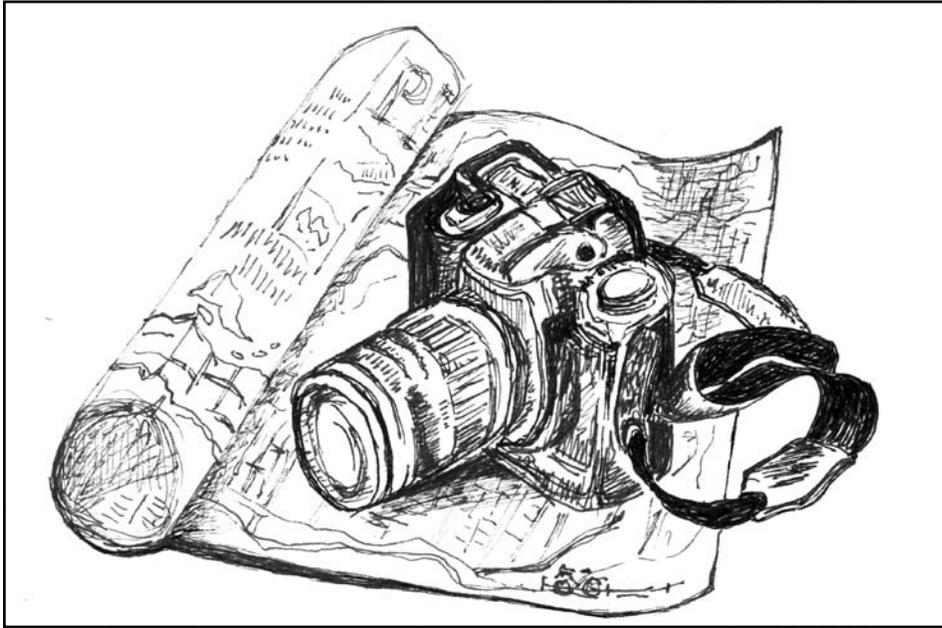
[http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer\\_Center/Literacy\\_Resources/inquiry.html](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/Literacy_Resources/inquiry.html)

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

RiPAL Network  
<http://www.nald.ca/ripal>

VAERN (Virginia Adult Education Research Network)  
[http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/publications/vaern/Dennis\\_Traverse.pdf](http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/publications/vaern/Dennis_Traverse.pdf)

# Collecting Information





**W**HEN I WANT TO LEARN about a place I'm visiting, I read, watch, ask questions and listen. I like to wander off the well-worn trails and have conversations with people along the way. I collect maps and placemats and local papers. I snap photos or buy postcards to remind me of what I've seen.

We can seek information to address our research interests in similar ways. In qualitative research, data collection methods can include interviews, observations, participants' writing, art making, and collection of artifacts (learner writing, art, lesson plans, policy documents). However, the "data" we collect for our research usually differs from the souvenirs we gather during a trip. Data collection is done systematically and with the intention of making meaning related to our research question.

As you plan your research, you'll be thinking about data, methods and tools. Here's how these terms are used in this chapter (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004):

- *Data* is the information we collect, for example, a transcript of what people say.
- *Methods* are systematic ways used to collect the information, e.g., an interview.
- *Tools* are the specific resources for collecting that information, e.g., an interview framework or interview questions.

In the next pages, we'll look at some common types of data, methods and tools researchers in practice might use. In this chapter, the terms "methods" and "tools" refer to the methods and tools used for data collection. There are also methods and tools for analysis, writing and other research processes.

## Deciding about data

What kind of data will you need to address your research focus or question? How might you collect it? The following chart lists some types of data, sources, and methods, in relation to possible research areas.

*There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after.*

— J. R. R. Tolkien

Focus of research	Type of data	Some sources of existing data	Some methods to generate data
People's knowledge, ideas, feelings, emotions, etc.	Oral language that is recorded/documentated  Written language  Artifacts (objects created by people)	Students' writing (e.g., journals or stories written during or outside lessons)  Published writing by practitioners or students  Art created during or outside lessons (drawing, sculpture, drama, song, etc.)  E-mail correspondence	Oral interviews (face-to-face or by phone; individual or group)  Requesting responses to questionnaires  Journals or diaries that people keep  Eliciting story-telling  Art created in response to a research-related prompt (e.g., collage about learning goals)
Teaching/learning strategies that people use  How people respond to strategies  Teaching/learning environments  How people interact	Any of the above  Observations that are documented	Some of the above may be applicable  Reflective journals (e.g., kept by students as part of class)  Curriculum, texts, readers, workbooks	Any of the above  Observations

Adapted from *A handbook for teacher research: From design to implementation*, by Lankshear and Knobel, 2004. (Berkshire, England: Open University Press). Reprinted with permission of the Open University Press Company.

As noted in the chart, some relevant data may exist already, or will be created, even if you are not doing a research project. For example, Pam Young (2002) wanted to find out about what writing strategies students used. Students were keeping learning journals as part of their course, and with the students' permission, Pam used the journal entries as data for her research.

The chart also lists ideas for *generating* data. This is data that wouldn't exist if we weren't doing the research. For instance, Fay Holt Begg (2002) wanted to learn about the effectiveness of a teaching approach for a student named Carol. She tutored Carol for six months and wrote notes after each tutoring session about what she had observed, heard and experienced. Fay's notes became her data. Andrea Pheasey (2002) wanted to hear from students about what they thought it meant to be literate. She conducted interviews with individuals and small groups after regular class time, and the recorded interviews provided data.

As you can see from these examples, you can collect data that is created as *part* of your regular practice, as Pam did, *alongside* your practice, as Fay did, and in *addition* to your regular practice, as Andrea did. Using existing data (with participants' consent) is an efficient way to incorporate data collection into your day-to-day practice.

If you need to generate data, think about what methods will help you collect the data as efficiently as possible. You'll want to be mindful of your own time and resources, and of the time and resources of others you might ask to participate. As we'll discuss later, you'll likely use more than one source of data.

## Collecting data from people

Whether you use existing data or generate new data, your research will likely involve students, practitioners and other people. The following questions may help you decide who to invite to participate, and how. (Chapter 5 addresses ethical decision making related to research participants.)

*Which people are likely to be able to provide information that will help you answer the questions?*

As part of a project about moving research about violence and learning into practice, I asked literacy practitioners about their use of arts-based approaches in their literacy work (Norton, 2008). I wanted to gain a general idea of developments and perspectives in the field, and thought that practitioners could answer the questions I had. If I wanted to focus specifically on learners' responses to arts-based approaches, it would make sense to speak with learners as well.

It may not be possible to involve all the people you hope to include. For example, BC researchers planned to include student participants as well as practitioners in their study of effective ABE/literacy instructors. However, they received less funding than they had applied for and could not work with as many people as planned. After thoughtful discussion, they decided to focus on practitioners because

in ABE/Literacy research, instructors have rarely been looked at, while students have. That was part of the drive behind the project, to hear from the instructor's experience in the ABE/Literacy field. We felt we needed to hear from other instructors to hear different voices, not just our own, to add to our beliefs about what makes instructors effective in their practice, and obtaining that from other instructors was the way to proceed.

Since instructors, as part of their jobs, spend time and energy trying to make their practice effective, we believed that they would be articulate and critical in their comments on effective practice. Thus, their perspective would yield more useful and varied data for our research than what we might receive from students. Because we were pushed to decide which data source would yield the most valuable data for us, we chose to hear from instructors. (Twiss, 2004, p. 30)

### *How many people will be involved?*

You could do your research with as few as one person, or many more, depending on your question and resources. If you decide to work with one person or a small group of people, consider whether you will be able to collect enough information to answer your question.

### **How many sources of data do I need?**

In planning a trip or visit, we might consult more than one source of information. A tourist guide will give one sort of information, and someone who's traveled in the area may confirm some information or provide a different perspective. It's generally a good idea to have more than one source of data in research.<sup>9</sup>

Using more than one source can provide a range of perspectives. Sometimes the perspectives will be similar, which helps to support your conclusions. On the other hand, different perspectives can prompt you to question your assumptions and look further (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003).

Following are some ways you might include two or more sources of data in your research.

**Use different methods.** In researching the use of movement and arts-based approaches with a group of women, Judy Murphy and I (Norton & Murphy, 2001) met after each session to write in our journals and

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<sup>9</sup>As you read others' research, you may come across the idea of "triangulation." Developed for surveying and navigation, triangulation is a process of using two points to find a third one. The idea was first applied to research in the late 1950s. In the 1970s and '80s, triangulation was described as "the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon" (Denzin, cited in Jick, 1979). It was believed that using a combination of methods could provide a check on the accuracy of data and "improve the probability that findings and interpretations will be credible" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). Early applications of triangulation reflected perspectives that there is a single, objective truth. This notion of a singular truth is being challenged in some arenas with the idea that there are multiple truths. In this context, and as the field of qualitative research has developed, ideas about triangulation have also developed and shifted (Olson, 2002). Some researchers now prefer the notion of "crystallization" (Richardson, 1944, cited in Janesick, 2000), based on the idea of a crystal and its many facets: "What we see when we view a crystal, for example, depends on how we view it, how we hold it up to the light or not" (Janesick, 2000, p. 392).

share and extend our reflections. We also interviewed the women who participated. In some cases, the art they had created provided prompts for conversations. Our reflections, the women's art, and what they said provided different sources of data.

Andrea Pheasey (2000) worked with a group of students who wanted to organize computer training in their program. While the students undertook an action research project about computer use, Andrea researched how the group worked together. Her data on the group process included her notes from group meetings and activities, group interviews at the beginning, middle and end of the research, and students' writing.

Fay Holt Begg (2002) worked with one student in her program over an extended period of time. Fay documented and reflected on her observations, collected the student's writing, and had conversations with the student about the tutoring.

In a study of practitioners' interests in professional development (Norton, 2004), participants responded to a questionnaire and took part in interviews and focus groups. In this case, there was funding for co-researchers and someone to collate the questionnaire responses.

