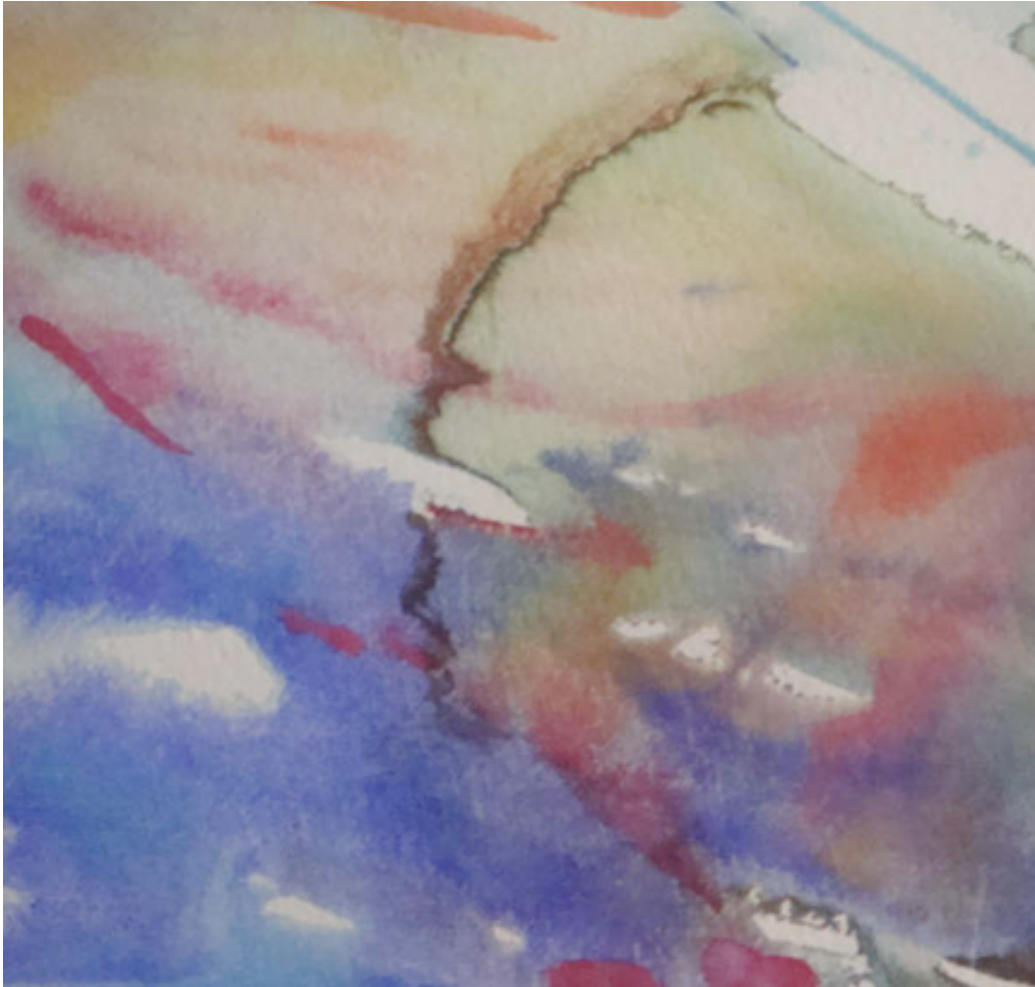


# POWERFUL LISTENING

## A Practitioner Research Project on Story and Difference in Adult Literacy



*Michele Kuhlmann*

by Sheila Stewart

with Tannis Atkinson, Mary Brehaut, Guy Ewing,  
Sally Gaikhezheyongai, Michele Kuhlmann, Maria Moriarty,  
Andy Noel, and Nadine Sookermany



Festival of Literacies  
Festival de l'Alpha

**April 2009**

**Project Partners**

Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre Literacy (DPNC)

Parkdale Project Read (PPR)

Festival of Literacies

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

**Co-facilitators**

Tannis Atkinson and Sheila Stewart

**Research Mentors**

Guy Ewing and Nancy Jackson

**Advisory Committee**

Janice Brant and Mary Norton

**Transcription**

Noreen Shanahan

**Front and Back Cover Art**

front cover: Chögyam Passing, watercolour, original piece is 30 inches by 23 inches, this detail is 10 inches by 10 inches, by Michele Kuhlmann

back cover: Untitled, watercolour, 16 inches by 17 inches, by Michele Kuhlmann

This report is available at [www.literaciesoise.ca/story.htm](http://www.literaciesoise.ca/story.htm)

For further information, contact Sheila Stewart  
[sstewart@oise.utoronto.ca](mailto:sstewart@oise.utoronto.ca) or 416-978-0786.

Festival of Literacies Office  
Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology  
Room 7-184  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto  
252 Bloor Street West  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
M5S 1V6

The trick is to create a bridge between my world and the learner's world, a safe meeting place out there in the open middle of the bridge, with neither of us completely transparent about our learning needs and goals. Both of us, in that moment and however many other moments and meetings we have, come with learning needs and goals . . . my heart is open in a detached sort of way in order to maintain some distance between us in our roles as worker and learner, to things like the similarities and differences between our personal experiences and discerning if and how that is/can be relevant in the "here and now" of the space we're standing in – out there in the middle of the bridge.

*Sally Gaikezheyongai*

Are programs safe for queer learners?

*Tannis Atkinson*

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Research and Knowledge Mobilization Office of the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) for funding this project.

Thank to researchers Tannis Atkinson, Mary Brehaut, Guy Ewing, Sally Gaikzheyongai, Michele Kuhlmann, Maria Moriarty, Andy Noel, and Nadine Sookermany for such open sharing, careful thinking and questioning, and good humour.

Thank you to Tannis Atkinson, Guy Ewing, and Nancy Jackson for making this project possible by encouragement and discussion of early ideas and questions, help in conceptualizing and writing the funding proposal, and for working on and supporting this project with much wisdom and guidance.

Thank you to Tracey Mollins for the creation of the story and diversity webpages, which can be seen at [www.literaciesoise.ca/story.htm](http://www.literaciesoise.ca/story.htm) and for supporting this project from the beginning.

Thank you to Janice Brant, Mary Norton, and Evelyn Battell for your helpful comments on drafts of the report. Thank you to Aaneke van Enk and Jean Connon-Unda for early discussions about narrative and literacy.



*The Project Team. Seated, left to right: Maria Moriarty, Nadine Sookermany, Mary Brehaut, Michele Kuhlmann. Standing, left to right: Guy Ewing, Sally Gaikzheyongai, Sheila Stewart, Tannis Atkinson, Andy Noel.*



## **In This Report**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
Guiding Research Questions	11
<b>Background to the Project</b>	<b>13</b>
Locating Myself	15
Origins of the Project	16
<b>Adult Literacy Context</b>	<b>16</b>
Why Story?	16
Why Difference and Diversity?	16
<b>Research Context</b>	<b>18</b>
Research on Narrative	19
Within the Context of Literacy Research	20
<b>What We Did</b>	<b>22</b>
Programs and Researchers	22
Collaborative Research	24
Holistic Approaches to Space and Time	25
Meetings	26
An Intuitive Flexible Approach	29
<b>Arts-based Activities</b>	<b>30</b>
Story Bundle Activity	30
Accordion Books	33
Sharing Our Research with Others	35
<b>What We Learned</b>	<b>37</b>
About Story	37
Exploring Difference Through Discomfort	37
Space and Time as Learning Resources	40
The Use of Metaphor	41
We Learned Through Careful Telling and Listening	42
Examining “We” and “I” Helps Us Learn About Diversity	44
Complexity and Importance of Naming Difference	44
What We Learned About Power	46
Identifying What Limits Our Ability to Learn about Difference	47

<b>Conclusions and Reflections</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Researchers Reflections</b>	<b>52</b>
Notes from a Journal by Tannis Atkinson	52
Story Webs by Mary Brehaut	56
The Problem of Distance by Guy Ewing	59
Middle of the Bridge by Sally Gaikezheyongai	61
Listening to Our Stories by Michele Kuhlmann	62
All Our Stories Coming Together... by Maria Moriarty	64
the commodification of stories... by Nadine Sookermany	66
<b>Notes</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>74</b>
Workshop Plans	74
Story Circle Prompt Questions	79
Songs	80
Annotated Bibliography by Guy Ewing and Maria Moriarty	82

## **Executive Summary**

This report tells the story of a collaborative research project entitled, “The Uses of Narrative in Adult Literacy Teaching and Learning.” A team of nine community-based practitioner-researchers in Toronto met monthly from September 2007 until July 2008 to reflect on our practice and ourselves as practitioners through the lens of story and diversity.

The three research partners were the following:

- Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre Literacy (DPNC)
- Parkdale Project Read (PPR)
- Festival of Literacies, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT)

Our focus was on story because stories are at the heart of literacy work and learning is about creating possibility in the stories we tell about ourselves. This project focused for a change on practitioner stories, in the belief that as we become more aware of what is happening in our teaching, learners learn more. Our research method also involved story: we told stories of why we do literacy work and of the challenges we face, particularly in understanding how issues of social difference affect practice.

Differences, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, ethnicity, and ability, shape how people listen and hear each other and the ways they feel or do not feel comfortable or safe in a group. By focusing on practitioners’ moments of discomfort where social differences are at play, we learned about the ways practice is shaped by the complex dynamics in literacy learning groups and one-to-one pairs. We learned that if we take the time to tell our stories and return to them to uncover further layers of experience and meaning, we gain valuable insight into literacy practice. We found that listening in a non-judgmental way allowed us to learn from moments of discomfort that in some cases had happened many years ago.

In literacy work we are aware of the differences between those of us who are well fed, well housed, educated, and employed and those for whom there is not always enough money for food and shelter, and for whom education and employment are a huge struggle. During the time many

of us have worked in literacy, the gap between those with money and those without has grown.<sup>1</sup> As literacy workers we are often marginally employed ourselves, but most of us are middle-class, either from a middle-class background or having entered the middle-class. How do the differences between learners and ourselves affect how we listen to them? How do social differences affect how we listen to our fellow literacy practitioners? What time and space do we give to listen to each other? What happens with our own stories and experiences as we listen to learners' stories?

This research begins to uncover tensions between differences and power as they thread through adult literacy teaching and learning. Teachers are in a position of power and authority even when we try to share power with learners and follow learner-centred approaches to learning. We gained insights into our frequently uneasy relationship with power.

Our work builds on the traditions of research in practice, practitioner research, and teacher reflective research.<sup>2</sup> Practitioners learn how to be better at their work by examining and discussing their practice, and projects such as this one provided much needed reflective time and space.

Differences are not a “problem” to be “managed” or “solved;” rather we seek to learn more about how the ways we view our differences and experience, affect literacy teaching and learning. This project is part of an ongoing conversation in the literacy field about how we listen and learn across social differences. We hope this work contributes to a deeper understanding of ourselves as practitioners and which, in turn, helps us develop practices that more fully embody respect.

## Introduction

Sometimes we have difficult moments in our work as literacy practitioners; but do we get time to reflect and learn from them? What about days when we feel vaguely uneasy or downright badly about how a class or meeting with a student went? Or times when we are surprised by students' reactions to our efforts? Or doing intake with a learner or observing a tutor-learner pair when we want to say something else, but can't find the words? How often do we sweep some of these moments of discomfort under the rug as we move on to all the tasks of a busy literacy worker?

So much is happening at once in a literacy program, including the many dynamics between students, tutors, ourselves, and colleagues. We work in a context of multiple social differences, including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, educational level, ability, and culture. Some of the difficult moments occur in the context of these differences; yet our discomfort with thinking or talking about these differences can limit the possibilities of learning from what is taking place.

This report shares some stories from a research project in which a group of mostly community-based practitioner-researchers in Toronto explored such difficult moments in our own practice. From September 2007 to July 2008, researchers from Parkdale Project Read (PPR), Mary Brehaut, Andy Noel, Nadine Sookermany, and from Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre (DPNC), Sally Gaikhezheyongai, Michele Kuhlmann, along with Tannis Atkinson (*Literacies*), Guy Ewing (Festival of Literacies/OISE/UT), Maria Moriarty (AlphaPlus Resource Centre) and myself met monthly to reflect on our practice and ourselves as practitioners through the lens of story and diversity. We range in age from late thirties to early sixties. Our time in literacy work varies from four years to over twenty-five. One researcher is Anishawbe, two are of Caribbean background, and six are white. We come from different socio-economic backgrounds and have various sexual orientations. All of us have English as our first language.

Michele reflected on the complex dynamics of working with a particular learner. Here is what she said transcribed from one of our research meetings.

I've been tutoring one-to-one a lot more. And there is this one learner, I've known her for a long time, and we're comfortable with each other. She comes from another part of the

world. Very different. I find it very interesting when she talks about her experience, because sometimes it's very surprising to me. And I don't know how it happened, but we started talking about families and divorce. Well I'm divorced. And I'm completely settled about it. And I know her long enough that I know that she has strong opinions about family and parenting and very, very strong feelings, right? So I was actually sharing with her some of the things that I felt were very positive about my life, because of my situation, like how I handled it. I would normally not get into a conversation like that, I think, it was just because we were just alone here, right? And it was okay up to a certain point. But then that part of her that I was familiar with, the part that's very certain, like "this is how it should be," sort of came at me. It's partly religious and it's also partly cultural. And I thought, oh boy, here it comes. And I thought, what can I do? Because from her background she's telling me things that I don't know, that are very good for me, like how other people approach life, you know? So I thought, what can I do? Because I feel like I'm gonna be wounded here in a minute, and I see it coming. So the only thing I could think of to do was to ask her – sort of just to tell me what the view of divorce was. Was it ever allowed in her culture? And what was the view of it? And it was also, again, something different that I had never expected. So it was a really funny thing because I could have just, you know there's this thing of turning off and turning on and I had turned on too much probably, in that situation. I mean she's not my personal friend. And yet we get along really well with each other, and that's what opened this thing up. But, you know, like you talk about people having opinions, you don't know where those opinions are coming from and where did they get them, right? So I thought well the best thing I could think of doing was to ask her to tell me really where it was coming from. But, boy, that was tough, it was very strange and it was very hard.

And it wasn't even that I had any doubts about where I was or where I had been or decisions I had made or anything like that, that was really solid. It was just that I knew I was going into territory that was becoming very much a lecture. But what I found interesting about even having this conversation to begin with, is because she is really clearing up some misconceptions that I have about women's place in Africa, in the country that she comes from. And so some things are very surprising and very interesting to me, so actually I feel like I'm getting something back from it. But somehow I just – it is really funny – you can find yourself hearing things and not getting that involved and letting the person – just hearing the things that they're gonna say, and letting it happen. But every once in a while something just gets very personal.

In our research group, we found this story to be a kind of a-ha moment where we gained an inside look at how an experienced practitioner can respond skillfully in a delicate situation. Other stories we shared brought different kinds of learning for the teller and the listeners. By making moments of discomfort the focus of research, approaching them with care and a non-judgmental attitude, we found them to be sites of rich learning. We learned about ourselves, the ways we work with students and the nature of literacy work by taking the time to do this reflection. We examined the role of story in adult literacy practice, focusing for a change not on learners but on



practitioners' stories and the complex paths that have brought us to this work and the myriad of reasons we continue to do it. Examining our own stories helps us to learn more about how we listen to students and to ourselves in difficult moments of practice.

