

"Thinking in a Research Way"

A Rationale for Research-in-Practice Initiatives in Ontario

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A number of different terms have been used over the past decade to describe and promote research as a way to foster a more vibrant two-way exchange between literacy policy and the everyday reality of practitioners: practitioner research, practitioner inquiry, program-base research, field research, action research are the most common (see Horsman and Norton 1999, Quigley and Norton 2002). This proliferation of terminology reflects the growing international recognition of the importance of strengthening this link, and also the considerable challenges in finding a successful model of doing so. Though barriers are real, the continuing motivation to overcome them is great because the benefits to be gained are quite mutual. For policy makers, access to high quality research grounded in the actual conditions and complexities of practice will allow policy discussions to be well informed and creative. For practitioners, engaging with research will foster a more reflective and inquiring stance in their work, an openness to "trying out" new ideas in practice, a greater familiarity with existing research-based knowledge, a desire to improve their own skills in generating new knowledge. All of this has been succinctly described by Harold Alden as "thinking in a research way" and is a vital part of creating a dynamic and effective environment of policy and practice in Ontario as elsewhere.

At OISE/UT we have taken a number of concrete steps in this direction, guided by the framework established in "*Setting the Agenda: The Ontario literacy research strategy*" (MTCU 2000) and the field consultation report "*Building Adult Literacy Research Capacity in Ontario: A University/Community Approach* (OISE/UT 2001). Several research-in-practice initiatives are already underway, with funding support from MTCU/NLS, and are beginning to show results including several new proposals for continuing work. These are described in the attached memo "Making Progress through Research in Progress."

In the remainder of this memo, we restrict our focus to the aims and principles of research-in-practice initiatives, with a particular focus on the mechanism of "circles."

Why Research Circles?

Research circles have been used in various forms in various parts of the world for over a century (see Schugurensky, 2000; Quigley and Norton (2002; Harnsten, 1994). In our estimation, this idea has a very high potential to make a significant contribution to ongoing development of the field of adult literacy in Ontario as well. Here we will try to outline that potential and the benefits (short, medium, long term) to be anticipated, as well as some of the conditions necessary for success, as we see them.

Research circles usually begin in the classic manner of community development projects. That is, somebody calls a meeting with a simple agenda: for a handful of people to share

a cup of tea in a non-threatening environment and talk about their shared experiences, their triumphs, their frustrations, and their intuitions about how to improve their circumstances. Amongst committed literacy workers, such conversations are frequent, and most often gravitate toward (variations on) a few universal concerns, such as “what helps our learners succeed” and “how to improve our practice as teachers” or “how to avoid burnout.” Also like other community development projects, this experience, energy, and striving for answers needs to be harnessed, focused, and facilitated in order for the group to persist and any effective action to result from such casual supportive talk.

This is where a role for OISE/UT comes into the picture. OISE/UT, particularly the Adult Education and Community Development Program, has the expertise and the interest to play this much-needed facilitation role. It also has the knowledge base to channel such professional curiosity and motivation toward the production of high quality contributions to knowledge. OISE/UT can assist field-based practitioners to use their energies and idealism in ways that will not only help to ward off professional burnout, but also work toward bridging the perennial gaps among theory, policy and practice and the development of a culture of research and innovation in the Ontario adult literacy community.

Of course, such a culture will not be built overnight, and it cannot be built only through grass roots practitioner inquiry. But it can be built only in increments, by fanning such small embers of curiosity wherever they smoulder, throughout the institutional labyrinth that is the literacy field. This means not only in community-based delivery agencies, but also in school boards, colleges, and other related professional associations. Thinking about how to foster a ‘research culture’ across all these institutional sectors is certainly on our agenda at OISE/UT, but beyond the scope of this memo. Here we have tried to focus our attention on the community sector and the gains to be anticipated through developing practitioner-researchers through the mechanism of research circles or other research-in-practice initiatives.

Reflective Practice

Amongst practitioners, the scenario we are working with is a classic one of reflective practice leading to professional development, leading to more and better dialogue amongst players, and to gradual enrichment of theory and policy in the field of adult literacy. There are many potential benefits, both direct and indirect, to be anticipated from this process if it is sustained over time and allowed to bear fruit.

One immediate, direct, and practical benefit would be the use of such new research-based knowledge in the tutoring and teaching work of the local agencies where it is produced, and in the surrounding region or network. This requires of course that some mechanisms for sharing/dissemination of small project is also supported and facilitated.

A second direct use would be to share such new practitioner-generated knowledge in the professional development of staff, tutors and classroom teachers in the agency or region, thus hopefully stimulating additional awareness, legitimacy and enthusiasm for local inquiry.

Another, still broader benefit would result from sharing this knowledge with a broader circle of practitioners in the literacy field in Ontario and beyond. This might take place in workshops at provincial or national conferences. This year there is a third annual pan-Canadian conference on research-in-practice taking place in Newfoundland, and OISE/UT is proposing such a conference for Ontario in June 2003. It might also occur through publishing in newsletters or journals read by other practitioners, including the new national literacy journal being launched in Spring 2003 by the Movement for Canadian Literacy with support from the NLS. By speaking and writing about their findings, these reflective practitioner-inquirers will incrementally enrich ongoing discussions about many areas of policy, including curriculum, assessment, reporting, professional development, etc..

