What do literacy students
think being literate is?

Andrea Pheasey

What do literacy students think being literate is? is one in a series of reports by members of the Alberta Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL) Network. The Network is a collaborative project of the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta and The Learning Centre Literacy Association and is affiliated with the Centre for Research on Literacy at the University of Alberta. The National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development Canada, funded the project in partnership with Alberta Learning.

Contents

Preface

What do you do when you become aware of a situation in your literacy work that is puzzling or problematic? Perhaps you talk about the situation with a colleague, read a book or article about it, or use a trial and error approach to address the problem. A research in practice project starts with the same sorts of puzzling situations but is an opportunity to investigate a situation in more systematic ways.

Through the Research in Practice in Adult Literacy (RiPAL) Network, eight literacy researchers in practice from across Alberta investigated a range of puzzling questions. During an on-line course in 2000, we clarified our questions and developed research proposals. Then, over several months in 2001, we conducted research, using various methods to gather and analyse information. We started to find some answers but also discovered more questions, which fuelled lively discussion when we met in inquiry groups. Improving our practice was a main reason for us to do research, but we found personal benefits to engaging in research as well.

The research in practice process holds challenges as well as benefits, however. Perceptions of research and who "gets to do it," confidence and expectations of self, lack of time, and writing up the research are among the challenges we faced and learned from.

As a member of the RiPAL Network, Andrea Pheasey investigated what adult literacy students think being literate is. In this report, Andrea shares her learnings about her question and about the research process.

Mary Norton, Facilitator
The RiPAL Network

Introduction

When I started work at The Learning Centre nine years ago, I was a teacher with a mission to help adults learn to read. I had taught children to read for some time and knew the satisfaction of that job. Working in the teacher-centred atmosphere of public schools and using teacher-centred curricula produced the desired results—the children learned to read and write. I knew, from volunteering in other programs with adult learners, that teaching children and teaching adults was not the same. I had also been introduced to participatory practices in those volunteer jobs.

Participatory practices in teaching reading, writing and math requires knowledge of what learners want to learn and learner involvement in planning their own learning. The adult learner "must be involved in determining both the content and direction of their education" (Auerbach, 1992, p.14).

I now refer to myself as a facilitator, rather than a teacher, for two reasons. First, I do not presume to direct students' learning, and second, The Learning Centre is not a school in the traditional sense. [1] The Learning Centre is a community-based, adult literacy and education program located in downtown Edmonton. As a facilitator at the Centre, part of my role is to help students find what they need and/or want to learn.

The Centre's mission statement (see sidebar) outlines the purpose of the programs at The Learning Centre. The statement doesn't mention reading, writing or basic math skills specifically, but because the word "literacy" is used, opportunities to learn these skills may be assumed.

The Learning Centre engages people in community-based learning and literacy development that further enables them to make positive changes for themselves and their communities.

Many people who come to The Learning Centre state "I want to get my Grade 12," or "I want to do upgrading," (meaning high school upgrading). Some prospective students do say they want to learn to read, to write or to spell better. Some say they want to improve their math skills.

—————————

[1] However some learners do refer to the Centre as "school" and some prefer to call themselves "students." Thus I use the words "learner" and "student" interchangeably throughout my report.

Why do these students want to read and write? What do they see themselves doing with better reading and writing skills? What do they mean by "better" reading and writing skills? I wonder if there is some deeper need not being expressed when these words are stated. I wonder what people who present themselves at the doors of literacy programs think being literate is. These wonderings led to the question for my research project.

Question

What do literacy students think being literate is?

My question from the beginning of this research has not changed: "What do literacy students think being literate is?" With what notion of literacy or personal goals do learners come into adult literacy programs like the Centre? Even if some people come because they have friends or family already there, what do these folks expect they will be able to do when they leave the program? What will their lives be like when they decide to move on? How will they know it is time to move on?

Part of the intake process at The Learning Centre is an interview with the learner. With information on what some adult learners think being literate is, perhaps we can ask better questions, more insightful questions, and hopefully get to what students really want. Questioning students at the outset and during the learning process help to indicate students' programs, but, for me, it does not answer what the students want to be like at the end of their stay at the Centre. How will a student know when she or he has achieved literacy?

