

Listening Across Difference: The Uses of Narrative in Adult Literacy Teaching and Learning

Sheila Stewart

Festival of Literacies, OISE/UT

Abstract: This collaborative, community-based research explores the role of narrative in adult literacy practice, considering the context of students and facilitators listening to each other across multiple social differences, such as race, class and educational level. Self-reflection by practitioner-researchers highlights how practitioners' stories shape their practice. Using journaling and simple arts-based methods to prompt reflexivity and story-telling, practitioner-researchers examine moments of discomfort and complexity which arise in their teaching, uncovering potential and challenge at the intersection of narrative practises and how we listen and learn across difference. This research identifies a process which makes honest self-reflection and more inclusive ways of working possible.

Oral and written communication, often in story form, are at the heart of community-based literacy practice. Yet, within this tradition of literacy work is a conundrum: not all stories are heard the same way. Between the telling of literacy stories and the hearing of these stories there is the possibility for learning, but also the possibility of silence and shame.

How educators and learners hear and take up each other's stories depends on our understanding of the role of story and of the shifting, complex terrain of the differences between us. In the literacy field, practitioners and learners work together across huge social differences, particularly of educational level and class, and very frequently of race. When literacy practitioners begin to focus on issues of diversity we discover that using stories is not so simple or necessarily safe for all learners.

There is a dearth of anti-racist, equity-based research about adult literacy, particularly in Canada. Moriarty (2007), in "Reflections on Becoming White, or Avoiding the Button Factory" begins to explore the Canadian literacy context. She describes her working-class roots in Ireland, looks at the conceptions of skill, training, and work which shape the literacy field, and points out how rarely these concepts are examined in terms of race, class, and gender. Issues of equity and social difference need to be at the centre of literacy research.

Over the past year, a community-based research project has been investigating how adult literacy practitioners understand and use narrative, implicitly and explicitly, in their work with adult learners. To understand more about the complexities and possibilities of using narrative when working across multiple differences we have explored the ways that our own stories shape our practice.

Our team of nine has extensive experience in adult literacy practice and research. Five practitioner-researchers work at two community-based adult literacy programs in Toronto: Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood Centre and Parkdale Project Read. The team also includes an adult literacy librarian from AlphaPlus Resource Centre and three researchers now affiliated with OISE/UofT who have many years of frontline experience. While some researchers have been co-workers since the 1980s, others have met more recently. The long connections as practitioner and research colleagues has made the honest sharing and trust possible.

What we did

The research team used a recurrent focus group process and simple arts-based activities to facilitate our inquiry over several months. Our initial research questions were:

- How are personal narratives used, formally and informally, in literacy programs? How do practitioners experience and/or understand these situations?
- How do practitioners hear and understand learners and each other across multiple social differences? How do these dynamics either support or stifle literacy learning?
- How can literacy practitioners learn to work with story to foster more possibilities for learning?

To create trust, safety and a space for openness, the facilitators used ritual, including formal openings and closings. Allowing time to think and draw before speaking also helped participants be more reflective. The group used active listening which made it possible for people to speak and believe that what they say will make sense, even when ideas feel half-formed.

What we are learning

Our research focused on practitioners' moments of discomfort working with learners where we were not sure what to do or were struck with the differences between us. Such moments often do not get explored in our daily work lives, but the complexity of these moments of tension has much to teach us. While we expected to explore how teaching methods using story telling do, and do not, produce silence and shame, we have begun by examining moments of our own silence and shame as practitioners.

Thus far we have learned about the value of working with practitioners' awareness of themselves, the complexity of their identities as teacher-facilitators, program coordinators and administrators, and as people who are able to share some of their identity with learners and keep other parts hidden. We have explored our individual educational histories, and become more aware of how they are entwined with our family and cultural history.

Literacy facilitators need open reflective time to exploring who we are as practitioners and how our own social locations and histories are entwined with how we do literacy

work. This research has given us opportunities to ask who are we and what are we doing. In this kind of reflection we learn from the challenges, probe what happens in practice, and get clearer about what is happening to ourselves, thereby making space to be more reflective about what we are hearing and seeing in our interactions with learners. When we attend to these sites of complexity, neither ignoring them or becoming paralyzed by them, we create the potential to use narrative as a source of energy and growth.

Our reflections are leading to an understanding of what time, resources and teaching strategies practitioners need to be able to use stories appropriately in cross-cultural situations. We begin to discover strategies and conditions which will help practitioners and learners better hear each other across such differences as race, class, and educational level. Finally, the research has identified a process that allows practitioners to truly do the work of honest self-reflection that allows them to work in different, more inclusive, ways.

References

Moriarty, M. (2007). "Reflections on Becoming White, or Avoiding the Button Factory"
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Members of Research Team

Tannis Atkinson – *Literacies*

Mary Brehaut, Andy Noel, Nadine Sookermany – Parkdale Project Read

Guy Ewing, Sheila Stewart – Festival of Literacies, OISE/UT

Sally Gaikezhonyongai, Michele Kuhlmann – Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre

Maria Moriarty – AlphaPlus Resource Centre