Indirect benefits of all these activities would accrue like ripples¹ outward from the centre, though they are easy to miss if we are not paying attention. First, the individual practitioners involved in this process would benefit greatly from a sense of accomplishment, validation of their knowledge, and recognition of their contribution, not only to learner success, but also to knowledge in their field. By successfully planning and executing a small scale, manageable research project, the sense of efficacy and accomplishment of these individual practitioners will be enhanced, likely leading to a greater satisfaction, motivation and commitment to their work. By presenting their experience and their findings at professional gatherings, their individual and collective capacities as leaders in their field will be advanced. By getting involved with a university in the conduct of their research, they will be exposed to a larger range of theoretical and policy-related research relevant to their topic, and their interest in further professional development may be stimulated. An expanded awareness of theory and research in the field, will enhance their capacity, as individuals and as agencies, to contribute knowledgeably to policy discussions in the literacy field in Ontario. As Allan Quigley and Mary Norton argue in their recent publication (2002) this cycle of activity starting with research-in-practice "... simply makes us better."

Of course, the success of this entire sequence of events, from the launching of a few research circles to a dynamic culture of research, cannot be taken for granted. There are many pitfalls along the road from conception to execution, even for a single research circle, and discouragement can easily set in. One common pitfall for such groups is to founder in the early stages of design or execution of their research. This can occur for many reasons: lack of common understanding within the group about research principles appropriate to the objectives of a group; tensions related to internal group leadership; inexperience with common hurdles in research data collection and analysis; lack of experience/confidence in writing up research findings for distribution ... to name just a few. While the provision of support from university-based researchers is no guarantee or panacea for these troubles, it can provide critical support and encouragement, research advice and problem solving as hurdles are encountered, explicit training in suitable research techniques, an external point of view when tensions arise, and practical

¹ The newly forming Research-in-Practice Network currently forming in British Columbia with support from the B.C. government has chosen this metaphor for their name.

assistance in pulling things together to achieve a product. There is often a crisis/turning point in the life of such groups, when they persist despite their doubts and differences, begin to see their achievements take shape, and regain confidence in their own ability to achieve their goals. A skilled research facilitator is the single biggest asset such a group can have in making it through this obstacle course.

There are also important benefits to be gained by organising such activities as ‘research-circles’ or research-in-practice projects, rather than a conventional, one-off research contracts. The reasons are many. In a conventional research contract, there is a different fundamental logic at work. There are usually only one, possibly two researchers, often external consultants with specialised expertise. This reduces the involvement of local practitioners to the status of ‘research subjects,’ possibly being interviewed or observed as they work. This relegates them to a passive role in both the process and the product of the research. The research may be able to proceed more efficiently, and with a short time from start to finish. The finished product may be a bit more glossy. But the learning, skill development, professional enrichment, stimulation, and morale building ... and important capacity building ... for practitioners as a group is virtually eliminated. Practitioners with a passive involvement in such a research process are unlikely to feel validated to speak with authority about this new knowledge in conferences or discussions of policy development in the field. The research report is much more likely to remain unused and un-championed on the shelf in both the agency and the ministry. Individual practitioners are less likely to feel stimulated to seek further education or professional development. In other words, in the medium to long term, the funder gets a lot less return on investment by relying on researchers who are not also literacy workers.

By contrast, if the research process is designed, conducted and concluded by the practitioner-researchers themselves, the outcomes go well beyond the particular ‘findings’ of a project. Over time, a significantly different professional climate is likely to be incubated as well. If the first research circle is successful in generating a spirit of validation for practitioners as the authors of knowledge, the idea of a circle has potential to become part of the life of the agency or network. This may lead to the development of further small-scale research initiatives in future, and some spill over into increased capacity to handle other kinds of problem solving in the agencies involved. If such a culture of inquiry can be stimulated in even a small portion of literacy networks in Ontario, a significant impact on the culture of the field is possible. The ripple effect continues.

A number of factors would need to be in place to support the success of this scenario. (see Horsman and Norton, 1999). Adequate funding to cover the time and expenses of practitioner-researchers is an absolute necessity. Release time for practitioners is less costly on a daily basis than the time of professional consultants, but will require the involvement of several local practitioners in order for the alchemy of dialogue and support to unfold. Practitioner researchers will also take a longer time from start to finish, but this investment can be expected to result in multiple benefits to individuals, agencies and the vitality of the field as outlined above in the medium and long term. Ongoing availability of university-based research facilitation is likely to be an important

part of the recipe for success, for the reasons outlined. The expansion of university-sponsored conferences and courses exploring the links between research, theory, policy and practice will also contribute greatly to the development of such a culture of inquiry in the field.

All of the above places the current investment in a small number of research circles supported by OISE/UT within the context of a more comprehensive overall strategy for research capacity building in Ontario. OISE/UT is prepared and is well positioned to make a contribution to this strategy in the short, medium and long term and has indeed begun to do so over the past 18 months with support from MTCU.

References

Horsman, J. and M. Norton (1999) *A Framework to Encourage and Support Practitioner Involvement in Adult Literacy Research in Practice in Canada*. A Working Paper prepared for the National Literacy Secretariat, Ottawa.

Quigley B.A. and M. Norton (2002) *"It simply makes us better:" Learning from Literacy Research in Practice Networks*. Edmonton: The Learning Centre.