Reflecting in the context of this group of practitioner-researchers has allowed us to unpack some of the tensions in our practice. How do the differences between students and ourselves shape the teaching and learning that takes place? For example, how can I listen and learn more fully given my social position as a well-educated, white, middle-class, and able-bodied woman? Meanwhile, the students are often of various cultural backgrounds, usually living in poverty, sometimes with a disability, often having chronic health problems and other problems resulting from poverty. While we try to respect and help everyone in the literacy program, what old stories, stereotypes, and aspects of our backgrounds play in our heads? Such shared reflections help us to open the space to improve practice.

This report is called *Powerful Listening* because of the power we found in literacy practitioners listening to each other's stories of frontline challenges. The report describes a process we found to support deeply engaged listening and learning. Listening to each other as practitioners helps us become better at what we do. We began to learn to listen also *for* power, for the ways the social differences between ourselves and learners are entwined in power differences and dynamics. By beginning to understand how these differences affect each of us as practitioners, we create space to improve our literacy practice.

## **Guiding research questions**

The guiding questions of this research were the following:

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

Throughout our project we used the word story, rather than the more academic term narrative. Our guiding questions were written while we developed the funding proposal, through a process of reflecting on practice and reading some of the literature on narrative. In research, definitions of terms are helpful; in the literacy field, people vary in their interest and tolerance for discussions of definitions. By telling a story we meant, first of all, telling a story in the everyday sense of relaying a sequence of events to another person. In literacy work, the telling of stories about important life events is fairly common; as part of this practice there is an assumption that the telling, reading and writing of stories impacts our lived experience in positive ways. The questions we asked about story throughout our research process allow a more complex understanding to emerge.

Our research began with a desire to examine how adult literacy practitioners understand and use ideas and practices around stories, implicitly and explicitly, in their literacy practices with adult learners. We explored some of the complexities and possibilities of using stories when working across multiple social differences, by gathering wisdom on these issues from a highly experienced group of practitioners. We worked in the traditions of reflective practice, practitioner research and research-in-practice using simple arts-based activities to deepen our examination of practice.

## **Background to the Project**

### **Locating Myself**

Given that this project rests on a belief that who we are affects our practice and research, I begin by sharing aspects of myself which shape who I am as a long-term practitioner and new researcher. Like most literacy workers, I didn't grow up knowing I wanted to be one. In the early 1980s in Kingston I saw an ad for tutors. I did my tutor training and worked one summer with Kingston Literacy. I immediately liked the non-formal learning setting and getting to know the students. I supported students with their writing and worked on a student-written collection of writing. After working as a teacher's aide with adults who attended a sheltered workshop, I did my B.Ed. I taught high school in Libya and ESL to Mozambican and South African adults at a refugee camp in Swaziland, still uncertain of my direction. I knew I didn't want to do development work and would prefer not to teach in the Canadian school system.

My social location is similar to that of many literacy workers; I am a white, middle-class, able-bodied woman, with a male partner and children. My father's work as a United Church minister and his interest in social justice influenced me to want to work with "the poor." I was drawn to literacy partly because I wanted to learn about poverty. My concern about discrimination and racism grew from my parents' immigration from Northern Ireland and my childhood visits to Ireland during the Troubles. I feel fortunate to have been able to continue doing literacy work, often thinking that I would have to leave it for better-paid work. The longer I stay with it, the more I understand why I am drawn to it.

I began working at PPR in 1989. My interest in story and writing found expression through working with students on publishing their writing. There is a contrast between my mostly white, middle-class north Parkdale neighbourhood where many people own their homes and the predominately rental neighbourhood of mainly people of colour in south Parkdale where PPR is located. In the mid-90s I did a Masters of Education at the OISE/UT examining race, class, and gender in relation to parents' involvement in the school system, prompted by thinking about how different my experience as a parent was from most of my students. I began writing poetry in the

early 90s and my first book, about my mother and my relationship with her, was published in 2003.

Eager to learn about research and needing a change from front-line literacy work, I began working at OISE/UT in 2001, on a project related to labour educators, and shortly thereafter started to work with Nancy Jackson in Adult Education and Community Development to create the Festival of Literacies. The Festival has provided professional development opportunities for practitioners through a speakers series, courses and workshops which help build bridges between practice, research, theory, and policy. It has given me the opportunity to work with the Aboriginal literacy community and attempt to build bridges with the Deaf community.

From 2006 to 2008, I was involved in a research project about the effects of violence on learning. (Battel et al, 2008) My research focused on practitioners' stories following the hunch that we need to examine our own stories and our relationship with violence if we are going to be open to the programming needed for students who have experienced trauma. I want to move beyond an "us-them" way of thinking about students' lives as often traumatized and ours as not. My research builds on Jenny Horsman's description of vicarious trauma and the need for self-care in "Examining the Costs of Bearing Witness," a chapter in *Too Scared to Learn*. I talk about students' and practitioners' stories needing to be "breathe," to be approached with openness and care, as something dynamic, rather than fixed. There is so much complexity in why a particular story is told where and when, so much potential power in the telling and listening. It is helpful to think of stories as porous, rather than fixed or stuck. (Stewart, 2008b)

I came to this research project as a white woman wanting to examine power issues in literacy work, with some awareness of how my positionality affects how I perceive others and experience literacy work. My challenges at OISE/UT to feel my own power as a "senior research officer" and my wariness of research are also part of what I have brought to this project. The Festival has provided opportunities to support practitioners to reflect, speak about literacy and begin to do research in practice.

Writing poetry I began to find a “voice,” but as literacy practitioners we don’t have enough time to talk or write about our work; there are few opportunities to give voice to what we really care about in our practice. Literacy practitioners work with students on their oral and written voices and I wonder in what way “voice” is also an issue for some literacy workers, as it is for me. The youngest child and only daughter, I was raised to be a quiet, “good girl.” My mother’s delicate health and other family tensions contributed to an identity based on helping others. This project gave a group of experienced literacy practitioners some time to reflect on aspects of their identities, and find new ways to speak and write about their work.

In writing this report I wrestle with the “we” of our research group, the “we” of the community of literacy practitioners I know, the “we” of the literacy field, and the “I” as the principal researcher, the primary author of this report, practitioner, and researcher. I am grateful for the Researchers’ Reflections, beginning on page 51, which give a sense of the depth of insight of the researchers involved in this project. In literacy work, as well, we juggle the “we” and “I,” including multiple roles of teacher, program coordinator, administrator, intake worker, and whether we like it or not, counselor and gate-keeper. We work to balance the many parts of our lives, to work with literacy colleagues, to speak on behalf of our programs, to hear the voices of our students, and to hear our own voices.

### **Origins of the Project**

This project grew out of the Festival of Literacies’ desire to support research in practice and work on diversity and concerns I had about our use of story in practice. I shared my early questions about story with Guy Ewing, Tannis Atkinson, Tracey Mollins, and Nancy Jackson. In November 2005, Tannis and I facilitated an event for the Toronto literacy community as part of the Festival of Literacies called “What’s story got to do with it?” This event examined different kinds of literacy stories: official stories, learner stories, practitioner stories, funder stories, media stories. What emerged were less-told stories of why we do literacy work, the tensions and joys inherent in it, what it means to us, and social pressures on the work. A small group called the Story Inquiry Group was formed with interested people who attended that session. We met over a period of fifteen months exploring story and literacy in greater depth. In the spring of 2007, a series of workshops on diversity and anti-racism in adult literacy facilitated by Jay Pitter were

held as part of the Festival of Literacies. These two initiatives fed into applying to do this research on story and diversity. Nancy, Tannis, Guy and I played key roles in writing the funding proposal in consultation with the researchers from DPNC and PPR.

## **Adult Literacy Context**

### **Why Story?**

Storytelling is a long-used method in literacy programs, as in many educational settings. Groups of learners and practitioners aim to build learning communities and camaraderie by sharing stories. The “Language Experience Approach” is a frequently used method to help learners’ spoken stories become the texts they read: learners tell and learn to write their stories based on their own language. At many programs, they go on to read their stories at literacy events. Literacy programs and other literacy organizations publish learner written books. Oral and written communication, often in story form, is at the heart of literacy practice. Stories are used in intake interviews, in developing teaching materials and in assessment practices. In many programs stories are used for public awareness, and for program evaluation, assessment and strategic planning.

My initial concern was about students’ stories being “stuck.” The act of writing down a student’s story may give it a fixed quality which is at odds with the transformation we often hope for in education. Increasingly, I became interested in practitioners’ stories and concerned that our stories likewise can be stuck; I felt that beginning with our own stories was important for us to see how they shape the work we do. I want to understand more about what is at play as we listen, interact with students, support learning and make sense of our work.

### **Why Difference and Diversity?**

Education is entwined with issues of power. Some of us have greater access to schooling and our experiences in the school system are greatly affected by expectations we have for ourselves and others have for us. When I began working at PPR, it was an all-white staff collective and close to half the students were people of colour. We began to try to recruit volunteer tutors of colour, aware that there are many reasons there are less volunteers of colour, including, lower wages which make additional unpaid work more difficult. Since being a tutor is a traditional path to



employment in literacy, the near absence of tutors of colour is a barrier to increasing the numbers of people of colour doing paid literacy work. Changing the face of who volunteers and works in literacy is a slow process and has limited impetus in the literacy field. It is made further complex by students, both white and of colour, sometimes saying that they want a “Canadian” tutor, or a white tutor. Students might say, “I want a tutor like you” which can mean they want a white female tutor. At the same time, students benefit enormously from having teachers and tutors who come from a similar cultural or racial background to themselves.

There is a near absence of anti-discrimination work in the literacy field. In the early 1990s there were workshops in Toronto on anti-racism in literacy work and the provincial department responsible for literacy included a staff person who talked to literacy staff about disability and literacy. Later that decade, as program reform impacted on the field, increased accountability measures meant practitioners spent more and more time keeping statistics. With these changes, discussion of differences and discrimination – and how to understand these issues in literacy work – found very few avenues of exploration. This research project aims to bring this enquiry to the fore and shed some light on the complex intersection of diversity issues, story and listening.

In writing this report for a national audience, I am aware of how issues of race can be viewed as pertinent to Toronto, but not to other parts of the province or country. But I think this belief illustrates how the problem can be invisible to us as a field. Each locale has its demographics, but if we know how to notice, we will find issues of diversity and power at the centre of literacy work wherever it is practiced. There is always diversity in the context of literacy learning. In northern communities, there may be a mixture of white and Aboriginal students and staff. In communities with white students and staff, all the other differences, particularly class, educational level, and ability, are at play.

This paper does not attempt to look comprehensively at issues of difference and literacy work, rather to explore how “story” as an entry point to a discussion on diversity and literacy can help us inform the work we do.

## **Research Context**

Recent interdisciplinary theory about the power of narrative shows that story is never innocent. Stories are always told in a context. They are a potentially rich way of bringing knowledge gained in one setting to another audience. For the teller they can clarify and create learning. Stories can unlock people, opening them to change. Yet conventional practices in literacy work have often been rather unreflective about how they use stories, particularly about the complexity of stories told in a setting of many differences.

Fortunately, key ideas from people working in the field of equity education can help literacy practitioners unpack some of the complexity at play when learning pairs (practitioner and learner) and literacy groups attempt to hear and respond to what they tell each other in a supportive learning environment. Sherene Razack's "Storytelling for Social Change" (1998) examines how stories can be dangerous and can silence rather than empower participants in a learning environment. But this literature has rarely been read or discussed amongst literacy practitioners in recent years.

There is also a dearth of research in adult literacy from anti-racist, equity-based perspectives particularly in a Canadian context. In her article "What's Whiteness got to do with it? exploring assumptions about cultural difference and everyday literacy practices," Australian academic and literacy advocate Sue Shore (2003) argues that literacy practitioners need to examine notions of whiteness and better understand privilege in order to examine their pedagogy.

As well, despite the rich history and central role of story-related practices in adult literacy work, the effect or impact of narratives in these situations has rarely been examined. A number of key practices in adult literacy programming, including helping learners to develop their "voice" are relevant to this investigation. Though literacy and "story" have always been entwined, little conceptual work has reached the field of adult literacy to guide practitioners as they work with learners.

## Research on Narrative

By contrast recent academic thinking on narrative is being actively applied in other fields. This includes such diverse domains as, business management and organizational change (Boud, 2006); counseling and therapy (Muntigl, 2004; Russell and Carey 2004); palliative care (Barnard et al, 2000); medicine (Harter, 2005); and conflict resolution (Cahn, 2007). In popular culture, community development and educational practice, “storytelling,” is being recognized as an art form and a means of sharing wisdom. Narrative theory has also increasingly influenced academic and applied research methods over the last two decades (Clandinin 2007; Bruner, 1986). In adult literacy and adult learning more broadly, recent understandings of re-storying oneself are of particular relevance and yet there has to date been few attempts to connect theory and practice on these issues.

Within this tradition of literacy work is a conundrum inherent in storytelling particularly in an educational setting: not all stories are heard the same way. They are not always understood in ways intended by the teller, nor all valued in the same way by listeners. Stories bring our differences to the surface. Thus, when we, as literacy practitioners, begin to focus on issues of diversity, **we discover that the use of stories is not so simple or necessarily safe for all learners.** Most of us are not skilled at hearing across differences, particularly when very different life experiences come to the fore. In *Women, Native, Other* Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, “her (story) remains irreducibly foreign to Him. The man can’t hear it the way she means it.”(1989, p, 149) 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 largely 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: literacy learners are often among society’s most marginalized groups and, by contrast, literacy workers are usually from locations of relative privilege.

Even the everyday knowledge and thinking about stories that practitioners enjoy in their private lives can be more complex and developed than the way stories are often used to teach in literacy

programs. How can research help us explore this disconnect in order to improve the effectiveness of literacy instruction?

### **Within the Context of Literacy Research**

This project shares the view of literacy as a social practice that has informed two decades of New Literacy Studies (NLS) in the United States and the United Kingdom. (Appleby and Hamilton, 2005; Barton and Hamilton, 1989; Barton and Hall, 1999; Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic, 1994; Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic (eds.), 2000; Barton, 2007) In this view, literacy skills cannot be extracted from social practices; instead, literacy is understood to be embedded in everyday life. NLS looks at literacy in a holistic context and has a helpful focus on the community and family as sites of learning. Our research draws on NLS's broad stance and its understanding of literacy that goes beyond formal teaching and learning in literacy programs.

Within a Canadian context, the national Learning Circles Research Project (2006) is relevant in the way it conceptualizes adult learning broadly, makes links with other adult education endeavours and organizations, and views learning as relational. A small body of literacy research draws out the connections between story and self-esteem for adult literacy learners. Eileen Antone (2002, 2003), Ningwakwe/E. Priscilla George (2008) and Janice Brant (2006), Aboriginal literacy researchers, develop holistic views of literacy with communication, culture, and the oral tradition at the centre. Particularly of note in Ontario is the work of Jenny Horsman on the effects of violence on learning (1999) and the recent project *Moving research about addressing the impacts of violence on learning into practice*. (E. Battell et. al., 2008) Katrina Grieve's *Supporting Learning, Supporting Change* (2003) explores concepts of learner confidence. Practitioner-researchers in Eastern Ontario examined the practitioner-student relationship, exploring how the rapport between the two is crucial to the learning that takes place. (Trent Valley Literacy Association, 2004). From western Canada, the work of Evelyn Battell (2004) and Bonnie Soroake (1999, 2006) take up literacy learning holistically. These projects are part of a recent research-in-practice movement (Jackson, 2004; Horsman and Norton, 1999; Horsman and Woodrow, 2006; Norton, 2008) supported by the national journal *Literacies: Researching Practice, Practicing Research*, and a number of national conferences which have created dialogue between the worlds of practice, research and policy. This movement

has promoted high quality, close-to-the-ground research whose primary audience is literacy practitioners and their allies.

