

Making connections

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(with contributions from **Tannis Atkinson, Mary Norton and Tracy Westell**)

Literacies : Researching practice, practising research comes out of discussions among experienced literacy practitioners, researchers and academics from across Canada. These discussions concluded with a determination to start a journal that would help to connect adult literacy practice and research. This article tries to elaborate the nature of that connection, and its difficulty.

One idea now commonly discussed is that of a “culture of research” in adult literacy. It is a useful idea to develop, one which points towards a conversation that links research and practice in many ways. In this conversation, people will listen to one another seriously, assume one another’s good will, and aspire to a condition in which research and practice enrich one another. We want this journal to encourage that conversation – to foster dialogue, debate and mutual development between adult literacy research and practice.

There will be different voices in the conversation here, as people from various locations find a place to publish, and ideas to read and discuss. Some of those voices are from adult literacy practice. Some are from adult literacy research.

What is practice, what is research?

By the term adult literacy practice we mean a broad range of activities aimed to promote and develop people’s abilities to read and write, and their opportunities and resources for reading and writing. Of course, the central activities are the many education or training programs for people working to improve their abilities. These programs go by a variety of names: literacy, adult basic education, basic skills, ESL, aboriginal language, and so forth. Literacy practice also includes:

- work to develop awareness about the importance of literacy questions and about ways of respecting and assisting people with limited literacy. This work happens in trade unions, public health services, government departments, and many other places;
- efforts to inform people about, or attract them to, programs;
- writing for audiences that include people with limited literacy – whether that means plain language in institutional communications, or writing by and with communities that have had few writings of their own; and
- attempts to develop public policy that supports the promotion of literacy abilities and literacy opportunities.

There is also another meaning of the word practice. In much writing about literacy, it is used very broadly, to refer to all the ways that people use and relate to texts and documents – writing grocery lists and fictions and applications, reading the news and court orders and textbooks. When we think of practice, we think of that vast domain as well.

The term research likewise encompasses a broad range of activities. It includes all the ways in which people concerned with adult literacy practice re-search – look again, articulating and clarifying what they know, and pushing out into the unclear and the unknown. Research includes:

- the kinds of work usually called “theory and research”, often done by university faculty and students;
- the work of independent researchers who conduct research studies or development projects; and
- the many ways that practitioners look again – especially when they leave a public record of their learning, whether in an “article”, teaching materials, or workshops.

The categories of practitioner and researcher are often cross-cutting. Many practitioners have done academic work about literacy. Current university students may be mid-career practitioners. Some university faculty and some independent researchers have been (sometimes still are) practitioners. In spite of this, the practice conversation and the research conversation often seem remote from one another. Some even question whether they can be put together.

Can practice and research come together?

What are the prospects for connections among all these people, for a lively culture of research?

When we begin to connect a broad understanding of practice with a broad conception of research, the first thing we recognize is that much of practice already includes research. It is research when teachers experiment with learning materials, with the phrasing of explanations, or with learner involvement in program organization, and make findings about what works. It is research when practitioners carry on discussion and debate, seeking to share and to clarify their understandings, or to pose and address problems. It is research when people drafting and testing plain language documents come to new understandings of reading processes. It is research when practitioners and policy makers observe and reflect on how administrative arrangements work.

So research is a normal part of ongoing good practice. But of course when people conventionally speak of research, they mean something different and more formal than this – inquiries that are deliberately planned and conducted, and that result in some writing (or taping or filming) and public communication of their results.

Good practice often includes and grows into research in this more formal sense – that in turn transforms the practice from which it came. But the movement from practice to research isn’t easy. Practitioners may not see the possibility of making knowledge, or the plausibility of using writing as a way of exchanging knowledge about what they do. Even when the point seems clear, there are problems finding the time to read, to observe carefully and to write. And it’s often doubtful whether research will be valued by administrators, policy-makers, or more traditional researchers.