The Learning Centre

The Learning Centre is housed with a community services agency in downtown Edmonton. This is an historic cohabitation that works because the agency and the Centre provide different but equally valuable services for people who live in the city centre. There are some folks who do come downtown to access services of the agency and the Centre, but mainly the clientele is from the local neighbourhoods.

Some of the services offered by the agency are housing referrals, "Streetworks" public health services, youth-at-risk counselling, family and adult outreach and advocacy, and a drop-in centre where coffee and juice are often available and where soup is served most days at noon. The Learning Centre adds to this mix basic reading, writing, math, spelling and other educational facilitation for adults.

The flexibility and variety of the schedule of the Centre's program makes it comfortable for people who use the agency and for others referred here by social service agencies. Largely this clientele do not want institutionalized programs.

The Centre is open four days per week. Mornings are devoted to "open learning" time when students read, write, or do math on their own, with the help of volunteer community tutors, peer tutors or in a groups with other learners. Afternoons have a variety of learning activities, for example: creative writing, Reader's Theatre, an action research group and women's and men's book clubs.

Learners also volunteer at the Centre in many ways, such as doing receptionist duties, organizing social events, sitting on our board of directors, helping with mail-outs and keeping our kitchen and eating areas clean.

The Centre aims for learner-centred approaches in that we try to focus on the learners' interests; sometimes we are successful, sometimes not. When individuals contact us to find out what we do, our program co-ordinator meets with them. During the first meeting, potential participants see the Centre and are invited to talk about their interests for learning. Some new students may identify that they want to learn to read and write or do math, and some may indicate that they are looking for something meaningful to do with their time. Some identify a particular interest immediately; others may take longer. So, on an ongoing basis, facilitators and tutors also listen for learners to express their interests directly or indirectly.

Perhaps someone needs to read notes sent home from school or they may need to read and write letters home to relatives. Some people may need to fill out forms for jobs, social assistance or rental agreements. Some want

to read the driver's license manual. Some people need to read and use the bus schedule; some want to learn to count money to avoid being "ripped off" at the store.

The schedule at the Centre is divided into six or seven-week cycles during and after which participants are encouraged to reflect on their learning. This is when the students review the skills and talents they brought with them, what new skills and talents have been realized. and what they still need to work on. Students use the reflection session as a tool to help them see their progress and to indicate where adjustments to the study plan are needed.

The intake interview, the reflection sessions, ongoing conversations and observations provide valuable information for the facilitators in setting up and amending the program of study.

What is literacy?

In this report I give examples of definitions for literacy I have found in the literature. These definitions helped me formulate my question because I found there is no precise definition and many of the definitions I found seem to have personal values attached.

When The Learning Centre was formulating its mission statement a few years ago, I remember a discussion about the use of the word "literacy" in that statement. Some learners were against the use of the word because it connoted illiteracy in participants. The words illiteracy or illiterate have highly charged connotations. One student said those words meant uneducated, unread, unskilled, unsuccessful—all negative meanings. He had had enough of being "put down" for his lack of formal education.

During the literature search for this research project, I encountered many different definitions of the word literacy—definitions that depended on the word's context and purpose. Some meanings are simple, as in the definition by Hare (1995): "When asked about literacy, all participants [in her study] deemed literacy, that is, being able to read and write, as

important" (p. 49). Similarly, *Webster's new world dictionary* defines literacy as "(n) the ability to read and write" and literate as: "(adj) able to read and write, to be educated."

Others' definitions are more complicated and bring into play all manner of cultural, social and political histories of individuals and groups. In the *Survey of literacy skills used in daily activities* (Statistics Canada, 1991), literacy is defined as: "the skills necessary to use the printed material commonly encountered at work, at home and in the community" (p. 1). Millar (1998) states that literacy surveys like the *International adult literacy survey* (Statistics Canada, 1995) and others present literacy development on a continuum: "not a question of either being literate or illiterate, rather how literate an individual may be is determined by a combination of the current definition of literacy…" (p. 36).