As mentioned above, the scarcity of literacy research from an equity standpoint is alarming, but a notable exception is an Ontario practitioner research report called *I've opened up: Exploring learners' perspectives on progress* (2006), by Susan Lefebvre, Pat Belding, Mary Brehaut, Sarah Dermer, Anne-Marie Kaskens, Emily Lord, Wayne McKay and Nadine Sookermany. These practitioner-researchers in Toronto and southwestern Ontario made important strides in identifying the importance of naming differences in doing research with learners. Mary and Nadine, as researchers in that project, brought their learning to this project. *I've opened up* makes clear the importance of researchers examining their positionality at the beginning of a research project.

In summary, we have begun an examination of recent thinking about narrative and diversity as it relates to literacy practice. This project provided an opportunity for a small group of experienced community-based researchers to examine their own practices and assumptions, and begin to re-think, re-formulate, and expand practice in the light of story and diversity.

## **What We Did**

### **Programs and Researchers**

Stepping into Parkdale Project Read (PPR), you see a couch and other comfortable chairs to the right. A big program space is to the left, a large table surrounded by chairs, and bookshelves, with such labels such as “easy-to-read,” “math,” “atlases,” and “poetry.” There’s a kitchen area at the back and plastic bins of art supplies. There are racks of pamphlets on topics such as housing and domestic violence. This is a homey space with a casual atmosphere where students come for one-to-one tutoring or small group work.

PPR is beside a fast food restaurant at the corner of Dufferin and King Streets in Parkdale, an old neighbourhood in the west end of Toronto, home to diverse groups of people including new immigrants, the working poor, and psychiatric survivors. PPR began in the early 80s in the basement of the Parkdale Library, on Queen Street, one street north of its current location. When I worked there in the 1990s, we dreamed of the program being a storefront as it is today. Currently it is bursting its seams as students’ children are coming in increasing numbers. PPR is one of Toronto’s oldest community-based literacy programs, started by the librarians in the Parkdale Library in the early 80s and becoming a separate program in 1986. It is one of the few literacy collectives and programs with its own board of directors

Mary Brehaut is a community literacy worker who has worked at PPR since 1999. She trains volunteer tutors, supports learner-tutor pairs, and facilitates small learning groups including a creative writing group. Nadine Sookermany has been a community literacy worker at PPR since 2001 and is also an adult educator with George Brown College. Nadine is a former ESL teacher and women’s shelter worker and sits on various boards where she promotes an anti-racist perspective. Andy Noel has been a part-time community worker at PPR for the past four years. He practices yoga and meditation and leads meditation programs. Mary is white and born in Toronto, Nadine is South Asian and born in Winnipeg, and Andy is black, having emigrated from Trinidad.

A few kilometers north at the corners of Davenport and Perth, there’s a large building built onto an old red brick church. You enter a modern door and into a well-lit reception space with a tree



growing inside. Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre (DPNC) is a multi-service centre with a community health centre and a variety of programs for children, youth, and seniors, including community arts activities. Italian, Portuguese, and many other languages are spoken at DPNC. You walk through the central waiting area at DPNC and go up four flights of stairs to reach the main classroom of the adult literacy program. The open mezzanine area is enclosed with yellow drapes bordering a space filled with a scattered variety of tables and chairs. The program office, computer lab and resource library are back on the third floor toward the back of the building.

DPNC Literacy Centre was started in 1985 by the Downtown Churchworkers, with help from Project Read. It was originally called Adult Literacy for Action (ALFA) and was managed by its own board of directors. In June 2003, the program became part of the Adult Services unit of the DPNC.

Sally Gaikezheyongai is the coordinator of the Literacy Centre and worked previously at Native Women's Resource Centre. She has taught anti-racism workshops in Toronto. Michele Kuhlmann is a community literacy worker and facilitates multi-level basic literacy groups for adults. Michele has worked closely with learners at various community-based literacy programs since the 1980s. Sally is Anishawbe and Michele is white, having emigrated from the States.

Guy Ewing teaches face-to-face and on-line courses in literacy theory and research at OISE/UT, works one day a week at PPR, and has been involved in various literacy research projects, most recently the Learning Circles Project. (Brant et al, 2006) Maria Moriarty is a literacy librarian with AlphaPlus Resource Centre. Tannis Atkinson is founding editor of *Literacies: researching practice, practising research*, teaches book history at Wilfrid Laurier University, is a plain language editor and started her PhD at OISE/UT in September 2008. Tannis worked at DPNC in the 1980s. Guy, Maria and Tannis are white, Guy having grown up in the States, Maria immigrating from Ireland, and Tannis growing up in various parts of the world.

I selected practitioner-researchers who I know to be thoughtfully engaged, highly committed to learners' learning, and interested in diversity issues. I approached small teams of practitioners from two programs who do strong programming with a social justice perspective. These

practitioners have extensive knowledge from which the field can benefit. But like most practitioners, they have rarely had the time to systematically examine aspects of their practice in depth, and talk or write about their insights. I wanted more than one practitioner from each program so they could go into greater depth by talking between meetings and relate the research to their work, rather than sole practitioners from a larger variety of programs.

Some research group members met through literacy work in the 1980s, others more recently through the Festival of Literacies. This long history, including various connections as practitioner and research colleagues, has made an honest sharing and trust more possible than in many groups brought together to do research. Five of us were in the original Story Inquiry group, but we felt it was important to create a new research group, rather than adding some new people into the original group who then might not feel able to participate fully.

### **Collaborative Research**

This project was collaborative from its inception sharing questions and concerns and then a short paragraph about story. Fundamentally about the relational nature of learning, it is appropriate that it started in dialogue between literacy colleagues. The joint leadership of Tannis and I began with the informal Story Inquiry Project and a process of collaborative workshop planning and facilitation from which I learned a great deal about how to make workshops creative and reflective spaces. I was in the role of Principal Investigator required by CCL and the University of Toronto, but I attempted to share the leadership of the project. Tannis and I planned our meetings, which allowed for two perspectives on what was the next needed step in our process. The facilitation likewise benefited from two perspectives on what was taking place and what would work best work with the group. Tannis, Guy, and I discussed the project throughout, with input from Nancy at key points. Maria Moriarty provided the valuable perspective of a literacy librarian who has supported many research projects and connects with learners and practitioners across the province. We learned as we went, finding that analysis is difficult whether in a group of nine or alone. I continue to learn about the challenges of collaboration research.

## **Holistic Approaches to Space and Time**

In keeping with the holistic approach we use in teaching literacy learners where we attempt to invite the whole self to learning, we tried to do the same with this research group. We deliberately tried to create a different sense of space and time. We began our meetings after having lunch together which gave us a chance to catch up and share literacy and other news. We opened and closed our meetings with movement and gratitude to mark the space and time together as valuable. Tannis began our meetings by leading us in Qi Gong which helped us to “arrive” with more of ourselves, emotions, body, spirit and mind. We tried to be present and honest. Tannis and I planned the meetings carefully by phone and emailed draft agendas back and forth. (See sample workshop plans, page 73 to 77.) We created plans for activities that would draw on different parts of ourselves, enable creativity to help our thinking and feeling, give us time for our own thoughts and to listen to others, and have fun. What we did was simple, but it took preparation and planning.

Meeting on a Friday afternoon after a full week of work, our meetings needed to help our work and lives, by being part of our individual and collective search for meaning, rather than serving a research project’s predetermined agenda. We gave the afternoons to the sessions, rather than short-changing ourselves with shorter meetings. The research project was shaped by who we are individually and how we developed as a group. We built trust as we went. Given that some of us had known each other for years and others met recently, we worked deliberately to try to create a group climate where everyone could contribute as a researcher.



As part of our process, we took time before we talked to go to a quiet corner with journals or coloured pencils and paper for drawing, and a cup of tea. When we had this time with our own thoughts, and let our journals or drawing take us into our own reflection in a non-linear way, our conversation dropped to a deeper place. Referring to our drawings when we talked helped us to express more.

Some researchers sent journal entries to the group by email. These emailed stories prompted a flurry of other stories. Some didn't find the journal writing worked for them, so they tried taping themselves, and that was difficult too. Some journaled all the time and read from their journals at meetings. Some found that journaling didn't work for them and tried tape-recording. That wasn't easy either.

The meetings were working sessions. We gathered our thoughts and reflected more on our experience with learners and this research project in the days coming up to our meetings. We rotated where we held our meetings between the two programs where the practitioners work and held a couple toward the end at AlphaPlus Resource Centre. We talked about how space affects our practice.

We prepared our meeting place to help the space seem different from our regular working spaces. We brought brightly coloured table cloths, flowers, food and drinks. Our meetings took place in spaces where we had windows; the natural light helped. At our first meeting, held at PPR, we wanted the researchers to arrive and feel they had entered something other than an ordinary work day with all its pressures. They were coming in on a Friday, their usual day off, after a full week of work. Someone said, "This room looks completely different."

## **Meetings**

For our first meeting, at the end of September 2007, Tannis and I planned that we might examine several aspects of practice, of which story was a key part, such as intake or learner writing. We thought the practitioners might want to work in two small groups, one for each program, or that groups would form according to their specific interests in story and diversity, perhaps with a focus on "teaching" an anti-oppression perspective to tutors or matching tutors and learners. We

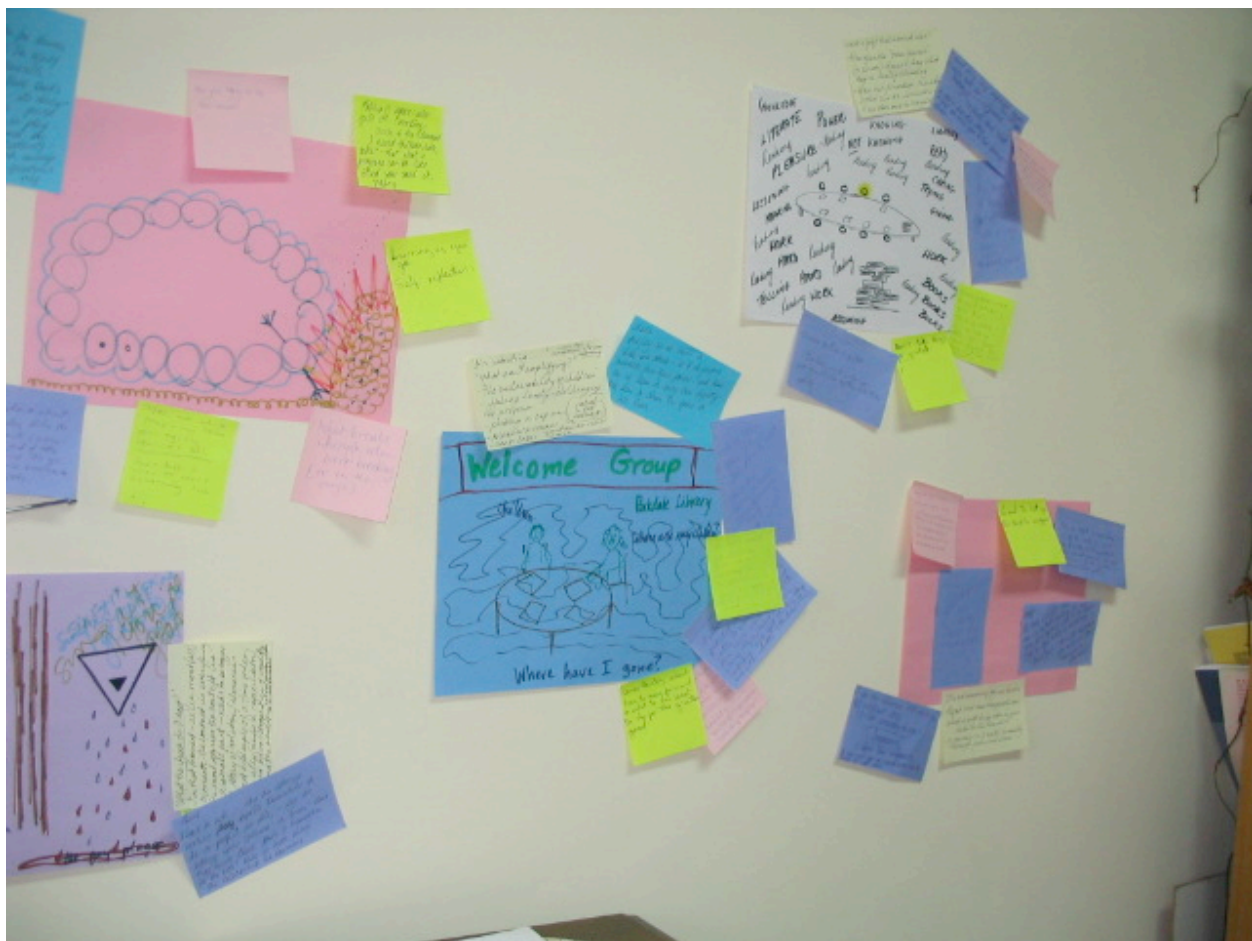
spent part of that first meeting grouped by program. What struck us at that first meeting was the complexity of everyone's thinking about story and diversity. For example, Sally talked about *The Seventh Fire: An Ojibway Prophecy* (Gaikhezheyongai, 2003), referring to a process of disintegration and integration being part a learning cycle. She drew a diagram showing how culture, spirituality, basic living skills, and communication are interrelated. After her talk, I wrote in my journal, "Can story be used to help build resilience?" A fairly strong sense of us as a group was already emerging, making it seem less important to meet in small groups by program or focus.

At our November meeting we began to tell stories about times when things weren't right in our work, reflecting on moments of discomfort, often related to the social differences among students and ourselves. We took our time telling each other these stories, providing the details of the context, and not interrupting each other. We explored what had happened that concerned us, uncovering the layers of this experience. Some of us told of not knowing where our job began or ended, some of having to hold up our program alone when things were rough. Sometimes we learned a lot from students who told us that our experience was different from theirs and we shouldn't assume things were the same for them. We talked about what we hid from students, such as sexual orientation or spiritual practice and about the effects of this hiding on ourselves, students, and the program. We reflected long and hard about whether we had done the right thing in our encounters with students and how we might do things differently. We noticed how our personal stories impact on how we hear and respond to students. There were moments of practice that stuck with us like knots in the backs of our necks, stitches in our sides, which we didn't touch. Our gentle holistic approach helped to loosen some of what was stuck.

Some of the stories were quite "raw" in their first telling and at our next meeting we returned to these stories, reflecting on what it meant to tell them and hear them. We added further layers to our understanding. We cycled back to our stories when we met the next month, realizing we had left out key parts. We had more to tell, the underside, the back story of meeting students and tutors and going to meetings and conferences. We seemed to notice things differently now that we had a group to tell.

At some meetings after each story, we wrote on post-it notes which we gave to the speaker, rather than interrupt the feeling of having been heard by speaking. Sometimes one of the group members took away the post-it notes, typed them up, and emailed them to each of us. This allowed us to return powerfully to our stories, away from the group in privacy.

We had planned to do a series of focus groups with literacy practitioners, but as the layers of reflection and depth of conversation became apparent in our own group, we decided it was best to treat our own meetings as focus groups, focusing our energies on what we were uncovering.