Furthermore, formal research – and public communication of its results – pose demands (and opportunities) for explicitness, coherence and abstraction. These don’t often arise within practice itself, even within the research that is part of good practice. Perhaps the greatest of these demands is finding a language that combines two qualities. It must be grounded in particular situations, in the detail of literacy work and aimed to make sense of it. Yet it must allow exchange between situations, conversations with others elsewhere who are shaping ideas about literacy and its teaching and learning. We have only just begun inventing this language.

On the other hand, people who regularly do formal research and writing are accustomed to explicitness, coherence and abstraction. Formal researchers are accustomed to taking up others' ideas in relation to their own – accustomed to what is called “building on existing knowledge”. But grounding in practice is not common in formal research. Academic and policy research seem, at least at times, to start someplace away from the particular situations where adult literacy practice goes on.

So from this side, too, language and knowledge need to be invented – knowledge not merely about adult literacy practice, but for it. The problems of practice need to be taken up as problems for research and theorizing. Formal research needs to aspire both to inform and to learn from practitioners grappling with every day practical concerns. But there are barriers here too. For academic and independent researchers, what is rewarded is often not local and grounded but abstract and tied into academic discourses and policy objectives.

Conclusion

There is much to change, and much to learn, in bringing together practice and research. The culture of research will require shifts in both the common assumptions and the working conditions of literacy practice, and in the culture and constraints of academic and policy research.

What role can Literacies play? We think the journal can best work on the invention of new language and new genres. This does not mean sweeping away traditions unreflectively. To connect practice and research, we need to make use of existing forms of writing. There will be ethnographies that describe in detail the activities and interactions of adult literacy practice, and of literacy practices in the more general sense. There will be case studies of learners or teachers. There will be surveys of the uses of literacy, of programming practices and of individual skill levels. There will be practitioners' analyses of their own practice – likely based on regular journal-keeping or discussions among colleagues. There will be theory, systematic efforts to develop those general conceptions that help us come to terms with what we see about and what we do in literacy practice.

But we will also be continually open to ways that these genres may need to be adapted, and new genres may need to be invented. We're not sure what these developments will look like. The journal will be a place for experimenting and creating. We will ask that articles written by researchers address not only relevant research literature, but also reach out to address the concerns of literacy practice. We will ask that articles by practitioners not only address their own experiences but also aim to hook up with conversations going on among practitioners elsewhere and with relevant theoretical ideas. We expect to see narrative reports of experience, dialogues, even fictions. We expect we will recurrently step back to look at the basic issues of what literacy practice and literacy research are and how they can relate.

We look forward to you joining us in this unfolding conversation.

writing for Literacies : an overview

Literacies is where the education community shares ideas and experiences about how research and practice connect and how each informs the other. Our goal is to cross fences and unite the range of fields and disciplines that touch literacy. By communicating and documenting individual scholarship and experiences, *Literacies* advances a collective understanding of literacy work, promotes the exchange of ideas with policy-makers and theorists, and builds and strengthens the community.

Literacies encourages and supports writers from a diversity of experiences and backgrounds as they create an inclusive dialogue. Our objective is to cultivate and develop writership among adult education workers.

Literacies was created as a forum for thinking on literacy. We welcome contributions that build connections between adult literacy research and practice. These links can be made in various ways, including

- informal reflections and discussions delving into or illuminating one aspect of practice;
- reading research and reflecting on its applications to practice;
- asking questions about practice which could lead to further inquiry, reflection and research; and
- conducting research about practice and sharing the results.

Literacies welcomes contributions that

- represent the wide range of research and reflection about adult literacy that is being carried out in various contexts;
- encourage discussion, reflection and research about how adults develop and use reading and writing; and
- encourage critical reflection about literacy practice and research.

Contributions should relate to the vision and intentions of *Literacies*. They should address the topic, question or issue in a manner relevant to the audience for this journal. Our readers include people interested in adult literacy research and practice. They may have one or more roles including teaching, research, professional development, consulting, networking, or policy development. They may work in other fields that connect in some way to adult literacy.

If you have an idea for a contribution and would like help to develop it, contact the editor at our general info email address. We are willing to help and advise where we can.

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