Barton and Hamilton (1998) say literacy is something people do; it does not just mean the ability to interpret text. It is not just a set of skills to be learned; it is essentially social, and it lies in people's interaction with each other. There are different literacies associated with different aspects of a person's life, or domains. Barton and Hamilton describe the main domains of life to be home, school and work. The home and work domains have a certain type of literacy practice referred to as vernacular literacy. This is an informal practice not regulated by an outside authority. The learner and the "expert are not fixed but shift from context to context" (p. 252). This vernacular literacy is not separated from its use, as is the case in "institutional" reading and writing and related skills training.

The idea of bettering one's self through the acquisition of literacy skills is common in the literature I read. The assumption is that learners want to be part of the dominant culture, want to use the dominant language and want to join the "middle class." Millar (1998) takes issue with this notion of the "emancipation myth" (p. 1). She reminds us that schools, curricula and teachers are not neutral, and the systems that deliver literacy training have predetermined what skills will be necessary for everyone. The assumption is if learners do well "it is because of individual ability and effort. If they do badly…the assumption is some kind of inability or negligence on the part of the student" (p. 49).

Fagan (1998) points out that "literacy is perhaps one of the terms most disagreed upon regarding its meaning or meanings" (p. 13), especially when all the new literacies are taken into consideration. He says "literacy has become a catch word" (p. 13). Put in combination with other words, it means nothing more than knowledge. Fagan suggests that combination literacies like "Cultural literacy," "Financial Literacy" or "Computer Literacy" indicate knowledge of these subjects. Attaching the word literacy to other words only gives them "an aura of significance, and seems to embody a goal that people should strive for, a goal not easily attained…" (p. 31).

I find my own definition of literacy has been shaped by my work at the Centre during the last nine years. I originally thought of literacy only as the ability to read and write. As mentioned, when I started at the Centre, I felt like the teacher and that I was there to "help" adults who, for whatever reason, had not learned to read and write. I was trying to teach in isolation from the rest of our lives. One woman told me to open up and tell her something about myself. That was the beginning of my getting to know the students better, to listen to their stories and to see what rich life experiences we all had. In the variety of life experiences I learned about, I also learned about literacies that went beyond reading and writing, and also about how people used literacy outside the Centre.

One man who would be considered a "less able" reader and writer has another life as a volunteer disc jockey in a local club where he is required to know the names of countless recording artists, the similarities and differences in the music the audience want to hear, and how to play this music using modern sound production equipment. This man's knowledge of a certain type of music and his ability to use that knowledge in the club is a type of "Music Literacy." He has also developed a way to note requests from the audience, which is his own method of encoding.

Now I understand literacy as an individual's ability to get along in the world, which may include reading and writing, but mainly it means the person's understanding of how the world works. Understanding processes, being able to see patterns in those processes and being able to "read" people and situations are what I now think of when I talk about literacy. My definition is very near that of Barton and Hamilton. I particularly like

their view of "vernacular literacy" because it recognizes everyone as an expert at some time. As an example, I was riding the city bus with a group of learners. I am unfamiliar with the bus system and therefore uncomfortable while riding the bus. The bus made what I thought was a wrong turn and the apprehension I felt was apparent on my face. One member of our group immediately and emphatically assured me everything would be OK and I need not worry. I felt better being guided by her because of her "Transit Literacy."

How I did the research

This is my second opportunity to work on a qualitative research project, so this time I was less intimidated by this type of research. However I was concerned about choosing participants. Should I ask people I knew well or was it better to have no history with the participants? I also worried about how I would get information from learners without showing my bias. I spent a long time wording the questions I wanted to ask in the interviews.

Participants

I am aware of the differences in power that exist between the participants and me. I am a facilitator at the Centre—a staff person, a teacher (the participants' term)—and this puts me in a position of authority. I know most of the students at the Centre well. However, this study was completed with the help of students at the Centre. The fact that these students and I have a long history was at first bothersome to me. I am a new researcher and I felt the familiarity we shared would influence the interviews we did together. However, as Teeling (1990) says, the previous knowledge of participants and their learning environment can be a positive thing. Instead of getting in the way of my research, this knowledge "enhanced insight through intuitive knowledge" (p. 21). I had already established a relationship with each respondent and my "familiarity with the learning situation allowed conversations in the interviews to be focused…"(p. 21).