**Use one method with different groups of participants.** You could interview students and practitioners about your research question. As mentioned above, in their original plan about studying effective ABE/Literacy instructors, the researchers wanted to interview both practitioners and students.

**Use one method with the same participant or participants over time.** You could do several interviews with an individual over a period of time, or review a series of journal entries by an individual.

**Use one method with a large group of participants.** You could interview or survey many people. Kate Nonesuch (2008a) used an online survey to hear from 507 practitioners.

## How much data do I need?

As you plan your research, think about how much data you might need to feel confident that you can draw conclusions and support them.

Ideally, you continue to collect data until you feel that you are not learning anything new related to your research question. Realistically, you need to balance the desire for quantity with your time and resources and with participants' time (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003).

*I wonder—do we ever really finish? ...You could always do more and that's OK. We stop when we run out of time and we feel we have enough to say something.*  
— Stacey Crooks (personal communication, August 2007)

## Other considerations

As you read and talk about research, you may come across the terms *validity* and *reliability*. These terms and concepts originate with research based in quantitative approaches (see Chapter 1) and are related to each other. In those approaches, *reliability* has to do with whether research methods will have consistent results if the research is repeated. The concept of reliability is used in designing tests. For example, if I take a personality test, it is considered reliable if the results are similar each time I take it.

Generally speaking, *validity* has to do with whether the research measures what it sets out to measure and whether the conclusions drawn from research can be considered sound. Quantitative researchers use various approaches to determine if their research is valid.

As discussed in Chapter 1, quantitative and qualitative research reflect different perspectives about truth, knowledge and knowing. Some qualitative researchers question whether concepts of reliability and validity can be applied to qualitative research. Instead, they consider whether research is credible and trustworthy (Golafshani, 2003; Holly, Arhar & Kasten, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

Following are some questions to help you judge the credibility and trustworthiness of your research. Review the questions as you plan and carry out your research. If you answer “no” to some questions, make adjustments as needed. The more questions you can answer “yes” to, the more confident you can be that your research will be considered credible. When you share your research, it is important to tell others how you addressed these considerations so that they can judge the credibility of your research.

- Have I described my social identities/location and biases?
- Have I described ethical considerations and how I addressed them?
- Is my research focus guiding my research?
- Do the methods and tools help me collect or generate the data I need?
- Am I able to use the methods and tools successfully? (e.g., Do participants understand the questions I ask them? Did the tape recorder work and is the tape audible? Was I able to observe a class as planned?)
- Am I checking with participants to make sure I understood what they were saying?
- Does the data help me find out what I want to find out?
- Am I using more than one source of data?
- Am I able to collect enough data?

- Am I checking with participants about how I am using their words and ideas in my analysis and report?
- Am I keeping accurate records of my decisions about data collection?
- Am I keeping the data in safe storage?

## Data collection methods

Methods are the systematic ways we use to collect data. This section describes some common research methods and includes some arts-based approaches. As you plan your research, think about what methods will help you collect the data you need, and keep in mind that you will need time to develop and test your research tools. More information about tools for observations, interviews and questionnaires are included at the end of this chapter.

### Observations

As a research method, observation has to do with taking regular and conscious notice of what goes on in teaching/learning activities or environments that are relevant to your research focus or question (Mills, 2000). You might use observation as a main method if your research purpose is to describe a situation.

Observation might also be used to find out about a situation before you narrow your research focus (Robson, 1993). For instance, in observing learners writing, a researcher might notice that they use various spelling strategies to identify how a word is spelled. These could lead to more focused observations and/or interviews about the strategies learners use or don't use, and which are most effective.

You might also use observations as a way to support or extend information you collect through other methods, such as interviews (Robson, 1993). For instance, if learners say they sound out unknown words, this could be supported, or not, by observing them. The observation could lead to further interviewing.

#### *Examples*

Heather Ward (2004) used observation as a method in her research about literacy learners' changing self-concept:

Once the project was underway, I took notes during and after sessions. I observed and noted responses to activities and changing ideas, concepts, and behaviours of both the project participants and me as the researcher. In observing, I drew

from my training and experiences as an early childhood educator. I tried to describe what I saw without making inferences or drawing conclusions. I noted such things as body language, social interactions, whether affirming statements were used, the delivery or degree of comfort when speaking out in the group, the ability to offer new ideas, and participants' ability to speak to their own personal needs. (p. 106)

Paula Davies (2006) also used observation in her research about the use of personal narrative to enhance learning in an English classroom. Paula

kept brief notes during each class, each of the times that I used the student personal narrative technique. In point form, I recorded my observations and reflections on what went on in the class in general, and for specific students. I then used these notes and expanded on them to create field notes for what I had observed. (p. 17)

## Interviews

Interviews are interactions with people, intended to collect information related to a research question or focus. They provide a way to gather information about things we cannot directly observe. This includes people's feelings, thoughts and intentions, and things that happened previously or outside of our range of observation (Patton, 1980, as cited in Merriam, 1988).

There are various approaches to interviews, from structured approaches that include pre-planned questions, to informal, guided conversations related to the topic. Interviews are typically face-to-face with one person, but can be conducted by phone or e-mail. They can also be used with groups.

### *Examples*

Evelyn Battell (2004) and her colleagues interviewed 17 practitioners in connection with their research about effective ABE/literacy instructors. Their report includes a copy of their interview "protocol" or guide. The guide includes questions, notes about how to ask them and suggestions for follow-up questions.

When I was researching participatory approaches (Norton, 2004), I asked a research colleague to interview some students who had been involved in a conference planning committee that I had facilitated. I had kept notes about my observations and had tape recorded group meetings, and hoped

that the interviews would provide another perspective on my work with the committee:

I prepared the interview questions and suggested four people to interview, based on who was available and who seemed at ease talking to a relative outsider. I hoped that people would feel that they could criticize my actions, although [the interviewer] suggested that...people would still feel constrained because of my position as coordinator. To address this, [the interviewer] had the interview tapes transcribed, collated the transcripts, and did not name the people in the collation. (p. 166)

Marina Niks and her colleagues (Niks et al., 2003) interviewed adults with little formal education to learn about their learning strategies:

We collaboratively designed one interview protocol. Although no two interviews were the same (as no two open-ended interviews ever are), much of the same content was covered at each site. There were some common questions including those related to going on a trip, finding information on a disease and identifying an area where the participants wanted to learn more. We taped the interviews and took detailed notes from the tapes, often marking areas of interest to come back to later. (p. 11)

## Group interview

A group interview involves participants who come together to respond to a research focus or questions. Participants are able to interact with each other and build on each other's responses.

Some researchers consider focus groups as a particular form of group interview. Originally used in marketing, the approach is also used to collect data for program planning, marketing and evaluation of educational services (Einsiedel, Bron, & Ross, 1996). The terms *group interview* and *focus group* are sometimes used interchangeably in research in practice.

You might use a group interview approach when

- the participants are likely to work together;
- the interaction among participants may provide the best results (compared to one-to-one);
- time is limited;
- participants might be hesitant to provide information one-to-one.

Sometimes group interviews are used in conjunction with one-to-one interviews. For example, after individual interviews, key ideas may be brought to a group for feedback.

### *Examples*

Andrea Pheasey (2002) used small group interviews to explore what adult literacy students “think what being literate is.” Andrea used small group interviews because:

I found the participants were more likely to elaborate on a theme when questions or comments were made by their fellows in the group.... The interviews became more conversational than simply a question/answer exercise. (p. 8)

Paula Davies (2006) used a group interview approach to collect students’ responses to the use of personal narratives in an English class. She asked the students to form small groups and discuss and make notes on what they liked about the class, what they did not like and suggestions for improvement (p. 18).

The Saskatchewan Literacy Network (Ham, 2006), conducted focus groups with adult learners in order to

acquire information from as many learners as possible in order to set the direction of support groups in each community. (p. 5)

In Toronto, researchers used a combined focus group/interview approach to collect data from 56 adult learners:

We used a semi-structured interview approach to elicit answers to our basic question: “How do learners perceive progress.” (Lefebvre et al., 2006, p. 5)

## Questionnaires

A questionnaire is similar to a structured interview. In both cases, the questions are predetermined. Questionnaires can include questions that require the participant to compose the response (similar to a structured interview), questions that include responses to choose from, or both.

Given the same number of participants, a questionnaire usually requires less time to collect data than doing interviews. For this reason, questionnaires might be used when you want to collect information from a large number of people.

Questionnaires can also provide participants the options to respond at their convenience and to be anonymous to the researcher. However, questionnaires require respondents to read and write, or to have someone read the questions and write the responses for them. As well, it is usually not possible for the researcher to ask for clarification about written responses to questionnaires once they have been received.

### *Examples*

In a research project about computer use, a group of students developed a questionnaire

to ask all students why they were not using computers, what they knew or wanted to know about computers...and how they would like to be taught. We knew that students would be unable to complete the questionnaires on their own, so three members of the group met with students individually, asked them the questions and recorded their answers on record sheets. (Pheasey, 2000, p. 54)

Darlene MacInnis (2002) used questionnaires as a method to help find out whether using the Internet would “assist in the achievement of teacher/participant objectives when there are program time constraints” (p. 44). Darlene used two questionnaires with 23 participants:

The first questionnaire focused on questions related to computer accessibility, e-mail accounts, computer skills and current e-mail addresses. The second questionnaire dealt with comfort level, actual e-mail skills, research ability using the Internet, hours per week that participants spent on-line, and a request to self-identify if assistance was needed in any of these areas. (p. 45)

As part of a project to identify literacy program coordinators’ professional development interests, I sent a questionnaire to 83 coordinators in order to

introduce the research, invite participation in the PDP [research], to invite participation in the research activities and to collect some demographic and related information about coordinators’ jobs, job roles and professional development experiences. (Norton, 2004, p. 5)

As another example, Kate Nonesuch (2008a) wanted to survey a large number of literacy practitioners about their knowledge and practice related to violence and learning. She used SurveyMonkey software (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) to design a questionnaire:

The survey consisted of 21 questions, some of which were answered only by instructors, some only by administrators, some only by counselors and advisors. Each question had a list of responses that respondents could check off; most questions offered a space for listing other responses or for making comments.