In our project we focused more on unpacking what we could from our own experience, than learning from articles or books. Tannis brought in relevant articles: “Writing wrong: conundrums of literacy and human rights” by Catherine Kell; “On the Bus With Vonnie Lee: Explorations in Life History and Metaphor” by Micahel V. Angosino; “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding

to Racism,” by Audre Lorde; “Widening the Circle of Compassion,” by Pema Chodron. We read these on our own, occasionally discussing them in the group. Given that we had so much to say about our own experiences, we did not make discussing them a priority in our meetings.

### **An Intuitive Flexible Approach**

Our process was multi-layered. There were moments that we chose to share with each other in the group, and other moments that people wrote about in their journals or reflected on privately, partly as a result of doing the work together. The complexity of choosing what to share was present in our group as in all settings. Though we moved to a deep level, we paced what we shared and did not share everything. We had made a container through our use of space and time and building of trust which allowed us to sit with certain moments that emerged in our consciousnesses as relevant to tell this group, to help us learn about diversity and difference in literacy practice. We sometimes shared other pieces of our personal histories which helped us make sense of our own literacy and understandings of difference. Since we were in that environment of telling, there was a wonderful way in which the telling of one story opened the possibility for the telling of other stories. We attempted an organic process with a more organic sense of space and time. We created spacious agendas rather than cramming in as many items as possible and we changed our plan as we went. This kind of inviting, flexible approach is one we often use with learners, but less often with practitioners. Research-in-practice has the ability to give us protected space and time, which we do not get in many other literacy gatherings or meetings or in our everyday work. Our group was following our own sense of what ways support reflective practice.

As people spoke, they told about difference and diversity and many other things at the same time. We tried not to box in the stories. We just told them in whatever way worked for the people around the table, so they came out in different ways. Mine came out in a raw form where I seemed to drop into the story as I attempted to tell it. It was different for each person. But there were some patterns in the telling, for example, that later on we often saw key things that we had left out. The telling brought the incident to light, and then we kept returning to it in an iterative way. On returning to our story, we brought more meaning to it, within the context of the other stories we told, or what happened in the next couple of weeks. There was a releasing of energy

around the telling of these stories. Some of these moments haven't had "voice" before; they weren't yet part of a story. When we told them, they weren't the usual stories that we tell when we gather with our literacy colleagues. They were more complex stories in process, often laced with discomfort.

Emailing between meetings, particularly in the week before our meetings, helped to prepare us to gather our thoughts. By email, I talked through the plan for the session and posed a couple questions to the group to help us prepare, re-kindle and keep our thinking going.

Intuition is another part of what led this group, which seems fitting for a project on story. The entire team is very experienced at group facilitation. Thoughtful, intuitive facilitation is something we do with learners, but not as often with ourselves. Tannis and I often let go of sections of our agenda as our discussion pulled us in other relevant directions. This flexibility contributed to the feeling of spaciousness we wanted to create.

## **Arts-based Activities**

### **Story Bundle Activity**

The story bundle activity, also described as an object table, is one of the activities that helped us to access other layers of feeling and thinking, helping us come to new understandings of our work. We used this activity in a number of our early meetings and then at several workshops and presentations. This activity involves a table of assorted objects. Participants approach the table with a question or thought held loosely in mind. They pick up the object which they gravitate to, rather than thinking logically about which object will let them explain something to the others present.





This activity can be used to get a group started in a way which allows space for emotions and unconscious associations to be made; it can give people quiet reflective space, rather than have them start talking right away. The assortment of odd domestic objects and those from nature, such as a clothes peg and a stone, can give this activity a playful feel. We are able to approach complex feelings and situations from an angle, rather than directly, and unearth more of what is at play. This activity is often done orally, with participants holding up the objects and speaking. We found it helpful to pick an object and take it to a quiet corner to journal or draw before sharing with the larger group.

At one of our research presentations, (see *Sharing Our Research With Others*, page 34) when our research group did the story bundle exercise to help us think about moments of discomfort, I picked up a big clip, the kind that holds a lot of papers together. It reminded me of myself, wanting people to get along, even to kind of forcing them together. I uncovered a kind of

pinched, clip-like quality to the way I approached certain students' dislike of each other. I recalled a writing group I was facilitating and how uncomfortable I was with a man and a woman in the group and their problems with each other. It wasn't my problem that they didn't get along, but I often worried about it. I thought one or the other or both might leave the group. The woman would sometimes sit at another table with her back to the man. They both came most of the time, so it didn't seem to be affecting their attendance, but if one of them was away, I wondered if the conflict was part of it and what I could do to improve the situation. I think my focus on their dislike had to do with my childhood history and on-going conflict between some of my family members. If so, then maybe my discomfort was more about myself than about the learners.

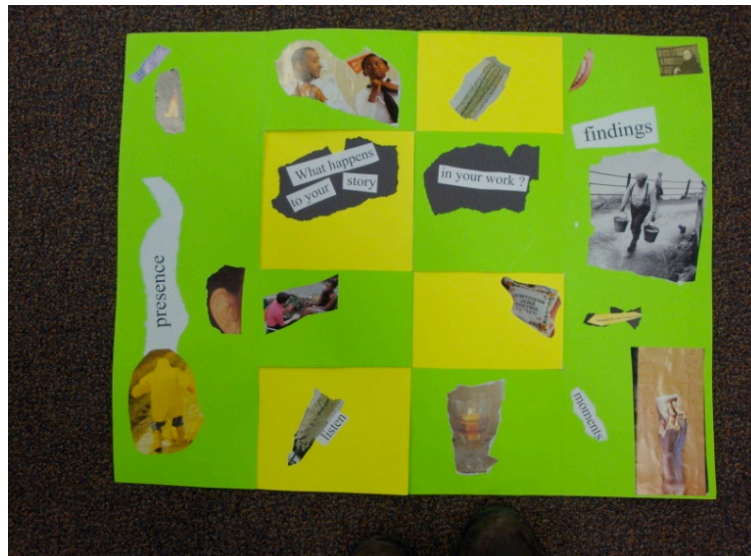
In terms of our learning about diversity, I notice my white middle-class Irish-British female way of wanting everything to be polite and people to be "nice" to each other. I am uncomfortable hearing people complain about each other. Did the fact that they were two black people play a part in my worries? The group was all people of colour. I have led various groups where there are conflicts between learners, including a mainly white group, with white participants not getting along with each other, but I think in that conflict I felt I could have little influence on the people who were in conflict. I don't know if I reacted differently in this case partly because the students involved were people of colour. Gender was also definitely part of their conflict. Their animosity was more direct than I was comfortable with. My worrying about their conflict seems like wasted energy that would have been better used in focusing on what the group was doing. On reflection, I think I had a misplaced sense of my responsibility to "teach" them to get along. Trauma in their lives affected their ability to relate to each other and affects my relations with them and with the discord between them. At the time, I didn't speak with a colleague about the tension between the students or journal about it to better understand it. Frequently in literacy work there is no one else to talk to, but I also need to examine my feeling that I should be able to deal with problems alone and I shouldn't burden others by discussing them.

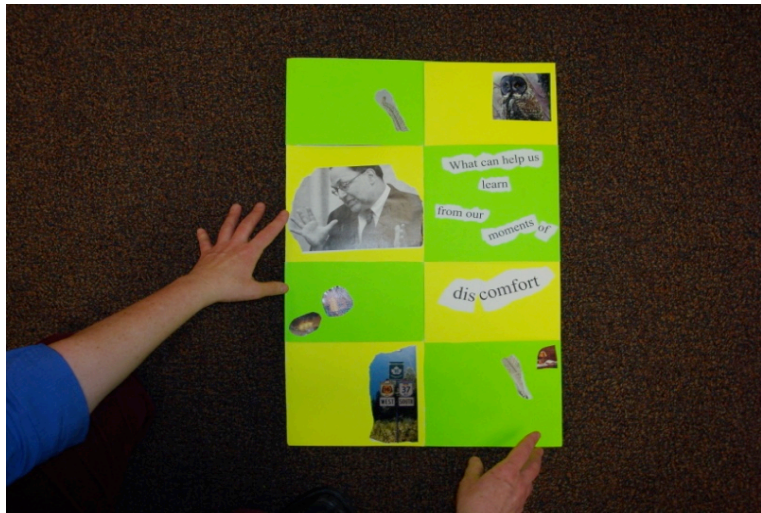
The story bundle activity allows access to our memories in different ways. By calling up the feelings and thoughts associated with our literacy worker selves, but in a place separate from daily work activities and in a spirit of playfulness and exploration, we find new ways to re-think old uncomfortable incidents. We begin to tease out some of the layers of what was taking place.

Rather than just feeling bad, we have the opportunity to learn about our habits as practitioners, and gain new perspectives.

### **Accordion Books**

At one of the meetings we made accordion books. Tannis taught us how to make these simple folded books which allow some panels to be seen and others hidden. The book is opened in different ways revealing other panels and images. We tore pictures from magazines, some of us working more with colours, others with images or textures. The hidden and revealed aspect of this book suited the multi-layered way we were talking about ourselves and our identities as literacy workers.





## **Sharing Our Research with Others**

An important part of our process was that we shared our research with others mid-way through and this helped us to become more aware of our process. In March, Tannis and Nadine went to the WE LEARN conference<sup>3</sup> in New York. In May, we held an event for the Toronto literacy community at OISE/UT called Beyond Active Listening<sup>4</sup> and participated in a conference at Centennial College in Toronto mainly for health practitioners and educators.<sup>5</sup> In June, Sally and I presented our research at the annual conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) in Vancouver.<sup>6</sup> In October, a group of us did a workshop at the Ontario Literacy Coalition training event<sup>7</sup> and at the Transformative Learning Centre's conference at OISE/UT<sup>8</sup>.

In all these settings we were interested in how workshop participants valued having the time and space to reflect. In preparation for WE LEARN, we did some reflection on our process and analysis of the holistic elements of ritual, movement, arts-based activities which supported trust within our group work. WE LEARN is a feminist gathering of American literacy women, practitioners and learners, and the focus in 2008 was on issues of diversity. Tannis and Nadine were surprised to find that even in a short workshop, they were able to facilitate meaningful reflection about moments of discomfort which occurred across social difference. Several participants said that having time for reflection had given them a chance to think about those moments in new ways.

At all the workshops and presentations, we used the space to convey how we were doing something exploratory, reflective and playful. We transformed the rooms ahead of time, changing conference rooms at hotels with classroom like set-ups into circles with artwork on the walls. At the OISE/UT event, Centennial College and CASAE we used arts-based methods to give people a taste of the process we had used. We had key words and phrases such as “moment of discomfort,” “zone of liberation,” “emotion,” “trauma,” and “learning” scattered about the floor within our circle and/or hanging on strings. We attempted to mark the space as different from the ordinary. At the OISE/UT event we had time as well for a focus group where participants reflected on the story-telling, art-making and object table activities which had been used to prompt their reflection and on what they learned from the process. At the Centennial



College conference we were interested to learn that reflective practice is a well-established part of nurse training, but it appeared that reflection about difference and diversity was less well developed. At all these events we told about our process, showing some examples of our drawings.



## **What We Learned**

### **About Story**

Mary wrote in a reflection piece toward the end of the project,

Our stories weave together – before we open our mouths, pick up our pens, books, instruments, art materials, or hands. I imagine you, my listener, my reader, my audience, my mirror, my receptor, my holder, receiving my story, hearing me.

I anticipate your lenses and filters. I imagine I know some of who you are in this moment, and set up my story accordingly. I want to be heard, seen, held, known.

In my mind, our stories toss and tangle – little threads getting snagged in unexpected places – knots tightening the harder I pull.

Mary talked about how our differences are a strand in our challenges to truly hear each other.

I try to use language (voice, gesture, writing) to translate whatever small part of this complexity I can pull out and offer – across a huge divide of diversity and difference – the doomed attempt to pass this whirling intangible energetic mist to other human beings – which, if we're lucky, they genuinely try to pull through their own distorting lenses and filters – through their own kaleidoscope of stories. If any parts of this mist resonate enough, a few droplets of something might stick somewhere in their web. And so it goes...

Maria spoke powerfully about the intersection of story and difference.

We talked without interruption or questions, we listened without interrupting or questioning, we took our stories as we heard them. [...] All our stories coming together, sometimes contradicting or even conflicting with each other, colouring how we see and what we hear, what we do. I see it as one way to acknowledge our many selves, to honour some of the many versions of our stories, the personal, the political, and the social. I see the work of the story group as one way to look at the tacit knowledge and the working wisdom of practitioners, how in working in relationship with students and with each other, across differences of class and race and gender we learn by encountering each other and ourselves in our stories.

### **Exploring Difference through Discomfort**

We came to the idea of reflecting on moments of discomfort early in our research process and began doing it our second meeting. We wanted to examine moments of discomfort across multiple social differences, but we did not insist on the focus being only on such moments; rather

we opened space around the possibility that part of the discomfort we feel may be about the unnamed differences between the people in the room.

Maybe we came to moments of discomfort partly because that is what stories often unearth. Stories, in a broad sense, explore tension or conflict, and contain energy. In our work, we felt that the kinds of stories we tell are often too simple, because of the nature of the stories required or expected from us by the outside world, such as funders, our board of directors, or would-be tutors. Often, the stories we manage to tell are these simple, externally solicited ones. In looking more deeply into this notion of literacy stories, we see that part of what is missing is stories of our own discomfort as practitioners.

Michele wrote,

Our research group was very open to exploring very personal feelings and the space we shared was very respectful. We called our time together deep listening..... [B]ut I was also aware ...[of] how unusual our research situation was compared to the experience of keeping up with our daily life in literacy. When feelings of discomfort and difference arise in our work, we are on the spot and have to choose the best response for the moment but can be left with disturbing feelings and questions that are not resolved even for years. These feelings and experiences surfaced and lived in our storytelling.

Stories of practitioner discomfort are missing for a number of reasons. They are difficult so we want to avoid them. There are few venues to share them. If literacy is all about the learners, then practitioner discomfort does not count as a topic that deserves attention. In the funding framework, where contact hours and numbers of students count as important, moments of discomfort are a different language altogether. We don't even have a concept of learning from discomfort that would give a frame to examine those moments. Our project set up an environment that we hoped would allow this examination.

If discomfort is often about unnamed difference, then unpacking stories can give an entry point into examining differences. In mainstream history, certain people's stories have been told and others have not. The stories of more powerful members of society are told and in the literacy field that means the story of IALSS (International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, Government of Canada, 2003), the funder's story, and the overly simple, media story that 50% of people can't read and write well enough to do their daily activities. Our project allowed different stories to be



told, which help us learn about power and power differences, in a more complex way. The shifting landscape of power and difference is always at play and limits what we are allowed or allow ourselves to think, feel, or say. We made space for telling richer narratives, for expressing more of ourselves. We came to understand more about what we express and don't express, and how those dynamics may stifle our learning around diversity, when we don't talk about important things that happen. There is learning in this reliving and telling. We are both alone in our learning and accompanied by others; we are in partnerships and groups, in which a key ingredient is the degree of support and feeling supported. As literacy practitioners, we too need to feel a kind of support as we learn. Some of us are isolated in our practice so that when difficult things happen, we have nowhere to express our feelings about what has occurred. These experiences can be like hot potatoes which we avoid. As practitioners, there is a greater chance of learning, individually and collectively, if we can look at some of these challenging experiences.