To identify participants, I first tried drawing names from a hat, which was unsuccessful because some of those people whose names I drew did not

want to participate. In the end I tried a more direct and ultimately successful method. I explained my project and why I wanted to do this research to all the students, and asked for volunteers. Ten people responded, nine of whom stayed with the study throughout. One of the nine has since left the Centre, but has kept in contact with students and staff.

Consent

All of the participants were asked to sign a consent form. These forms were read to participants as needed. The consent form, besides the routine agreement to participate and use (or not use) the participant's name, also included a statement which made it clear the participant could leave the study at any time for any reason.

Collecting data

I collected data from taped individual and small group interviews with participants. I made field notes after all these interviews. I used small groups (two-to-four people) 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. This was something I learned from my first research project. The interviews became more conversational than simply a question/answer exercise. The field notes were my interpretations of body language, power relationships within the group interviews, and follow-up questions I needed to pursue during the individual interviews. Some participants wrote about why and how they came to The Learning Centre in the first place, and these writings provided another source.

Developing the interviews

I originally planned to ask prepared questions to establish the context of participants' learning, their definition of literacy, an understanding of a literacy scale, where they felt they fit on that scale and how they rate themselves as literate. Following are the questions I developed:

- Tell me a little about yourself.
- Why are you attending this program?

- What kind of things do you do in this program?
- What are some signs of being literate?
- How do you understand the literate world?
- Where do you fit into the literate world?
- How would you rate your literacy skills? Who are you comparing yourself to?
- What will your life be like when you have achieved all the literacy skills you need?

However, I was worried about using set questions because I felt that approach would set the tone and direction of the interviews. I refer back to my remarks about the differential in power between the participants and myself. There was also the fact that some of the participants were more articulate than others and the formal question/answer format was intimidating. I needed to hear the participants' views, which meant just letting them talk.

Dialogic interviews

At a meeting of research practitioners, I learned about a dialogic interview technique that gave the participant control of the interview. The interview would be a conversation, which would go in the direction the participants lead it. McLeod (1999) explained this interview technique in a counselling context as "the most powerful understandings are generated by groups of people working together to explore their experience" (p. 99). Social scientists who developed this interview method were concerned about the tendency of published research to "privilege" the voice of the researcher and silence the voice of the informants or participants. The dialogic format does not require standardized questions; it allows the participant to talk about their experiences and ask clarifying questions of the interviewer. I felt this interview method would bring out ideas that originated with the participants rather than ideas that I wanted addressed.

With the dialogic interview format in mind, I began each interview with an explanation of the consent form and further description of why I was doing the research. I explained that as a facilitator I needed to better understand what learners wanted from our program and I needed to have

a clear view of what students wanted to be able to do when they decided to leave The Learning Centre. Then I asked if the participants had any questions. This is where the dialogue began and where the interviews differed in scope and content.

Conducting the interviews

The interviews varied in length from half an hour to one hour and ten minutes. Most of the interviews began with the participants talking about where they came from and why they came to the Centre, which sometimes led me to ask what the program at the Centre would do for them. I asked some participants if they saw themselves as somebody who gets along in the world. The questions I did ask were for my own clarification. This "depth-probing" is what Glesne and Peshkin (1992) describe as that time when the interviewer pursues a point of interest with "Tell me more about…" "Do you mean…? "Can I say …"? I felt these probes allowed the participants not only to restate their views but to expand upon them as well.

Besides the individual and small group interviews, I wanted to do one final interview with the whole group. At the final whole group interview I reminded some folks of their earlier remarks with the hope that other participants would have more to add to these ideas. I attempted to interview the whole group of nine on two occasions; neither attempt was successful.

Armstrong and Yarbrough (1996) name five progressive stages most groups go through to become a functioning entity: shyness, focus, conflict, solidification and performance. From research into group development I had done previously (Pheasey 2000), I understood that the problem with this group was conflict among members. At both attempts to meet, historical personal problems and opposing priorities got in the way of us talking about literacy.

Analysis

When I reviewed the transcripts of interviews with individuals I asked for clarification of some remarks and if I could paraphrase something they

had said or had written. I read to them how I had paraphrased their comments, and I read my final report to all the participants.