## Journals

Learners' or practitioners' journals can provide insights related to the research question. These include journals that people usually keep as part of their learning or work, or journals that are kept specifically for the research. (See Chapter 2 for suggestions about using journals for reflection.)

### *Examples*

Pam Young (2002) wanted to find out about what writing strategies students used. Students were keeping learning journals as part of their course, and, with students' permission, Pam was able to use the journal entries as data for her research. Leonne Beebe (2006) used students' reflective learning logs to research the effectiveness of the Guided Reflective Writing Technique.

Journaling is often combined with observations. Melanie Sondergaard (2006) kept a journal to document and reflect on organized and incidental meetings with participants in her research about supporting youth involved in making change in their community:

I took time, within at most a day of each session, to make detailed notes of my observations and reflections. I also made entries whenever I had interactions with group members outside of the eight sessions.... I was careful to record who was there, what I observed in terms of behaviour, interactions, what took place and my own questions and reflections as a facilitator along the way. (pp. 11-12)

In her work with a women's writing group, Laurie Kehler (2004) researched how she put her growing understanding about impacts of violence on learning into practice. For Laurie, documenting and reflecting on her observations was a method for lesson planning as well as for research. Laurie and her co-facilitator met after each class to write about the day's activities:

We each described responses to exercises and activities and the way group members interacted. After we had finished, we would

share our writing with each other and discuss the day and take more notes. These sessions gave us time to really discuss what was happening in class and what action we might take next time. The themes we pulled out of our discussion became the ideas behind the following week's lesson plan.... The notes also provided data for my research. (pp. 67-68)

A group of Ontario practitioners used journals as their main method to study the student-practitioner relationship (Trent Valley Literacy Association, 2004). Their research report includes a description of stages they went through as they learned how to use journals for research—from uncertainty, to developing a framework, to developing patience and confidence that the journals would provide data to address their research questions:

So we write in our journals, and though we try to write immediately following a session with our student or small groups, for most of us it usually proves to be impossible. A student stays behind to talk, a volunteer wants to discuss something, a meeting or appointment takes precedence. But we do journal. It may be at one in the morning with pillows and blankets invitingly close, or early in the evening after supper and the dishes, but we write. Our early jottings are straightforward and descriptive, and a few are reflective. We question why we do this or that, can we really help our student, are we capable of working with his problems, the challenge that he presents? And what is this journaling supposed to be revealing anyway? (p. 8)

## Life stories/autobiographies

Participants could be invited to write about their own life stories or experiences, in relation to the research question.

### *Example*

Evelyn Battell and her co-researchers (2004) used autobiography as a method in their research about effective ABE/literacy instructors. By writing their stories, they hoped to explore how childhood and life experiences affected their becoming effective instructors. For four of the five researchers, autobiography was a way to document their careers, which spanned the development of the ABE/literacy field in BC. Autobiography also provided a way for their voices to be heard, and an opportunity for them to explain who they are and what they had seen as ABE/literacy instructors.

Each of the five practitioner-researchers wrote four to seven pages about their life experiences. They posted their writing on an electronic conferencing system, and responded to each other's writing. Sharing and responding helped them process their writing. Analysis of the autobiographies provided themes that the researchers used to develop questions for interviewing other practitioners.

## Documents

Examples of documents are learners' writing, attendance records, test scores, tutors' written evaluations of workshops, minutes of meetings, lesson plans, etc.

You could do research using only document sources. For example, research about why people enroll in programs could be done from registration forms that ask why people enroll. You would need to consider whether people provided enough information to address your questions, and whether they had provided permission to use the information.

You could also use registration forms as one source, along with interviews. The forms might provide general trends for a large group, and the interviews would provide more in-depth information from some of the people.

### *Examples*

Jane Power (2002) used documents as one method to research what new process would “help learners attend the non-credit (leisure or personal development) courses for which they have signed up” (p. 60). She used the learner data base to create a report about the number of courses learners had signed up for and which ones they attended. This gave her a way to identify people who regularly attended classes they signed up for and people who did not. The lists provided a basis for interviewing ten “super attenders” and ten “super non-attenders” (p. 60).

Julie Salembier (2002) also used documents as one method in her research about learning indicators. Julie reviewed

existing program related documents composed of attendance records, written feedback in post-course evaluations, and products of learners' accomplishments...such as passing the GED exam, creating a web page, writing clear memos, and producing a work-specific spreadsheet. (p. 21)

## Assessments/tests

Depending on the research question, informal reading inventories and other tests may be sources of relevant information. You might use this approach at different stages of tutoring in order to assess changes in reading development. Using tests for data collection draws from quantitative approaches. Tests could be supplemented by interviews or observations.

### *Example*

Richard Yates (1997-1998) was interested in learning whether students would increase their recognition of sight words if they practised the words three times a week with the support of an audio tape of the words. He used pre- and post-tests of word recognition as one of his methods. Jenny Jamieson (2002-2003) also used pre- and post-tests to find out whether a particular teaching approach led to improved scores on a GED math test.

## Using arts-based approaches in data collection

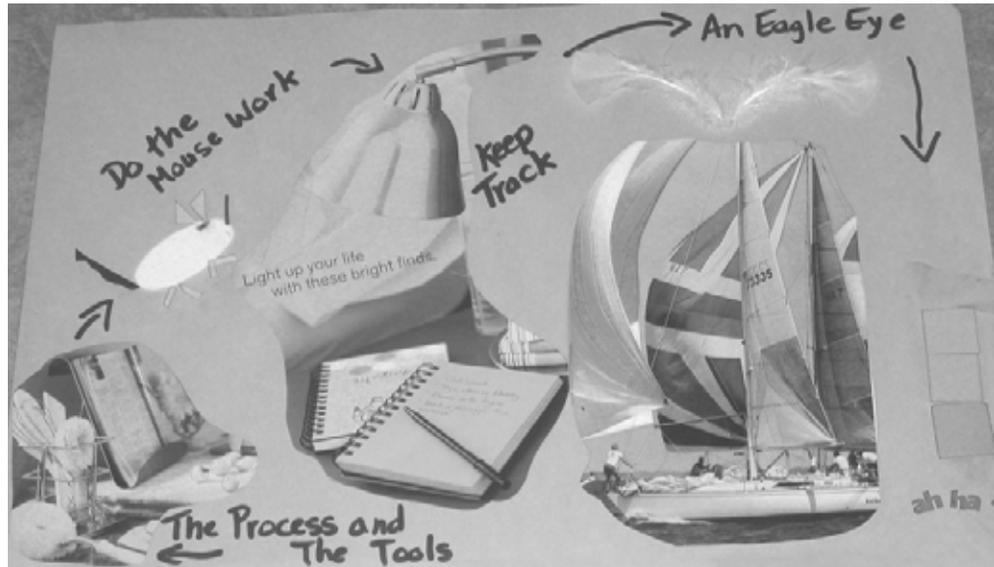
As discussed in Chapter 1, arts-based approaches can invite participants to use ways of knowing in addition to words. One of the challenges of art making has to do with our levels of comfort and skill, so it's helpful to choose formats and materials that suit both you and the participants. In order to use the art for research, you will need to ask participants to speak or write about their pieces. In this way you will have their perspective on the words and images, rather than your interpretation. A conversation about the art can also be an opportunity to explore more deeply some of the ideas that are expressed in it.

### *Collage*

Collage is one approach that you may already be using in practice. The process of creating collages can also provide an opportunity for discussion about a research topic. Nadine Sookermany (2008) invited a group of women learners to create collages to explore the impacts of violence on the lives and experiences of literacy learners who are parents, and on their children. Nadine wrote:

Women talked and browsed through magazines, cutting and pasting. We shared how some of the issues that came up, like racism and sexism and classism, are so ingrained in the system and how it feels impossible to work against them.

In her exploration of research in practice in Alberta, Rebecca Still (in Horsman and Woodrow, 2006) asked a group of literacy practitioners to create collages about the concept. The participants commented that the collage making process helped them unfold their thinking about research in practice.



### **Image of Research in Practice**

By Alberta practitioners

This collage outlines the process. First you choose the tools you will use to collect your data. Then you go out and do the mouse work, gathering the facts and finding all the details. While you are doing this you keep track of everything. As you go along you will shine a spotlight on some of the facts and details that you find. Then you need to step back, look at everything with an eagle eye and spend some time reflecting. Hopefully that will lead you to an "Aha!" Prepared by Lorene Anderson.

Reprinted from Horsman & Woodrow (Eds.), *Focused on practice*, 2006, p. 154.

## *Sculpture*

Bonnie Soroke (2003) used sculpture as one tool for data collection in her research about power and authority in a literacy centre. Bonnie used zippers, coloured telephone wires and other found materials to create sculptures to introduce discussion about educational experiences. Later, participants were invited to work individually or in small groups to create sculptures themselves. Bonnie found that:

The experience of creating sculptures together contributed to my deeper awareness about students' experiences at the Centre and pushed me to uncover and reflect upon my own assumptions. Issues and stories emerged while talking about the sculptures that never came up during our conversations and interviews. (p. 52)

## *Open invitation to use art*

Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George (2008) issued an open-ended invitation to learners to use art to respond to the question: "How is participating in the literacy program impacting on you?" The responses included a drawing and a poem, a series of self-portraits, and two collages. One woman chose to respond orally.

## *Pictures and photographs*

Visual images can also provide a prompt to generate data. I have a collection of photographs (from cards and magazines) that I regularly use to open discussion on a topic or as prompts for writing. I have also used photographs in research. In an exploration about student voice in literacy organizations (Norton, 2005), I laid out a collection of images and asked participants to choose one that "said something" about what it means to have a voice. As with the questions I choose to ask, I try to be mindful that the pictures I select can also shape people's responses.

## **More about data collection methods and tools**

This section includes details about observations, interviews and questionnaires, and some suggestions for preparing tools for each method. It is important to test your data collection tools with some research participants or with people who are similar to the participants. It can also be helpful to have colleagues, students or others review your tools before you test them.