Examining such moments has potential as a tool in equity work. Because equity work is something many people avoid, and discussions of story seem more inviting, story can be an entry point to equity work. Story is helpful because it is at the heart of literacy work, and it is something that doesn't threaten people in the way that the words equity, diversity, anti-racism, anti-oppression may. When we are on difficult terrain, we often look for guideposts that seem to simplify things for us. But when we simplify, a lot of meaning gets lost. In contrast, using story can keep the complexity but create a more flexible and open-ended atmosphere of discovery. Not much is simple in literacy programs, or easy to untangle: not the way narrative is woven through literacy practice, nor the way our differences are at play in everything we do. However, we may be more comfortable exploring this complexity through stories than we are with trying to face more directly how difference, power, and literacy are entwined.

Sometimes in moments of discomfort, we clamp down. Other times, we avoid listening as it can be too much. As Nadine said about being busy on the computer, "I realized though [that it] was my defense mechanism. What I do is not listen, but I have to listen, because I can't take it in. And I think that, and I think that they'll just think I'm busy and they'll just walk away, you know?"

As well, when we become anxious and uncertain of what is happening, we may revert to simple ways of teaching or interacting with students, less developed and less reflective forms of practice. But if we can do as practitioners what we tried to do in the research project, bring space, spaciousness, openness to these moments, there is much more possibility for learning. We need to give space to both literacy practitioners' and learners' stories. We usually don't know in advance how long a story needs in the telling. What is the relationship between spaciousness and learning?

Like the language of research, the language of equity work has a complex history and needs to be used in ways that are helpful for the literacy field and stretched where necessary. We talked about how words complicate the way we talk about difference, such as the phrase "working across difference." We asked why we use the word across, and talked about how each encounter between humans is across a divide. We considered the use of the word "differences" as well. Further exploration of anti-oppression theory could help us become familiar with the history and contexts in which these phrases and words have developed. Learning about the history of these words and phrases might help us to see our own experience in a new light. Our group recognized how little time as practitioners we have for this kind of learning about ideas, even though such learning would support our work in quite practical ways.

### **Space and Time as Learning Resources**

We attempted to work with non linear senses of time and space to draw on different kinds of understandings. We learned that time and space can be resources if viewed as our own to work with creatively. We attempted to create a different sense of time in our meetings which contrasted with the hurried feeling of many literacy meetings.

Guy reflected on space and respectful distance.

Literacy workers and literacy learners meet at a table. At one level, the table brings us together. At another level, it embodies separateness, enforced by the divisions of class, race, gender and culture that characterize our society. If we fail to acknowledge the distance which this separateness creates, we deny each other, erase literacy learners' stories and our own.

In our final research meetings, we often talked about spaciousness. Spaciousness requires distance of a particular kind, a non-judgmental, non-interventionist openness to what learners have to say. For example, several of the researchers described how they had created spaciousness for learners' stories by encouraging learners to write without asking to see their stories. Others talked about listening to stories without rushing to transcribe them. This kind of distance is nourishing because it allows stories to develop, go deeper. In keeping a respectful distance, the literacy worker lets the story breathe, to use Sheila's phrase, refrains from wrapping a story up, to use Mary's phrase. Differences between the learner's story and the literacy worker's story remain unresolved. Sometimes, to use Sally's phrase, a seed cracks open, and learning grows.

## The Use of Metaphor

Sally's metaphor of a seed cracking open became an "a-ha moment" for the group.

. . . I think, when you're in that space when you're the most wide open, I think that's when you're the most vulnerable, and I remember my, the drawing I did, and I spoke about 'you're the seed, you're the seed, the seed's got to crack open for the moisture to come in and the nourishment, and so the growing can happen.' So people are afraid, you know, of cracking up basically, and what am I gonna do? Because I've lost all control in that moment and I'm at my most vulnerable. But that's also that moment when, you know, people, they sit with it a while. And I think it's how we sit with them, in that moment, that's important. And they'll either feel supported and, okay, just keep breathing and I can get through this. So it could be how we're sitting with them when they're in that moment.

Using arts-based activities in our research process helped us use metaphor to talk about discomfort and difference. For example, the story bundle activity, where we came to a table of objects with a question held lightly in our minds, allowed us to approach difficult terrain gently. By turning to moments of discomfort indirectly we created a kind of safety that encouraged us to access and discuss experience that might otherwise be unapproachable. In this kind of work, where we were dealing with difficult material as part of a research project rather than a therapy session, metaphor was extremely helpful as part of a container which could hold emotion and meaning. The playfulness of a simple activity like the story bundle activity allowed us new ways of seeing



ourselves and our work. Unconscious and not yet articulated knowledge becomes available helping us to learn in a fuller way.

## **We Learned Through Careful Telling and Listening**

We noticed that some shifts happened when we told a difficult story and felt that we were heard without judgment and heard in a way that is understood to not be a final or polished telling. There was an assumption that we might come back to that story, and of respect for the story and the person who has told what they could tell at that time. The story does not sum up the practitioner; it is just one attempt for them to tell about a thread of meaning found in their practice. At one session, Tannis told us about being told by a learner that homosexuals should die, how vulnerable this made her feel as a lesbian whose friends were dying of AIDS, and how confused she was about not revealing to the learner that she was lesbian. At the following session, she came back to this story.

. . . I kind of struggle, I had all these different things, one of which was why did I tell that story that was really all about me, I mean we were all telling stories that were about us. And then I remembered, in that moment of that homophobic comment, it was about me, it wasn't about well, if there are gay learners in the program how are they perceiving it, it wasn't even in my consciousness about that. Yeah, so I'm thinking also of some other things that were going on at the time. I kind of don't want to go into a great deal of detail about some of that, because it feels like a whole new story, I'm not sure where I'm going. When I started out, I was a tutor at East End Literacy, before I worked at ALFA, and one year, shortly after I'd come out I was at Gay Pride, I was at the beer tent, and there was this learner who I knew from East End, I was just so surprised. I said, "You're gay?" And he said: "You're gay?" And I don't even know if he's, yeah, I don't even know where he might be, if he's even alive, there's so many people I knew in my twenties died. That's a big huge part of that story too; it shouldn't be that way that your friends from that part of your life have gone. It shouldn't happen.

Then it made me think about bigger things that were happening too, like some of the organizing that happened in the gay community, when HIV was first around, people felt like it was happening because the people who had the resources, the white gay men were suddenly shocked to find that they were losing all their privilege because of being sick. So that was like a really rich possible moment for things to really change. And some things did change, but some things got really more entrenched in that: let's just take care of us, and let's make sure that we have the best possible medical care. It wasn't about expanding access. Here I go, on another tangent, but it's somehow related. Anyway, so you see why I'm struggling to talk about what happened since telling the story? Anyway, what I drew, is that one in the middle, at the top, soft, open, shut heart, because when I kind of went, okay yeah, the reason that I told that tangent about gay men losing their privilege was because I

thought why is it that, for example, maybe now the 519 Community Centre in Toronto has a literacy program, I don't know. When I was in Glasgow, the Gay and Lesbian Centre has a literacy program. How cool is that? How come we don't here, the gay and lesbian centre at the 519. They do have some more diversity of programs than they did 25 years ago, but primarily their audience is the guys who live in the Gay Village, right? So part of me is thinking about that gay learner who is at the beer tent. Are programs safe for queer learners? Maybe, maybe not, you know?

Anyways, that's all sort of separate from what I drew there, which is all – some of the reactions that I got, I felt like I hadn't told the story right, because I felt like some people didn't understand what I was saying, or that I didn't convey the thing that I really wanted to convey. So what's there is soft, open, shut heart because I felt like when I was working with learners, I wanted to be open, so you really have to be soft, open, to be hearing, right? And yet in that moment of when the guy said that homophobic thing, just for self protection I had to be very hard and very shut. And I did, I clenched, and like when I was growing up, my mom had a lot of repressed anger, and I think I did that [she clenched her jaw] and it's not a helpful reaction. For myself. Guy and I had a conversation because one of his reactions I felt, like, it helped me see that I hadn't told all that I wanted to tell in the story. And I had left out that moment, and I think I did that thing like my mom used to do: when somebody triggered her, react like this! [she clenched her jaw again]. It doesn't help you actually hear each other or work through it. So that's what I drew. I didn't draw the jaw. But anyway, I think that's why that moment interested me so much, because you have to be open, and then how do you protect yourself but then not react in that way, that clenched jaw way, so that it's helpful, as I said to Guy, to myself, to the learners, to the other learners, to the potentially closeted learner in the group. You know? So it's all about that soft, hard. And I think there's something in there that that's the only way to really work with difference, it's just a balancing act.

Some group members commented that in telling stories and feeling that they were heard, their practice was affected, and their thinking about literacy. Something shifted a little for them. These shifts are important in a process which is about change, changing practice and ultimately social change. We discussed that our focus on changing learners can be problematic and we became clearer that for this research a focus on change within ourselves was important, helping ourselves become more aware in our teaching, more present, flexible, and creative.

Sally wrote,

The trick is to create a bridge between my world and the learner's world, a safe meeting place out there in the open middle of the bridge, with neither of us completely transparent about our learning needs and goals. Both of us, in that moment and however many other moments and meetings we have, come with learning needs and goals. I see that more clearly now.

## **Examining “We” and “I” Helps Us Learn About Diversity**

Through our stories we learned that at the heart of understandings about diversity is a complex dynamic between “we” and “I.” Guy told about a time when he was discussing housing issues with a group of students. A student turned to him and said, “don’t ever say ‘we’ when you are discussing this with us.” Discussing this in the group, we could see that using “we” with literacy students can involve “hiding” aspects of our lives, such as our privilege, educational advantages, or as in the story above, the very different material realities of different kinds of housing. We may de-emphasize our differences with students in order to give more importance to the ways that we are similar, and this too is important. But in some cases, as in Guy’s story above, this may feel disrespectful. On reflecting on this situation Guy described his feeling of shame at having violated a boundary.

## **Complexity and Importance of Naming Difference**

We explored how naming differences is both complex and important in various ways and how it also can be problematic. People are always choosing what to tell about themselves in any given context, telling different stories, in different settings. When I talk about telling a story here I mean all the ways we express our story, including our manner of presenting ourselves, dressing and speaking, not just the words we use.

Students certainly face this challenge of what to reveal where. For literacy learners, often a lot is at stake in choosing which story to tell, for example, whether they are admitted to a program, and more generally, whether they are seen as “worthy” of help. The structure of such processes as intake shapes the telling in literacy programs and other social services; being poor requires a series of tellings of stories of self, which can be a kind of accounting for oneself.

As literacy workers, we may tell a “professional” story in which we are helpful and a little distant. Or we may tell a story of ourselves as here-to-help-you. Given the chaos of some learners’ lives, we may be tempted to present ourselves as the “good mother” or “good father” in ways which we can’t sustain, which wear us out eventually. We seek authenticity in teaching.

We want to be present, but don't need to disclose more than we are comfortable with. It is helpful to think about what we are not revealing and whether some of this "hiding" is squelching ourselves unduly and impacting on our teaching and our relationships with literacy work. For example, what does it mean not to come out as a lesbian with a group of students?

As activists, we often use "we" in social justice contexts as a kind of "we the people," but "we" can also homogenize. It can assume more solidarity than is present. If we say that the literacy field is mainly white women, how does that feel for people of colour and male literacy workers? Depending on how it is said and the context, it may be a relief to have this named, or may make the experience of people of colour and men invisible. Then again, erasing the experience of white male literacy workers has a different impact than erasing that of literacy workers of colour of any gender. It is important to look at who speaks on behalf of the literacy field and to work toward multiple voices.

"We" can be about a hope for greater social justice, a hope for change. People create groups often to do things, to attempt to affect social conditions. "We" is very different from "us and them." It holds more hope. Yet the desire for collectivity and community needs to hold the complexity of the myriad of ways that people are different and all the ways that people are the same. Inherent in that complexity, is the desire to name oneself, as well as to recognize others, and the choice of identifying with one group or another or no group at all.

There are explicit and implicit negotiations with learners, because we are all in the room for different reasons. We hold greater power as teachers and gate-keepers; the people who give out transit tickets, childcare cheques, letters of reference; the ones who match the learners with tutors, suggest they be in a certain group, say that they are ready for college.

People with power may use "we" out of a wish to link to those with less power. This can be an effort at solidarity; but it may also be a gesture that attempts to, or feels like an attempt to erase differences. Do people with less power use "we" in this way? People's realities are so very different, including their material conditions. Sometimes it is not clear what groups we are part of, which we want to belong to, and which will include us.

We reflected on the question of how much to tell about ourselves and why. Tannis said,

[In the program where I worked...] I think we were very careful, though our politics, our values were very important to us, to try not to impose our views... And I continue to wonder how that contribute[s] to silence. Yet it is true that as teachers we're in a different position – our role is not to raise our issues, though questions of faith and spirituality and values may well be connected to how we might best support learners as they try to make changes.

The question of change is central – what students want to change, what we implicitly agree to help them change. That's why we're careful about naming ourselves...it's none of my business to try to change...I don't have the right to try to change your faith. But I do have the right to foster an inclusive space where everyone feels comfortable to learn. So wouldn't naming who we are help that?

What happens when we make ourselves disappear? We can't, we don't, but we think we should – yet **we are there**.

Talking about this issue, Maria was reminded of how she and her sister had once spoken in front of her sister's daughter.

Years ago my niece was visiting, my sister and her family were visiting and her daughter was twelve and my son was twelve. But her daughter was twelve, and the boys didn't want anything to do with us, and we were sitting there drinking juice and talking, my sister and I, but her daughter hung around us all the time. She was figuring out what was going on, and I think she found it thrilling to be around her mother in that particular way, but my sister and I thought after several day, we're out walking together, and realized that what we were doing with her, was we were telling stories of our lives, and she was lapping it up, but we were giving them all, as my sister described, as feminist endings. Because we're in instruction mode, as well as casual, we had this young person in the kitchen with us, and ... that was our job! And it was extremely dishonest of us, but we know it was very righteous of us. And that was kind of interesting too, like those stories got twisted around and became stories for her ears.

This family story shows how stories lend themselves to change and being used to influence another.

### **What We Learned About Power**

Mary brought an important reflection on inferiority/superiority to one of our meetings. She told a story of feeling “grounded” when she heard of a friend's challenges. Mary said she felt better physically and psychically within herself in that moment. She was uncomfortable with her



“relief” at another person’s misfortune and went on to reflect on how that relates to our interactions with learners and why we are drawn to this work.

Our sense of inferiority/superiority relates to power in complex ways. Power is entwined with the way we view our similarities and differences. We often look at our similarities and differences from an almost quantitative, status-gauging way of viewing each other, as having less than or more than, as being inferior or superior. Inherent in the view of others as superior is a giving away of our own power. Sometimes when we feel we are helping “inferiors,” we may feel better about ourselves and this may be part of why we have gravitated to this kind of work.

Nadine said,

Reflecting on our power is difficult. It is difficult to acknowledge our power... particularly when we are unaware of our location, specifically our social location; that being our race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability... where are we located as the listener in relation to the storyteller? Do we consciously ask ourselves this? Or must we remain objective, free and clear of any judgment. If we locate ourselves, things may become clearer, or they may become muddier . . . at least we are aware of our power.

Tannis reflected on our own power.

Of course we have lots of power, as the instructors or program coordinators. Are we assuming that students see us as free of social markers? (Only a white person could think that!) . . . Some students have asked staff to match them with a different tutor . . . when they have been matched with a person of colour . . . saying they want a “real” Canadian.