I read and reread each interview transcript and participants' writing to determine themes. I made multiple copies of the transcripts so I could colour code them according to who spoke. I also colour coded comments from the participants' written work. Then the comments were cut into bits containing one idea or theme. The comments were separated out into units that used similar words. At first I found myself using "predetermined categories" (Norton 2000). Unintentionally, I was looking for themes that answered the original questions I wanted to ask at the interviews. I was sorting the themes with words similar to that group of questions. This process did not seem to be getting to anything very interesting. I then tried a few more times using only the words as indicators.

Finally one theme became apparent. "Trying" was a word so commonly used by participants I am surprised now that it took me so long to see it. I looked for other words to describe this theme, words like confidence or positive self-esteem (both of which were used occasionally) but I decided to use "trying" because the participants used precisely that word. When I was thinking about this theme, "trying" does define their comments most clearly.

Other themes I identified dealt with reasons people came to the Centre, what the participants learned while at the Centre, and what they would be able to do when they decided to leave. Throughout the conversations participants also gave definitions of literacy.

Findings

Why come in the first place?

Why participants came to The Learning Centre in the first place can be divided into two sub-themes. First, they wanted to find out about the world through interaction and discussion (socialization) and second, they wanted to learn to read and write.

Socialization

The need for social interaction was a common theme expressed by women who lived alone. Three of the women talked about it as their primary motivation for coming to the Centre:

> *To meet other people.*
> *I wanted to get out and be with people*
> *I wanted to know what was going on here* [The Learning Centre].

One woman went on to say she "wanted to learn how to get along with people instead of fighting…." She found her circle very small and needed to go where she would learn and use new social skills. Another of the women commented, "I have to do something with my life…. I had to make some changes in my life." The changes this woman mentioned mean getting out and away from the routine of taking medication, doing crafts and being isolated. Changes also mean using intellectual ability by talking and reading with others.

Many participants mentioned coming to the Centre on the advice of family or friends. I got the sense these participants were coming initially for the social contact and, secondly, because it was a safe place to begin work on reading and writing. There was no one putting up obvious barriers to these people attending, although more subtle forms of resistance sometimes stopped the women from attending. Needing to care for children or lack of bus fare are the reasons some participants gave for not attending this or other programs. While not directly keeping these women from attending, the partner or roommate was the one who pointed out this lack of childcare and/or bus money.

One man said his adult children sometimes ridiculed him for coming to the Centre. He said he didn't know education for people his age was available and moreover, he thought he would not qualify for the Centre because he could read and write. He came to improve his math skills but found he was learning a great deal about his writing as well. Another man, who lives alone, was emphatic he came to the Centre only to learn to read and write. The social contacts he made at the Centre had nothing to do with his decision to come or not.

> *I want to understand. I could read but I couldn't understand.*
> *I now know how to interpret it, which I could not do before.*
> *I wanted to understand the world a bit more.*

The above statements were from a woman who had been emotionally abused for many years to the point where "they had me believing I was challenged." She said she did not understand math at all but has learned she is capable of learning and retaining math concepts.

To learn to read and write

> *I know people who do not read or write and I wanted to be better*
> *than that.*

A woman made this remark about half way through her group interview. Some other participants mentioned the need or desire to learn to read and write, but not in comparison to others in their social or family group. Those learners said they felt independent or self-sufficient because they could read and understand their own correspondence.

Only one of the women in the group had children at home and she did mention one of her motivators was to "help her kids at home with their schoolwork…read the notes." Barton and Hamilton (1998) talk about this domestic function predominately being the responsibility of women. "More women than men reported reading to their children, dealing with school demands of letters to be answered and forms to be filled in, buying books for children and helping them with their homework" (p. 172). Dealing with written material and authority figures (i.e. teachers and social workers) is often the job of the mother even in two parent families.

The participants in this research did not mention economics as a reason for coming to the Centre. Most of the participants had had paying jobs at some time in their lives, which they left for health reasons. Two of the participants did seasonal part-time work. None of these people saw returning to work as an immediate goal. Going to a community college in our neighbourhood was mentioned as an end in itself, not as a step toward retuning to the work force.

What is literacy?