For example, when I worked on the Professional Development Project in Alberta (Norton, 2004), I drafted interview questions and prompts which

my co-researchers and I revised. Then each of us tested the interview with one participant. As well as showing us that the questions collected information we were looking for, the testing gave us an opportunity to become familiar with the questions. (The transcribed responses to the test interviews were also included in our data.)

## Observation

Approaches to observation are generally described in terms of the observer's role. Roles vary, depending on the degree of involvement the observer has in the situations being observed. Since you will be mostly researching questions related to your own practice, you will likely take the role of *active participant observer*. Other roles you might take in research in practice include *participant as observer*, *privileged active observer* and *passive observer* (Mills, 2000; Robson, 1993).

**Active participant observer.** An active participant observer is or becomes a member of the group being observed. It is difficult to be entirely a participant when also being a researcher. However, the observer has a role in the group, shares experiences and tries to understand the language and culture of the group. In such approaches, the main data is based on the observer's interpretations of what s/he observes. When I did research about my role as facilitator with a student conference committee (Norton, 2000a), I was an active participant observer, as I was a member of the group with a particular role.

**Participant as observer.** The participant as observer is a bit distanced from the group being observed, compared to an active participant observer. As well as observing through taking part in activities, the observer may be able to ask people to explain what is happening. When undertaking research about peer tutoring at The Learning Centre (Norton, 1996), I contracted a researcher who served as a "participant as observer." He took part in activities and did some training, but was identified initially as the researcher.

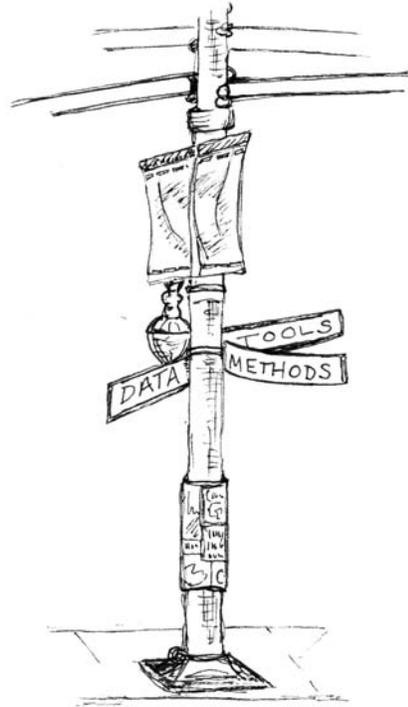
**Privileged active observer.** In this role, the observer is a member of a group, but steps back from the role in the group to observe. For example, a teacher might observe a workshop presented by a guest that involves tutors or learners in the teacher's program.

**Passive observer.** The observer is present at the event being observed but has a largely passive role. In my research about my role as facilitator with a student conference committee (Norton, 2000a), I asked a colleague to serve as a passive observer of a meeting I facilitated.

## Observer tasks

As an observer, your main task is to observe the people (person) engaging in whatever event or activity that is the focus of research. In some cases you will be involved in the event or activity. You might also ask participants questions about what is happening.

You might find yourself trying to observe everything. It is important to select aspects to focus on. These may become clearer after initial observation. If the situation is new, focus your initial observations on becoming familiar with the situation rather than on collecting information. As you start to collect information, make your observations short, so you are not overwhelmed with information. As you become at ease in the setting and more comfortable taking notes, your focus will shift to more data collection.



Here are some suggestions about what to observe (Merriam, 1988; Robson, 1993):

- The context (What is the context? What is in the space? How is the space organized?)
- Participants (e.g., learners, facilitators, tutors, others)
- Activities (What is happening? How do people interact? Who initiates the activities? How do people respond?)
- Time frame (When did an activity start? How long did it last? Is it repeated? What prompted it?)
- Other factors (informal and unplanned activities; nonverbal communication; symbolic and connotative meanings of words)

Other suggestions for observing include (Mills, 2000):

- Try to see the situation with new eyes and to approach the situation as if you were an outsider.
- Watch for things that stand out, and for contradictions. For instance, you might notice that particular individuals are dominating a situation. Or you may note a contrast in what people say and what they actually do.

## Recording information about observations

By Herb Katz  
Reprinted from  
Norton, 1996, p. 3



Approaches to recording information range from informal/unstructured to formal/structured methods. Formal methods use a structure, developed ahead of time, that identifies what to observe. Informal documentation is relatively unstructured and includes note taking and reflective writing. With participants' permission, you might also take photographs or make sketches or diagrams to record what you observe.

Notes serve as a record of what you attended to during your observation. They can help guide further observation and other data collection methods. What you write down becomes your data.

Following are some suggestions for taking and writing up notes (Robson, 1993, p. 203):

- It is important to have a system that allows you to record information as clearly, regularly and fully as possible.
- When possible, record observations during the event. These can be condensed and will serve as reminders of what happened when you write up detailed notes. You might note important verbatim comments, or inconsistencies that you want to explore. When it is not possible to make notes during the event, try to do so as soon as you can afterwards.
- Go through your notes as soon as possible to add detail and ensure that you understand the record and that it includes what you want to say.
- Some researchers find it helpful to make large margins on one side of their notebooks. They write observations on the main part, and include their comments, reflections, etc. in the margins. If you enter your notes on a word processor, you might use a different font or style to identify your reflections.
- Try to write up your notes as soon as you can after your observation, and before you start a second observation.

Following are ideas about what to include in your write-up (Merriam, 1988).

- A description of the event and activities
- Quotations or paraphrases of what people said
- Your comments, including interpretative ideas or analysis, personal feelings and impressions
- Reminders about additional information you want to watch for

## Interviews

Interviews are typically described as structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Merriam, 1988). Interviews may also be collaborative, or dialogical (McLeod, 1999).

**Structured interviews.** In this approach, the interview questions, and the order of asking them, is determined ahead of time. It is important that all questions are asked in the same way, in the same order, in each interview. In structured interviews, the interviewer takes the lead and controls the interview.

Structured interviews are commonly used when large numbers of people are surveyed and responses are quantified. In some cases, more than one person is trained to conduct the interviews. Structured interviews are also useful for gathering demographic information.

**Semi-structured interviews.** These are guided by questions or issues that the researcher wants to explore, but the exact wording and order of questions is not necessarily determined ahead of time. In this way, researchers can make adjustments and respond to what comes out in the interview. The interview outline may include headings as well as specific questions. In semi-structured interviews, the researcher sets the agenda but follows the lead of the person who is being interviewed.

**Unstructured interviews.** These are exploratory and are aimed at learning about a situation, sometimes in order to develop questions for further interviews. Unstructured interviews are often used along with observations in the early stages of research. They are similar to everyday conversations, except that they are for the purpose of doing research. You might have such informal interviews while working with students or program participants or observing their work, provided they have consented to participate in your research. For example, if you are trying out a new teaching strategy, you might use informal interviews or conversations to gauge how practitioners are using it (Mills, 2000; Olson, 2002).

**Collaborative interviews.** McLeod (1999) describes these “dialogical methods” as approaches in which the researcher and participant build meaning together. I was drawn to this idea, because in some interview situations I have entered into conversation or dialogue with the person I’m interviewing rather than sticking with my questions and listening. However, I’m also aware that I need to decide ahead of time whether the interview will be “dialogical” rather than just letting it go that way. When I’ve planned semi-structured interviews with a number of

people, and then gone off on tangents with individuals I'm interviewing, I've had some challenges pulling information together from across the interviews.

### *Preparing interviews*

The type of interview you choose will depend on what you want to find out as well as on your experience and ease with doing interviews. Some researchers use one or more types in a study.

An interview can include the following components (Robson, 1993, p. 234):

- Introduction (purpose of interview, how long it will take, how the information will be used, consent matters, permission to tape record)
- Warm-up (easy, inviting questions to help you and the participant settle in and get comfortable)
- Main body of interview (the questions that relate most directly to your research purpose)
- Ending (questions to wind down with, if needed)
- Closure (thank you, good-bye)

### *Asking questions*

Questions are a way to translate your research purposes into specific ways to collect information, as well as a way to invite participants to share what they know. As you develop questions, ask yourself how each one relates to your research question.

Patton (1990, pp. 290-292) suggests six kinds of questions to get different types of information:

**Experience/behaviour.** These aim to find out about experiences, behaviours, actions and activities that the researcher could have observed if present.

**Opinion/value.** These try to find out what people think about something.

**Feeling questions.** These are aimed at understanding people's emotional responses to experiences and thoughts.

**Knowledge questions.** These aim to find out about factual information related to the research topic (e.g., How many people come to this program? What services does the program offer?)

**Sensory questions.** These ask the participant to describe what s/he sees, hears, etc. (e.g., What do you see when you walk into the program?)

*The key to getting good data from interviews is to ask good questions. Asking good questions takes practice.*  
– Sharan Merriam (1988, p. 78)

**Background/demographic.** These have to do with age, education, gender, etc., and are used to situate the participant in relation to other participants or other people.

Questions also may be categorized in terms of whether they are closed, open or scale.

**Closed.** These ask the participant to choose between two or more alternatives (e.g., When you have a night off work, do you watch TV or read a book?)

**Open.** These do not restrict the content or way in which a participant might reply (e.g., What do you do when you have a night off work?). Open-ended questions are more commonly used in interviews and have the potential to elicit more information.

**Scale.** These ask the participant to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with a statement.

There are certain types of questions to avoid. These include (Robson, 1993, p. 232):

- Long questions (The participant may remember only part.)
- Questions that ask about more than one thing (Break these into simpler questions.)
- Questions with jargon or unfamiliar words
- Leading or biased questions (So, you like the program....)

### *Documenting interviews*

Following are some ways to document interviews:

**Tape recording.** Tape recording interviews provides you with a full oral record. Drawbacks include equipment that doesn't work (always do a check!), surrounding noise, or a participant's discomfort with taping. (Sometimes you'll plan to tape and then decide not to, because of the participants' discomfort.) Transcribing tapes takes time, although you do not necessarily need to transcribe everything.

Video taping is sometimes used and can provide a record of nonverbal responses. Video taping can be more intrusive.

**Taking notes.** It is usually not possible to write down everything a participant says, so taking notes is usually considered an option only when tape recording is not possible. Some researchers take notes as well

as tape recording. A drawback to taking notes only is that it is hard to write down everything. Try to review your notes after the interview and ask the participant to review them.

**Taking notes after the interview.** Although there are obvious disadvantages to this approach, it might be used when it is too intrusive to tape record or take notes during an interview.

Tips for doing interviews (Robson, 1993, p. 232):

- Listen more than you speak.
- Ask questions in a straightforward, clear way.
- Show interest but avoid cues or responses that may prompt the participant to answer in a particular way.

Listening is one of the most important interview skills. It is tempting to fill the silence between our questions and a participant's response. However, the silence can provide time for participants to think and may encourage them to tell more about the topic. As well, we may need to remind ourselves to be open and receptive to what participants are saying.

There may be instances when participants tell about an issue or incident that is painful for them to recall. It is helpful if you plan ahead of time how you will deal with such instances. Some suggestions include:

- Advise participants ahead of time that issues might arise.
- If issues do arise, ask participants if they would like to continue or take a break.
- Clarify whether participants have support and resources to address the issue.
- Remind participants that they have the right to withdraw information from the interview and ask if they wish to do so.
- Be aware of how issues might affect you. Think about how you will respond if a participant discloses information that is not related to the research and that you feel unprepared to hear.

Interviews require time

- to prepare and test the interview and revise it as needed;
- to arrange the interview (time, place, consent, rescheduling as needed);
- to conduct the interview;
- to transcribe tapes or write up notes from the interview.

## Group interviews

Preparation for a group interview is similar to preparing for individual interviews. Do you need to use a structured approach or will you aim to have a collaborative dialogue? In any case, you may need to have fewer questions than in an individual interview, since you will be hearing from more people. Consider how long your participants will be willing to spend (e.g., 1-1.5 hours) and how many questions you might be able to cover in that time.

Depending on the size of the group, it can be helpful to work with a co-researcher or colleague who can facilitate or take notes. You might record responses on flip charts to help participants remember and elaborate on responses. If you tape record the interview, check that your tape recorder will pick up everyone's voices. You might need to borrow or rent an appropriate microphone.

As well as addressing information and consent matters, you might suggest some ground rules for the group (e.g., take turns, listen and build on each other's responses). Keep in mind that in a group interview, participants will not be unknown to each other and you will not be able to ensure confidentiality, although you can encourage it. You will want to make this clear when you invite people to participate.

## Questionnaires

When preparing questionnaires, keep in mind that your participants generally will read and respond to the questions, without additional explanation or prompts from you.

### *Designing questionnaires*

- Keep the questionnaire as short as possible.
- Decide what information you need. Let that guide the number and type of questions you ask.
- Write short questions in clear language. (See the suggestions for writing interview questions in the previous section.) Ask a colleague or student or other person to review your questions for clarity.
- As appropriate, provide a variety of possible responses that participants can check off. Responses can range from "yes" and "no" to a list of answers. Include space for participants to make other comments, as applicable.
- Write clear instructions about how to fill in the questionnaire. This can be especially important if you want participants to indicate priorities or use a scale to show agreement or disagreement.

To develop questions for a questionnaire about what practitioners know about violence and learning, Kate Nonesuch (2008a) consulted with colleagues who were doing related research and she read the Canadian literature on connections between violence and learning.

### *Testing questionnaires*

- Ask some potential participants to respond to the questionnaire and identify questions or words that are not clear.
- Assess how long it will take to complete the questionnaire. When you test the questionnaire, ask participants to time how long it takes them to respond. Then you can let participants know approximately how much time it will take to complete the questionnaire.

### *Other suggestions*

- Lay out the questionnaire so that it looks clear and inviting to read.
- Provide information and request consent to use the responses for your research.
- Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope as needed.
- Remember to include a Thank You at the end of the questionnaire.

### *Using software*

As introduced earlier, there are software packages to use for online questionnaires. As one example, SurveyMonkey software (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) provides options for different types of questions (e.g., multiple choice, rating scales).

## Making Meaning Along the Way





WHEN I TRAVEL, particularly in unfamiliar places, I am often more aware of how I make sense of my surroundings. Some things are very familiar, but often times I'm overwhelmed by sights and sounds that seem to mean nothing to me. Then, as I start to watch and listen intentionally, I find bits of information that relate to my purpose at the time. I try to connect the bits to what I already know, and eventually something clicks and I make meaning.

*Whatever interests, is interesting.*  
– William Hazlett

I use a similar process to make meaning from research data. However, like data collection, the analysis process is more consciously intentional and systematic. Meaning making in research generally includes *data analysis* (What's in the data?) and *data interpretation* (What does it mean?) (Mills, 2000). In this chapter, we consider some qualitative approaches to analysis and some suggestions to help with interpretation.

## Data analysis

Qualitative data *analysis* is a process of reviewing and looking for patterns in the data that you have collected. Although it might include summarizing responses, it goes beyond that. You will likely begin to analyze your data as you collect it. Once you've collected your information, analysis becomes more intense or more of a focus. Although this chapter includes suggestions and examples of how to do analysis, you will make your own way. It may be messy and you may get bogged down. Reflective activities and connecting with others may be especially important at this time.

*Creativity consists of 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.*  
– Thomas Edison

Although *interpretation* also occurs along the way, this will also be more of a focus as you complete the analysis. As possible and relevant, present your analysis to your participants and ask for their feedback about it. They might agree or disagree with the sense you make of their words and ideas, and they might help you extend the analysis.

## Analyzing along the way

During data collection, it can be useful to take a break and review what you have collected to that point. In light of what you have collected, consider:

- Is your question still answerable and worth answering?
- Are you collecting the kind of data you need to address your question?  
Are your methods and tools working for you?
- Are there any gaps, missing voices or missed questions?

Analysis along the way will help you decide if you need to gather more or different information, or use different approaches or questions. You'll likely have more opportunities to do analysis along the way if you are

doing a longer-term study (e.g., tutoring over several weeks) than in a shorter-term one (interviews with a number of people in a short time).

Analysis may also continue as you write your report, or you may start to write your report as you do analysis. As you write about what you've learned, you may have different insights or rethink your earlier ideas.

In some cases, analysis of one set of data may be a step in developing tools for further data collection. For instance, Evelyn Battell and her colleagues (Battell et al., 2004) analyzed their autobiographies and constructed eight themes related to their research about effective ABE/literacy instructors. These themes provided a framework for interviewing other practitioners.

## Analysis as the focus

Your specific approach to analysis will depend on your research question, the data you have and the methods you used to collect it. In some cases, you may have predetermined categories and will be able to sort the data into those categories. For instance, if you used a structured interview or a questionnaire, the questions may provide categories for collating and reporting your data.

When using less structured methods (e.g., interviews, journals), a common approach is to read through all the data, identify relevant words, phrases or larger pieces, organize these pieces into categories, and look for patterns and themes related to your research focus.

A guide to this type of analysis is included at the end of this chapter. The guide is offered as a starting point that you'll likely adapt as you work with your data. As you'll see in the following examples, there is no one, right way to do analysis. It is important, however, that you document the process you use so that others can follow it. You need to be confident that your process helps you make meaning as fully as possible.

The following describes the process I used to analyze data about sharing power with students (Norton, 2000a):

Analysis of information began almost as soon as I started to collect it. As I wrote field notes [journal], I included questions and ideas about what I was documenting. Through ongoing reading, I found a framework for understanding power. When I made time to work more intensely and intentionally on the analysis, I used this framework as a starting point.

At first I went through all of my field notes and Grace's summary of interviews, highlighting parts that seemed to relate to the framework and my research focus. I began to think about how bits of highlighted information related to each other, and started to add headings to categorize the information.

I sorted the highlighted bits according to the headings I'd made, then resorted and adjusted headings. Meanwhile, I re-read materials that had helped me identify a framework for understanding power. I revised my understanding of the readings, based on the information I'd analyzed. I re-sorted information and reviewed the tape recording transcripts, as a check against my field notes. As I wrote about my learnings, I continued to go back and forth between my information, the readings, and my writing. Gradually I built an understanding about my attempts to share power with the conference committee. I reviewed my research report with committee members and incorporated their elaborations into a revision. (pp. 167-168)

In the next example, Fay Holt Begg (2002) describes how she analyzed her notes in her study about a particular tutoring approach:

To analyze my volumes of notes, I first read through them to find similarities, so findings could be sorted in categories. Then, thanking the technology gods for my computer, I grouped paragraphs on the same topics together. Classifications included *progress indicators, skills taught, learning theory, phonics information, Carol's thoughts, my thoughts, and questions*. Sorting the information made it possible to see accomplishments more clearly; it also helped me realize that I still had plenty of questions. I could see that there were times in our work together where I had no idea what Carol was thinking, and we spent quite a bit of time going over the notes together. I discovered that she was not used to "thinking about thinking" and needed time to reflect. We repeated this review process three times, as I found more questions from the new information Carol provided. I then added further reflections about both the tutoring and the research process. (p. 5)

Rebecca Still (2002) used her data collection questions as general categories, then searched her transcripts for key ideas to include in each category:

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed. I grouped the information for each participant into three or four themes based on the interview questions. The groupings were *purpose of reading, concepts and views of readers, tasks/strategies of*

*reading* and for the tutors, *supporting reading*. I read through the transcripts and noted concepts which corresponded with the categories. In order to compare tutors and students' responses, I organized responses for each pair into a chart with tutors' responses in one column and students' responses in another. The interviews also provided background knowledge about tutors' and students' early learning experiences. I then interviewed each participant a second time to clarify certain aspects of the first interview.

The oral reading tapes were also transcribed. I then analyzed the miscues in each reading, deciding if the student was using context and background knowledge, print cues or both.

I wanted to compare what students said about using context and background knowledge, print cues or both. I wanted to compare what students said about reading with how they actually read. I continued to analyze as I wrote the report, as I read articles related to my learnings and as I discussed my analysis and learnings with the RiPAL network facilitator. (p. 7)

Jenny Horsman (2008) collected data about what people learned from workshops and courses about addressing impacts of violence on learning. The following description of analysis is from her report:

I often think the process of analysis is a little mysterious. For me it usually involves reading and re-reading my data—marking words and phrases that I notice repeatedly, seem surprising or confirm my expectations. In this case I looked for repeating patterns in the data. I paid less attention to the array of comments about what participants liked, but was drawn to statements that surprised or disturbed me—the ones I couldn't let go of because they confirmed my doubts about my effectiveness in transforming educational practices. Sometimes I physically cut up printed copies of the data to organize and re-organize my scraps of paper into themes. For this study, I initially used the computer to re-organize the data according to my research questions. But I soon realized that it was less compelling to read all the responses to one question than it was to read all the answers one person had offered...I returned to reading the initial data several times to find new patterns and themes.

Building on her analysis of words and ideas, described above, Jenny created collages as a way to work more holistically with the themes she'd constructed:

And then I went to collage. I sat with a mountain of very assorted magazines, with six themes in my mind and a list of them beside me and I just kept pulling pictures.... Sometimes I had a concept...and I looked for a picture to illustrate the concept and other times a picture drew me. It wasn't so much that I had a picture that I was looking for until the end when there were some gaps and I know exactly what I was looking for.

[Creating the collages] helped me keep the themes better—as I collected images around, for example “is it too hard to take on [addressing impacts of violence on learning]”—I had all these wild images of sky divers and of rock climbers, all these images of almost impossible acts. As they gelled for me, I had more of a sense of empathy, “Of course it’s almost impossible to take on.”... It gave me an emotional tenet of the themes. It’s like I had content, but once I depicted them I had a much stronger feeling, a much more emotional sense of the meaning of the themes. (personal communication, December 2007)



**Hiding Pain Behind Prettiness and Play**

By Jenny Horsman

Reprinted from Horsman, 2008.

Chapter 8 includes a description of how Bonnie Soroke (2003) collected data by inviting participants to create sculptures from zippers and other recycled materials. Bonnie also created zipper sculptures to test themes and interpretations of her study:

One way that I responded to interviews and observations was to create sculptures, and then use them to reflect back my perceptions of students’ experiences, illustrating their issues and concerns. (p. 49)

Judy Murphy (2008) described how she used photographs to help her make sense of her data about the body and learning. Images are a key way of knowing for Judy:

Images were a way to think. I weave back and forth.... I have the data from the interviews, my own experiences, the literature review. All through that I had images in my head about what I was talking about...e.g., what meditation means or what I think people say it means...so that's how I think.... The trouble is it takes longer...you come up with images and sensations and then you have to come up with words.... I had images in my head, but when I took the photographs I had an image of what I wanted to capture, and then sometimes the images spoke and said more. Some pictures I already had and most were ones that I took. The outcome is...here are some photos that support the text, but it really was the process. (personal communication, December 2007)

Sheila Stewart (2008) was writing poetry, or what she calls poetic pieces, alongside her more “straightforward” writing about her exploration of practitioners’ stories. At the time she didn’t know that those poems would make their way into her research writing. Sheila reflected how writing the poems helped her move forward with the research writing and added to that writing:

For me the [poetic] writing is very tied up with figuring out what I think and feel, as I do it, it’s not like I know something and then I write it down. I’m kind of writing it.... I was just writing those [poetic] pieces as I went along...on my computer, on other little files...partly to help me out.... I don’t know that I knew that I would be putting those in or not, then sometimes when I put them in they just seemed to help whatever was there.

And I think you’re trying to say so much with words that are in sentences that have to be in a paragraph or whatever, and there’s all these other things that are going on inside of you as you do it... It’s like those poetic fragments can hold some of the tension of the words and the feelings...they hold the tension in a different way than the prose does.... We’ve been told that prose is supposed to explain something in a kind of straightforward way, we’re taught how to write an essay.... These poetic pieces can hold the tension. They were a sort of a release for me.... Then I can go on and say something else. (personal communication, December 2007)

### *Checking with participants*

Checking with participants is a way to find out if your analysis reflects what they shared with you through interviews, journals or other methods. It may not be possible to check with all of your participants,

especially if there is a long time between data collection and analysis. However, when you are able to check, participants' feedback can help you develop the analysis and help you feel more confident about the credibility of your work.

Presenting your analysis can also be a time to ask participants if they agree with how you quoted or paraphrased them. To complete her research about group process, Andrea Pheasey (2000)

presented a draft copy of my interpretation of the group's development, with names attached to various comments, to all members of the Computer Group who were still at The Learning Centre. Betty and Madeline were able to read the document alone and both told me the evaluation and comments were fair.... Wanda, Ed, Joyce and I read the document together orally. We stopped many times for clarification of some of the quotes from the literature.... They seemed pleased to be identified and agreed that I had attributed comments correctly. (pp. 62-63)

### *Extending the analysis*

Sharing your analysis with others is one way to extend your thinking. In a project about moving research about violence and learning into practice, researchers "workshopped" their data. Researchers presented their themes to other practitioners and invited feedback. Collaborative research projects and research networks also provide opportunities to share and respond to data analysis.

Research friends and support group members might assist with analysis. Dee McRae (2006) describes how she shared her journal entries by e-mail with Marina Niks, and how she was

able to launch into a trial analysis of the data that we could then discuss and work through as more data was collected. (p. 10)

### Using computer software for analysis

There are software programs that can help you make sense of the information you have gathered. Such software can free you of many manual tasks associated with qualitative research by classifying, sorting and arranging your data. The packages can make the research process more efficient but will not perform any magic on your data. In that way, they are like word processing software—they help with editing and revising but don't do the writing.

Research software can be expensive. If you are affiliated with an educational institution, the institution may have a license that allows you to use the software at no cost to you. This access may be available to community members, so it is worthwhile to talk to a librarian at a college or university in your area and ask whether community members can access the institution's computers and use the software. As well, some current research software programs can be downloaded for a trial period of about 30 days without cost. In some instances, free software may also be available on the web.

Sample: *NVivo 7* <http://www.qsrinternational.com>

## Interpreting what you learn

What does it all mean? This is a guiding question for interpreting your data analysis. Interpretation can draw on your own and others' knowledge and experiences. You draw conclusions and make suggestions about what the analysis means for practice. When you interpret, you might also consider and discuss alternative explanations.

Mills (2000, pp. 103-104) offers some suggestions for interpreting what you've learned through the analysis:

**Extend the analysis.** This involves asking questions that arise from what you learned and/or suggesting implications for practice (or further research). For example, in my research about using arts-based approaches in adult literacy education (Norton, 2008), I concluded:

Participants...suggested that we need a way for practitioners to get together to share ideas. This could include workshops with online follow-up. Another suggestion is for literacy educators to link with artists and others who are not necessarily involved in education, but who use arts-based approaches in their lives. An artist in residence is another idea to explore.

My hope is that this exploration provides a base to develop a proposal for a group of adult literacy educators to research ways to introduce arts-based approaches into our work and to document the approaches and outcomes.

**Connect your learnings with personal experience.** This involves relating the findings to your own context. How does what you learned apply to your work? How does your work or context influence your interpretation? For example, as one of the practitioners who researched how adults with little formal education learn, Kate Nonesuch found that

In some ways [the research] has confirmed and validated what I already knew. After our analysis of the data we collected, I am more convinced than ever of the importance of helping students increase their agency and their sense of having control over their learning; I know that the importance I place on their feeling safe and comfortable in the classroom is not just my style, that it affects students ability and willingness to learn. (Niks et al., 2003, p. 94)

**Invited feedback from critical friends.** Show your learnings to colleagues and invite them to offer their interpretations. As well, share your interpretations and invite their responses.

**Connect your learnings to the literature.** Connecting your learnings to other studies can serve to support your work. It also introduces the related work to others who read your report. As well, it helps to build the body of information about the topic you researched.

In my exploration about using arts-based approaches in adult literacy work (Norton, 2008), I decided to relate what I was learning from participants to what I was reading about expressive arts therapies and research about arts-based approaches in schools. It was interesting to see how practitioners' knowledge about using arts-based approaches related to what others know. I hoped that including ideas from the wider literature would help to support our efforts to move forward with the use of arts-based approaches.

**Connect to theory.** Making connections with theory links your work to broader issues.

## Sort and categorize: An approach to analysis

This approach to analysis is based on pre-computer analysis methods and suggests that you cut and sort paper. If you are new to research, you may find the step-by-step procedure helpful, whether you cut and sort paper or use the *find* and *cut and paste* functions in your word processing software.

### *Getting ready*

Your analysis may include physically separating (cutting) out bits of information (words, phrases, etc.) from your printed data, then sorting it. Here are some ways to prepare for this.

- Find a workspace where you can spread out your data. (Keep in mind the need for security and confidentiality.)

- Make copies of any information (e.g., notes, interviews, journals). Keep the originals and use the copies for note making, cutting, sorting, etc.
- Check that you have identified your documents (field notes, date; interview, date, who with). Some people use different colours to distinguish sources. (Run a coloured highlighter down the edge of the page or use different colours of fonts, e.g., blue for first interview, green for second interview, etc.).
- Decide how you will organize information as you sort it (e.g., file boxes or folders, paper clips, envelopes).
- Prepare to be confused for a while and to “trust the process.”

### *Getting started*

- Re-read your proposal. Your research process may have led you away from your original question. However, the question shaped your research and you will need to address it in your write-up (Merriam, 1988), even if it’s mainly to acknowledge the shift in direction.
- Immerse yourself in your data. Read through what you have collected. Listen to tapes of interviews. (Have a look at the related literature too, if you have been referring to literature.)
- As you review all the data, keep notes about:
  - questions and comments related to the data (You could jot these in the margins);
  - major ideas that seem to cross the various sources;
  - themes that seem to come up (e.g., repetition or similar words or phrases that people use to describe their feelings or explain situations). You can come back to these notes as you do more detailed analysis.

### *Looking for patterns*

Looking for patterns in your data is one way to organize and make sense of it. In the approach described here, you identify “units” of information, separate these units, then sort them into categories.

**Identify units.** Read through your data and identify “units” (underline or highlight them). A unit can be a word, phrase, sentence or paragraph that meets two criteria (Lincoln and Guba, 1985):

- It can help you find meaning related to your research and help you think beyond the particular bit of information (e.g., it will help you identify patterns and themes).
- It should be the smallest bit of information that can stand by itself and make sense on its own. You should be able to interpret it without other information, other than an understanding of the context of your research.

As part of this process, you will be making decisions about what data to include and what to leave out. Keeping your research focus or question in mind will help. For instance, in interviews, there may have been side conversations or comments that don't relate.

You can also use a word processor to underline or highlight units. As well, you could use the search function to find similar words in the data or sets of data.

Do not try to categorize the units at this stage. (Although you might note ideas about patterns or categories on a separate sheet.)

**Separate the units.** Once you have identified units, cut them out and stick them onto 3" x 5" cards or pieces of paper. (Remember to identify the sources.) You can also work with the slips of paper, rather than stick them to cards, but if they are small this can be finicky.

**Sort.** Imagine you have to sort out a random selection of 200 grocery items (Merriam, 1988, p. 132). The first item is a box of cereal. The second is an orange. You'd likely put these items in two categories. You could sort all of the items into categories of fresh, frozen, canned or packaged. You could sort them by colour or weight. Or you could sort them in usual grocery store categories of meat, dairy, produce, etc. How you sort them will depend on your questions and on the meaning you bring to the data.

The following sorting process is based on what Glaser and Strauss (cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 339) developed and named as a "constant comparison" process (a process of constantly comparing each new unit with the preceding ones). It is offered as a starting point; you'll likely find your own way of sorting, depending on the data you're dealing with.

- Put all the cards in a stack.
- Take the first card, read the unit and place it on the table.
- Take the next card, read the unit and compare it to the first one. If the data is similar in some way, put the second card with the first one. (For example, each unit may refer to a reason for leaving school, or they may both refer to a reading strategy). If not, start a second group (e.g., the first unit may be about leaving school, the second about a reading strategy). At this stage you are working with what "looks" or "feels" the same.
- Continue in the same way with the other cards. (At this stage, work with broad categories. You might develop sub-categories later.)
- Name the categories and review the units in them. You may need to review your categories and regroup some units. Check that all the units in a category are indeed similar. Also, check that the differences between categories are quite clear.

- When you are satisfied with how you have sorted the units and with the categories, identify (or code) each unit with the name of the category.
- Some units may not seem to fit with any group. Keep these in a miscellaneous pile to review later. They may point to a theme that you haven't named yet.
- Some units may seem to fit in more than one category. If this is the case, review the information in the unit. Perhaps it includes more than one piece of information. If a number of units seem to relate to the same two or more categories, review the categories to see if they need to be combined and perhaps renamed.

### *Variation*

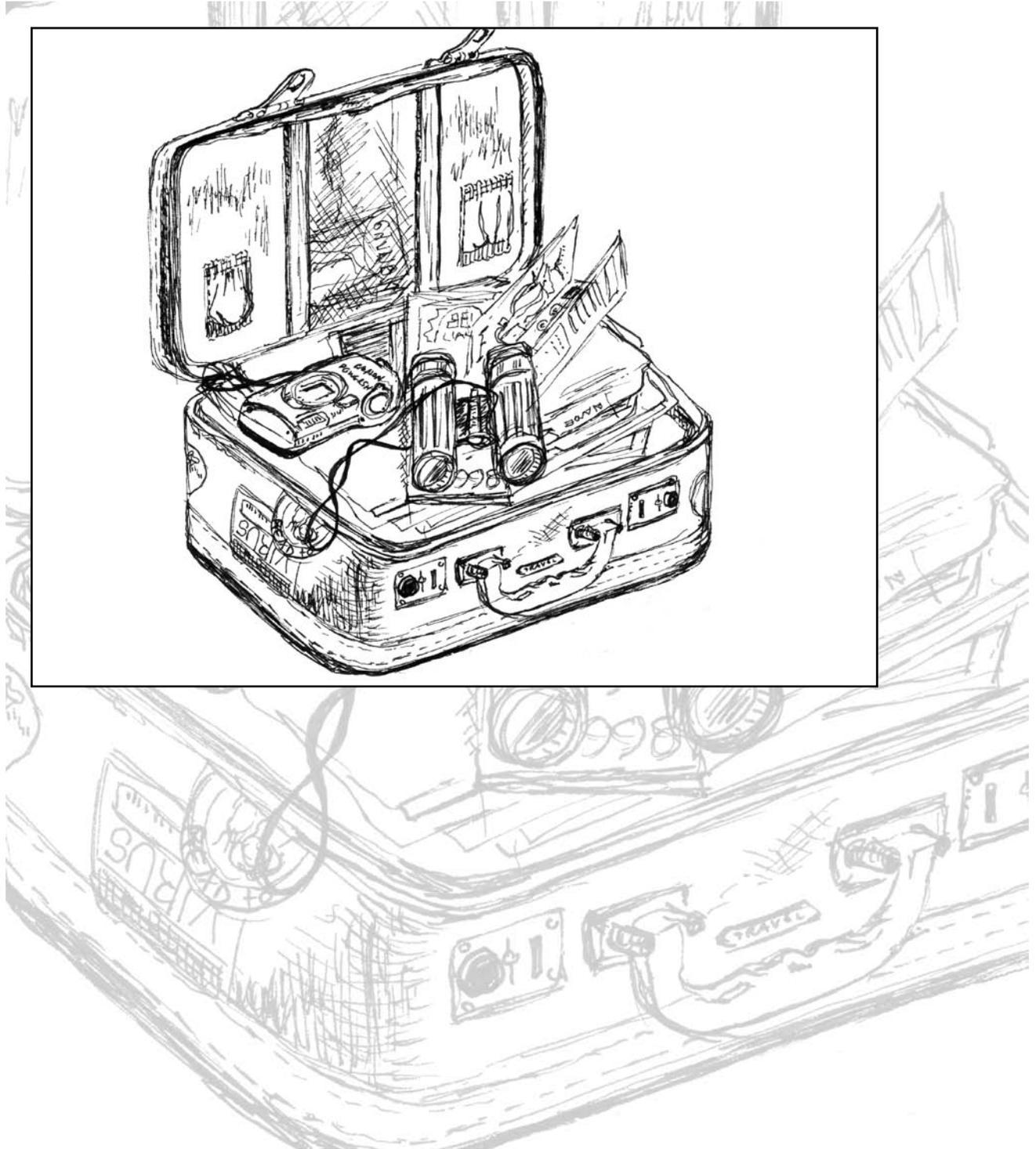
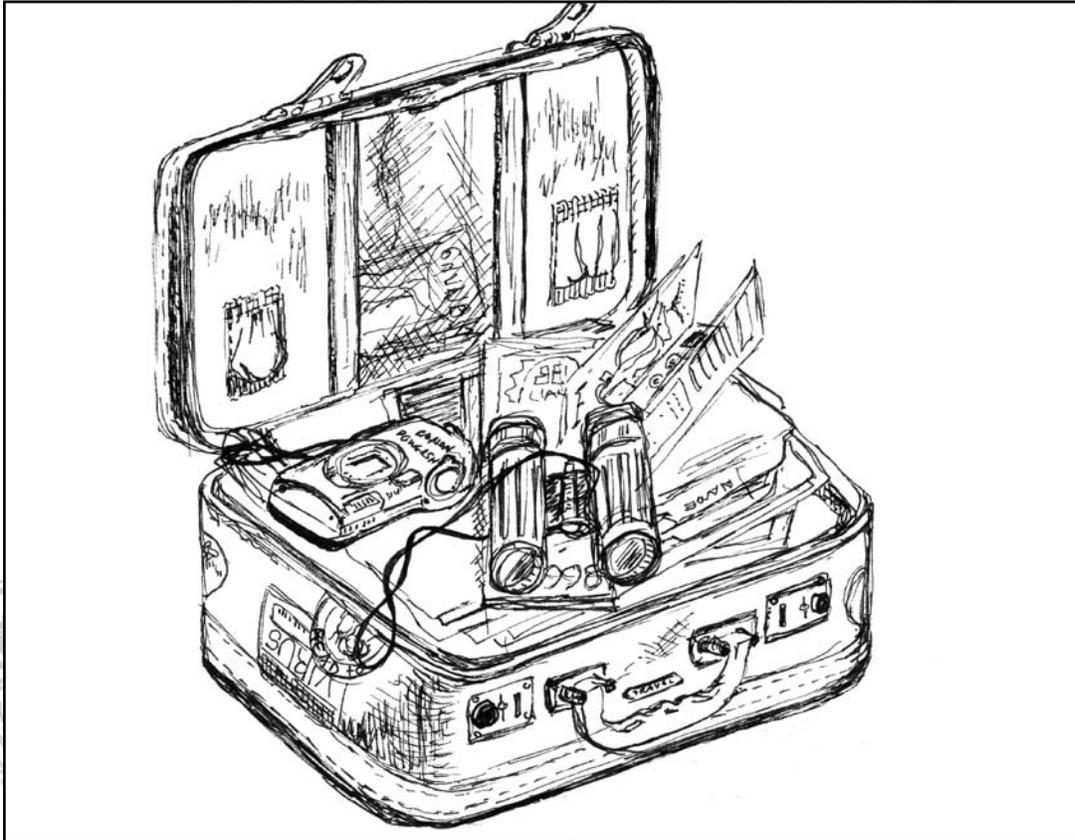
The process described above involves developing categories from the data. A variation on this process is to sort the information into previously determined categories. For example, you may be trying to find out about reading strategies used by learners at different stages. You may decide to use categories from other research, such as “print-based” and “meaning-based.” A drawback to using predetermined categories is that they will influence how you see your data and you may miss new ways of seeing things. Whether you use predetermined categories will depend on your research purposes and questions.