### **Identifying What Limits Our Ability to Learn About Difference**

As I reflect now on our learning I think about the difficult emotion of shame. Taking racism as an example, racism can create shame in people of colour, as it is a violation of who the person is as a person. There can be shame of a different kind for white people as we uncover aspects of our privilege. Shame may be involved in the reluctance of white people to do anti-racism work, shame that we don’t know enough and will get it wrong. A spacious, non-judgmental approach allows room for feelings to emerge and shift, and can help us change the habit of avoiding discussions of the dynamics of power and difference.

In Canada our field is predominantly made up of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. As I notice the ways I avoid discussing difference and conflict, I want to ask what this avoidance

serves. This avoidance limits my ability to learn and keeps me entrenched in old ways of thinking and feeling about literacy work and old ways of doing it. Many of us who are attracted to “caring” kinds of work may be adverse to conflict. As women, some of us have been trained to be “peacemakers” and to make things comfortable for others. Uncovering uncomfortable emotions is part of this work and opens up new learning.

If we analyze our work in a supportive group, self-reflection and critique can help improve our practice. Best intentions are rarely enough. Our concerns and feelings can weigh us down, but when shared with colleagues, journalled about or expressed in some way, can help us analyze and improve practice; they can help us see what we are doing well, have a perspective on the constraints which make our work highly challenging, and come to see what we want to change. Likewise with new learning about difference and diversity; it can both weigh us down and when shared with colleagues and approached with a feeling of spaciousness, can be exciting. We aren't proposing this approach as yet another task for overworked literacy workers, but as a shift in understanding that will start to make our work more meaningful and respectful for everyone.

## **Conclusions and Reflections**

In this project, we used arts-based research approaches to discover what is important in listening to stories in literacy practice. We identified some important aspects of listening across difference.

- Attending to moments of discomfort, and what these moments open up in us when we reflect on them, is an important tool in equity work.
- Space and time are required for open listening.
- Openness to shifts and changes in stories over time is important in the learning process.
- Reflecting on how we use “we” and “I” helps us learn about diversity.
- Naming difference is complex but useful.
- It is important to acknowledge that our awareness of the power we have or do not have shapes our listening and our telling.
- It is useful for each of us to think about what limits our ability to learn about difference.

The Story Circle Prompt Questions at the end of this report provide a starting point for thinking about some of these aspects of listening across difference. The story bundle activity and the accordion bookmaking activity provide additional ways of exploring any of these aspects in depth.

Our approach as literacy practitioners can be to try to fix things and find solutions quickly. Fortunately, research gives us time to step back and think. We aren't going to “solve” problems of difference. There is no toolkit we are going to create that will make the inequalities between people in literacy programs go away. We also did not rush in this project to come up with a list of do and don't for practitioners on how to listen across difference. Rather, we found a process that allowed us to talk about difference and story, to learn more about ourselves, and what difference and story mean to each of us as practitioners.

It is not possible to tell the whole story about a research project, particularly one with nine researchers and three partner organizations on the rich topic of what story and diversity mean in

adult literacy teaching and learning. This project is part of an ongoing conversation in the literacy field about how we work across social differences.

Our words and stories reflect a complex dance between our inner selves and our social context. On the surface of things, literacy is about respectfully supporting the learning of students who struggle with reading and writing. But when a white literacy worker meets a student of colour to do intake and asks why the student has come to the program and what they want to learn, there is a lot going on under the surface. The student makes a series of complex judgments about which story to tell. We all offer up different kinds of stories depending on the context: some stories are told in the belief they will help us get what we need; other stories are told in the hopes of being recognized and better understood. Most stories are told for several different reasons. We also speak based on whether we expect to be heard.

There are deeper stories which students and practitioners come to gradually that have transformative power. If, as practitioners, we can engage in a process of re-telling our stories and seeing how our subjectivity has been shaped by our social locations, spirits, vulnerabilities, and all that happened to us, we can be more open to the nuance of students' telling and re-telling.

Our routes to literacy work are often circuitous and the reasons that keep us in this ill-paid work are useful to unpack. Projects like this one, which allow us to meet with time and space to express ourselves, help us to learn more about why we do this work. Literacy workers, like other teachers and individuals working in the "caring" professions, need reflection time to examine how their stories are similar to and different from their students. This kind of reflection can ward off burn-out and give us the words to speak to new literacy workers about the complexity and magic of our work. Listening carefully to each other is both rejuvenating and teaches us more about the listening process.

Moments of discomfort are moments where we can learn. They can be hard to talk about because they are unresolved. In our final gathering in January 2009 as we looked back on this project, Sally talked about these moments as ground-shaking moments where we face our vulnerability. She said that we wish answers would come clearly but there are things that aren't solved now.

They are moments where we might feel like disappearing or giving up. Sometimes we see these moments coming and need to keep ourselves grounded.

Literacy practice can be full of such ground-shaking moments, which create possibilities for learning and new practice. In research as well, we face our vulnerability as we open to learning about who we are as practitioners and the profound complexity of the work we do.



## **Researchers Reflections**

Toward the end of the project the researchers wrote the following reflection pieces.

### **Notes From a Journal**

by Tannis Atkinson

I can't figure out how to summarize what this group process has meant to me. Instead I decided to share some excerpts from my journal.

*After our first session, (no date in my book):*

What I want to write:

- thread with Maria about how it's richer on the margins than the mainstream believes
- to Michele and Andy about dharma and dissolution and change
- to Sally and Michele about not bringing ourselves to the room (my experience of that: why I did it, what it made me wonder
- something about spirituality (what?)
- something about change versus being stuck

It was a different time, then. It's always a different time. I was starting to wonder why I hadn't ever talked to tutor s or learners about being lesbian, begun to wonder why on weekends I took the stage to speak my truth and through the week never spoke it. How to cross that bridge? Some parts of being a dyke, what does that mean, were still so new to me. Some part of me wanted to keep my intimacy private with people I knew while defiantly pushing it into the faces of strangers I thought feared and loathed me. But friends were dying all around me and at their funerals the Christian preachers were saying they were sinners and the wages of sin is death; saying they deserved it.

I didn't talk either about being charged for assault for slapping one of the men who knocked my girlfriend to the street, tore her shorts and broke her glasses into her face, though we did talk about it on queer radio. Again, speeches to strangers so much safer than a conversation with someone I'd see again and again, someone who saw me as in a position of power.

And I think we – my colleagues at ALFA and I – were very careful, though our politics our values were very important to us, to try not to impose our views... When Michelle and Sally say they don't talk about their spiritual practice I recognize my own hesitation about bringing my politics and values to the program. And I continue to wonder how that contributed to silence. Yet it is true that as teachers we're in a different position – our role is not to raise our issues, though questions of faith and spirituality and values may well be connected to how we might best support learners as they try to make changes.

*On October 1, 2007 I wrote:*

The question of change is central – what students want to change, what we implicitly agree to help them change. That's why we're careful about naming ourselves...it's none of my business to try to change...I don't have the right to try to change your faith. But I do have the right to foster an inclusive space where everyone feels comfortable to learn. So wouldn't naming who we are help that? Another reason we (or I) haven't done so is that I thought that students would either not accept my sexual orientation (making the program inaccessible to queer learners) or think it was irrelevant. There's the rub – between how we strive to foster a “safe” space and our own position. Of course we have lots of power, as the instructors or program coordinators. Are we assuming that students see us as free of social markers? (Only a white person could think that!) Some students have asked staff to match them with a different tutor, saying they want a “real” Canadian when they have been matched with a person of colour...

What happens when the space becomes one where we don't feel comfortable to teach? We're still the ones in a position of power, even when students are saying things that make it feel otherwise.

*And on November 16:*

My story of being stopped in my tracks when a student said queers should all be shot was a story about me. My reaction, my self-doubt, my could-have-said, should-have-said, might-have-dones.

Was it really about diversity and difference? Maybe...Michele said it made her wonder how safe the program is for queer learners. And people of colour are confronted with racist statements every day. Was it such a shock for me because it was one of the first times I had felt threatened for being who I am? Why has the story stuck with me so long? Why do I think it has something generalizable in it? Does it? What did I leave out when I told it? What has escaped from the memory, and what have I held onto?

The larger picture is that since then my quest has been to try to heal, to recover. So much of that story is still hanging on what it was to lose so many friends – the intense grief, in my 20s and so many funerals – and the atmosphere of indifference and hostility that surrounded my grief. At that time, too, I was critical of gay men who were politicized by the epidemic, seeing them as in crisis because they had lost some of their privilege. (So few took the broader view – how is AIDS affecting people who don't have the resources to pay for drugs or set up clinics and counseling centres – but can we be surprised, given this culture's fixation on social pyramids rather than diverse communities?)

And literacy work has shown me how unhelpful dogma can be. We need to be soft.  
Try to be soft/open.

Have to be hard (to survive).

What happens when we make ourselves disappear? We can't, we don't, but we think we should – yet **we are there**.

*From February 21:*

Lunar eclipse last night. Susan wanted to draw the circle of the earth on our window – from the arc you can see how HUGE the earth is. So easy to forget. We're so used to seeing the moon, sometimes larger than others as yesterday when it was first rising in the pink sunset hues of easterly sky. As the eclipse deepened the lit side of the moon became more brilliant (I saw its light concentrated through the lens of the scope shining on Susan's eye...). The shadow side of



the moon became an orange, a colour hard to fix, hard to see, a varying shade, an unusual deep reddish orangish definitely shadow.

The eclipse was, to me, a perfect metaphor for what we are doing with this project – what we are trying to catch glimpses of. How what is unseen is huge.

*From April 25:*

I left the story group feeling as though I don't have anything particular or profound to say as analysis of the conversations we've had, though I am interested in the echoes and reverberations, fascinated by the many connections that have arisen.

But I am aware of how my own thinking has changed, specifically about how being grounded in some kind of spiritual understanding can help this work.

And I realize how my comfort with doing body work has changed. When I think back to the first session, I was so nervous about leading the group in a breathing and stretching exercise. Much less so now. Is it that I am now more able to be in my own body? At home in my own spirit, too?

*From June 13 (notes during the group session):*

Curiosity is so very important . . . and **helpful!**

Time, and trust, are essential for this kind of group process to work.

“The best way to be spontaneous is to prepare, prepare, prepare” – who said that?

## **Story Webs** by Mary Brehaut

Our stories weave together – before we open our mouths, pick up our pens, books, instruments, art materials, or hands. I imagine you, my listener, my reader, my audience, my mirror, my receptor, my holder, receiving my story, hearing me.

I anticipate your lenses and filters. I imagine I know some of who you are in this moment, and set up my story accordingly. I want to be heard, seen, held, known.

In my mind, our stories toss and tangle – little threads getting snagged in unexpected places – knots tightening the harder I pull.

I am my complex web of stories – infinite, dynamic, constantly evolving. I live and relive them, most of them I cannot access. Each has light, shape, texture, depth, sound, motion, colour, taste and smell. I interact with them through a kaleidoscopic lens – shifting prisms of whirling perspectives – contaminated/enriched with bits and pieces, built up residue formed in the context of my colour, race, class, gender, age, ability, environment, family, school, relationships, work, mostly unprocessed nagging, haunting, shaming, energizing, festering, blistering scenes, snippets, narratives. I mostly live on the surface of these stories – as they whiz and whirl outside of my reach.

I try to use language (voice, gesture, writing) to translate whatever small part of this complexity I can pull out and offer – across a huge divide of diversity and difference – the doomed attempt to pass this whirling intangible energetic mist to other human beings – which, if we're lucky, they genuinely try to pull through their own distorting lenses and filters – through their own kaleidoscope of stories. If any parts of this mist resonate enough, a few droplets of something might stick somewhere in their web. And so it goes . . .

In the story group we tried to place our attention on that complex journey from my web of stories to yours. A safe container and deep listening were the tools that we used to slacken the webs so we could move the strands, lift them up, look underneath, follow their paths – in our attempts to

know and be known. We tried to notice, to slow down the process of that journey through focused, respectful listening, and, in many ways, through deep sharing that evolved through relationship building and trust. We held sacred mindfulness, reflection time, environment, ritual, spaciousness, open-endedness, flexibility, freedom from expectation of outcomes and pressure.

We used moments of discomfort as entry points, rich places to excavate – knots in our webs where the access was often more painful but a more direct route to the deeper complexity. We offered space and support for members to expose their knots, massage them, loosen them up, pick and pry at them, untangle a few threads, whatever they chose to do.

The tension I'm caught in at the moment is feeling like I can somehow make sense of and articulate both the content and process of our story group. It's a kind of optimism, confidence, even arrogance to think that it can be done. Then I have moments of humility, wonder, awe, when I know that it can't be expressed. Then I wonder if it's a cop out to not even try. So, in my own clumsy way, I've been trying to "analyze the data." I know that it's gold that we have in the transcripts – and I want to sift through the strands, pull out the nuggets, take out the bits that I want to remember, that I want to integrate into my own life somehow.

My process, in some ways, has been contrary to the holistic, qualitative nature of our research. I haven't been doing much breathing and stretching, singing, drawing, collaging, or even journaling my reflections. In angst, I resorted to a quantitative and linear approach: I read through the transcripts, highlighted the sections that resonated with me; read through those highlighted sections and listed them under participants' names, read through each person's "gems" and broke them up into themes or categories, all the time mulling over the different pieces and interweaving my own thoughts as I went. It wasn't my original intention to sift through the transcripts in such a methodical way. I just didn't know how to write a paragraph about my experience in the group – what could I possibly say that would do justice to such a rich process? – so I was pulled to do something more involved. I felt that I couldn't narrow in or branch off until I'd held the whole thing. Imagine the audacity to think that I could somehow hold the whole thing?

In other ways, my process has been a microcosm of the story group – personally very rich, combing through the various strands of discussion, looking at the different sides through my own lenses and filters of identity and life experiences, sitting with them, interacting with them, changing their shape and context, draping them over pieces of my own life, my own current moments of discomfort, to see what I can learn. Like the group itself, this process has been helpful, reassuring, a reminder to stay open, to embrace the complexity, to be compassionate with myself. But I still agonized about what I would offer up as my reflection piece. My fourteen page list – a skeletal web, straightened up, polished? Or are my chunky lists of tensions, pitfalls, ways of relating to strive for, really only useful for me because I know the context of each written sound bite? Do I flesh out the whole thing into a manuscript? For whom? Or do I pull out one or two chunks or threads and try to talk about them? How do I pull out the different bits and strands and write about them? When I pull them apart, pare them down, look at them individually – out of relationship, they lose much of their richness. The complexity of their context and interconnectedness is not alchemized, but instead simplified, even lost. When I try to capture it, it morphs, the angles change, the other glimpses gone.

So I hold onto the reassuring words of others also struggling to express the inexpressible. There are no grand conclusions, no ways to capture the whole. Sheila talks about much of the complexity being beyond words. Jean Connon Unda talks about how we circum-ambulate the complexity with many different stories, how each piece is part of the greater whole. Maria talks about the oppressive politics behind simplifying the story. There clearly is no truth or static story about such a rich experience – that would contradict everything we've unearthed in our process.

So, this thinly sliced, tiny corner of the web is my offering at this particular moment – my truth from where I am right now. An unpolished fragment, not even close to touching the infinite richness and complexity of the process – perhaps a small illustration of some of what we struggled with in the group. Maybe tomorrow, I will figure out how to write, draw, collage, sing or dance about other threads, other chunky bits in the web. I will again wrestle with what and how much to disclose and how to package it without undermining it. These are ongoing challenges.