As mentioned earlier in this report, the definition of literacy is very personal. It can have many aspects to its meaning, but mainly it is about language. Language—written, spoken, read or listened to is how the participants defined literacy. Following were some of the remarks about what literacy is.

> *Listening is a literacy skill.*
> *Speech, try to say something and make sure people understand what you are saying.*
> *Speaking out is a literacy skill.*
> *A literate person has to be able to write.*

Further discussion brought out more introspective definitions of literacy around understanding what is read or spoken. Understanding and being understood orally seemed to be as important as being understood using written language.

> *People talk different. Like rich people use big fancy words and we can't understand it.*

The man who told me this has a speech difficulty. He is very aware of how his speech pattern marginalizes him. He has talked about not understanding the way certain people talk, not understanding words people use outside his social circle. Remembering his past interaction with oral language is unpleasant for him but coming to the Centre has given him a chance to practice his oral language. Conversation is still difficult but he does read orally in small groups now.

In the early interviews, participants were more guarded than in later sessions around the use of the word literacy. Most participants used the "read and write" meaning of literacy or of being literate mainly, I think, because they thought that was what I wanted to hear. At later sessions in the interview process, the groups enjoyed the opportunity to discuss larger and larger meanings for literacy. The word "illiteracy" did not come up in any conversation, either in individual or group interviews.

The conversation about what is literacy and what being literate is came up at all the sessions, likely because the title of my research and the question I was asking has the word "literacy" in it.

> *Collision, what's that? Is that some rich person's word? Why can't they just say crash?*

The idea of "being somebody" in one's own social circle or among others at the agency drop-in was discussed. The participants recognize people who have power as people who can read and write. Power and deference is given to people who can read and write because they can function in the larger society using the dominant language. This power allows "literate people" to gain access to opportunities others don't have and it helps "literate people" deal more effectively with authority figures. I think those learners see further education as an acquisition of power and status. It is unclear if the participants see further education and literacy as the same thing.

The notion of "rich people" using different vocabulary and different language was mentioned. The idea seemed to be that language divided people into classes just as do other social determinates. Willis (1977) talks about language usage as a cultural battleground. The language from the dominant social group is not that of many adult learners but those learners are expected to understand and articulate their needs with the dominant language—an expectation they place upon themselves in some cases.

Literacy as a social or ideological practice is most often symbolized as becoming educated. Being educated means changing, moving out of one's cultural or social group, "out of the confines of one's home…. Education symbolizes the hope for a better life, a different life, and a way out of this lifestyle…."(Rockhill, 1987, p. 328). Millar (1997) argues another point of view when she talks about adult learners coming up against and dealing with the "Emancipation Myth of Literacy." She found that adult learners in her study accepted their need for literacy so they can participate in the dominant society but they were ambivalent toward formal education.

Even though participants in this study recognized certain vernacular literacies they possess, the notion of being educated (having gone to

school or college) would put them into a different social group. Some said they wanted that, but some were threatened by that kind of change.

What have I learned and what will I do?

The participants talked about specific concepts or skills they had gained since enrolling in the Learning Centre. A lot of these comments had to do with math concepts. My position as the math facilitator may have influenced participants' responses. Or perhaps they talked about math so much because describing learned skills is much easier in math than reading or writing. Some participants talked about other specific skills they had mastered.

> *I learned public speaking.*
> *I learned (to read) the signs outside on the street.*
> *I'm learning how to talk to people and answer the phone and take messages.*
> *I learned how to work at* [an inner
> city church where local people meet for lunch and coffee].
> *The more you read the more you learn.*

Others talked about social skills they had learned or were given an opportunity to practice in a safe environment.

> *Since I came here I learned to slow down. The schools* [public] *had*
> *me convinced I was challenged.*
> *I'm meeting other students from other programs. I would have been*
> *too scared to just walk up to someone and talk to them about their*
> *background…. I've learned the ability to socialize and feel comfortable.*
> *I learned how to deal with my problems with_____. I work at*
> *the* [church] *too, folding chairs and the clothes and put*
> *them away.*

One woman couldn't tell me exactly what she had learned but felt positive about her ability to learn and felt secure in her learning plan.