### *Identifying themes*

Once data has been sorted into categories, you can begin to construct themes or broader categories that address your research questions. In developing themes, you'll likely draw from the data, from your own experiences and knowledge, and from the relevant literature. For example, in my research about sharing power, one of the themes I found was “devolution of power.” This theme came from recognizing how, in a number of instances, I tried to hand over power to the group. But it also came from reading about power and approaches to keeping or sharing power.

In my research about using arts-based approaches in literacy education (Norton, 2008), I identified categories, such as “making room for emotions,” “self-esteem and confidence” and “drawing on and discovering strengths.” I then looked at how these categories related to larger themes related to holistic learning, such as emotional learning and spiritual learning.

## Stories From the Road: Writing Up and Sharing Our Research





ONE SUMMER, I spent a month in Northern Ireland and Eire, birthplaces of my maternal grandparents. Every day or so, I'd write a page or two of a letter that I'd mail home. My mother kept the letters, and I still have them as a record of what I'd seen and experienced during that trip. On later trips, I e-mailed home from internet cafes. Now, when I am away, I phone. There are many ways to share a journey, and more than one way to share our research. You can start thinking about how to share learnings from your research when you begin your research journey.

Typically, sharing research in practice has meant writing a comprehensive report and publishing it in hard copy and/or online. This makes the reports quite accessible to others in the field. Writing is also a way to clarify your thinking and move it along.

Research can also be shared orally. As discussed earlier, in-progress workshops are a way to collect more data, invite feedback, or move the analysis along. You also might do workshops, presentations or poster sessions about your completed work. You could record the presentation or photograph the posters for further sharing. Face-to-face or online study groups are another way to share.

Research can be reported and shared in other ways too, including through stories, poetry, drama, videos or multimedia presentations. For example, *Under the Line* is a play about living with welfare, created by women literacy students. The women shared their experiences of living with welfare and did research about related questions. Public presentations of the play were followed by question and answer periods (Norton, 1992).

Nadine Sookermany (2008) created a video about her research about the impacts of violence on learning, on program participants and on their children. In her research about the body and learning, Judy Murphy (2008) created a multi-media report that included video clips, photographs, voice, music and excerpts from her written report.<sup>10</sup> Judy commented:

Taking a multimedia approach served two purposes for me. One, the need (a strong internal motivator for me) to share my research in a way that integrated more fully all its varied pieces—same idea of “bringing the whole person”—it seemed the only way I could find to do this and make sense of what I wanted to say was through a multimedia approach.... The process of putting the arts-based plus text pieces together has deepened my understanding of my topic and has fostered new

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<sup>10</sup> Mike Kelly provided technical support for Judy to create the multi-media report.

insights along the way. Two, from the perspective of reporting, it offered me another alternative to invite people into the work and a way to connect with others who may also value other (i.e. non-text based) ways of expressing. (personal communication, January 2008)

As reported in Chapters 8 and 9, Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George (2008), Jenny Horsman (2008) and Sheila Stewart (2008) used arts-based approaches in their data collection and analysis, as did Christianna Jones (2008). The drawings, collage and poetry that were created were also included in their reports. In my report about using arts-based approaches in adult literacy programs (Norton, 2008), I included examples and stories about my own expressive arts work, as a way to bring myself into the research and connect it with my own practice. As well as illustrating the research process, including examples of the arts-based work can invite readers into research reports.

Research reports can also be combined with suggestions or guides for practice. In reporting on research about writing in ABE programs in Newfoundland and Labrador, Helen Woodrow and I (Woodrow & Norton, 1996) included a section about the research and a section of activities and examples for facilitating writing groups and instruction. For her research about addressing impacts of violence on learning, Brenda Squair (2004) developed and facilitated workshops for tutors. Her report included the workshop outline and her reflections about facilitating the workshops, given her own experiences with violence.

However you share your research, it's important that it is shared. Sharing our research is one of the ways that research in practice differs from day-to-day reflection and reflective conversations, and is a way to add to knowledge about literacy practice. What we learn about our practice may also prompt others to reflect about and possibly change or affirm theirs.

## Writing a research report

The rest of this chapter is about what to include in a written report. Think about your report as a story about your research, written for other educators in the literacy field. Speak to your audience and include yourself in the story (its okay to use "I"— despite what we might have been taught about writing reports.) You'll want to include enough information about the research process so readers can follow how you did the research and how you made meaning from it.

If you report in a form other than writing, such as a workshop or video, think about how you'll cover information usually included in a written

report. You also might need to write some of the information to accompany your oral or visual report. If you used arts-based approaches in your research, think about how to include examples of the art in your report.

## What to include in a report

The various sections of a report don't need to be in the order suggested, although logically some parts need to come before others. Use headings that are appropriate for your report and that suit your writing style. Formal terms like data collection, analysis and findings may not be familiar for readers who haven't been involved in research. Other headings may be more inviting for some.

### *Introduction and context*

Like the setting for a story, this part can tell about the program or other context of your research. If the context is a program, you could describe the program, who comes to the program, and your role. Include whatever other information readers might need as background to your research. Decide whether to use the actual name of the program. (Consult program participants and anyone else who needs to have a say about this decision.)

This might be the place to include information about what led you to do the research, including what you know about the topic.

### *What did you want to find out?*

State the focus or question(s) you wanted to address through your research. Include why the research is important and who you hope will benefit from it.

### *How are you located in the research?*

Refer to Chapter 4 for a reminder about locating ourselves. In one report (Norton, 2008), I used a family photograph to identify my White (Irish/English), age, family and gender locations.

### *How is your research located?*

Did you look for others' reports on the topic, or talk to people in your field? What did you find and how did you use this? For instance, did someone else's work help you focus your research or choose methods? Acknowledge the source of quotes or paraphrased information and include bibliographic information for reports or other sources you refer to (see Chapter 7).

*Planning to write  
is not writing.  
Outlining,  
researching, talking  
to people about  
what you're doing,  
none of that is  
writing. Writing is  
writing.*  
– E. L. Doctorow

### *How did you do the research?*

This part needs enough detail to inform readers about your research process and to show that you were systematic. Address the following questions:

**Who took part in the research?** Introduce the research participants. (See Chapter 5 for discussion about representing participants). Include information as needed to help readers get a sense of the participants and their context:

- How did the participants get involved in the research?
- How did you ask for consent?
- Did you use names or pseudonyms?
- What other ethical decisions did you have to make?

**What methods and tools did you use to collect data?** As well as telling what methods you used (e.g., interviews), describe the tools and how you used them. For example, if you used interviews, did you prepare specific questions or outline topics to talk about? Include examples of your data collection tools, as they will help your readers understand how you collected data. Did you tape the interviews or take notes? If you kept a journal, when did you write and what did you write about?

**How did you make sense of the data?** Describe how you organized the data and how you did the analysis. Show how your analysis is connected to your data.

### *What did you learn or find out?*

This will be a main part of your report and is where you'll likely include excerpts from your data sources (quotes, paraphrases, summary of comments). You can organize this part in relation to your question and in terms of themes or categories you constructed.

### *What were some of the challenges you had as you did your research?*

Describe these, as they may help others avoid similar problems (e.g., inviting participants, methods, tools).

### *What do your findings mean for your practice? What suggestions do you have for others?*

Because research in practice usually involves small numbers of people, we can't usually make general statements or recommendations for

other literacy practice. However, we can describe how the research has influenced or will influence our practice. As well, we may make some suggestions about what other practitioners might consider when doing similar work, depending on their context.

## Publishing your report

If you are part of a research network or collaborative project, there may be plans to publish and distribute printed copies of your report. If not, you'll need to decide if you want to make and share printed copies.

Here are some places where you can publish your report online. Check the websites for details about how to make submissions.

Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English  
<http://www.nald.ca/crd/>

Education Resource Information Centre  
<http://eric.ed.gov/>

National Adult Literacy Data Base  
<http://www.nald.ca>

If you publish your report for distribution, you might apply to the Canadian Cataloguing in Publication program for cataloguing information. This information will make it easier for people to locate and cite your report. As well, you will be asked to send two copies of your report to Libraries and Archives Canada. The service is free. For information: <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/cip/index-e.html>

## Sharing from your research

The following journals publish brief articles about research. Check the websites for information about how to submit articles.

*Literacies*. (Canada) <http://www.literacyjournal.ca>

*Focus on Basics*. (United States) <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=31>

The RaPAL Journal (United Kingdom)  
<http://www.literacy.lancs.ac.uk/rapal/journal/issues.htm>



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Mary Norton has produced a document that explains abstract notions while staying grounded in adult literacy practice. Although the emphasis is on doing research, the book also invites readers to critically read, reflect on and apply research to their practice. By presenting examples from research in practice experiences and projects in Canada the book also provides a portrayal of the work done since 1997. This volume will surely become the primer to research in practice in the adult literacy field as well as other related areas of practice.

**Marina Niks**

RiPAL-BC (Research in Practice in Adult Literacy)

A thorough and insightful resource that will support and enrich your work, no matter where you are on the research and practice journey.

**Tannis Atkinson**

*Literacies* Journal, Editor

This is truly a traveler's guide for research in practice. It has a definite end goal; it charts the way, highlights signposts, and cautions the reader on possible pitfalls. It lightens the load of a researcher practitioner embarking on that exciting quest for knowledge.

**Dr. Bill Fagan**

Literacy Researcher

The *Traveler's Guide* encourages us to give ourselves the time to read, write and reflect about our work and in the process change our practice. The book is rich with stories and snippets about literacy work, and how research as a creative process offers possibilities and solutions to questions people have. Well mapped, easy to follow, and just the right amount of information.

**Audrey Gardner**

Literacy Coordinator, Bow Valley Community College

*A Traveler's Guide to Literacy Research in Practice* maps out the complexity of research in practice in a clear, calm, comprehensive way. It is a wise travel companion, full of the stories and insights from fellow travelers. Norton helps us to see how "research is one way to name and tell what we know, as well as one way to question and extend our knowledge."

**Sheila Stewart**

Senior Research Officer, Festival of Literacies

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto



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