## **The Problem of Distance**

by Guy Ewing

In this project, the research meetings took place in spacious places, full of light: Sheila Stewart's living room, Parkdale Project Read, a room at the Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre that overlooked a garden, the meeting room at AlphaPlus. The meetings filled these spaces with laughter, insight, stories, listening, hearing, art. We came to places of profound discomfort, and in these places, explored how we can do literacy work better.

This experience has helped me to think about the problem of distance in my work. For me, distance has always been essential. I have needed to keep myself from tipping into learners' stories in order to support the telling of these stories and the learning that comes from this telling. On the few occasions when I found myself identifying too closely with the stories, I became incapacitated, an emotional wreck, unable to cope. In this project, I found that I was not alone in this.

The project has also deepened my understanding of literacy learning as a process that takes place across social divisions which we cannot ignore or pretend to cross. Literacy workers and literacy learners meet at a table. At one level, the table brings us together. At another level, it embodies separateness, enforced by the divisions of class, race, gender and culture that characterize our society. If we fail to acknowledge the distance which this separateness creates, we deny each other, erase literacy learners' stories and our own.

So literacy work involves distance. But we can achieve the wrong kind of distance. We can insulate ourselves from learners' stories, disassociate ourselves completely from them, retreat into a world of professionalism that reduces their stories to texts, objects of study. This project has made me particularly aware of how prone I am to creating this kind of distance from learners' stories. A learner tells me a story of struggle, suffering, hope. I write this story down, make it into a Language Experience Story, use it to help the learner with his or her ability to recognize written words. There is nothing wrong with the Language Experience process in itself. This process creates a window on patterns in written language that has been useful to many of

the literacy learners that I have worked with. But there is a huge part missing if I have not attended to the story itself, allowed a nourishing spaciousness around it, letting it grow, become a place of learning.

In our final research meetings, we often talked about spaciousness. Spaciousness requires distance of a particular kind, a non-judgmental, non-interventionist openness to what learners have to say. For example, several of the researchers described how they had created spaciousness for learners' stories by encouraging learners to write without asking to see their stories. Others talked about listening to stories without rushing to transcribe them. This kind of distance is nourishing because it allows stories to develop, go deeper. In keeping a respectful distance, the literacy worker lets the story breathe, to use Sheila's phrase, refrains from wrapping a story up, to use Mary's phrase. Differences between the learner's story and the literacy worker's story remain unresolved. Sometimes, to use Sally's phrase, a seed cracks open, and learning grows.

The spaciousness of those rooms had found its way into the exploration of how to achieve space for story in literacy work.

At the end of this project, I am more aware of the difficulty of hearing another person's story. At the deepest level, hearing any other person's story is not possible. The social divisions which separate literacy workers from literacy learners compound this impossibility. But, paradoxically, by acknowledging the difficulty of hearing and keeping the kind of distance that we called "spaciousness," we create the possibility of respectful listening. This, in turn, supports telling and learning across social divides, by literacy learners and by literacy workers.

## **Middle of the Bridge**

by Sally Gaikezheyongai

This project was helpful in exploring the complexities, possibilities, and limitations of hearing or reading any learner's story in my role as a literacy practitioner. The trick is to create a bridge between my world and the learner's world, a safe meeting place out there in the open middle of the bridge, with neither of us completely transparent about our learning needs and goals. Both of us, in that moment and however many other moments and meetings we have, come with learning needs and goals. I see that more clearly now.

The times we spent building a space we could tease out our own experiences, helped me to articulate in various ways, what happens to me on that bridge. When I relate with a learner, I am always challenged by my own principles to be humble, respectful, present, attentive and to some degree non-judgmental when I hear or read learners' stories. I think what always happens though is one part of me, as a paid worker bound by professional ethics, keeps my mind open to things like sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, etc., looking for the gaps in skills and knowledge either of us needs, relating everything to the "learning plan" or stated goals, and another part my – my heart – is open in a detached sort of way in order to maintain some distance between us in our roles as worker and learner, to things like the similarities and differences between our personal experiences and discerning if and how that is/can be relevant in the 'here and now' of the space we're standing in – out there in the middle of the bridge.

## **Listening to Our Stories**

by Michele Kuhlmann

I experienced two quite different responses to the story research project. First my personal experience in the research group meetings and discussions. Later when we were sharing our research in workshops, I found myself looking at the experience in a very different light.

For years I have felt the need for a space to come together with other literacy practitioners to discuss the feelings we have while listening to the intimate and often traumatic experiences of learners in our programs. I was very aware that encouraging literacy learners to write from personal experience created a space where we heard very disturbing things. We were then in the position of hearing experiences that were often removed from our own present life situations. The story research project has been a wish finally coming true for me. Our research group was very open to exploring very personal feelings and the space we shared was very respectful. We called our time together deep listening. We needed this experience and we were very open about how we entered this time with each other, looking for what would emerge each time, and cherishing the time together. This is a very personal reaction to a research project, but I was also aware how it related to the field we work in everyday. There was this lingering feeling about how unusual our research situation was compared to the experience of keeping up with our daily life in literacy. When feelings of discomfort and difference arise in our work we are on the spot and have to choose the best response for the moment but can be left with disturbing feeling and questions that are not resolved even for years. These feelings and experiences surfaced and lived in our storytelling. I don't mean that we "used" the stories as much as we experienced them together.

When the research group began to reach out of our group and bring our story experience to workshops at conferences, it seemed like such a different environment. I wondered how would this change the experience. I felt it would be valuable but wondered if I could be presented in the same way in a short time with people who may not even know each other. It is different. What it was, turned out to be very much needed by the workshop participants. This was very inspiring. Because we did the groups with activities and artwork, it was surprising and refreshing for people who came to the workshops. We confirmed what we thought that there is a great need for



space and time to reflect on and express the experiences of community work such as literacy and in other fields too.

I am left with questions now about how what we have found can live now that the research project is being completed. We each experienced ways of relating to our own experience and seeing in new ways; that of course is priceless. Because the experience was so rich there is the feeling left that the story group is needed and should continue but how is not clear to me. Since this has been a very important experience for all of us in the research group, I hope that what comes next will evolve just like each of our times together, as we trust the process we are in with story. I suspect what is needed is an ongoing opportunity for this kind of experience for the well being of our community.

## **All Our Stories Coming Together...**

by Maria Moriarty

*“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”* – Thomas King

We talked without interruption or questions, we listened without interrupting or questioning, we took our stories as we heard them. We wrote, we drew – we had time to breathe, to think, to see – maybe the world couldn’t work this way. Maybe we need the structures and systems and rules and regulations – maybe those things help us too, like highway signs and traffic lights and rules of the road. But we also need to wander, to meander, to be surprised, to step outside the structure – to reflect on what we are doing, to think about what we know, how we can guide and support each other, how we can have the courage to be honest and brave about our discomforts, how we can examine assumptions, live with questions and how we can accept ambiguity. The experiences and ideas we talked about in the group are inexpressible in the landscape of accountability, where knowledge gained through quantitative research is privileged, where statistics, measurable targets and continuous improvement are thought to be a true reflection of experience, where our agendas are set by others and we have to feed and satisfy a system which has been created to keep it all tidy.

The great temptation for me is to think about the experience of the story group as a superior alternative to the types of learning/training that is usually available to us in the literacy field in Ontario. My impulse is to put my experience of being the story group on the top of some sort of hierarchy, so that the story group is better, purer, and more authentic than other experiences of learning. But I have thought and thought about this and have come to see that my experience in the story group is one thing, very important to me personally, a great learning experience, an opportunity to actually and literally hear about literacy practice – to learn about what it’s like to work as a literacy practitioner and about the struggles and energy that go into it.

But that’s not really the point – it’s not that the story group is a better way; it’s that it’s another way – a way past abstraction to the real everyday work and relationships in literacy programs. I see it as one way to break the silence about the mystery and complexity of the relationships that grow in a program. This is a way of knowing that is left out in standard or accepted accounts of what happens in literacy. It gets us closer to understanding something about what goes on.

It's not an either or, better or worse, authentic or not. It is a way of looking – that makes room for the experience, emotions, life history, story of the practitioner – what she is bringing, learning, needing and asking and how all these pieces are always there. All our stories coming together, sometimes contradicting or even conflicting with each other, colouring how we see and what we hear, what we do. I see it as one way to acknowledge our many selves, to honour some of the many versions of our stories, the personal, the political, and the social. I see the work of the story group as one way to look at the tacit knowledge and the working wisdom of practitioners, how in working in relationship with students and with each other, across differences of class and race and gender we learn by encountering each other and ourselves in our stories.

**the commodification of stories...**  
by Nadine Sookermany

stories to sell?  
stories to consume...  
to ingest...to digest  
we carry them in our stomachs  
and on our backs  
whose stories  
not our stories  
others' stories...  
those people...  
their stories

story is central to our work because what we do all day is take stories in, the stories of our clients, learners, friends. a woman shared her story at a conference about violence and learning. her story of a client telling her that she can't bear to share her story again because it is all she has left. her story has become a commodity that she peddles to gain access to services, to shelter, to resources. what does this do to her, to her story? what is the impact? what about those of us who hear her story. how does it impact us, where does it fit into our lives? what about our story. does it fit anywhere? if she is a woman of colour, I hear her story and it resonates with mine. my liberation is tied up in her story.<sup>9</sup> it must be. it has to be. what do I do now?

power

There is power in telling a story and there is power in listening. Reflecting on our power is difficult. It is difficult to acknowledge our power... particularly when we are unaware of our location, specifically our social location; that being our race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability... where are we located as the listener in relation to the storyteller? Do we consciously ask ourselves this? Or must we remain objective, free and clear of any judgment. If we locate ourselves things may become clearer, or they may become muddier . . . at least we are aware of our power.

I learned so much in this project. I reflected on the ways I take up space, and reflected on why I do it. I had the opportunity to think about those stories that are 'stuck' in my head, in my body. I have long reflected on my identity in the literacy field, why I am here doing this work and this project helped me understand why. I enjoyed being part of this project immensely. It was a truly reflective, embodied experience, incomparable to no other.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of literacy and poverty, see Harold Alden's *thesis Illiteracy and Poverty in Canada: Toward a Critical Perspective* (1982). For a discussion of the effects of increased poverty and the racialisation of poverty, see Grace-Edward Galabuzi's *Canada's Creeping Economic Apartheid: The economic and social marginalisation of racialised groups*. (Toronto: CSJ Foundation for Research and Education, 2001). <http://action.web.ca/home/narcc/attach/Canada\'sCreepingEconomicApartheid.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See Jenny Horsman and Helen Woodrow's *Focused on practice: A framework for adult literacy research in Canada*. (2006) St. John's, NL: Harrish Press for a rich discussion of research in practice. See Mary Norton's *A Traveler's Guide to Literacy Research in Practice* (2008) for a guide of how to adult literacy research in practice. The report bibliography and annotated bibliography for a number of key research in practice project reports.

<sup>3</sup> The 5th Annual WE LEARN (Net)Working Gathering & Conference on Women and Literacy, March 7 to 8, 2008, at Fordham University, New York, New York, entitled "Building Alliances," was about differences and alliances. Tannis and Nadine's workshop was called "Listening across differences."

<sup>4</sup> "Beyond Active Listening" was held on May 16, 2008 at OISE/UT for the Toronto literacy community.

<sup>5</sup> On May 29, 2008, we presented a workshop called "Listening across differences" at Centennial College's conference called "Reflect, Refresh, Renew."

<sup>6</sup> The 28<sup>th</sup> national conference Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) was held in Vancouver, June 1 to 3, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> The Ontario Literacy Coalition Training Event/Adult Literacy Learnership Forum's "Spotlight on Learning" took place in Toronto October 6 to 8, 2008, and was funded by The Office of Literacy and Essential Skills, HRSDC and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Our workshop entitled "Research in practice: Giving us time to think and better understand learning relationships" was well attended.

<sup>8</sup> The Transformative Learning Centre's international conference took place in Toronto October 16 to 18, 2008. It attracted adult educators, popular educators, activists, and activist-scholars. Our participants included graduate students and staff from city hall.

<sup>9</sup> Lily Walker reflects on power, "If you are here to help me, then you are wasting your time, but if you are here because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us begin." (Heard from Lib Spry during the Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop, Montreal, 1988.)

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## Appendices

### Workshop Plans by Tannis and Sheila

A couple workshop plans are provided here to give you ideas about activities and approaches which can help you explore story and diversity. These plans may give you ideas for how to plan and facilitate a story and diversity group.

<b>Story and Diversity first meeting: Sept 28, 2007</b> <b>Orientation, Getting to Know Each Other, Getting Focus</b> <b>and Planning How to Work Together</b> <b>11:45 – 4 p.m., at PPR; Lunch 11:45 to 12:30</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Clock</b>
<b>(T)Begin</b> - Welcome people, thanks for effort and time to be here, point out agenda for today. Introduce yourself and tell us, how do you feel about being here? Brief go-around. (Hopes and fears may start to emerge and return to hopes at wrap-up.)	10 min	12:30
<b>(S)Background to this research project / How we got to this point</b> - Story enquiry group: open-ended, arts-based methods - Work on equity: Jay Pitter workshops; more equity focus needed particularly in literacy research, Progress project started; this project has particular focus within equity work around story/narrative/listening, may spawn other projects	15 min	12:40
<b>What's fixed?</b> timeline; deliverables <b>What's open?</b> <i>focus within the bigger topic</i> (key to work through today); how we work; what we do: focus group, interviews; whether in your program or in wider TO literacy community; how arts-based How as researchers you contribute to final products based on your time and interests (Tannis can support) (think about down the road)	15 min	12:55
<b>(S) Our stories of why this work</b> Why you want to be involved in this research? Are there incidents or things that happened? Moments of discomfort or something that stuck in your craw. Imagine yourself in your program doing your work. We are getting at story of why involved with this project and what our focus will be. Starting with individual story. Write in your journal or draw (10 min). Your own story. Then get to your program's story.	70 min	1:10
<b>(T) Our program's story of this work</b> Debriefing of stories in program groups. Sharing of individual stories  DPNC and PPR each talk in a group. 4 of us divide selves among them. Story of what this project means for each program. Find a way to share this with the others, i.e. what can you tell about your program's	20 min	2:20

<p>relationship to this project, incidents in program? Prepare as group to tell or present story of your program by words, enacting something, drawing something in your program.  (Tape-record the telling or photograph the showing of stories.)  (Rest of us will listen, especially 4 of us for the questions that emerging from the telling. What are we hearing in these stories?)</p> <p><b>(S) What aspects of story and diversity are your focus?</b> Draw your focus, interlocking circles or web. Ways things connect and what are part of?</p> <p><b>Short break</b></p>	5 min	2:40
<p><b>Stretch on return</b></p> <p><b>(S) Big questions. More specific questions.</b>  Generating all kinds of questions is good, getting at what interests us and helping to zone in on what doing. We'll return to questions in October and throughout the project.  What are the questions want to ask ourselves?  What are questions for others in focus group or interviews?  What questions emerge from our stories and our focus?</p>	15 min	2:45
<p><b>(S) Planning how we'll work; how to collaborate</b>  - briefly mention roles of Tannis, Guy, Maria, Sheila; Advisory Committee</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- within each program, a program focus or more individual?</li> <li>- how work, individually or as a program?</li> <li>- ***how to gather data: journal, tape record, arts-based, pictures</li> <li>- how do we work as a whole group? how often do we meet?</li> <li>- is most of the work done at our meetings or individually or with colleagues in program?</li> <li>- should Guy or I meet with each program separately?</li> </ul> <p>Decision-making: all give input, decide together when can, I'll take leadership to keep us going but prefer group input</p> <p>Keeping connected especially when project seems hard: phone, email, getting together, etc.</p>	45 min	3:00
<p><b>(T) Time / date/ place for next session</b>  <b>Hand out Sherene's article.</b>  <b>Closing: Ask for words or images re hopes. Thank you.</b></p>	15 min	3:45

<b>Story and Diversity 5th meeting: Sat. Jan. 19, 2008</b> <b>Planning our next phase and moving into analysis</b> <b>PPR, 1 to 4 pm</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Clock</b>
<b>Begin</b> Welcome people, thanks for effort and time to be here on a Saturday, look at day's agenda; some stretching to ground selves	10 min	1 pm
<b>Reflection on Accordion Book Making:</b> insights? what did it bring up for you and how does this relate to our research?	20 min	1:10
<b>Taking stock what we've done so far:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have we learned about difference?</li> </ul> Sub-questions if needed: How do we work and listen across difference? Or does the word "across" imply a gulf to cross? How do we work with the diversity present? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What have we learned about story-making practices?</li> </ul> Sub-questions if needed: What is going on that can foster learning? Or what could stifle it?	5 min	1:30
Quiet time to reflect on 2 main questions. Write in journal, use tape recorder if prefer. Create a page for each: a drawing or words. Perhaps a list. Or a mixture of picture and words.	15 min	1:35
Post on wall under each big question. Take time to look at and read each others'. Use post it notes to add comments or coloured dots to put beside something that strikes a cord. Move into <b>BREAK</b>	15 min	1:50
Talk about what we posted and what we see posted, about difference and story-making practices.	35min	2:05
Short stretching and breathing transition; laughing yoga	5 min	2:40
<b>What are we doing next?</b> What are you most curious about? What are the threads or themes? Which excites you most? Which seem most important to investigate and tell the literacy field about? Are there aspects of daily practice you want to examine? intake? working with learners on their writing? how we work with tutors?	40 min	2:45
<b>How the next steps will happen.</b> Do people want to have conversations within their program, with others in this group, with this group as a whole? Do they want to write about it, think about it, draw it out? Have an email conversation about it or a face-to-face discussion?	20 min	3:25
(Tannis' interests:* a further conversation about silence		

- \* a conversation about difference and relationships with tutors
- \* a conversation about how spirituality affects how we do this work)

If there were several clusters of interest, we could plan to have those discussions happen at the same time when we meet in February and March -- one group could talk and be recorded by the podcast factory while another group had an online chat. Some other discussions might happen between times that we meet.

**Wrap-up**

**Next session: Fri. Feb. 22 at DPNC, 11:45 to 4**

**Closing: Thank you.**

5 min

3:55

<b>Story and Diversity 7th meeting: Sat. Apr. 12, 2008</b> <b>PPR -- 2:00 to 5 pm</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Clock</b>
<b>Begin</b> Welcome people, thanks for effort and time to be here on a Sat. afternoon, for Nadine after another meeting ... look at day's agenda (reminder to be aware of mic and background noise)	10 min	2:00 pm
<b>Opening</b> - some stretching to ground selves; spring/change of energy		
Where we are at: Analysis: What have we learned? What does it mean? What is it's significance to the field?...data collection and telling stories doesn't completely stop now. Doing analysis as a group is less usual so the distinction with data collection gets further blurred. But the end of project is in sight....Sheila and Tannis have little time in Sept....so most work done by end of July.	10 min	2:10
Dissemination started with New York WeLearn conference, continues with International Day for Sharing Stories May 16, and Centennial May 29, and CASAE June 2 <sup>nd</sup> . Getting ready for New York produced first piece of analysis. Each of our events/conferences will push us further into analysis and learning.		
<u><b>Themes of today</b></u>		
<b>What are we learning.... what can we tell other literacy workers?</b>		
<b>Moments of discomfort and complexity around issues of difference. Are there times when you could move into a positive space for telling and listening? (Guy to ask this)</b>		
<b>Report back on New York, pair work or other things people need to say.</b> Report back on New York: Tannis and Nadine Report back on pair work over past month....what happened? what have you learned?	70 min	2:20
<b>Break</b>		
<b>Our questions – what learning and complex moments</b>		
<b>Planning</b>	10 min	3:30
Story telling day Fri. May 16 – Peace Lounge: who wants to plan this with Sheila? Who is it for? What are we doing? Why? What do we want out of it?	40 min	3:40
<i>Literacies</i> issues on Barriers and Openings – due May 15		
Centennial conference panel – May 29, 1:30 to 2:20 pm	15 min	4:20
Podcast – Tracey Mollins can think about it after May 15, we could meet with her, can start thinking about audience, purpose, what to include, T - visuals		
CASAE, UBC (June 1-3) – June 2, 9 to 9:50 a.m.	15 min	4:35
Set dates next sessions: May, June, July	5 min	4:50
<b>Wrap-up. Closing: Thank you.</b>		



## Story Circle Prompt Questions

If you want to examine story and difference either in a group or on your own, these questions and suggestions can get you started.

### Inferiority/superiority

- How do I feel inferior to this person?
- How do I feel superior to this person?
- How do I acknowledge my own power?
- How do I undermine myself?
- How do I stay present?
- When do I feel vulnerable?
- When do I feel judgmental?
- How do I protect myself yet still be open and present?
- How do I not take over the learning relationship?
- What assumptions am I making about this person?
- How much do I tell and how much do I hold onto?
- How can I turn the potential for hurt into learning, stop in the moment of what's coming and turn it?

### Space and time for group learning.

- Have you allowed yourself at least four hours with no other demands or interruptions?
- Who do I want to talk with?
- How can I transform the space?  
Some suggestions: table clothes, plants, whatever will help it not feel like a meeting space. Wall space to hang up work is helpful. Create time with no interruptions.
- How, in the group, can we nurture each other and stretch each other at the same time?

### We/I

- How do I work in solidarity, alliance without overlooking differences?
- When is it appropriate to overlook differences?
- When do I want to say "we?" Why?
- What "we" is this? Who's included, who's excluded?
- What "I" is this?

### Deep listening

- Am I packaging stories, making them neater than they are to help deal with them?
- Am I interrupting the story to give advice?
- Am I preparing what I am going to say while another person is talking?
- Am I allowing the person who is speaking to set the pace?
- Am I allowing myself and other people moments of silence?
- Am I facilitating in a way that holds the process without pinching it?
- Am I facilitating with a light touch, allowing rather than leading?

## **Songs**

We sometimes sang to close our meetings. We found that singing was a good way to acknowledge the energy, thoughts and feelings created by our time together. An embodied experience, it sometimes provoked laughter before we headed off into the rest of our day.

### **We Come from the Mountain by Harry Belafonte**

We come from the mountain  
Living in the mountain  
Go back to the mountain  
Turn the world around

We come from the water  
Living in the water  
Go back to the water  
Turn the world around

We come from the fire  
Living in the fire  
Go back to the fire  
Turn the world around

We come from the sky  
Living in the sky  
Go back to the sky  
Turn the world around

We come from the mountain  
Living in the mountain  
Go back to the mountain  
Turn the world around

**Woyaya**  
**by Sol Amarifio**

We are going  
Heaven knows where we are going  
We will know we're there  
We will get there  
Heaven knows how we will get there  
We know we will  
It will be hard we know  
And the road will be muddy and rough  
But we'll get there  
Heaven knows how we will get there  
We know we will  
We are going  
Heaven knows where we are going  
We will know we're there

This song is the title song of the 1971 album by Osibisa, a group of Ghanaian and Caribbean musicians.

**Steady as a Rock**  
**by Kim Brody**

Steady as a rock  
Rooted like a tree  
I am here  
Standing strong in my rightful place.

(This song is sung as a round.)

## **Annotated Bibliography**

by Guy Ewing and Maria Moriarty

Battell, E, L. Gessner, J. Rose, J. Sawyer and D. Twiss

### ***Hardwired for Hope***

2004. Duncan, BC: Malaspina University-College.

*Hardwired for Hope* is an exploration of what makes an effective instructor by five experienced adult literacy instructors in British Columbia. The researchers set out on their journey by sharing autobiographies and by speaking to other instructors. They worked collaboratively to reflect and consider their own practice and the underlying personal and emotional elements that support their adult literacy Here's how they describe their work: "*The assumption we worked with is that there is something in our lives, how we became who we are, and how we interpret the world around us, that can lead to answers to the question about effective practice, and hence to effective instructors.*"

Available at: <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/hwired/cover.htm>

Battell, E., S. Hornstein, J. Horsman.,C. Jones, J. Murphy, Ningwakwe/E.Priscilla George, K. Nonesuch, M. Norton, N. Sookermany, S. Stewart and H. Ward

### ***Moving Research about Addressing the Impacts of Violence on Learning into Practice***

2008. Edmonton: Windsound Learning Society

This book and the DVD that accompanies it comes out of a two-and-a-half-year project on the impact of violence, understood in its broadest sense: "*Violence regardless of its specifics is an abuse of power*" (p. 11) In the project adult literacy practitioners and researchers across Canada joined together to look at moving research about learning and violence forward and to explore new ways of doing research in practice. The intent is that the book will be a catalyst for change and a way to support opening up conversation about the impact of violence on learning and its meanings for adult literacy students and practitioners.

The multimedia presentations on the DVD are available at:

<http://www.learningandviolence.net/changing/ElevenResearchers/ElevenResearchers.htm>

Brant, J.

### ***The Aboriginal Literacy Toolbox: Cultural Philosophy, Curriculum Design and Strategies for Self-Directed Learning***

2006. Saugeen First Nation, Southampton, Ontario: Ningwakwe Learning Press.

This book embeds practical ideas for literacy work in an Aboriginal cultural perspective.

Brant, J., A. Bull, G. Ewing and T. Mollins

### ***The Learning Circles Project website***

<http://www.nald.ca/learningcircles/index.htm>

2006. Toronto: Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy.

This website documents the spaciousness and supportiveness of learning circles, informal places for listening across difference in community environments. A summary of the material on the website, a report to the literacy field, can be downloaded from the Reports page.

D'Amico, D.

**“Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation in Adult Literacy: Power Pedagogy and Programs”**

2004. *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy* pp.17-70. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This article explores issues of power and pedagogy within Adult Basic Education in the United States. The author provides an overview of the demography of students in adult basic education programs and explores what this demography reveals about the intersection of adult basic education with gender, class, race and sexual orientation. Based on this analysis she goes on to discuss whether or not adult basic education programs provide literacy instruction that confronts or supports inequalities. This article connects to our questions about difference and what that means.

Available at: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=583>

Davies, P.

***See Me: Use of Personal Narrative in the Classroom***

2006. RiPAL-BC

The author and experienced adult literacy instructor and research reports on her own research, grounded in the personal experience of the practitioner, on how the use of personal narrative can enhance content learning and on the effects and benefits of the use of personal narrative to support student engagement in the learning process.

Available at: <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/ripal/seeme/intro.htm>

Gaber-Katz, E., and J. Horsman

**“Is It Her Voice If She Speaks Their Words?”**

1988 *Canadian Woman Studies* Vol. 9 (No. 3 & 4). Reprinted in *Canadian Woman Studies* Vol. 11 No. 3, 1991.

This article raises challenging questions about the Learning Experience Approach in literacy work. Are literacy practitioners listening to learners or giving them words to say?

Available at: <https://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/cws/article/viewFile/10865/9954>

Hart, M.

**“Class and Gender”**

2005. *Class Concerns: Adult Education and Social Class. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education No. 106*, pp.63-71. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

In this article the author, a college instructor in the U.S. explores the idea that gender is inseparable from class in the context of what she describes as “caring labor”. Given the gendered nature of literacy work the concept of “caring labor” offers a means to think about issues of gender and class interwoven in the relationships within a literacy program and how these help explain or illuminate the challenges and complexities of literacy work.

King, T.

***The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative***

2003. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

As Thomas King says “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous.” This book is a wise, witty and wonderful exploration of the power of stories and of how our stories shape who we are and how we connect with other people. King eloquently interweaves his own story with a powerful examination of stories told by and about native North Americans and he reminds us that story telling comes with personal and social responsibilities, as he says, “*Don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now.*”

Lefebvre, S., P. Belding, M. Brehaut, S. Dermer, A-M. Kaskens, E. Lord, W. MacKay and N. Sookermany

***I’ve Opened Up: Exploring Learners’ Perspectives on Progress***

2006: Toronto: Parkdale Project Read

Adult literacy learners talked about their views of what constitutes progress in literacy learning, and literacy practitioners listened. The literacy practitioners debated questions about how literacy practitioners listen to literacy learners across racial, cultural and class differences.

Available at: <http://library.nald.ca/item/6008>

Lopez, T., and B. Thomas

***Dancing on Live Embers: Challenging Racism in Organizations***

2006. Toronto: Between the Lines.

This book about systemic racism in organizations takes us on a journey of discovery and self-reflection about racism.

Norton, M.

***A Traveler’s Guide to Literacy Research in Practice***

2008. Edmonton: The Learning Centre Literacy Association.

This guide to research in practice, written for literacy practitioners, has broadened our understanding of what is possible in research in practice, and gives literacy practitioners the tools they need to get started.

Available at: <http://library.nald.ca/item/7042>

Razack, S.

**“The Gaze from the Other Side: Storytelling for Social Change.”**

1998. In *Looking White People in the Eye*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

In this article author explores and raises questions about whether uncritical reliance story within popular education, results in political action to bring about social change. She challenges the notion that simply telling ones story always contributes to empowerment, and argues that critical, and ultimately empowering, pedagogy must take account the context in which stories are heard

and told and must take account of existing power relations and support discussion and debate across difference.

Scollon, R, and B.K.Scollon

***Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication***

1981. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing

This book explores how European and Athapaskan people in northern Canada misunderstand each other's stories and ways of speaking and listening.

Shore, S.

**“What’s Whiteness got to do with it?”**

2003. *Literacies* No. 2.

Shore argues, rationally, passionately, that literacy work is informed by the assumption that White is normal. “*What I am suggesting is a process of reading and writing against a grain which posits White as the norm; a process which makes us rethink our relationship, not only to our (white) selves but to our (White) histories as well.*”

Available at: <http://www.literacyjournal.ca/search.html>

Soroke, B.

***Doing Freedom: An Ethnology of an Adult Literacy Centre***

1999. Burnaby, BC: Simon Fraser University

This is a study of power relationships in a community literacy program in Duncan, BC. Although this is an academic paper (a Master's thesis), it is beautifully written, from the perspective of an artist and community activist.

Available at: <http://library.nald.ca/item/5201>

Stewart, S.

**“Stories that Breathe: Practitioners Stories Opening Windows and Doors on Learning and Violence”**

2008. *Moving Research about Addressing the Impacts of Violence on Learning into Practice*, pp. 87-110. Edmonton: Windsound Learning Society

“As literacy practitioners we hear all kinds of stories: of distress, loss and pain as well as strength, resilience and determination...” (p. 87) So begins this article - one practitioner's reflection on the “weight” of the stories heard and told in literacy programs and how those stories affect and influence practitioners and their literacy work.



*Michele Kuhlmann*