> *I'm not sure. I'm just getting it. I'm just getting on my feet. I'm moving*
> *in the right direction.*

Below are some examples of what the participants want to be like, or what they see themselves being able to do when they leave the Centre. These statements also relate to the participants' concepts of literacy.

> *I'll give workshops on public speaking.*
> *I want to be able to go out and get a* [volunteer] *job, do something, volunteer or work outside the Centre.*
> *I will understand why, so I understand the world better. I understand what I hear.*
> *If anybody needs help I won't say no. I'll just feel it, I won't make as many mistakes.*
> *I'll be able to go to* [name of a college].
> *I will have more confidence.*

Trying

This category came as a surprise to me. Most participants mentioned "trying" as both a skill they had learned and what they planned to do more of when they leave the Centre. Two women said "trying" was being literate. They said trying is having confidence, and having confidence enables one to try new things. Having confidence and being willing to try something new is being literate. But which one came first? Did the confidence come first, or did the willingness to try something new? These two women said the process was a cycle. One woman even made the circular motion with her arm when she explained how one is a cause and a result of the other.

> *If you get more confidence you get more skills then you try new things and you get more confidence. It is a circle that keeps moving, moving on.* [Makes a circle movement with her arm]
> *Try it and it sort of works and then you try it again. If you try it once, if it works then you try it again. But now if I try and it works a little bit then I'll try it again. So I'm building on it.*
> *Literacy and confidence…I will have more confidence. If I have more confidence. I will learn by myself, try new things.*

The woman who made this comment was talking about how before she came to the Centre things had to work out perfectly, or better than she

expected they would, in order for her to be willing to try them again. Now only an indication she was on the right track was enough to keep her interested and involved.

The trying comments can be divided into two sub-groups. The first is trying as risk taking where there is an element of danger involved.

> *I did it* [applying for a job] *and it worked out so I will try it again. I want to try for my driver's license, but I'll wait to do that.*

Then there is trying as an aspect of fun. Taking a chance can be fun in the sense of trying something new for a change.

> *I sent a letter to my sister, then she wrote back to me. My sister told me about her bird. I'll write to her again.*

The whole notion of strength and determination coming from within is another aspect of trying, taking responsibility and taking control. If it works, the learner now takes the credit for initiating and successfully completing the learning.

> *Something kicks me to go and try it.*
> *You have to give yourself a little push.*
> *If I have more confidence I will learn by myself, try new things.*

Implications for practice

Speaking and Listening

The number of students who wanted to call their new oral language skills literacy makes a good case for literacy programs to "reconceptualize… literacy to place more emphasis on voice, on speech…." (Campbell, 1996, p. 3). Programs and facilitators need to understand shyness or silence on the part of learners as "a socially constructed phenomenon." I agree with Campbell's (1994) assertion that literacy programs should provide a safe "rehearsal ground in which students could learn the dominant language

that often excludes them from participating in public events and the wider community…" (p. 159).

The oral aspect of literacy also included listening. The participants told me they want to learn to listen, to understand what others are saying. Students could be taught to participate in and to lead meetings where behaviour policy, personal relationship issues, or social plans are made. The shyness and silence some students present are self-protective behaviours learned from years of not being heard. Following rules of order would help quieter students speak up and louder students listen to others.

Student membership in program policymaking groups where they have voice and real decision-making power is essential. Opportunities to work in groups of their peers where oral communication is encouraged and the way students do speak is honoured are two other ways programs and facilitators can help students reach their literacy goals.

Facilitators could also model listening skills. The intake interview is an important listening opportunity but so are the many times later when learners feel more comfortable and just wants to talk, to tell part of their story. Facilitators need to listen even though it may take many months for the complete story to be told.

Goal Setting

The participants in this study took great care not to say anything they thought might offend me. Their politeness showed me I have to set up times when participants can talk about their learning without feeling they are upsetting me. That can happen in reflection sessions during or after terms. These reflection sessions could be lead by someone who has no personal relationship with the student. It is difficult, if not impossible, for the personal facilitator to distance her/himself sufficiently to really hear what students are saying about their education plan. However, an outside person does not start from the position of trust that a familiar facilitator my have built with learners. The solution to this might be having the same outside person come to work with learners at the time of the reflection

sessions. That way there is a possibility of having the trust through familiarity, but not the personal attachment to the program content.

Learners may not be coming to the Centre for the reasons they state at the outset. In this study there were many examples where the end learning was not the same as the initial reason for attending. One learner came for math but ended up writing many great stories. Another came for writing and ended up doing public speaking for adult literacy. The stated goal may change over time. Facilitators must be observant and listen when the learner is speaking.

What is literacy?

What do the participants of this study think being literate is? Mostly they said being literate has to do with language. Speaking, reading, listening, writing and understanding language is being literate. The notion of knowing certain things important to an individual and the individual's ability to get along in the world because she/he has this knowledge is also being literate. One man I talked to outside of the participant group said, "Literacy is knowing what you need to know." Knowing what you need to know may include reading, writing and math. It may also include knowing how to cook for your family, knowing where to get good used clothing, knowing how to calculate 15% off, or knowing how to pay the rent and utility bills.

The learners who were part of this study have all been at the Centre for some time and they see they are learning. As a facilitator I need to honour existing skills and help the learners celebrate their personal expertise— their vernacular literacies. Learners can be encouraged to start from a position of knowledge. Program planning should start where the learner is the expert and build from there.

Trying

The implications for practice around the notion of "trying" are profound. I think the discovery of how pervasive the idea of "trying" is as a literacy skill means we must look more closely at what we are doing in adult literacy programs besides teaching reading, writing and math. We are

helping learners see their potential skills and their vernacular skills. Students are learning the joy and challenge of trying new things. They are learning that trying something new and failing is not the end of the world, and that trying something new and achieving it is better. Both of these experiences are part of gaining an education.

The mission statement of the Learning Centre, written with input from learners, staff, volunteers, and the board of directors, includes the notion of trying when it uses the words "further enables them to make positive changes for themselves and their communities." The assumption is that learners are already trying to make positive change and need encouragement to keep on trying.

The Learning Centre engages people in community-based learning and literacy development that further enables them to make positive changes for themselves and their communities.

References

Armstrong, J. L., & Yarbrough, S. L. (1996). Group Learning: The role of environment. *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education*, *71*, 33-39.

Auerbach, E. (1992). *Making meaning. Making change. Particiaptory curriculum development in ESL literacy.* McHenry, IL: Delta Systems.

Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies: Reading and writing in one community.* London: Routledge.

Campbell, P. (1996). Participatory literacy practices: Exploring social identity and relations. *Adult Basic Education*, *6(*3), 127-142.

Campbell, P. (1994). *Participatory literacy practices: Having a voice, having a vote.* Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming a qualitative researcher: An introduction*: White Plains NY: Longman.

Fagan, W. T. (1998). *Literacy for living: A study of literacy and cultural context in rural Canadian communities.* St. John's, NF: ISER.

Hare, J. (1995). *Meanings attached to literacy in a first nation community.* Unpublished masters thesis. University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

McLeod, J. (1999). *Practitioner research in counselling.* London: Sage.

Millar, R. (1998). *Ambivalent learning: Adult learners confronting the emancipation myth of literacy.* Unpublished doctoral thesis. University of St. Thomas, St. Thomas, Minnesota.

Norton, M. (2000). Analysis and interpretation. In *A traveler's guide to literacy research in practice.* Edmonton, AB: The RiPAL Network.

Pheasey, A. (2000). Learning about group process in a participatory action research project on computer training. In M. Norton and G. Malicky (Eds.). *Learning about participatory approaches in adult literacy education. Six research in practice studies* (pp. 45-70). Edmonton, AB: Learning at the Centre Press.

Rockhill, K. (1987). Literacy as threat/desire: Longing to be SOME BODY. In J. Gaskell and A. T. McLaren (Eds.). *Women and education. A Canadian prespective* (pp. 315-331). Calgary, AB: Detselig.

Teeling, K. (1990). *Women's experiences as learners. A story of struggle.* Unpublished masters thesis. University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Statistics Canada. (1991). *Survey of litreacy skills used in daily activities.* Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.

Statistics Canada. (1995). *International adult literacy survey.* Ottawa, ON: Statisitics Canada.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate.